

Surprised by Hope

by Tom Wright

Surprised by Hope was first published in 2007 and the preface opens with the following – *“What are we waiting for? And what are we going to do about it in the meantime? These are the two questions which shape this book.”* This book urges Christians to re-think heaven, the resurrection, and the mission of the church. Wright says that your view of heaven and life after death directly affects how you view life before death: *‘resurrection doesn’t mean escaping from the world; it means mission to the world based on Jesus’ lordship over the world’.*

The book is set out in 3 clear sections – the first section sets the scene (and talks about the confusion that exists), the second looks at God’s future plan and the third looks at hope in practice: resurrection and the mission of the church.

What did I like about the book?

I have read this book before and was delighted to re-read it. It rightly sets the Easter story and resurrection at the heart of belief where hope flows from the resurrection, since 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 and 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 (and important). Three areas – justice, beauty, and evangelism – compromise the present mission and form the foundation for hope in the everyday work of the church.

I particularly liked the conclusion to the second section of the book moving into the final part – which can be viewed as ‘so what does this mean to me’, ‘why it matters’ and ‘how do I respond’. This is because 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. *“A piety that sees death as the moment of “going home at last,” the time when we are “called to God’s eternal peace,” has no quarrel with power-mongers who want to carve up the world to suit their own ends. Resurrection, by contrast, has always gone with a strong view of God’s justice and of God as the good creator. Those twin beliefs give rise not to a meek acquiescence to injustice in the world but to a robust determination to oppose it.”*

The ultimate future hope though remains a surprise. “Our task.....is to live as resurrection people in between Easter and the final day, with our Christian life, corporate and individual, in both worship and mission, as a sign of the first and a foretaste of the second.”

Were there things about the book which didn't quite work for me?

The sections in the book on hell and communication with the dead didn't quite work for me and I must admit that I somewhat skimmed this part of the book. Wright says that since the future heaven is a physical place and not an abstract 'area' where Christians float for eternity, hell is not as much a place of eternal torment as it is a place of dehumanisation. I feel that I need to re-read this part of the book again and also look at scripture in more depth and pray on the issue. He condemns praying for the salvation of dead saints but believes in praying for their rest.

Why should someone read this book?

This book is readable and also strongly biblical with referencing to both Old and New Testament passages. Wright also references some of his other writings which is useful. This encourages me to read some of his other books. (I have read his *Simply Christian* book which is anything but 'simple'! I found *Surprised by Hope* to be easier read in that sense.)

The third part of the book – hope in practice – deserves a further read which is in fact something I'm doing now. This part of the book essentially sets out the fundamentals to faith, rethinking salvation, building for the kingdom, and how we are to reshape the church for mission, the biblical roots and living the future (baptism, communion, prayer, scripture, holiness and of course love). In the final 2 chapters he develops the nature of Christian spirituality and mission. I enjoyed the *Tailpiece: two Easter sermons* as well!

Review by Fiona Abbott

NB: Tom Wright (also known as NT Wright) is an English New Testament scholar and an expert in the theology of the apostle Paul. He was the Bishop of Durham from 2003 to 2010. The author of over seventy books, he is highly regarded in academic and theological circles for his 'Christian Origins and the Question of God' series.