

Simply Jesus

Chapters 1-2

- **Opening Prayer**

Lord God, open all our senses to experiencing Jesus in a fresh way that sheds light on your purpose for us as his disciples. In Jesus's holy name we pray. Amen.

- **Video – [YouTube “[SIMPLY JESUS: A Discussion with N.T. Wright](#)” 0:00-4:01]**

- “*Kingdom of God*” does not equate to heaven
- Do you think we overspiritualize Jesus, rather than relating to him as earthly?
- Is it realistic to view Jesus with a fresh and open mind?

- **Chapter 1 – A Very Odd Sort of King**

- How would you characterize a king?
 - Why might it be difficult for us to think of Jesus in this light?
- Explore Matthew 21:1-9 with all your senses. Read the scripture aloud and have the group close their eyes and listen for things that trigger sights, sounds, smells, touches, and tastes.
 - What sights came to mind?
 - Sounds?
 - Smells?
 - Touches?
 - Tastes?
- What are your experiences do you have with the production *Jesus Christ Superstar*?
 - Theater / Album / Movie / Live TV event (John Legend as Jesus and Alice Cooper as Herod)
 - Like *Godspell*, it has no clear depiction of the resurrection
 - Why not?
 - [2] Wright notes that it asks questions (e.g., “Who in the world do you think you are?”)
 - “Is our sense of Jesus...simply a figment of our imagination?”
 - Why is it important for us to ask these questions?
- [4] “With Jesus, it’s easy to be complicated and hard to be simple.”
 - In what ways do you consider Jesus complicated? Simple?
 - Does considering him as simple help in any way?
- [5] “We want a ‘religious’ leader, not a king! We want someone to save our souls, not rule our world! Or, if we want a king... what we want is someone to implement the policies we already embrace.”
 - Do you agree?
- *The existence of the four Gospels attest to Jesus being a real historical figure*

- **Chapter 2 – The Three Puzzles**

- We don’t know as much about the ancient historical figure of Jesus as we’d like (we know more about him than most historical figures)
 - If you were to ask one question about Jesus’ life, what would it be?
- Three puzzles
 - Jesus’ world is a strange, foreign country
 - Jesus’ God is strange to us
 - Jesus spoke and acted as if he was in charge
- Are you puzzled by any of these three statements?
- What would the world be like if Jesus was in charge politically as well as religiously?

- Other reflections?
 - [optional] Video – YouTube “[Simply Jesus \(Official Music + Lyric Video\) - Jasmine Janá](#)” 0:00-4:37
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References for material:

- [Simply Jesus](#)

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Chapters 3-5

- **Opening Prayer**

Heavenly Father, frequently our lives feel like we're living in the middle of a storm. Calm our spirits this hour as we open ourselves to you and your inspiration. In Your son's name we pray. Amen.

- **Chapter 3 – The Perfect Storm**

- [13] Wright uses the image of a “perfect storm” to characterize both Jesus’ time and that of today
 - Rationalistic skepticism of last 200 years vs. conservative Christian reaction
- What do you think of this imagery?
 - Wright sees this as paralleling Democrat vs. Republican polarization
 - Do you agree?
- Wright writes that American skeptics are “rescued” from the closed-minded world of Jesus – Bible, Mass, family, strict morals, Rapture, purgatory, heaven, hell
 - Can you see this in skeptics you know?
- In Britain, despite two generations removed from strict upbringing, skepticism still thrives
 - Is this cyclical or a one-way street?
- 2 Myths about Jesus: supernatural vs. simply human teacher
 - Neither stands up to hard-edged scrutiny
 - Reactions?
- 3rd element of the perfect storm today: Historical complexity of Jesus’ life – based on Gospels and a single historian (Josephus) who wrote about it 40 years later
 - Does this historical complexity bother you?

