



THE
CROSS
BEFORE ME

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REIMAGINING
THE WAY TO THE
GOOD LIFE

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DAVID  COOK

transforming lives together

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THE CROSS AND THE ART OF HUMAN FLOURISHING

We all live with the objective of being happy, our lives are all different and yet the same.

Anne Frank, *Diary of a Young Girl*

All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end.

Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

We all want to be happy, but we don't know what will make us happy, and our intuitions about what will lead to our happiness are often entirely wrong. This book asks a strange question: What does

the cross have to teach us about happiness and the art of living the good and beautiful life?

In the ancient world the cross was an instrument of torture—of suffering, humiliation, and death. It was not venerated; it was feared. No one wanted to commemorate it, much less wear it as a symbol around one's neck. It was too painful, too shameful.

Death by crucifixion was so agonizing that a new word was coined to describe it: *excruciating*. The sight of crosses lining the Roman roads leading into the capital city would have evoked dread and terror in the imaginations of first-century men and women.¹

Today the cross is the most iconic religious symbol in the world, revered by Christians as the instrument of human salvation and celebrated as the place where Jesus died to take away the sin of the world. It decorates hills and homes, biceps and necklines.

But what if the cross is more than we realize? What if the cross is not just a memorial of the world's most important event but also a revelation of God's wisdom for this world here and now? What if the cross is a perpetual challenge to our notions of glory and greatness and an ongoing indictment of our most ingrained ways of thinking and valuing? What if God's way for a human life to flourish is the cruciform way?

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CRUCIFORM LIFE

Cruciform, we said in the introduction, is a word taken from the context of architecture. Many older cathedrals and church

buildings were designed in such a way that their footprint made the shape of a cross with an extended sanctuary flanked by wings near the front for additional seating. *Cruciform* simply means in the shape of a cross.

The thesis of this book is that God's way to human flourishing is the cruciform way. The good and beautiful life is the cruciform life, a life not only saved by but also shaped by the cross. This is the unique and unheralded path to the life we have always wanted. It is the way to what Jesus calls the blessed life (Matt. 5:3) and what Paul calls "the life that is truly life" (1 Tim. 6:19 NIV). The cross of Jesus has something to teach everyone created in God's image, which is every one of us, about the art of living as our Maker intended us to live.

That might sound intriguing, even oddly beautiful. But most of us don't believe it, not really. If we did, instead of dreading what disappointed us, we'd embrace unmet expectations as moving us further along. "Thank you," we would say to anything that humbled us. Failure would become a friend, and our egos would become our enemies. The cross is God's *strange* way. It shows us we have to lose the life we've always thought we needed in order to find the life we've always wanted.

This theme of the cruciform life is ancient and biblical, but for the most part it has disappeared from our literature and language today, even from our churches. This is not surprising in a culture that cherishes self-expression and promotes radical individualism, that prizes comfort and safety and health (and for which these are more accessible than at any other time in history). The scandal of the cross today is that it has ceased to be a scandal.

Yet the vision of the cruciform life has historically captured the imaginations of some of our best artists. It's the story line of one of the world's greatest poems, *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri. And it inspired the book that for a thousand years was second only to the Bible as the most read book in the world: *The Consolation of Philosophy*. (It had quite a run at the top of the charts, but it doesn't sound as if it would be a bestseller today, does it?) It was written by the most famous man of the sixth century: Boethius (Bo-EE-thee-us). Here's his story.²

HOW BOETHIUS CAN SAVE YOUR LIFE

Boethius was born into a noble family, but both of his parents died when he was young. He was adopted into another family of prestige, wealth, and influence. He became an accomplished scholar. It is because of his translations that we have some of Aristotle's works still with us today. Then he became a celebrated statesman, widely respected for his political savvy. And he married well—his wife was universally admired for her character and pedigree.

He received the highest honors of the state. Boethius was named *magister officiorum*, kind of like prime minister. He had two sons, and he saw them grow into honorable men and achieve some measure of his own success. These two brothers were named joint consuls at a young age. Their proud father gave the speech that day.

