



Thank you for your interest in Cross Wise—a twelve-week study of the cross of Christ.

The pages which follow include:

- An overview of this series (4 pages)
- A sample sermon/class outline (6 pages)
- A sample handout (4 pages)

Again, thank you for your interest in our material. If you have questions or want to place an order, contact us at:

e-mail: lookpress@aol.com
phone: (800) 863-5665

1730 Coachman's Court
Brentwood, TN 37027
800-863-5665
lookpress@aol.com
www.lookpress.com

Cross Wise

A Theology for Today's Church

This twelve week series on the cross is a call to the church to consider what it means to become a “cross-shaped” people. It is a confronting, convicting series that will take you and your congregation into theological territory that is, at once, thrilling and terrifying. This will not be the easiest material you have ever preached, but it may well be the most rewarding.

I say that not because these sermons and supplementary materials are so special (although I am proud of this work). It is the nature of the subject. The cross is powerful. It cuts. It pierces us in ways few other subject do. All our pride and pettiness and pretension tends to pale in the shadow of the cross. Perhaps that is why the cross can slip so easily under our defenses and remind us all over again that we are sinners for whom Christ died.

I can think of no subject more central or necessary for the church today than the word of the cross. The implications of the cross (for discipleship and for the church, for ethics and for ministry) are so profound, so far-reaching that it does us good to visit Calvary often. Most of our members have never thought very deeply about the cross—perhaps because most of their preachers have never led them to contemplate the meaning of the cross. As a preacher, I repent of that.

A renewed appreciation of the cross of Christ, a fuller understanding of its implications for our lives and our churches, a fresh commitment to the way of the cross, would spread revival in Christians and congregations and communities. It would turn the world upside down. And why not? It was the word of the cross that accomplished that feat some 2000 years ago.

My prayer is that these lessons will be a blessing to you personally and to the church to which you minister. May God use them to kill his people—and bring them new life once more.

Tim Woodroof
August, 1997
Searcy, Arkansas

Bibliography

- Charles B. Cousar. *A Theology of the Cross: The Death of Jesus in the Pauline Letters*. A volume in the series 'Overtures to Biblical Theology.' Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 1990. 194 pgs. This review of the cross in the writings of Paul is one of the best things I've read on the subject. Cousar writes well and convincingly. He is scholarly but doesn't get bogged down in minutia. This book will not be for everyone, but for those who are patient, it will be a great blessing. I heartily recommend it.
- D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. *The Cross: God's Way of Salvation*. Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books. 1986. 221 pgs. This collection of sermons, compiled after Dr. Lloyd-Jones' death, was preached in the autumn of 1963. Yet his sermons on the cross still seem alive and powerful. The book is uneven, and—in the long tradition of English preachers—Lloyd-Jones tends to be wordy. But there are some marvelous insights in this book and some wonderful passages to contemplate. Chapter 5, *The Triumph of the Cross*, was especially moving to me.
- C. Leonard Allen. *The Cruciform Church: Becoming a Cross-Shaped People in a Secular World*. Abilene, TX: ACU Press. 1990. 192 pgs. This powerful book is a God-send to those of us with roots in the Restoration Movement. It looks at our history and doctrine through the lens of the cross and does a great service to our heritage thereby. Though Allen's insights are not always comfortable, they are usually right on the mark. If you haven't read this book, you should.
- L. E. Maxwell. *Born Crucified*. Chicago: Moody Press. 1945. 192 pgs. This little work is more devotional than expository or theological. Yet Maxwell has captured some great insights into the meaning of the cross for individual disciples. You will benefit from reading this book yourself. And it makes a good resource to recommend to others.
- John R. W. Stott. *The Cross of Christ*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. 1986. 383 pgs. This is a wonderful, comprehensive treatment of the cross. Stott's work is broader than the others mentioned above. He engages some of the historical debates over the cross, as well as dealing with a wider range of Scriptures. Stott is always worth reading. If you can only read one book on the subject, this is the one.

