

The Cross: Week 1

Steve Watson | Daily Bible Guide | 2020

Find each week's Bible guide at: <https://www.reservoirchurch.org/lent/>.

Introduction

The cross is a ubiquitous symbol - be it in churches or jewelry, on tombstones or tattoos. But it's often been a problematic one. In Ancient Rome, the cross was a symbol of the state's power to humiliate and torture. Many thousands of slaves, Jews, Christians, foreigners, disgraced soldiers, and criminals were killed by asphyxiation while hanging from wooden crosses. Later in Europe, what religious minorities had once feared became a symbol of religiously backed Empire, off to battle or on crusade. In America, the cross at times has been a symbol of healing or spiritual devotion, and at other times a weapon of racial intimidation and violence.

So the cross is complicated.

And yet, if we are interested in the possibilities to be found in a Jesus-centered faith, in the beauty and power of a Jesus-centered life, the cross is unavoidable. Each of the Bible's four good news accounts of the life of Jesus spend about a third of their time in the last week of Jesus' life, which reaches its climax as he is crucified.

Sixteenth century German reformer Martin Luther said that religious people are always tempted toward what he called a theology of glory: minimizing suffering and difficulty, using religion to have power over others, or the illusion of power over life's challenges. We often use religion to our own purposes of self-justification: to convince ourselves we are secure and better than others. Luther insisted that Jesus-centered faith is always grounded in a theology of the cross - thinking about and relating to a God who in the person of Jesus has suffered and died. Faith grounded in the cross knows how to face pain and death, knows how to win and soar but also how to lose and suffer. Faith grounded in the cross dares to hope that God is in solidarity with all of us, not picking favorites among us.

Too many of us have confronted the cross through simplistic and often unhelpful little systems to do with bridges to God, tickets from hell to heaven, or punishments averted. Last year, our staff team at Reservoir read three books, each of which explored powerful contemporary or historical connection with a crucified Jesus. We read James Cones' *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Emily Swan and Ken Wilson's *Solus Jesus*, and Brad Jersak's *A More Christlike God*. These books helped us consider what the Bible has to say about Jesus' death on the cross, and what that might mean to us and our times.

This season, we'd like to share some of that reflection with you. We hope that the Lenten¹ season will be for us all a profound time of revisiting the most famous and surprising event in the life of Jesus, his death by crucifixion at

¹Lent is from an Old English word meaning "spring". It's used to refer to the 6-week period before Easter Sunday. For centuries, Jesus followers have marked this period of anticipation for Easter through prayer, fasting, and giving.

the hands of the State. The gospels record seven different things Jesus said in the hours he spent dying. Tradition has called these phrases, “The Seven Last Words of Christ.”

This year’s Bible guide won’t examine a single, contiguous section of scripture as we so often do but will be a survey of material related to these seven words. We’ll start each of our seven weeks with one of these phrases Jesus said while dying. And for the other four days, we’ll share scriptures - and occasionally artwork or poetry - that relates in some way to what Jesus said.

The Bible passages will be presented in the NRSV translation. One or two days a week, we will offer a poem or piece of art instead of scripture. On weekends, feel free to catch up on a missed day, review a favorite passage, or skip the guide all together. Each day will also have:

- **Points of Interest** — a handful of comments, which include literary or historical notes as well as impressions, thoughts, questions, and reactions. These aren’t meant to be exhaustive or authoritative, but simply to give you some more perspective to work with as you ponder the passage yourself. We try to name things you hadn’t noticed but wish you had, as well as give voice to some of the questions and observations you may have had but weren’t sure what to do with.
- **A Direction for Prayer** — there will also be a prompt for prayer that you can use. These invitations focus on the prayers for others we encourage you to try during this season:
 - *For your friends and family:* Consider some of your favorite people, people you interact with on a regular basis, who don’t seem to have much of a direct connection to God, but for whom you are very much rooting. What does this passage have to say to them, or to you about them?
 - *For your church or city:* How can we apply the passage corporately as a faith community? Or what does this passage say about or to our entire city?
- **Spiritual Exercise** — each week, there will be a different daily spiritual exercise to try, inspired by the week’s passages.

We hope Lent will be a season of spiritual formation for us – of engaging spiritual practice that increases our health and encourages the flourishing of the life of God in and through us. If you would like to engage in fasting or other spiritual practice during this season, feel free to listen to the [February 23rd sermon](#) that starts our season for more comments on how to engage with Lent. Meanwhile, we’ll be encouraging the spiritual practices of Scripture reading and prayer in community. Attend our Sunday services [and join a community group](#) for the season if you’re able. You could also find a friend to touch base with on your own if you like. May your Lent be a place of warm encounter with God and with others, and may it be a time of rich learning, discovery, and formation.

