

“Whether you find the cross of Christ a bit of puzzle or you want your heart to be filled with wonder all over again, *The Cross in Four Words* is a great book to go to. It’s short and simple, but it takes us deep into the heart of the mystery of God’s reconciling love.”

**Tim Chester**, Pastor, Grace Church, Boroughbridge, UK; Faculty Member, Crosslands Training; Author, *Enjoying God*

“This is a really helpful book that I will be sharing widely. I read it in a single sitting and took a lot of notes.”

**Alistair Begg**, Senior Pastor, Parkside Church, Cleveland, Ohio; Author, *Pray Big*

“We should never stop coming to the cross, marvelling at the wonder and kindness of God’s plan of salvation. This important and accessible book helps us to do just that. It gives a spur to cross-shaped thinking and living that we are so in need of today and always.”

**Alex Weston**, Senior Female Students Pastor, St Andrew the Great Church, Cambridge, UK

“The idea that God’s wrath against our sin has to be poured out on his own Son is despised and ridiculed today. Yet it is the non-negotiable heart of the Christian gospel. In this book this great central truth is both defended and gloried in. It will sharpen your thinking and warm your heart. Highly recommended.”

**Paul Mallard**, Pastor, Widcombe Baptist Church, Bath, UK

“Amid the plethora of material available on the theme of salvation in Christian theology, this little book stands out. It is a superb biblical theology in summary form of what God has done in and through Jesus Christ. It is refreshing to see complex theological categories such as redemption, justification and propitiation presented unapologetically and yet in such an accessible way. All three contributors bring a wonderfully fresh and insightful approach. I enthusiastically recommend *The Cross in Four Words* to Christians and local churches both as a discipleship resource and as an excellent evangelistic tool.”

**Edwin Ewart**, Principal, The Irish Baptist College

“This brilliant short book is at once deeply biblical and intensely practical, easily read, heart-warming and challenging: characteristic of each of the contributors’ ministries. The cross is clearly explained and mission is faithfully defined and sharply applied—each peppered with great and fresh illustrations. This little book is excellent and worth bulk buying to give to new and older Christians alike. I love it and benefitted from it. It has caused me to praise God, again, for Christ’s cross!”

**Trevor Johnston**, Rector, All Saints’ Church, Belfast, UK; Chair, Irish Men’s Convention

“If we forget the cross—or fail to understand our desperate need of its reconciling work—we will lose our joy. *The Cross in Four Words* redirects our gaze to “Christ crucified,” reminding us of the love that bore our sin so that we might experience true freedom, forgiveness, justice, and purpose. This helpful book will refresh your heart and renew your mind in the wonder of such a great salvation.”

**Melissa Kruger**, Director of Content, The Gospel Coalition;  
Author, *The Envy of Eve*



Freedom

Forgiveness

Justice

Purpose



THE CROSS  
IN FOUR WORDS

The Cross in Four Words  
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Published by:  
The Good Book Company



thegoodbook.com | www.thegoodbook.co.uk  
thegoodbook.com.au | thegoodbook.co.nz | thegoodbook.co.in

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Chapters 1 and 3 published in association with the literary agency of Wolgemuth & Associates.

ISBN: 9781784985226 | Printed in the UK

Design by André Parker

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# INTRODUCTION

## RICHARD COEKIN

The preaching and ministry of the early Christians were dominated by one theme: “Christ crucified”.

But proclaiming “Christ crucified” in the first century sounded absurd. “Christ” means “anointed one” and refers to God’s chosen Saviour King, promised long ago by his Old Testament prophets, and expected to arrive with irresistible power and glory. But “crucified” refers to the Roman punishment of criminals by crucifixion—designed to be the most hideously cruel and obscenely humiliating death imaginable. To proclaim “Christ crucified” sounded ridiculous—like advertising “dry water”.

In fact, the apostle Paul himself describes this message as a “stumbling-block” (something disgusting) to those from his own Jewish background and “foolishness” (something insane) to those from other nations:

*Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and*

*foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.* (1 Corinthians 1 v 22-24)<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the message of Christ crucified remains a stumbling-block and foolishness in the world around us today.

Back then, Paul says, “Jews demand[ed] signs” because they respected impressive power and influence. They longed for a mighty warrior to liberate them from Roman occupation and they loved their spectacular temple religion. It’s similar today. Our world ranks people by their social power and influence and by what they earn or own. Our culture is fascinated by celebrities and royalty. Our chat shows feature people because they’re famous, not because they’re good. And those from religious backgrounds tend to admire leaders who are powerful and popular, like the Pope. It’s as difficult now as it was in Paul’s day to admire a man who thought he had to die in agony and degradation on a cross for our sins. And it’s hard to respect the churches who proclaim him. Then and now, the message of Christ crucified seems an offensive stumbling-block to many.