Sermon Summaries

There are twelve lessons in Cross Wise. They are divided into two sections. The first deals with the cross of Calvary (sermons 1-6), attempting to help people better understand what went on 2000 years ago. The second (sermons 7-12) deals with the implications of the cross for Christians today.

I have included two forms of support for your preaching. The first is a weekly handout for your congregation, which is closely tied to the sermon outlines. Any changes you might make to the sermons may require you to make changes to the handouts as well. Be alert to this as you adapt this material to your own style.

Then there are the sermon outlines themselves. Each outline is about 6 pages in length—a lot of information! I tend, however, to speak quickly and for about 30 minutes. You may want to use these outlines verbatim, modify them to your own style and situation, or throw them out entirely. I hope they can at least serve as a starting point for your own preparation.

Sermon Title	Text	Page #s Outline	Page #s Handout
<p>1. The Cross at the Center This introduction to the subject of the cross asserts that the cross is the very center of the gospel. It is the chosen symbol of the Christian religion, adorning our buildings, shaping our worship, and summarizing our faith. The cross was at the center of the Apostles' preaching and writing. The question for us thus becomes, "Is the cross at the center for you and me?"</p>	<p>1Cor 15:1-5</p>	<p>1-6</p>	<p>1-4</p>
<p>2. The Cruel Cross This sermon has been designed as a worship experience. There are "Comments" rather than points, interspersed with readings, prayers, songs and the Supper. If you choose to use this format, you will need to supply songs that the congregation knows and plan for other elements of the worship so that everything flows smoothly.</p>	<p>Mark 15</p>	<p>7-12</p>	<p>5-8</p>
<p>3. The Conscious Cross The cross was not an accident. It did not take Jesus by surprise. It was something he knew about the week before he died, as he began his ministry, before he came to earth. But, more, the cross was something Jesus <i>chose</i>. He deliberately walked the way of the cross. Will we?</p>	<p>Matthew 4:3-11</p>	<p>13-18</p>	<p>9-12</p>
<p>4. The Cross and the Blood Judaism was a "bloody" religion. But so too is Christianity. The blood of Jesus plays as central a role in our worship and faith as did the blood of lambs in the O.T. sacrificial system. The wages of sin are still death. We still sin. So we still need the blood of Jesus to wash us clean.</p>	<p>Heb 13:11-12</p>	<p>19-22</p>	<p>13-16</p>
<p>5. Who Betrayed Jesus? In this sermon, you search for the one who betrayed Jesus to the cross. Several suspects are considered, along with their motives and opportunities. Judas, the</p>	<p>Acts 3:13-15a</p>	<p>23-28</p>	<p>17-20</p>

Jewish authorities, and Pilate are examined. But, in the end, our role in condemning Jesus is confessed.

- 6. Satan and the Cross** **Heb 2:14-15** **29-32** **21-24**
Satan's role in the crucifixion is discussed. Satan hates God, but can only hurt God through us—and through his Son who becomes flesh for a brief time. Satan's victory at the cross was illusory and short-lived. Jesus turned defeat into astonishing victory by turning death into new life.
- 7. The Cross that Cuts** **1Cor 1:18-24** **33-38** **25-28**
What is the cross? Foolishness? A scandal? Or the power and wisdom of God? What you think of the cross determines what God thinks of you. We see in this sermon that relying on our own wisdom (like the Greeks) or our own goodness (like the Jews) causes us to abandon the cross. Only those who embrace the cross and their need for a Savior can be Christian.
- 8. The Tree Falls** **Mark 15** **39-44** **29-32**
Has the cross of Christ fallen on our lives and changed everything? Or has it given us only a glancing blow, momentarily stunning us but failing to transform us? Paul took the cross of Christ very personally. So must we—through faith, baptism, and discipleship.
- 9. The Cross and Changed Lives** **2 Cor 5:15-16a** **45-50** **33-36**
According to Paul, Christians don't change—they die. We don't get *better*. We don't *improve*. We just learn how to die—to ourselves, to the world—more completely. What is needed most among God's people today is not more tweaking with morality but a greater determination to put the old man to death so that the new man can rule in our lives as Lord.
- 10. A Cross-Shaped People** **1Cor 5:6-7** **51-56** **37-40**
The cross shapes the church. It determines our identity as a people, the way we treat each other in the fellowship, and the standards of holiness by which we live. The church is rooted in the cross. To allow anything to usurp the cross in the life of the church is to listen to “another gospel.”
- 11. Cross or Crown?** **Php 2:5-11** **57-62** **41-44**
The resurrection always beckons us to run past the cross, ignoring its suffering and shame, to get to the “good stuff” of victory and joy. Truth be told, we would rather have lives and churches defined by resurrection than by the cross. This sermon suggests that God will raise us up—that is his promise. But we must be about the business of dying.
- 12. The Rest of the Story** **1Cor 15** **63-68** **45-48**
Though the cross must be the defining element of our Christian life, the resurrection does have an important and powerful role to play in helping us to live out the cross. The resurrection gives us the courage to take up our crosses. It puts new life into the void our death leaves. And it gives us something to say, a vital message for the world around us.