- **Chapter 4 – The Making of a First-Century Storm**

- *Perfect storm in Jesus’ time was Rome vs. the story of Israel*
- Wright talks about Jews of Jesus’ day felt they were living in the story
 - Do you feel like we’re living in Jesus’ story, or viewing it in the rearview mirror?
- [31] Wright talks about the “myth of progress” where we live in a story of progressive freedom moving toward an ultimate libertarian utopia
 - Reactions?
- *Rome practiced retrospective eschatology – feeling they’d arrived*
- *Jews practice prospective eschatology – looking forward to the peace/freedom/justice which was theirs by right*
- *Wright compares Jewish reaction to Hitler’s atrocities to their reactions to Rome’s imperialism*
 - *They believed God would react to these events*

- **Chapter 5 – The Hurricane**

- [37] *Third element to Rome vs. story of Israel: God remained free and sovereign*
- God’s plan was frequently not in line with the way Israel told its story
 - How is God’s plan different from the way we tell our story?
- [38] “God called Israel, so that through Israel he might redeem the world; but Israel itself needs redeeming as well.”
 - In what ways is this analogous to our present-day situation?
- Jews at the time of Jesus were praying for God to come and be king – theocracy
 - Is this what we want?
- Do you think of God as our king – as is described in the passages from the Psalms Wright includes?
- Wright talks about the use of “shepherd” as well as “king” due to its meaning in Jesus’ time

- Are there occupations in our time that might be used instead of “shepherd”?
nurse/teacher/orphanage director
 - YHWH appears in many different ways, which adds to the confusion of what to look for
 - Recurring theme is that God **will return**
 - How does this align with your view today?
 - [53] Nobody in the three hundred years surrounding Jesus suggested God might come in the form and person of the Davidic king
 - [54] “why would anyone say this of Jesus, who had not done the things people expected a victorious king to do?”
 - Do you have a sense that Jesus is ruling the whole world today?
 - Other reflections?
-

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Chapters 6-7

- **Opening Prayer**

Dear God, give us new understanding about the nature of Jesus and the mission of his campaign on earth. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

- **Video – [YouTube “[Part 2: Simply Jesus - A Discussion with N. T. Wright](#)” 4:32]**

- What is your view of “theocracy”?
- Can or should *we* redeem the world?

- **Chapter 6 – God’s in Charge Now**

- [57] Wright gives 4 quick answers as to what we know about Jesus – What do each reveal to you about Jesus?
 1. Jesus attracted crowds
 2. People accused Jesus of being in league with the devil
 3. Jesus gave the explanation that “something new was happening”
 4. It may be time to be skeptical about skepticism itself (“Skepticism is no more neutral or objective than faith.”)
- Jesus was *announcing* that God was king
 - What are the memorable announcements in your life?
 - How do you typically greet announcements about God?
- [61] Timeline of ~600 years since Babylonian conquering of Jerusalem
 - The Jews recognized that things weren’t right.
 - What sustained their hope?
 - In what ways is this similar to our condition today?
 - *The Hebrews retold the story at Passover. We retell it at Easter (same time as Passover).*
- “Reliving the Exodus story”
 - [63] 7 Exodus themes: wicked tyrant, chosen leader, victory of God, rescue by sacrifice, new way of life, presence of God, promised/inherited land
 - Are there any parallels with Exodus today?

- **Chapter 7 – The Campaign Starts Here**

- What are the characteristics of the period of time when a new government leader takes over?
- *Chapter theme - Jesus used celebration, healing, and forgiveness*
- [68] Imagine what it would be like if, without an election someone were to go on national television and announce they were president.”
 - What would that be like?
- Jesus knew that Israel had to repent. He frequently spoke of forgiveness.
 - Desmond Tutu: “No Future Without Forgiveness” slogan
 - “Forgiveness has a claim to be the most powerful thing in the world”
 - Reactions?
 - Luke 4:16-30
 - What do you think was the root of the people’s rage?
 - Was it the broad forgiveness included in the scripture or something else?
- Israel’s exile brought them deep, deadly shame due to their culture.
 - Do we have this same sense of honor and shame that would cause exile to be similarly viewed?
- When do you most closely sense God’s personal forgiveness of you?
- Do you ever wonder why Jesus didn’t work to free John the Baptist from prison?

