

For Heaven’s Sake: A Review of N. T. Wright’s *Surprised by Hope*

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The subject of life after death is one that has challenged scholars for centuries. A significant Roman Catholic writer, Father Richard John Neuhaus, quoted philosopher George Santayana: “A good way of testing the caliber of a philosophy is to ask what it thinks of death.” Neuhaus then made the following poignant query: “What does it tell us that modern philosophy has had relatively little to say about death?”¹ In fact, the Prophet Joseph Smith observed: “All men know that they must die. . . . It is but reasonable to suppose that God would reveal something in reference to the matter, and it is a subject we ought to study more than any other. We ought to study it day and night, for the world is ignorant in reference to their true condition and relation. If we have any claim on our Heavenly Father for anything, it is for knowledge on this important subject.”²

In that spirit, and being one who is intrigued with what persons of other faiths have to say on the matter, as well as what has come to us through modern revelation, I would like to engage in a rather unusual exercise: I will review and discuss, from a Latter-day Saint perspective, a recent book by British scholar N. T. Wright entitled *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*.³

The Work of N. T. Wright

Few scholars have taken the religious world by storm as dramatically as Professor Nicholas Thomas Wright, known on his academic

works as N. T. Wright and on his more popular commentaries as Tom Wright. Wright is currently the Anglican bishop of Durham, fourth in line of authority behind the archbishop of Canterbury, the bishop of York, and the bishop of London. And he is now one of the most respected New Testament scholars in the world.

Wright is, in my opinion, the C. S. Lewis of our generation. On the one hand, he has a brilliant mind and is equipped to engage the Bible—its historical context, biblical languages, hermeneutics, and doctrinal message—in exacting detail, more concerned about searching for and finding the truth than with defending a denominational or creedal perspective. He is a staunch believer in the divinity of Jesus Christ and one who has a high view of scripture. Perhaps his most respected series, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, consists of three volumes: *The New Testament and the People of God*, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, and *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.⁴

Without question, his most controversial work has been as a major contributor to the “New Perspectives on Paul” movement during recent decades. Among other things, his books *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, and *Paul in Fresh Perspective*⁵ set forth an interpretation of the phrase “the righteousness of God” that has aroused the passions of Protestant (especially Evangelical) thinkers who feel Wright has dismissed out of hand one of the pearls of the Reformation, namely, the forensic imputation of righteousness to sinners through Christ’s Atonement. Wright has suggested that in understanding Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, for example, we should not look upon chapters 9–11 (on the destiny of Israel) as a misplaced doctrinal side canyon that has been plopped right into the middle of the Apostle’s weighty discussion of justification by faith and the work of the Holy Spirit. Rather, Wright asks us to entertain a “fresh perspective” on Paul’s teachings, one not so burdened by Reformation thinking, one much more historically contextual—that the “righteousness of God” is not simply that heavenly goodness that is imputed to the sinner, but rather the steadfast and immutable promise that the Almighty will not let Israel go, that he will through his infinite patience and long-suffering keep his promises made to the fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to make of Israel a holy nation. In short, while Wright does still hold out imputed righteousness as a secondary meaning of “God’s righteousness,” he feels the primary Pauline meaning is linked to God’s covenant loyalty to his chosen people.

At the same time, Wright is able to present his scholarly findings in books clearly intended for the informed nonspecialist, works that are gaining a broad and extensive reading audience. I speak here of such books as *The Challenge of Jesus*, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture*, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*, *Evil and the Justice of God*, *Judas and the Gospel of Jesus*, and *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision*.⁶ *Surprised by Hope*, though a rigorous and mind-stretching read in itself, appears to be Wright's more popular version of *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.

