

Simply Christian
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Course outline, book and other materials

[Simply Christian](#) by N. T. Wright
Also recommend [Simply Jesus](#).

Gathering, Prayer

Introduction

Review:

Four echoes of a voice: justice, spirituality, relationship, and beauty.
God: Where is he? God's space is not the same as our space. How do they overlap: Pantheism, deism, and Christian view.
The story of Israel: Exile and restoration. Four themes in the OT: King, Temple, Torah, and new creation.

Chapter 7: Jesus and the Coming of God's Kingdom

Christianity is about something that happened. Something that happened to Jesus. More importantly, something that happened *through* Jesus.

Christianity is not about:

- A new moral teaching—as though we as humans had not ideas about morality and needed fresh or clearer guidelines. There is of course intelligent and challenging moral teaching from Jesus and his followers. But, this is not what Christianity is all about.
- Jesus offering a wonderful moral example. You hear this a lot from non-believers. Jesus was a great moral teacher, but he wasn't God. Certainly people's lives have been dramatically changed by contemplating and imitating the life of Jesus. However, such contemplation might make you feel inadequate—I'll never be that good. Watching Peyton Manning run an offense is like watching a genius. But, I have no illusions that I should try to copy that.
- Jesus offering, or demonstrating, or even accomplishing a new route by which people "can go to heaven when they die." This is a common sentiment. There is certainly lasting (eternal) consequences to our beliefs and actions. But, it is not the focus of Jesus' work and it is not the point of Christianity.

The obvious question is what is Christianity all about then. Read the last paragraph on page 92.

What Can We Know About Jesus?

<show slide of papyrus>. This made huge headlines because Jesus refers to “my wife”. Noted scholars weighed in <show slide>. Interviews were done on all the major news shows. What happened? <Does anybody know?> Most scholars believe that the fragment is a skillfully made forgery. The back end of the story didn’t make much news, certainly not mainstream news. And, I’m sure the academic world is cranking away on papers.

The point is that writings about Jesus are a huge industry in the Western world. And, outrageous claims about Jesus make front page news. The *Da Vinci Code* is a great example. The premise of that book includes that Jesus married Mary Magdalene and fathered a child. <How many of you have read it? WDYT?> IMO, it was a cleverly written thriller, but not as good as the sales would indicate if this outrageous claim had not been made. Rebutting the claims became an issue for Christians. I heard a couple of sermons in a multi-part series aimed at GenXers. <show slide as an example>

Historical figures are open to interpretation. Even when we know a lot about a figure, motives and drivers are open to speculation and interpretation. Think of all the biographies of Abraham Lincoln. We know far less about Jesus and we do about more contemporary figures in history like Lincoln, or Churchill, or JFK. But, we know a lot more about Jesus than we do about other ancient historical figures like Tiberius, the Roman ruler when Jesus died, of Herod Antipas, the Jewish ruler at the same time.

Even though we have tons of material, there are still lots of gaps. <For example, what did Jesus look like?> We don’t anything about Jesus’ looks, his dietary habits, 20 years of his life is a complete blank. Does it matter? No, but it would be nice. We know very little about how he prayed. The trick is to understand the complicated and dangerous world of the Middle East that he lived in. In that way, we can make sense historically, personally, and theologically about what he was try to do and what he was called to accomplish.

This is more complicated because we as Christians believe that Jesus is with us and that we can “get to know him” in a way that is impossible for other historical figures. A central belief of Christianity is that in Jesus, heaven and earth have come together once and for all. Jesus is the place where God’s space and our space intersect—not the temple.

You could argue that we should just abandon trying to understanding the historical Jesus and concentrate on our present experience of Jesus. There has, after all, been a lot of rubbish (not too strong a word per Wright) written about him. That approach is fraught with danger. It is hard enough when studying the history to avoid making Jesus in our own image. Abandoning the history puts no barriers between the real Jesus and fantasy.

Can We Trust the Gospels?

The short answer is yes. <Add more?>

The Kingdom of God.

The center of Jesus' public proclamation was "The kingdom of God is at hand." Remember the world of the Israelites we talked about last week—the were anxious to be rescued by God from their pagan oppressors. They were waiting for a King to rule their world and put it to rights.

So, what did he mean—the kingdom is at hand?

Isaiah (in line with some Psalms and other passages, spoke of God's kingdom as the time when:

- a) God's promises and purposes would be fulfilled.
- b) Israel would be rescued from pagan oppression.
- c) Evil would be judged, especially the evil regimes.
- d) God would bring about a new reign of justice and peace.

Daniel had a similar message. So, when Jesus spoke of God's kingdom arriving, these are images that would have come to mind in the Jews of the time. This was the first time this message had been preached. Twice during Jesus' life Jewish revolutionaries had call for revolt. Those revolts were put down by the Romans with their usual brutal efficiency.

