CRUCIFORM
LIVING THE CROSS-SHAPED LIFE
Jimmy Davis
Christine: The way you live—denying yourself daily, taking up your cross, and faithfully following Jesus—paints a God-glorifying portrait of the Cruciform Life.

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“Cruciform is built on sound theology that has been tested in the crucible of life and found to be true. This book will be a help to everyone struggling with “Why, God?” As a seminary professor, I believe every person planning for, and serving, in a place of Christian ministry should read this book.”

Dr. Brian Richardson, Basil Manly, Jr. Professor of Christian Ministry, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“In today’s evangelical culture, the cross of Christ is a no-show in many churches and sermons. Not in Jimmy Davis’ Cruciform: Living the Cross-Shaped Life. The Cross is not merely a message, he says, it forms the template and the substance of how we live, worship and disciple. Chock full of memorable stories, illustrations, and Scripture, this is a terrific book for those breakfast discipleship groups. It is the next one I am going to use.”

Dr. William E. Brown, President, Cedarville University

“The cross-shaped life is a life that’s larger than life, far wider, deeper, and higher than we can possibly imagine. If the gospel has become at all routine to you or you simply wish to be freshly amazed at the transformative grace of God to you in Christ Jesus, read Jimmy Davis’ book Cruciform: Living the Cross-Shaped Life. In it, Jimmy provides stunning, gospel-saturated vistas of what a cross-shaped life looks like in real life. If you are like me, you will want to read it more than once. It’s that spiritually helpful.”

Dan Cruver, Director of Together for Adoption and editor of Reclaiming Adoption: Missional Living Through the Rediscovery of Abba Father
“Jimmy Davis helps us understand that the cruciform shape of history and our living is the only way to make sense of both. He leads us to see that the death of Christ is not only something done for us but also something done in us. And he helps us to see that the cruciform life is the most practical one of all.”

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David Arthur, Executive Vice President, Precept Ministries International

“With compelling stories, winsome humor, and sound theology, Jimmy Davis draws us into the power and purpose of our lives revealed by our cross-shaped story. Read this book to know and grow in a life of radical discipleship. Read this book to see how your Cruciform life reveals God’s grace and glory to a broken and desperate world.”

Elizabeth Reynolds Turnage, author, Learning God’s Story of Grace

“In Cruciform: Living the Cross-Shaped Life, Jimmy Davis calls us to live beyond what comes naturally and live into lives truly shaped by the cross. In a world habitually turned in on itself, this book speaks a word we desperately need to hear: a word about life so anchored in Christ that our lives and our ministries can’t help being transformed as a result.”

Mark DeVries, author of Family-Based Youth Ministry, Associate Pastor for Youth and Their Families, First Presbyterian Church, Nashville
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INTRODUCTION

Cruciform Cathedrals

Those grand and glorious cathedrals built in the Middle Ages may have something to teach us about the way we live the Christian life today. The medieval church ministered to a culture that had no direct, personal access to the Scriptures in their own language. The church leaders of that era were faced with the challenge of teaching biblical truth to a Bible-less people. One creative way they taught key doctrines was by building object lessons into their church facilities. The cathedral served as “The Poor Man’s Bible,” as historians now call it. Everything about the way a cathedral was built—firm foundations and transcendent towers, storytelling statues of stone, tile mosaics and stained glass windows depicting central biblical stories in full color, and even the way sunlight streamed through those windows—was designed to help folks discern, delight in, and declare the great, biblical doctrines concerning God and the gospel.

The art and architecture of these sanctuaries taught two central biblical truths: God’s just judgment
against the sinfulness of mankind; and God’s gracious provision of salvation from his wrath through the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Cathedrals were intentionally built to teach theology to the people in the pews. And not just random bits and pieces of biblical teaching, but a consistent curriculum of repentance from sin and faith in Jesus as he is offered in the gospel. Indeed, the most distinct feature of these cathedrals was their cruciform or “cross-shaped” floor plan. *The central doctrine the church building communicated was the gospel, the message of the cross.* And since these church buildings were the most prominent and prized buildings, the hope was that through the preaching of the gospel inside the church building and through the presentation of the gospel in its art and architecture, the surrounding population would both see and hear the message of the cross.

