

N. T. WRIGHT

small faith

GREAT GOD



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Biblical Faith for Today's Christians

SECOND EDITION


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For Keith and Margaret Weston

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

I WAS NERVOUS ABOUT REPUBLISHING these studies, which started out as sermons in and around Oxford. I was still in my early twenties when the first of them was preached—chapter five in this book, preached on Trinity Sunday 1972 in St. Ebbe's Church—and the thought of revisiting after forty years the things I had been trying to say, and the way I had been trying to say them, was somewhat daunting. A bit like looking at old photographs: Did we really have those hair-styles? Those clothes? Those cars?

Well, yes, we did. I had something of that sense in rereading these sermons. We thought they were all right at the time, of course—the hair, the clothes, the cars and the sermons—even though they now feel in some respects embarrassingly dated. But I was also surprised to discover that quite a few themes which I had thought were more recent additions to my thinking were already there in embryo. I think, for instance,

of the discussion of hypocrisy in chapter ten, which goes closely with my book *After You Believe*. There are several other connections which the curious reader of my work might tease out.

But what I was really glad to discover was not only that I substantially agreed with so much of what I had written all those years ago, but also that a wealth of memories came flooding back: people and occasions, friends and family, the support and encouragement of so many as I started out on the long and winding journey of ministry, of studying the Bible and trying to preach from it. I have mentioned St. Ebbe's Church in Oxford; the other place which heard many of these sermons was Merton College Chapel. Keith Weston, the then rector of St. Ebbes, and Mark Everitt, the then chaplain of Merton, were and are very different people, from very different sections of the Church of England. But both gave me the space to explore new ideas and preach about them. That was a great gift. The fact that it's hard to tell, without some other clue, which sermons were preached in which of the two places indicates, I hope, that fresh biblical exposition belongs to the whole church, not to one party or strand.

There are, of course, several features which do indeed look decidedly dated. Nobody supposed in those days that spanking naughty children constituted "child abuse." And I realize, in particular, that my more recent work on the ultimate Christian hope (as in *The Resurrection of the Son of God* and *Surprised by Hope*) needs to be brought to bear on what I say about "heaven," especially in chapter nine and also, for instance, the final chap-

ter of this book (which I remember writing frantically one summer Sunday in Oxford, after hours of writer's block and urgent prayer, before cycling the two miles to Merton College at breakneck speed, arriving just in time for the service). And I have changed my mind about some things: for instance, analysis of the Pharisees in chapter ten, and the place of Paul's imprisonment in chapter eleven.

But I don't think that the emphasis I would now place on new heavens and new earth (rather than just "heaven") makes much difference to the main thrust of the book. The greatness of God the Creator and Redeemer is what matters. Our little faith grasps now this aspect of his greatness, now that. But it is God himself who counts, not our perceptions or understanding of him, not our faith or our rhetoric or our pilgrimage. I hope and pray that this little book, period piece though it be, will still be able to make that point clear.

part one

FAITH IN A
GREAT GOD

ENTHRONED IN HEAVENLY SPLENDOR

“I’D LOVE TO BE A FLY ON THE WALL when that happens!” So we often say, wishing we could be present at some important meeting or could listen in on some high-level discussion. Well, we’re going to begin this book by becoming flies on the wall at a scene of great beauty, as well as of great significance for our understanding of God, of the world and of ourselves. Like all eavesdroppers, we may be in for a few surprises.

The scene is set for us in the fourth and fifth chapters of the book of Revelation. If you find the picture confusing to begin with, you are not alone. All these beasts and crowns and thunder and lightning—you may be tempted to dismiss the whole thing as so much incomprehensible mumbo jumbo. Please don’t. Revelation isn’t mumbo jumbo: it’s written in symbols, and once you understand the symbols most of the problems disappear. Of course, nobody understands them all, or per-

fectly, but we can make a reasonable job of it.

With language like this we have to stop thinking of it as if it were a photograph of heaven—as though such a thing were possible! Revelation is more like a map: and a map, once we learn the symbols it uses, is actually of more use to us than an aerial photograph would be. We don't imagine for a moment that when we are climbing a hill we will actually *see* the contour lines as we cross them on the map. And if we are driving down a road and turn off on a side road, the road is unlikely to change color the way it does on the map. But contours and road colors are not useless. They tell us important facts about where we are going. We would be lost without them.

