



# Presbyterians *Read*



## Holy Week

“Matthew, telling us that Jesus’ disciples all forsook him and fled, wants us by contrast to stay the course, to see this thing through, to witness the glory of God in the suffering face of his crucified son” (Wright, p. 127).

### Theme: Kingdom People are Part of the Passion Narrative

#### 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 31:9–16.

#### 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.*

This week, N.T. Wright invites us to spend time with each part of the passion narrative. Even though as readers today we understand Jesus’ death in the context of his resurrection, this part of the story can still raise questions for us. Like the disciples, we find it hard to believe what Jesus is telling us at the Passover dinner and in the Garden of Gethsemane: Will some of us really deny and betray him? As we witness Pilate sentencing Jesus to death and watch as he is hung on the cross, we are shocked and bewildered along with his followers: Is this really a necessary part of God’s kingdom story? As we grieve alongside Joseph of Arimathea and the women who visit Jesus’ tomb after his death, we wonder with them if the impossible will truly happen: Will Jesus really be raised as he told us he would be?

While we know that Jesus will, indeed, be raised from the dead, we are invited to inhabit this part of the story fully—to be drawn from the sidelines to the center of the scenes of Jesus’ suffering. We cannot avoid these vivid and horrible scenes because they are a key part of the kingdom story. As N.T. Wright explains, Jesus’ death on the cross was “the event through which Jesus became king. King of the Jews. King of the world” (137).

The people of Jesus’ time expected that the messiah would become king through the path humans normally take to power: “pushing and shoving his way forward, fighting and killing until his position was established” (148). But, as we have learned this Lent, Jesus came to establish a different type of kingdom—the kind where the last are first and the first are last. He willingly took the powers of darkness that destroy God’s creation on to himself in the crucifixion. As Wright explains, “He came as the Servant, the one who took people’s infirmities and diseases on to himself, the one who suffered insults and mocking and torture and death. He was obedient throughout his life, to a different vision of power, a different sort of kingdom-dream” (148).

We are called to live as kingdom people, which means following Jesus through the darkness as well as into the light. This week’s readings have encouraged us to spend time in that darkness, “grieving over the ruin of the world that sent Jesus to his death” (141), examining our own complicity in power structures that oppress the most vulnerable, and trusting in the promises of God that new life is on the way.

### **Reading Focus**

In this week’s readings, N.T. Wright once again reminds us that we are “not merely spectators, but participants” in the kingdom story (123). For most of us, it is probably more challenging to see ourselves as participants in the horror of the crucifixion than as participants in the joy of the resurrection. But, during Lent, we are invited to confront the reality of the darkness in the world. We are called to hold a space for grief and acknowledge the suffering, inequality, violence and oppression that continues to exist. We are also called to repent of the ways that we’ve wounded each other and God’s creation. It is a time to feel the ache at the heart of human existence for things to be made right.

N.T. Wright reminds us that, as we face the darkness, we are called to stay focused on Jesus “as the rescuer, the kingdom-bringer” (124). As you read during Easter week, you are encouraged to keep the image of Jesus as the kingdom-bringer in mind. Ask yourself: What part does the resurrection play in God’s unfolding kingdom story? What did the resurrection mean for the followers of Jesus’ day? What does it mean for us today?

### **Opening Discussion Questions**

- 1) Has there ever been a time in your life when you have been faithful and following God but have still found yourself suffering, alone or in distress? How did you experience God’s presence or absence during this time?
- 2) While it can be difficult for us to admit, we have all wounded God’s creation and caused suffering in the lives of others. Share an example of a time that you asked for forgiveness from God and/or from a person you hurt. What was the experience like?

### **Key Scripture Verse: Matthew 26:36–56**

- Read N.T. Wright’s translation of Matthew 26:36–56 (found below and on p. 124).
- Read or listen to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of Matthew 26:36–56, or another version of your choice.

## Matthew 26:36–56

So Jesus went with them to the place called Gethsemane.

‘You sit here,’ he said to the disciples, ‘while I go over there and pray.’

He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee with him, and began to be very upset and distressed.

‘My soul is overwhelmed with grief,’ he said, ‘even to death. Stay here and keep watch with me.’

Then, going a little further on, he fell on his face and prayed.

‘My father,’ he said, ‘if it’s possible—please, please let this cup go away from me! But... not what I want, but what you want.’

He came back to the disciples and found them asleep.

‘So,’ he said to Peter, ‘couldn’t you keep watch with me for a single hour? Watch and pray so that you don’t get pulled down into the time of testing. The spirit is eager, but the body weak.’

And, for the second time, he went off and said, ‘My father, if it’s not possible for this to pass unless I drink it, let your will be done.’

Again, he came and found them asleep; their eyes were heavy. Once more he left them and went away. He prayed for the third time, using the same words once again. Then he came back to the disciples.

‘You can sleep now,’ he said, and have a good rest! Look—the time has come, and the son of man is given over into the hands of wicked people! Get up and let’s be going. Look! Here comes the one who’s going to betray me!’

While Jesus was still speaking, there was Judas, one of the Twelve! He had come with a large crowd, with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. The one who was intending to betray him gave them a sign: ‘The one I kiss—that’s him! Grab hold of him!’

So he went up at once to Jesus and said ‘Greetings, Teacher!’, and kissed him.

‘My friend,’ said Jesus, ‘what are you doing here?’

Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him.

At that, one of the men with Jesus reached out his hand, drew his sword and hit the high priest’s slave, cutting off his ear.

‘Put your sword back where it belongs!’ said Jesus to him. ‘People who use the sword die by the sword! Don’t you realize that I could call on my father and have him send me more than twelve legions of angels, just like that? But how then can the Bible come true when it says this has to happen?’

At the time Jesus said to the crowds, ‘Have you really come out with swords and sticks to arrest me, as if I were some kind of brigand? I sat there teaching in the Temple, every day, and you didn’t arrest me! But all this has happened so that what the prophets said in the Bible would be fulfilled.’

Then all the disciples abandoned him and ran away.

## Biblical Reflection Discussion Prompts:

- 1) N.T. Wright writes: “This scene in Gethsemane is absolutely central to any proper understanding of who Jesus really was” (126). What do we learn about who Jesus was from this scene? Why is this scene also important to understanding what the kingdom of God is?
- 2) The disciples do not come across in a positive light in this scene. Wright encourages us to do better, to “stay the course” instead of fleeing so that we may witness “the glory of God in the suffering face of his son” (127). How do you feel you’ve done this week at staying with and paying attention to the difficult parts of the passion narrative? Have you caught any glimpses of the glory of God amid the suffering you have witnessed?

- 3) Prayer is central to the drama that unfolds in the garden of Gethsemane. What do we learn about prayer from Jesus in this scene? What prayers will you be focusing on as you head into Easter week?

### **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.