Some five months before Hurricane Katrina ripped through the Gulf Coast and decimated the city of New Orleans, I attended a debate in the Crescent City between Wright and John Dominic Crossan on the topic of the Resurrection. The two-day conference was held in a Southern Baptist Seminary in the heart of New Orleans. While the two men, each distinguished scholars in their own right, could not have disagreed more vehemently upon whether Jesus did (Wright) or did not (Crossan) rise in bodily form from the dead and leave the Arimathean's tomb, their conduct and composure were admirable and contagious; although varying approaches were taken and certainly disparate conclusions were drawn by the two, they could not have demonstrated more respect, common decency, and convicted civility than they did. Crossan's was a liberal Catholic point of view, indeed, a radical revisionist reading of the scriptural text, explaining the Resurrection as a great mythic moment in Christian history, a symbol of the new intellectual and spiritual birth that comes to those who accept and abide by the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Wright's was, of course, a more traditional witness of the literal union of body and spirit of the Son of God that took place on that first Easter morning.

Since then I have had occasion to read and study much of Wright's work and to find *Surprised by Hope* a literary gem, a historical and doctrinal defense of the Resurrection that, as far as I am concerned, is without peer. In the preface Wright calls for the Christian world to recapture "the classic Christian answer to the question of death and beyond, which these days is not so much disbelieved (in world and church alike) as simply not known." He adds that "I often find that though Christians still use the word *resurrection*, they treat it as a synonym for 'life after death' or 'going to heaven' and that, when pressed, they often share the confusion of the wider world on the subject" (xii).

The Kingdom of God

The author suggests that there are two questions that too often are addressed separately, when in fact they are inextricably linked. “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 from* this world, the two questions are bound to appear unrelated” (5). Wright reminds us that John Donne had a glimpse of “what we shall discover to be the central New Testament belief: that at the last, death will be not simply redefined but defeated. God’s intention is not to let death have its way with us” (15).

Above and beyond all things, Wright desires to clarify that when Jesus spoke of the “kingdom of heaven” he was really speaking of the “kingdom of God” that had come to earth and not about some post-mortem place to which the righteous will be escorted as they breathe their last. “The roots of the misunderstanding go very deep,” Wright observes, “not least into the residual Platonism that has infected whole swathes of Christian thinking and has misled people into supposing that Christians are meant to devalue this present world and our present bodies and regard them as shabby or shameful. . . . Heaven, in the Bible, is not a future destiny but the other, hidden, dimension of our ordinary life—God’s dimension, if you like. God made heaven and earth; at the last he will remake both and join them together forever” (18–19). Wright insists later, “What creation needs is neither abandonment nor evolution but rather redemption and renewal; and this is both promised and guaranteed by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This is what the whole world’s waiting for” (107).

In addressing the question of the immortality of the soul, the author points out that many in the “Christian and sub-Christian tradition” have adopted an odd idea that it is the soul that needs saving, the soul being that part of us that will enter heaven after death. “All this, however, finds minimal support in the New Testament, including the teaching of Jesus, where the word *soul*, though rare, reflects when it does occur underlying Hebrew or Aramaic words referring not to a disembodied entity hidden within the outer shell of the disposable body but rather what we would call the whole person or personality” (28). This of course reminds Latter-day Saints of the words of Jacob, son of Lehi: “O how great the plan of our God! . . . The paradise of God must deliver up the spirits of the righteous, and the grave deliver

up the body of the righteous; and *the spirit and the body is restored to itself again*, and all men become incorruptible, and immortal, and they are *living souls*” (2 Nephi 9:13; emphasis added). Or as set forth briefly but poignantly in modern revelation: “And *the spirit and the body are the soul of man*. And the resurrection of the dead is the redemption of the soul” (D&C 88:15–16; emphasis added).

Wright warned that left to ourselves, we automatically “lapse into a kind of collusion with entropy, acquiescing in the general belief that things may be getting worse but that there’s nothing much that we can do about them. And we are wrong. Our task in the present . . . is to live as resurrection people in between Easter and the final day” (29–30).