So, what did Jesus mean when he said the kingdom of God was coming into being even as he spoke. Jesus believed that the ancient prophecies were being fulfilled. God was doing a new thing, renewing and reconstituting Israel in a radical way. John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, had told people to get ready for someone coming after him. And talked about the axe being laid to the roots of the tree. This was different. God was to judge not only the pagans, but the people of Israel as well. God was fulfilling his promises, but in a way that nobody expected. There was not to be a military revolt. It was time who what God was really like, not by fighting and violence but by loving ones enemies, turning the other cheek, going the second mile, etc. Think about how the Jews of Jesus' day would have heard the Sermon on the

Mount. They might have come to hear an impassioned plea to take up arms against the Romans and instead they heard, "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth" and "blessed are the peacemakers ..."

This is a radical message. Jesus got that message out in two ways: symbol and story.

- Symbol. <Can you think of anyway that Jesus used symbols to emphasize his message?>
 - 12 disciples symbolic of the 12 tribes of Israel. Healing. Jesus didn't heal the sick solely for humanitarian reasons.
 - Healing was a sign of the message itself. God's work of opening blind eyes and unstopping deaf ears was being done through Jesus.
 - Jesus chose to hang out with scandalous people—a symbol that the kingdom of God was all the people.
- Story. Jesus told stories that aggravated his religious listeners because they had a different twist to the normal stories they were used to. For example, the prophets had spoken about God replanting Israel after the long time of exile. Jesus told the story of people sowing seed and some of being fruitful, but much of it, maybe most of it, going to waste. He told a tiny seeds growing into huge trees. A story that combines symbolism is what we call the prodigal son. Here is the theme of coming and going, exile and restoration that we talked about last week.

Surprise, surprise. Jesus' message generated opposition. The religious establishment objected strongly to Jesus message that the kingdom was coming in through the work of Jesus. And, the Romans saw the popularity of Jesus and were nervous. They were aware that most people interpreted Daniel's 4 sea monsters to mean that the 4th was Rome itself.

This is what Jesus's message about the kingdom of God must have stirred in the Jews and Romans of the time.

So, what did he intend? And, why did anyone take him seriously after his violent death?

Chapter 8. Jesus: Rescue and Renewal.

Jesus had been preaching all over Palestine that God's kingdom was arriving. So, when he began to tell his disciples that, "the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be killed, and on the third day rise again" (Mark 8:31) they must have figured he was speaking in coded references to the biblical prophecies which talked about the coming kingdom of God. Yet, they couldn't figure what he meant this time.

This is not really surprising. They regarded Jesus as the Israel's Messiah, YHWH's anointed and the king-in-waiting that they had been longing for. Messiah in Aramaic means anointed (Christ when translated into Greek).

What did Jews expect from their Messiah?

- He would fight the battle against Israel's enemies, specifically the Romans.
- He would rebuild, or at least cleanse and restore, the Temple.
- He would reestablish the monarchy as in the days of David and Solomon.
- He would be God's representative to Israel, and Israel's representative to God.

There were other would-be Messiahs during this time in Israel's history. A hundred years after Jesus, Simon ben Kosiba was hailed as Messiah by a prominent rabbi. Simeon actually minted coins with year 1, year 2, and year 3. Not surprisingly, his rebellion was crushed by the Romans soon after. His actions fit the above pattern exactly.

So, why did Jesus' followers think he was the Messiah. He did not lead a military uprising, nor was there any sign that he would. The Temple was not part of his public proclamations. Whenever people began to hail him as king, he slipped away and escaped. (¹⁵*When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.* John 6:15). Most people thought he was a prophet, and he certainly acted in ways to encourage that view. Yet, his closest followers saw him as more than just a prophet. Jesus hinted that himself when he talked about John the Baptist. Elijah had been prophesied to return to prepare the world for the Messiah. Jesus words as recorded in Matthew 11:9-15 would have been crystal clear to the disciples as pointing to him as Messiah. ⁹*What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.* ¹⁰*This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'* ¹¹*Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.* ¹²*From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.* ¹³*For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came;* ¹⁴*and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.* ¹⁵*Let anyone with ears listen!*

But nobody, including the disciples, thought that the Messiah would have to suffer, let alone die. In fact, the expectations were just the opposite. The disciples just couldn't comprehend the idea of a literal resurrection when Je-

sus talked about it. Resurrection would happen to all of God's people at the end, not to one person in the middle of history.

