

STUDY GUIDE

EIGHT SESSIONS



N.T. WRIGHT  
MICHAEL F. BIRD

# THE NEW TESTAMENT YOU NEVER KNEW

EXPLORING THE CONTEXT, PURPOSE AND  
MEANING OF THE STORY OF GOD



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MEANING OF THE STORY OF GOD

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N.T. WRIGHT AND MICHAEL F. BIRD  
WITH KEVIN AND SHERRY HARNEY



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## INTRODUCTION

# EYE-OPENING MOMENTS

**W**e all have moments that shock us. Something was right there in front of us, but we simply did not see it. We did not understand. We just never noticed. Then, in a flash—at the snap of a finger, at the speed of thought—we understand. We get it!

Our eyes snap open.

Many young women and men have an eye-opening moment when they bring their first newborn home from the hospital. After a few days of diapers, sleep deprivation, and perpetual feeding, the reality hits them. *My parents did this for me! They changed a thousand diapers. They cared for me through countless sleepless nights. Mom and Dad provided for me in ways I never really knew . . . until this moment.*

Some people experience such sobering moments of clarity when they try a new food. They knew a certain food was there all along. Other people talked about it. They just never tried it. But then someone offers it to them for the first time, and their taste buds cry out, *Sushi is delicious! How could I have missed it? Or, Coffee is intoxicating! Why did I say no so many times through the years? Or, Baklava is glorious! How did I not know about this?*

Many people have likewise heard sermons from the New Testament but have never had their eyes opened to the power of those words. They have heard passages quoted from the New Testament but never realized how those seemingly random fragments fit together to tell a glorious and eternity-impacting story. They might have read portions

of the New Testament, or even the entire text of those twenty-seven books, but the lights have never switched on.

This eight-week study is designed to help you have one of these eye-opening moments. There is more in the New Testament than you imagine. There are truths you may have overlooked and lessons that might have slipped by. But if you will open your heart and mind, the King of all kings is ready to awaken your imagination. He is waiting to speak and teach the truth to you. The Spirit of the Living God is longing to whisper fresh truth into your ears.

The kingdom of God is closer than you think. The books of the New Testament have been given to unfold the story of God's love, grace, and truth. If you are ready, God is prepared to give you an epiphany, a revelation, and a fresh insight.

There are things about the New Testament that *you never knew*. It is time to have your eyes opened. Brace yourself . . . God is near and ready to move!

# HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

**G**et ready for an adventure! Over the course of the next eight weeks, your hosts, N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, are going to lead you on a unique journey to the lands where Jesus taught and ministered, the apostle Paul traveled and preached, and the early church took root before exploding throughout the Roman Empire. As they guide you step by step in this journey, you will get to know more about the story *behind* the New Testament, how it came to be written, why it was written . . . and what it means to your life today.

This study is designed to be experienced as a home Bible study, Sunday school class, or other small-group setting. Ultimately, the idea is not just for you to gain knowledge but also to experience life transformation, grow in relationship with others, and apply what you learn to your life. And what better way to do that than surrounded by a group of friends?

Each session in this study guide includes opening “Talk About It” questions, video teaching notes, group discussion questions, and closing prayer suggestions. As a group, you will watch the video and then use the video notes and questions to engage with the topic. Note that you have complete freedom as to how to best use these elements to meet the needs of your group. Again, the goal is experiencing life change, not just “covering the material.”

To get the most out of your group experience, keep the following two points in mind. First, remember the real growth in this study will happen during your small-group time. This is where you will process



the content of the teaching for the week, ask questions, and learn from others as you hear what God is doing in their lives. For this reason, it is important for you to be fully committed to the group and attend each session so you can build trust and rapport with the other members. If you choose to only “go through the motions,” or if you refrain from participating, there is a lesser chance you will find what you’re looking for during this study.

Second, make sure your small group is a place where people can share, learn about God, and build intimacy and friendship with one another. Seek to make your group a “safe place” by being honest about your thoughts and feelings and listening carefully to everyone else’s opinion. Resist the temptation to “fix” a problem someone might be having or to correct his or her theology, as that’s not the purpose of your small-group time. (Note that if you are a group leader, there are additional instructions and resources provided in the back of this study guide to help you lead a productive discussion group.)

Following your group time, you can reflect on the material you’ve covered by engaging in any or all of the between-sessions activities. For each session, you may wish to complete the personal study all in one sitting or spread it out over a few days (for example, working on it a half-hour a day on different days that week). If you are unable to finish—or even start—your personal study, be sure to still attend the group study video session. You are still wanted and welcome at the group even if you don’t have your “homework” done.