An Intermediate Stop

The writer explains that when the early Christians did speak of heaven as a destination after this life, they seemed to be speaking not of a final destination but of a kind of way-station. “They seemed to regard this heavenly life,” Wright says, “as *a temporary stage on the way to the eventual resurrection* of the body. When Jesus tells the brigand [the thief on the cross] that he will join him in paradise that very day, *paradise clearly cannot be their ultimate destination*, as Luke’s next chapter [chapter 24 on the resurrected Lord] makes clear. *Paradise is, rather, the blissful garden where God’s people rest prior to the resurrection*” (41; emphasis added) Later the author clarified: “‘Today you will be with me in Paradise.’ There will still, of course, be a future completion involving ultimate resurrection. . . . Jesus, after all, didn’t rise again ‘today,’ that is, on Good Friday. Luke must have understood him to be referring to a state-of-being in paradise, which would be true, for him and for the man dying beside him, at once, that very day—in other words, *prior to the resurrection*.” Wright states that resurrection “wasn’t a way of talking about life after death. It was a way of talking about a new bodily life after whatever state of existence one might enter immediately upon death. It was, in other words, life *after* life after death” (150–51; emphasis in original).

The Prophet Joseph Smith, in speaking of the Greek word that Jesus would have used when he spoke of the thief’s place upon his immediate departure—probably the word *Hades*—offered his own commentary on this episode (Luke 23:39–43) by suggesting that what Jesus actually said to the penitent thief was, “This day thou shalt be with me in the world of spirits.”⁷ Joseph taught on another occasion that “the infidel will grasp at every straw for help until death stares him in the face, and then his infidelity takes its flight, for the realities

of the eternal world are resting upon him in mighty power; and when every earthly support and prop fails him, he then sensibly feels the eternal truths of the immortality of the soul. . . . Let this, then, prove as a warning to all not to procrastinate repentance, or wait till a death-bed, for it is the will of God that man should repent and serve Him in health, and in the strength and power of his mind, in order to secure his blessing, and not wait until he is called to die.”⁸

A Corporeal Resurrection

Over thirty years ago I sat in a doctoral seminar on the Apostle Paul. There were, as I recall, about eight persons seated around the table with the professor, a secular Jew, at the head of the table. That particular day we were discussing 1 Corinthians 15 and Paul’s teachings on the Resurrection. About an hour into the three-hour session, it became quite clear to me that I was the only one in the room who believed that the resurrected body was a tangible, physical, material body, notwithstanding there were Roman Catholics, Southern Baptists, and a Pentecostal in the seminar. As I was wondering why, especially given the evidence in such resurrection narratives as Luke 24, I realized, first of all, that 1 Corinthians 15:42–44 was rendered as follows: The body “is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: it is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: it is sown a natural body; *it is raised a spiritual body*” (emphasis added). And yet I knew that a “spiritual body” was a physical, material, immortal body not subject to death. Why? Because I was aware of Jesus’ postresurrection appearances, especially in Luke 24.

Further, this doctrine is taught plainly in Restoration scriptures. In addressing the wicked people of Ammonihah, Amulek explained, “The spirit and the body shall be reunited again in its perfect form; both limb and joint shall be restored to its proper frame, even as we now are at this time; and we shall be brought to stand before God, knowing even as we know now, and have a bright recollection of all our guilt. Now, this restoration [of spirit and body] shall come to all, both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female, both the wicked and the righteous; . . . every thing shall be restored to its perfect frame.” Amulek then goes on to speak of the judgment linked to the resurrection, and then returns to this restoration, adding that “this mortal body is raised to an immortal body . . . that they can die no more; *their spirits uniting with their bodies, never to be divided; thus the whole becoming spiritual and immortal*, that they can no more see corruption” (Alma 11:43–45; emphasis added). Or, as stated succinctly

in a modern revelation, “And the spirit and the body are the soul of man. And the resurrection from the dead is the redemption of the soul. . . . For notwithstanding they die, *they also shall rise again, a spiritual body*” (D&C 88:15–16, 27; emphasis added).