Are you getting the picture? Whatever you're good at, Boethius was better. Whatever you've achieved, he did more. He was the most accomplished man of his time—musician, poet, politician, scholar,

orator. Here is a man who seemingly had it all. He was successful in every way possible. We don't even have a category for this kind of success today. It would be like Michael Jordan winning the Nobel Prize in Literature *and* a Congressional Medal of Honor *and* then becoming a beloved president, complete with a family everyone admired. Boethius is the original *most interesting man in the world*.

Yet less than a year after presiding over his sons' public inauguration, Boethius found himself in a solitary jail cell 350 miles from home. He had been the victim of an unjust smear campaign by his understandably envious rivals. He was falsely accused and then stripped of his honor, wealth, and friends. He was sentenced to death. Maybe this does have the makings of a bestseller after all. Except the plot doesn't turn the way we'd expect.

His book *The Consolation of Philosophy* opens with Boethius in prison. He is distraught, indignant over the injustice of it all, and consumed with self-pity. The heartbroken man is visited in jail by a vision of one whom he calls "Lady Philosophy," and she becomes his guide. Over the course of his book, Boethius learns that he had indeed suffered a great tragedy but that his greatest tragedy was not the loss of his reputation, wealth, or honor.

Boethius's guide leads him to see an even graver concern—one that it took this adversity to open his eyes to. Lady Philosophy shows him that his prosperity and his success, his victories and his gains, his personal glory and his public acclaim, had all led him to forget what is most important. Lady Philosophy leads Boethius to the realization that his "highest good" and "the hinge on which the greatest happiness turns"³ is God. But the journey to this realization is a difficult

one. We need God's help even to see God as our good. So Lady Philosophy sings a beautiful song asking for God's help—the God who brought forth the world out of his perfect love and in whose goodness all things have their good. She sings that the desire of every human being is to behold the majesty of God:

To the blessed who alone behold
it, you are the sole serene
goal in which we may rest, satisfied and tranquil,
and to see your face is our only
hunger, our only thirst,
for you are our beginning, our
journey, and our end.⁴

Later, she sings, “How happy is mankind, if the love that orders the stars above rules, too, in your hearts.”⁵ Happiness is knowing and being known by the God of the universe.

This wise guide was not the first and neither will she be the last to sing this song. Many of our best artists, philosophers, and theologians throughout the centuries have defined happiness in this way. From Augustine to Aquinas, from John Calvin to Jonathan Edwards, from John Donne to John Owen, the definition of happiness is to know and delight in our Maker; it is to see God's face and so give him the glory he alone deserves (Isa. 42:8).

This is what we were made for, and this is precisely what we see throughout the Bible (Ps. 27:4; 105:4; 1 Cor. 13:12; 1 John 3:2). It is, in fact, the culmination toward which the whole biblical narrative

builds. The book of Revelation ends with a picture of God dwelling with humanity. The end, quite literally, is communion with God (21:1–5). God’s final intent is his original intent, and the unfolding story of the Bible describes the lengths to which God went in Christ to restore the communion that was lost in Eden.

If happiness is communion with God, no external event or circumstance can take this living hope away from us. That’s what Boethius learned through what he suffered and lost. *Communion with God is humanity’s highest privilege*. It is the great end to which all our teaching must point, to which creation and redemption are but the path.⁶ “There is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Ps. 73:25–26). But how can this song become our song?

Communion with God is happiness, Boethius learned. But how can we attain this communion? What words must we speak, what deeds must we perform, and what sacrifices must we make to reach this level of bliss? Some have thought that we can know God only by ascending to him through contemplation and purity or other efforts.⁷ But God did not wait for us to become worthy and ascend to him. We cannot, for our sin separates us from him absolutely.

Instead, out of love God descended to become one of us.