We would certainly be lost—for good—without the facts presented in Revelation 4–5: our problem is to work out what those facts are. If the language is symbolic, like the symbols on a map, then we shouldn't try to imagine the scene literally—the Lion which is also a lamb, with seven horns and seven eyes, stretches our imagination as far as it will go, and probably further. What we have to do is to get into John's mind and understand what he was wanting to say by these symbols. Then we shall be able to join him, like flies on the wall, in seeing the invisible and hearing things our human ears couldn't normally hear.

The first thing we see sets the context for everything that is to come. There before me, says John, was a throne, with someone sitting on it. Someone. Not even with symbols does John attempt to describe God who sits on the throne: but the fact that he is enthroned tells us the first important thing about

him. He is the King. He is sovereign. And the sight is not just awe-inspiring: it is positively beautiful, surrounded by many-colored jewels and capped by the rainbow, which John mentions to remind us that this is the same God as revealed to Noah and Ezekiel—the God who makes loving and gracious promises and keeps them.

With the beauty and the love goes great power and majesty. God's throne, surrounded by the twenty-four thrones of the elders, sends out flashes of lightning and peals of thunder. In a few short sentences John has let us in on a picture of God so big and terrible that we are forced to ask—is this really the God we believe in? Or is the God of the Bible not bigger and greater than most of our usual pictures of God? This book is about faith: and the way to faith is always down the road of an enlarged view of God, a view constantly checked and revised in the light of the Bible. Without this, the God we worship shrinks into an idol, formed by our own imagination. Faith in an idol is no faith worth having.

The creatures in the scene John is describing, however, were not worshiping an idol. We can always tell. Idol worshippers may be concerned with many things, but they are never thinking about holiness. Instead, they are either not thinking about ethical standards at all—since an idol is impersonal and therefore not bothered about such things—or they are following a hollow asceticism, which is the outward form of holiness minus the inner joy that dwells at the heart of the true God. But the four living creatures think of nothing but holiness—because they think of nothing but God.

Who are the creatures? In John's symbolism, they represent the world of creation—nature, animals, plants. This is the song the sun sings as it rises. This is what trees sing as their leaves change color. This is what the penguins sing as they march around the ice. Fanciful? Not a bit of it. God's creation, sustained by him from moment to moment, is full of his glory, if only we had eyes to see it.

We can have eyes to see it. The beasts are not alone in their singing. As creation sings God's praise, so the song is continually taken up by the twenty-four elders. And who are they? The church, the people of God: twelve to stand for the twelve tribes in the Old Testament, and twelve to stand for the successors of the apostles, the church in the New Testament era. The church is a family of priests, summing up the praises of creation in their own praise. But their praise goes beyond that of creation. Nature simply praises God: redeemed humans understand why God ought to be praised. You are *worthy*, sing the elders, to receive glory and honor and power. It is one of the signs of life in the people of God that they find themselves echoing that song.

There is another song which the redeemed people sing, and it comes in Revelation 5. So far in our eavesdropping we have seen a great vision of God. Now we hear something which comes closer and touches us personally. In the right hand of the figure on the throne is a sealed scroll. God holds out the book which contains his perfect plan for the righteous and holy ruling of his world. And, just as God is not described directly, so he does not act directly. God, it appears, has purposed that

his will should be carried out by a person or people other than himself. And that's the problem. Who on earth can be worthy to carry out God's will, to act as his right-hand man in ruling the world? For a minute it looks as though, bound by his own decree, God will never vindicate truth and justice—as though the whole world is going to turn out meaningless and futile. No wonder John burst into tears.

