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Table of Contents What is Surprised by Hope about? This book addresses the question of what happens after death. Wright argues that Christians often misunderstand the afterlife. He explains that rather than going to heaven, believers will experience resurrection. Heaven will ultimately come down to earth, transforming our lives now. Book Details Title: Surprised by Hope Author: N.T. Wright Pages: 332 Published: May 30, 2007 Synopsis of Surprised by HopeIntroduction to the Resurrected Hope In “Surprised by Hope,” N.T. Wright, a renowned Anglican bishop, reexamines Christian beliefs about life after death. He critiques common perceptions that suggest Christians simply go to heaven when they die. Instead, Wright argues for a view that emphasizes resurrection and the coming together of heaven and earth. He claims this perspective radically influences how believers live in the present world. Wright’s arguments challenge both non-Christians and uninformed Christians, making a case for a more profound understanding of Christian eschatology. A Shift from Disembodied Souls to Bodily Resurrection One of Wright’s central assertions is that the biblical portrayal of hope revolves around bodily resurrection. Contrary to what many believe, the New Testament does not primarily advocate for an ethereal existence. For Wright, Christians are not just waiting to escape to heaven; rather, they await physical resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus serves as the first fruits of this hope. It symbolizes God’s ultimate victory over death and decay for believers. Wright argues that historical interpretations of the afterlife often stem from Greek philosophy. Many Christians mistakenly embrace views influenced more by Gnosticism than by biblical texts. Through critical examination, Wright reveals how popular views neglect the biblical vision of new heavens and a new earth. He urges readers to recognize that heaven is not our ultimate destination; it is the renewed creation that awaits us. Theological Insight on Heaven and Earth Wright delves deep into the implications of this resurrection-centric view. He discusses that both heaven and earth will eventually be intertwined, transforming into a unified existence. He refers to the biblical cosmology, emphasizing that it posits heaven as a dimension rather than a mere place beyond the clouds. Wright contrasts popular beliefs with the teachings that illustrate creation as inherently good. Death and decay are seen not as a natural end; they are parasites on a good creation. Wright explains that God’s goal is to restore his creation, not abandon it. Powerfully grounding his arguments in Scripture, he reminds readers that eternal hope reigns in the resurrection. Moreover, Wright touches on what heaven signifies. He illustrates it as but a temporary stage, a waiting place before the final resurrection. Here, believers experience God’s presence, but not in irrevocable separation from their bodies. The essence of New Testament hope lies in the promise of physical resurrection and eternal fellowship with God, resulting in a revitalized earth. Church’s Mission in Light of Resurrection In the final sections, Wright discusses the church’s mission and the active role believers play in shaping the future. If the resurrection informs the Christian hope, it should similarly drive the mission of the church. He calls for Christians to engage with the world, fostering justice and beauty while sharing the hope of the Gospel. Wright challenges the notion of the church merely waiting for the end of days. Instead, he encourages believers to embody the values of a renewed creation right now. Creating a kingdom marked by justice, compassion, and love is not just aspirational; it is integral to their faith. This transformative approach calls Christians to be active agents of change, participating in God’s work of restoration on earth. Despite the vibrancy of his ideas, Wright does encounter dissent. For some, his emphasis on social justice may overshadow traditional teachings about individual salvation. Critics argue that not all can align on political and social issues, yet Wright stresses the importance of Christian involvement in these areas. He’s passionate about ecology and global justice, highlighting the church’s role in addressing poverty and environmental crises. Conclusion: A New Vision for Christians “Surprised by Hope” challenges conventional notions of heaven, life after death, and church mission. Wright’s thought-provoking exploration offers a rich reinterpretation of Christian hope. His work emphasizes that understanding resurrection is vital to living faithfully. By reclaiming the biblical narrative around the resurrection, believers can affirm a hope that transcends mere escape. Wright’s compelling reasoning inspires a fresh perspective rooted in the New Testament and points believers towards a future of healing and renewal. Through challenging and refreshing insights, Wright encourages all Christians to scrutinize prevailing ideologies about the afterlife. He motivates believers to engage deeply with theological truths, grounding their faith in a hope that transforms how they live each day. The essence of Wright’s message is one of hope—not in an ethereal escape, but in a vibrant, renewed creation where heaven and earth coexist. From here you can jump to the Spoilers section right away. Below you can search for another book summary: Alternative Book CoverComing soon... Quotes “Jesus’s resurrection is the beginning of God’s new project not to snatch people away from earth to heaven but to colonize earth with the life of heaven. That, after all, is what the Lord’s Prayer is about.”—N.T. Wright,Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church “The point of the resurrection...is that the present bodily life is not valueless just because it will die...What you do with your body in the present matters because God has a great future in store for it...What you do in the present—by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself—will last into God’s future. These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable, until the day when we leave it behind altogether (as the hymn so mistakenly puts it...). They are part of what we may call building for God’s kingdom.”—N.T. Wright,Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church “Easter was when Hope in person surprised the whole world by coming forward from the future into the present.”