

“What a helpful book. Clear: it focuses us on Jesus. Wise: it reminds us that his work on the cross is sufficient. Rewarding: it offers reflections and prayers that reveal the treasures of John’s Gospel. A great resource to use through Lent. Buy it for yourself and give one to a friend.”

REV'D JAMES LAWRENCE, *Leadership Principal, CPAS*

“Lent is usually a time for fasting, but this new book by Tim Chester will help you to enjoy it as a time of feasting on God’s word. Short yet profound daily readings in John’s Gospel, which are deeply devotional without sacrificing exegetic rigour, will help you to meet Jesus and to gaze on his glory as revealed by his word and actions, and especially through the cross and resurrection. Suggested prayers and meditations will help you to apply these truths to your heart, strengthening your faith and love for Christ. Although structured especially for use in Lent, this book would be spiritually profitable for daily readings at any time of year.”

JOHN STEVENS, *National Director, Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches*

“*The Glory of the Cross* is a brilliant resource. Tim writes beautifully, accessibly and concisely. As well as shedding light on the text of John’s Gospel, he adds a rich diversity of comments and prayers from the full range of Christian history. The chapters are rich enough for anyone to benefit from, but short enough for anyone to manage (a rare balance!). While the idea of 47 readings for “Lent” may not immediately resonate with many of us, this book provides a marvellous way to work through John’s Gospel in the run-up to Easter (or actually, at any time). I hope this book is widely used, for if it is, the benefit to God’s people as we chew over John’s Gospel will be significant.”

GARY MILLAR, *Principal, Queensland Theological College*

“A great read for those for whom Easter has, dare I say it, got a bit perfunctory. They know their sin, they know the story, they know the cross. Is that you? Well, I pray you’ll have the courage and energy to go on this journey through John’s Gospel and let your blindness be exposed. I found it profoundly enlightening and refreshing.”

RICO TICE, *Senior Minister (Evangelism), All Souls Langham Place
and founder of Christianity Explored Ministries*

“So clearly written and heart-warming, accompanied by a judicious sprinkling of quotes from hymn-writers and luminaries of the Christian church down the centuries, united in finding glory in the cross because of the One who died on it for us. What a splendid resource for Lent!”

DR STEVE BRADY, *Moorlands College, UK*

“Reading *The Glory of the Cross* made me sad and glad! The sadness was the realisation of how hard I find it to see the real glory of Jesus because I am so self-centred. The gladness was that through John’s Gospel I was constantly reminded of how wonderful Christ is. This book will clarify the heart of Easter: our fallibility and Christ’s magnificent strength to save.”

GRAHAM DANIELS, *General Director, Christians in Sport*

“I would want a good supply of these Lenten readings to be on our bookstall right through the year. So often books of readings are cheesy, shallow, frothy and self-centred. These three-page readings however are honouring to Christ, careful with the text, perceptive and edifying. You can give this book to a seeker, new Christian or long-time disciple. Tim Chester takes sections of John’s Gospel and shows us the majesty and mercy of Jesus, giving us a great resource.”

SIMON MANCHESTER, *Senior Minister, St Thomas’ Anglican Church, Sydney*

TIM CHESTER

The
Glory
of the
Cross

Reflections for Lent from
the Gospel of John

the goodbook
COMPANY

The Glory of the Cross
© Tim Chester/The Good Book Company, 2018

Published by:
The Good Book Company

Tel (UK): 0333 123 0880
Tel (US): 866 244 2165
Email (UK): info@thegoodbook.co.uk
Email (US): info@thegoodbook.com

Websites:
UK: www.thegoodbook.co.uk
North America: www.thegoodbook.com
Australia: www.thegoodbook.com.au
New Zealand: www.thegoodbook.co.nz



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ISBN: 9781784982560 | Printed in the UK

Design by André Parker

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INTRODUCTION

What do you see when you look at the cross?

What do you see when you look at the cross? If you had been there on that first Good Friday, you would have seen a man, grimacing in pain, covered in blood and sweat, being executed alongside two criminals. It would have been an appalling spectacle.

What would you have made of Jesus? If you were a passer-by, then you would have assumed Jesus was another criminal perhaps, or a political agitator who had fallen foul of Roman justice. If you had known anything of his story—if you knew he had been a roaming preacher—then you might have concluded he was a fraud. All that talk of the coming of God’s kingdom had ended here along with his life. Or maybe, like many people today, you would have seen a good man whose noble ideas had brutally hit the buffers of real life. All that talk of love was captivating while it lasted. But it couldn’t last. Of course it couldn’t. The message of Jesus is a pleasant diversion for children and dreamers, but makes no sense in the real world.