The Cross at the Center

Read “The Part that Matters,” Max Lucado, *No Wonder They Call Him the Savior*.

“I just want to know what counts.” Deep Irish brogue. Dark, deep eyes. The statement was sincere. “Don’t talk to me of religion, I’ve been down that road. And please, stay off theology. I have a degree in that. Get to the heart of it, okay? I want to know what counts.”

His name was Ian. He was a student at a Canadian university where I was visiting. Through a series of events he found out I was a Christian and I found out he wanted to be but was disenchanted.

“I grew up in the church,” he explained. “I wanted to go into the ministry. I took all the courses, the theology, the languages, the exegesis. But I quit. Something just didn’t click.”

“It’s in there somewhere,” he spoke with earnestness. “At least I think it is.”

I looked up from my coffee as he began to stir his. Then he summarized his frustration with one question.

“What *really* matters? What counts? Tell me. Skip the periphery. Get to the essence. Tell me the part that matters.”

The part that matters.

I looked at Ian for a long time. The question hung in the air. What should I have said? What could I have said? I could have told him about church. I could’ve given him a doctrinal answer or read him something classic like the twenty-third psalm, “The Lord is my shepherd...” But that all seemed too small. Maybe some thoughts on sexuality or prayer or the Golden Rule. No, Ian wanted the treasure—he wanted the meat.

Stop and empathize for a second. Can you hear his question? Can you taste his frustration? “Don’t give me religion,” he was saying. “Give me what matters.”

What does matter? In your Bible of over a thousand pages, what matters? Among all the do’s and don’ts and shoulds and shouldn’ts, what is essential? What is indispensable? The Old Testament? The New? Grace? Baptism?

What would you have said to Ian? Would you have spoken on the evil of the world or maybe the eminence of heaven? Would you have quoted John 3:16 or Acts 2:38 or maybe read 1 Corinthians 13? What really matters?

What do we tell the “Ians” of this world who come to us lost in the maze of organized religion, bewildered by the differences between churches, and confused by the 1001 “central issues” about which we seem so concerned?

What do we tell these people who have all but turned off to Christianity, who need to believe so badly but can’t decide what is worth believing, who long to see something relevant and alive in the church today but too often see only the dying embers of a fire that used to be.

Tell me - tell Ian - what is the part that matters? What’s at the heart of it all? When all the additions and periphery and lesser matters are stripped away, what is left that can break a heart, and bend a knee, and change a life?

I. What is the “Part that Matters” in the Christian Message?

A. What that “part” is *not*. There are many subjects which would fight for the privilege of being “the part that matters.” And many of them *do* matter. But they are not the part that matters *most*.

