

**Dan Crowe. 30<sup>th</sup> March 2008.**

## **The cross centred life**

I want to start this morning by telling a story from my own life.

The story is about what is one of my earliest memories of having someone bring correction to me in my life as a follower of Jesus, and its something that has stuck with me ever since then. The bible talks about how it is good for us to challenge one another to follow God and follow the bible and I can certainly say that the time I was challenged then has done me real good in my life. I am reading through the book for proverbs at the moment and many times it talks about the benefits of being challenged to live our lives the way God wants us to and responding well to the challenge.

So my memory is of a time when I had been a Christian probably about 4-5 months. I had become a Christian in the summer and then that Christmas holidays I had gone to a reunion for all the people who had attended the Christian holiday I had been to over the summer. During the reunion I went to a meeting when someone preached the gospel, as another opportunity for people who perhaps come to the holiday in the summer but had not responded to the gospel when they heard it then. I can remember speaking to someone after the meeting had finished. They asked me what I had thought of the preaching that morning. I can remember saying to them something along the lines of "That was great but it wasn't really that relevant to me as I have already become a Christian". They challenged me on that, and said something like "actually that message will always be relevant to you".

This morning I want to look at some verses in Paul's second letter to Timothy that teach us on the importance of keeping the cross and its message at the centre of our lives. This letter is the last letter in the bible that Paul wrote before he died. He is writing to Timothy, who is a man who Paul describes as his son in the faith. Paul is writing to someone who is very important to him,

someone who is very dear to him. He is close to him as someone that Paul has poured his life into; he has worked with him and taught him over many years. Then Paul writes this letter to Timothy at a time when his life is coming to an end. In a very real way these are Paul's last words to Timothy before he dies. Because of this Paul focuses on what he sees of being vital importance in terms of carrying on the work that Paul has started. One of the things that Paul talks about is the importance of the gospel as being central.

He talks about the importance of protecting the message of the gospel, the message of Christianity. He sees this as something to focus on as he writes this final letter to Timothy. I want to read out some verses from the letter that highlight this point.

So Paul wrote in his last letter to Timothy

**'Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal.'** (2 Timothy 2:8-9, NIV)

Now Timothy was a man who you would hope know something about Jesus, the news about the cross at this point in his life would not be new to him, he had been taught by Paul himself about the cross. He was a man who was in leadership in a very large church in Ephesus and was also someone that Paul had sent to work on his behalf in a number of different places. Yet in the last letter Paul sends him, Paul tells him to remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead.

At the beginning of this year I spoke on living a life that is focused on the man Jesus Christ, the man who is also God, and at that time I talked about who Jesus is. In this verse Paul talks about remembering the man Jesus Christ but talks about particular events that happened in this man's life, in particular his death and his resurrection. This morning I am going to be focusing on one of those events, on the death of Jesus Christ that happened at the cross.

Paul makes it clear to Timothy that the gospel is not something to forget about. It's not just a message for when he becomes a Christian, or for when he wants to talk to people who don't know Jesus, it is THE message. Paul talks in his first letter to the church that met in Corinth about the message which he considers to be of first importance, and the message is, that Christ died for our sins.

He's not saying that the gospel is the only thing he wants Christians to learn about – clearly Paul teaches on many different aspects of the Christian life in his letters to Christians – but he states it is the gospel that is of most importance.

I do believe that at times we can all be at risk of losing our focus on the cross, of losing our focus on what Jesus has done for us and that can be for various reasons. If Paul needed to remind Timothy of the gospel then clearly we need to be reminded of it also. So what I want to do this morning is to try to help us live our lives with the message of the cross as always the most important message in our lives.

It can be easy that once we're saved we can focus on how the message of the cross affected our lives in the past – how our lives were changed by the cross, and then after our lives have been changed then see it as a message which will then be more relevant to our non Christian friends rather than ourselves, but we are encouraged in the bible to keep remembering the gospel, to remember the cross, to remember Jesus' death and resurrection.

There is a book by a church leader from the USA called CJ Mahaney which is called 'living the cross centred life' which I'd highly recommend. It's easy to read and short but is very effective in communicating the importance of keeping the cross centred in our lives. One of the reviews on the back of the book helps to express this point that as Christians we can almost look to move on from the cross once we are Christians and only remind ourselves of its significance from time to time.