—N.T. Wright,Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church You want to give Surprised by Hope a try? Here you go! Key Ideas Resurrection: The core belief that Christian hope centers on physical resurrection, rather than a disembodied afterlife. Heaven and Earth: Wright emphasizes that heaven is not a distant place but a reality connected with our earthly existence. The Mission of the Church: Christians should work for justice and renewal in their communities as an expression of their faith. Highlights Rethinking Afterlife: True Christian teaching focuses on resurrection over heaven as a destination. Creation Matters: Creation is valuable and will be redeemed, not discarded. Holistic Gospel: Wright argues for a gospel that includes social justice and ecological concerns. Orthodox Beliefs: Addresses misunderstandings in traditional Christian beliefs about heaven and hell. Modern Implications: What you believe about the afterlife affects how you live now. Spoilers Spoiler Alert! If you want to read the book, don’t click “Show more” and spoil your experience. Here is a link for you to get the book. Rejection of Gnosticism: Wright strongly opposes views that separate spiritual and physical existence. Theology of Glory: He challenges the idea that earthly life is merely a preparation for the afterlife. New Creation: Wright describes a future where heaven and earth merge, contrary to popular beliefs. Resurrection Bodies: Believers will receive transformed physical bodies, as Christ did after His resurrection. Interim State: Heaven is described as an intermediate state, not the final destination. Let us know what you think about this book and the summary in the comment section at the end of the page. FAQs about Surprised by Hope N.T. Wright argues that Christians should understand resurrection as the core of their hope, not just the concept of going to heaven.Yes, he believes heaven is more about a restored relationship with creation and God rather than simply a physical place.It challenges readers to live out their faith with a focus on earthly actions reflecting future hopes.Wright minimizes the focus on hell as a place and emphasizes resurrection and new creation.Churches should focus on both spiritual care and earthly justice, reflecting God’s kingdom here and now. Reviews For a deeper understanding of Surprised by Hope and its various interpretations, visit our full review. Are you looking for a nice read that perfectly fits your current mood? Here is a free book suggestion tool. It gives you suggestions based on your taste. Also a likelihood rating for each recommended book. Would you like to find the book you will love later or now? N.T. Wright is a renowned Anglican bishop and biblical scholar. He served as Bishop of Durham and is now a professor at the University of St. Andrews. Wright has authored many influential books on New Testament studies. Are you looking for a nice read that perfectly fits your current mood? Here is a free book suggestion tool. It gives you suggestions based on your taste. Also a likelihood rating for each recommended book. Would you like to find the book you will love later or now? Conclusion We hope you found this synopsis of Surprised by Hope engaging. Remember, summaries only capture part of the journey. If you enjoyed what you read, the full book promises a richer exploration. Ready to continue your adventure? Here is the link to buy Surprised by Hope. DISCLAIMER: This book summary is meant as a summary and an analysis and not a replacement for the original work. If you are the original author of any book on our website and want us to remove it, please contact us. 1.3K WARNING: I am providing a lengthy review for Surprised By Hope. This is intentional. I want to devote some time to giving you guys a thorough evaluation and discussion of a book that is much needed in all Christian circles today. Surprised By Hope is that important. But…if you want to see an extremely condensed review of this book by New Testament writer and scholar, N. T. Wright, visit the 2014 Book and Reviews page. INTRO What is the value of exploring heaven and eschatology? For many Christians, there is little value in one’s theology of this subject. Surprised By Hope urges Christians to re-think heaven, the resurrection, and the mission of the church. The book’s author, N. T. Wright, believes that one’s view of heaven and life after death directly affects how he or she views life before death. Surprised By Hope is a paradigm-shifting book that explores the relationship between heaven, the resurrection, and the mission of the church. As the book unfolds, N. T. Wright attempts to answer two questions, primarily: What is Christian hope? And, What hope is there for change, rescue, transformation, and new possibilities within the world in the present? Wright sees these two questions as inextricably connected. How one answers the first question directly influences the answer to the second. OVERVIEW In the first section of the book, Wright attempts to clear up some of the muddled confusion about a Platonic view of heaven where everyone floats away into the clouds. According to Wright, this view of heaven is inconsistent with Scripture and creates a separationist mentality where God’s people are unconcerned with the issues and problems in the world. Instead of God transporting people to some ethereal place, He is going to bring heaven to earth. Wright continually emphasizes the “kingdom” as God’s reign and rule in this world, and followers of Jesus are called to bring forth the kingdom of God through their actions in the present. As Christians work, speak, evangelize, etc., in the world today for the glory of God, we are contributing to the work of the kingdom of God. Eventually, God will fully reign in the kingdom when he brings heaven to earth. The resurrection of Jesus and the Christian hope are mutually inclusive. Wright argues for the bodily resurrection of Jesus as the basis for life after death. Jesus defeats death by physically coming out of the tomb with a physically resurrected body. He is not a ghost or spiritual being. Wright declares this is precisely the definition of resurrection, and he calls the reader to view the resurrection of Jesus through a first century lens. Likewise, those who are to dwell in the new earth will possess a body similar to the body of the resurrected Jesus. It will be very “earthly” in the sense that it will be physical. Defeating death necessarily infers a physical resurrection. This understanding of hope through the resurrection is integral to Wright’s theology of Christian mission in the present. Because followers of Jesus are going to dwell physically in a new earth, everything done in the present is significant. Three areas – justice, beauty, and evangelism – compromise the present mission and form the foundation for hope in the everyday work of the church. The resurrection of Jesus does not save us out of the world, but saves us to engage the restoration of the world as we anticipate full restoration. STRENGTHS N. T. Wright does a superb job of expounding on the central premise he presents in Surprised By Hope. He believes strongly that the resurrection of Jesus involves a physical body dying and a physical body coming out of the grave, and the physical nature of the resurrection provides a tangible glimpse of life after death. God does not intend to carry us away into the clouds, but seeks to establish heaven on earth. Wright makes his point when he says this: [su_quote]The risen Jesus is both the model for the Christian’s future body and the means by which it comes about. [/su_quote] Wright also does a good job of painting a picture for the intermediate state, and he presents a strong case against common misunderstandings of what happens when a person passes from this life. One of Wright’s strongest arguments deals with the connection between hope and mission. Viewing Christian mission primarily as evangelism is near-sided at best. Mission is much more broad and complex than