A Lenten Devotional

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N.T. WRIGHT ONLINE

RENEWING MINDS THROUGH BIBLICAL TEACHING

Week 1

Grasped by the Love of God

Look', said Pilate, 'here is your king!'

'Take him away!' they shouted. 'Take him away! Crucify him!'

'Do you want me to crucify your king?' asked Pilate.

'We have no king', the chief priests replied, 'except Caesar!'

Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

John 19:14-16 KNT

By 6:00 P.M. on the first Good Friday, the world was a different place. That may sound very odd, but that is what the first Christians said again and again. They said things like ‘on the cross Jesus disarmed the principalities and powers and led them in a captor’s triumph making a public example of it’. It didn't look like that on the evening of the first Good Friday but as they looked back, that's what they said had happened. They said that that day a revolution had begun.

There is a famous story (I wish I knew which archbishop it was that it concerned) that concerns a Roman Catholic archbishop who told the story of three naughty young lads who one day for a laugh went into a Catholic Church and went into the confessional one by one and confessed to all sorts of outrageous sins that they claimed they had committed. The priest being an experienced guide saw through them quite quickly. And the first two lads ran out of the church laughing but the priest hung on to the third one and said, ‘Okay, you have confessed these sins. I want you to do a penance. I want you to walk up to the far end of the church and I want you to look at the picture of Jesus hanging on the cross, and I want you to look at his face and say, “You did all that for me and I don't care that much.” And I want you to do that three times'.

And so the boy went up to the front, looked at the picture of Jesus and said, ‘you did all that for me and I don't care that much’. And then he said it again, but then he couldn't say it the

third time because he broke down in tears. And the archbishop telling the story said, ‘the reason I know that story is that I was that young man.’ There is something about the cross. Something about Jesus dying there for us that leaps over all the theoretical discussions, all the possibilities of how we explain it this way or that way and it grasps us. And when we are grasped by it, somehow we have a sense that what is grasping us is the love of God.

I've often thought when I go into a restaurant and have a meal, I don't know much about cooking. I certainly don't know much about the theory that lies behind it, but if I have a good meal, I don't need to know the theory. Somebody else has done that bit. Or if I hear a wonderful piece of music, I didn't have to understand how the violin strings actually work or how the brass or the woodwinds actually function. I simply take in this fantastic music but unless somebody understood that, there wouldn't be any instruments made unless somebody understood it, and those instruments would never get played.

So in the church and for the sake of the church's mission, we need to celebrate the fact that the cross does still carry an extraordinary evocative power. But we have sometimes reflected on, if you like, the theory behind it, not for its own sake, not so that the theory can replace that power and passion which we sense with the cross and with great pieces of art like J.S. Bach’s, St. Matthew Passion or St. John Passion, but so that in our

thinking, our praying, our preaching and teaching, and not least our mission, we can understand so that we can be like the chefs who are cooking the meal or the instrument makers and players who are producing the music for the next generation.

One of the reasons it's a puzzle is that the New Testament doesn't give us a single theory. Every time the New Testament talks about Jesus' death it seems to say it slightly differently. We're in danger sometimes of collapsing those differences and simply imagining that there is basically one theory and then everything else conforms to that. That certainly isn't likely to work. Okay, there are other simple summaries in 1 Corinthians 15. Paul says, 'Here is the summary of the Gospel which I preached and which you believed and it goes like this: The Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures and he was buried and he was raised from the dead in accordance with the Scriptures on the third day and he was seen by many….' And then he gives a list, ending with himself.

So the Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures. Even that can be a bit of a puzzle. Which Scriptures are we talking about? How do we know? Is it just three or four proof texts, which we can go to and say that Isaiah 53, Psalm 22, or something else gave us an advanced theory of what this would mean? Or is it somehow deeper than that? And when we try to probe, we find that already by the middle of the first century, that

is within 25 or 30 years of Jesus' death, there is an apparently bewildering range of ideas.

The New Testament draws on sacrificial imagery, draws on the imagery of the slave market trying to explain, or if not to explain, at least to evoke something of that power and meaning of Jesus death, though again and again coming back to the central fact that Jesus' death was the expression of the love of God. That's there all the way through one of the best known verses in the Bible, John 3:16, 'God so loved the world that he gave his only son', and that's in the context of talking about Jesus' forthcoming death. And, particularly, we have a puzzle here because, though we in the West have often thought that Jesus died so that we could go to heaven, neither the Old Testament nor the Gospels nor the Epistles nor the Book of Revelation actually say that. Isn't that bizarre? We have assumed that that's what it's about. We are sinful; that's stopping us getting to heaven; so Jesus died so that we will be all right after all.

The Bible never actually puts it like that. We need to get back into the mindset of those Christians in the first century experiencing Jesus, his death and his resurrection, and then his new life and the power of his spirit and reflecting right in those early days on what this actually meant. Coming back to this question by 6 P.M. on Good Friday, what was different? What had changed? The Gospels all say something had changed. Paul says something radical had happened. John says it was finished. What was

finished? What was accomplished that day? How can we express that, and more particularly, live by it ourselves?

Week 2

History and Theology—
Why Jesus Had to Die

From then on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he would have to go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and be raised on the third day.

Peter took him and began to tell him off. 'That's the last thing God would want, Master!' he said. 'That's never, ever going to happen to you!'

Jesus turned on Peter. 'Get behind me, satan!' he said. 'You're trying to trip me up! You're not looking at things like God does! You're looking at things like a mere mortal!'

Matthew 16:21-23 KNT

The question we are faced with when we look at the New Testament or when we think about Christian preaching and teaching in general is: Why did Jesus die? I've been haunted by that question, and actually sometimes amused by it, for many years. Amused, because once I was teaching a Sunday school with a class of bright 12-year-olds. We had been working through the Gospels, as you do in Sunday school, and we got to the point of the cross. I asked them at the beginning of the class why did Jesus die? And I said, ‘we are going to go around without conferring. I want you each to write two sentences on a piece of paper about what you think the answer is to that question: Why did Jesus die?’.