The writer of this review says '[CJ illustrates the critical differences between snacking on the on the benefits of the cross and surveying the wonders of the cross](#)'.

There are a couple of quite sobering quotes in the book written by Christian writers regarding the cross.

DA Carson, another writer from the USA wrote this: 'I fear that the cross, without ever being disowned, is constantly in danger of being dismissed (sent away) from the central place it must enjoy'

John Stott, an English writer wrote this: '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'

So this morning I want to help us in learning to remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, to remember the message that Christ died for our sins. In some ways I am not going to be saying anything new this morning on the cross itself, I am not going to have time to look extensively at the message of the cross, although I will be looking at some very important aspects of it. In fact my main point this morning is that I am not looking to point us to anything new this morning because Paul doesn't teach Timothy to look anywhere new. He wants Timothy, and God wants us to keep coming back to the message of the cross, because the cross is the reason we are who we are as Christians, and God doesn't want us ever to forget that. The key word for this morning that I want to focus on out of these verses is the word 'remember'

What I plan to do is to look at two important aspects of the message of the cross, as way of helping us to remember the cross this morning, and then look at how we can learn to keep the cross central in our lives, to keep on remembering the cross.

The two aspects I want to look at are that firstly the cross shows us the depths of our sin, and that secondly it shows us God's forgiveness.

Peter Lewis, an English Christian says this about how we can learn these things from the cross:

'On Calvary (on the cross), as nowhere else in the world, we can see what sin deserved, what Christ endured, and what God was willing to do to save us guilty sinners'

## The depths of our sin

So firstly the cross, the death of Jesus Christ on the cross shows us just how sinful we were. I believe it is important for us to remind ourselves of just how much we needed Jesus to die for us. I believe it can be very easy to forget this, we can forget just how rebellious we were to God. We can forget how offended he was at our sin. We can forget that his reaction to our sin, as a pure, righteous being was one of immense fury, anger that the bible describes as the wrath of God. He was not laid back about our sin; he did not see it as a small issue but a huge issue.

In the book of Isaiah we are taught about the cross, and as we are taught about the cross we learn about the depths of our sin.

But he was pierced for our transgressions (rebellion), he was crushed for our iniquities (perversity, depravity);

the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to his own way;  
and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:5-6, NIV)

Isaiah 53 teaches us about what was going to happen on the cross but it also tells us why it was going to happen. It tells us that the reason Jesus was punished by God on the cross was because of our sin, it was because of our wrongdoing. It was because of our sexual immorality, because of our idolatry, because of our division and bitterness, it was because of our pride, it was because of our self-righteousness, it was because of our drunkenness and rage and hate. Our sin towards him was so great it could not just be overlooked by God because he is a God of justice.

Imagine if someone was involved in murdering someone in this country. Imagine that murder was a big profile case and was in the national papers like we sadly often see. Imagine that person went to court and they pleaded guilty to the crime – and they really had to plead guilty because 20 people had seen

them carry out the murder and they all could identify this person as the murderer and without doubt, for justice to be done they would deserve to be punished. Imagine then if the judge was then to say to that person and say – I know without a doubt that you are a murderer. You admit it yourself and there are all these people who confirm that it was you. But today I don't feel like punishing people today and I am going to let you go free!

If that happened it would be completely unjust of that judge.

The bible tells us that God is a God of justice, so for him he has to punish wrongdoing.

It would be completely unjust if God did not choose to punish our sin.

So because God is just God does punish our sin by punishing his only son on the cross.

When we consider punishments for wrongdoing it gives us an indication of how serious the wrong doing was. So for a minor offence you might get community service or a fine, and then you have committed a very serious offence you may end up in prison for a long long time.

So in terms of looking at the seriousness of our sin we need to look at the cross, because at the cross we see Jesus receive the punishment that we deserved.

Again we can look to Isaiah 53 to tell us about this punishment.

It tells us that he was wounded.

It tells us he was crushed

It tells us he was oppressed and afflicted

It tells us he was cut off from the land of the living.

He was killed by what is probably the most barbaric form of execution that has ever been devised.