evangelism, and Wright does a superb job of expounding upon the full breadth of what it means to live as followers of Jesus. To hope for a better future in this world (intermediate hope) is not creating sideways energy or detracting from the mission. Caring for the needs of the poor, sick, lonely, and depressed is, in fact, central to the gospel, central to Jesus, and, therefore, central to the mission of Christians today. Wright even goes so far as to say almost everything we do in this life, whether working, painting, preaching, praying, sewing, teaching, or building, has value in the present because these things will last into God’s future. WEAKNESSES Although Wright accurately depicts the future heaven as a physical place and not an abstract “area” where Christians float for eternity, his understanding of hell is much less convincing. For Wright, hell is not as much a place of eternal torment as it is a place of dehumanization. He is right in claiming hell exists, but his description of hell seems to pull more from contemporary sources, such as C. S. Lewis, than the Bible. In addition, Wright will undoubtedly leave many theologians scratching their head when he explicitly condemns praying for the salvation of dead saints but believes in praying for their rest. [su_quote]I see no reason why we should not pray for and with the dead and every reason why we should.[/su_quote] CONCLUSION Surprised By Hope is a game-changer. I would recommend this book to any person, whether conservative or liberal, Christian or non-Christian. The contents of this book are both academic and applicable, which is remarkable for a man of Wright’s intellectual level. He gives his readers a fresh (and strongly Biblical) approach to life after death, hope, and how these two influence Christian mission. He presents a convicting explanation of the relationship between evangelism and mission, and he encourages Christians to look at all types of work in this life as valuable (which is refreshing). Church leaders would benefit greatly from the final two chapters, as Wright poignantly develops the nature of Christian spirituality and mission. Although some of Wright’s convictions about hell, Pauline theology, and communication with the dead are puzzling, this book is an extremely important resource in a world looking for hope. As long as we see Christian hope in terms of “going to heaven,” of a salvation that is essentially away from this world, the two questions are bound to appear as unrelated. Beyond individual salvation. The common perception of Christian hope as simply "going to heaven when you die" is a limited view. The true Christian hope encompasses a much grander vision: the renewal of all creation, a "new heavens and new earth." This perspective connects our ultimate destiny with our present actions and responsibilities. Two questions intertwined. The book addresses two questions: What is the ultimate Christian hope? What hope is there for change, rescue, transformation, and new possibilities within the world in the present? These questions are often treated separately, but the author argues they are tightly connected. Surprising hope. The Christian hope is surprisingly different from what many assume. It offers a coherent and energizing basis for work in today's world. This hope is not just about escaping this world but about transforming it. When the early Christians said that Jesus had risen from the dead, they knew they were saying that something had happened to him that had happened to nobody else and that nobody had expected to happen. Jewish roots, Christian innovation. The early Christian belief in resurrection was firmly rooted in Jewish thought, not paganism. However, early Christians introduced several key modifications to the Jewish understanding of resurrection. Seven mutations: Unanimity of belief Centrality of resurrection Transformed physicality Resurrection split into two (Jesus's and the general resurrection) Collaborative eschatology New metaphorical use of resurrection Association with messiahship Revolutionary hope. These mutations transformed the Jewish belief in resurrection into a revolutionary hope that energized the early Christian movement. This hope was not merely about individual survival but about the transformation of the entire cosmos. Historical argument alone cannot force anyone to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead, but historical argument is remarkably good at clearing away the undergrowth behind which skepticisms of various sorts have long been hiding. Eyewitness accounts. The Gospel accounts of Easter, though differing in details, share key features that suggest a genuine historical event. These include the presence of women as primary witnesses, the absence of biblical allusions, and the portrayal of a transformed yet physical Jesus. Historical evidence. The empty tomb and the encounters with Jesus are the best historical explanation for the rise of Christianity. Alternative explanations, such as cognitive dissonance or spiritual experiences, fail to account for the radical changes in Jewish resurrection belief. Faith and history. While historical arguments cannot compel belief, they can clear away skepticism and point to the possibility of a transformative event. Faith in Jesus's resurrection transcends but includes historical and scientific knowing. The classic Christian doctrine, therefore, is actually far more powerful and revolutionary than the Platonic one. Beyond personal salvation. The Christian hope is not limited to individual salvation but extends to the entire cosmos. God's plan is to redeem and renew all of creation, not just to rescue souls from an evil world. Continuity and discontinuity. The Christian doctrine of resurrection emphasizes both continuity and discontinuity between the present world and the future. What we do in the present matters enormously because it will be transformed and reaffirmed in God's new creation. Revolutionary doctrine. The robust Jewish and Christian doctrine of the resurrection gives more value, not less, to the present world and to our present bodies. It gives rise not to a meek acquiescence to injustice in the world but to a robust determination to oppose it. The ascension demands that we think differently about how the whole cosmos is, so to speak, put together and that we also think differently about the church and about salvation. Heaven and Earth Intertwined. The ascension of Jesus is not simply his departure from Earth but his enthronement as King of Heaven and Earth. This means that Jesus is both present with us through the Spirit and ruling over all creation. Relational view of space. The ascension demands a relational view of space, where heaven and earth are not separate locations but interconnected dimensions. Heaven is the control room for Earth, the place from which instructions are given. Church's role. The church's role is to act as ambassadors of Jesus's kingdom, implementing his authority and transforming the world in accordance with his will. This requires a balance of humility and confidence, recognizing both our limitations and our calling. The English evangelicals gave up believing in the urgent imperative to improve society (such as we find with Wilberforce in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) about