1. The part that matters most is not the *ethical teachings* of the Bible.
 - a. Our world is in great need of some basic ethical and moral teaching. All around us, we can see the tragic results of lives lived outside the boundaries of God’s commands and precepts.
 - b. But before the world will listen to our *rules* for living, it must discover our *reason* for living. The rules can tell us *how* to live; but not *why to live that way*.
 - c. Something more central is needed.
2. The part that matters most is not *doctrines regarding church or worship*.
 - a. I believe, with you, that the church and its activities are important themes.
 - b. But before the world will be interested in *where* the saved gather and *what* the saved do, it must be convinced that it needs saving.
 - c. Something more central than the church is needed to convince the world of that.
3. The part that matters most is not even the life and teachings of Jesus.
 - a. You know how I stress knowing Jesus and listening to Jesus and becoming like Jesus. There is nothing more important than holding Jesus of Nazareth before people and inspiring in them a sense of awe and love and devotion to him.
 - b. Nothing, that is, save the *one thing* that is at the very center of the gospel message.

B. The part that matters most is the cross

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance : that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures . . . (1 Cor 15:1-4)

1. “Of first importance” is the message of the cross. This is what was preached and what saved them (vss 1-2). The cross is at the center.
2. Objection:

That is just one verse, just your opinion that the cross is what matters. There are other verses in the Bible and other preachers have their opinions about what is central to the gospel message. Like all you preachers, you advance your opinion and think you alone are right.
3. This is *not* just my opinion. It is the clear and consistent teaching of the history of the church and of the entire Bible. The cross is at the center.

II. The Cross as Our Rallying Flag

Every movement has its visual symbol, its “logo,” which represents some significant feature of history or beliefs. The Buddhists revere the lotus flower. Judaism has the star of David. The Communists had the Hammer and Sickle. Hitler had the Swastika. We pledge allegiance to the flag.

Have you ever wondered why Christians should choose—as their most prominent and recognizable symbol—the sign of the cross?

A. The cross as the symbol of Christianity.

1. There were many symbols the church could (and did) use—the peacock (symbolizing immortality); the dove (symbolizing peace); the athlete’s crown (for victory); and, particularly, a fish (ICTHUS—an acrostic based on the Greek for “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior”).
2. But it was the cross which, above all other symbols, captured the essence of the Christian message and the imagination of the Christian church. Examples of the cross’ use in the early church.
 - a. If you go to the catacombs of Rome, and witness the scratchings and primitive paintings of early Christians - there you will find the cross.
 - b. Tertullian, North African lawyer around AD 200.

At every forward step and movement, at every going in and out, when we put on our clothes and shoes, when we bathe, when we sit at a table, when we light the lamps, on couch, on seat, in all the ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign of [the cross].

- c. When the emperor Constantine had a vision before the Battle of Milvian Bridge (a fight which secured his claim to the throne of Rome), it was the cross he saw. He knew enough of Christianity to believe he had seen something which symbolized Jesus Christ.

B. Why should the cross come to symbolize the gospel?

1. The fear and loathing in which the cross was held.
 - a. Invented by barbarians. Adopted by Greeks and Romans.
 - b. “The most cruel method of execution ever practiced, for it deliberately delayed death until maximum torture had been inflicted.”
 - c. It was a punishment reserved for criminals convicted of murder, rebellion or armed robbery, provided the criminal was also a slave, foreigner or other “non-person.”
2. The cross as a sign of shame.

We can understand why Paul’s ‘message of the cross’ was to many of his listeners ‘foolishness’, even ‘madness’. . . . How could any sane person worship as a god a dead man who had been justly condemned as a criminal and subjected to the most humiliating form of execution? This combination of death, crime and shame put him beyond the pale of respect, let alone ... worship.¹

C. The use of that symbol today

1. Many of us wear a cross, or have one on our key chain, or wear jewelry in that shape. It is more than simple superstition—it is a constant reminder of

the cross in our daily lives.