I recently read something about how people today were looking into the least distressing ways of carrying out the death penalty, yet with the cross it is probably the most distressing method of carrying out the death penalty. The

Romans had taken it on as a way of punishing slaves, rebels and pirates. It was not generally used for Roman citizens because it was considered too barbaric.

Then on top of the physical punishment and more significantly, Jesus is abandoned by his father. He experiences the depths of God's wrath, God's hatred and anger towards sin, wrath and anger that exists because we have sinned against God. So on the cross Jesus calls out 'my God my God why have you forsaken me' because he is receiving this punishment from God.

Peter Lewis also writes on this – he says 'the law of Israel, even in its greatest penalties, could never fully express the real nature of sin or the full wrath of God towards sin. Not even capital punishment could do that! The only judge who could fully express God's wrath and inflict God's penalty against sin was God himself; and the only penalty which could express sin's full desert (what it really deserved) and God's holy wrath was the ultimate penalty, which would be called in the book of revelation 'the second death; eternal loss and anguish.'

He is taking the punishment that **has** to be handed out, because God is a God of Justice.

So the Cross shows us the depths of our sin, that our sin is not a minor issue but it is a horrible, horrible offence against God.

### The extent of God's forgiveness

So next I want to look at what the cross tells us about the extent of God's forgiveness

Paul wrote in his letter to the church that was in Ephesus

'In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace' (Ephesians 1:7, NIV)

What we deserved as sinners was terrible punishment for our terrible sin. As we look at the cross we see how Jesus received the punishment we deserved. We did not deserve to receive any good thing from God. All we deserved was punishment.

But because God is a God of love as well as a God of Justice he chose to find a way in which it would be possible for us to be released from the punishment we deserved. Because he is a God of justice, he wanted to punish our sin, but because he is also a God of love he wanted to set us free from that punishment.

The only way he could achieve both of those things was through the cross.

The cross reminds us of the depth of our sin but it also reminds us that the punishment for our sin, that we deserved, was taken by someone else. The cross isn't just a demonstration of God's anger, and hate towards sin. It isn't just a reminder of how awful our sin was.

At the cross, every single part of the punishment we deserved was poured out on Jesus. The sentence, the punishment that was hanging over us for our sin was totally given to Jesus. Jesus received every single part of that punishment.

Sometimes we can look at the cross and we can be appalled at the depths of our sin that made it necessary for Jesus to be killed in that way, and it is good to be reminded of the extent of our sin.

But at the same time we need to be reminded that the cross is not just something that reveals to us the depth of our sin. What happened to Jesus on the Cross made it possible for us to know complete forgiveness of our sins because he took the punishment for us, instead of us, so that we could be forgiven.

The reason I wanted to remind us about the extent of our sin this morning, to encourage us to keep doing this, was not to make us all feel so bad about our sin that we feel we have to somehow repay Jesus ourselves but it was to help remind us of the depths of God's forgiveness, forgiveness that extends to people like us who were so deeply corrupted by sin, to remind that the reason our forgiveness is so extensive and to remind us that our forgiveness is completely and totally dependent on what Jesus did for us at the cross.

It wasn't just partial forgiveness or forgiveness that would only last for a few years; it was complete, total forgiveness for our sins, for all our sins, for all time. This means that although our sin was sin of extreme depth that God's forgiveness through the cross was much greater, that absolutely any sin

that we have ever committed or any sin that we will commit in the future was completely dealt with at the cross.

This is why the cross is such good news for us. It is very very good news for us. It clearly does show us how enormous the problem of sin is, but it also shows us how that problem is completely, totally, eternally, perfectly, lovingly, wonderfully overcome at the cross.

I know in my life I can at times get concerned that I have completed all the jobs that I need to do or that I have told someone that I will do. At work I have pads of sticky notes and when I come across a task, a job that I cannot do at the time I will furiously write it down on a sticky note and post it somewhere to try to make sure that I manage to get the job done at a later date. Even then at times I will forget to write things down on the sticky pad and so at times I can end up with this nagging concern at the back of my head that I am not going to get everything done that I need to do.

I think sometimes we can get a bit like that with the cross, that we can start to get concerned that somehow more work needs to be done when it comes to our sin being dealt with, that somehow somewhere there is a sticky note with some sin on that has not been dealt with. But fantastically this is very very far from the truth, that every single sin of ours has been dealt with at the cross, that there are no sticky notes lying around anywhere with sins of ours that have not been dealt with. Every single one was dealt with at the cross.