And yet what the church sees when it looks at the crucified Jesus is the Son of God and the Saviour of the world. How is that possible?

That's what John invites us to explore this Easter. He beckons us to look at Jesus and see the very glory of God. John says as much at the beginning of his Gospel: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (1 v 14).

But seeing the glory of God in the person of Jesus is not straightforward. For one thing, whatever you think glory looks like, it doesn't look like the battered and bloodied man we see on Good Friday. Glory is certainly not what comes to mind as we look at the cross. Yet John is clear. The cross is not a glitch en route to Christ's true glory. The cross is Christ's glory.

But John also keeps alerting us to the fact that our human pride will distort what we see. Instead, he invites us to leave our self-centred preoccupations behind so we can recognise and embrace the true Jesus.

Many of us know that Easter is supposed to be the high point of the church calendar. We want it to *feel* glorious—but instead it comes and goes and passes us by. So over the next 47 days, we'll journey through John's Gospel to the foot of the cross. Each week we'll explore one key episode from Jesus' earthly ministry—his teaching, miracles, death and resurrection. The Sunday reading will give you the opportunity to take in the big sweep of the Bible passage; then from Monday to Saturday we will slow down to reflect more deeply.

My hope and prayer is that you will reach Easter Sunday having been thrilled by who Jesus is and what he has done for you—amazed afresh at the glory of the cross.

THE BEGINNING OF LENT

*Seeing the
Kingdom
of God*

ASH WEDNESDAY

John 3 v 1-3, 19-21

“What time is it?” I asked. “The meeting’s cancelled,” my friend replied. It wasn’t really an answer to the question I’d asked! Yet I was satisfied because my friend had rightly guessed the reason behind my question and cut straight to the point.

Something like this is going on in this exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus. John 3 might seem a peculiar place to start Lent, but it’s here that Jesus first speaks of his death and what it will achieve.

Yet at first, Jesus’ response doesn’t seem to connect with what Nicodemus has just said. Nicodemus says, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God”. And Jesus replies, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” (v 2-3).

But there’s a subtext to Nicodemus’ words. The Jews were expecting God’s Messiah, his promised Saviour-King. They were looking for God’s King to come to defeat God’s enemies and re-establish God’s kingdom over Israel. So when Nicodemus says, “We know that you are ... from God”, he’s really asking, *Are you the One who is from God? Are you the messianic King? Are you about to establish God’s kingdom?*

Jesus responds by saying people can't recognise God's King—or see God's kingdom—unless they're born again. Jesus can't engage with Nicodemus' unspoken question unless Nicodemus becomes a changed man.



We like to think of ourselves as modern people, people of reason, impartially evaluating the evidence. But the reality is we're not neutral observers and we're not impartial. We're firmly on one side—and it's the dark side.

Think about when this conversation takes place. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night because he fears exposure (v 2). Nicodemus meets Jesus in the dark and then asks why he can't see! Nicodemus is himself a picture of the answer to his question.

“Light has come into the world,” says verse 19. It's a reference to Jesus himself (1 v 9). Jesus has come, but we've chosen darkness instead of light because we're already biased against Jesus. There are two issues.

First, our deeds are evil (3 v 19). We love sin and we don't want to stop. We don't want to submit to God. In other words, we don't want Jesus as our King.

Second, we fear exposure (v 20). We're too proud to acknowledge that we need Jesus. In other words, we don't want Jesus as our Saviour.

And so we're deeply invested in rejecting Jesus. We come up with all sorts of reasons to reject him as our King and Saviour.

We're all like Nicodemus. We prefer darkness to light. We fear exposure. Underlying all our reasons for not

knowing God is the fact that we won't admit our need and we won't submit our lives. And so we need God's Spirit to recognise God's King, because we're hiding from him.

Ash Wednesday is traditionally a day for confession and repentance. Take the opportunity to confess your failure to admit your need and submit your life. Leave behind the shame and guilt and evil—and take a step into the warmth of Christ's light.

Pray

*Almighty and everlasting God,
who hatest nothing that thou hast made,
and dost forgive the sins of all them that are penitent:
Create and make in us new and contrite hearts,
that we worthily lamenting our sins,
and acknowledging our wretchedness,
may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy,
perfect remission and forgiveness;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

*The Book of Common Prayer
(Collect for Ash Wednesday)*

THURSDAY

John 3 v 3-13

I wove through the room, looking at name badges. I was supposed to be meeting someone called Robin, but I couldn't see him anywhere. Then a young woman introduced herself. Robin had been there all along, but I couldn't find her because I was expecting a man.

