

GALATIANS AND THESSALONIANS

for

EVERYONE

20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T.
WRIGHT

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NEW TESTAMENT FOR EVERYONE
20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T. Wright

Matthew for Everyone, Part 1

Matthew for Everyone, Part 2

Mark for Everyone

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John for Everyone, Part 1

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Acts for Everyone, Part 1

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Romans for Everyone, Part 1

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1 Corinthians for Everyone

2 Corinthians for Everyone

Galatians and Thessalonians for Everyone

Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon for Everyone

1 and 2 Timothy and Titus for Everyone

Hebrews for Everyone

James, Peter, John and Judah for Everyone

Revelation for Everyone

*For
Chloe, Sam and David
a small gift from
an often absent Godfather*

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INTRODUCTION TO THE ANNIVERSARY EDITION

It took me ten years, but I'm glad I did it. Writing a guide to the books of the New Testament felt at times like trying to climb all the Scottish mountains in quick succession. But the views from the tops were amazing, and discovering new pathways up and down was very rewarding as well. The real reward, though, has come in the messages I've received from around the world, telling me that the books have been helpful and encouraging, opening up new and unexpected vistas.

Perhaps I should say that this series wasn't designed to help with sermon preparation, though many preachers have confessed to me that they've used it that way. The books were meant, as their title suggests, for everyone, particularly for people who would never dream of picking up an academic commentary but who nevertheless want to dig a little deeper.

The New Testament seems intended to provoke all readers, at whatever stage, to fresh thought, understanding and practice. For that, we all need explanation, advice and encouragement. I'm glad these books seem to have had that effect, and I'm delighted that they are now available with study guides in these new editions.

N. T. Wright
2022

INTRODUCTION

On the very first occasion when someone stood up in public to tell people about Jesus, he made it very clear: this message is for *everyone*.

It was a great day – sometimes called the birthday of the church. The great wind of God’s spirit had swept through Jesus’ followers and filled them with a new joy and a sense of God’s presence and power. Their leader, Peter, who only a few weeks before had been crying like a baby because he’d lied and cursed and denied even knowing Jesus, found himself on his feet explaining to a huge crowd that something had happened which had changed the world for ever. What God had done for him, Peter, he was beginning to do for the whole world: new life, forgiveness, new hope and power were opening up like spring flowers after a long winter. A new age had begun in which the living God was going to do new things in the world – beginning then and there with the individuals who were listening to him. ‘This promise is for *you*,’ he said, ‘and for your children, and for everyone who is far away’ (Acts 2.39). It wasn’t just for the person standing next to you. It was for everyone.

Within a remarkably short time this came true to such an extent that the young movement spread throughout much of the known world. And one way in which the *everyone* promise worked out was through the writings of the early Christian leaders. These short works – mostly letters and stories about Jesus – were widely circulated and eagerly read. They were never intended for either a religious or intellectual elite. From the very beginning they were meant for everyone.

That is as true today as it was then. Of course, it matters that some people give time and care to the historical evidence, the meaning of the original words (the early Christians wrote in Greek), and the exact and particular force of what different writers were saying about God, Jesus, the world and themselves. This series is based quite closely on that sort of work. But the point of it all is that the message can get out to everyone, especially to people who wouldn’t normally read a book with footnotes and Greek words in it. That’s the sort of person for whom these books are written. And that’s why there’s a glossary, in the back, of the key words that you can’t really get along without, with a simple description of what they mean. Whenever you see a word in **bold type** in the text, you can go to the back and remind yourself what’s going on.