**We Need More Cruciform Cathedrals**

Here in the 21st century we need more cruciform churches. Not lavish cathedrals but living communities of disciples being shaped *by* the cross into the shape of the cross for the glory of God and the good of our neighbors, the nations, and the next generation. Our best hope is to cooperate with The Architect, who promised he would build his church (Matthew 16:18) as we join him to form our families, small groups, and churches into “cruciform communities.” Such communities visibly show and verbally share the message of
the cross because they are made up of people who have been vibrantly shaped by that message.

**Cruciform Christians and Cruciform Churches**

Unlike the cathedrals of the Middle Ages, this construction project requires both a cruciform building and cruciform building blocks. The Apostle Paul taught that both our individual bodies (1 Corinthians 6:19) and the corporate Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 3:16-17) are temples in whom the Spirit and glory of God dwell. The biblical blueprint calls for Christians and churches to live what I’m calling “the Cruciform Life.”

So grab your work gloves, strap on your tool belt, and put on your hardhat and safety glasses. Let’s partner together with the Architect as he builds his cruciform cathedrals in and with us.
It started in fourth grade when my buddy Tommy and I entered our class talent show. Elvis had died that summer, so with all the taste, compassion, and sensitivity of 10-year-old boys we decided to pay tribute to the King by mocking him. I sang “Hound Dog” while Tommy ran around on all fours, barking. We were a hit.

By fifth grade my family had moved, so I decided to bring Elvis back for the all-school talent show. This time it was serious — out with the canine sidekick, in with the costume. My mom slaved over a sewing machine to tailor a white jumpsuit, complete with rhinestones, high collar, and giant belt buckle. My dad squeezed half a tube of goo into my hair and combed it into an impressive pompadour. I took that stage and stole the hearts of the grade-school girls and their moms. “Jailhouse Rock” and “Love Me Tender” never sounded so good, *thankyouverymuch*, and I became known as “The kid who does Elvis.”
Seventh grade brought yet another new school. Since my older brother was already established there, I was mostly known as “Jeff’s little brother.” But that changed when I showed up at the Homecoming banquet in full Elvis mode. As everyone applauded and the Homecoming Queen planted a kiss on my cheek, I basked in the attention. I had made a name for myself. From then on in that school, I was “Little Elvis.”

Why do I offer this odd glimpse into my past so early in the book? Because as any good theologian will tell you, Elvis impersonation has its roots in the Garden of Eden.

We are all born to be someone special; all created to do something special. Indeed, we were made to partner with God’s community and participate in his mission. But one way or another we all tend to pursue a people and a purpose that neither relies on nor revolves around God. We have this desperate, unshakable need to be special, but that need gets misdirected, so we find ourselves in a kind of costume, pretending to be someone we are not meant to be and singing songs that are not really our own.

Pastor Tullian Tchividjian offers a brief explanation for how we came to this condition. “Essentially, the Bible tells a three-part story. Creation: God made everything good. Fall: Our sin has broken everything. Redemption: Everything in Christ will be made new.”1 That is an excellent summary of what’s gone wrong and how God will make it right, but to really understand
how Elvis impersonation and our countless other strivings for human greatness relate to Adam and Eve, we need to go a little deeper.

**Creation**
The first words on the first page of the first book of the Bible are, “In the beginning, God created.” That is the right anchor point for the story of creation, but another passage in the Bible actually looks further back. Writing after the resurrection of Christ, the Apostle John’s New Testament account of the story of Jesus opens with, “In the beginning was the Word.”

John was present among the disciples on Resurrection Sunday when Jesus “opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” as being all about him, their long-awaited Messiah (Luke 24:45). Moses wrote Genesis 1 to describe creation, but when we talk about origins from this side of the resurrection, we must go further back. We must begin where John began.