In writing of the resurrected body as a transformed body, but a physical one nonetheless, Wright states: “It is of course Paul, in a much misunderstood passage in 1 Corinthians 15, who sets this out most clearly and to whom many, though not all, subsequent writers look back. He speaks of two sorts of body, the present one and the future one. He uses two key adjectives to describe these two bodies. Unfortunately, many translations get him radically wrong at this point, leading to the widespread supposition that for Paul the new body would be a spiritual body in the sense of a nonmaterial body, a body that in Jesus’ case wouldn’t have left an empty tomb behind it. It can be demonstrated in great detail, philosophically and exegetically, that *this is precisely not what Paul meant*. The contrast he is making is not between what we would mean by a present physical body and what we would mean by a future spiritual one, but between a present body animated by the normal human soul and *a future body animated by God’s spirit*” (43–44; emphasis added)

Elder Orson Pratt eloquently made the point as follows: “A Saint who is one in deed and truth, does not look for an immaterial heaven, but he expects a heaven with lands, houses, cities, vegetation, rivers, and animals; with thrones, temples, palaces, kings, princes, priests, and angels; with food, raiment, musical instruments, etc., all of which are material. Indeed, the Saints’ eternal home is a redeemed, glorified, celestial material creation, inhabited by glorified material beings, male and female, organized into families, embracing all the relationships of husbands and wives, parents and children, where sorrow, crying, pain, and death will be known no more.” On this earth, Elder Pratt continued, the Saints of God “expect to live, with body, parts, and holy passions; on it they expect to move and have their being.” In short, “materiality is indelibly stamped upon the very heaven of heavens, upon all the eternal creations; it is the very essence of all existence.”

After the Ascension

In the middle of chapter 4 (“The Strange Story of Easter”), the author introduces us to what he calls “an epistemology of hope.” “Faith in Jesus risen from the dead,” Wright declares, “*transcends but includes* what we call history and what we call science. Faith of this sort is not blind belief, which rejects all history and science. . . . Hope,

for the Christian, is not wishful thinking or mere blind optimism. It is a mode of knowing, a mode within which new things are possible, options are not shut down, new creation can happen.” Wright asserts that “the resurrection 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. If we are even to glimpse this new world, let alone enter it, we will need a different kind of knowing. . . . Hope is what you get when you suddenly realize that a different worldview is possible, a worldview in which the rich, the powerful, and the unscrupulous do not after all have the last word. The same worldview shift that is demanded by the resurrection of Jesus is the shift that will enable us to transform the world” (72–73, 75; emphasis in original).

It is not uncommon to speak to Christians of all types who believe that once Jesus Christ, who is God the Son, had finished his intercessory work on earth, had suffered and died for our sins, and had risen in glory and majesty from the dead, that he returned to heaven to sit on the right hand of the Father as an eternal spirit. This, of course, the scriptures do not teach, nor do Latter-day Saints believe it. The earliest reference in a sermon by Joseph Smith on the corporeality of God seems to be January 5, 1841. On that occasion William Clayton recorded the Prophet as saying, “That which is without body or parts is nothing. There is no other God in heaven but that God who has flesh and bones.”¹⁰ On March 9, 1841, he spoke of Jesus as the Mediator and the Holy Ghost as the Witness and Testator. He then declared that “the Son had a tabernacle and so had the Father.”¹¹ Finally, on April 2, 1843, in Ramus, Illinois, Joseph the Prophet delivered instructions on this matter that are the basis of Doctrine & Covenants 130:22: “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost . . . is a personage of spirit.”

Wright remarks on the status of Jesus after his ascension into heaven:

The idea of the human Jesus now being in heaven, in his thoroughly embodied risen state, comes as a shock to many people, including many Christians. Sometimes this is because many people think that Jesus, having been divine, stopped being divine and became human, and then, having been human for a while, stopped being human and went back to being divine (at least, that’s what many people think many Christians are supposed to believe). More often it’s because our culture is so used to the Platonic idea that heaven is, by definition, a place of “spiritual,” nonmaterial reality so that the idea of a solid body

being not only present but also thoroughly at home there seems like a category mistake. (111)

Wright, of course, would not subscribe to the Latter-day Saint view of the corporeality of the Father, but we would agree with his exposition of Jesus' resurrected body in heaven now.