This is Steve writing this introduction and Week 1, and I’ll write several weeks of this year’s guide as well. Pastor Lydia will also be taking a couple of weeks of the guide, and you’ll see her listed as the author on the weeks she writes. We’re so grateful for our heritage of powerful Lenten seasons together and our great team that carries that practice forward for us. This season, may you find Jesus anew, or be found by him. And may it be a rich season of discovery and hope as you consider all the ways in which God is with us, bringing hope, love, courage, and renewal in all things and in all times.

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Monday, February 24

Luke 23:26-34 (NRSV)

²⁶ As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷ A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. ²⁸ But Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' ³⁰ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.' ³¹ For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

³² Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³ When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing.

Points of Interest

- How poignantly Luke records this time and place of immense suffering. A Lybian immigrant or refugee is forced to march with Jesus, as they carry the tools of his execution. Women wail. Even grimmer days ahead are foretold. Suffering is to grow upon suffering, in this place called the Skull, where Jesus and two criminals are hung up to die.
- This is the setting of the first of Jesus' words: the word of forgiveness. "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."
- Jesus hangs naked, looking at the crowds, the criminals, the women in tears, the soldiers vying for his clothing, and he loves them all. He views them charitably. He asks God to hold nothing against them.
- Author Brad Jersak challenges us to believe that Jesus on the cross reveals the most perfect picture of God's eternal nature: self-giving, radically forgiving, co-suffering love.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray that our church will together know the love of this beautiful God, no matter how bleak our days. Pray that we will again fall in love with this God who sees with so much love.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Beloved Gaze – This week, you are invited to imagine Jesus looking at you with self-giving, all-forgiving, delighting-in-you love. Sit quietly for a few minutes and imagine Jesus with you. If you can't imagine the person of Jesus, you could imagine God with you as your loving Father or Mother. Picture God's loving gaze. As any part of you comes to mind that you consider unlovable, imagine God viewing that part of yourself or experience with love and compassion as well.

Tuesday, February 25

Luke 15:1-2, 11-32 (NRSV)

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

¹¹ Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" ²⁰ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' ³¹ Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

Points of Interest

- Jesus got in trouble for enjoying and eating with evil government collaborators and moral failures. Arms too wide, love too big, associates too scandalous.
- Culturally, the younger son starts wishing his father dead and ends up in the most humiliating circumstances possible. This would be a perfect ancient morality tale - that's what you get for being such an awful person.
- Except, that's not Jesus' story. Here, the father goes along with the son's plan: gives him an early inheritance and then when he screws it all up, waits outside just hoping he'll come back, runs out to see him, and welcomes him back into the family with tears of joy and kisses of affection.
- The younger son never gets to give his prepared apology speech. Everyone is too busy hugging him and preparing his welcome home party.
- The real story Jesus is getting to is the older son. He too has access to all the family wealth and favor, but he's so bitter and angry about his brother that he's scared there's not enough left for

him. Father roots for reunions and homecoming. Big brother roots for other people getting no more than he thinks they deserve.

- Jesus ends the story in suspense. Will big brother rejoin the family? Or will he now be lost? Will the judgy, bitter, fearful soul in all of us stay far from God, or will we welcome the embrace and celebration both for us and for all whom God loves, even if we don't?

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for the big brothers and the little brothers in your circle of family and friends. The bitter moralists, the foolish wasters, the fearful, the angry, the wayward - pray that each will know an extravagantly loving God who longs for them to know a loving embrace.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Beloved Gaze – This week, you are invited to imagine Jesus looking at you with self-giving, all-forgiving, delighting-in-you love. Sit quietly for a few minutes and imagine Jesus with you. If you can't imagine the person of Jesus, you could imagine God with you as your loving Father or Mother. Picture God's loving gaze. As any part of you comes to mind that you consider unlovable, imagine God viewing that part of yourself or experience with love and compassion as well.

Wednesday, February 26

Today we offer to you a well-known painting, to supplement our Bible readings.

The Return of the Prodigal Son, by Rembrandt



Points of Interest

- Rembrandt's famous 17th century oil painting is inspired by yesterday's passage. Little brother is on his knees, embraced by his elderly father: at peace, relieved that he is home. And while preparations for the party begin, older brother stands apart to our right, in disapproving judgement. As you look at the painting, take a moment with each character.
- Younger brother has had a hard journey. His hair and beard have been shorn. His clothes are dusty and ragged. He's worn out his shoes, which are torn and falling off. He's armed because life has been hard and dangerous. Where are you in pain? Where has life been hard and merciless for you? What embrace and relief do you need today?
- Years of worry have been hard on the father. He looks both tired and relieved. He now knows both pain and peace. As the household prepares the feast of homecoming, he can't let go of his child, so great is his affection and gratitude and joy. What does it say to you that God loves you like this. And whose welfare are you rooting for, against all odds? What does it say that God is with you in this?
- It strikes me that the big brother is so wealthy and strong. He's dressed just like his father. He has an honored position in the household, all that he could ever want. But all he sees through bitter eyes is the brother he resents, and the unfairness of his father's love. Does anyone stand against you like this? Do you stand against anyone in this way? What does it tell you that God always invites people away from this kind of judgement and resentment?