We have advantage of Christian hindsight and can connect the dots between Isaiah's prophecy of the "suffering servant" to Jesus. The Jews of Jesus' day interpreted this on the suffering servant in two ways:

- That the servant of Isaiah would inflict suffering on Israel's enemies, or
- The servant would suffer, but then he couldn't be the Messiah

Jesus combined the 2 interpretations in an explosive way. The servant would be both royal and a sufferer. And, the servant was Jesus himself. Jesus' task was to bring the story of Israel to its climax. God's long range plan to rescue the world from evil was going to come true in him.

Matters came to a head when Jesus went to Jerusalem for one last Passover. Passover remembers celebrates the freeing of the Jews from slavery. Remember the themes we talked about last week—exile and restoration. Passover celebrates one of the restorations in Israel's history. So, Jesus gets to Jerusalem after a triumphant processional in to town (even that was rife with symbolism—the donkey) and what does he attack? Not the Romans as many probably thought and hoped he would. No he went to the Temple and declared it corrupt and disrupted the entire chain of commerce in the Temple. I don't think we can conjure anything as disruptive and symbolic as what he did. Jesus challenged in the name of God the very place where God was supposed to be and do business with his people. And then he said that God would destroy the temple and rebuild it in 3 days. They must have thought he was bonkers.

The Passover meal is a symbolic meal that recalls the time when God acted to free Israel from tyranny and slavery. Jesus talked about the bread as being his body that was going to take on the weight of evil so the disciples (and us) wouldn't have to bear it themselves. The Passover cup, the wine, was his blood and would be poured out like the sacrificial lamb to establish the covenant, but this time the new covenant. These images would not have been lost on the disciples.

We all know what happened next. Nothing in history comes anywhere near to this event. And, nothing in Judaism had prepared the Jews for it. Wright summarizes it well, "The death of Jesus of Nazareth as the king of the Jews, the bearer of Israel's destiny, the fulfillment of God's promises to his people of old, is either the most stupid, senseless waste and misunderstanding the world has ever seen, or it is the fulcrum around which world history turns. Christianity is based on the belief that it was and is the later."

The First Easter.

The third day, the woman and then the disciples found an empty tomb. It is hard to explain the rise of Christianity without the resurrection. First, an important point. This is resurrection, not resuscitation. Even if the efficient Roman killers had made a mistake and not killed him, he would have had months of rehabilitation and recuperation.

Nobody was expecting anyone, least of all a Messiah to rise from the dead. A crucified Messiah would be a failed Messiah. The best explanation for the rise of Christianity is that Jesus really did reappear as a living, bodily human being. The body was different. It had human characteristics—it could talk, eat, drink and be touched. But, it could also appear and disappear and pass through locked doors. This was not something that would have been made up. If it were fiction, Jesus would have been like a shining star. There is no precedent or prophecy for such a body, and no other example.

This is not an argument that will lead to people saying, “Of course, I believe now.” Wright says, “Faith can’t be forced, but unfaith can be challenged.”

Jesus and “Divinity”

Nobody ever imagined that a Messiah would be divine. The whole idea of the incarnation—a human becoming God—was not in their world view. But, from the earliest days of Christianity we find the belief, still firmly rooted in Jewish monotheism, that Jesus was indeed divine. Paul and other early writers said things like “at his name every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth; that he was the one through whom all things were made, and through whom all things were being remade; that he was the living incarnate Word of God”. This was not 300-400 years later after the theologians sank their teeth into the story. This was within one generation of Jesus’ death. And, they said in spite of the fact that it was shocking and generated controversy, even persecution. Wright says, “The earliest Christian evaluation of Jesus as the place where heaven and earth met, the replacement for the Temple, the embodiment of the living God, was about as social provocative, as well as theologically innovative, as it could possibly have been.”

Did Jesus know he was divine? Stated a bit differently, when did Jesus know he was divine? Clearly, we can’t know. How do we balance being fully human and fully divine with respect to inner knowledge? If he knew from a young age that he was God, how would that impact his humanity. Wright argues in detail elsewhere that Jesus was aware of a call, a vocation, to do and be what, according to the Scriptures, only Israel’s God gets to do and be. Jesus

was clearly aware enough to think he might be delusional. Others certainly thought he was crazy. Did he ever wonder if he was? He must have come to his conclusion by reading of the scripture (he clearly knew the scripture he had—the OT) and by an intimate prayer life. He prayed to someone he called Abba, father, or better daddy.

How do we make sense of this? Wright says, "I do not think that Jesus 'knew he was divine' in the same way the we know we are cold or hot, happy or sad, male or female. It was more like the kind of 'knowledge' we associate with vocation, where people *know*, in the very depths of their being, that they are called to be an artist, a mechanic, a philosopher." This discussion is on the edges of language being able to describe it and on the edges of theology as well. When we have a chance to ask about it, the answer will be interesting I am sure.

Stay tuned as they used to say. Next week we will talk about the Holy Spirit and living by that Spirit. Read chapters 9 and 10.

End in prayer.