the same time that they gave up believing robustly in resurrection and settled for a disembodied heaven instead. Beyond Rapture Theology. The second coming of Jesus is not simply about a future rapture or escape from this world. It is about the final unveiling of Jesus's lordship and the establishment of God's justice on Earth. Judgment and Justice. The second coming involves judgment, but this is not simply about punishment. It is about setting the world right, vindicating the oppressed, and bringing justice to the oppressed. Present Transformation. The hope of the second coming should inspire us to work for justice and righteousness in the present. We are called to live as citizens of God's kingdom, anticipating the day when his will is done on Earth as it is in Heaven. The early Christian belief in resurrection remains emphatically on the map of first-century Judaism rather than paganism, but from within the Jewish theology of monotheism, election, and eschatology, it opened up a whole new way of seeing history, hope, and hermeneutics. More than immortality. Bodily resurrection is not simply about the immortality of the soul. It is about the transformation of our entire being, including our physical bodies, into a new and glorious form. Transformed physicality. The resurrection body will be a transformed body, possessing new properties and capabilities. It will be incorruptible, no longer subject to decay and death. Model for our future. The resurrection of Jesus serves as the prototype and guarantee of our own future resurrection. We will be raised to new life in bodies like his, sharing in his glory and power. The golden evening brightens in the west; Soon, soon to faithful warriors comes their rest; Sweet is the calm of paradise the blest. Alleluia, Alleluia! Beyond a three-tiered system. The traditional view of the church divided into triumphant, expectant, and militant is not fully supported by Scripture. All Christians, living and departed, are saints, united in Christ. Paradise, not purgatory. The Christian dead are in a state of restful happiness, awaiting the final resurrection. There is no biblical basis for the doctrine of purgatory, which suggests a need for further purification after death. Communion of Saints. We share in the communion of saints with those who have died in Christ. We can pray for and with them, holding them in our love before God. If you and I accept the death and resurrection of Jesus as a living, divine, working mechanism in our own lives we shall one day go home to God and find peace....The Holy Spirit, sent by Jesus himself after his death, offers support and strength for those who call on him. More than a ticket to heaven. Salvation is not simply about escaping this world and going to heaven when we die. It is about being rescued from the corruption and decay of the present world and being restored to our true humanity. New Creation. Salvation is about participating in God's new creation, a world of justice, peace, and love. It is about being transformed into agents of God's kingdom, working to bring his will to bear on Earth as it is in Heaven. Whole-life transformation. Salvation involves the whole person, not just the soul. It involves our bodies, our minds, and our relationships. It is a process of ongoing transformation, as we learn to live in accordance with God's will. Therefore, my beloved ones, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain. Justice, beauty, and evangelism. The mission of the church involves three key areas: justice, beauty, and evangelism. These are not separate activities but interconnected aspects of God's kingdom. Justice. Working for justice involves challenging oppression, advocating for the poor, and seeking to create a more equitable world. It is about reflecting God's righteousness and compassion in our actions. Beauty. Celebrating beauty involves creating and appreciating art, music, and other forms of creative expression. It is about recognizing the goodness of creation and pointing to the glory of God. Evangelism. Sharing the gospel involves proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ and inviting others to join his kingdom. It is about offering forgiveness, hope, and new life to those who are lost and hurting. The point is that they were announcing that in Easter “the resurrection from the dead” had actually begun. Beyond self-preservation. The church must be reshaped to be mission-driven, not self-serving. This means prioritizing the needs of the world over the comfort and convenience of its members. Biblical priorities. The church must be grounded in Scripture, allowing the Bible to shape its vision and guide its actions. This requires a commitment to studying and interpreting Scripture in its historical and theological context. Servant leadership. The church must be led by servant leaders who prioritize the needs of others and empower them to participate in mission. This requires humility, compassion, and a willingness to sacrifice personal gain for the sake of the kingdom. The world of space, time, and matter is where real people live, where real communities happen, where difficult decisions are taken, where schools and hospitals bear witness to the “now, already” of the gospel while police and prisons bear witness to the “not yet.” Reclaiming space. The church must reclaim space for worship, prayer, and community. This involves creating sacred spaces that are open and welcoming to all, and that reflect the beauty and glory of God's creation. Redeeming time. The church must redeem time by celebrating the Christian year, observing the Sabbath, and creating rhythms of work and rest that honor God. This involves prioritizing relationships, reflection, and renewal over productivity and efficiency. Transforming matter. The church must transform matter through the sacraments, through acts of service, and through responsible stewardship of the Earth's resources. This involves recognizing the goodness of creation and using it to glorify God and bless others. Last updated: February 23, 2025 Being a fan of much of N.T. Wright’s books, I was excited to read the book “Surprised by Hope” by N. T. Wright. I previously read several of his books including his book “Simply Jesus” and thought them all to be good. So I put “Surprised by Hope” on my reading list. It is a bit lengthier than the average book. However, it is the most important book I’ve read recently—I could hardly recommend “Surprised by Hope” highly enough.Wright presents a paradigm of Christianity which, while biblical, has often been clouded or lost through centuries of western theology. Wright clears away the clutter and explains the central importance of Jesus’ resurrection as understood by the early church and the Bible, and why it’s important for both our present and future.The ideas in the book are so good, which makes it a struggle to be able to summarize them concisely. I have decided that the best way to summarize the book will be to quote Wright himself.