It’s not a coincidence or accident that you have chosen to participate in this journey! God has great things in store for you, and as you travel the lands of the New Testament during the next eight weeks, he will reveal himself to you in ways you might not expect. So be open to what he is doing in your life . . . as you learn more about *The New Testament You Never Knew*.

## ***Of Note***

The quotations and text boxes in this study guide are from *The New Testament You Never Knew Video Study* by N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird. All other resources, including the small-group questions, session introductions, prayer direction, and between-sessions materials, were written by Kevin and Sherry Harney in collaboration with N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird.

## SESSION 1

# THE BOOKS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Anyone who picks up the New Testament will  
find, if they give it a chance, that it is one of  
the most explosive books ever written.

N.T. WRIGHT

## INTRODUCTION

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There is a massive difference between being familiar with something and understanding it. Having an acquaintance and building a deep friendship are radically different experiences. Flying on a plane and being an aeronautical mechanic are not the same thing!

In the same way, when it comes to the New Testament, many of us are familiar with it. We have an “acquaintance” kind of relationship with this ancient collection of twenty-seven books. But the real question is . . . *do we know and understand the New Testament?*

Imagine you have gone to the same doctor for more than twenty years. You know his name and can predict how he will be dressed (he always wears a long white coat that buttons in the front). You have a good sense of his interests. He likes to ask questions about your health, eating habits, and exercise disciplines. You could certainly identify your doctor in a crowd. He is caring and compassionate and is quick to ask questions about you.

After twenty years, you are confident you know your doctor.

Then one day, you go to a dinner party with friends and are delighted to discover your doctor is also there. As you listen to him throughout the evening, you are amazed to learn all sorts of new things about this man you thought you knew. For one, he has a wife—which had never really crossed your mind. He also has two sons and is clearly fond of them. Later, in a quieter conversation with a few people, you also discover he had a daughter who died when she was only eighteen months old. As he describes the loss, you realize the experience was more than two decades ago, but there is still real pain behind his eyes and in his heart.

During the course of the evening, you have learned your doctor is far more complex, interesting, and real than you had ever imagined. This new context and interaction has opened your eyes and heart to a whole new person you now see in a completely different light. You realize that while you *knew* your doctor, you never *really knew* your doctor.

Perhaps you know the New Testament at the same level you know your doctor. You've interacted with it here and there. You've heard your pastor use it in sermons at church. You've read a few passages here and there. Maybe you have even read the *entire* Bible. But you don't really know it personally . . . or the incredible story that it has to tell.

Over the next eight weeks, your hosts N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird will invite you to “get out of the office” and get to know the real story behind the New Testament. The table is set. The agenda is clear. It's time to enter into a deeper understanding of the New Testament than you have ever experienced before.

## TALK ABOUT IT

Welcome to the first session of *The New Testament You Never Knew*. If you or any of your group members do not know one another, take a few minutes to introduce yourselves. Then, to get things started, discuss one of the following questions:

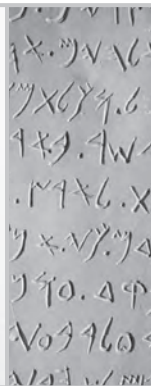
- Think about a relationship you've had where you *thought* you knew the person, but in a different setting, you saw that person in a completely different light. What was the experience? What did you learn?

—or—

- How were you introduced to the New Testament? What do you hope to learn about the New Testament in this study that you did not know before?

### ***The Bible***

The Bible is a collection of sixty-six books. They are broken into two parts. The Old Testament has thirty-nine books and the New Testament has twenty-seven books. The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. These books were written by a wide variety of people over a wide expanse of time. Anyone who picks up the New Testament will find, if they give it a chance, that it is one of the most explosive books ever written.





## VIDEO TEACHING NOTES

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*Play the video segment for session one. As you watch, use the space provided to collect your thoughts and make some notes about the New Testament that are new and fresh for you.*

### The Gospels and Acts

Matthew, Mark, and Luke: three similar accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection

The Gospel of John: a unique look at Jesus

Acts: the apostles, early church, and spread of the gospel

### The Letters of Paul

What we know about Paul and what he is writing about in his letters



#### ***The Apostle Paul***

In the Greek, the letters that Paul wrote are fairly brief—about 150 pages. This is much less text than the letters written by Cicero about a hundred years earlier or the letters of Seneca. We don't know when Paul was born. He was most likely a fairly young man when Jesus was crucified and raised from the dead. What we do know is that when we first encounter Saul (later named Paul) in the book of Acts, he is a hot and fiery persecutor of the early Christians. He hated the idea of people following the crucified would-be Messiah. He saw Jesus as a danger to the traditions of Israel, destructive to their laws, and a threat to the temple that they loved. Paul was part of a Jewish sect called the Pharisees and he was committed to do all he could to stamp out the followers of Jesus.