Here Comes Heaven

One of the most important Christian myth-breaking points made by the author is that no one will *go* to heaven. That is, no one will be whisked away (or raptured away) from the earth to some celestial sphere, as many Protestant dispensationalists teach. No, heaven will be here, on earth, on this very planet. "The main truth," Wright emphasizes, "is that *he* will come back to *us*" (124). Reminiscent to Latter-day Saints is the clear teaching in modern revelation that "the redemption of the soul is through him that quickeneth all things, in whose bosom it is decreed that the poor and the meek of the earth shall inherit it. Therefore, it [the earth] must needs be sanctified from all unrighteousness, that it may be prepared for the celestial glory; for after it hath filled the measure of its creation, it shall be crowned with glory, even with the presence of God the Father; that bodies who are of the celestial kingdom may possess it forever and ever; for, for this intent was it created, and for this intent are they [the people] sanctified" (D&C 88:17–20).

He explains further that the Greek word *parousia*, usually translated as "return" (meaning Jesus' Second Coming) really means "presence"—that is, presence as opposed to absence. "The second meaning emerges when a person of high rank makes a visit to a subject state, particularly when a king or emperor visits a colony or province. The word for such a visit is *royal presence*: in Greek, *parousia*." Wright continues, "Now suppose that Paul, and for that matter the rest of the early church, wanted to say two things. Suppose they wanted to say, first, that the Jesus they worshipped was near in spirit but absent in body but that one day he would be present in body and that then the whole world, themselves included, would know the sudden transforming power of that presence. A natural word to use for this would be *parousia*" (129). In addition, Wright challenges the typical conservative Evangelical view of the rapture, made popular through the enormously successful *Left Behind* series of books written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. "When Paul speaks of 'meeting the Lord in the air,' the point is precisely not—as in the popular rapture theology—

that the saved believers would then stay up in the air somewhere, away from earth. The point is that, having gone out to meet their returning Lord, they will escort him royally into his domain, that is, back to the place they have come from” (133). While Latter-day Saints believe that the righteous will be “caught up to meet” the Lord in the air at the time of his Second Coming in glory, the faithful will return to an earth that will have been cleansed and purified of all wickedness and wicked people, including Satan and his hosts, who will be bound. Christ will then reign on the earth as King of Kings and Lord of Lords for a millennium (see D&C 43:29–33; 63:49–52; 88:95–98).

One section of chapter 10 (“The Redemption of Our Bodies”) was especially provocative to me. In writing of the concept of men and women gaining immortality in the Resurrection, Wright noted: “In particular, this new body will be immortal. That is, it will have passed *beyond* death not just in the *temporal* sense (that it happens to have gone through a particular moment and event) but also in the *ontological* sense of no longer being subject to sickness, injury, decay, and death itself” (160). Ontology pertains to being. Wright appears to be suggesting that the resurrected body has indeed undergone a major ontological change, from corruptible to incorruptible, from natural to spiritual, from mortal to immortal. Could it be that the resurrected being, having been perfected in Christ (see Moroni 10:32; D&C 76:67), having become a joint heir with Christ (see Romans 8:17), having become a partaker of the divine nature (see 2 Peter 1:4), having become like God and being in a position to see him as he is (see 1 John 3:1–2)—could it be that he or she has undergone the kind of spiritual metamorphosis such that they have passed from humanity to divinity?

The Work of Grace

Without question, one of the most searing of the fiery darts launched at the Latter-day Saints by their Evangelical critics is that we are caught up in a kind of works righteousness, a belief that we must “work out our own salvation” and that Jesus will fill in the gaps. Certainly the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants teach otherwise (see, for example, 2 Nephi 2:3–4, 8; 10:24; 31:19; Moroni 6:4; D&C 3:20; 6:13; 14:7; 20:30–31). Attend for a moment to Wright’s words:

The new body will be a gift of God’s grace and love. However, there are several passages in the New Testament, not least in the words of Jesus himself, that speak of God’s future blessings in terms of *reward*. . . . Many Christians find this uncomfortable. We have been taught that

we are justified by faith, not works, and, somehow, the very idea of a Christian for what we will get out of it is distasteful.