“This book addresses two questions that have often been dealt with entirely separately but that, I passionately believe, belong tightly together. First, what is the ultimate Christian hope? Second, what hope is there for change, rescue, transformation, new possibilities within the world in the present? And the main answer can be put like this. As long as we see Christian hope in terms of “going to heaven”, of a salvation that is essentially away fromthis world, the two questions are bound to appear unrelated.” (p. 5) “In the last two hundred years Western thought has overemphasized the individual at the expense of the larger picture of God’s creation. What is more, in much Western piety, at least since the Middle Ages, the influence of Greek philosophy has been very marked, resulting in a future expectation that bears far more resemblance to Plato’s vision of souls entering into disembodied bliss that to the biblical picture of new heavens and new earth.” (p. 80) “John has so ordered his gospel that the sequence of seven signs, climaxing in the cross of Jesus on the sixth day of the week and his resting in the tomb on the seventh, functions as the week of the old creation; and now Easter functions as the beginning of the new creation… Jesus’s resurrection is to be seen as the beginning of the new world, the first day of the new week, the unveiling of the prototype of what God is now going to accomplish in the rest of the world.” (p. 238) “The resurrection [of Jesus] is not, as it were, a highly peculiar event within the present world (though it is that as well); it is, principally, the defining event of the new creation, the world that is being born with Jesus.” (p. 73) “The gospel, in the New Testament, is the good news that God (the world’s creator) is at last becoming king and that Jesus, whom God raised from the dead, is the world’s true lord… As every Roman knew, the one who ascends into heaven is enthroned as the divine Emperor… It is the resurrection of Jesus that means he is now enthroned as Lord.” (pp. 227, 242, 243) “The message of Easter is that God’s new world has been unveiled in Jesus Christ and that you’re now invited to belong to it.” (pp. 252-253) “Redemption is not simply making creation a bit better, as the optimistic evolutionist would try to suggest. Nor is it rescuing spirits and souls from an evil material world, as the Gnostic would want to say. It is the remaking of creation, having dealt with the evil that is defacing and distorting it. And it is accomplished by the same God, now known in Jesus Christ, through whom it was made in the first place.” (p. 97) “The word resurrection in its Greek, Latin, or other equivalents was never used to mean life after death. Resurrection was used to denote new bodily life after whatever sort of life after death there might be.” (p. 36) “Resurrection doesn’t mean escaping from the world; it means mission to the world based on Jesus’s lordship over the world.” (p. 235) “Jesus is risen, therefore his followers have a new job to do. And what is that new job? To bring the life of heaven to birth in actual, physical, earthly reality… Jesus’s resurrection is the beginning of God’s new project not to snatch people away from earth to heaven but to colonize earth with the life of heaven.” (p. 293) “The resurrection means that what you do in the present, in working hard for the gospel, is not wasted. It is not in vain. It will be completed, will have its fulfillment, in God’s future.” (p. 162) “The task of the church between the ascension and [Jesus’ return] is therefore set free both from the self-driven energy that imagines it has to build God’s kingdom all by itself and from the despair that supposes it can’t do anything until Jesus comes again. We do not ‘build the kingdom’ all by ourselves, but we do build for the kingdom. All that we do in faith, hope, and love in the power of his Spirit, will be enhanced and transformed at his appearing. This too brings a note of judgement, of course, as Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians 3:10-17. The ‘day’ will disclose what sort of work each builder has done.” (p. 143) “If a church is… actively involved in seeking justice in the world, both globally and locally, and if it’s cheerfully celebrating God’s good creation and its rescue from corruption in art and music, and if, in addition, its own internal life gives every sign that new creation is indeed happening, generating a new type of community—then suddenly the announcement [that Jesus is lord and his new kingdom has begun] makes a lot of sense.” (pp. 227-228) Click here for a German version of this review N. T. Wright is one of the most talented writers among New Testament scholars today. In this book he presents his understanding of what the Scriptures teach about heaven, the resurrection, and the church’s mission. A Summary What is heaven after all? Wright contends that too many Christians have a Platonic idea of heaven. They conceive of it in ethereal terms, as if we float in a bodiless state in some transcendent realm. Indeed, most Christians think of heaven as “up there,” and as separated from the earth. What the Scriptures teach, however, is that heaven will come to earth. The Scriptures do not say, according to Wright, that we will “go to heaven when we die,” but that heaven will come to earth, that the earth upon which we live will be transformed, and that we will enjoy the new creation. Wright’s understanding of the Christian hope is predicated upon the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Surprised by Hope therefore summarizes Wright’s older, massive, and outstanding book The Resurrection of the Son of God. What is important to see here is that the resurrection is irreducibly physical. People in the ancient world believed in spirits, ghosts, and the like, but they did not confuse things like these with the idea of a resurrection. Also, Wright does not simply accept the resurrection by faith, since the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is incredibly strong. No, we cannot prove beyond a shadow of doubt that Christ was raised. Still, his physical resurrection fits most suitably with the evidence of the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus Christ. The resurrection of Jesus is fundamental to Wright’s thesis, for Christ’s resurrection is tied to the future resurrection of believers. Hence, the future that awaits believers cannot be described as a spiritual existence in heaven. Rather, heaven will be on a new earth where believers will continue the bodily existence they enjoy in this world, but with bodies that are transformed by the Holy Spirit. And what is the payoff for the church’s mission in the present? Wright emphasizes over and over that our life in this world makes a difference. We do not simply wait to go to heaven when we die. We are called upon to engage this world, to work for justice in the political realm, to exercise our artistic gifts as creatures made in God’s image, and to evangelize the lost. An Assessment How should we assess Surprised by Hope? Wright’s fundamental thesis here is correct. Heaven will be on a new earth, and therefore it must not be regarded as floating in some kind of spiritual never-land. We look forward to our future resurrection, and to the new heavens and new earth where righteousness dwells. Wright’s defense of the resurrection of Christ, defended more fully in his major book on the topic, is the finest treatment I have read on the subject. Wright does affirm the intermediate