- Why might he have refrained?
 - Other reflections?
-

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Chapters 8-9

- **Opening Prayer**

Heavenly Father, as we listen to the stories of Jesus, help us to greet them with fresh minds and open hearts. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

- **Chapter 8 – Stories That Explain and a Message That Transforms**

- Jesus told stories designed to “tease.”
 - In movies and books, in what ways can teasing be a useful tool? *Foreshadowing, attention grabber*
- [87] “*The parables were not... earthly stories with heavenly meanings [some perhaps by accident]”*
 - *Rather they resonate with scriptural promises*
 - *Some are heavenly stories with earthly meanings (rich man and Lazarus in the afterlife)*
- [90] “...the wrong people seem to be getting the message, and many of the right people are missing it entirely”
 - How is this true today?
- Stories of *apocalyptic vision* – the coming of God’s Kingdom on earth as in heaven
 - Prodigal Son – How might this be viewed in that light?
 - Daniel – subversive stories about overthrowing kingdoms
 - Why was this message important to Jewish readers?
- Read Mark 7:1-23 [Pharisees confronting Jesus about eating/cleansing]
 - [101] “his point is that *when God becomes king, he provides a cure for uncleanness of heart.*”
 - “forgiveness is not just to remove old guilt but to renew the person from the inside out”
 - How does this scripture apply to us today?
- [102] Wright says that when Jesus is asked about divorce, his response claims that when God is king, creation is renewed including lifelong monogamous marriage
 - What are your reactions to this?

- **Chapter 9 – The Kingdom Present and Future**

- Jesus speaks “God’s kingdom has come upon [them]” (Luke 11:20) and “the coming of the son of man” (Matt 24:30)
 - Why does he speak of the kingdom being both present now and coming in the future?
- **Judah the Hammer** (*Judas Maccabeus*) – led 3-year revolt in 160s BC ending in cleansing of the Temple – Hanukkah
 - *Judah’s family (Hasmoneans) turned out to be far from perfect rulers*
 - *Groups arose to force the true realization of prophecy – Pharisees*
- **Simon the Star** – 132AD: led rebellion against Roman emperor Hadrian who was anti-Jewish
 - *Great rabbi of the time declared him the Messiah*
 - *Rome crushed the rebellion in 135*
- **Herod the Great** – 37 BC: Overcame Parthia who had overtaken Jerusalem and other Middle Eastern Roman territories
 - *Fought on behalf of Rome*
 - *Recognized by Rome as “King of the Jews”*
 - *Not fully Jewish*
 - *Turned evil – killing own family members*
 - *On his deathbed, ordered leading citizens to be killed so there would be mourners – not carried out*
- **Simon Bar-Giora** – 66-70 AD: Jewish revolt against Roman rule; Simon was ruler when Romans retaliated

- *Freed slaves*
 - *Surrendered to Rome, shipped off to Rome, led through streets, whipped, and killed*
 - How might a first and second century Jew view Jesus in light of these other four?
 - *Jewish expectations for a Messiah: 2 key moments*
 1. *Raise the flag*
 2. *Final battle won and Temple rebuilt*
 - Segue to the next chapter
 - Other reflections?
-

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Chapters 10-11

- **Opening Prayer**

Lord God, help us to gain a better understanding of the change Jesus brings to our world, and to participate in this revolution. In his holy name we pray. Amen.

- **Chapter 10 - Battle and Temple**

- What are your views of “satan”?
- *Beelzebub/I = “Lord of the Flies”*
- [121] C.S. Lewis *Screwtape Letters*: “the modern world divides into those who are obsessed with demonic powers and those who mock them as outdated rubbish”
 - How do you see this witnessed in our world today?
 - “...there is such a thing as a dark force...that can make people do things they would never normally do”
 - Do you agree?
- *Fatally* easy to typecast people like us as “good” and others as “evil” ...”we demonize our opponents”
 - In what ways do you exhibit this behavior?
- *Jesus’ final battle is with satan, not with those whom the Jews labeled as demons*
- Jesus cleansing the Temple
 - What is your take on this story?
 - *He was claiming to be king (the king controlled the Temple)*
 - *Wright thinks that Jesus’ action declared that the Temple was under God’s judgment and would soon be destroyed forever*