THE STRANGE GLORY OF THE CROSS

Christians believe that Jesus reveals the character of God. John 1:18 says that Jesus has “made ... known” the God whom no one

has seen or can see. The Greek word for “made known” is where we get our English word *exegete*, which means “to interpret” or “to explain.” This is John’s poetic way of saying that Jesus shows us God’s character, and it is the ground of the distinctly Christian claim that “the glory of God” is revealed “in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

“It is a strange glory, the glory of this God,” the German pastor-theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached to a London audience in 1933.⁸ God’s divine glory did not appear in a way we would expect. Jesus entered the world not with the pomp and splendor of a ruling king but in humility, “taking the form of a servant” (Phil. 2:7), even washing feet (John 13:1–9). He practiced the way of faithful obedience all the way through suffering death, “even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8), where he was finally given a crown and enthroned as a king with a sign over his head to prove it: “The King of the Jews” (John 19:19).

It’s possible to read the gospel stories and conclude that Jesus’ glory was in spite of the cross, that he endured the cross on his way to the *real* glory. But it would be more accurate, more biblical, to say that Jesus’ glory was not in spite of the cross but through it. A strange glory indeed.⁹ The cross was not *on the way to* glory but was integral to it, because the cross is where we see the fullest expression of God’s self-giving love for us. God was most glorified when the Son of God was crucified (John 12:27–33).¹⁰ This is a strange glory because it contradicts our expectations of what glory looks like and what God should be. As the apostle Paul observes in 1 Corinthians, the cross looks like foolishness to

us. It offends our sensibilities. Yet this is exactly how God chose to reveal himself—not according to worldly wisdom but in the folly of the cross (1:18–21). Paul wrote these words to the church in Corinth, which was an ancient metropolis very much like Los Angeles, where we have written this book.

THE CORINTHIAN WAY

Corinth was a prosperous commercial crossroads, a port city located on a major east-west trade route. It had been sacked by Rome in 146 BC but refounded a hundred years later as a Roman colony. It was quickly repopulated with former slaves and freemen who saw in the new city new opportunities for social and economic advancement, opportunities not available in more settled cities like Rome. Hypersexualized and religiously pluralistic, it was home to dozens of temples, statues, and monuments, including a temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, on a high hill overlooking the city.

As a young city, Corinth was home to the upwardly mobile and those looking to make a fresh start. And because most of its citizens were not highborn, Corinth was very status conscious and status aware. People were obsessed with appearance, self-promotion and publicity, and given to boasting, which is why the word *boast* appears frequently in Paul's letters to that city.

Corinth was cosmopolitan, diverse in every way, materialistic, highly competitive, hungry for status, with an inflated emphasis on perception and recognition, resulting in widespread insecurity

born of constant comparison. They even carved their names in the stones of the city in a desperate plea to be remembered.¹¹

That was Corinth, but it sounds exactly like our city. The values of self-promotion and materialism and the practice of jockeying for power and popularity are deeply entrenched in the American way. It's all about what's bigger, newer, shinier.

THE WORD OF THE CROSS

To the community of Christ followers in that city, believers who had grown up swimming in Corinthian culture and values, Paul wrote the letter we call 1 Corinthians. A surface reading of the letter suggests the major issue confronting that church was disunity (1:10). But the deeper issue was that though they had heard the gospel of Jesus, their values and aspirations were still under the sway of their old Corinthian way. "Are you not being merely human?" Paul asks his readers (3:4). The saints in Corinth had more of Corinth in them than they had of Christ.

In effect, Paul is saying, "The gospel you have chosen to believe has not yet done its deep work. It has not captured your imaginations, the eyes of your hearts. You say you belong to Christ, but you are still living like Corinthians. You are still valuing what Corinthians value. You are still concerned about what Corinthians are concerned about. You are still measuring yourself against those old markers. You are still looking for status in all those old, merely human ways of success and power and wealth." Their real issue was continuing captivity to their

culture's values, even within the church, and disunity was just the symptom.