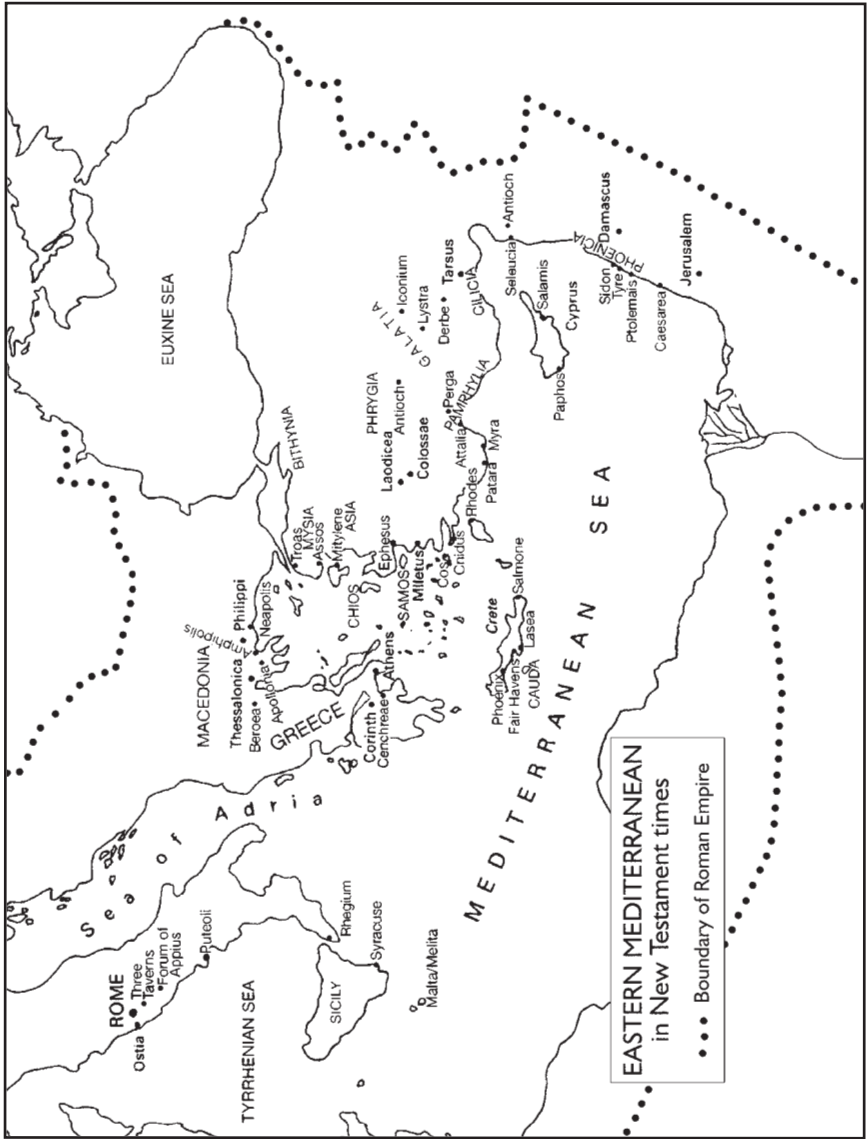
INTRODUCTION

There are of course many translations of the New Testament available today. The one I offer here is designed for the same kind of reader: one who mightn't necessarily understand the more formal, sometimes even ponderous, tones of some of the standard ones. I have of course tried to keep as close to the original as I can. But my main aim has been to be sure that the words can speak not just to some people, but to everyone.

Let me add a note about the translation the reader will find here of the Greek word *Christos*. Most translations simply say 'Christ', but most modern English speakers assume that that word is simply a proper name (as though 'Jesus' were Jesus 'Christian' name and 'Christ' were his 'surname'). For all sorts of reasons, I disagree; so I have experimented not only with 'Messiah' (which is what the word literally means) but sometimes, too, with 'King'.

The three letters in this book were among the first, perhaps the very first, that Paul wrote to the young churches. That means they are the very earliest documents we possess from the beginning of the church's existence. They are already full of life, bubbling with energy, with questions, problems, excitement, danger and, above all, a sense of the presence and power of the living God, who has changed the world through Jesus and is now at work in a new way by his Spirit. So here it is: Paul for everyone – Galatians and Thessalonians!

Tom Wright



GALATIANS

GALATIANS 1.1-9

Paul's Distress over the Galatians

¹Paul, an apostle . . . (my apostleship doesn't derive from human sources, nor did it come through a human being; it came through Jesus the Messiah, and God the father who raised him from the dead) . . .

