

**LENT 2024
STUDY GUIDE**



LENT 2024 THE CROSS

From February 14 to March 31 Christians enter a season called “Lent”. Lent comes from the old English word “lengthen” which means “spring”. We are entering the season of spring.

This is the season where we journey with Jesus towards the Cross and then the resurrection. Lent has been observed by Christians since the 4th Century. Activities associated with Lent include penitence, fasting, almsgiving and prayer.

I want to welcome you into this season of preparation by doing 2 things. One is to fast from something during the 40 days of Lent. Things you can fast from:

- Social media
- Chocolate or sweets
- Coffee
- Tv
- Fast from food one meal a week or one day a week

The second thing you can do is use this devotional/study guide to deepen your spiritual life. There are 7 studies that will correspond with the 7 Sundays of this season. As a church we are going to be studying the Cross in this series. We will see just how radically Jesus’ death on the Cross changes the world and our lives. Behind all of this, my hope and prayer is that as you fast, pray and study you will be drawn closer into the heart of Jesus – that you will feel closer to him.

Pastor Santosh Ninan
Ebenezer Baptist Church
Lent 2024

The Cross Sermon Series

February 18 – The Centrality of the Cross – 1 Cor. 1:18-25, 2:1-5

February 25 – Freedom in the Cross – Galatians 5:1-11

March 3 – Forgiveness in the Cross – Romans 5:1-10

March 10 – New Life in the Cross 1 – Romans 5:12-20

March 17 – New Life in the Cross 2 – Romans 8:1-17, 12:1-3

March 24 – Journey to the Cross – Matthew 21:1-11

March 29 – Jesus’ death on the Cross Matthew 27:27-61

March 31 – Jesus defeats the Cross – Mark 16:1-8

February 18 – The Centrality of the Cross – 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, 2:2

*“The preaching of the Cross,
the preaching of the Lord Jesus Christ on that cross
is the very heart and center of the Christian gospel
and the Christian message.”
-Martyn Lloyd Jones*

The Cross is at the center.

No cross, no Christianity.

The Cross is the fundamental reality around which our faith is built.

Christianity does not exist without the death of Jesus on the Cross.

No one understood this better than the apostle Paul. In 1 Corinthians 1:17 – he makes it clear that he has been sent to preach the gospel – to preach the Cross of Christ – nothing else and nothing less.

In an even more direct statement in 1 Cor. 2:2 he says, **“I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”** Paul wants his hearers to know who Jesus is and what he did. This is the most important thing.

Life can get complicated. We can complicate our lives. Parents of school age children know the hectic demands made on our time. Our careers can be complicated and demanding. Many of us struggle under cross current pressures in our lives. As I meditated on these passages I felt God using Paul to call us back to the simplicity of meditating and reflecting on the Cross.

Study

1. What is the center of your faith?
2. What do you think Paul means when he says that he needs to preach with simplicity, “lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.” (1 Cor. 1:17).
3. Why is the cross foolishness to those who are perishing? (1:18). How is it the power of God to us who are being saved?
4. Paul contrasts worldly wisdom and spiritual “foolishness”. Why would our faith appear foolish to others?
5. In v. 22 what does Paul call Christ crucified?
6. Does v. 25 empower you?

Personal Reflection

1. Does your outer and inner life feel frantic?
2. Do you long for more peace and serenity?
3. Take 5 minutes a day this week to spend time in quiet contemplation around a bible verse that God brings to mind. Ask God to slow the rapid thoughts in your mind and bring you peace.

February 25 – Freedom in the Cross – Galatians 5:1, 2 Cor. 3:17, Romans 6:17-23

*You entered a life like ours to give us back our own
You wanted us like you, as choosers not clones
You offered up your flesh and death was overthrown
Now salvation is ours,
-Dweller by a Dark Stream by Bruce Cockburn*

The 2020's have proven so far to be a decade marked by trauma and various species of mental illness. Starting the decade off by a global pandemic where our young people were isolated from one another planted the seeds of many of the challenges we face.