## **The General Letters**

Hebrews: Jesus is better

James: faith without works is dead

Jude: beware of false teachers

1 and 2 Peter: remember who you are and guard your faith

1, 2, and 3 John: love God, love others, and uphold the truth

## **The Book of Revelation**

How we should read the book of Revelation



### ***Where Did the New Testament Come From?***

The Bible did not fall from the sky, written in “Ye Olde English” with the words of Jesus in red print. It came through a particular process—through the story and struggles of the early church. The Holy Spirit drew it together from the diaries they were keeping, the sermons they were preaching, the problems they were facing and seeking to solve, and the faith they were striving to live out each day.

## **GROUP DISCUSSION**

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*Take a few minutes to discuss what you just watched and explore these concepts together.*

1. In what ways could we consider the writings of the New Testament “explosive” and “powerful”? How have you experienced this power unleashed in your own life through the teachings contained in the New Testament?
2. Jesus and the early Christians believed that he was the place that heaven and earth actually meet and come together. If you believe this is true, how is Jesus the place that heaven and earth intersect? What difference does it make if this is true?

**3.** Read the following passages from the beginning of the four Gospels:

The book of the family tree of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham became the father of Isaac, Isaac of Jacob, Jacob of Judah and his brothers . . . (Matthew 1:1–2).

This is where the good news starts—the good news of Jesus the Messiah, God’s son. Isaiah the prophet put it like this (“Look! I am sending my messenger ahead of me; he will clear the way for you!”): “A shout goes up in the desert: Make way for the Lord! Clear a straight path for him!” (Mark 1:1–3).

Many people have undertaken to draw up an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled in our midst. It has been handed down to us by the original eyewitnesses and stewards of the word. So, most excellent Theophilus, since I had traced the course of all of it scrupulously from the start, I thought it a good idea to write an orderly account for you, so that you may have secure knowledge about the matters in which you have been instructed (Luke 1:1–4).

In the beginning was the Word. The Word was close beside God, and the Word was God. In the beginning, he was close beside God (John 1:1–2).

When you read the introductions to the Synoptic Gospels, what similarities do you see? How is the introduction to John’s Gospel different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke?





### ***Why Were the Gospels Written?***

- The first generation of disciples were dying and they wanted to capture their testimony and witness in written form.
- These stories and accounts could be used in worship.
- They were for instruction of believers in how to live for Jesus and follow the Messiah.
- They were an apologetic for the idea of a crucified and risen Messiah.

#### **4. Read the following passages about Saul, who became Paul, recorded in the book of Acts:**

So they stoned Stephen. “Lord Jesus,” he cried out, “receive my spirit.” Then he knelt down and shouted at the top of his voice, “Lord, don’t let this sin stand against them.” Once he had said this, he fell asleep.

Now Saul was giving his consent to Stephen’s death.

That very day a great persecution was started against the church in Jerusalem. Everyone except the apostles was scattered through the lands of Judaea and Samaria. Devout men buried Stephen, and made a great lamentation over him. But Saul was doing great damage to the church by going from one house to another, dragging off men and women and throwing them into prison (Acts 7:59–8:3).

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out threats and murder on the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest and requested from him official letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that he could find people who belonged to the Way, men and women alike, tie them up, and bring them back to Jerusalem.

While he was on the journey, and was getting near to Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. He fell on the ground and heard a voice speaking to him.

“Saul, Saul!” said the voice. “Why are you persecuting me?”

“Who are you, Lord?” he asked.

“I am Jesus,” he said, “and you are persecuting me. But get up and go into the city, and it will be told you what you have to do.”

The men who were traveling with Saul stood speechless. They heard the voice but couldn't see anybody. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he couldn't see anything. So they led him by the hand and took him to Damascus. He went for three days, being unable to see, and he neither ate nor drank (Acts 9:1–9).

“I am a Jew,” he continued, “and I was born in Tarsus in Cilicia. I received my education here, in this city, and I studied at the feet of Gamaliel. I was trained in the strictest interpretations of our ancestral laws and became zealous for God, just as all of you are today. I persecuted this Way, right to the point of killing people, and I bound and handed over to prison both men and women—as the high priest and all the elders can testify. I received letters from them to the Jews of Damascus, where I was going in order to find the heretics who were there, tie them up, and bring them to Jerusalem to face their just deserts.

