

LIVING THE
CROSS
CENTERED
LIFE



C . J . M A H A N E Y

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To Nicole, Kristin, Janelle, and Chad.
May our Lord give you as much joy with your children
as you have given me.

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FOREWORD

by R. Albert Mohler, Jr., President
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary



The book you now hold in your hands is nothing less than a manifesto for turning your world upside down. C. J. Mahaney wants you to know and experience the cross centered life. Thus, I need to warn you that reading this book will not be a safe and static experience. After all, the cross isn't about playing it safe; it's about being found safe in Christ—and that is the most exhilarating experience a human being can ever know.

In *Living the Cross Centered Life*, C. J. walks us through the real meaning of Christ's cross. He takes us right to the center of God's plan to save His own enemies—a rebellious humanity. As C. J. writes, "Because of God's amazingly gracious heart toward those who thoroughly deserve only His wrath, He both planned for and provided this mediator to resolve the divine dilemma—a mediator who, through His blood, would accomplish a unique assignment utterly unlike any other work of

mediation. In the mystery of His mercy, God—the innocent, offended party—offers up to death His own Son, to satisfy His righteous wrath and save the guilty party from it.”

That’s about as clear a description of God’s saving purpose as you will ever find. It is wonderfully grounded in Scripture (just read Romans 3:21–28!) and it points directly to God’s mercy toward sinners. Of course, this takes us right to the cross of Christ and its meaning for us. He explains why the good news of the cross is so infinitely good, and how you can know the grace of God through the message of the cross.

I must also be honest with you. C. J. can be irritating at times. He tends to be very honest about sin and very clear about the fact that we can do nothing at all to deserve our salvation. This is a book that will humble the proud. Then again, that’s the power of the cross. Our pride must be among the first things we surrender if we are to live the cross centered life. Like I said, this book isn’t safe. The cross is deadly to pride.

C. J. also wants us to learn to celebrate the cross as the very ground of our salvation. “Move on to rejoicing in the Savior who came to save the worst of sinners,” he urges. “Lay down the luggage of condemnation and kneel in worship at the feet of Him who bore your sins. Cry tears of amazement.”

I can pretty much assure you that reading this book will be an emotional experience. After all, the cross of Christ is the very foundation of our salvation. What Christ did for us in dying on the cross must move believers to the deepest depths of emotion. At the same time, C.J. warns us against trusting our emotions as the barometer of our Christian experience. He teaches us

how to live a mature Christian life that is centered in the cross and faithful to Christ.

Some books describe the objective reality of the cross without explaining how the cross transforms our daily lives. An even larger number of books commit the opposite error, trying to talk about the meaning of the cross while avoiding any biblical explanation of how God saves sinners through the cross of Christ.

C. J. Mahaney beautifully weaves these truths together and walks us into the transforming power of the cross. C. J. is a dear friend, and I can assure you that he lives what he writes. That's why he is such an influential Christian leader, and that's why you will find yourself connecting with his words.

Like I said, this book is a manifesto for turning your world upside down. May God greatly bless you as you read *Living the Cross Centered Life*.

AT THE CORE

*Life's Most Important Truth
Can Be the Easiest to Forget*



The Cross is the blazing fire at which the flame of our love is kindled, but we have to get near enough for its sparks to fall on us.

JOHN STOTT

Each of our lives is centered on something.

What's at the center of yours?

Think about it for a moment. What's really *the main thing* in your life? Only one thing can truly be first in priority; so what's at the top of your list, second to none?

Or let me put it this way: What are you most passionate about? What do you love to talk about? What do you think about most when your mind is free?

Or try this: What is it that *defines* you? Is it your career? A relationship? Maybe it's your family, or your ministry. It could be some cause or movement, or some political affiliation. Or

perhaps your main thing is a hobby or a talent you have, or even your house and possessions.

It could be one of any number of good things—but when it comes to centering our life, what really qualifies as the *one* thing God says should be the most important?

Maybe your life's passion is not so much a single focus as a constantly shifting gaze. After all, today's marketing culture bombards us with never-ending offers of something newer, something better. Sadly, an obsession with the latest innovation and the trendiest pursuit—and all in up-to-the-minute style—is as common inside the church as outside.

New things will always come along. Many will be useless, some will be good, a few will be better—but what's the one thing that's really *best*, according to God?