**In the Beginning Was a Community on Mission**
John 1:1-15 gives us a glimpse into the eternal plans of God. It is the prequel to Creation because God’s story really begins with himself. It begins with the God who is a three-in-one community: “and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God” (John 1:1). The community we understand as the Trinity was there in the beginning, with each
member participating in creation (Genesis 1:1-2, John 1:2-23, Colossians 1:16, Hebrews 1:2). The story begins with God’s mission to show his glory and goodness by sharing with his creation the overflow of the fullness of his grace and truth.

God’s story begins with the Community on the Mission.

**God Created a Community on Mission**

Genesis 1 and 2 teach something affirmed by John: God is a being intent on doing. In fact, God began his doing with a unique special project: he created the heavens and the earth and filled them with unfathomable radiance and resources (Genesis 1:1-25). But he didn’t stop there. This triune God was on a mission to build a people in his image, created for his glory (Genesis 1:26-28, Isaiah 43:7). Adam and Eve were made to relate and to create, just like the inherently communal and creative God who made them. They were created in the image of God for relationship as his beloved son and daughter and also rulership as his blessed servants.

When God made mankind he created a people with a purpose, sons who would serve. They were not only meant to take delight in one another, but also to take dominion over all that God had made (Genesis 1:28). As his “kingdom of priests,” the mission of God’s son-servants was to “work and keep” creation, to cultivate and care for the place in which he put them so that it would be the dwelling place of God and his people, for
the glory of God and the good of others forever (Genesis 2:15; Numbers 3:7-8; Exodus 19:6; Revelation 1:6, 5:10). If God is a relationship that rules, a being who is doing, those made in his image and likeness must also relate and rule. Each human being is designed for relationship—to be someone special to God and to one another—and for rule, as together they do something special for the glory of God and the good of all God has made.

Created to Be Cruciform
We too were made to live in God’s community and on God’s mission. We were made for God, for people, and for creation. The stick-figure diagram below illustrates what I mean. Like Adam and Eve, we were made to live in right, loving relationship with God, people, and all that God has made (Genesis 1:26-28, 2:15-25). We exist and have been placed here for God, for other people, and for the sake of all creation. We exist to exalt the glory of God and to help other people and all of creation do the same (Psalm 8, Isaiah 43:6-7).
In my family, this is what we call living with a you-first heart. We were created to look away from ourselves toward God, other people, and all of creation and say, “You first.” A person with a you-first heart recognizes that life is about using oneself to serve God, others, and all that God has made, thus living a life that takes the form of a cross. Can you see it? We were created to be cruciform (cruc = cross, form = shaped). Like Adam and Eve, we were made to live a cross-shaped life.

**Fall**

Today, however, cruciform is not the norm. A quick look at the way we and others fulfill our various relationships, roles, and responsibilities tells us we’re not in Eden anymore. Something has gone terribly wrong. The people God made became a man-centered community on man’s mission to multiply man’s glory for man’s good throughout all creation forever. Since then, people no longer live with you-first hearts but lean toward living with me-first hearts.
This drawing represents the human condition as we know it. People are disconnected from God, isolated from one another, and cut off from meaningful purpose in the world. The arrows are broken because our relationships with God, people, and creation are broken. The arrows point inward, indicating that we have traded the self-sacrificing cruciform life for the self-centered life of a me-first heart. Rather than using ourselves to serve God, people, and creation, we live to use God, people, and creation to serve ourselves.

The Story Has a Villain
What happened? How did we all become isolated individuals who live for our own glory and good? In Genesis 3 we’re introduced to one who hates God’s community and God’s mission. The serpent that slithered his way into God’s garden is “that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world” (Revelation 12:9). The Adversary sought to disassemble God’s new community and distract them from their mission (Genesis 3:1-5). Satan suggested that perhaps God was not as open to share his community and mission as Adam and Eve had first believed. Adam and Eve listened to these lies and came to think there was something better than that which God offered them. This was an illusion, yet they wanted it. They wanted to do it their way. So they traded their you-first hearts for me-first hearts. God’s son-servants rebelled against their Father, the
King. They rebelled against the being and doing of God, and thus lost their passion for and place in God’s community and God’s mission.

