

“God and the Pandemic:”
A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and Its Aftermath

N.T. Wright

September 2, 2020

Session Three:

Chapter 3 – Jesus and the Gospels (p. 15 - 29)

Matthew 6:9-13

Mark 12:1-12

John 11

Questions to Grapple With...

- 1. N.T. Wright addresses the theological concept of “sovereignty” in chapter three. When you think about Jesus’ ministry on Earth, do you often think of him as being “sovereign”? Or do we usually reserve that for our Heavenly Father? Do we usually make a distinction of divine characteristics between the different Triune Godheads?**
- 2. N.T. Wright speaks about the Kingdom of God in terms of the “present” instead of in the “future”. When you have heard the term “Kingdom of God”, have you thought more of “heaven” or “earth”? How does Wright’s explanation agree with or challenge your thoughts?**
- 3. In the story of the death of Lazarus in John 11, have you ever wondered why Jesus wept if he knew he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead? Something to think about in terms of our situation as we think about Jesus’ divinity, his redefining of roles, and our approach to crisis.**

Diving into the Text...

The New Testament and “Now”

N.T. Wright begins the focus on the New Testament by sharing that one of the great words used is the word “Now”. That was then, this is now. Paul uses “now” when describing the move from humanity’s struggle to God’s solution. Jesus ushering in a new era, Now! Wright also addressed that Jesus, like the prophet of the Old Testament, would point to disasters and the need to repent...but they were specific to historical events in that time frame. “The warnings were all about the imminent destruction of Jerusalem.” (p. 15) This reference coming from Luke 13 was historical in context. Jesus could read the

signs of the times, and he did (the destruction came forty years later at the hands of the Roman Empire.)

Now is a powerful word. In Jesus' time, individuals wanted signs or miracles "Now". When they asked for these signs, Jesus saw these requests as a sign of their unbelief. His response in Matthew 12:39 would be another prophetic sign, *"A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."* Jesus would be the sign to the other generation. The other signs Jesus performed were not negative ones, like those of Moses or Aaron, or proclaimed by Amos or the other prophets. Those were warning signals. Jesus' signs, as seen in John, were about a new way – positive, forward thinking – a new way that God was working "Now".

Jesus was standing at the middle point – the hinge. A reminder of the Old Testament prophets (sin no more), but looking forward to a new way of life (building the kingdom of God). We see this picture in John 9:1-3 with a man born blind. Jesus does not look back at a hypothetical cause, a sin that had to be punished. He looked ahead to see what God – what Jesus – was going to do about it – "Now".

Jesus is the "Sign"

Jesus stood at this transitional point in history. He was the last warning to Jerusalem to follow God's way of peace or face destruction at the hands of the Roman Empire. This emotion plays out as Jesus rides towards Jerusalem and laments over the city in Luke 19. In the same act, Jesus is pointing the world, through his symbolic act of death and resurrection, to repentance and peace. Wright points out that when Jesus speaks of war, famines, and the like, "he doesn't say, "So when these things happen you must think carefully about what you and your society should be repenting of." (p. 18) Instead, Jesus says the end is not yet (Matthew 24:6). Just as today, conspiracy theories of end times were prevalent in the first century as well. Jesus pushed them aside and said trust in me.

Instead, Jesus gave his followers a prayer, one that we still pray today. However, we often overlook the significance of the words. The words in the "Lord's Prayer" have daily impact, but carry key prophetic points too.

Let's read The Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13.

- Have you ever thought about what it means to pray "daily" that "God's kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven"? What does that mean to you? What does that look like?
- If we are asking for forgiveness for our "trespasses" or "debts" daily, Wright would argue there is no need to have a cataclysmic event to "scare us" into forgiveness. Repentance is something we should be seeking daily. Do we?

"Thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven" should be a daily prayer. As should be, "Forgive us our trespasses" – not just when we think the world is coming to an end! Wright states being "kingdom people" and "penitence-people" is part of what it means to follow Jesus. Praying these prayers daily may open our eyes to anti-kingdom actions taking place in the world. The Lord's Prayer should be a model for us to follow Jesus. It should not require a special event – like a pandemic – to nudge us into following Him. When we do this, we will realize that Jesus (as the last prophet, his death and resurrection as the last summons) began ushering in the new Kingdom when He came, rather than other events or other voices as our guiding lights.

Jesus as the Center

How do we apply the Bible to disturbing events of our time? We place Jesus at the center and work out from there! Failure to do this, takes Jesus out of the picture all together. Where does this start? Jesus came into Galilee saying "Now". Jesus redefined the ancient stories, prophecies, and expectations around a new vision using parables to define this new Kingdom of God that redefined "kingdom", "sovereignty", and "control".

Jesus redefined it not just for the first century, but for modern day as well. Our understanding of God's "sovereignty" in terms of the COVID-19 pandemic was redefined by Jesus. "Sovereignty" is defined as a supreme power or authority, and "sovereign" describes an individual who is a supreme ruler, completely in charge. Jesus unveiled a new meaning of "divine sovereign" when he healed a leper, forgave a penitent woman, celebrated parties with the "wrong" people, announced judgement on Jerusalem and the Temple, broke bread with

the disciples, hung on the cross, and when he rose three days later. N.T. Wright says that as Christians we must see these Messianic events as the ultimate sign and call to repentance, or we will overcompensate in interpreting other events as such, leaving Jesus out.