THE ONLY ESSENTIAL

Here's how Paul answers that question for us: “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you.... For I delivered to you as *of first importance* what I also received: that Christ died for our sins.”¹

First importance. Paul is pointing us to the one transcendent truth that should define our lives. In the midst of our various responsibilities and many possible areas of service in the kingdom of God, one overarching truth should motivate all our work and affect every part of who we are: *Christ died for our sins.*

This, Paul says, is the main thing. Nothing else—not even things that are biblical and honorable—are of equal or greater

importance than this: *God sent His Son to the cross to bear His wrath for sinners like you and me.*

If there's anything in life we should be passionate about, it's the gospel. And I don't mean passionate only about sharing it with others; I mean passionate in thinking about the gospel, reflecting upon it, rejoicing in it, allowing it to color the way we look at the world and all of life.

The gospel is history's only essential message.

"The gospel," writes Jerry Bridges, "is not only the most important message in all of history; it is the *only* essential message in all of history. Yet we allow thousands of professing Christians to live their entire lives without clearly understanding it and experiencing the joy of living by it."² Neither you nor I want to be numbered among the believers who live out that tragedy.

That's why our attention must continually be drawn back to what John Stott calls "that great and most glorious of all subjects—the cross of Christ." In the Scriptures we discover a profound urgency for focusing all we are and everything we do around the gospel of the cross. For not only does this good news come first chronologically in our Christian experience, but it *stays* foremost in critical importance for creating and sustaining our joy and our fruitfulness—a fact we too often overlook.

OUR CONSTANT DANGER

A concern expressed by D. A. Carson, Bible scholar and professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, is well justified: "I fear that the cross, without ever being disowned, is constantly

in danger of being dismissed from the central place it must enjoy, by relatively peripheral insights that take on far too much weight. Whenever the periphery is in danger of displacing the center, we are not far removed from idolatry.”³

John Stott agrees: “All around us we see Christians and churches relaxing their grasp on the gospel, fumbling it, and in danger of letting it drop from their hands altogether.”⁴

Every day, we all face the temptation to move away from the gospel, to let it drop from our hands and hearts. Three main tendencies in particular tend to draw us away:

1. *Subjectivism*, which means basing our view of God on our changing feelings and emotions.

2. *Legalism*, which means basing our relationship with God on our own performance.

3. *Condemnation*, which means being more focused on our sin than on God’s grace.

Later in this book we’ll examine each of these tendencies more closely and discover how we can overcome them. But the first and most important thing you can do—*always*—is simply to make sure the gospel is at the very center of your life.

What’s the main thing in your life? What is truly “of first importance” to you? It might be something perfectly honorable, perfectly legitimate; but if it’s something other than the gospel—are you willing to repent to God and reorder your life?

Let me urge you to do whatever it takes to make the gospel your passion. Ask God to change your heart so you can personally affirm for your own life the words of Galatians 6:14—“Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

WE NEVER MOVE ON

But maybe this thought is nagging you: If we as Christians have already come to believe in the gospel—if we’ve already received the gift of salvation He purchased for us with His precious blood—why focus any longer on the cross? Isn’t it time to give our full attention to more “mature” matters of living out our faith?

Nope.

Read slowly and listen carefully to one of my favorite quotations: “We never move on from the cross, only into a more profound understanding of the cross.”⁵ The cross and its meaning aren’t something we ever master.

In *Living the Cross Centered Life*, I hope to help lead you in that pursuit, in that pathway toward a more profound understanding.

George Orwell once noted that “sometimes the first duty of intelligent men is the restatement of the obvious.”⁶ One purpose of this book is to restate the obvious yet oft-neglected truth of the gospel of the cross of Jesus Christ and bring it before you again—vividly and compellingly—so that you more deeply grasp the crucial importance of never taking it for granted.

If you think for a moment that the truth of the cross is something you’ve already adequately understood—if you suspect your life is already cross centered—allow me to bring to your attention some symptoms that arise from *not* being cross centered. Do any of the following describe you?

Do you think the truth of the cross is something you’ve already adequately understood?

- You often lack joy.
- You're not consistently growing in spiritual maturity.
- Your love for God lacks passion.
- You're always looking for some new technique, some "new truth" or new experience to pull all the pieces of your faith together.

If you can relate to any of these symptoms, let me encourage you to keep reading. As you learn to live a cross centered life, you'll learn...

