




## Introduction

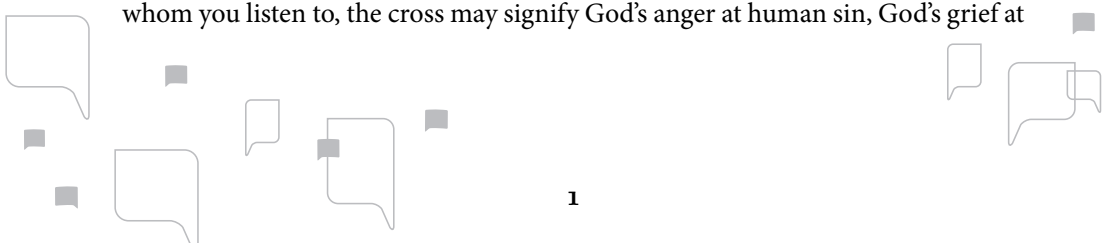
**Some years ago** I was spending Easter weekend with my oldest sister. We were watching one of the “life of Jesus” movies shown at that time of the year and had reached the scenes of the crucifixion. Her then six-year-old son paused on his way to bed to watch for just a moment. As his father walked him up the steps, I heard him ask, “Daddy, isn’t it sad that Jesus was killed like that?” To which his dad replied, “No, it’s not sad. God used Jesus’ death to save us.”



I remember experiencing a curious ambivalence about my brother-in-law’s answer. On the one hand, it was perfectly understandable to respond this way to a young boy who had just seen a small portion of a fairly grisly episode in history portrayed on-screen. More than that, it was theologically sound. God does, indeed, work through Jesus’ death for the health and salvation of the world. At the same time, though, I also remember thinking, “But wait—it is sad, really sad, that people crucified Jesus, and we shouldn’t soften that.”

Thinking back on that evening, I recognize now that right there in that conversation rests one of the enduring puzzles for Christians about their faith: how should we regard the cross? Is it a sad tragedy that we should grieve? Is it the moment of God’s victory and redemption that we should celebrate? Is it the place where we stand in awe to see God’s incomprehensible love poured out for us? Is it some combination of these, or something we haven’t named altogether?

These are important questions, not only because the cross and resurrection stand at the center of the New Testament’s story of Jesus, but also because the way we understand the cross very much shapes the way we regard God. Depending on whom you listen to, the cross may signify God’s anger at human sin, God’s grief at



human waywardness, or God's plea for us to return to right relationship. Further, more than one thoughtful Christian has asked *why* the cross was necessary in the first place, or even whether it *was* necessary. Behind these questions lies a darker one: what kind of God would require such a gruesome death to achieve redemption?

How we understand the cross also shapes how we construe and construct our life in the world. The cross has been seized by many throughout the centuries to justify their causes. The apostle Paul is one of the earliest, as he believed that through the cross God was opening a way of salvation not only for Jews but also for Gentiles. In the century after Paul, countless Christians would lose their lives because they confessed that it is in the cross of Jesus that the true God of heaven and earth is revealed most clearly. Several hundred years later, Emperor Constantine seized upon the cross to symbolize the power of his empire. In the centuries to come, crusaders, educators, dictators, and humanitarians would all claim the cross as the symbol that best explained their missions and motives, even though their various exploits may seem to us as different as we can imagine.

Although the way we understand the cross matters a great deal, and although the remembrance and celebration of our Lord's death and resurrection during Holy Week and Easter is the center of the Christian year, few of us pause to try to understand what it is, exactly, that we are remembering and celebrating. On one level, that's understandable. There are many and various ways to interpret the cross and its meaning. The prospect of sorting through them all can seem daunting. Further, at the heart of the cross is an element of mystery that can't be resolved either easily or entirely. From this point of view, perhaps devout contemplation and adoration are the most apt responses to God's immersion into human life and death through the cross.

At the same time, though, Christians throughout the centuries—beginning with those who wrote the New Testament—have reflected earnestly and often helpfully on the cross. We may grow in and deepen our faith by considering the fruit of their labors. This book is an effort to help you do just that. In six chapters, we will explore together what the biblical witness and some of Christianity's most

---

**At the heart of the cross is an element of mystery that can't be resolved either easily or entirely.**

---

thoughtful and important theologians have said about the cross, comparing them with each other and with our own experiences as Christians living in the world. By the time we are done, you should not only understand what other Christians have said about the cross, but also what you believe about this central symbol and element of our faith. I look forward to exploring with you two thousand years of reflection on the cross and its place both in God's act of salvation and our daily lives.

## Two Convictions

Before getting started, though, I'd like to share two convictions that guide this book. First, I've found that *many of us learn best in and through conversation*. There's something about actively using information that helps us understand material more quickly and deeply. I think that listening to and considering another person's point of view, explaining what we think and feel, fashioning our own thoughts and arguments, and so on, helps us exercise and own the information we're trying to learn far more than just reading it. For this reason, the book is written as a conversation. One of the two voices knows a little more and assumes the role of teacher or coach, someone who has had the time and opportunity to study the faith in some depth. The other voice assumes the role of the student or novice, someone who is curious and knows a little bit about the faith but brings a lot of questions.