Despite tremendous material and financial prosperity, we find ourselves struggling to be happy or even just to be “normal.” And so we seek therapy, medication or spiritual enlightenment. And we keep coming short.

Into our dilemma, the apostle Paul boldly proclaims, “It is for freedom, Christ has set us free!” What an audacious claim! Is it true? Does Christ really set us free? In Romans 6 he digs a little deeper into what he means when contrasting freedom and slavery.

Study

1. What does it mean to be a slave to sin?
2. In v.17 Paul references “a pattern of teaching” that claims the Romans’ allegiance. Would you say that you have aligned yourself with a “pattern of teaching” or a doctrine that has helped you experience greater personal freedom?
3. Do you feel you have been set free from sin? Are there sins that you still feel enslaved to? If so, why do you think that is?
4. What do you think it means to be “free in the Lord?”

Personal Reflection

1. Many Christians continue to struggle with addictions and negative thought patterns. If there is pattern of sinful thinking or behavior in your life, you might want to share it with your life group, a trusted friend, a pastor or counsellor. God did not create us to journey through our struggles alone.
2. Spend some time this week meditating on freedom in Christ. Ask God to draw you deeper into what that means.

March 3 Forgiveness in the Cross – Colossians 2:13-15

*“We are told that Christ was killed for us,
that his death has washed away our sins
and that by dying he disabled death itself.*

That is the formula.

That is Christianity.

That is what has to be believed.”

– C.S. Lewis

The heart of the gospel of Jesus is forgiveness. We have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed. We are born sinful. We are born with a fundamental anti-God posture. The forgiveness that Jesus offers us through the Cross we will never fully understand in this lifetime. We can spend all our time and energy studying it and still find so much more to learn.

The truth is – life is unlivable without forgiveness. We need to be able to forgive others and we need others to forgive us. But behind all this human relational debris lies our deep need to be forgiven by God.

Study

1. When did you first understand that God has forgiven you because of Jesus' death on the cross?
2. Are there areas in your life you still need God to forgive? Often there are things we are so deeply ashamed of, we choose to bury them, instead of bringing them out into the light.
3. Paul uses very forceful language here: “cancelled the charge” and “disarmed the power and authorities”. Ask God to help you enter the full reality of his forgiveness of your sins.
4. Discuss what it means to be “dead in sin” and “alive in Christ”.

Personal Reflection

1. Spend this week praising God that he has forgiven you.
2. Meditate on this beautiful passage:

*The Lord has taken away the judgments against you. ...
The Lord your God is in your midst,
a mighty one who will save;
he will rejoice over you with gladness;
he will quiet you by his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing.
ZEPHANIAH 3:15,17*

March 10 – New Life in the Cross 1 – Romans 5:12-20

Romans 5:12-20 (The Message paraphrase)

*You know the story of how Adam landed us in the dilemma we're in—
first sin, then death, and no one exempt from either sin or death.*

***That sin disturbed relations with God in everything and everyone, but
the extent of the disturbance was not clear until God spelled it out in detail to Moses.***

***So death, this huge abyss separating us from God, dominated the
landscape from Adam to Moses.** Even those who didn't sin precisely as Adam
did by disobeying a specific command of God still had to experience this termination of
life, this separation from God. But Adam, who got us into this, also points ahead to the
One who will get us out of it.*

*¹⁵⁻¹⁷ Yet the rescuing gift is not exactly parallel to the death-dealing sin. If one man's sin
put crowds of people at the dead-end abyss of separation from God, just think what
God's gift poured through one man, Jesus Christ, will do!*

***There's no comparison between that death-dealing sin and this
generous, life-giving gift.** The verdict on that one sin was the death sentence; the
verdict on the many sins that followed was this wonderful life sentence.*