“Similarly, any claim to tell from world events when the ‘second coming’ will occur is a claim to know more than Jesus himself (Mark 13:32).” (p. 21) Jesus and his death on the cross is the reason to turn from sin, not fear. The resurrection is the start of a new creation, a new kingdom – a summons to all and a clue to the world. Trying to figure out what God is doing through a natural disaster is asking someone to discover something about our Heavenly God without going through Jesus, or as Wright says, “going behind Jesus’ back” (p. 22) Wright uses Mark 12 to illustrate this point...

Read Mark 12:1-12.

- From a historical perspective, Jesus was giving a warning sign to Jerusalem about his message of peace in regards to the Roman Empire. To the religious leaders, the message was deeper. This was their last chance. Things would be different...and they were. Historically? Theologically? For the Kingdom?
- In terms of the message, Wright says the application goes beyond to the terms of messages and messengers too. “If there is One God, and if he has come in the person of his own son to unveil his rescuing purposes for the world, then there can be no other signs, no other warning events, to compare with this one.” What do you think? Why are we quick to label an event one of these? Why do we “expect” it?

God is sovereign, and He can do what he wants. We should not expect it though. Our call to repentance comes through Jesus, not other outward events. God will continue to speak to us in how the world is going, but they will be “Jesus-shaped”. He is the final messenger. He is our voice.

The Kingdom of God – Now

God's Kingdom has already been started through the work of Jesus. What is this "kingdom"? N.T. Wright shares that a lot of misinformation has flooded the marketplace over the past couple centuries on this topic. This kingdom, or God's ultimate future, is not about saved souls going to heaven, leaving earth for good. Platonic thought infiltrated this Christian philosophy early on and created this escapist mentality in the mid to late first and early second century.

So when? Matthew 28:18 says, "All authority in heaven and on earth **has been** given." Not in the future, but present. Jesus is already reigning in the present. Paul talks about Jesus' present rule over the world in his letters, starting with his resurrection and ending when all enemies are subdued.

Jesus' reign also reveals the sovereignty of God, especially through his approach to the cross. Wright shares that Christians have always seen this act as "salvation" bringing, but we often miss the "kingdom bringing" effect of Jesus' death. Jesus redefined power by the act of "service", being questioned by two of his closest disciples about seats "in the kingdom". The world says this, but I say serve. "Jesus' own unique saving vocation has thus redefined power and authority for all time." (p. 25) Unfortunately, Western Christianity has tried to separate salvation and power – while Jesus redefined them both, one in the same! *"If you want to know what it means to talk about God being 'in charge of the world, or being 'in control', or being 'sovereign', then Jesus himself instructs you to rethink the notion of 'kingdom', 'control', and 'sovereignty' themselves, around his death on the cross."*

In John 11, we see Jesus and his disciples confronted with the death of Lazarus. Why would Jesus, who has already healed a stranger's son from a distance, not do the same for Lazarus?

Read John 11.

- How is Jesus' (God's) sovereignty – knowing what is going on and what he will do – revealed in this passage?
- How does the way that Jesus handles the situation – not looking back, but simply weeps in the present, then moves forward – reveal a model for us in our present approach to the pandemic?

A few things to notice from this passage. Upon arriving at the tomb, Jesus thanks God for hearing his prayer (this means Jesus lifted a prayer before arriving in Bethany that Lazarus, we would assume, would not decompose and ready to be risen.) Once the stone is rolled away, Martha's fears are not realized. Jesus is sovereign through all – what has gone on already, what he will do, and what the family is going through. He knows he will understand death as Lazarus has done but will understand life in a whole new way.

A Clue in Tears

But why weep? Jesus is sovereign. He understands it all. Why weep? Wright argues against what some theologians state that it was a show for the family, showing sympathy for Mary and Martha. These are real tears. “The horror of death – the fact that is sneers in the face that is lovely and beautiful – is overwhelming even for the Lord of life.” (p. 27) We see these same tears in the Garden of Gethsemane. This is how Jesus has redefined the sovereignty and the kingdom!

Mary, Martha, and the crowds say to Jesus, “You could have done something!” These are the same words echoed in the world today around the pandemic. Just as with the man born blind, blame was attempted to be assigned, but Jesus looked ahead. Forward. What will happen now? “He has trusted his Father, and is looking ahead to see what must now happen. And the way to that goal is through tears.” (p. 27) Tears can be the clue to wisdom. Wisdom that we need right now.

Jesus does not turn to anger or blame. He weeps, and then with tears and trust, he commands Lazarus to come forth. Jesus redefined what it means for God to be in control and that he is taking charge. Jesus refused to split God's providence (God's supervision) and atonement (God's forgiveness) - no matter what we tried to do, and we must remember that scripture has them intertwined and our theology must merge them also. We must also remember that Jesus must be the center of our signs – of all that God has done and will do. He will continue to speak to us through other events, but all things work out from Jesus who is our center. Next week, we will see how we read events in the world considering Jesus' death and resurrection.

Follow Up Questions...

How does Jesus' redefinition of "sovereignty" – supreme power over the world – as an act of service, love, forgiveness, healing, etc. shape our understanding of how we are to approach the world as a follower of the "supreme being" of the world?

If Jesus, knowing that he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead and knowing that he was going to die on the cross and be raised three days later, still wept at the tomb and in the Garden of Gethsemane in the face of pain and death, what model does this show us when faced with pain, crisis, and death in the world? How can we both express these emotions and look ahead at the Kingdom of God that has been established "on earth as it is in heaven" by Jesus?

Next Week...

Session 4

Wednesday, September 9

6:30 PM

Readings: Chapter 4 – Reading the New Testament (p. 30 – 51)

Acts 11:19-30

Revelation 5:6-14

Romans 8