And back then, Paul says, “Greeks look[ed] for wisdom” because the Greco-Roman world respected impressive learning that brings successful living. The culture of the day fostered admiration for religious philosophers who were brilliant scholars and entertaining orators. Again, things are not so different today. Our world admires distinguished education and eminent qualifications. We prefer spiritual

<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, Bible quotations are taken from the NIV.

gurus who write bestselling books promising wellbeing without challenging our morality, like the Dalai Lama. It's as counter-cultural now as it was then to admire a tradesman from Galilee who warns of hell and divides public opinion. And many find it hard to respect Christians who follow him. Then and now, the message of Christ crucified seems like insane foolishness to many.

For example, the brilliant but atheistic Oxford biologist, Richard Dawkins, writes about Jesus' death in his bestselling book, *The God Delusion*, in these scornful terms:

*"I have described atonement, the central doctrine of Christianity, as vicious, sadomasochistic and repellent. We should also dismiss it as barking mad." (page 253)*

God's "atonement", his reconciliation of sinners to himself on the cross, is clearly a stumbling-block and foolishness to Dawkins. He hasn't realised that the cross isn't about God being horribly "sadomasochistic"—inviting pain because he likes it—but wonderfully self-sacrificial for others. He hasn't realised that the cross is not revealing God as "barking mad" but as passionately loving.

Christ crucified will always be a stumbling-block and foolishness to many—perhaps offensive and ridiculous to some of our family, or pathetic and stupid to some of our friends. And yet Christ crucified is what they need to hear about more than anything else. Because Paul goes on to explain that God has deliberately chosen the crucifixion of Christ as the means of our salvation in order to contradict

and shame our proud assumptions about ourselves. He always planned to reveal his divine power and wisdom in a salvation that seems strange and confusing to us, so that we have to abandon our self-confidence and trust him instead. Paul says the message of “Christ crucified” is actually “the power of God and wisdom of God”—his effective and coherent way to save people from all nations who turn from sin to trust in Jesus.

### **THE CROSS THROUGHOUT THE SCRIPTURES**

Many Christians may feel familiar with the basics of Christ crucified. But the more we can understand about the cross, the more we’ll delight in God’s amazing grace, and the better we’ll be able to explain it to unbelieving family, friends and colleagues.

Christ crucified is central to Christianity. The cross is the purpose of creation and the turning point of history, the climax of Scripture and the heart of our faith. It is the highest revelation of God’s glory and the deepest joy of our eternity—for ever stirring the vast crowds of heaven to worship the Lamb of God who was slain (Revelation 5 v 6-10)!

And the cross saturates the pages of Scripture from start to finish. For example, one word used for the cross (translated “cross” in Acts 10 v 39 and “pole” in Galatians 3 v 13) is also used at the beginning of Scripture, in the Garden of Eden, for the “tree of life” keeping God’s people alive (Genesis 2 v 9). At the end, in Revelation 22 v 2, in

a beautiful vision of God's new creation, the same "tree of life" is there to heal and sustain God's people for ever. This language points to the fact that Christ crucified is the centre of everything.

Surveying the whole of Scripture, we find that by his death, Christ has glorified his Father in many marvellous ways—too many to describe in detail here. For example, his death completed an exemplary Christian life that shows us how to live. His death disarmed Satan's claims upon us by suffering the penalty we deserve under God's law. And his death has saved us into a new humanity.

But the supreme accomplishment of Jesus' death was in satisfying God's holy justice. He accepted onto himself, like a lightning conductor, all God's anger against our sin. By faith in him, our sin is no longer counted against us.

The background which explains this wondrous accomplishment is found in three unfolding themes, beautiful crimson threads, flowing throughout the Old Testament. This is why the risen Jesus himself turned to the Old Testament to explain his death to his bewildered disciples on the road to the village of Emmaus:

*"How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.*

*(Luke 24 v 25-27)*

Paul, too, emphasised the importance of the cross in the Scriptures when he wrote:

*For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance:  
that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.*

*(1 Corinthians 15 v 3)*

We will marvel more at the beauty of the cross, and be able to explain “Christ crucified” more clearly to others, when we follow these three crimson threads through the Old Testament to discover how the death of Christ brings us *freedom, forgiveness and justice*.

## **FREEDOM**

Most people long for freedom of some kind—perhaps freedom from social constraints, political oppression or personal addictions. But the Scriptures reveal that true freedom begins with liberation from sin in order to serve God—through the sacrificial death of Jesus. This is called “redemption”.

The background to our redemption for freedom is found in the account of the Passover in Exodus 12. Here we learn how God redeemed his people from slavery to Pharaoh and from the danger of death through the blood of a lamb, giving them the joyful freedom of worshipping him.

This points forward to the cross, where God redeemed us from slavery to sin through the blood of Jesus. The cross gains for us the joyful freedom of worshipping him with our whole lives.