***If death got the upper hand through one man's wrongdoing, can
you imagine the breathtaking recovery life makes, sovereign life, in
those who grasp with both hands this wildly extravagant life-gift, this
grand setting-everything-right, that the one man Jesus Christ
provides?***

*¹⁸⁻¹⁹ Here it is in a nutshell: Just as one person did it wrong and got us in all this trouble
with sin and death, another person did it right and got us out of it. But more than just
getting us out of trouble, **he got us into life!** One man said no to God and put many
people in the wrong; one man said yes to God and put many in the right.*

²⁰⁻²¹ All that passing laws against sin did was produce more lawbreakers.

But sin didn't, and doesn't, have a chance in competition with the aggressive forgiveness we call grace. When it's sin versus grace, grace wins hands down.

All sin can do is threaten us with death, and that's the end of it. Grace, because God is putting everything together again through the Messiah, invites us into life—a life that goes on and on and on, world without end.

I have placed Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of this passage in this guide because Peterson skillfully draws out some of the key points Paul is making here. This is one of the most important and profound passages in all of Paul's writings. Romans is a theological high point in scripture. And Romans 5 is a brilliant piece of logical reasoning and gospel hope.

Paul does careful analysis of death that came through Adam and life that came through Christ. By using contrast and comparison he adds more force to the statement: "Jesus brings us life".

Study

1. What are the consequences of Adam's disobedience?
2. What are the results of Jesus' obedience?
3. What does it mean in practical terms to be "separated from God"?
4. When Jesus says he has come to bring "life to the full" (John 10:10) – what does he mean?

Personal Reflection

1. Take time to consider what your life would be like if you were separated from God.
2. List all the things that are different in your life because of Jesus' presence.
3. Use this list to thank and praise God this week.

March 17 – New Life in the Cross 2 – Romans 8:1-17

*“Christ died on the cross to break the curse of evil and vanquish it once for all.
The main reason he came to earth was to free us from the powers of darkness.
We can search the whole world, but we will find forgiveness of sins
and freedom from torment nowhere except at the cross.”*
-J. Heinrich Arnold

This passage is one of the most theologically rich passages in scripture. An entire seminary course could be taught just on Romans 8. Paul uses contrast and comparison to point out the sharp differences between life in the flesh and life in the spirit. This is the fundamental difference that salvation in Christ brings into our lives:

“The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.” – v.6

It cannot be more sharp or direct. Life without God is death. Life with God is life.

Jesus’ death on the cross not only forgives our sins but opens up a pathway into true life – life lived in relationship with the living God. It is quite a stunning concept to consider. There is no other human endeavor: in business, education, politics or the arts that can compare to this reality of new life in Christ.

Study

1. Read this passage in 3 different translations.
2. Write out 5 things that you notice in the passage.
3. How is life without God focused on death? How is life in Christ focused on life? Do you believe this is true?

Personal Reflection

1. This can be a rather convicting passage because it forces us to consider whether we are living in “the realm of the spirit.” If you were to compare your life with those of your non-believing friends and neighbors – what differences can you see?
2. If there are no noticeable differences between you and non-believers you know, spend some time praying and asking God to reveal any changes you need to make in your lifestyle that would show more that you are “in the realm of the spirit.”
3. Spend time praying and asking God to continually transform and renew your mind to be more like the mind of Christ.

March 24 – Palm Sunday / Journey to the Cross – Matthew 21:1-17

*“The death of Christ as that which wrought reconciliation
is set forth as the supreme manifestation of the love of God toward men.”*

– John Murray

This is the beginning of the end. Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem is the start of his final days before his death on a roman cross. His entry is marked by prophetic fulfillment, humility and praise from the crowds.

I have included 3 extra vignettes that happened on Palm Sunday: Jesus cleansing of the temple, Jesus healing the lame and his interaction with the chief priests and the teachers of the law. In these actions we see various aspects of Jesus’ identity.