“Just as I was on the way, and getting near to Damascus, suddenly a bright light shone from heaven all around me. It was about midday. I fell down on the ground and I heard a voice saying, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ I answered, ‘Who are you, Master?’ And he said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, and you are persecuting me!’

“The people who were with me saw the light, but they didn't hear the voice of the person speaking to me. So I said, ‘What shall I do, Master?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Get up and go into Damascus, and there you will be informed of all the things that have been arranged for you to do’” (Acts 22:3–10).

How do you see Saul/Paul being transformed in these passages? How have you experienced change and transformation in your outlook, attitude, and life because of your encounter with Jesus?

**5.** Read the following passage from Paul's letter to the Colossians:

Right now I'm having a celebration—a celebration of my sufferings, which are for your benefit! And I'm steadily completing, in my own flesh, what is presently lacking in the king's afflictions on behalf of his body, which is the church. I became the church's servant, according to the terms laid down by God when he gave me my commission on your behalf, the commission to fulfill God's word.

This word declares the mystery that was kept secret from past ages and generations, but now has been revealed to God's holy people. God's intention was to make known to them just what rich glory this mystery contains, out there among the nations. And this is the key: the king, living within you as the hope of glory!

He is the one we are proclaiming. We are instructing everybody and teaching everybody in every kind of wisdom, so that we can present everybody grown up, complete, in the king. That's what I am working for, struggling with all his energy which is powerfully at work in me (Colossians 1:24–29).

How does Paul describe his mission in this passage? How do you think this motivated him to share about Jesus and write his letters?

### *Paul the Theologian*

Paul is a theologian of creation and new creation. He is a theologian who believes that Jesus is Israel's Messiah, that he is the Lord of the whole world, and that he is the very living embodiment of Israel's God in person. He believes God's new world has begun in Jesus through his death and resurrection. Paul is confident the resurrection of Jesus has renewed the covenant with Israel and has created a single family . . . Abraham's one family in the Messiah. This family is made up of Jews and Gentiles together.



#### 6. Read the following brief passage from the letter of James:

What use is it, my dear family, if someone says they have faith when they don't have works? Can faith save such a person? Supposing a brother or sister is without clothing, and is short even of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; be warm, be full!"—but doesn't give them what their bodies need—what use is that? In the same way, faith, all by itself and without works, is dead (James 2:14–17).

In what way are works (the good things we do in the name of Jesus) a sign our faith is real? What are some of the actions and works that you know God wants you to do to show the reality and depth of your faith?

**7.** Read the following passage from the first letter of John:

Love consists in this: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be the sacrifice that would atone for our sins. Beloved, if that's how God loved us, we ought to love one another in the same way. Nobody has ever seen God. If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is completed in us (1 John 4:10–12).

How has God revealed his love to lost and sinful people? How does his love inspire and teach you how to show love to others?

**8.** Read the following passage from the book of Revelation:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven, from God, prepared like a bride dressed up for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne, and this is what it said: “Look! God has come to dwell with humans! He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them and will be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or weeping or pain anymore, since the first things have passed away.”

The one who sat on the throne said, “Look, I am making all things new.” And he said, “Write, because these words are faithful and true.”

Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will freely give water to the thirsty, water from the spring of the water of life. The one who conquers will inherit these things. I will be his God and he shall be my son (Revelation 21:1–7).

What kind of things happen when heaven meets earth? How do you see God doing these kinds of things in the person and power of Jesus today?

### ***All Things New***

Many Christian teachers imagine that the purpose of Christian discipleship is one day we will leave this earth and go up to heaven. Instead, the end of the book of Revelation is about the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem, coming down to earth so that the dwelling of God is with humans and God says, “I am making everything new.”



## CLOSING PRAYER

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*Take time as a group to pray in some of the following directions . . .*

- Thank God for the people who have taught you the truth and lessons of the Bible. Mention them by name and express to God your deep appreciation for placing these people in your life.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to give you many eye-opening moments over these eight sessions where you see the New Testament in a new light and with fresh insight.
- Lift up praise to Jesus for bringing heaven to earth (including to your life).
- Ask God to make your mind sharp so that you can understand how he has brought together the twenty-seven books of the New Testament into one message of God's work through the Messiah, Jesus.
- Pray for eyes to see where God is still bringing heaven to earth and ask for power to share in this work of Jesus that continues in our day.