It may be tempting to imagine that it is the first voice that is more important, but I want to suggest that the second voice is equally, and in some ways perhaps more, important, as the questions asked and insights offered move the dialog forward. Further, I hope you hear some of your own questions embodied in the voice of this earnest and honest seeker. I know I did, as the questions asked by this second person often led me to think differently and better about matters I've considered for some years. I know that may seem odd, as I wrote both voices. But to tell you the truth, even just imagining a lively conversation about the cross and the questions it might lead to regularly brought me fresh thoughts and insights. And so it's my hope that as you "listen in" to this conversation, you'll find yourself participating vicariously and thereby be more actively engaged in what we're discussing.

Second, and perhaps similarly, I think that in most areas of life, but certainly in our religious life, *questions are as important as answers*. That's not always the conventional wisdom today, as many persons assume that questions betray an ignorance that we would be better off hiding. But I couldn't disagree more. In

fact, I believe asking questions is essential to life in general and the life of faith in particular. St. Anselm of Canterbury, whose view of the cross we will consider in some detail, once described his life as “faith seeking understanding.” That is, Anselm felt that you may simultaneously believe elements of the Christian faith even while you do not fully understand them, and so he advocated what we might today call a faithful and insatiable curiosity. Along with Anselm, I think that questions are not the mark of an inadequate faith but instead signal the kind of curious, searching, and seeking faith that you find all over the pages of the Bible.

Further, I believe that many of these questions can’t be answered definitively. That is, there are many ways of looking at the cross that have helpful elements. So while I’ll describe a way that has been most helpful to me and many others in understanding the cross, we’ll spend time with a variety of other ways of regarding the cross and try to highlight both their strengths and weaknesses. Each may have something profound to offer you depending on your immediate circumstances, faith tradition, and temperament. So if you are seeking the one and only way of understanding the cross, you may be disappointed. But if you are curious about what different Christians have believed over the centuries and can imagine that many different approaches to the cross can deepen your own understanding, then I invite you to read on and explore the heart of the Christian faith that is revealed in and through the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

## **Advice for Reading**

Two further words of counsel seem in order. *First, don’t ever doubt that you are more than capable of not only understanding the cross, but also of letting it shape your faith and life.* Sometimes I think everyday Christians shy away from the central elements of the faith because they seem too complicated or come freighted with two millennia of deep thought. But, honestly, I have found time and again

---

## **The cross isn’t something we just think about; it’s also something we experience.**

---

that if you are willing to slow down, read the biblical witness, and engage in honest conversation about what you find there and in your own experience, there aren’t many elements of the faith that we can’t approach with some confidence. This is most certainly true of the cross. Will you understand it completely? Of course not.

I don't pretend to either. What great matter of our faith or lives—whether love, freedom, family members—do we ever fully comprehend? Yet if our goal isn't complete comprehension or mastery but instead deeper appreciation and facility, then I expect that you will find yourself amply rewarded for the time and effort you put into thinking with some of Christianity's keenest theological minds about the cross.

*Second, pay attention to your questions and insights as you read.* As I will suggest at a couple of points in the book, the cross isn't something we just think about; it's also something we experience. For this reason, your experiences—of faith and doubt, joy and sorrow, health and illness, and so many other things—matter. If I've done my job well, you'll also experience certain things while you read. Some explanations of the cross will seem to make sense, while others don't add up. Some will bring you comfort or even a sense of courage, while others may leave you feeling frustrated or even angry. Pay attention to these reactions and then take the time to explore where they came from. Consider how they help you to understand not only a particular theory about the cross but also the God the cross discloses. Space is set aside at the end of every chapter for you to note both the insights you've had, as well as the questions sparked by material in the chapter. Feel free to write in it. After all, this is your book now!

## **A Unique Approach**

This book has been written as a complete narrative. After introducing the question of why the cross matters so much to Christians in the first chapter, we consider the primary narratives of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection contained in the four New Testament Gospels in the second. In chapters 3 through 5, we look at three primary approaches, or theories of atonement, used to make sense of the cross during the two-thousand-year history of the Christian tradition. In each case, we will honestly gauge both the strengths and weaknesses of the approach in question as well as compare and contrast them with each other. In the sixth and final chapter, I offer a slightly different way of approaching the question that I hope you will find meaningful. While the book proceeds as a complete narrative, however, I have found that many people profit from reading this kind of material in a group where they can discuss it with others. If this option interests you, a Leader Guide and DVD are available from Augsburg Fortress that may help you in group study.

Finally, *Making Sense of the Cross* is part of a series of books and resources that seek to immerse everyday Christians more deeply into their faith. *Making*

*Sense of Scripture* delves into the nature, history, and authority of the Bible, while *Making Sense of the Christian Faith* explores seven primary doctrines at the heart of Christianity in the broader narrative of the biblical witness. Resources for all of the Making Sense materials can be found at [www.augsburgfortress.org](http://www.augsburgfortress.org).

I am grateful that you are interested in exploring the significance and the relevance of Jesus' cross and resurrection for our lives in this world. These events, simultaneously as distinct in character yet intimately woven together as night and day, have stimulated, perplexed, encouraged, and inspired Christians for nearly two thousand years. And that hasn't stopped, as God continues to come to women and men through the words of Scripture about the cross and resurrection and through the words we share with each other as we endeavor to delve into what the apostle Paul calls "the mysteries of God." I am privileged to serve as a guide on your journey into these mysteries, and I hope that these words and our time together prove a blessing to you.

Yours in Christ,  
David