Cleansing the temple – this is a foreshadowing of what will happen in the ultimate form on the Cross. The moneychangers and merchants selling sacrificial animals were barriers for the poor to come in and worship – he removes this material, physical barrier. On the cross he will remove the final barrier: human sin.

Healing the lame – a hallmark of Jesus’ ministry is his actions of physical healing. On the cross and in his resurrection, Jesus will heal our spiritual lameness.

Arguing with religious leaders: Jesus confirms his identity as the messiah, as the Son of David but refusing to refute the religious leaders. He receives praise and then says that this worship and praise of him is proper and biblical. Jesus’ resurrection will be his final vindication of his identity.

Study

1. Why did Jesus choose a donkey to enter Jerusalem?
2. Why was “the whole city stirred” by Jesus?
3. What is Jesus’ main purpose in removing the merchants from the temple?
4. Why were the religious leaders upset that people were following and worshipping Jesus?

Personal Reflection

As you enter Holy Week, try to carve out 10-20 minutes a day where you will be in silence and meditation, contemplating all the things Jesus will go through this week.

Passages for reflection:

²⁸ “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” – Matthew 11:28-30

Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit^[b] gives birth to spirit. – John 3:5-6

*Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.
2 Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.
-Psalm 51:2*

March 29 – Good Friday – Matthew 27:45-56

*“Surely no more terrible abyss can be conceived than to feel yourself forsaken and estranged from God:
and when you call upon him not to be heard. It is as if God has plotted your ruin.
Jesus cry of dereliction on the cross were drawn forth from deep anguish in his heart.”
– John Calvin*

I have read the passages describing the death of Jesus many times (hundreds?). And they always evoke the same emotions of sorrow and horror. There is a feeling of - how can this be happening? How can this man who has done so much good be treated with such cruelty?

On Good Friday, Christians commemorate one of the most pivotal events of their faith: the death of their savior Jesus. Jesus' crucifixion has been the catalyst of more art, study, discussion, and debate than almost any other event in human history.

On this somber day we should go deep into contemplation of what does this mean for us.

Why did Jesus have to die?

What difference does it make in our lives?

Attend the Good Friday service today at Ebenezer. Take some time individually or as a family to pray and enter what the meaning of this day means for you.

March 31 – Easter Sunday – Mark 16:1-8

*Make no mistake: if he rose at all
It was as His body;
If the cell's dissolution did not reverse, the molecule reknit,
The amino acids rekindle,
The Church will fall.
-from Seven Stanzas at Easter by John Updike*

Easter is the final and complete vindication of Jesus Christ. The moment Jesus rose from the dead was the moment of universal victory.

Jesus has won!
Death has been defeated!
Hallelujah!

As one of my favorite writers reminds us, “Resurrection reminds us that the worst thing is never the final thing.” – Frederick Buechner.

The resurrection of Jesus is a violent intrusion against depression and cynicism.

Negativity does not win in the end.

Life is filled with struggles, suffering and pain. But Jesus’ victory should always be a forefront as we walk through the desert seasons of life.

If possible, spend part of your Easter Sunday celebrating with friends and family – maybe a walk along the river or a meal together.

FURTHER STUDY

Here are some of the best books on the atonement if you want to dig deeper.

The Cross of Christ – John Stott – An absolute classic. Stott was one of the most respected church leaders of the 20th century. He wrote many books and this is considered his masterpiece.

The Crucifixion – Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ – Fleming Rutledge – This is a recent book and it's the best book on the atonement since Stott's book – which is saying a lot!

In My Place Condemned He Stood – JI Packer and Mark Dever – A more reformed understanding of the atonement. Packer is reflecting a lot on an older Puritan book by John Owen called "The Death of Death in the Death of Christ".

Mere Christianity – CS Lewis – Not specifically on the atonement but there is a chapter where Lewis very clearly helps us understand what happened on the cross.

NOTES