²and the family who are with me; to the churches of Galatia. ³Grace to you and peace from God our father and Jesus the Messiah, our Lord, ⁴who gave himself for our sins, to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of God our father, ⁵to whom be glory to the ages of ages. Amen.

⁶I'm astonished that you are turning away so quickly from the one who called you by grace, and going after another gospel – ⁷not that it is another gospel, it's just that there are some people stirring up trouble for you and wanting to pervert the gospel of the Messiah. ⁸But even if we – or an angel from heaven! – should announce a gospel other than the one we announced to you, let such a person be accursed. ⁹I said it before and I now say it again: if anyone offers you a gospel other than the one you received, let that person be accursed.

Imagine you're in South Africa in the 1970s. Apartheid is at its height. You are embarked on a risky project: to build a community centre where everybody will be equally welcome, no matter what their colour or race. You've designed it; you've laid the foundation in such a way that only the right sort of building can be built. Or so you think.

You are called away urgently to another part of the country. A little later you get a letter. A new group of builders are building on your foundation. They have changed the design, and are installing two meeting rooms, with two front doors, one for whites only and one for blacks only. Some of the local people are mightily relieved. They always thought there was going to be trouble, putting everyone together like that. Others, though, asked the builders why the original idea wouldn't do. Oh, said the builders airily, that chap who laid the foundation, he had some funny ideas. He didn't really have permission to make that design. He'd got a bit muddled. We're from the real authorities. This is how it's got to be.

Now imagine you're in central south Turkey during the reign of the Roman Emperor Claudius. Most of the town worship one or other of the local gods or goddesses, several of whom claim the loyalty of particular racial groups. Some have started to worship the emperor himself, and with him the power of Rome. There is also a significant minority of Jews, with their own synagogue. They are threatened by the growing power of the imperial cult, on top of the usual pagan idolatry and wickedness. And into this town has come a funny little Jew called Paul . . .

Paul's project is, he often says, building; but he's building with people, not with bricks and mortar. He lays foundations for this building by telling people some news which is so good it's shocking. According to Paul, there is one God, the world's creator (standard stuff for the Jews, that), and this one God has now unveiled his long-awaited plan for the world. The unveiling took place in a Jew called Jesus; Paul says this Jesus is the Jewish **Messiah**, a kind of king-to-end-all-kings (sounds like a challenge to Emperor Claudius). Jesus was executed by the Romans; that's what they did, often enough, to other people's kings. But Paul says that the true God raised Jesus from the dead.

That's the beginning of the **good news**, but it doesn't stop there. According to Paul, Jesus' death and **resurrection** mean that this God is now building a new family, a single family, a family with no divisions, no separate races, no one-table-for-Jews-and-another-for-**Gentiles** non-sense. Jews believed that when the Messiah came he would be Lord of all the world; so, Paul argues, he'd have to have just one family. And, though this family is the fulfilment of what this God had promised to the Jews, the remarkable thing is that, because of Jesus, you don't have to be a Jew to belong. The God of Israel wants to be known as 'father' by the whole world. So, with this good news, Paul has laid the foundation of a people-building in central south Turkey. Then he has moved on.

And then he hears the bad news. Other people-builders have come in. Oh, they've said, Paul didn't really know what he was doing. You could get into trouble for that kind of thing. In any case, Paul just got his funny ideas by muddling up things that other people had said to him. We've got it from the real authorities. This people-building has to have two sections. Yes, we all believe that Jesus is the Messiah; but we can't have Jewish believers and Gentile believers living as though they were part of the same family. If the Gentile believers want to be part of the real inner circle, the family God promised to Abraham, they will have to become Jews. The men must be **circumcised**. All must keep the **law**, must do the things that keep Jews and Gentiles neatly separated. That's the real good news, they said: you're welcome into God's family if you follow the law of Moses.