And so they all did and we went around and they read them. Roughly half the class did one sort of thing and the other half the other sort of thing. It wasn't a male-female division or anything like that, it was just random. Half of them gave me what you might call ‘historical reasons’. Jesus died because the Romans were frightened that he might be leading some sort of revolution. Or the chief priests didn't like the way he was teaching and attacking the temple. Or the Pharisees didn't like the sort of things that he was saying and leading people to believe and they didn’t like the fact that he was mixing with all the wrong sort of people. Historical reasons of one sort or another.

The other half gave me theological reasons. He died to save us for our sins. He died so we could go to heaven. There are hymns, of course, which make it easier to remember all that.

He died that we might be forgiven;

And he died to make us good,

So we could go at last to heaven

Saved by his precious blood.

That's one of the best-known Good Friday hymns, *There is a Green Hill Far Away*. Maybe some of the children were dimly remembering that. These historical and theological reasons look at one another as if they were on opposite sides of the room, and we say, 'How do they work together? Do they work together at all?'

And here is one of the odd things. Generations of Christians have said, 'He died to save us from our sins; He died so that we could go to heaven'. And people have told the story about the chief priests saying, 'crucify him', and about Pontius Pilate trying to figure out what to do and all the rest of it. Although they have never put these two together as though all that the Gospels are doing from that point of view is just providing the back story. And later, then, we come with a theory from somewhere else about what it all means. But supposing some of what it all means is actually contained within that history. What would that do to our understanding of the cross? How will that, as it were, work? Is it just incidental background detail? Or what do we think, for

instance, about John telling that extraordinary story of Jesus and Pilate arguing with one another about kingdom and truth and power? Do we think that John is really telling us all that without it having any impact on the meaning of Jesus death?

I think that the history and the theology really do go very closely together. But for Jesus himself, what did he think was going on? And again, isn't it interesting that many Christians, when they are thinking about the meaning of Jesus death, don't actually pause and ponder very much about what Jesus himself seems to have had in mind?

All our records suggest in the Gospels that he did know he was going to face death and that he knew that this death would have, what we might call, a ‘theological meaning’. When we read the Gospels, it looks as though, at least from the time of his baptism, when the voice from heaven quoted from Psalm 2 and Isaiah 42, Jesus was aware of a vocation, not just to inaugurate God's kingdom, but to do so by going to his death. How on earth would that make sense? What would it mean to have a vocation like that? How could Jesus himself think that through, pray it through? Why didn't people get it at the time and why have they found it so difficult to get hold of ever since? And how does that relate to any sense of what God was up to? Are we just going to say that because Jesus was the incarnate Son of God, He knew exactly all the atonement theories that might subsequently come, and he just engineered his own death in order to make those atonement

theories work? Doesn't that make Jesus just weird? How do we understand a first century Jew, fully human as well as fully divine, according to the church's teaching? How do we understand such a person coming to terms with a vocation to go to the place of death itself in order to achieve some kind of extraordinary new revolution?

It is because of these questions and others like them that church teachers down the years have come up with various theories as to what it all means, growing out of and developing some of the things that are said in the New Testament. There is perhaps the most famous theory of all the theories that on the cross Jesus won the victory over all the powers of darkness. This is sometimes the Christus Victor theory. It's a Latin phrase meaning Christ the Victor; Christ is the one who has won the great triumph. You'll find this in many of the early Church Fathers, often couched in terms of a victory over the devil, over the powers of darkness.

And so other theories have developed as well, again growing out of much of the teaching of the New Testament. These are theories about sin needing to be punished and so Jesus takes the punishment on behalf of his people and perhaps on behalf of the whole world. That he stood in for us. That he died for us. How does that then fit with Christus Victor? The early fathers seem to teach them both side by side and they don't really wrestle with the question of should they fit together, and if so, how.

So these different preachers who pointed to different illustrations and different ideas, were present from very early on. But it was only really in the 16th century and the 17th century when and after the Protestant Reformation people thought we needed to sort this one out. And as they did so, they pulled in a couple of other ideas as well.

One is the notion of sacrifice. There is much of the language of the New Testament about what Jesus' death has to do with sacrifice, taking the sacrificial cult of the Old Testament and speaking of Jesus' death in those terms. Now, on the face of it, that's a very odd thing to do because the ancient Jews knew that human sacrifice was absolutely ruled out. So what does it mean to think of Jesus' death as a sacrifice?

Some people have put that together with the idea of Jesus being punished for our sins on the assumption that when an animal was sacrificed, the person who brought the sacrifice deserved to be punished and perhaps killed when the animal was being killed in their place. Now that idea may have had some currency in the pagan world but that doesn't seem to be what's going on in the Jewish sacrificial cult. For a start, the animals are *not killed on the altar*. The animals are killed elsewhere, and that isn't so important. What is important is that the *blood* that is collected is used as a purifying agent to purify not only the worshipers but also the temple furniture, and so on. The result is that the stain of death, which comes from human corruption and the corruption of the

present material world, is covered by the *life, which is the blood*. That seems to be what's going on in Leviticus.

And after all, it isn't only animals that are offered in sacrifice. There are grain offerings and wine offerings as well. And, of course, you can't say that they are being killed as a punishment. In fact, the only animal in Leviticus that has sins confessed over its head is the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement. And that is precisely the one animal that isn't killed. That is the animal that is driven off into the wilderness.

I'm particularly concerned with this question: What had changed by 6 P.M. on Good Friday? So we have Christus Victor. We have a theory of punishment or something like it. We have sacrificial notions. We also have the idea of Jesus' death as an example. When Jesus died according to the New Testament, this was the great outpouring of the love of God and we are to love one another in the same way.