The Brokenness Begins
Adam and Eve’s broken relationship with God led to broken relationships with one another and with creation. This unraveled their relationships with God’s people and purpose as well. Genesis 3 describes their alienation and aimlessness.

First, their relationship with God was broken. They once enjoyed unhindered partnership with their Creator and participation in his creative work, but having disobeyed his Word, they became disconnected from him (Genesis 3:8-11).

Second, their relationship with people was ruined. What was once a beautiful partnership of oneness (Genesis 2:18-25) disintegrated into furious finger-pointing (Genesis 3:12). Disobedience to God left them distant from and divided against one another (Genesis 3:7).

Finally, their relationship with creation was corrupted. They retained their created purpose to be someone special by becoming an intimate community, but their efforts to do so would often seem futile (Genesis 3:16). They retained their created purpose to do something special by pursuing a God-given mission, but their plans would regularly be frustrated (Genesis 3:17-19). Their purpose to make the world a temple filled with the multiplied glory and goodness of God was
curtailed when God’s curse plunged all of creation into misery (Romans 8:20-23). Once disengaged from their mission and cut off from paradise (Genesis 3:24)—the place in which they could live freely as a people with purpose—humankind immediately began to distort creation’s glory and goodness (see Genesis 4 for starters).

Tragically, we have inherited Adam and Eve’s ruined relationships with God, people, and creation (Romans 5:12-21). We are now naturally inclined to believe that everyone (God and people) and everything (creation and all its resources) is here to serve us. Our fallen “community” of me-myself-and-I has adopted an almost exclusively me-first mission: making the world a temple of our praise by using everyone and everything for the exaltation and enhancement of our glory, not God’s.

From Bad to Worse

Genesis 4-10 illustrates the intensified impact of sin as it passed from generation to generation and culture to culture. The me-first heart went viral. Genesis 11 tells a story that captures the essence of the brokenness Adam and Eve set into motion, because it is a story about a community with a mission.

The people who built the Tower of Babel sought the community and mission for which they were made but separate from dependence on the One who made them. They wanted to maintain relationship with heaven and with one another by building “a city and
a tower” so that they could reach the heavens and not be “dispersed over the face of the whole earth.” They wanted the community for which they were made, but on their own terms. They also held out hope that this project would help them make a name for themselves, an accomplishment that would leave a legacy. They wanted the mission for which they were made, but again, on their own terms.

**Making Sense of My Story**

Doesn’t this shed some interesting light on my supposed glory days as a teenage Elvis impersonator? I was using the Elvis act to be someone special and do something special. I sinfully pursued the affection and the attention of my community, and my mission was to make a name for myself instead of living for the only name worthy of fame, Jesus Christ. I was designed to live life with a you-first heart, to relate and rule with God in his Kingdom, but the Elvis act was all about establishing my own me-first kingdom.

I look back now and laugh at the madness of my methods. I might be tempted to chalk it all up to youthful foolishness, but the truth is that as I grew older I simply found more subtle and sophisticated strategies to pursue the same twisted goals. In high school and college I tried drama club, getting good grades, student government, and the church youth choir as avenues for joining a community on mission. In my college and seminary days, local-church ministry and academic
achievement were my means to be someone special and do something special. These days I’m tempted to depend on the behavior of my children, my religious reputation, praise for preaching and teaching and counseling skills, the number of hits on my blog, and a whole host of other ways in which I can relate to others and rule some small kingdom within my purview without depending on God. Even now I must fight against all the me-first reasons for writing this book.

Elvis is still in the building, still trying to do it his way. He just keeps changing costumes. Indeed, all of us are caught between the dignity of our design on the one hand and our depraved distortion of it on the other. We were created to live in community and on mission, but we pursue these things on our own terms, not God’s.

What’s your story? As you look back over your years, can you see the pattern I’ve described here? Are you aware that you were created to be cruciform, to enjoy right relationship with God, people, and all that God has made? Can you discern the ways in which you have pursued people and purpose apart from God? What are your Elvis stories?
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