But the image of reward in the New Testament doesn't work like that. It isn't a matter of calculation, of doing a difficult job in order to be paid a wage. It is much more like working at a friendship or a marriage in order to enjoy the other person's company more fully. It is more like practicing golf in order that we can go out on the course and hit the ball in the right direction. . . . The reward is . . . always far in abundance beyond any sense of direct or equivalent payment. (161–62)

Later, in chapter 13 (“Building for the Kingdom”), Wright continues this line of thinking. “Many people,” he states, “faced with the challenge to work for God's kingdom in the present, will at once object. ‘Doesn't that sound,’ they will ask, ‘as though you're trying to build God's kingdom by your own efforts?’ Well, if it does sound like that, I'm sorry. It wasn't meant like that.” Wright adds that since we have been created in the image of Deity, “God intends his wise, creative, loving presence and power to be *reflected*—imaged, if you like—into his world *through* his human creatures. He has enlisted us to act as his stewards in the project of creation.” That is, “through the work of Jesus and the power of the Spirit, he equips humans to help in the work of getting the project back on track. So *the objection about us trying to build God's kingdom by our own efforts, though it seems humble and pious, can actually be a way of hiding from responsibility, of keeping one's head well down when the boss is looking for volunteers*” (207; emphasis added).

As to how the works of righteousness fit within the grand scheme of things, how they relate to the ultimate establishment of God's kingdom on earth, Wright concludes:

Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or to walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one's fellow human beings and for that matter one's nonhuman creatures; and of course every prayer, all Spirit-led teaching, every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world—all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make. (208)

For Wright there is no place in the life of a true follower of Christ for “cheap grace,” for “easy believism,” or for “grace gone wild.” Jesus meant what he said when he declared, “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15) and when he set forth the invitation

to discipleship, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily [denounce ungodliness and worldly lusts—Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 16:26], and follow me” (Luke 9:23). “Some kinds of evangelism in the past,” Wright notes, “implied that the main thing is to sign on, to pray a particular prayer, which results in the assurance that one is safely on the way to heaven—and failed to mention, to the frustration of pastors and teachers who then tried to look after such converts, the fact that following Jesus means just that, *following Jesus*, not checking a box that says ‘Jesus’ and then sitting back as though it’s all done. To speak, rather, of Jesus’ lordship and the new creation, which results from his victory on Calvary and at Easter, implies at once that *to confess him as Lord and to believe that God raised him from the dead is to allow one’s entire life to be reshaped by him*, knowing that though this will be painful from time to time, it will be the way not to a diminished or cramped human existence but to genuine human life in the present and to complete, glorious resurrected human life in the future” (229–30; emphasis added).

As an Anglican, not far removed from the Roman Catholic view of the necessity of the sacraments, Wright argues that many in the Christian world have focused much on conversion and rebirth and regeneration but have attempted to do so without requiring baptism. To be so bold as to state that baptism is essential, Protestants often say, is to attempt to supplement the finished work of Jesus Christ, to add requisite works on our part to his substitutionary atoning sacrifice. From a Latter-day Saint perspective, this is flawed thinking: repentance and baptism and righteous works are the products of one’s acceptance of Christ, the faithfulness that manifests true faith, the means by which we receive the proffered gift, the manner by which the Atonement is appropriated. Baptism is “the sign and means of leaving behind the old life and beginning the new, of identifying with the death and resurrection of Jesus himself.” Further, “What has proved much harder to do, in those movements that have stressed the new birth as a vital spiritual experience, is to articulate a theology of baptism that goes with it, as it obviously does in the New Testament. Evangelicalism’s inability to do this left the door wide open to the various theologies of the Spirit baptism that have characterized Pentecostalism” (228, 271).

Our Destiny with Charity

Perhaps no section of *Surprised by Hope* proved more poignant to me and expanded my understanding more dramatically than a portion of chapter 15 (“Reshaping the Church for Mission: Living the

Future”), in which Wright spoke of the nature of men and women who will inhabit the resurrected world, God’s world, composed of glorified, immortal men and women. He emphasized that the actions we perform as a part of our Christian task today—good things that we often do, but do for less than heavenly motives, such as out of duty or responsibility—will in that day be performed for very different reasons. “We all know”—in today’s world—“that it’s no good simply telling people to love one another. One more exhortation to love, to patience, to forgiveness, may remind us of our duty. But as long as we think of it as duty, we aren’t very likely to do it.