## SESSION 1

# *Between-Sessions Personal Study*

**R**eflect on the content you've covered this week in *The New Testament You Never Knew* by engaging in any or all of the following between-sessions activities. The time you invest will be well spent, so let God use it to draw you closer to him. At your next meeting, share with your group any key points or insights that stood out to you as you spent this time with the Lord.

### REFLECTION

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Why do you think God used so many different people to write the story of the Messiah in the New Testament?

Why do you think God chose Saul, a persecutor of the church, to become a primary leader in the early church, a preacher of Jesus, and the writer of so many New Testament books?



What specific actions can you take during the next eight weeks to become more familiar with the New Testament and the story of Jesus that it tells?

Write down a prayer asking God to guide you to the insights and truths that he wants you to learn as you go through this study.

## STUDY

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Commit to spending some time during the upcoming week (until your group meets again) to read the following portions of the New Testament each day. Write down one new lesson and new insight you learned about Jesus from your daily reading.

### Day 1: The Gospels

*Read Luke 1–2; Matthew 5–6; Mark 15–16; and John 1–2*

One new lesson you learned . . .

One insight you gained about Jesus . . .

## **Day 2: The Book of Acts**

*Read Acts 1–2; 9; 16; and 25*

One new lesson you learned . . .

One insight you gained about Jesus . . .

## **Day 3: The Letters of Paul**

*Read Romans 3; Galatians 1; Ephesians 2; Philippians 2; and Colossians 1*

One new lesson you learned . . .

One insight you gained about Jesus . . .

## **Day 4: The General Letters**

*Read Hebrews 1–3; James 1–2; 1 Peter 1; 1 John 1; and Jude*

One new lesson you learned . . .

One insight you gained about Jesus . . .

## **Day 5: The Book of Revelation**

*Read Revelation 1–4; 19; and 21–22*

One new lesson you learned . . .

One insight you gained about Jesus . . .

## RESPONSE

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*Read through the insights you recorded about Jesus this past week. In the space below, write down three key insights and how they should (1) impact the way you relate to Jesus, and (2) impact the way you relate to the people in your life.*

### Insight #1

What you learned about Jesus . . .

How this should influence your faith and relationship with God . . .

How this should impact your relationship with the people God has placed in your life . . .

### Insight #2

What you learned about Jesus . . .

How this should influence your faith and relationship with God . . .

How this should impact your relationship with the people God has placed in your life . . .

### **Insight #3**

What you learned about Jesus . . .

How this should influence your faith and relationship with God . . .

How this should impact your relationship with the people God has placed in your life . . .

## **APPLICATION**

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The followers of Jesus believed a new world had begun in Christ through his death and resurrection. God had dealt with sin and evil, and his covenant with Israel now consisted of a single family—a family comprised of Jews and Gentiles together. This understanding of Jesus affected their personal lives, their relationships, and the way they viewed the world around them. Think about how your understanding of Jesus has impacted you in each of these same three ways and record your responses below.

In your personal life . . .

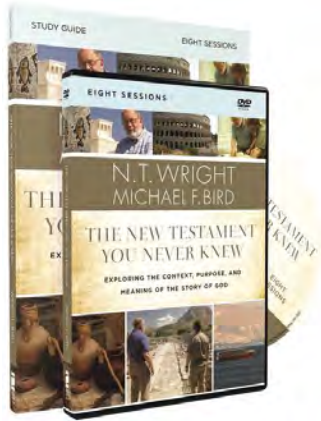
In your relationships . . .

In the world around you—your church, culture, and community . . .

**FOR NEXT WEEK**

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*Use the space below to write any key insights or questions from your personal study that you want to discuss at the next group meeting.*



# THE NEW TESTAMENT YOU NEVER KNEW

by N.T. WRIGHT & MICHAEL F. BIRD

## **Do you know the real story behind the New Testament?**

We all share a fascination for discovering 'the rest of the story.' We enjoy learning the behind-the-scenes facts about seemingly familiar events. In this eight-session video Bible study (DVD/video download sold separately), well-known Bible scholars N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird team up to take you on a tour of the story behind the explosive story of the New Testament.

You will discover things you never knew about Jesus' baptism and journey into the wilderness, the meaning behind his parables and miracles, the significance of his death and resurrection, the incredible expansion of the early church into the Greco-Roman world, and how the transforming mission of Jesus can still turn the world upside down today.

Through reading the New Testament we continually discover that God indeed keeps his promises, but those promises don't always look like what people expected. Especially when it comes to Jesus. So, come join the journey with N.T. Wright and Michael Bird and they will help you understand the New Testament you never knew.

**LEARN MORE**