A Direction for Prayer

Offer a prayer for anyone in public life in your city or county that comes to mind who seems to have lost their way from God, that in their misery they'd walk home. And pray for those in public life who seem gripped by mean-spirited resentment, that they'd turn away from that toward mercy.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Beloved Gaze – This week, you are invited to imagine Jesus looking at you with self-giving, all-forgiving, delighting-in-you love. Sit quietly for a few minutes and imagine Jesus with you. If you can't imagine the person of Jesus, you could imagine God with you as your loving Father or Mother. Picture God's loving gaze. As any part of you comes to mind that you consider unlovable, imagine God viewing that part of yourself or experience with love and compassion as well.

Thursday, February 27

Psalm 32

- ¹ Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
- ² Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.
- ³ While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
- ⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.*Selah*
- ⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.*Selah*
- ⁶ Therefore let all who are faithful
offer prayer to you;
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.
- ⁷ You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.*Selah*
- ⁸ I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.
- ⁹ Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.
- ¹⁰ Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.

¹¹ Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Points of Interest

- The self-giving, radically forgiving, co-suffering nature of God reaches peak clarity on the cross, but it didn't start there. We include this ancient poem from the Hebrew scriptures as a reminder that God has always loved to forgive. God knew how to forgive God's children before Jesus.
- The psalm offers a few helpful insights for us all on God becoming more and more of a source of strength, love, and joy for us.
 - Unacknowledged sin, not sin, destroys us. Secrecy and silence all enable shame and unhealth in us. God loves the honest person, not the non-existent perfect person. Is there something off in your life that you need to tell God about today? Perhaps even share about with a trusted friend?
 - With God, there's no suspense regarding second chances. God's disposition to us is YES.
 - When we're in trouble, better to reach out for help - to God and friends, rather than to independently fight ourselves. Strength comes with interdependence, not solitary kicking and grasping. How do you need to reach out for help ?
 - Better to do what is healthy and good for us than wait for life to kick us in the pants after years of stubborn neglect. Is there anything that's good for you that you've been putting off? God loves you enough for you to pursue what is good and healthy for you.

A Direction for Prayer

Among your friends and family, if any are experiencing torment or distress, pray they will have the courage to reach out for help. Consider sending a note of encouragement if that might go well.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Beloved Gaze – This week, you are invited to imagine Jesus looking at you with self-giving, all-forgiving, delighting-in-you love. Sit quietly for a few minutes and imagine Jesus with you. If you can't imagine the person of Jesus, you could imagine God with you as your loving Father or Mother. Picture God's loving gaze. As any part of you comes to mind that you consider unlovable, imagine God viewing that part of yourself or experience with love and compassion as well.

Friday, February 28

Matthew 6:7-15

⁷ "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹ "Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial,

but rescue us from the evil one.

¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Points of Interest

- What does prayer need? What is the basis of faith? Any kind of connection to God in this life? Not many words. Not some kind of special, complicated process. We are all already known to a God who sees and loves us.
- So what helps us have faith, learn to pray, know God? Here are a few things.
 - Remembering God is different. God is better. God is greater. However small or bad or bound is our god, God is more beautiful than that.
 - Longing for God's ways in all the earth.
 - Sticking to this day's needs, but taking them seriously, asking God for help.
 - Knowing that danger and evil and trial are out there, and asking God in advance for help and mercy.
- The closing words about forgiveness are sobering, even a little threatening. I think that's intentional. Jesus is always kind, not always nice. There's a truth here, that if the nature of God is love and the nature of love is generosity and forgiveness, unburdening and unbitting our gaze

and heart toward those that have hurt us is required to be well, to be with God, to be in the way of love.

- Forgiveness doesn't say: that was OK. Forgiveness doesn't welcome further harm. Forgiveness doesn't necessarily even forget. Forgiveness may or may not involve reconciliation or a restoration of relationship - those things require trust to be rebuilt; they often require amends to be made. But forgiveness says no one is the sum of their worst quality or worst deed. Forgiveness says I'm not holding on to rage or blame. Forgiveness walks toward freedom.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray that your church will be marked by this way of prayer and this way of life: remembering a bigger and more beautiful God, longing for mercy and justice, reaching out for help, and pushing toward more and more mercy and forgiveness and restorative generosity.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Beloved Gaze – This week, you are invited to imagine Jesus looking at you with self-giving, all-forgiving, delighting-in-you love. Sit quietly for a few minutes and imagine Jesus with you. If you can't imagine the person of Jesus, you could imagine God with you as your loving Father or Mother. Picture God's loving gaze. As any part of you comes to mind that you consider unlovable, imagine God viewing that part of yourself or experience with love and compassion as well.