What did Nicodemus expect to see? He *expected* to see a king who would defeat the Romans and restore Jewish rule in Jerusalem. He expected a court, a throne, a palace, an army. He expected all the pomp and power of earthly kings.

And what *did* he see? "Signs" of God at work, yes (v 2). But where was the army, the throne, the glory? In the end, Nicodemus would see the cross (John 19 v 38-39). How could this be God's King?

The kingdom of God was standing in front of Nicodemus. But he couldn't see it because he was looking for something else. And who can blame him? Sometimes it's easy for Christians to forget just how unlikely it is that a pathetic-looking figure on a cross should be God's solution to the problems of the world.

This is why Jesus says we need to be born again (John 3 v 3). God's King confounds all our expectations. He's hidden in plain sight. And, to make matters worse, we're in the dark, hiding from God. So we need an inner transformation in order to recognise God's King.

Nicodemus takes it all very literally and starts trying to imagine a fully grown man re-entering his mother's womb (v 4)—not an image you want to linger on. But Jesus isn't talking about literal births or rebirths (v 5-7, 12). He's talking about spiritual transformation—what's known as “regeneration” (which means “rebirth”). John the Baptist has described Jesus as “the one who will baptise with the Holy Spirit” (1 v 33). John can only make someone wet on the outside. Jesus washes us clean on the inside through the Spirit.

As a Pharisee, Nicodemus assumed he had an inside track on God's kingdom. Nothing could be further from the truth. The self-reliant and self-righteous are the last people to spot the grace of God in action. Our problem cannot be solved by a little bit more moral effort. It's much more fundamental than that. And so is Jesus' solution—spiritual transformation. People (born of the flesh) don't mature into spiritual people through moral or religious improvement (3 v 6). We have to start all over again. Have you been attempting a bit of spiritual DIY lately? Put down your tools, and ask Jesus to do a complete renovation instead.

“What our Lord wants us to present to him,” said the 19th-century preacher Oswald Chambers, “is not goodness, nor honesty, nor endeavour, but real, solid sin: that

is all he can take from us. And what does he give in exchange for our sin? Real, solid righteousness.”

Look at the cross *without* new birth, and you see another victim of Roman violence. Look at the cross as someone who is being remade by the Spirit, and you see God’s King winning a victory of love.

Pray

*Give me a sight, O Saviour,
Of thy wondrous love to me,
Of the love that brought thee down to earth,
To die on Calvary.*

*O make me understand it,
Help me to take it in,
What it meant to thee, the holy One,
To bear away my sin.*

*Then melt my heart, O Saviour,
Bend me, yes, break me down,
Until I own thee Conqueror,
And Lord and Sovereign crown.*

Katharine Agnes May Kelly (1869-1942)



FRIDAY
John 3 v 14-16

"The Son of Man must be lifted up." This sounds more promising. After all, "lifted up" is the language of ascension. Monarchs "ascend" to the throne. They're "exalted"—quite literally, for thrones are set on platforms so that, even when the king is seated, he's above everyone else. Members of the royal family are addressed as "Your royal highness". These people are "high".

And God's King will be lifted up too. But when Jesus speaks of being lifted up, he has something very different in mind from the normal pomp of earthly kings. The parallel is not a king on a throne, but a snake on a stick!

Jesus is alluding to a story from the time of Moses (Numbers 21 v 4-9). God had rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt. But in the wilderness they grew impatient with God. "They spoke against God," we're told. So God sent venomous snakes among them. It didn't take long before the people confessed their sin and asked Moses to intercede.

The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and

live.” So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

(Numbers 21 v 8-9)

The rebellion of the Israelites was a picture of the rebellion of all humanity. We too “speak against God” and we too face his judgment. But God is gracious. Just as the snake was lifted up, so Jesus says he will be lifted up on the cross.

John elaborates: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3 v 16). Here is the meaning of the cross.

- *The cross is God’s love for the world.*
- *The cross is God giving his one and only Son.*
- *The cross is God rescuing us from judgment so that we need not perish.*
- *The cross is God making it possible for us to receive eternal life.*

Sin is like the venom of those snakes, infecting all humanity, flowing through our blood, as it were. And the prognosis is death. But at the cross, Christ absorbed the venom of sin in full. He drew it out onto himself, so that he perished and we receive eternal life.

