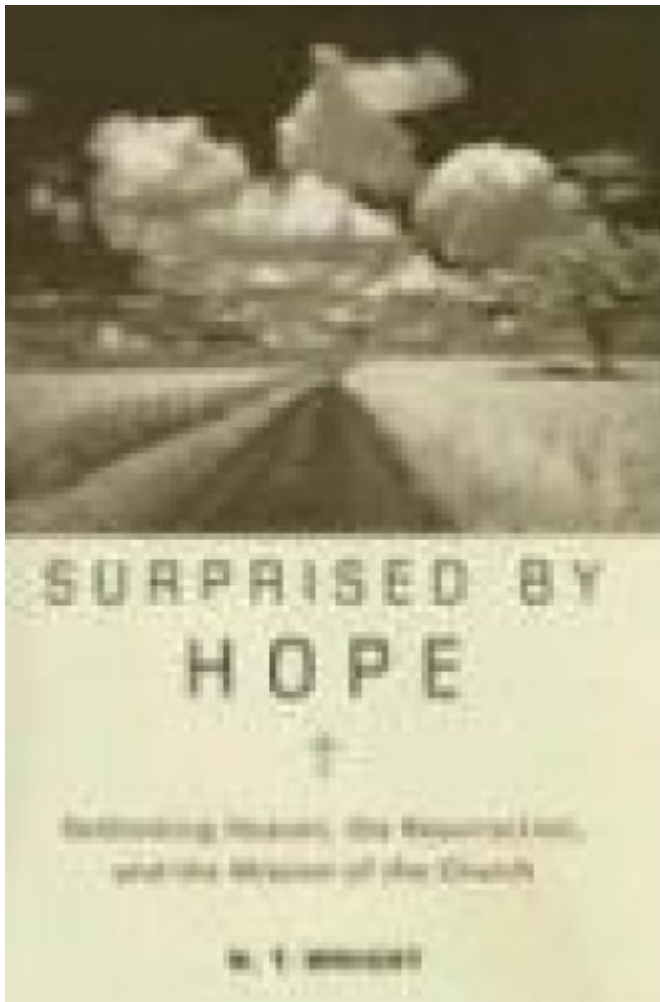


Heaven explained

by [William C. Placher](#) in the [May 20, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church

N. T. Wright
HarperOne

Christians don't go to heaven when we die—that's the dramatic way to summarize N. T. Wright's book. The Christian hope is that our bodies will be raised on a transformed Earth when Christ returns, not that our souls will be freed of our bodies so that they can get to heaven.

N. T. Wright is a distinguished New Testament scholar and (sometimes under the more approachable name of "Tom Wright") author of short introductions to New Testament texts and widely read popular defenses of Christianity. A British evangelical and a gifted and prolific writer, he is probably the closest living equivalent to C. S. Lewis. He also has a day job as the Anglican bishop of Durham.

Luther would have agreed with Wright about resurrection hope, but for Luther our intervening state is one of sleep. After death, he said, his next experience would be at the second coming, when he would hear a voice saying, "Dr. Martin, wake up!" Wright concludes that a body of scriptural evidence, beginning with Jesus' promise to one of the thieves crucified with him, demands something more:

When Jesus tells the brigand that he will join him in paradise that very day, paradise clearly cannot be their ultimate destination. . . . Paradise is, rather, the blissful garden where God's people rest prior to the resurrection. . . . The early Christians held firmly to a two-step belief about the future: first, death and whatever lies immediately beyond; second, a new bodily existence in a newly remade world.

Resurrection therefore means not life after death, but life after life after death. Using an analogy from technology, Wright explains that in this intervening period, "God will download our software onto his hardware until the time when he gives us new hardware to run the software again."

That waiting area of paradise cannot be the end of the Christian story for at least two reasons. First, Jesus' bodily resurrection back in this world is the foundation of Christian hope: "What God did for Jesus on the first Easter Day, he has promised to do for each one who is in Christ. . . . That is the biblical and historic Christian expectation." Wright thinks that the empty tomb and Jesus' followers' experiences of meeting him are "as well established . . . as any historical data could expect to be. . . . They are the only possible explanation for the stories and beliefs that grew up so quickly among Jesus's followers." True, they are not the sort of experiences for

which we can find analogies in the rest of our experience; some facts about the world, like the evidence of Jesus' resurrection, are of the sort that challenge us to remake our worldview in order to find new hope. We give up this grounding for our hope, however, if our hope is not in bodily resurrection.

