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.

Abi, Micah, and Anna: I’m praying that you will learn, love, and live the cross-shaped life. Remember, Jesus loves you, and so do I.

– Jimmy Davis
“Jimmy Davis loves the cross. This little book will open your heart up to see how the cross is the center of all of life. Well done.”

Paul Miller, Director of seeJesus.net, author of A Praying Life

“In our day, when all kinds of words are being tossed around to describe the faith of Christ, we need some down-to-earth sanity to help us sort out what it really means to be a Christian. What better image than that which Jimmy Davis supplies in the cross of Jesus Christ? The Christian is a temple of the Lord, a cathedral devoted to demonstrating the power of the cross. Jimmy explains to us how this ancient image, first endorsed by our Savior himself, is the best way—and, really, the only way—to think about the life to which we’ve been called as Christians. With sound biblical exposition, clear and helpful illustrations, and a wealth of practical guidance, Jimmy Davis shows us how to cut through the fog of contemporary Christian thinking to recover the Savior’s plan for our lives.”

T. M. Moore, Dean of Chuck Colson’s Centurions Program, Principal of the Fellowship of Ailbe, author of Culture Matters

“In Cruciform: Living the Cross-Shaped Life, my friend Jimmy Davis compellingly demonstrates that the gospel is just as necessary and relevant after you become a Christian as it is before. Jimmy shows from personal experience how a lack of passion and purpose, focus and fervor, compassion and conviction, is always due to distance from the now-power of the gospel. I pray that through this book you will rediscover the beauty and brilliance of the gospel in brand new ways.”

Tullian Tchividjian, Senior Pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, author of Surprised by Grace: God’s Relentless Pursuit of Rebels

“Cruciform is a theologically grounded and redemptively freeing picture of a life spent boasting in the cross of Jesus. Avoiding the distortions of both repressive legalism and irresponsible antino-
mianism, Jimmy Davis helps us understand how the indicatives of God’s grace lead to the imperatives of obedient love. This book will help many people understand what the gospel driven life is all about.”

Scotty Smith, Pastor for Preaching, Christ Community Church, Franklin, Tennessee

“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 everyone 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.”

**Dr. Joseph (Skip) Ryan**, Chancellor and Professor of Practical Theology, Redeemer Seminary, Dallas

“Jimmy Davis has developed a simple but profound approach to the Christian life using the symbol of the Cross. The three elements in the shape of the cross—vertically, our love for and from God; horizontally, our love to and from others; and the intersection and unity of these two directions—pack a powerful punch.”

**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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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.
One

CREATED TO BE CRUCIFORM

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.” 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 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 (cruci = 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 “dispersd 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 sínfully 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?
I had never seen so much orange. The side streets of Knoxville had turned to raging rivers of color, sweeping my friend and me the two miles from our car, across campus, and finally to Neyland Stadium. It was my first University of Tennessee Volunteers home football game. I’ll never forget cresting that last hill and standing in awe as a vast orange crowd flooded into the famous football fortress as if someone had pulled the stopper from a giant drain.

We were soon sucked through the main gates with volumes of other fans. Finally surfacing near our seats, we took in the vastness of one of the nation’s largest open-air stadiums. The splendor of the Volunteer spirit filled that place to overflowing. The energy of anticipation and the sights, sounds, and smells of “football time in Tennessee” almost took my breath away. A hundred choruses of “Rocky Top” gave way to a single, massive roar as our players ran out of their locker room,
solemnly slapped the sign that says, “I will give my all for Tennessee today,” and blasted onto the field.

As the game unfolded, there were moments of high drama when we seemed to be on the verge of defeat. I sat on the edge of my seat. I chewed my nails. Hope rose and sank in that orange sea like a fisherman’s bobber. When our boys somehow pulled through and won the game, I leaped and yelled, pumping my fists in the air as if I had personally made the winning touchdown. All around me, complete strangers shared hugs and high-fives. We were all champions, each one a conqueror. We were the victorious Vol Nation.

What I experienced that day was glory. I was caught up in the glory of a community on mission, the glory of being someone special and doing something special. I felt that glory, saw and heard it magnified by a hundred thousand people, and even contributed to the glory with my own heart, head, and hands.

There is only one reason college football can do this. There is only one reason that we can be captivated and galvanized by any kind of collective activity, be it sports, the arts, politics, crafts, business ventures, online communities, social causes, or anything else. We were made to pursue and participate in the glory generated by a community on mission. We were made to be a people with a purpose. We really were born for glory.

There’s nothing inherently wrong with enjoying Tennessee football—unless and until it turns into i-Vol-try. And that’s the tragic part. We so easily turn any
community-on-mission into an idol. It happens the moment we define ourselves more by any community other than the community-on-mission for which God made us. When we look to some smaller community to save us from boredom and give us our primary sense of intimacy and effectiveness, we have joined with those who rallied around the Tower of Babel. We have begun to use that smaller community-on-mission to pursue a me-first search for glory.