Think about that scenario, and you'll see why, in this opening paragraph of his letter to Galatia, Paul sounds as though he's trying to say several things at once, all of them pretty sharp. The key things he's talking about are *apostleship* and *gospel*. Grasp these, and the rest of the letter will start to make sense.

Paul's opponents in Galatia – the rival builders, if you like – had persuaded the Galatians that Paul was only an **apostle** at second hand. The word 'apostle' means 'one who is sent', and came to be a technical

term in early Christianity for the original ones whom Jesus sent out after his resurrection. The opponents have suggested that Paul got his apostleship, and the **message** that he announced, from other early Christians, not from Jesus himself. They, by contrast, got theirs (so they claim) from Jerusalem, from the 'original' apostles such as Peter, and James the brother of Jesus.

Not so, replies Paul. His apostleship, his commission to build this new family, came from God himself, and from Jesus the Messiah. Paul's vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus is absolutely central for him and his work.

So too is 'the gospel'. For Paul, this isn't a system of salvation, or a new way of being religious. It's the announcement that Jesus, the crucified Messiah, is exalted as Lord of the whole world; therefore he is calling into existence a single worldwide family. This is the true gospel, he says; beware of illicit imitations. Indeed, shun them; they are a curse, not a blessing.

Paul's apostolic aim to build a single Jesus-based family by announcing this gospel has been partially successful and partially not. It's as much a challenge in our day as it has ever been. In the wider world, ethnic rivalry and hostility continue unabated. Isn't it time for the church to rediscover the apostolic gospel, and to live by it?

GALATIANS 1.10–17

Paul's Conversion and Call

¹⁰Well now . . . does *that* sound as though I'm trying to make up to people – or to God? Or that I'm trying to curry favour with people? If I were still pleasing people, I wouldn't be a slave of the Messiah.

¹¹You see, brothers and sisters, let me make it clear to you: the gospel announced by me is not a mere human invention. ¹²I didn't receive it from human beings, nor was I taught it; it came through an unveiling of Jesus the Messiah.

¹³You heard, didn't you, the way I behaved when I was still within 'Judaism'. I persecuted the church of God violently, and ravaged it.

¹⁴I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age and people; I was extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions. ¹⁵But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace, was pleased ¹⁶to unveil his son in me, so that I might announce the good news about him among the nations – immediately I did not confer with flesh and blood. ¹⁷Nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me. No; I went away to Arabia, and afterwards returned to Damascus.

John Henry Newman was one of the great figures of nineteenth-century England. A brilliant thinker and writer, a spellbinding preacher and a deeply sensitive soul, he left the Anglican Church and became a Roman Catholic in 1845. After a long career in which his friends, at least, wondered what had become of the early brilliance, he was made a cardinal.

Many English Protestants could never forgive Newman for what they saw as his treachery. One in particular, the clergyman and novelist Charles Kingsley, accused Newman of what today we would call double-think, of sitting light to truth. Newman, goaded beyond endurance, produced as his answer one of the century's classics, his *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (1864). He went back to the beginning and told his own story up to and beyond his move to Rome. The depth and transparency of the story carried its own weight. Even those who did not agree with the positions Newman adopted could hardly doubt that they were reached sincerely and out of a passion for, not a disregard of, truth itself.

Paul was in a somewhat similar position. His opponents had been saying that he had tailored his **gospel** to please people. Presumably they imagined Paul's failure to have **Gentile** converts **circumcised** was just a trick to please people, giving them the gospel on the cheap. Most of us like to be liked; many, in pursuit of this goal, are prepared to say what they think people want to hear.

The opening nine verses of the letter make it quite clear that this wasn't how Paul operated. Verse 10, in fact, implies that they were designed to make exactly this impression. They were deliberately written, it seems, so that Paul could then pause for breath and say, with a wry smile, 'So, you thought I was looking for human approval, did you?' Like Shakespeare's Demetrius in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Paul says to himself, 'Well roar'd, lion.' He can now adopt a somewhat gentler tone: 'So, can I make it any plainer to you that I am not seeking human approval, writing stuff like that?' No, he says, that's not my business. I'm the **Messiah's** slave; that's all that matters.