And those controversies meant that the reformers were basically trying to give biblical answers to what actually were mediaeval questions. I think they did a pretty good job of that, but actually, as many theologians have seen subsequently, we need to go beyond that and say, 'What were the first century questions and what is the Bible saying in relation to those first century questions?' If we just come with the mediaeval picture, we remain with

the idea that what matters is going to heaven, whereas the New Testament is about New Creation. It is about new heavens and a new earth. And if we asked the question, 'what is it about Jesus' death that somehow enables that New Creation to take place and somehow enables us to be part of that New Creation in the resurrection', then we get a rather different picture of what was achieved on the cross.

Week 3

A Story Which Seems to be in Search of an Ending

But now, quite apart from the law (though the law and the prophets bore witness to it), God's covenant justice has been displayed. God's covenant justice comes into operation through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah, for the benefit of all who have faith. For there is no distinction: all sinned, and fell short of God's glory—and by God's grace they are freely declared to be in the right, to be members of the covenant, through the redemption which is found in the Messiah, Jesus.

Romans 3:21-24 KNT

Paul says the Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the Bible. That's 1 Corinthians 15:3. Then we find Romans 3:21, introducing one of the most famous, brief, and dense statements about the cross. The apostle Paul says that God's righteousness has been revealed apart from the Law and the prophets, though with the law and the prophets bearing witness to it. So, what did the Law and the prophets of the Jewish Scriptures say? What were they witnessing to? And how did people in Paul's day tell the story to which then the death of Jesus might turn out to be the astonishing fulfillment or climax?

We need to study the implicit narrative that many people in Paul's world were telling. They had a story in their heads, as we can see, not only from the storyteller of the time, Josephus, the great historian, but also from many other books from the Dead Sea Scrolls, from books like the Wisdom of Solomon, and on through to later Jewish books like 4 Ezra, which was written after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. They all have in their minds the great story, the story we find in what Christians call the Old Testament, Israel's Scriptures. This book is very strange because it tells a story which seems to be in search of an ending.

The great Jewish philosopher at the middle of the 20th century, Ludwig Wittgenstein, said that the Old Testament is like a torso without a head and that the Gospels seem to be offered as a head for that torso. That's a very interesting and actually a very Jewish perception.

The Jewish Bible, of course, begins with the five books of Moses with Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The story of the creation of the world and the fall of humankind and the dissolution and disruption of creation, the story of the call of Abraham, God's covenant with Abraham, Abraham's family going to Egypt, being rescued from slavery in Egypt, being taken through the wilderness to their promised land, the land of inheritance which God had promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And that continues with the laws for the sacrifices and offerings in the tabernacle in Leviticus, with all the discussions of the strange things that happened to them in the wilderness in the Book of Numbers, and then in Deuteronomy. They are on the threshold of the Promised Land. Moses says, in essence, 'Now you need to know how you have to behave when you're in the Promised Land'.

But then there is a strange thing that happens at the end of Deuteronomy, which means that even the first five books themselves encompass in a sense the whole story, not just the back-story, of the people of Israel. There are signs in the first century that people are reading Deuteronomy like this because in Deuteronomy 27, 28, 29 and 30, Moses says, here then is how the covenant is going to work out. If you obey, you will live in the land and all will be well; but if you disobey, if you worship idols, if you sin, then sooner or later the curses of the covenant will come upon you. The ultimate curse will be exile and you will be sent

away from the land. And only then, maybe, according to Deuteronomy 30, will God renew your heart, so that you will love him with all your heart and mind and soul. And then he will restore you.

But even after that, you might have thought that would be a good point on which to end. But no, you find Deuteronomy 32, the great song of Moses, which is a song of celebration of God and his justice and his victory. But it is also a song of warning that Israel is going to go wrong and bad things are going to happen. Thus, the Pentateuch, those five books, doesn't end easily. It ends with a kind of warning. And Josephus, the historian, writes about that song of Moses found in Deuteronomy 32. And he is writing this after the Jewish War of 66 to 70. Josephus says that Moses' song was talking about things that would happen. Josephus says that 'these things are happening in our own day'.

In other words, Josephus sees this whole story as the story of Pentateuch, the story of Israel. And you see how it fits together and how Jews in that period and subsequently would read it as the ultimate back story, Adam and Eve, being given this lovely paradise, being given a command, breaking it, and being sent off with thorns and thistles attacking their lovely garden. Then they are sent off into the wilderness themselves, and this has happened to Israel itself.

Israel has been given this lovely land and Israel has committed idolatry and sin and so has been kicked out and exiled. That's how the story works. And the question then is, ‘What is God going to do?’ Because if God has made promises to Abraham and his family, that through them the whole world would be blessed and would be rescued, how then are they going to cope if the people who were carrying the solution are also the bearers of the problem? And we see the Prophets wrestling with exactly this question. We see the Psalms wrestling with exactly this question. Psalm 105 celebrates the great victories of God, the rescue of Israel, and the fact that Israel has been bought into the land so that they can keep this law. And then Psalm 106, right beside it, tells the dark side of the same story that we have sinned with our fathers; we've all done the same thing. Yes, we went badly wrong. You punished us, but then you had compassion on us and forgave us and then we went and did it again and so on and so on.

And it's a cry of how can we live with this tension that we are the people who are bearing the promise. But we are also the people who find that the problem is gnawing away at our own hearts.

And one of the books written in the period of exile, the Book of Daniel, puts it like this: Yes, Jeremiah did say that the exile would last for 70 years but actually it's not 70 years, it is 70 times seven years. That ultimately the final rescue from exile will be like a Jubilee of Jubilees, 70 times seven, 490 years, half a millennium

of exile? Yes, that's how Jews in the second century BC, in the first century BC and the first century AD were telling their own story: that we are the people who are brought out of Egypt. We are the people of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We are the people through whom God was going to do everything that would put the world right after the initial disaster. But we, too, have had our exile. We have embodied in our own story the problem that has infected the human race from the beginning, and we are longing for the real ultimate return from exile because exile was the result of Israel's sin and idolatry. Therefore, the return from exile will mean forgiveness of sins and rescue from idolatry. The Book of Ezekiel begins with chapters which talk about the wickedness of Israel resulting in God leaving the temple, abandoning it. But at the end of the book it says the temple will be rebuilt and the holy, glorious presence of God will come back and dwell in it again.

