



# Presbyterians *Read*



## Week 3

“The challenge to the disciples, then, turns into the challenge to all of us. Following Jesus means losing your life in order to find it. We squirm and struggle against this, like fish on a hook. Anything rather than this. But it’s the only way” (Wright, p. 65).

### Theme: What Does It Mean to Be Kingdom People?

#### Opening Psalm

To open your discussion each week, we recommend reading a psalm together. N.T. Wright uses the psalms from the Revised Common Lectionary as the basis for his Sunday devotions. This week’s psalm is Psalm 95.

#### General Opening Questions

Depending on your group, you may want to start with a general opening question. Here are a few options that you can use throughout the study:

- What struck you about this week’s readings?
- Is there a specific passage from this week’s readings that caught your attention? Why?
- What did you find challenging about this week’s reading?
- Was there a theme in this week’s readings that stood out?

#### Overview of Theme

*We recommend reading this overview together as a group. It will help contextualize the discussion questions and focus the conversation.*

As you’ve probably noticed in the past few weeks of reading, *people* are a big part of God’s kingdom story. Everywhere he went, Jesus announced the reign of God and invited people to participate in it. While God’s sovereignty on earth is not dependent on human effort, our participation in the kingdom matters.

In this week’s readings, N.T. Wright explores the stories from Matthew that show us in dramatic ways what it means to participate in God’s kingdom. We are invited to witness Peter stepping out of the boat on stormy seas, a Canaanite woman throwing herself at Jesus to beg for her daughter’s healing, Jesus showing his disciples the power of faith by healing a sick child, and Jesus proclaiming that he (and we) must suffer for the kingdom.

An important element of God's kingdom that is evident in each of these stories is the intermingling of the spiritual and the social. In mainstream Christianity today, there is sometimes the tendency to spiritualize God's kingdom—to overemphasize the internal transformations God's reign enacts in our hearts—to the detriment of the social demands of the gospel.

This week's readings have shown that faith is anchored in the heart: Peter, the Canaanite woman and the disciples are all asked to have complete trust and confidence in Jesus. Yet, faith is not limited to the heart: they are also invited and compelled to express that faith in tangible acts of love for God and neighbour.

The social demands of the kingdom are, however, not always comfortable. In fact, as Jesus explains to his disciples in telling them they must pick up their cross and follow him, the demands of the gospel are often deeply uncomfortable. We are faced with daily situations in which we are asked to choose between God's kingdom and the kingdoms of the world. Will we choose Jesus' values or our own interests? Will we choose to side with those who are marginalized and excluded or those with power? Will we choose peace, forgiveness and love at all cost, no matter what?

### Reading Focus

Over the last few weeks, we've been practicing placing ourselves as observers in the gospel stories. We've been imagining ourselves amid the action in Matthew and observing the reactions of those who met Jesus and witnessed his miracles firsthand. We've also been paying attention to our own reactions as we imaginatively stand alongside Jesus' first followers.

For the rest of this study, we are going to be reading with action, in addition to observation, in mind. We are going to read as *participants* in God's kingdom-movement—as people whose faith in Jesus is expressed in tangible and socially subversive acts of love.

As you read, pray that God will guide you to notice signs of the kingdom not only in scripture but also in your life. Ask for the courage, wisdom and means to participate in the building of God's kingdom in whatever way God chooses for you.

### Opening Discussion Questions

- 1) In this week's readings, Wright described faith as follows:  
"Faith is like a small window through which you see a vast landscape, and the landscape in question is the sovereign power of the creator God and the overwhelming glory of Jesus himself. We stand at the window, doing our best to wipe it clean from the condensation of our own unbelieving breath, and holding on, as we do so, to those for whom we want to pray" (p. 67).

Imagine yourself standing at that window of faith Wright describes: What are you seeing? How are you feeling? Is there doubt clouding your vision? Who are you holding in prayer as you gaze out the window?

- 2) Wright continues his description of faith by writing:  
"When you read the stories of remarkable Christians down the years, and in our own time too, again and again, you find tales of people who have stood at that window, gazing out at the landscape of God's power and love, and gradually bringing the rest of the world, and the people for whom they were praying, into healing focus in relation to it" (Wright 67).

Who are the remarkable Christians who have helped you see out this window? How did they help bring the kingdom of God into focus for you?

### Key Scripture Verse: Matthew 14:22–33

- Read N.T. Wright’s translation of Matthew 14–33 (found below and on p. 53)
- Read or listen to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of Matthew 14:22-33 or another version of your choice.

#### Matthew 14:22–33

Jesus at once made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the opposite shore, while he dismissed the crowds. After he had sent the crowds away, Jesus went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came he was there by himself. The boat had already gone some distance from the shore and was being smashed around by the waves, since the wind was against it.

At the very dead of night he came towards them, walking on water. The disciples saw him walking on the sea and panicked, thinking it was a ghost. They screamed with terror. But Jesus at once spoke to them.

“Cheer up,” he said, “it’s me! Don’t be frightened!”

“If it’s really you, Master,” said Peter in reply, “give me the word to come to you on the water.”

“Come along, then,” said Jesus.

Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came towards Jesus. But when he saw the strong wind he was afraid, and began to sink.

“Master,” he yelled, “rescue me!”

Jesus at once reached out his hand and caught him.

“A fine lot of faith you’ve got!” he said. “Why did you doubt?”

They got in the boat, and the wind died down. The people in the boat worshipped him.

“You really are God’s son!” they said.

### Biblical Reflection Discussion Prompts:

- 1) What do we learn about what Jesus expects from us as participants in the kingdom from his interaction with Peter? What can we expect from him?
- 2) Peter’s bold step onto the water demonstrates that it is possible for us, regular people who desire to follow Jesus, to participate in God’s kingdom, even when we feel fearful or doubtful. Discuss what you are currently doing in your life to follow Jesus. How is what you are doing to follow Jesus impacting others (family, community, neighbours, friends, enemies)?
- 3) Wright points out that sometimes it is well-intentioned human traditions, including religious traditions, that keep us from participating in God’s kingdom (p. 59). We have the tendency to choose familiarity over the movement of the Spirit. Brainstorm some ways your church community could listen to the Holy Spirit and practice stepping out in faith in new ways.

### Closing Prayer

To close your discussion each week, we recommend saying the Lord’s prayer together. For suggestions on using the Lord’s prayer as a guide for intercessory prayer, see the Lenten Spiritual Practice guidelines.