state, but he rightly stresses that the future hope of believers is the resurrection. Furthermore, Wright is on target in saying that we are to strive for justice, truth, and beauty in this world. Some believers have said that this world is destined for destruction, and hence only focus on the salvation of the lost. Yet there are some significant problems with the book. Surely some believers have mistakenly thought that heaven was only spiritual, but many (most of those I know) do not conceive of heaven in this way. We could say that Wright exaggerates his thesis to make his point. Well and good. Still, he is excessively critical of the phrase “go to heaven.” After all, we have a number of statements in Scripture about entering (going to!) the kingdom in the future (e.g., Matt. 5:20; 7:21; 18:3; 19:23-24; Mark 9:47; 10:15; John 3:5; Acts 14:22). Scripture also speaks of heaven as a realm above and separate from us (Matt. 6:1, 9, 10, 20; 18:10; Luke 24:51; John 1:51; Acts 1:10; 2 Cor. 12:2; Col. 1:5; 1 Pet. 1:4). That does not, to be sure, communicate that our future destiny is non-physical, but it does stress that it is a realm separate from our present existence. Yes, Wright is correct in saying that heaven will be a transformed earth, and that heaven will come, so to speak, to this world. But since the Scriptures also speak of us “entering” the kingdom; since they speak of heaven as a world above and beyond us; and since the new creation is not yet here in its fullness, I don’t believe it’s wrong to say that we will “go there,” as long as we recognize that this is just one of the ways to express the reality that awaits us. In fact, Wright’s protests against using the phrase “go to heaven” betray an overly literal understanding on his part. Hence, against Wright, the hymn Away in the Manger does not contradict Scripture when it asks God to “fit us for heaven, to live with thee there” (p. 22). As noted above, Wright often emphasizes that our work in this world is important. Christians ought not to think that their work in politics, economics, business, art, and so forth is insignificant. There has been a kind of pietism that has denigrated such work. Still, it isn’t clear that forgiving third world debt is a moral obligation on the same level as abolishing slavery. Wright too confidently dismisses all who disagree with him on this matter, sweeping away any objections with rhetorical statements. Moral claims in the public sphere must be advanced by careful reasoning, and Wright does not provide arguments to support his conclusions. Perhaps in the future he will tackle the matter with reasoned public discourse instead of dicta from above. Wright commends evangelism as part of our work as believers, but he clearly emphasizes being engaged in the political sphere. Surely Wright has his emphases backwards here. The Scriptures teach that only those who believe in Jesus Christ and repent of their sins will enjoy the new creation. Isn’t the most important thing for human beings, therefore, to gain acceptance into this new creation? Aren’t there great artists and gifted politicians who have improved our life in this world (for which we are all thankful), and yet who will not be part of the new creation because they have rejected the gospel? Moreover, while Wright correctly affirms that everything done in this world matters, there is also discontinuity between this world and the next. The curse of Genesis 3 will not be lifted until Jesus comes again. Our work in this world is provisional and always touched by the curse. The invention of the car solved a pollution problem in the streets caused by horses, but no one foresaw that it would cause pollution problems of its own. All this is to say that the call for Christians to evangelize remains more pressing than any call to work in the political sphere, even though all our work in this world is significant. Wright emphasizes that the good news of the gospel is that Jesus is Lord, but, as John Piper has pointed out, this isn’t good news if you’re still a rebel against God; it’s terrifying news. The New Testament is permeated with the message that we must turn from our sins and put our faith in Christ. Wright does not disagree with the need to do so, but he seems to be most excited about our work in the political and social sphere. I could perhaps understand why Wright would stress social concerns if England’s churches were full and thriving—as if almost everyone was a believer. But what is curious is that England’s churches are empty, and unbelief is common. It seems that a bishop in these circumstances would vigorously call upon the church to evangelize, and would emphasize the need to put one’s faith in Jesus Christ and to turn from one’s sins. I don’t see that urgency in Wright’s writing, and therefore he veers from the message of Jesus and the apostles. Odds and Ends I would also mention some bits and pieces of the book that call out for comment, even if I don’t have space here to interact with them here in detail. For instance, Wright contends that Jesus never spoke about his return. He defends this claim in other works, but it’s a controversial point. Here I simply want to register my disagreement with his exegesis. Also, Wright correctly says that justification by faith and judgment according to works do not conflict (p. 140), but he gives us no help in seeing how these two themes fit together. Readers would be helped in knowing how the two themes cohere. Putting these truths together wrongly can lead to a final curse (Gal. 1:8-9), and hence Wright must be clearer in explaining the gospel in his exposition. The section on purgatory is nicely done, showing that purgatory is absent from the biblical witness. But Wright falls into inconsistency when he endorses praying for the dead since this practice is not found in the Scriptures (p. 172). He does rightfully rule out invoking the saints for assistance. Contrary to Wright, Jesus’ statements about gehenna do not refer to the judgment of A.D. 70, though I cannot defend this argument here. Nor do I think Wright is correct in saying that judgment is a minor theme in the letters. The theme is pervasive in them, but, again, that would take too long to defend here. Too often Wright prosecutes his case by caricaturing a view and then introducing his own view as the solution. Hence, he rightly rejects the notion that hell is a torture chamber, but his own view of hell seems to be shorn of any notion that God punishes those who refuse to believe in Christ. Wright argues that those in hell lose the divine image, and this may well be part of the picture. Nevertheless, many texts speak of God’s active punishment of the wicked. Since Wright summarizes his view and does not engage in detailed exegesis, I assume he would offer a different interpretation of the relevant texts. Still, it’s difficult to see how God’s active punishment of the wicked can be denied (e.g., Rom. 2:8-9, 16; 2 Thess. 