“The point of 1 Corinthians 13 is that love is not our duty; it is our *destiny*. It is the language Jesus spoke, and we are called to speak it so that we can converse with him. It is the food they eat in God’s new world, and we must acquire the taste for it here and now. It is the music God has written for all his creatures to sing, and we are called to learn it and practice it now so as to be ready when the conductor brings down his baton. It is the resurrection life, and the resurrected Jesus calls us to begin living it with him and for him right now. Love is at the very heart of the surprise of hope: people who truly hope as the resurrection encourages us to hope will be people enabled to love in a new way. Conversely, people who are living by this rule of love will be people who are learning more deeply how to hope” (287–88).

Who Becomes Immortal?

Now, to be sure, Latter-day Saints should not look upon Wright’s writings as affirmations of our theology. There were, throughout the book, a few doctrinal matters with which I as a Latter-day Saint took issue, but I emphasize that there were very few.

First, on pages 28 and 161 Wright draws the conclusion—as I suppose he should, based on 1 Timothy 6:16 and 2 Timothy 1:10—that immortality is a gift granted to men and women by God through the atoning mercies of Jesus Christ; that because of Christ’s intercession all who receive him will gain immortality and eternal life hereafter. Here Latter-day Saints part company with Wright and with traditional Christianity in general. Latter-day Saints believe that each of us is already immortal, that we lived before we were born, and that we did not suddenly spring into existence at birth, but rather, “intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be” (D&C 93:29). The Prophet Joseph Smith explained, “We say that God himself is a self-existent being. Who told you so? It is correct enough; but how did it get into your heads? Who told you that man did not

exist in like manner upon the same principles? Man does exist upon the same principles. . . . The mind or the intelligence which man possesses is co-equal [co-eval or co-eternal] with God himself.”¹² In the Joseph Smith Translation of 1 Timothy 6:14–16, Paul encourages his beloved missionary companion to “keep this commandment without spot, unrebukable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ; which in his times he shall show, who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords, to whom be honor and power everlasting; whom no man hath seen, nor can see, unto whom no man can approach, only he who hath the light and the hope of immortality dwelling in him.” 2 Timothy 1:10 explains that Christ has brought “life and immortality to light through the gospel.” This is referring to resurrected, glorified immortality, which comes to us through one’s acceptance of and faithful observance of the principles and ordinances of the gospel.

Forgiveness and Cleansing beyond the Grave

Second, in arguing that the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory is unscriptural, Wright reminds readers that as “the reformers insisted, bodily death itself is the destruction of the sinful person. . . . Death itself gets rid of all that’s still sinful; this isn’t magic but good theology. There is nothing then left to purge.” Further, “it’s the present life that is meant to function as a purgatory. The sufferings of the present time, not of some postmortem state, are the valley through which we have to pass in order to reach the glorious future” (170–71). We would certainly agree that “this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God” and that our task is, through repentance and the application of the Atonement, to seek to obtain and retain a remission of sins (Mosiah 4:11–12, 26), acknowledging that “that same spirit which doth possess your bodies at the time that ye go out of this life, that same spirit will have power to possess your [spirit] body in that eternal world” (Alma 34:32, 34). Simply stated, repentance and refinement and improvement and sanctification go forward after this life in the postmortal spirit world (D&C 138:19, 31–34, 58). In the language of Elder Melvin J. Ballard: “Do not let any of us imagine that we can go down to the grave not having overcome the corruptions of the flesh and then lose in the grave all our sins and evil tendencies. They will be with us. They will be with the spirit when separated from the body. . . . The point I have in mind is that we are sentencing ourselves to long periods of bondage, separating our spirits from our bodies, or we are

shortening that period, according to the way in which we overcome and master ourselves.”¹³