- **Chapter 11 – Space, Time, and Matter**

- [131] Western world has lost a sense of sacred space in terms of geography
 - What’s your reaction to this?
 - Where are our sacred spaces?
- Wright says he’s witnessed an erosion of special time [Sundays, Good Fridays, etc.]
 - In what ways have you experienced this erosion?
 - When are your sacred times?
- ‘Matter is just stuff’
 - Is there any “matter” that has special spiritual meaning to you?
- Temple
 - When I say “temple” what comes to mind?
 - *‘Where God enters; intersection of heaven and earth’*
 - *Hebrews viewed it as the center of the banking system; symbol of nationalist movements/revolts against pagan oppression*
- Time
 - ‘God didn’t just rest on the 7th day, but rather took up residence and enjoyed’
 - What do you think of this perspective?
 - ‘Jesus’ time is the time of fulfillment where earth-as-in-heaven is launched’
 - Reflections?
- Matter
 - *Lots of Jesus’ ministry involves matter – fish, wine, bread*
 - *Miracles = ‘Characteristic of the new creation when heaven and earth come together’*
- *Misconceptions about Jesus’ revolution:*
 - *Didn’t come to teach how to get to heaven*

- *Wasn't a violent revolutionary trying to overthrow Rome or the rich*
 - *Instead, he was training people to be kingdom bringers*
- *Didn't come to prove his divinity*
 - *Instead, he realized God becoming king on earth*

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Chapters 12-13

- **Opening Prayer**

Dear Lord, we strive to hear your message today, even in the apocalyptic visions found in scripture. Open our eyes to the messages they contain for us, and help them reveal the true nature of your kingdom. In the name of the King of Kings we pray. Amen.

- **Chapter 12 – At the Heart of the Storm**

- [151] *Perfect Storm = Roman pressure + 1000 years of hope of Israel + purposes of God*
- Wright claims God's purposes through Jesus were aimed against the other two (i.e., the Roman pressure and the way Israel's hope was perceived)
 - Is that the way you view Jesus' ministry?
- Jesus reflects verbally and through his ministry prophecies of Isaiah, Daniel, and Zechariah
- Read Isaiah 42:1-9
 - Written during Babylonian exile
 - Some believe it refers to Persian king Cyrus the Great who destroys Babylon
 - What images from these verses foreshadow Jesus to you?
- Read Daniel 7:23-28
 - Dream of beasts which are interpreted as kingdoms
 - Promise of God's kingdom
 - What emotions does this scripture passage elicit in you?
- Read Zechariah 14:1-9
 - How might this passage shape the hope and expectations of the Jews in Jesus' time?

- **Chapter 13 – Why Did the Messiah Have to Die?**

- Jesus didn't fit any ready-made categories – messiah, rabbi, priest, and prophet
 - In what ways do you see Jesus fulfilling the role of each of these four?
 - In what ways does he differ from the role?
- Three strands meeting up: messiahship, servant, and God
 - Jesus spoke as if his call was to bring these three together
 - [170] The Baptism [of Jesus] – “You are my son!”
 - Do you agree that this event demonstrates these three strands?
 - Wright compares it to David's anointing and equates Jesus' victory when tested in the wilderness to David's killing of Goliath
 - Do you see this?
- [Mis]interpretation of Jesus' public life as successful & popular followed by decline in popularity and suffering
 - Have you viewed the phases of Jesus' life in this way?
- [173] “all four gospel writers insist, a cross that is to be seen as a throne” (“King of the Jews' sign”)
 - Do you think this is the intent of the gospel writers?
- The “Temple” where heaven and earth meet transitioned from Jerusalem to Jesus himself
 - Jesus was to go ahead of his people and meet the powers of destruction himself
 - New meaning to John 2:19 “Destroy this temple and in three days I will rebuild it”
 - What meaning does this have for your life today?
- Last Supper didn't as much point backward to Exodus but rather forward to Jesus' great sacrifice to rescue God's people from slavery
 - When you take communion, do you think of Jesus' sacrifice, or something else?

