

“The Centrality of the Cross” (1 Cor 2:2)

In August 2003, New York City’s Church of the Holy Cross was broken into twice. First, a metal moneybox next to a votive candle rack was stolen. Three weeks later vandals got away with something far more valuable: a statue of Christ. The thieves unbolted the 4-foot long, 200-pound plaster Jesus from a meditation area, but they left the wooden cross on the wall.

David St. James, a caretaker of the church, was amazed that someone would try to take Jesus without also taking His cross. He stated, “They just decided, ‘We’re going to leave the cross and take Jesus. We don’t know why they took just Him. We figure if you want the whole crucifix, you take the whole crucifix.’”¹

Mr. St. James raises a great point. To take Jesus and to leave the cross is to miss the whole of who Jesus is. Jesus’ entire life and ministry was consumed with the cross. His passion was to do the will of His father and to ultimately die on the cross for the sins of humanity. The cross is the crux of Jesus’ story. This was also the core of Paul’s preaching. In 1 Cor 2:2 Paul summed up his preaching ministry when he wrote, **“For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.”** The word translated “I determined”² means Paul made a conscious choice to do things a certain way. He didn’t fall into it by chance or by force of habit. Paul preached as he did because he chose to do it that way. For Paul the choice was clear: “Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” He started there and that became the center of his preaching.

My purpose this evening is to demonstrate the centrality of the cross throughout the whole of Scripture. *God stitched His Word together with a scarlet thread.* After His resurrection, Luke 24 records that Jesus appeared to two of His disciples on Easter evening. He reminded them that everything written about Him in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled. He then opened up their minds to understand the Scriptures. Jesus said, “Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?” Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:26-27). According to Jesus, the Old Testament plainly foretold his death and resurrection. The following Old Testament passages demonstrate this:

- The seed of the woman that would crush the serpent’s head.
- Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his one and only son Isaac.
- The Passover lamb whose blood protected the Israelites from the terrors of the destroying angel on the eve of the Exodus.
- The bronze snake raised on a pole in the desert.
- The elaborate and symbolic ritual atonement in the book of Leviticus.
- The countless animal sacrifices that stained the altars of Israel with their streams of blood.
- The psalmist recording the words “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
- Isaiah’s suffering servant wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities.
- Daniel’s anointed prince who would be cut off.
- Zechariah speaking of the one whom the Jews pierced that they will turn to in repentance

Clearly, these examples demonstrate that *God stitched His Word together with a scarlet thread.*

As we move into the New Testament, we see that the writers emphasize Jesus’ death again and again. It is rather interesting to note that most biographies devote less than ten percent of their pages to the subject’s death—including biographies of men like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi, who died violent and politically significant deaths. The Gospels, though, devote nearly a third of their length to the climactic last week of Jesus’ life. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John saw the cross as the central focus of Jesus’ life and ministry.

For example, Mark, the briefest and generally considered earliest of the Gospels, races with snapshot speed from one episode in Jesus' life to another. Mark is known for his use of the word "immediately," which he repeats again and again as he moves through his book. Yet, even Mark comes to a screeching halt near the end of Jesus' life. He takes six of his 16 chapters to tell the story of Jesus' death. *God has stitched His Word together with a scarlet thread.*

In the apostolic preaching reported in the book of Acts, the cross is preached boldly. It would have been unthinkable to preach a gospel message without preaching the cross. The epistles develop the doctrine of the cross in its fullness and richness, showing how the cross transforms the Christian's life here on earth. Finally, we reach the Revelation—the bookend of Genesis. Dominating the visions of the book of Revelation is the lamb enthroned in the midst of the multitudes redeemed by his blood. Twenty-eight times John describes a glorified Christ under this sacrificial image. *God has stitched His Word together with a scarlet thread.*³ To understand the cross is to understand the Bible.

If this is true, how should we respond? I would like to offer four brief applications.

1. ***Study the scarlet seam.*** Take some time during this Easter season to trace the doctrine of the cross through the Scriptures. Reread some of the Old Testament stories that point forward to the cross. Why not read the last six chapters of Mark's Gospel this Easter weekend? This would be a great exercise for you and your family and friends. This will take a mere 20-30 minutes out of your day. And it may just well have a lasting impact on those who hear the Easter story anew and afresh.
2. ***Appropriate the cross.*** Christ was delivered for our sins that we might be delivered from our sins. He was lifted up on the cross that we might be lifted out of our sin. What sin is breaking you down week in and week out? We need to realize that Christ died to help us overcome that sin.
3. ***Preach the cross.*** Do not be ashamed of the cross of Christ. Even though the word of the cross is considered foolish and weak by the world, it is God's wisdom and strength. Hence, we must proclaim it from the rooftops. This begins here in our church. We must proclaim the mercies of the cross to other believers in the midst of sin. We must extend God's promise of forgiveness. We must preach the message of the cross to those who are experiencing success, reminding them that it is Christ's work on the cross that grants us favor. We must also preach a proper response to the cross. Jesus calls Christians to become disciples: to deny oneself, take up your cross daily, and follow Christ (Luke 9:23).
4. ***Believe the message of the cross.*** Life's biggest decision is what you do with Jesus. The Bible declares that to get to heaven, you must go by the way of the cross. Any attempt to sidestep cross leads to disaster. The cross is *essential* because Jesus had to pay a debt. His payment was made to satisfy the demands of God's anger. Peace with God is the absence of anger. As much as God loves you, He hates sin with a holy, burning passion beyond comprehension. The only way He could embrace you was to make someone else pay for your sins. It couldn't be just anyone—it had to be someone perfect. Since we're all sinners, He came Himself. But God couldn't do that lightly. He couldn't say, "Oh, I see your sin, but never mind." Someone had to pay for our sins. It was Jesus. He willingly suffered and died on the cross and God, somehow in His infiniteness, laid all of our sinfulness there upon His Son. Therefore, God now says "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

God stitched His Word together with a scarlet thread. He desires you and me to share this reality with those that we come in contact with. Furthermore, He wants the word of the cross to change our lives.

Notes

¹ Preaching Today, Andrea Elliott, “Thieves Take Figure of Jesus, but Not the Cross,” New York Times (8-25-03); submitted by Greg Asimakoupoulos, Naperville, IL.

² The Greek verb *krino* (“determined”) can be defined “to come to a conclusion after a cognitive process, reach a decision, decide, propose, intend” (e.g., Acts 3:13; 16:4; 20:16; 25:25; Rom 14:13b; 1 Cor 5:3; 7:37; 2 Cor 2:1; and Titus 3:12). See BDAG s.v. *krino* 4, Electronic Ed.

³ See Richard Allen Bodey, “The Inescapable Cross,” *Preaching Magazine* March-April 1995, 24.