We might wonder whether Paul was writing to ancient people or to us. Don't we still measure ourselves, compare ourselves, and seek status and recognition in all the old ways, as opposed to boasting only in the cross of Christ?

Yet the gospel, which Paul called "the word of the cross" (1:18), is actually promoting a whole new way of being—in Corinth or Los Angeles or wherever you live. Everything you once sought and valued must now be reinterpreted in light of the cross. That's what Paul was telling his status-seeking, competitive, anxious, and insecure readers. Christ's people are to model a new way of being human, where the old markers of success not only no longer count but also have been exposed as foolishness. So, what does the cross have to teach us about the art of living? For the apostle of the crucified Lord, the answer is *everything*.

We opened *The Cross Before Me* with Dr. Santos saying, "Our intuitions about what will make us happy ... are totally wrong."¹² But two thousand years before this professor spoke to her crowded lecture hall, the apostle Paul says virtually the same thing to a group of status-seeking Christians prone to boast in all the wrong things. Paul's point in 1 Corinthians is that the wisdom of God is to be found in the word of the cross.

God's way to the flourishing life, to the life that is truly life, is the cruciform way. We are prone to miss this, and we'd suggest that a Christian culture that prizes size, strength, and prosperity

most often will miss it (and not just the obvious examples of prosperity preachers).¹³

Not only is the cross the instrument of human salvation; it is also the pattern for our lives here and now. The apostle Paul was saying in 1 Corinthians that the cross is more than a means of personal redemption—it shows us what it means to live a fully human life.

Where did Paul get such a counterintuitive idea? From the life and lips of his Master.

JESUS: TRUE GOD, TRUE HUMANITY

Jesus Christ, by his life, in his death, and through his resurrection, shows us what it means to live a fully human life. The Bible says that every human being is created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). The Bible also says that Jesus is the perfect image of God (Col. 1:15). So when we wonder what it means to be created in the image of God, above all, Jesus shows us.¹⁴

Christians are familiar with the idea that Jesus shows us who God is. But seldom do we realize that Jesus also shows us what humanity was created to be.

Not only is Jesus fully God, but Jesus is also fully human. He is what the theologian Karl Barth once called “the real man.”¹⁵ Not only does Jesus show us what the proverbial real man looks like. He also shows us what Everyman, each man and each woman, was created by God to be. Jesus Christ defines the fully human life for everyone created in God’s image—that is, for every human being.

“Not only do we know God by Jesus Christ alone, but we know ourselves only by Jesus Christ.”¹⁶

If that weren't controversial enough, there's something even more challenging to our sensibilities. If Jesus shows us what humanity was created to be, then it's worth asking, *What character traits, ambitions, and values shaped Jesus' life? What does a fully human life look like?*

Jesus lived a life marked by humility. We don't typically associate humility with happiness or flourishing, yet Jesus tells us, “Learn from Me, for I am ... humble,” and to this exhortation is attached a promise: “And you will find rest for your souls” (Matt. 11:29 NASB). Jesus could have selected any virtue for us to learn from him, for he possessed them all in perfect measure. But he singled out one above all. If we would find rest for our souls, then we must learn humility from him.

Jesus' life was marked by a compassion that placed the needs of others above self-concern. Compassion might sound okay, but if it means serving others in ways that inconvenience us, perhaps we would rather stay at home. Yet Jesus singled out compassionate service as the measure of a person's greatness. He told his self-seeking disciples that “whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant” (Mark 10:43 NASB).

Jesus deliberately eschewed fame and praise. We tend to be overly concerned with our reputations and care deeply what others think of us. Yet not only did Jesus ignore his reputation, but he “made himself of no reputation” (Phil. 2:7 KJV). It's not simply that he didn't seek the praise of others (John 5:44); he deliberately

sought to make himself a person of no reputation. This is the very opposite of reputation building. It moves beyond self-forgetfulness to self-renunciation.