If you are here this morning and you are a Christian, it means that our sins have been totally forgiven. Being religious won't help, avoiding sin won't help, trying to live a perfect life, going through suffering ourselves won't help – what will help us is the cross and that is always the thing that will help us for now and for eternity – as I've already mentioned this is very very good news for us.

If you're here this morning and you're not a Christian I want to encourage you to consider what I have been saying this morning, that the bible says that our sins are not as unimportant as we might see them sometimes, but that to God, our sin against him is an awful, horrible thing.

I would also ask you to consider what I have been saying about the cross, that because of the cross we can be amazingly forgiven by God for our sins, because of Jesus. I want to ask you consider this because I believe that this is also very very good news for you also if you choose to trust in Jesus and in Jesus alone for forgiveness of sins. The bible tells us that to know this forgiveness as individuals we need to come to Jesus and to ask for forgiveness for our sin and to trust in what he did on the cross as the way in which we can be forgiven. If you want to come and ask me about this please do come and speak to me once I've finished.

### How do we keep the cross central in our lives?

So having spent some time remembering the cross by talking this morning about some aspects of what the cross means for us, I want to continue by looking at how we can learn to remember the cross in our lives.

Firstly I want to ask the question, do we truly believe that the message of the cross, the message of the gospel is THE central message for us. We need to be honest about this, because if it's not too important to us in the first place it will be hard to keep ourselves focused on it in our lives.

If we are going to live cross centred lives then we need to first agree with Paul's statement in the bible that the message of the gospel is the message that is of first importance. In other words, if we are going to look to keep the message of the cross central in our lives it need to be at a central place to begin with

CJ Mahaney has a few points on this which I'll read out now:

'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 – 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? .....I can hear you asking "but don't I need more than the cross? ..... You do need more. You've been saved to grow,

to serve in a local church, to do good works and to glorify God. But the “more” you need as a follower of Christ won’t be found apart from the cross.’

So we need this conviction that the message of the cross is not just a message for people who don’t know God but that it is a message for all of us.

### Remember

So how can we learn to live cross centred lives, lives that keep the message of the cross central?

Let me tell you something about myself that may help to think about this

I don’t know about anyone here but I can be very forgetful. Something I can be particularly forgetful of about is car keys. I have now lost count of how many times in the morning before work I have been running madly around the house trying to find car keys. For the last few years I have tended to cycle to work in the mornings which has had some benefit but my wife has suffered as since then what I have managed to do is to forget I have the car keys with me when I have gone off to work leaving her without the car for the day.

What I have needed is something to help me to remember where they are, and a few years ago my mum very helpfully bought us a key hook rack and although Lucy will definitely testify that I am still not great with keys it is something that has helped me.

What I’m talking about this morning though is something that is infinitely more important than keys, it is the message of the cross, and I’d like to think through some ways in which we can be helped to remember the cross.

- 1) Communion – clearly this helps us to remember the cross in a very powerful way. Jesus asked us to break bread and drink wine in remembrance of him, to remember him and what he did on the cross for us, and after I finish this morning I’d like us to break bread and drink wine together. Although we do have communion on Sunday morning

meetings we don't need to be limited to having communion together at other times.

- 2) The bible - clearly the bible is full of teaching on the cross, it has historical accounts of Jesus' death on the cross, and it has prophecies about the cross.
- 3) Books – there are many different good books on the cross – please ask me if you want any recommendations

Finally to help us focus our lives on the cross I want to encourage us to think about the cross in terms of what the bible says about the cross rather than focusing on our own thoughts and our own feeling about the cross.

What we think and feel about the cross can vary with time but what the bible says about the cross never changes. If we look at our own thoughts or feelings sometimes we can see condemnation and shame and guilt, or we can see pride and complacency.

It is very easy to look inwardly to ask ourselves how we are doing with God and at times we need to do this. But as Christians we know that the truth about our salvation is not found by looking at our own thoughts and feelings but that the truth about our salvation is revealed by God in the bible, by looking outside of ourselves and taking hold of God's word, so let's keep looking to see what the bible has to say on the cross, and keep the true message of the cross central to our lives.