- how to break free from joy-robbing, legalistic thinking and living.
- how to leave behind the crippling effects of guilt and condemnation.
- how to stop basing your faith on your emotions and circumstances.
- how to grow in gratefulness, joy, and holiness.

These aren't the overhyped promises of an author wanting to convince you to read his book. These are God's promises to all who keep responding with their whole lives to the gospel of Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

Too many of us have moved on from that glorious plan. In our never-ending desire to move forward and make sure that everything we think, say, and do is relevant to modern living, too many of us have stopped concentrating on the wonders of Jesus crucified.

Too many of us have fumbled the most important truth of

the Bible, and therefore we've suffered the consequences.

But it's not too late to change. It's not too late to restate and reestablish the obvious truth as the *most important truth in your life*—and to be caught up as never before in wonder over the love and grace of God.

MORE REAL THAN EVER

In the church where I've served since 1977, our consistent pursuit has always been to keep the gospel central in everything we do. We never assume that there's already sufficient understanding, appreciation, and experience of "Jesus Christ and Him crucified."⁷

A while back I received a thank-you e-mail from a young woman who recalled her reaction when she first heard me identify the gospel as our church's lasting passion and priority. She told me, "I remember sitting there thinking... 'What does he mean? Yes, we're saved because Jesus died for our sins. But don't we then focus on other aspects of the Christian life?'"

Meanwhile, under our teaching she began recognizing:

that there was a problem deeper than my outward expressions of sin (harsh words, complaining, etc.).... I was learning about the sin in my heart and the motives at the root.... I vividly remember driving down the road one day, and God opening my eyes to see that I'm a wretched sinner to the very core of my being. In that second I thought, *What am I to do?!*

Instantly I was clearly aware that this is why Jesus

Christ came and died on a cross—for me.... I laughed out loud, and said, ‘My God, only You could show me what a wretched sinner I am and make it the greatest news I’ve ever heard!’ The truth of Jesus’ sacrifice became more real to me than ever before.

More real than ever before. Can you say that as well?

Luther once said he felt as if Jesus Christ died only yesterday. Is that how you feel?

*Do you feel as if
Jesus Christ died
only yesterday?*

Through what we experience together in this book’s pages, I hope you’ll learn to feel that way consistently, and become committed to live that way as well. As we cultivate our understanding and appreciation for the cross, as we live the rest of our earthly days feeling increasingly as if Jesus’ death happened only yesterday, we’ll be more and more astonished and overwhelmed by God’s grace.

Only then will we more deeply understand and experience God’s grace in a way that consistently engages our passion.

GRACE MORE AMAZING

I received another recent expression of thanks from a man who concluded his letter with these words: “I am amazed by the power of the gospel over and over, and have increased in my own love of the Savior. I can’t believe that I have been saved from what I deserve.”

Amazed by the power of the gospel, over and over—can you say those words about your own experience as well? Do you continue to find your salvation an incredible miracle as you recall the judgment you genuinely deserve?

If not...what can bring about a change? What is it that can make the gospel of God and His grace more deeply and consistently amazing to us? In our busy lives, how can we more often be gripped by gratitude and enflamed in passion for the Savior...and cast off lukewarmness and dullness in our spiritual experience?

For me, grace is never more amazing than when I'm looking intensely at the cross, and I believe the same will be true for every child of God. There's nothing more overpowering and captivating to the soul than to climb Calvary's mountain with childlike attentiveness and wonder, with all the distractions and wrong assumptions cleared away.

That's what we'll aim for in these pages. We'll trust our Shepherd to show us the unique path of righteousness He walked and to give us a profound glimpse into the depths of anguish it brought Him. It was an anguish infinitely darker than any death-shadowed valley you or I will ever pass through, but by better understanding His suffering, we'll grow in a consistent joy and zeal that will equip us for whatever trials God brings our way in the process of our sanctification.

Recalling John Stott's imagery in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter, we want to stay near enough to the "blazing fire" of the cross to be showered with its sparks and to find the flame of our love freshly kindled.

WORTHY OF AN ANGEL'S TONGUE

Before going on, I have to confess something personal: Although on most days I recognize how inept and inadequate I am in various areas, I'm never more acutely aware of my inadequacy than when I address the suffering of Christ and its meaning. I savor this privilege, yet when I teach and preach these things I consistently find myself physically weakened and emotionally overcome. So I acknowledge my dependence on God's strength in articulating this message, while also affirming my confidence in the One whose strength is made perfect in our weakness.