And all of this comes together particularly in the middle chapters of the Book of Isaiah, Isaiah 40 to 55, one of the greatest poems ever written in any culture in the world. It is about forgiveness. It is about restoration. It is about the return from exile. It is about the overthrow of the Babylonian gods that have appeared to win the victory over God's people. In fact, God himself is going to celebrate his triumph. God is going to come and be king. ‘How lovely on the mountains’, it says, ‘are the feet of the one who publishes salvation’, says to Zion, ‘your god reigns’. That's the promise of Isaiah 40 to 55. What will this look like? And how is this going to be accomplished?

Running like a scarlet thread through Isaiah 40 to 55, we find the picture of the servant in Isaiah 42, and then a couple of other passages ending with the passage we call the Fourth Song of the Servant, Isaiah 52:13 through to the end of Chapter 53. It is a picture of one who is Israel, in person, representing Israel. You are my servant, Israel, in whom I would be glorified but who now somehow stands over against Israel and hence over against the world. He does for Israel and the world what they couldn't do for themselves. And yet he is despised and rejected by human beings and dies under the weight of Israel's sin, the world's sin, the world's shame and horror.

And then as a result, there is new covenant, Isaiah 54 and new creation, Isaiah 55; that's how the story works.

And it looks as though Jesus of Nazareth came into the middle of that picture and said, 'Actually, this is what it's going to look like'. It looked like one person coming to the place where Israel and the world are in their deepest pain and taking that pain, that shame, that death, upon himself. Thus, we have the story of the loving Creator who called Israel to be the means of his loving redemption of the whole world and now somehow has come himself come back to Zion, come back to the place where the world's pain is concentrated, to take that upon himself.

Week 4

Kingdom Movement on Earth

All the tax-collectors and sinners were coming close to listen to Jesus. The Pharisees and the legal experts were grumbling. 'This fellow welcomes sinners!' they said. 'He even eats with them!'

So Jesus told them this parable. 'Supposing one of you has a hundred sheep,' he said, 'and you lose one of them. What will you do? Why, you'll leave the ninety-nine out in the countryside, and you'll go off looking for the lost one until you find it! And when you find it, you'll be so happy—you'll put it on your shoulders and come home, and you'll call your friends and neighbours in. "Come and have a party!" you'll say. "Celebrate with me! I've found my lost sheep!"

'Well, let me tell you: that's how glad they will be in heaven over one sinner who repents—more than over ninety-nine righteous people who don't need repentance.

Luke 9:1-7 KNT

A decade or two ago, some Christian teenagers wore bracelets that said, ‘WWJD: What Would Jesus Do’? Some Christian teachers objected to that. Some people responded by objecting, ‘The Gospel is much more than just thinking of Jesus as a moral example.’

When somebody said that to me I remember saying, ‘I wish my teenagers would at least ask that question once in a blue moon, never mind actually making it something they had on their wrists’. But what we need to do is to ask, ‘what did Jesus do and what did Jesus think about his own forthcoming death’? I'm assuming that the Gospel writers are correct to say that Jesus not only foresaw that doing what he did, he was likely to end up being killed. It appears he actually understood that this was to be part of his vocation, part of his divine calling. This was something for which he had been commissioned, specifically in his baptism and then moving on past that.

So when he speaks cryptically about a baptism that he has to be baptized with, or a cup that he has to drink, we have a sense that he is wrestling with a Scripture-fueled vocation, which he knows is taking him in one direction, and one direction only. It is odd, in fact, that many people who have written about the atonement or the meaning of the cross don't spend very long asking what was Jesus was actually thinking about when he was doing what he did in his public career.

And this is because in his public career, Jesus was not talking about dying for the sins of the world or dying to enable us to go to heaven or anything like that. Yes, he was offering forgiveness to people, but he didn't usually directly connect that with the death that he was going to die. And, yes, he was talking about suffering and about taking up the cross, but he didn't interpret it that in the way that much later atonement theorists seem to have done.

So what was he doing and how did it all fit together? Jesus was talking about the kingdom of God. Right away there is a problem there because many Christians when they start to read the New Testament begin of course with Matthew, and in Matthew's Gospel, when in the other Gospels we have kingdom of God, Matthew has kingdom of heaven. And so many people – I myself thought this when I was younger – assume that when Jesus talks about inheriting the kingdom of heaven, he means going to heaven when you die. So people have said, 'There you are, in Matthew, Jesus is talking about the kingdom of heaven, the place will go when we die. And at the end of the Gospel, he dies so that we can go there.'

That is completely wrong. Jesus taught us to pray in Matthew's Gospel in Chapter 6, 'Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done, on earth as in heaven'. The phrase kingdom of heaven is not about a place called heaven, which is somewhere else, where God is king and where we'll go one day. It is about the establishment of the rule of heaven, in other words, the rule of God here on earth.

Does that just make Jesus a revolutionary? Well, in a sense, yes, it does. Many people have said, ‘Maybe Jesus was just the typical revolutionary trying to bring the kingdom of God on earth’. Well, yes, he was, but he was double revolutionary because, though that was his agenda, an agenda which he shared at that level with many other Jews of his day, the means by which he believed this revolution would happen, was radically different and it involved, yes, his own death in a way which no other Jewish revolutionaries had even dreamed of before.

In fact ordinary Jewish revolutionaries, of which there were many in Jesus day, if the leader of their movement was killed by the authorities, they didn't say, ‘Good, this is the way the kingdom of heaven is coming’. They said, ‘This means we back the wrong horse, and if we are still alive and able to escape, either we should give up the revolution or we should get another messiah, another leader.’