Like the people who built the tower in Genesis 11, we all tend to live for the glory of being someone special and doing something special, but we try to do it on our own terms, apart from God. The reason it never really works and never really satisfies is that we were made for greater glory than that. Far greater glory.

**Redemption**

In sharp contrast to what took place a chapter before in Babel, Genesis 12 opens with God’s stunning plan of redemption. As he did in the beginning, God chose one man from whom he would make a people for himself and his purposes. What makes this plan stunning is that God did not wipe the slate clean and start over. No, he did the unthinkable. Rather than throw all of us hell-bent sons and rebellious servants in a landfill, the holy and righteous Creator salvaged some to build the cruciform cathedral—the you-first, God-first community called the church—he had planned from the beginning. God’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 lays out his plan:
Now the **Lord** said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:1-3)

John Stott highlights the prominence of these promises: “It may be truly said without exaggeration that not only the rest of the Old Testament but the whole of the New Testament are an outworking of these promises of God.” These verses unveil God’s blueprint for redeeming and rebuilding his cruciform cathedral. God plans to choose a people whom he will bless by bringing them into loving relationship with himself. He will then change these me-first idolaters into you-first image-bearers who, in blessed community with God and one another, will be someone special and do something special toward the fulfillment of God’s mission to bless the world.

**First, God planned to adopt and bless a people.** When God promises Abraham, “I will bless you,” he is repeating and restoring the blessing he originally gave his first son and servant, Adam, in Genesis 1:28. Abraham and his descendants would enjoy a special relationship with God based on nothing more than
God’s gracious promise to lovingly choose them as people he made special and would faithfully use to do something special (Deuteronomy 7:6–8). The community that would come from Abraham, later called Israel, would be God’s adopted son and servant (Genesis 35:10–11, Exodus 4:22–23, Hosea 1:10).

Second, God planned to assemble this people as his beloved community. God’s promise to make Abraham’s people “a great nation,” blessing those who bless them and cursing those who dishonor them, undergirds his plan to build them into a privileged community whom God himself protects and for whom God provides. Later, under the ministry of Moses, God would give this people the Law, a more detailed blueprint for building a cross-shaped community functioning as his “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). In this Law, summarized by the Ten Commandments, God showed Israel what it would look like to live as a God-centered community of people who love God with all their head, heart, and hands (commandments one through four), and who love their neighbors as they love themselves (commandments five through ten) (see Exodus 20:1–17; Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 5:1–21, 6:4–5). They were to be cross-shaped, a graciously chosen and blessed community of people in right vertical relationship with God and right horizontal relationship with one another in the place God had them. God made them to be, and then caused them to be, a people special to him, to one another, and to the world.
Third, God planned to apprentice this people in his mission to bless the world. God redeemed his collective son Israel to serve with him as a kingdom of priests who would pick up where Adam and Eve had left off. They would do this by loving God and each other, and by preparing the place where God had put them. Preparing it as a dwelling place for God and people. Preparing it by guarding and keeping all creatures and creation for the glory of God and the good of others. God would therefore strengthen his servant Israel to do something special (Isaiah 41:8-10). Their mission was to bless their neighbors, the nations, and the next generation by pointing them to God’s glory and goodness. Eventually, this would include inviting Gentiles to become part of God’s community and mission (Genesis 12:3, Deuteronomy 26:18-19, Galatians 3:8).

Bad News

But as we read the Old Testament, it’s clear this plan was never fully worked out. Even with great men like Moses and David leading them, God’s sons and servants continued to be runaway rebels. Under King David’s reign, God’s blueprint for an adopted community apprenticed on his mission began to approach reality, but then it all fell apart again. Throughout Israel’s history, sin repeatedly divided God’s community and distracted them from his mission. Any contractor knows that a structure is only as strong as its materials, and something had to be done
about these faulty building blocks, these sinners God had been using to build his sanctuary. But God had a plan to deal with sin. And though there had always been provisions made for sin through the sacrifices of atonement God had granted, these were only a shadow of God’s ultimate plan to make strong bricks out of sinful people (Hebrews 10:1-18).

We pick up the story with God’s people in exile. Once again, just as in Eden, they were kicked out of God’s place and outside of his blessing because they refused to live under his rule.5 Not only had they profaned God’s name in their own land, they continued to do so even while being punished in exile (Ezekiel 36:16-21). But God intended to vindicate his good name. Had I been the architect, I would have trashed the building blocks and started from scratch with better ones, but God didn’t do that. He would build a cathedral that would vindicate his name, but he would use the very people who had shamed his name. And so God’s people began to hear through his prophets about a New Covenant, a new set of promises that would deal with sin and complete the blueprint for God’s holy dwelling place in our hearts (Jeremiah 31:31-34). God knew he must do something about the me-first hearts of his hell-bent sons and rebellious servants, so through the prophet Ezekiel he unpacked the New Covenant promises to God’s people: a new purity, a new passion, a new power, and a new partnership.