Above all, Jesus' life was marked by suffering, from start to finish. This is the most difficult pill for us to swallow, for who would consider suffering to be a defining feature of a good life? We actively avoid suffering. We prefer comfort. Yet Jesus was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isa. 53:3). He didn't deserve his suffering—it certainly wasn't a result of disobeying God. Instead, it was precisely his obedience to God that led him down a way of suffering, to "death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8). The Bible even calls Jesus' life of suffering "fitting" (Heb. 2:10), necessary for him to sympathize with us (4:14–15), and integral to his learning (5:8).

All these characteristics—his humility, compassion, service, renunciation of his will, and suffering—come together in the cross. Jesus' whole life was oriented toward a cross. He "set his face" toward it (Luke 9:51). "For this purpose I have come to this hour" (John 12:27). It wasn't just the culmination of his life; it was the *pattern* from start to finish. "His whole life was nothing else than a kind of perpetual cross."¹⁷

So if Jesus shows us life as God intended humans to live it, then we can see in Jesus' life that the way for a human life to flourish is the way of humility, compassion, service, and self-sacrifice. Happiness is found in the path of consciously making yourself of no reputation, even the path of pain and suffering. For Jesus this is the way to a fully human life: the way of the cross.

FINDING THE GOOD AND THE BEAUTIFUL IN THE CROSS

Ah, but does this sound like the good life to you? If we're honest, we would probably admit it sounds neither beautiful nor good. We might pay lip service and agree that the above virtues should be part of a good Christian life. But so few of us seem to believe that this path—what Thérèse of Lisieux once called the “little way”¹⁸—leads to the life we long for. If we did, our fears (what we are afraid of losing) and our ambitions (what we aspire to) would look very different.

We want to be careful to point out that this book is not a call to self-improvement. Jesus is not calling us to a new moral or religious program. He is calling us to himself. He has united us to himself if we belong to him. He is calling us to the fullest measure of life and happiness, of knowing and being known, of loving and being loved, of living in communion with him and his Father by his Spirit. This is the deepest fulfillment of our nature because this is what we were made for. Jesus blazed the trail, and his life shaped the path.

This book is also not about the imitation of Christ. Imitating Christ is impossible if our faith isn't grounded in our union with him. We press on into this new life from a position of confidence and security “in Christ,” to use a frequent designation in the Bible of those who belong to Jesus. “Every spiritual blessing” is already ours if our lives are united to Christ (Eph. 1:3). We participate in Christ's life, death, and resurrection. If we are united to him, all

that belongs to him now belongs to us. Imitation without participation is not life-giving. It's exhausting. It's just religious moralism.

This is a book about how we grow deeper and deeper experientially into the love of God. The way of the cross is not how we justify our lives before God. Jesus has already done that for us. This is a book about the way we move further up and further into this reality. It is not possible to make God love us more. But we can grow in our understanding of the love of God that's already ours.¹⁹

In terms of Boethius's story, didn't he already have the consolation of God's presence before he lost everything and entered that jail cell? Yes! But as Lady Philosophy pointed out, Boethius had forgotten who he was and what he was made for. It was only through his loss and deprivation, through his pain and humiliation, that he discovered what had been true from the beginning. It was when he saw God as the hinge of his happiness that he began to see clearly.

RIGHT-SIDE-UP THINKING

If we approach the way of Jesus as a moral, religious, or spiritual program to improve ourselves, we are bound to fail. It is a problem of motivation—that is, what moves the will. *Why* should we practice humility and service? *Why* be compassionate? *Why* be patient in suffering? *Why* pursue this cruciform life? If it's just a matter of following orders, this sounds like a pretty grim life indeed.

The best and truest reason for following the way of the cross is that it leads us to the deepest reality of things: Jesus and his

kingdom. In being conformed to the cruciform life, we are being conformed to the very heart of God, a God of self-giving love. The entire world is a gift of that love. And the cross supremely reveals that love to us. The cross is the means by which “the love that orders the stars above,” to quote Boethius, rules in our hearts.²⁰ This is the way—walk in it!