Jesus, however, was announcing the kingdom of God, that is to say, he was announcing that this was the time for God to become king at last. He was evoking those pictures from the Psalms, from Isaiah, from Daniel, about God taking his power and reigning, about God coming back to Jerusalem, so that the watchmen would shout in joy and say, ‘Your God reigns; God has become king’. What would that mean? Obviously, it would mean that he had defeated and overthrown all the powers that had enslaved

God's people. That would mean that God has come back to dwell with them, to lead them, to make them his people indeed. That's a thread which goes right through so many of the Scriptures and which Jesus seems to have evoked very clearly.

He was launching, in other words, a kingdom of God movement on earth, as in heaven. When he feasted with all the wrong people, with tax collectors and prostitutes, and other people known to be notorious bad characters, he would say, 'This is what it looks like when God becomes king'. There is a party going on. This is about forgiveness and new starts. He was evoking themes from Jeremiah about the new covenant. He was evoking themes from Deuteronomy, about the renewed heart when he was talking about the heart and the way that the heart can be transformed by the love of God. He was evoking themes that spoke about being able to love God finally with your heart and mind and soul and strength. 'This is what it looks like', he was saying, 'when God becomes king'.

He was evoking, particularly, Daniel Chapter 7, which refers to the 'son of man' strangely. That was cryptic because the phrase 'son of man' could just mean me, I, someone like me, someone doing this kind of stuff, an oblique way of referring to oneself. But when he talks about the son of man having authority and then when he talks about the son of man coming on the clouds to be seated beside the ancient of days God himself, he is clearly resonating

with Daniel, and Daniel has this picture in Chapter 2 as well as Chapter 7 and actually all through the book of Daniel.

Daniel has this picture of the powers of the earth, the human empires doing their worst. They are not only human empires. They are strange dark forces like spiritual monsters that make war on God's world and God's people. And when that gets to its height, God will act; he will take his throne and he will raise this one like a son of man to sit beside him in authority, ruling the world in a whole new way. Jesus seems to have plugged into all of these themes, and in prayer and meditation, to have made them his own. He was speaking then about the kingdom of God in order to interpret and explain what he was he was doing himself.

People have often said, 'Well, Jesus talked about the kingdom of God but then the early church talked about Jesus as though that was a sort of falsification of Jesus' message. They should have just gone on talking about God'. That's completely wrong. Jesus talked about God becoming king in order to explain what it was that he, himself, was doing when he told those parables in Luke 15 about the woman with the lost coin or the shepherd with the lost sheep or the father who has these two sons.

He is saying there is a party going on in the heavenly places and we are having a party here. This is a place where heaven and earth are joined because there is more joy in heaven over one

sinner who repents than over 99 righteous people who don't seem to need to repent. So Jesus was doing the kingdom and talking about the kingdom, inaugurating the kingdom. His healings were all about signs of new creation. This is what it looks like when God takes his power and reigns.

Week 5

Being in the Kingdom Today

So we are ambassadors, speaking on behalf of the Messiah, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore people on the Messiah's behalf to be reconciled to God. The Messiah did not know sin, but God made him to be sin on our behalf, so that in him we might embody God's faithfulness to the covenant.

2 Corinthians 5:20-21 KNT

It is always tempting when trying to understand Christian theology to sort out the theory first and then to make it fit with Jesus and who he was and what he did. I want to do it the other way. We have in the previous Lenten Devotional thought about Jesus' own vocation, only now to stand back and say, 'Can we get a glimmer of how this works? Can we see something of what is going on?'

Jesus chose Passover to do what had to be done. He seems to have believed that the Passover story, the Exodus narrative, would contain within itself all the things that would resonate properly so that his death, when it happened, would mean what it needed to mean.

In this way, his own unique vocation would come into focus through that well-tuned lens of Israel's long traditions. And that means that when we look at the Last Supper and see Jesus both doing Passover and doing forgiveness of sins, we ought to be able to see something of how these two themes work together. It has been very difficult in Christian theology to hold them together but I think maybe we can.

I think we have to start with the notion of what it means to be human, what it means to be in the image of God, what it means to reflect God. Theologians are worried about this word 'image', but the more people have looked that the Old Testament in its context, the more they have said that we should see that Genesis 1, as a whole, is a temple. It is heaven and earth together.

And the final thing you put into a temple is an ‘image’ of the God, so that the worshipers can see who their God is, and so that the power and influence of this God may be manifested out into the world around. So God creates this heaven plus earth reality, which we call the whole creation, the heavens and the earth. Into this reality he puts his image: humans, made in the divine image, male and female, Adam and Eve, as seen in Genesis

Chapters 1-3.

And the result of this is that the human vocation is to sum up the worship, the praises of the whole creation, to bring those praises to articulate speech before God the Creator. Humans are also to be responsible stewards, working in God's world.

This vocation, this double vocation of image bearing, should be the angled mirror reflecting God into the world and the world back to God. This is what is summed up in Israel's traditions in terms of Israel as the ‘royal priesthood’. The ‘Priestly’ bit is the worship bit.

The ‘Royal’ bit is the vocation of being wise stewards. That's what Israel was designed to be according to Exodus 19. The prophets seem to be saying that it doesn’t appear to be working out the way they wanted. But, at the end of the Bible, in Revelation Chapter 5, and then repeated a couple of times later, it says that the reason that we are rescued by the death of the lamb, in other words, Jesus, is so that we could be kings and priests – the royal priesthood re-constituted.

The aim of it all is not simply to go to heaven when you die, but to be renewed humans, renewed image-bearers, so that in the new creation we will be at last what humans were meant to be. That is, we are to be part of God's creational project, summing up the worship of creation and being the bearers of God's wisdom and love and stewardship into the rest of the world. So that is a temple picture of creation, with humans in the middle of it. The human problem, then, is not just sin. It is not just that we have broken some arbitrary rules, as though God, like some despot, has stuck up a list of rules on a wall somewhere and then is watching to see who can keep them.