The Communion of the Saints

Finally, in chapter 11 (“Purgatory, Paradise, Hell”), Wright indicates that he finds no particular problem with the concept of mortals praying for or in behalf of departed loved ones, all as a part of the doctrine mentioned in the Apostle’s Creed as the “communion of the saints.” “Love passes into prayer,” he writes; “we still love them; why not hold them, in that love, before God?” But then he goes on to describe his discomfort with what he terms an unscriptural and potentially dangerous idea that those on the other side are praying *for us* (172–73). Because of the Latter-day Saint perspective on the nearness of those who have gone beyond¹⁴ and because we believe so strongly that life and love and learning are forever, we find comfort in the teachings of President Joseph F. Smith at the April 1916 general conference:

Sometimes the Lord expands our vision from this point of view and this side of the veil, so that we feel and seem to realize that we can look beyond the thin veil which separates us from that other sphere. If we can see, by the enlightening influence of the Spirit of God and through the words that have been spoken by the holy prophets of God, beyond the veil that separates us from the spirit world, surely those who have passed beyond, can see more clearly through the veil back here to us than it is possible for us to see to them from our sphere of action.

I believe we move and have our being in the presence of heavenly messengers and of heavenly beings. We are not separate from them. We begin to realize, more and more fully, as we become acquainted with the principles of the gospel, as they have been revealed anew in this dispensation, that we are closely related to our kindred, to our ancestors, to our friends and associates and co-laborers who have preceded us into the spirit world. We can not forget them; we do not cease to love them; we always hold them in our hearts, in memory. . . . How much more certain it is and reasonable and consistent to believe that those who have been faithful, who have gone beyond and are still engaged in the work for the salvation of the souls of men, . . . can see us better than we can see them; that they know us better than we know them. They have advanced; we are advancing; we are growing as they have grown; we are reaching the goal that they have attained unto; and therefore, I claim that we live in their presence, they see us, they are solicitous for our welfare, they love us now more than ever. For now they see the dangers that beset us; they can comprehend, better than ever before, the weaknesses that are liable to mislead us into dark and forbidden paths. They see the temptations and the evils that beset us in life and the proneness

of mortal beings to yield to temptation and to do wrong; hence their solicitude for us, and their love for us, and their desire for our well being, must be greater than that which we feel for ourselves.¹⁵

Conclusion

Reading *Surprised by Hope* renewed for me the scriptural injunction to “seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, *seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom*; seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118; emphasis added). To put it bluntly, this is one of the *best books* I have read in thirty years, and those who know me know that I read a great deal. What a delight it is to turn each page, knowing that the writer has done his homework, put all of his ducks in a row, and chosen powerful prose to elucidate his message. The book was intellectually challenging, but it was also spiritually stimulating, confirming my hope in the reality of the risen Lord. “The power of the gospel,” Wright explains, “lies not in the offer of a new spirituality or religious experience, not in the threat of hellfire (certainly not in the threat of being ‘left behind’), which can be removed if only the hearer checks this box, says this prayer, raises a hand, or whatever, but in the powerful announcement that God is God, that Jesus is Lord, that the powers of evil have been defeated, that God’s new world has begun. This announcement, stated as a fact about the way the world is rather than as an appeal about the way you might like your life, your emotions, or your bank balance to be, is the foundation of everything else” (227). **RE**

Notes

1. Richard John Neuhaus, *As I Lay Dying: Reflections Upon Returning* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 53.

2. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 324.

3. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

4. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

5. N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005); *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997); *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

6. N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 2000); *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (New York: HarperOne, 2005); *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2006); *Evil and the Justice of God* (Notting-

ham: IVP Books, 2006); *Judas and the Gospel of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006); *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009).

7. Smith, *Teachings*, 309; see also 310.

8. Smith, *Teachings*, 197.

9. *Masterful Discourses and Writings of Orson Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962), 62–63.

10. *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 60.

11. *Words of Joseph Smith*, 64.

12. Smith, *Teachings*, 352–53.

13. *Melvin J. Ballard—Crusader for Righteousness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 212–13.

14. See *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 326; Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool: F. D. Richards & Sons, 1851–86), 3:367–69; Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 80.

15. James R. Clark, ed., *Messages of the First Presidency* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–75), 5:6–7.