Second, Christians should not believe in the myth of progress—the world is not steadily getting better and will never approach perfection—nor is it true that only a few of us will be rescued from a world doomed to destruction, as many American fundamentalists believe. Rather, the world—the physical world—will be transformed and redeemed.

What does that mean? The incomplete world we know will be re-created in different space and matter, flooded with God's own life. Jesus will be present "as the center and focus of the new world." And in that world our bodies will be resurrected—again in a transformed way, and not necessarily including any of the same molecules that now make up our bodies (after all, we can preserve our identities even in this life through complete changes in the matter that we contain). These transformed bodies will not be somehow ethereal but will be "more real, more solid" than the ones we have now.

Will the world be too crowded to hold all the accumulated generations? Wright assures us that God can figure out a way to solve such problems in any event, but notes that half the people who have ever lived are now alive, as if to suggest that this future world might not need to be too different from the current one in order to hold everybody. It will not be a world in which we will simply lounge around—"There will be work to do, and we shall relish doing it."

But first, when Christ returns, there will be judgment. Wright sees no need for purgatory—death itself will free most of us from all that is sinful. He also does not expect eternal punishment of the most sinful, or their annihilation. Rather, he thinks that some people so turn to evil that they are "conniving at their own ultimate dehumanization." Some who were once human so destroy the image of God within them that they cease to be human, and their eternal fate will be to exist forever in the new creation in this less than human state.

Wright devotes the last third of his book to arguing that his claims about the resurrection matter for the mission of the church today. If our hope rested in escaping the material world, he explains, then there would be no ultimate value in

trying to improve it. After all, it would all be destined to destruction. But if we await a transformed world, then “every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or to walk . . . all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make.” Wright therefore urges Christians who believe in the resurrection to work for justice, beauty and evangelism in the here and now. As to justice, interestingly enough, he identifies Third World debt as the most important moral issue of our time. As to beauty, perhaps the unexpected item on the list, he argues that “when people cease to be surrounded by beauty, they cease to hope,” and he therefore insists that the aesthetic must be an important component of the church’s mission.

I had great hopes for this book. We desperately need some reflection on what lies beyond death that falls somewhere between the Left Behind series and the often hopelessly vague thoughts of much theological liberalism, and Wright could have been the man to give it to us. Maybe I was hoping for too much, but I ended up disappointed.

For one thing, Wright’s work could have used more vigorous editing; the central points here could have been made in a book half as long. Second, as with C. S. Lewis’s apologetic works, I sometimes felt bullied. After an argument that seems a little fuzzy, Wright insists that it is “crystal clear” and that there is “no room for doubt” about the conclusion. Most of all, though, I was frustrated that Wright keeps wavering between the assertion of specific conclusions and the acknowledgment that of course everything about the future “is simply a set of signposts pointing into a fog.” The Puritans of colonial New Haven were buried facing Jerusalem so they could see Jesus returning at the general resurrection without having to turn around. Sometimes Wright seems fairly close to them, sometimes far, far away.

For example, sometimes Wright talks about the transformation of the whole cosmos into a different kind of space and matter. At other points he talks about the transformation of this world as a new home for our resurrected bodies, and he seems to mean that we will inhabit something like the terrestrial ball on which we now live. Which is it? Will Indiana still be Indiana, albeit (we may hope!) in a transformed condition? I do not know what Wright would say. Similarly, of course, any description of the interim state in which we exist before the resurrection will be tentative, but Wright offers such radically different pictures of that state—a garden

where we rest up and our software existing on God's hardware—that one wonders whether there would be a basis for rejecting any alternative. If Wright says confidently that other people have the picture wrong, then he needs to give us a little more detail about the right picture.

Furthermore, the main ethical conclusion that Wright draws strikes me as a non sequitur. The reality of history is that some good things do get lost. The severely handicapped child I teach to walk (to use Wright's example) may get run over by a truck, with my good deed forgotten. Why should I assume that my deed will find its way into God's new creation? The thought that all that we do is spiritually preserved in God's eternity seems at least as good a reason for hoping that our good deeds will not go for naught.

This book exhibits Wright's usual combination of great learning and friendly prose. Along the way he raises important questions and points in some interesting directions. I realize that any sensible account of what lies beyond this life can only offer, as Wright says, signposts and not photographs. It is the wavering line between matters where Wright seems absolutely certain and matters where he lets everything remain unclear that leaves me frustrated.