2. Every Sunday, we gather to sing songs like:
 - a. *The Old Rugged Cross*
 - b. *Jesus Keep me Near the Cross*
 - c. *O Sacred Head, now Wounded*
3. In our prayers, we thank Jesus for his self-sacrifice and confess our sorrow at having caused a death centuries before any of us was born.
4. We gather around the table and remember the one event in the life of our Lord which he specifically asked us to commemorate—his death.
5. In spite of the best efforts of those who would rid our nation of the sign of the cross, the cross is present in our government buildings, in our hospitals, keeping watch over our dead.

III. The Cross at the Heart of the Apostles' Witness.

A. The cross in the gospels:

1. The gospels have been accurately described as “passion stories with extended introductions.”
2. Each of the Gospels is consumed with the story of the cross.
 - a. At his birth, there are dark hints of his death.
 - b. Early in his ministry, his enemies plot to kill him.
 - c. He carries O.T. prophecies about suffering and dying like a burden.
 - d. Repeatedly, he warns his disciples that his end will not be enthronement and honor but rejection and crucifixion.
3. Each of the Gospels climaxes with the events surrounding the cross.
 - a. Matthew, Mark and Luke each spend 2 chapters on the last day of Christ's life.
 - b. John spends 9 out of 21 chapters on this time period. Had John given the same attention to every day of our Lord's life, his book would have been over 9000 chapters long!
4. When the gospel writers told the story of Jesus, they told the story of the cross. The cross falls like a shadow across all the pages of the gospel story. The Jesus they write about is a Jesus seen through the lens of the cross.

B. The cross in the sermons of Acts:

1. **Read Acts 2:22-25, 36** - Peter at Pentecost.

Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. . . . Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.

2. Read Acts 3:13-15, 17-19 - Peter preaching at the temple.

The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. . . . Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord,

3. Read Acts 4:9-12 - Peter before the Sanhedrin.

If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is "the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone." Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

4. Read Acts 5:30-31 - Peter before the Sanhedrin. Repeats.

The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel.

5. Acts 8 (esp. vss 32-35)—Philip teaches Jesus from Isaiah 53, and speaks of the suffering and humiliation the Christ must endure.
6. Acts 10 (esp. vss 34-43)—Peter preaches the cross to Cornelius, giving prominence to the cross.
7. Acts 13 (esp. vss 26-31)—Paul in Pisidian Antioch.
8. Acts 17 (esp. vss 2-3)—Paul in Thessalonica.

C. The cross in the Epistles:

1. The cross is a thread running through the fabric of those books.
2. One very reasonable way of understanding the epistles is that they are extended commentaries explaining the impact the cross must have on the lives of those who would follow Jesus.

Conclusion: The cross is the symbol of Christianity because the cross is at the very center of Christianity.

1. It made up the core of the gospel story—and the apostles’ teaching and writing.
2. The cross was central for the early Christians, because it was central for the Apostles.
3. The cross was central for the apostles because it was central for Christ.
4. And the cross was central for Christ because it was central for God.

Is the cross at the center for you?

1. Isaac Watts’ famous hymn:

When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss
and pour contempt on all my pride.

* * * *

Forbid it Lord that I should boast
save in the death of Christ my Lord
All the vain things that charm me most
I sacrifice them to his love.

2. Have you surveyed the wondrous cross?
 - a. You are not a Christian until you have seen the cross and understood its message. How many baptisms you’ve undergone, how often you attend church services . . . none of it is important without the cross.
 - b. Have you:
been broken by the cross ...
bowed down before the cross ...
been changed by the cross?²

For the next few weeks, we will be focusing on the cross.

1. Introduce and overview *Cross-Wise*.
2. Invite everyone back next week to *experience* the cross in a worship period built around Calvary.

¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, pg. 23.

² I am indebted to John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, pp. 19-46, for much of the material in this sermon.

Insight

The cross. It rests on the time line of history like a compelling diamond. Its tragedy summons all sufferers. Its absurdity attracts all cynics. Its hope lures all searchers.

And according to Paul, the cross is what counts.

My, what a piece of wood! History has idolized it and despised it, gold-plated it and burned it, worn and trashed it. History has done everything to it but ignore it.