Our God is good, He is gracious, He is kind, and He's eager to glorify His Son and edify His people. So I proceed, full of faith in Him...and confident that by the Holy Spirit's prompting, you'll join me in tears and in unspeakably joyful gratitude as we climb up Calvary together and gain a deeper understanding of what really happened there, and the staggering reasons behind it.

The subject of the cross, Charles Spurgeon once said, "is worthy of an angel's tongue. And this also is true: It needs Christ himself completely to expound it."⁸ In humble agreement with this prince of preachers on the infinite worth and wealth of this topic, I add as well the prayer it prompted from Spurgeon: that God would "by his own Spirit expound it to your heart."

THE CLIMAX AND THE KEY

Why the Cross Should Define Our Lives



The gospel cannot be preached and heard enough,
for it cannot be grasped well enough....

Moreover, our greatest task is to keep you faithful to this
article and to bequeath this treasure to you when we die.

MARTIN LUTHER

Imagine yourself at Timothy's side as he receives a letter from the apostle Paul—the letter that will be Paul's last.

You notice Timothy's hands slightly trembling as he breaks the seal and opens the parchment to read. He almost cradles the letter, as though his gentleness with it will somehow be conveyed to its author, now chained in a cold Roman dungeon.

These are written words that Timothy knows he'll return to often in order to carefully obey the apostle's guidance, but for now he reads quickly, hungering especially for personal news from his father in the faith.

A FINAL AFFIRMATION

Near the end of the letter, Timothy slows his pace. He can almost hear the encouraging voice of Paul:⁹ “As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.”

Then his eyes take in this line: “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and *the time of my departure has come.*”

For years Timothy has pushed aside the thought of losing Paul—this man who has been like a father, this friend and mentor who has guided and instructed the young leader. How could Timothy go on ministering without Paul’s reassuring words, his confidence, his prayers?

Timothy stops reading to brush away his tears. How can he wallow in grief when his old friend faces death so boldly? “I have fought the good fight,” Paul writes; “I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

After staring up from the page for several moments, Timothy sits down to begin reading again from the beginning, slowly and deliberately. His eyes bore into each word, each sentence.

With Paul’s life drawing to a close, what special insight has God given him to pass on? Timothy’s heart pounds as the truth hits him with piercing clarity: There’s no new secret revealed here, no previously hidden knowledge, but simply a stirring affirmation of the one truth Paul has lived for daily these past three decades, and soon will die for. It’s the same truth for which Timothy, too, must spend himself: *the gospel of Jesus Christ and Him crucified.*

The words seem to shout from the letter:

Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel...

You don't need a new truth; you need to guard the one truth.

Timothy can almost see Paul's fiery eyes blazing into his own, can almost feel his gnarled fingers gripping his arm:

Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.

"You don't need a new truth," he hears his old friend saying. "But you do need to guard the *one* truth. Keep the *one* message."

HELD CAPTIVE

Paul simply refused to be pulled away from the gospel. The cross wasn't merely *one* of Paul's messages; it was *the* message. He taught about other things as well, but whatever he taught was always derived from, and related to, the foundational reality that *Jesus Christ died so that sinners would be reconciled to God.*

D. A. Carson writes of Paul, "He cannot long talk about Christian joy, or Christian ethics, or Christian fellowship, or the

Christian doctrine of God, or anything else, without finally tying it to the cross. Paul is gospel-centered; he is cross centered.”¹⁰

John Piper agrees: “Paul was utterly mastered, held captive, by one great scene in history: a cross on Golgotha and on it the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us.”¹¹

In every epistle, Paul kept the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus at the center—just as he did in his personal preaching and teaching: “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”¹²

Even Christ’s resurrection was, for Paul, perpetually linked to the cross. Teacher and theologian Knox Chamblin explains:

His gospel is “the word of the cross” (1 Cor. 1:17–18); nowhere is there a comparable reference to “the word of the resurrection.” In 1 Corinthians 1:23–24 it is “Christ crucified” who is identified as “the power of God and the wisdom of God,” not, as might have [been] expected (especially in the case of “power”), Christ resurrected....