The answer to the problem is close at hand, and in fact this moment is the climax of the whole sequence of events so far. There is someone who can open the book. If we found the vision of God bewildering yet awe-inspiring, the same is going to be true of this picture of Jesus Christ. He is the Lion of Judah—the sovereign one from the tribe which God chose out of his chosen people. He is the Root of David—the stock from which came the man after God's own heart. And he has triumphed. We turn with John, expecting to see a kingly figure ready to sweep all God's enemies out of the way and to rule the world with a rod of iron. And we see—a lamb. Worse, a lamb that has been killed. Yet, although it has been killed, this lamb is alive again, and now has been given complete power and authority (the seven horns), and the rule over the spirits who rule the world. Why? How does the picture even begin to make sense?

It makes sense very simply. The Lion of Judah won the victory by *being* the lamb who was sacrificed: because the enemies that were to be defeated were sin (the thing which meant that no one else was worthy to open the book) and death, which follows from sin. And the Lion defeated death by dying

as the lamb. He died to take away sin, taking the full weight of evil on himself, dying in refusing to submit to it. He, and he alone, is worthy.

Now at this point we have reached the eavesdropper's dilemma. What we are now hearing sounds suspiciously as though it is going to involve us: and that might not be such fun as just being a fly on the wall. Yet if we decide to go on listening nonetheless, what we hear will turn out to be for our benefit. Listen to the song which the beasts and elders now sing:

You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased men for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation.
You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve
our God,
and they will reign on the earth.
(Revelation 5:9-10 NIV)

This song is about what Christ, the Lion of Judah, did. And we, the eavesdroppers, discover that it's about *us*. Here are truths about us earthlings which are sung with joy by the inhabitants of heaven. We can summarize them like this.

First, the depth of the gospel. Christ purchased humans for God. That is, he came into the slave market where his people were standing in chains, and he paid the cost of setting them free. This isn't something he has to do over and over again. It's in the past: it's a completed action.

Second, the breadth of the gospel. There is no nation or people—no tribe or language—from which Christ did not buy himself people for his own possession. That is why, over against the exclusivism that implied that a person had to be born a Jew in order to qualify, the early church stressed (and we should not forget) that the achievement of Christ knows no barriers of color or class, of birth or social status.

Third, the purpose of the gospel. Christ purchased humans first and foremost for *God*, to be kings and priests to serve him. Realize the full impact of this. When Christ bought us at the cost of his own blood, it wasn't first and foremost for our happiness—though to be saved by him will mean happiness itself. He bought us for God. It was on commission from the Father that the Son came down to the slave market that day. He set us free to be—freemen? Just one grade up from slaves? Certainly not. Nothing mealy-mouthed about this freedom: we are to be kings, to share in God's work of ruling the world. And we are to be priests, representing the whole of creation to God, summing up its praises in our own.

This dual role (kings and priests) ties in exactly with the dual role of Christ, as the regal lion and the sacrificial lamb. This is just what we should expect. We are given these tasks simply and solely in virtue of what he has done. The eavesdroppers are not just hearing themselves mentioned, they are listening in on the forming and celebrating of plans that are going to make them spiritual millionaires. Here is God the Almighty planning his purposes; here is the Lion of Judah, who has died as the sacrificial lamb; here are the re-

deemed people praising this achievement; and we find ourselves caught up in it all, caught up in the amazing sweep of God's grace.

Which is why the eavesdropping must come to an end. We must come out from our hiding and admit that we have heard what has been going on. After all, the whole of creation is praising God the almighty Maker—the whole of the church is praising Christ the sovereign Redeemer—and are we going to remain silent? This applies whether we have been Christians for fifty years or for five minutes—and it applies equally well to those who have never given the matter a thought before. God's word through John is quite clear: our lives are to be lived in the light of the praise of heaven. This isn't a half-hearted or dreary suggestion. Being a Christian is not a matter of vague ideals and wishy-washy ideas. It is a matter of thousands upon thousands of God's ransomed people singing uninhibitedly the song of their deliverance.

Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing! (Revelation 5:12)

That is the context in which all Christian living takes place. Christian faith—biblical faith—is not a matter of putting a brave face on things and trying our best. It is a matter of looking away from ourself and seeing the world as God sees it, as it really is. In the real world every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, is singing,

To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might,
forever and ever! (Revelation 5:13)

Creation is saying “Amen.” The church bows down and worships. These are the facts. The question of faith is whether we stop eavesdropping and join in the song.