That's the one option that the cross does not offer.

No one can ignore it! You can't ignore a piece of lumber that suspends the greatest claim in history. A crucified carpenter claiming he is God on earth? Divine? Eternal? The death-slayer?

No wonder Paul called it "the core of the gospel." Its bottom line is sobering: if the account is true, it is history's hinge. Period. If not, it is history's hoax.

That's why the cross is what matters. That's why if I had that cup of coffee to drink with Ian again I would tell him about it. I'd tell of the drama on that windy April day, the day when the kingdom of death was repossessed and hope took up the payments. I'd tell of Peter's tumble, Pilate's hesitancy, and John's loyalty. We'd read about the foggy garden of decision and the incandescent room of the resurrection. We'd discuss the final words uttered so deliberately by this self-sacrificing Messiah.

And finally, we'd look at the Messiah himself. A blue-collar Jew whose claim altered a world and whose promise has never been equaled.

No wonder they call him the Savior.

Max Lucado

No Wonder they Call Him the Savior, p. 13-14.

The Cross at the Center

Key Text: 1Co 15:3-5

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve.

Theme:

When all is said and done, the part of religion that really matters is the fact and meaning of Christ's death. The Cross must be the very core of our faith and preaching. It is not without significance that the Cross has become the universal symbol of Christianity. Nor should we overlook just how central a role the message of the Cross played in the ministry of the Apostles. The Cross is the core.

Application:

Saying the cross is central is one thing. Living like the cross is central is another. This week, think of one area of your life, one relationship, where the cross can be put to specific and practical use. Make the cross central not just in word but in deed.



Sermon Helps

What is the “part that matters” in the Christian message?

Before the world will listen to our for living, it must discover our for living.

“I passed on to you as of first importance . . .”
The central passage we are considering today is:

The Cross as Our Rallying Flag

Every movement has a visual symbol, representing some significant feature of its history or beliefs. Have you ever wondered why Christians should choose—as their most prominent and recognizable symbol—the sign of the cross?

There were many symbols the church could (and did) use—the peacock (symbolizing immortality); the dove (symbolizing peace); the athlete’s crown (for victory); and, particularly, a **fish** (ICTHUS—an acrostic based on the Greek for “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior”).



But it was the which, above all other symbols, captured the essence of the Christian message and the imagination of the Christian church.

Why would a cross symbolize the gospel? It is a strange thing, given the universal fear and loathing in which the cross was held.

The cross was the most cruel method of execution ever practiced, for it deliberately delayed death until maximum torture had been inflicted.

Crucifixion was reserved for criminals convicted of murder, rebellion or armed robbery—and only if the criminal was also a slave, foreigner or other “non-person.”

We can understand why Paul’s ‘message of the cross’ was ‘foolishness’ to many of his listeners—even ‘madness.’ How could any sane person worship as a god a man who had been justly condemned and horribly executed as a criminal? This combination of death, crime and shame put Jesus beyond the pale of respect, let alone worship. [John Stott]

Yet, 2000 years later, many of us wear a cross, or have one on our key chain, or wear jewelry in that shape. It is more than simple superstition—it is a constant reminder of the cross in our daily lives.

The Cross in the Apostles’ Preaching

The gospels have been accurately described as:

References to sermons in Acts where the cross plays a central role.

The epistles can also be understood as:

Why did the cross become the predominant symbol of the Christian faith?

Do you agree with the following statement?

You are not a Christian until you have seen the cross and understood its message. How many baptisms you’ve undergone, how often you attend church services . . . none of it is important without the cross.

Never in human history were physical frame and nervous system called upon to endure such unremitting strain, as that imposed on our Lord during the three years of public ministry which climaxed in the cross. Only a physically perfect constitution could have supported such unceasing activity and expenditure of nervous force. (Oswald Sanders, *The Incomparable Christ*, p. 47)

Everything we know of Jesus testifies to his robustness and health. Luke tells us the boy Jesus grew “in stature” (2:52). We know he trained for a trade in carpentry. That meant long, arduous hours in the forests, felling trees, lopping branches and hauling logs. He could have been no stranger to the sawpit. He made a living matching his strength against stubborn wood.