**A New Purity.** “I will sprinkle clean water on you,
and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you” (Ezekiel 36:25). Purification must come first. In order to be God’s true sons and servants, the people must be unilaterally, voluntarily, and completely forgiven by God for rejecting his community, rebelling against his mission, and embracing idolatry. Idolatry is the reliance upon or trust in anyone or anything besides the Living God for community and mission (Jeremiah 2:11-13, Exodus 32:7-8). God had a plan to forgive and thus purify the people from their idolatry.

**A New Passion.** “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 36:26). What do you do with building blocks whose hearts are desperately wicked, diamond-hard, and determined to do evil (Genesis 6:5, Jeremiah 17:9, Zechariah 7:12)? God’s plan was literally to transform his people, turning their passionately me-first hearts into hearts that looked to him and others and said, *You first.*

**A New Power.** “And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (Ezekiel 36:27). It was painfully apparent that God’s people had no power to keep his royal law, so God promised the gift of his Spirit to empower them to live the cruciform life of vertical love for God and horizontal love for people. His Spirit will be the power supply for a you-first heart.
A New Partnership. “You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God” (Ezekiel 36:28). This is one of the sweetest and most often repeated promises in the Bible. It’s the assurance that the disobedience of God’s people will not dissuade him from partnering with them as a holy community on his holy mission.

God would claim, clean, and craft for himself a people who would live the cruciform life of loving God and others as it is required in his Law. He would forgive them for living a me-first life and give them a new heart and the power of his Spirit to live the you-first life they were made to live. Now that’s good news!

Good News

Good news, indeed. Gospel means “good news.” The promised plan of God to create a cruciform community with a new purity, passion, power, and partnership would come through the life, death, and resurrected life of his Son and Servant, Jesus Christ. So we fast-forward to the end of the New Testament Gospels where Jesus, when he lifted the cup of wine at the Last Supper, said, “This cup is the New Covenant in my blood, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (see Matthew 26:28, Mark 14:24, Luke 22:20, 1 Corinthians 11:25). With this statement, backed up by his life, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection, Jesus became “the mediator of a new covenant,” the promised righteous Servant, the
ultimate priest who offers himself as the sacrifice for the guilt of his people to “make many to be accounted righteous” (Hebrews 9:15, Isaiah 52:13-53:12).

Jesus lived the cruciform life of loving God and others, the life that God’s first son and servant (Adam), and God’s adopted sons and servants (Israel) had failed to live. He died by a crucifixion that all of us deserve: “he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities” (Isaiah 53:5). Then God raised him from the dead to prove that, by his cross, Jesus had triumphed over God’s adversary, the devil (Genesis 3:15, Acts 2:24, Colossians 2:15). It is by faith in Jesus as the perfectly obedient son and the perfect offering for sin in our place that we are finally and completely restored, having been reconciled to and made right with God (2 Corinthians 5:17-21, Romans 3:21-26). In Christ, both Jews and Gentiles “are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:22). Through the gospel we enter the reality of the promise that our corrupt, me-first life will be forgiven and progressively replaced with a cross-shaped, you-first life of glory by the power of the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18). Through Jesus we are shaped by the cross into the shape of the cross.

If we discarded stones are connected by faith to Jesus, the Cornerstone, as he is offered in the gospel, then the Architect has adopted us as sons and apprenticed us as servants who work to make all of creation the temple or sanctuary of God, the place where God’s glory is seen and sensed by our neighbors, the nations, and the
next generation. “Our task as the covenant community, the church,” writes G. K. Beale, “is to be God’s temple, so filled with his glorious presence that we expand and fill the earth with that presence until God finally accomplishes the goal completely at the end of time!” 6

Only the gospel can build this cruciform cathedral. The gospel preached to Abraham broke ground for the formation of God’s redeemed community-on-mission (Galatians 3:8-9). The gospel that Jesus preached and paid for with his blood gathered an initial community of disciples to continue his mission in the power of the Spirit (Luke 4:43, 24:50-53; Acts 1:6-14). The gospel is the message of the cross by which the Apostles established God’s spiritual house (Acts 2:36-47). Today, by the proclamation of the gospel to God’s people and by God’s people, this cruciform community is continuing to be built up for maturity and ministry (1 Corinthians 15:1-11, Colossians 1:3-6, 1 Peter 2:4-10). One day soon the project will be complete and we will hear “a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God’” (Revelation 21:3). And when the gospel is said and done the glory of God will fill creation “as the waters cover the sea” (Numbers 14:21, Psalm 72:19, Habakkuk 2:14, Isaiah 11:9).

That’s a glory story worth getting out of bed in the morning to pursue, saying, “By God’s transforming power, I will give my all for Jesus Christ today.” It’s game time. Let’s hit the field!