- John talks about God's *kingly* victory, and that Jesus' mission was not to rescue people *from* creation but rather to rescue *creation* itself
 - What's your interpretation of this?
- [184] *Points made by Jesus' death*
 - *It was exemplary, with a powerful love to rescue and restore*
 - *It was representative*
 - *It was penal*
 - *It was the ultimate means by which God's kingdom was established*

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Chapters 14-15

- **Opening Prayer**

Heavenly Father, we are so grateful for the gift of your Son. Help us to better understand and embrace his rule in our world today. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

- **Chapter 14 – Under New Management: Easter and Beyond**

- [191] *Jesus rose from the dead to the beginning of a new world*
- *Most believe that heaven could not contain a solid physical body*
 - *Wright's point is that the heavenly and earthly worlds combine with Jesus' arrival*
- *New world brings a new way to live: love and reconciliation*
 - *Do you think our world is closer to realizing this than before Jesus?*
- *4 things about the ascension*
 - *Heaven and earth are not far apart – heaven permeates earth*
 - *Heaven is the place from which the world is run*
 - *Fulfillment of Daniel 7*
 - *Jesus is radically upstaging Caesar*
- **Rapture**
 - [199] *Misreading of 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17 metaphorical language*
 - *Why do you think so many Christians get hung up on literal translations of the Bible?*
- *The second coming implies that Jesus remains sovereign and will return to put everything right*
 - *What does "Jesus returning" mean to you?*
- [202] *"God will do for the whole cosmos...what he did for Jesus at Easter; the risen Jesus, remember, is the prototype of the new creation"*
 - *How do you interpret this?*

- **Chapter 15 – Jesus: Ruler of the World**

- **4 Positions on Jesus' lordship**
 1. *Andy – Jesus is gone and is not lord*
 2. *Billy – Jesus is lord of the upper world, and will return to be lord of earth as well*
 3. *Chris – Jesus is already in charge of the world*
 4. *Davie – In the face of other "forces" or idols in the world (money, power, sex), the church is dragged into pantheism; we need a fresh word from God → Jesus*
 - *With which of these positions do you most empathize? Why?*
 - *With which of these positions do you most disagree?*
 - *Chris's position allows for non-Christians in the world to be fulfilling God's plan*
 - *If you're doing Christ's work, but not professing Christ, where do you stand with God?*
Reference the story of the sheep and the goats [Matthew 25:31-46]
- **God's Rule – Through Us**
 - *"God intended to rule the world through us"*
 - *What does this statement mean to you?*
 - [212] *"Jesus rescues human beings...that through them he may rule his world in the new way he always intended"*
 - *Some things had to be done solo, others could be shared with his followers*
 - *Which actions did Jesus need to do solo? crucifixion, transfiguration*
 - *Which actions did he share with his followers? healing, preaching*
- **The Centrality of Worship**

- [217] “worshipping the God we see at work in Jesus is the most politically charged act we can ever perform.”
 - What does he mean?
- Matthew 5:3
 - NIV - “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”
 - CEB – “Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.”
 - What are the differences between the two translations?
 - *The second aligns with Wright as it reflects heaven’s rule on earth now*
- **The Role of the Church**
 - What do you consider to be the church’s calling?
 - [220] “to be the means through which Jesus continues to work and to teach, to establish his sovereign rule on earth as in heaven”
 - How does this differ from your vision of the church’s calling?
 - [223] “God desires order, not chaos, and calls human rulers, whether they know it or not, to bring that order about.”
 - In what ways do you agree or disagree with this statement?
 - [224] “God will in the end call nations to account”
 - Do you see this happening?
 - Western democracies who don’t want to be held accountable for doing “Jesus’ work” per se, drive a wedge between church and state and assume much of the work previously done by the church.
 - Do you see this playing out today in America?
 - In what areas do you think the church should have more involvement?
- **Summing Up**
 - [228] “the reign of Jesus, in its present mode, is strictly temporary. God the father has installed Jesus in power, to act on his behalf; but when his task is complete, ‘the son himself will be placed in proper order’ under God the father, ‘so that God may be all in all.’”
 - How does this reconcile with your belief of Jesus’ rule and second coming?
- Other reflections?

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