We can talk about the ways the cross turns our world upside down. It certainly does overturn our expectations. But in truth the cross actually turns the world right side up.

The cross shows us the rhythm of the way things were made to be. This is what C. S. Lewis in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* describes as “deeper magic from before the dawn of time.”²¹ The cross undoes the curse of sin and sets us free—free in relation to God, his world, other people, and ourselves.

As the cross invites us to reimagine the good life, it calls us to be displaced from the center of our own lives: the cross before *me*. And as we keep the cross before us, this vision renews our minds and transforms our wills until we see ourselves correctly. Humility, compassion, service, and self-sacrifice start to seem self-evident: *of course* this is what the good life looks like! And of course suffering is necessary to wean us from our self-reliance.²² The cross tells the enduring true story of how new life comes. Only by losing our old way of life will we find new life.

By contrast, a life oriented around myself, with myself as my final goal, starts to show itself for what it really is: a distortion of the kind of life for which I was made. In this old way of thinking, *of course* the cross looks foolish to us. It looks foolish because *we*

are foolish. Self-centered lives are sad and wasted lives. This offends us. It wounds our pride to hear that our very best, our greatest accomplishments, and our most sincere efforts often are moving us further away from a happiness we can rest in. This cruciform call offends us because, while we do want goodness and love, we want it on our terms.

Reflecting on why he believed in Jesus, the poet W. H. Auden writes, “I believe because He fulfills none of my dreams, because He is in every respect the opposite of what He would be if I could have made Him in my own image... Why Jesus and not Socrates or Buddha or Confucius or Mahomet?... None of the others arouse *all* sides of my being to cry ‘Crucify Him.’”²³

The way of the cross is not the popular way. Thus, to write in praise of the cruciform life brings distinct risks. It can be easy to write about the cross in a way that is dour, grim, dark, pessimistic, life-denying. Perhaps that’s why we often hear “Take up your cross” as a burden rather than an invitation. It can sound like a belittlement of life rather than its flourishing. This is why we need to begin with a clear sense of what the cruciform way is ultimately aiming at: flourishing—even joy!

Perhaps our reluctance is less because this way is asking too much of us and more because we expect too little of the new life God has for us. In his book *The Sickness unto Death*, Søren Kierkegaard writes, “There is so much talk about being offended by Christianity because it is so dark and gloomy, offended because it is so rigorous etc., but it would be best of all to explain for once that the real reason that men are offended by Christianity is that it

is too high, because its goal is not man's goal, because it wants to make man into something so extraordinary that he cannot grasp the thought."²⁴

The Christian story proposes something that is too high to believe. It's hard for us to believe that God could be so good that his glory and our joy could be intertwined, that, as the early Christian thinker Irenaeus puts it, "the glory of God is a human being fully alive."²⁵ Rather than tearing the human being down, the cross elevates the human being nearly beyond imagining.

A WISDOM CONTEST

We are not so different from the people in Corinth. We too are asking the way to the happiness we seek. We too are in a wisdom contest. We too are surrounded by competing stories of the good life and rival visions of happiness. All our public debates on hot-button issues are at their roots about how to flourish as human beings. And we are all participating in this contest through the choices we make and the values we prefer. This contest can be contentious, even overwhelming.

But this contest is perennial. Humans everywhere and at all times have looked for happiness. And throughout history we have sought it in familiar places: money, success, power, fame, health, beauty, and pleasure.²⁶ These can be good things in themselves, but they don't add up to happiness—not even when all achieved together (see Boethius). Our best wisdom teachers have long tried to tell us this, and scientists are now confirming empirically that

our most common assumptions about what will make us happy are often entirely wrong.²⁷

So what is the hinge on which all true happiness turns? Boethius discovered the song we need to hear again today: flourishing is found in God alone.

This book is about the distinctly Christian way to taste God's full and free life until we see his face. It is a strange glory, but it's the only way home.