He then sets about telling how he came by his gospel, and what it did to him when it arrived. Like Newman telling his story to silence his critics, Paul explains where he had come from, how he had been confronted with the revelation of the risen Jesus, and what immediate effects all this had had.

Paul grew up with definite role models. Long before football stars and rock musicians, Jewish boys like Paul had their minds fed with tales of the Jewish heroes of long ago, the prophets and martyrs who had lived and died fearlessly for their God and his **law**. Paul describes himself as one of those who were strictest and keenest in their adherence to, and their application of, the ancestral traditions, that is, the

detailed discussions as to how precisely the law of Moses should be applied in day-to-day living. He was, in other words, a **Pharisee**, and a strict one at that. We know what sort of role models someone like that would have. The chief one was the prophet Elijah.

Elijah was a man of fire. He called down fire on soldiers sent to seize him. He called down fire on the prophets of Baal. He was feared by all who sought to compromise their obedience to the one God of Israel by worshipping idols. Just the man for a young Pharisee like Saul of Tarsus to emulate. And he did. He ravaged the church, just as (alas) some try to do today, not least in parts of Africa and Asia. He saw himself, it seems, as a latter-day Elijah, cleansing Israel of the horrible nonsense about Jesus of Nazareth, who couldn't have been the Messiah because he was crucified, and who certainly couldn't be worshipped because in any case the Messiah wouldn't be divine.

But then – and here he slips into talking about himself as an Old Testament prophet – Paul was stopped in his tracks, just as Elijah had been. Elijah, dejected and depressed, went off to Mount Sinai to meet his God afresh, to learn about the still small voice as well as the earthquake, wind and fire. Saul of Tarsus went off, probably to Sinai (he says 'Arabia', which is where Sinai was), most likely for a similar private wrestling with the God whom he worshipped. This God, to Saul's horror and amazement, had now revealed his son, and had done so in order that he, Saul, an ultra-orthodox Jew, might tell the pagan nations that Israel's God loved them just as much as he loved Israel.

Where did Paul learn his sense of irony from? Might it not have been from God himself?

We are all different, and as the old Puritans said, God does not break all hearts in the same way. But it is a central strand of most Christian living that everybody needs, from time to time, to wrestle privately with God and his will. It is necessary, too, that Christian leaders should be seen to be telling their own story truly. For Paul, his story was closely linked with God's unveiling of Jesus as the true Messiah, the crucified and risen Lord of the world. His life, his vocation, his whole identity was stamped with the gospel **message**. He was a true **apostle**.

GALATIANS 1.18–24

Paul's First Visit to Peter

¹⁸Then, after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to speak with Cephas. I stayed with him for two weeks. ¹⁹I didn't see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother ²⁰(Look, I'm not lying! The things I'm writing to you are written in God's presence.). ²¹Then I went to the

regions of Syria and Cilicia. ²²I remained unknown by sight to the messianic assemblies in Judaea. ²³They simply heard that the one who had been persecuting them was now announcing the good news of the faith which he once tried to destroy. ²⁴And they glorified God because of me.

A few years ago in England a strange advertisement appeared on large billboards. Without explanation, it simply said, 'IT IS. ARE YOU?'

It was, of course, designed to tease, so that when the answer was revealed a few weeks later everyone had been thinking about it. It was, in fact, a brand new newspaper: the *Independent*. At the time the advertisement felt like a cheap stunt; but it obviously worked, because I can remember it several years later, and the newspaper continues to flourish. It has become, remarkably, a fourth alongside the previous 'big three', *The Times*, the *Telegraph* and the *Guardian*. Whether it ever was, or is now, actually independent of the different parties and pressure groups in British public life, I am not qualified to say. But there was something magic, something fresh, about the idea of a new voice appearing in the public arena, a voice which wasn't simply going to say what other people, the same boring old power-brokers, had told it to say. We may guess that the other three found it, to say the least, a threat. Whose readers was it stealing?