The problem is idolatry. Instead of worshiping the God, in whose image we have been made, we have worshiped bits and pieces of the creation, or as we say, forces within creation. We use the language of force. We talk about economic forces or social forces or cultural pressures.

In the ancient world, they often talked about these forces and powers in a quasi-human fashion, as we sometimes do as well, but they gave them names. Mars was the God of war. We might not say Mars is what we're following, but when we actually find that we are driven towards force, in actuality that's what we're doing. Aphrodite was the goddess of erotic love. Mammon was the god of money. We may say that in the ancient world it is the *power* of money to which they assigned a name, but it is still an idol. It is still being worshiped.

And when you worship that which is not God, something happens to your 'image-bearingness', your humanness. It starts to deconstruct. You are not being the human being you are made to be. And the sign of that deconstruction is that you do things that are actually less than fully human. You are missing the mark of genuine humanness. The Greek word for 'missing the mark' which refers to shooting an arrow at a target and missing is *hamartia*. It is the word we translate as 'sin'.

That's how sin happens. It isn't just that there is a bunch of rules and we ponder, 'shall I keep them or not?' In actuality, I've been secretly in love with one or more of these idols. I've been worshiping the creature rather than the creator. As a result, the things that I ought to be doing as a human being I'm not doing, and things which represent a low grade, deconstructed version of being human, that's what I find myself doing.

The result is that humans ought to have power and authority delegated from God over the world. But when we sin, we are handing to the idols that power which we ought to be exercising. We are letting them exercise it over us instead. The reason the idols, forces within creation, have this power is because humans have abdicated it.

That's why, in that great poem in Colossians 1, Paul talks about all the powers and authorities in the world being created in and through and for Christ. Paul then says that they are subsequently reconciled in and through and for Christ. There is nothing wrong

with the world. There is nothing wrong with money and power and sex in themselves. What is wrong is when we worship these forces and give them our allegiance and then do things which flow out of that deconstructed idolatrous way of being human. So idolatry and sin go very closely together.

There is a sense that humans were made to be the place where the glory of God would be revealed. Irenaeus, one of the great second century theologians said, 'The glory of God is a living human being and the life of man is the vision of God'. That's a deeply Biblical insight. We were supposed to be the place where, and the means by which, God's glory would be revealed into the world. But instead we've turned away from that and gone for idols and images instead.

One fascinating insight concerning the New Testament is that many passages about the crucifixion have exactly that shape of being rescued from the rule of the powers, so as to set forward the purpose of God for the wider world. Some of the most famous passages about Jesus' death have that shape. In Galatians 3:13, we read that the Messiah became a curse for us. Many preachers have taken that passage and have made it mean he became a curse for us so that we could be freed from sin and go to heaven. What Paul says is, he became a curse for us so that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the nations and that we might receive the promise through faith.

In other words, if the powers are defeated, then the nations, which

have been held in their grip, can now come in, can now be brought to faith. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:20-21, ‘God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might embody the covenant faithfulness of God’. Paul goes on at once to quote Isaiah 49, which talks about the servant being given as a covenant to the peoples, a light to those who are blind.

So it says that though something happens in Jesus' death as a result of which the powers are defeated, the human vocation, Israel's vocation, can be taken up once more. That is how the inner dynamic of mission in the New Testament actually works. It isn't just, 'here is a truth about something that happens as a result of which there is good news and we can go to heaven'. It’s, ‘something happened by six o'clock on that first Good Friday, the result of which, the world is a different place; the grip of the powers has been broken and the name of that new world is ‘forgiveness’. These two go together, and that was, of course, revealed on the first Easter Day.

Week 6

The Human Vocation

It was before the festival of Passover. Jesus knew that his time had come, the time for him to leave this world and go to the father. He had always loved his own people in the world; now he loved them right through to the end.

It was suppertime. The devil had already put the idea of betraying him into the heart of Judas, son of Simon Iscariot.

Jesus knew that the father had given everything into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God.

So he got up from the supper-table, took off his clothes, and wrapped a towel around himself.

Then he poured water into a bowl, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel he was wrapped in.

John 13:1-5 KNT

When we look at Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the four Gospel writers, we see that they, like Jesus, don't seem to be telling us that we are all sinners and we need Jesus to die for us to take our punishment so we can go to heaven. The Gospel writers are telling several stories simultaneously. They are obviously telling the story of Jesus. They are telling the story of how the movement that they themselves are part of (which we now call the church) got started. But they are also telling at least three other stories. One of those stories is the story of how Israel's God came back to his people at last. That's a bit of a shock because Jesus doesn't look to most of his contemporaries as though he is Yahweh in person. But John says it very explicitly, ‘The word became flesh and dwelt in our midst and we gazed upon his glory, the glory as of the father’s only son’.

John is there, echoing that great temple promise, the word for ‘dwelt’ is ‘tabernacle’. God pitched his tent. He came like the divine glory to the rebuild the temple at last. That's what it was all about. But when we look at the beginning of Matthew and Mark and Luke, we see that in the baptism narrative particularly, we have Isaiah 40 being quoted and Malachi 3 being quoted. And then we see Jesus. But those prophecies from Isaiah and Malachi are not about the Messiah coming, they are about God himself coming back. And it says, through each of the four evangelists in their own ways, ‘When you hear this human story of Jesus, please understand this is what it looked like when Israel's God came back in person’. That’s how they want us to understand it.

This is, of course, the story of the fulfillment of Israel's hope, that great hope, in which eventually Israel's God would defeat the powers that had enslaved his people. God would rescue his people from exile, would establish his kingdom over them and through them, and would bring justice and peace and new creation to his whole world. That's the other story that the Gospel writers are telling.