Of course, this story is not the first time we meet a snake in the Bible. Back in the Garden of Eden it was Satan in the form of a serpent who tempted Adam and Eve to rebel against God. But God promised that a son of Adam would crush the serpent and reverse his work.

It was this promise that was paraded on Moses' pole. And it's this promise that was fulfilled at the cross. Jesus absorbed Satan's venom, disarmed his power and set us free.

Perhaps, as you read, you long to know God, but you're wondering whether you've really been born again—doubts creep and clamour inside your mind. Or perhaps you feel as if you're in a losing battle with your sin—you long to change, but you question whether all this Christian stuff is really making a difference.

If that's how you feel, take heart. Those longings may well be a sign of the transforming work of the Spirit. Your focus should not be on the work of the Spirit, which you can't see (v 8). Instead, look to the work of Jesus, which you *can* see—Christ lifted up on the cross, for you (v 14-15).

Meditate

This story is a type of the whole mystery of the incarnation. For the serpent signifies bitter and deadly sin, which was devouring the whole race on the earth ... biting the soul of man and infusing it with the venom of wickedness. And there is no way that we could have escaped being conquered by it, except by the relief that comes only from heaven. The Word of God then was made in the likeness of sinful flesh, "that he might condemn sin in the flesh," as it is written [in Romans 8 v 3].

Cyril of Alexandria (c. 376-444)

SATURDAY

John 3 v 17-18

I was once driving through Pennsylvania when I saw a huge model mushroom. It was raised on a pole so that no passerby could possibly miss Kennett Square, the self-proclaimed “Mushroom Capital of the World”. Of course, what happens next depends on whether you like mushrooms.

We lift things up so we can see them. This conversation with Nicodemus started with Jesus saying, “No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again”. What does the kingdom of God look like? The Jews thought it would look like a blaze of glory, the defeat of God’s enemies and the vindication of God’s people. But, no, that’s not what it really looks like—at least, not yet. First it looks like a man on a cross.

One day the kingdom of God will indeed involve the defeat of God’s enemies. The problem is we’re all God’s enemies. In fact, we’re “condemned already” by our unbelief (v 18). But God is gracious. And so first the King comes not to defeat, but *to be defeated* in our place. Verse 17 puts it like this: “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him”.

That's why in verse 14 Jesus doesn't simply say he *will* be lifted up. He says he *must* be lifted up. Why was the bronze snake lifted up? So that everyone could see it and be healed.

Imagine you're an Israelite, lying in your tent. Your leg is swollen from a snake bite and the venom is attacking your vital organs. Then someone shouts, "The bronze snake is coming!" What happens next all depends on your faith. You might say, "What good is a fake snake? Leave me alone to die." Or you might say, "I trust God's promise, so I'm going to drag my body out to see and live".

In the same way, people are saved from eternal death by looking to the death of Jesus on the cross. Jesus was lifted up publicly so that it would be written into the annals of history that Jesus died on a cross. But what happens next depends on your faith in God's promises. Three times John 3 emphasises that it's faith in Jesus that leads to eternal life:

- *"Everyone who believes may have eternal life in him" (v 15).*
- *"Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (v 16).*
- *"Whoever believes in him is not condemned" (v 18).*

Here's the problem. What do we see when we look at the cross? Humanly speaking, we see a pathetic figure dying in shame and defeat. We don't see God's King. We don't see God's Son. And that's why we need the Spirit to open our eyes—so we see our King and the glory of his love. "The soul is drawn by love," wrote

the 4th-century bishop Augustine. “Not necessity but pleasure; not obligation but delight” (Tractates on the Gospel of John 26.4). Marvel for a moment that this is the means God has chosen!

How does *this passage* end? “Whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God” (v 21).

And how does *this story* end? With a changed life. In John 7 v 50-51 Nicodemus publicly defends Jesus, even though he gets mocked as a result. And, after the crucifixion, a disciple named Joseph gets permission to bury Jesus, and is “accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night” (19 v 39). Nicodemus, the man who visited Jesus in secret, goes public. He risks all to bury Jesus. He is a man made new. He has been born again.

Will you, like Nicodemus, take a risk to honour Jesus today?

Pray

*Lord, I was blind; I could not see
In thy marred visage any grace,
But now the beauty of thy face
In radiant vision dawns on me.*

*Lord, I was deaf; I could not hear
The thrilling music of thy voice;
But now I hear thee and rejoice,
And all thine uttered words are dear!*

*Lord, I was dumb; I could not speak
The grace and glory of thy name;
But now, as touched with living flame,
My lips thine eager praises make.*

William Tidd Matson (1833-1899)