Both the cross and the resurrection of Christ are “of first importance” in Paul’s gospel (1 Cor. 15:3–4). Unless Christ has risen from the dead, the preaching of the cross (and of the resurrection) is a waste of time (15:14); but once the resurrection has occurred, the cross remains central.¹³

For Paul, the gospel—this “word of the cross”—was no cold theological formula. Paul lived a cross centered life because

the cross had saved and transformed his own life. Paul never forgot what he once had been, or the mercy and grace God showed him. This remained at the forefront of his mind. As he wrote on another occasion to Timothy, "Though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.... *I received mercy*...and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus."¹⁴

MERCY THAT CAN'T BE FORGOTTEN

I can relate to Paul's amazement at being shown mercy and overflowing grace. I've lived in the same part of Maryland since I was a boy. Hardly a month goes by that I'm not reminded of who I once was.

Before God saved me from His righteous wrath in 1972, I, too, was a blasphemer. I lived for myself and my own pleasure. I lived in rebellion against God and mocked those who followed Him. I spent my high school and college years deeply immersed in the drug culture.

Sometimes, late at night, my friends and I would seek out quiet, isolated places where we could come down safely from drug highs. On more than a few occasions it was a D.C. monument. Other times a peaceful street under thick, deep trees. Or even the terminal at what was then a little-used airport called Dulles, where the doors stayed open long after the day's flights had ceased and we could move through the nearly deserted canyon of a building.

Someday soon I'll be near one of those places again, and the memories will flood back in. I'll remember what I once

was...and be reminded of all I've received and experienced since then.

Often my eyes fill with tears at the memories of my foolishness and sin. And in the same instant, my heart will be filled with an unspeakable, holy joy. By the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross, I've been forgiven of the countless sins I've committed.

This truth echoes far deeper than any drug can go.

"Blessed is the man," David wrote, "against whom the LORD counts no iniquity."¹⁵ This truth echoes through my soul, resonating in places far deeper than any drug can go.

Many people today try to run from the past. I suppose I, too, could try that by leaving the hometown that holds so many reminders of my sinfulness. But I consider living here a gift from God. The regular reminders of my past are precious to me.

Why? Because, like Paul, I never want to forget the great mercy shown me.

A YOUNG MAN'S ESSENTIAL TRAINING

If you're a Christian, you don't need to live in the same place all your life to remember who you once were. And you don't need a background in drugs, or any dramatic conversion experience, for the cross to be dear to you.

Regardless of the differences in our backgrounds, we've all sinned and fallen short of God's glory.¹⁶ My twelve-year-old son Chad's life is very different from how mine was at his age. He's being raised in a Christian home. He has been taught

God's Word. And unlike his father, he's surrounded by people in a local church who respect godliness and humility, not worldliness and pride.

But as Chad enters his teenage years and young adulthood, the most important thing I can teach him is that, even though he's being raised in a Christian family and is leading a moral life, he's a sinner who desperately needs the substitutionary death of Christ for God's forgiveness.

And so for years I've been teaching him the gospel, day by day. I tell him that he's a sinner just like his dad, and that sin is his most serious problem. I put it in words that his young mind can understand, but I don't ignore or minimize the seriousness of sin. Through his actions and attitudes he has rebelled against his Maker. And this great God is perfectly holy and must respond with fierce opposition to sin. He must punish it.

Some might find it surprising that I would teach a young boy about God's wrath toward sin. But I find it surprising that any loving person would withhold this truth from another person they love. Because only when we understand God's wrath toward sin can we realize that we need to be saved from it. Only when we hear the bad news that we're deserving of judgment can we appreciate the good news that God, through His Son, has provided salvation and full, continuing forgiveness for our sins. Only those who are aware of God's wrath are amazed at God's grace.

This is what I hold out to my young son as the hope of his life: that Jesus, God's perfect, righteous Son, died in his place for his sins. Jesus took all the punishment; Jesus received all the

wrath as He hung on the cross, so people like Chad and his sinful daddy could be completely forgiven.

I hope to teach my son many other things as well, but the gospel is the one *essential* thing for him to know—as it is for us all.

THE CLIMAX AND THE KEY

The cross climaxes the story line of the Bible—and it's the true climax of the story line of all our lives as well. The gospel's truth is to saturate our lives just as much as it saturates Paul's writings and all of Scripture.

The message Paul had for Timothy is the same message God has for you. You need to rediscover the truth. The key to joy, to growth, to passion isn't hiding from you. It's right before your eyes.

It's the *gospel*.