When Jesus became an itinerant preacher, his lifestyle remained physically demanding. He frequently slept outdoors (Lk 9:58, 21:37). It has been estimated that his recorded journeys during the three years of his ministry cover at least two thousand five hundred miles. Most, if not all, of that distance was traversed on foot. We know Jesus had a hardy appetite—he was always eating with someone. Though Jesus sometimes appears tired or distracted, he is never portrayed as sickly or constitutionally weak. You don’t run away from a thin, pale, anemic, weakling even if he does carry a whip.

It is reasonable to assume Jesus was in good health and condition as he approached the cross—an important point for considering what he was about to endure. For, only hours after the Last Supper, Jesus is sweating blood. He is too weak to carry his cross to Golgatha. He expires so quickly on the cross that Pilate checks that he is really dead. So horrible were the physical and emotional strains Jesus endured, that this strong physical specimen was reduced in less than 24 hours to an emaciated corpse.

Warm-up:

What are some of the most recognizable symbols or logos in our society? In advertising? In politics? Not all of those symbols are *visual*. Play a round of “Hum the Jingle” and see if people can guess the product.

Look at the Cross:

1. Have someone in the group tell about the crucifixion of Jesus—from the time the cross was placed on his back until the time his body was removed from the cross. What do we know about the crucifixion?
2. How would you react had you been forced to witness the actual crucifixion of Jesus? What would your feelings have been? What would have gotten to you most?
3. Do heroes often end up on crosses? How difficult was it for people then (and now?) to hear that Jesus died by crucifixion? The apostles certainly weren’t shy about speaking of the cross. How did people react when they heard this message?

Looking Closer:

1. Do you think it odd that the cross should become the one symbol which most represented the Christian faith?
2. How does the symbol of the cross call us not just to remember but to commit.
3. If you had a cross tattooed on your forehead, are there situations where you would act differently because of it? Have you ever worn a cross, helping to remind you of who (and *whose*) you are?
4. If you had only one word that could describe your attitude toward the cross, what would it be? Why?

Looking Around:

Share with the group one way you intend to demonstrate the effects of the cross in your life during the coming week.

The Cruel Cross

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Read the crucifixion accounts in each of the gospels (Mt 27:26-50; Mk 15:15-37; Lk 23:23-46; Jn 19:16-30). Make a list of every painful, humiliating, degrading thing that happened to Jesus in the course of the crucifixion. Spend some time in prayer with this list. Pray through your list, thanking Jesus for every wound and every slight. Conclude by asking forgiveness for your contributions to his pain.

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Go through the crucifixion accounts again. But this time, list the people who played some role in the crucifixion of Jesus. Who was there? Beside each individual (or group like "the soldiers"), write out what part they played. Knowing yourself, which role would you have played had you lived at the time? Think also for a bit about who was absent. Who was not at the crucifixion you might have expected to see?

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You and I have never witnessed a crucifixion. Read through the gospel accounts once again, this time imagining what you would have experienced had you been there. You might want to rent a video like *The Greatest Story Every Told* or the New Media Bible *Luke* and watch a dramatization of the crucifixion. What would you have seen as an eyewitness that might have escaped you as a reader? What sounds would you have heard? What smells and tastes? Write down your thoughts and meditate on them as you think about the cross.

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No Psalm is quoted more frequently in the New Testament than Psalm 22. Read this Psalm carefully. On a sheet of paper, make two columns. On the left side, list phrases from the Psalm (e.g., "People stare and gloat over me"—vs 17). On the right side, list gospel parallels ("The rulers sneered at him"—Lk 23:35). How many parallels to the Psalms can you find in Jesus' experience on the cross?

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Find a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia and read up on crucifixion. What did it involve? How was it viewed by people at the time? What crimes were punished by crucifixion? Discover as much as you can about background on the cross.