1:8-9, etc.). Wright appeals to many because he is brilliant and fascinating, and some of what he says is helpful. Nevertheless, his failure to emphasize the centrality of the gospel is troubling, and pastors who find his work illuminating need to be careful that they do not veer away from their central task of proclaiming the good news to a lost generation. Surprised by Hope by N. T. Wright is a theological work that challenges common Christian assumptions about the afterlife, the resurrection, and the mission of the church. Wright, an Anglican bishop and prolific Christian scholar and commentator, argues for a transformative view of heaven, hell, and the resurrection. In particular, he argues that our ultimate destiny should be conceived not as “life after death” but “life after life after death” (148). Wright bases his argument on an analysis of biblical history and early Christian writings, particularly the letters of St. Paul and the book of Revelation. According to Wright, early Christians believed that Jesus’ resurrection was a sign that God would transform the world into a “new creation” rather than simply that human beings would survive death. Jesus’ disciples saw resurrection as a phenomenon that affects the body as well as the soul and, consequently, that the life we live on earth is of great importance to the future world that God will create with our cooperation. Wright argues that many modern Christians have lost these foundational beliefs. Recovering them will enable the church to lead a more effective mission in both improving life on earth and leading people to God. Surprised by Hope was published in 2008 and is based in part on lectures that Wright gave in various churches and colleges in England, the US, and Australia between 2001 and 2007. This guide refers to the 2008 HarperOne edition.Content Warning: The source text and this guide discuss death and beliefs about life after death.SummaryWright declares his intention to examine the nature of Christian hope, centering on the promise of new life that comes from Jesus’ resurrection. In the first part, Wright lays down the basis of his argument. He stakes his claim that Christian hope is widely misunderstood due to the influence of Platonism on Christianity. Platonism conceives of heaven as a “spiritual” place to which we go after we die, but the New Testament preaches a different message tied in with the ideas of new creation and renewal. Wright proposes that the misunderstandings of the Christian message have serious consequences for how Christians live their lives and that they should return to the “forgotten riches of the Christian tradition” (28). Wright then examines the historical foundations for Jewish and early Christian belief about resurrection and the afterlife. Christianity took up and modified a number of Jewish beliefs about resurrection, and there was remarkable unanimity in these beliefs in the early Christian period. Wright stakes his claim that the rise of Christianity makes no sense without the bodily resurrection as a real event. The author next delves into the specific details of the Easter accounts in the gospels. Based on a number of historical factors, Wright states his main argument that the accounts are trustworthy and are very early stories, not later inventions. Christians are compelled to believe in the resurrection, Wright argues, even though it goes against what they normally expect and poses a challenge to historical and scientific worldviews. The second section is both philosophical and theological in nature. Wright delineates two common modern views of the world’s future: evolutionary optimism and Platonism, or “souls in transit.” The early Christians believed in a third option, which Wright terms “new creation” and “life after life after death” (148)—views that are laid out in Paul’s letters in particular. In discussing Jesus’ ascension, Wright argues that it is an essential Christian doctrine because it ensures that Jesus is in heaven ruling the world in anticipation of the new creation. Wright next addresses the controversial topic of the second coming. He argues that the doctrine embodies the idea of Jesus as the supremely just judge of the world. He critiques the idea of the Rapture as inconsistent with early Christianity.Wright states that the early Christian view of life after death for the just was a two-step process: a period of “rest and tranquility” immediately after death and then the resurrection at the end of time. Based on the early Christian witness, especially the letters to the Corinthians, Wright argues for understandings of “heaven” and “soul” that are different from the norm and engages in a lengthy discussion of heaven, hell, and purgatory. He argues against the belief in purgatory and offers alternative ways of viewing hell as a person’s refusal to follow God. In the final section, Wright presents his proposals for how the church should engage with the world in light of the reality of Jesus’ resurrection—a process that he calls a “hope-shaped mission.” He defines salvation as being about creation as a whole instead of being merely about the individual. He also stresses that God is in charge of building his kingdom but that this happens with our cooperation; everything we do in the present life counts toward the future life. Wright discusses justice, beauty, and evangelism as three areas where Christians can make a difference in light of their faith. Finally, Wright offers more specifics about the “mission-shaped church.” He emphasizes the biblical foundations of the mission and outlines six central aspects of Christian spirituality that can help the church proclaim God’s new creation. Hi,Welcome to Bookey! Today we will unlock the book Surprised By Hope by Tom Wright. In "Surprised by Hope," Tom Wright, a prominent scholar and theologian, challenges the traditional Christian perspectives on heaven, resurrection, and the afterlife, offering a profoundly transformative view of what Christians actually believe about life after death. Wright urges readers to rethink the common doctrines about "going to heaven" and instead focus on the New Testament's promises of God renewing and transforming the entire cosmos through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Wright begins his exploration by dissecting the common misconceptions held by contemporary Christians, who often see the afterlife as solely being about escaping the world and living eternally in a spiritual heaven. Contrary to this view, Wright argues that God’s plan is far more earth-centered and rooted in resurrection. This perspective is grounded in biblical texts but often overlooked or misunderstood due to cultural and historical distances. Theologically rich and engaging, Wright examines the early Christian hope in resurrection, anchored in the Messiah, and the surprising ways this hope ought to be changing our present world. By investigating the resurrection, Wright sets a framework where the transformed resurrection body is a reaffirmation of God’s ongoing plan for creation, tying it intimately to themes of justice, beauty, and the renewal of all things. Here, Wright does not just provide a theological exposé but also opens up a broader discourse on how these beliefs should in turn shape our practical response to contemporary issues such as social justice, environmental concern, and the daily lives of believers. Crucially, Wright also delves into the implications of resurrection for the mission of the Church, seeing it as a call to action in the present life, not just a distant, future promise. This vision aligns eschatology