Then, underneath that, there is the dark side, the dark story that they are also telling, which is the story of the buildup of evil. We often miss this until we stop for a moment and think, 'Wait a minute, what's going on here?' In the Old Testament, it seems again and again, even at the greatest moments, Abraham, David, times like that, there are really bad things that are infecting the people of God. Abraham is given great promises and almost immediately he nearly blows it by going down to Egypt and saying that Sarah is his sister, rather than his wife, thus risking the promises before they've even got underway.

David establishes this wonderful kingdom, the great plan of building the temple, and then goes and commits adultery and the whole thing falls apart. His family is into war and so on, and then the kingdom is divided and ultimately from thereon it's a long road to exile. And we can see in the Gospels the way in which all sorts of forces of evil are rushing together. We take it for granted that at the beginning of Matthew, Herod the great, this malevolent

brooding old king, is trying to kill Jesus when he is only a baby. And then the Herod of the Gospels, Herod Antipas, is still a brooding presence in the background and at one point in Luke's Gospel people come to Jesus and say, 'You better get out of here because Herod is after you and he wants to kill you'. We have the sense of a buildup of pressure and tension.

As soon as Jesus announces his public career to launch God's kingdom, there are people shrieking at him in the synagogues, demon-possessed people who are shouting out things about who he is, about what he's doing, and there are Pharisees who are saying, 'We don't like this man. He has a different agenda. We have a kingdom agenda and he is doing it all the wrong way. He is it letting the side down. He is breaking the Sabbath'. And so they start to plot, and sometimes it is the Pharisees with the Herodians and sometimes it is the scribes and the Pharisees and sometimes it is just strange forces that seem to be bent on attacking Jesus or accusing him.

There is no period in the Gospels when all seems to be the sweetness and light that some 19th century scholars imagined. Before the 19th Century, there is a sort of dark turn and Jesus goes to Jerusalem. All the way through we sense this buildup of pressure, the pressure of evil, and it gets worse as Jesus comes to Jerusalem.

And so then they get in league with the Romans. Jesus knows what's coming, and on the night he was betrayed, he could, of course, have quite easily escaped. Why did he stay in Gethsemane that night? He could have gone up over the Mount of Olives by daybreak. He could have been down by the Dead Sea. He could have established a nice little community there, teaching people to pray the Lord's prayer, waiting for God to do some thing some time. But no, Jesus believed that this Passover was the moment. This was the time when, at the beginning of his public career, he said, 'The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand'. He had that sense that the time of waiting was over. This was the moment when something had to happen.

These are the stories the Gospels tell. It is only when we read them as whole, telling all these stories together, coming together in the story of Jesus himself, that we see that what it is they are saying is about the cross. The cross is woven in all through.

Take John's Gospel. Take the beginning of the passion narrative in John 13:1, where John says that Jesus, having loved his own who were in the world, now he loved them right through to the end. This is a story of love, of covenant love, of divine love, of love doing what only love could do. We have to read the whole story that way because otherwise, if we are not careful, instead of saying God so loved the world that he gave his own son, we end up saying God so hated the world that he killed his own son. I know preachers would never really actually say that, but there are

always some people in church who think that that's what they are hearing, who think for whatever reason that there is an angry malevolent God who is out to get them, and that fortunately Jesus happens to have stood in the way and taken the rap on our behalf.

So, right from the beginning of John's Gospel, we see Jesus announced as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. That's what John the Baptist says in John Chapter 1. And we know that something is going to happen which will bring his kingdom work to a climax. In Chapter 2 he says to his mother, 'my hour has not yet come', but in Chapter 12, he says, 'the hour now has come'. And on the way to that, he tells the story about the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

That's a development of Ezekiel's picture in Ezekiel 34 of God himself as the shepherd and of David the king as the shepherd. Somehow Jesus fuses these roles. The story of God, the story of Israel's Messiah, meets the story of the buildup of evil, so that the way for sheep to be rescued will be for the shepherd himself to take the attack of the wolf upon himself and to die in order to rescue them. In John Chapter 11, when the chief priests get together and plot, they wonder, 'Now what are we going to do about this man? If we let him go on like this, then the Romans will come and take away our holy place and our nation'. And Caiaphas, the chief priest says, 'This is what's best for you. Let one

man die for the people rather than the whole nation being wiped out'. And John comments, 'He didn't say this of his own accord; he was high priest that year and this was a prophecy that Jesus would die for the nation'.

So John is telling us that this buildup of evil, which seems to be coming from all sides, is going to burst upon Jesus but that it will actually, paradoxically, be the overthrow of the dark powers.

And in John Chapter 12 we find the scene where some Greeks come to the feast. They want to see Jesus. Instead of Jesus saying, as we might expect, 'Yes, bring them in; we'll have a talk; maybe we'll pray with them'. Jesus says, 'The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified'. Then he says, 'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain. But if it dies, it will produce lots of fruit'. And then he says, 'What am I going to say? Save me from this moment? No! It is because of this that I came to this moment. Father, glorify your name'. Then there is a clap of thunder, which is interpreted as a voice from heaven saying, 'I have glorified it and will glorify it again'. And Jesus said – this is the crucial point— *'Now comes the judgment of this world; now this world's ruler is going to be thrown out. And when I've been lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself'*. In other words, this buildup of evil has got to a point where evil itself is going to be judged and condemned. The ruler of this world, the Satan, the adversary, the great one who has accrued to himself all the power which properly belonged to

God's image-bearing humans, he is doing his worst. Through Jesus being lifted up on the cross, this power will be broken.

So, when in John Chapter 13, we see the Satan entering into Judas, so that Judas becomes the accuser, the one who is doing the accusing work. Then we see Jesus ultimately standing before Pontius Pilate, explaining to him what a true kingdom is all about and what truth and power are all about. We begin to understand John's picture. This is how kingdom and truth and power are launched into the world, by Jesus taking upon himself the sins of the world and thereby defeating the powers that have enslaved the world.