We could summarize what Paul is saying in this paragraph as: 'I AM. ARE YOU?' The trouble-makers in Galatia have been putting it about that he's simply a pawn of the Judaea Christians, especially the **apostles**. They have suggested that he's just a junior member of the Christian team of wandering preachers. What's more, he's not even a very reliable one! He's twisted the message he was given by the 'senior' apostles, distorting it to make it easier for non-Jews to swallow. So (these trouble-makers have said) listen to us instead. We're the ones who know what the Judaea apostles, the senior folk, the people who actually knew Jesus himself, are thinking. Take it from us.

Paul replies with a detailed description of his first visit to Jerusalem following his conversion. The point of the whole story is to declare the one word: INDEPENDENT. He didn't go and sit at the feet of Peter, James and John, the Big Three of the Judaea apostles. He didn't train under their leadership, or work alongside them in the little churches. He talked to Peter (he uses his Aramaic name, Cephas, which like the Greek word 'Peter' means 'rock'), and indeed stayed with him for a fortnight. He met James the brother of the Lord, who as we know from elsewhere was on his way at this stage to becoming the central leader in the whole Christian movement, even though he hadn't been a believer during Jesus' own lifetime. And that was it. He wasn't their **disciple**.

They hadn't commissioned him to be a sub-apostle under their leadership. He was . . . independent.

The point of all this for the Galatian Christians, who had first heard the **good news** of Jesus from Paul's lips, now becomes clear. 'PAUL IS. ARE THEY?' Are they independent of the Judaea apostles? Are they independent even of Paul?

Paul is of course treading a fine line here. He believes that his announcement of the **gospel**, which creates a single family composed of Jews and **Gentiles** together in the **Messiah**, is loyal to Jesus himself. To that extent, he wants them to be loyal to him. But if push comes to shove they must choose the gospel even over him (as he said in 1.8).

Nevertheless, unlike rival newspapers, which will sometimes take a different line just for the sake of being different, Paul has no long-term interest in maintaining that what he says, and what the Jerusalem apostles say, are actually two different messages. The unity of the church matters to him very deeply; ironically, the only way he can work for it in Galatia is to affirm his independence. What he will go on to suggest is that the trouble-makers who have come to Galatia, claiming authority from Jerusalem, are the ones who have got things muddled up. What he, Paul, was preaching as an independent apostle was in fact the same basic message that the Judaeen churches were living by.

The end of the paragraph is very telling on this point. The little messianic assemblies in Judaea – on their way to being what we would call 'churches', but at the moment simply synagogues whose members had all become Christians – had never met Paul. But what they heard about him, as he was starting his missionary work in Syria and Cilicia, away to the north where Paul was born, was not 'some wretched fellow is preaching a watered-down, distorted version of the gospel', but rather, 'the man we heard of as a great persecutor is preaching the **faith** he once tried to destroy'. An independent apostle but with the same message. That's the point. So 'they glorified God because of me', or, literally, 'in me'. They didn't grumble to God about this man who was perverting the good news. 'They saw that God was at work in me, the God they knew and loved in Jesus the Messiah and by the **spirit**; and they praised God for this work.'

Centuries have passed. But the issue of the independence and yet convergence of the churches, their teachers and their gospel is as important now as ever it was. Tragically, we still have 'turf wars' between churches, reflecting all too clearly the racial or cultural tensions of their world; think of the Balkans, or Northern Ireland. We still have people who try to claim that they, or their system, possess supreme authority, and that anyone who professes independence should come back into line. And, ironically, those churches who boast most loudly of their

independence are often quickest to set up new and rigid structures of authority.

It is some comfort to know that these problems were endemic in Christianity from the beginning. But it is more important still, in recognizing the problem, to know how to go about tackling it. If Paul is to be our guide, the first rule seems to be: tell the story clearly. Don't fudge the background out of which the problem has come. Learn to prize both the independence which grows out of a fresh vision of Jesus, and the convergence between different preachings of the gospel. But keep your eye on the main issue, which must always be God's glory.

These are only ground rules, not detailed guidelines. But they mattered in the first century and they matter today.

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