tightly with ethics, giving Christian practice a vibrancy and purpose that might otherwise be lacking. The book does not, however, merely lay out arguments and theological positions; it narrates a compelling vision for living Jesus's resurrection in the here and now. "Surprised by Hope" serves as both a critical examination and a passionate reminder of the hope that should be at the heart of Christian faith. Wright invites believers to let this hope renew their energy for justice and peace, and to re-envision their destiny not as departing to a nebulous, distant heaven but in participating in the new creation, starting in the present world. Drawing on scripture, early Christian writings, and rigorous theological reflection, Tom Wright charts a course toward this transformative vision, making this book a crucial read for anyone interested in the comprehensive scope of Christian eschatology. Through his meticulous study and accessible writing, Wright not only educates but also inspires, making "Surprised by Hope" a seminal work in understanding and living the Christian faith more fully. In the text below, we will explore the top three critical concepts from this book. 1: Christian hope is rooted in the belief in resurrection, not just the immortality of the soul, fundamentally reshaping how believers view life, death, and their purpose on earth. 2: The promise of a new heaven and new earth points to the future restoration and renewal of the world, not an abandonment of it, which calls Christians to actively engage in social and environmental justice. 3: The resurrection of Jesus is a historical event that not only assures individual salvation but also mandates the church’s mission in the world to bring about God’s kingdom through acts of compassion, justice, and beauty. Introduction: Celebrating Easter The chapter emphasizes the need for churches to reconsider how they celebrate Easter in a manner that reflects the vibrancy and significance of the resurrection. It argues against treating Easter as merely a single day of celebration following a long period of Lent, advocating instead for a robust, weeklong celebration filled with joy and creative expression. Living as Easter People - Easter Day and Beyond: The discussion begins with a call to transform Easter Sunday into a lively event, integrating exuberant worship and communal joy. The author critiques the common practice of reverting to mundane routines after Easter, suggesting that the entire season should be an opportunity to embrace new life and purpose. - New Traditions: Churches are encouraged to engage in creative expressions of Easter through art, music, and public festivities, reaffirming that Easter is foundational for Christianity, impacting theology and communal life. - Easter as a Time for New Beginnings: As Lent focuses on self-denial, Easter should focus on taking up new opportunities—new ventures that foster growth and enrich community. Space, Time, and Matter: Creation Redeemed - Challenges to Tradition: The text addresses the tension between traditional church practices and emerging expressions of faith, advocating for a balance that recognizes the significance of both historic processes and fresh initiatives. - Reclaiming Space: The importance of physical spaces for worship is analyzed, considering churches as ‘thin places’ where divine and human reality intersects. - Understanding Time: The chapter discusses how every action within a church setting should echo the significance of Jesus’ resurrection, bringing relevance to how we perceive time in worship and daily life. - Matter and Sacraments: Matter is seen as essential, emphasizing that sacraments like baptism and the Eucharist reflect God’s ongoing relationship with creation and affirm its renewal. Resurrection and Mission - Integration of Worship and Mission: The conclusion reveals that a mission-oriented church must reflect the hope found in resurrection, emphasizing that actions within the community must be part of a cohesive mission—aligning worship and just living as extensions of faith. - Prophetic Social Engagement: The church is called to engage politically and socially, advocating for justice and beauty within society, becoming agents of hope and transformation. Resurrection and Spirituality - Baptism and New Birth: The chapter highlights the essential relationship between baptism, resurrection, and the Christian walk, viewing baptism as a gateway to living out new life in Christ. - Eucharist as New Creation: The significance of Eucharist is explored, framed not just as remembrance but as a participation in the reality of new creation, linking God’s past work with present and future hopes. - Prayer and Intimacy: The article asserts that prayer is an open invitation to encounter God, resulting in a deeper faith that reflects a robust relationship established by Jesus’ resurrection. - Understanding Scripture: Scripture is regarded as the story revealing God’s plan for creation and new creation, offering a narrative that situates believers within the overall divine mission. - Emphasizing Holiness and Love: The chapter concludes with a reflection on holiness and love as pivotal to Christian life, urging that genuine love reflects the reality of resurrection and shapes interactions both in the church and wider community. In summary, the chapter invites a transformation in how Easter is celebrated and lived, advocating for an engaged, joyous, and creativity-driven church life, emphasizing the interplay between worship, mission, and the broader fabric of community and creation.ExampleKey Point : Easter's celebration should extend beyond one day to a vibrant season of life and purpose.Example : Imagine stepping into your church on Easter morning, not just to worship for a few hours and then return to your normal life, but to be swept into a week of joyous festivities and expressions of creativity. You share meals, create art, and engage in music that celebrates new beginnings, making every moment a reminder of the resurrection’s power. This renewed focus transforms your community, encouraging everyone to embrace life with the excitement and transformative energy that comes from living as an 'Easter person' through the entire season.Critical ThinkingKey Point : The Celebration of Easter Should Be a Continuous Joyous Act.Critical Interpretation : N.T. Wright's argument for extending the celebration of Easter beyond a single day challenges conventional church practices and suggests a deeper engagement with the resurrection's implications for everyday life. While Wright emphasizes the need for a vibrant, prolonged celebration that connects worship and mission, it's vital to question whether such a rebirth of tradition might overshadow personal reflection and contemplation, which some theologians argue are equally important for spiritual growth (see sources like "The Case for God" by Karen Armstrong). Additionally, engaging in a weeklong celebration might not resonate universally across diverse church communities, as varying cultural contexts influence how believers celebrate significant events. Thus, while Wright's ideas are thought-provoking, readers should consider the balance between celebration and solemnity, and the unique experiences of their faith communities.