So, for John by 6 P.M. on Good Friday, creation itself had been rescued by Jesus, dying under the weight of that accumulated evil, dying under the weight of the world's sin, in order to defeat the grip of the satanic dark forces. In so doing, then the whole world would now be free to hear the gospel.

This is the foundation of the church's mission, as we see in John 20, this is what John believed had been accomplished by the evening of that first Good Friday.

Good Friday

Reconciled! Salvation! Revolution!

The result is this: since we have been declared 'in the right' on the basis of faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus the Messiah.

Through him we have been allowed to approach, by faith, into this grace in which we stand; and we celebrate the hope of the glory of God.

That's not all. We also celebrate in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces patience,

patience produces a well-formed character, and a character like that produces hope.

Hope, in its turn, does not make us ashamed, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the holy spirit who has been given to us.

Romans 5:1-5

Romans Chapters 5 to 8 is one of the most extraordinary set pieces that Paul ever wrote. It is very carefully designed in sections, mostly of around 11 verses each, mostly finishing with the statement about what God has done through Jesus, or in the Messiah. Paul has structured it very carefully. I have to think that Paul, after years and years of teaching this stuff, and of engaging in debates, knew exactly where he was going with it. He has lined it up very carefully. And we can see that in the way it begins and ends, because Romans 5:1-11, at the beginning of the section, corresponds in all sorts of ways to Romans 8:31-39, the glorious climax. Both of them are about the death of Jesus, revealing the love of God, giving his people utter security. The confidence that comes from that bubbles up through the whole passage. But in between, Paul does what so many New Testament writers do and tells one more time the story of the Exodus. As we saw in Romans Chapter 3, we just get a little flicker of that through the redemption that is in the messiah Jesus. If we know our stuff, we know that redemption is the Exodus word, but it is here where we see how that actually works out in practice.

But let's just stop on 5:1-5 for a moment, because this is where he says we have ‘received access now to this grace in which we stand’. This is new temple

language, new covenant language. This is about God and his people coming together at last. This is the watchmen and Isaiah lifting up their voices and shouting for joy because, in plain sight, they have seen Yahweh returning to Zion. This is about the hope of the glory of God. And therefore, as throughout Paul, we celebrate. He says, 'We celebrate in our sufferings because suffering produces patience, produces character, producers hope, which doesn't disappoint, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us'. And, thus, we see where we are going.

This is a Trinitarian theology: the death of Jesus, the love of God, the power of the Holy Spirit, the present suffering, the future hope. It's all here, and it all comes to its climax in Romans Chapter 8. And then in Romans 5:6 to 11, Paul takes the themes of Romans 3:24 to 26 and unpacks them a bit further.

But we shouldn't, therefore, see Romans 5:6 to 11 as something other than Romans Chapter 3, rather, we see it is its expansion. So what does he say? While we were still weak at that very moment, the Messiah died on behalf of the ungodly. Verse 8: 'This is how God demonstrates his own love for us. The Messiah died for us while we were yet sinners'. You see what

Paul is saying about who Jesus is. If I say to you, I love you so much, I'm going to send somebody else to die for you, that's not an expression of love.

For Paul's argument to work, it demands that the Messiah is himself the living and dying presence of Israel's God. Paul doesn't give us a great theory of Christology as to how that would work. He simply says it quite boldly. This is how much God loves us: that the Messiah died for us while we were still sinners. So then in verse 9 he says, 'Since we've been declared to be in the right by his blood, we will be saved by him from God's coming anger, God's wrath'. See the wrath of God in Paul isn't something here, which was poured out on Jesus on the cross. Rather he says now that the cross has done its work. We have been justified by his blood, so that when we look ahead to the time when God will call in accounts and judge the whole world, we know that then we will be all right. He explains that more at the beginning of Romans Chapter 8.

When we were enemies, he says, we were reconciled to God through the death of his son. If that is so, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. We say to Paul, okay, what happened by 6:00 P.M. on Good Friday? Reconciled!

What's the result of that? Salvation! That's how it works. The revolution, which began on Good Friday, will be completed at the last day, not when we are taken away to heaven, but when we are saved from sin and death and from all the corruption that goes with that. In other words, the salvation which consists in God's new creation, new heavens and new earth, with us being raised from the dead to share that. And one day, he says, therefore we celebrate in God, through our Lord Jesus, through whom we have received this reconciliation. All this enables Paul to stand back and see the end from the beginning.

Here is the point: because he died for sins, the power of the powers has been broken. This is about victory. There is no condemnation for those who are in the Messiah. And then, ultimately, it is not just a juridical thing about sin; it is also a cultic thing about worship. Paul says, 'I am persuaded that neither death nor life nor any of these things will be able to separate us from the love of God in king, Jesus, our Lord'. That is to say, the new temple has been constructed and by the Holy Spirit, we are that temple. We have obtained access to this grace in which we stand. It isn't only the problem of sin that's been dealt with. It is the problem of ideology because in Jesus and in the spirit, the new temple has been constructed. We who are

renewed in the image of God ought to be the angled mirrors, reflecting the praises of creation, to God at least, and reflecting the love and wisdom and holiness of God back into his creation.

This is our vocation: to be people of worship, to be people of mission, to be people renewed according to the image of the creator, having been renewed in knowledge; to be people who can think through these things. The result is that whether we are preachers or teachers or whether we are prayers or workers or evangelists, we will know, deep down, that this is a love story.

But this is also the creation story. This is the story of the God who, from the beginning, intended to make his beautiful world and make humans as his image bearers to share his work in that world; and because humans have totally messed it up, the God who came himself as a human, as the true Israelite in the person of the Son, to do for the rest of us what we couldn't do for ourselves, so that in and through him we might be rescued from the results of our idolatry and sin and be enabled to worship and to live for his praise and glory. That's what it means to be the royal priesthood, and that is the result of the revolution that happened on the first Good Friday.

By Prof. N.T. Wright from lectures in the course The Day the Revolution Began.