

10 GREAT BOOKS ABOUT THE GOSPEL

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“The gospel cannot be preached and heard enough, for it cannot be grasped well enough,” wrote Martin Luther.¹

By God’s grace I have been a Christian for 49 years. I agree with Luther—I still cannot hear the gospel enough. Each morning I seek to preach the gospel to myself through my study of Scripture and the strategic reading of supplemental books about the cross. Here’s why: I awaken each day with a tendency to forget that which is most important, namely, the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because I am prone to forget, I must create practices that will enable me to remember what I must not forget.

So each day I seek to spend time in a location where I am not distracted, unhurriedly reading and meditating on Scripture and finding my way to a hill called Calvary. I want to meditate daily on Christ and him crucified. I need to fix my eyes, today, on the one who loved me and gave himself for me. I cannot live on yesterday’s recollection of the gospel.

The same is true for every pastor and every member in Sovereign Grace. We

1. EWALD M. PLASS, *WHAT LUTHER SAYS: AN ANTHOLOGY*, VOL. 2 (CONCORDIA: ST LOUIS, MO, 1963), 563-564.

need to review and rehearse the gospel each day or we will assume the gospel, forget the gospel, and prove vulnerable to all manner of temptation and sin.

So here are some of the books I have read and re-read as a supplement to Scripture that have provided insight into Scripture and have been a means of grace to my soul. As I read these books I am reminded of the gospel, I experience deepened affections for the Savior, and I am freshly amazed by grace. I invite you to join me in reading these great books and experiencing the transforming power of the cross.

1. *The Cross of Christ* by John R. W. Stott (20th anniversary edition: 2006), 380pp.

I'm not sure the opening line of a preface—not even the first chapter—of

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any other book I've read has affected me. This one did.

Stott opens by writing, "I count it an enormous privilege to have been invited by InterVarsity Press to write a book on that greatest and most glorious of all subjects, the cross of Christ." If you looked in my book I have a check mark on the left, part of the sentence underlined ("that greatest

and most glorious of all subjects"), and to the right of that is a star. These marks are my simple and feeble attempt to communicate on this book the immediate impact of this sentence upon my soul.

I can remember thinking for just a moment, Is that sentence just hyperbole? Is that well-meaning exaggeration from someone who has just finished writing a book on this topic? Quickly I realized this was not hyperbolic, not a well-meaning exaggeration, but an accurate statement from a man deeply affected by this topic.

This opening statement reflects the clear teaching of Scripture. The only question left unanswered was, Does that statement reflect my heart, personally and pastorally? Do I view the cross of Christ as "that greatest and most glorious of all subjects?"

I can certainly say that if I wasn't fully convinced at the outset of this book, soon into it I was convinced.

This is one book I grab off the shelf when I pull away for an extended period of time in order to survey the wondrous cross. I have read from it and been deeply affected by it countless times.

But I don't assume everyone who reads this book will have the same experience. The important point is that we have a set of supplemental books that help us in our comprehension of the most important book (the Bible) and serve our souls in drawing our attention to Christ and him crucified. I would recommend that every Christian build a small library of books where that experience can take place and their hearts can be refreshed when necessary.

I really cannot turn a page of *The Cross of Christ* without wanting to read and quote from it. I think that in many ways you can locate the theological origin for my passion for the cross in this book.

2. *In My Place Condemned He Stood: Celebrating the Glory of the Atonement* by J.I. Packer and Mark Dever (2008), 192pp.

I love the title. It's rare to come across a title that in itself arrests my attention and affects my soul. So from the first time I looked at this title to each time I have returned to this book, I find myself pausing and allowing these six words to lead me to worship Christ: *In My Place Condemned He Stood*. I encourage you to reflect on the title until it stirs your soul.

The book is worth the price, not only for the pieces by Packer and Dever, but also for Ligon Duncan's chapter titled "Books on the Cross of Christ" and a lengthy annotated bibliography (pp. 145–180). What he provides for us here is the largest breadth of recommendations related to books available on the cross of Christ and the atonement. With each book there is a paragraph description of the uniqueness and contribution of each volume. These valuable appendices alone make this book a unique gift to pastors.

3. *Saved from What?* by R.C. Sproul (2002), 128pp.

"This may be the most important book that you will ever read in your life" (9), writes Lane Dennis in the foreword of this book. He's right. R.C. Sproul writes to address a major problem: "I think the greatest point of unbelief in our culture and in our church today is an unbelief in the wrath of God and

in His certain promise of judgment for the human race” (22-23). Notice that he doesn’t just think this is a problem for people out there; this is a problem in the church as well. If Christians are going to rejoice in being saved, it is essential that we can answer the question, “Saved from what?”

So, can you answer that question? Do you know what you’ve been saved from? Sproul explains, “when the Scriptures tell us that God saves us, that salvation is of the Lord, we tend to forget that salvation is also *from* the Lord.” The gospel is such good news because the bad news is so bad: “The last thing in the world the impenitent sinner ever wants to meet on the other side of the grave is God. But the glory of the gospel is that the One from whom we need to be saved is the very One who saves us. God in saving us saves us from Himself” (25).

Saved from What? left me amazed at the gospel, especially at the mercy of God in rescuing sinners like me from the wrath of God through the substitutionary death of Christ. I still turn to this little book to be freshly awed by the glory of the gospel. “We are saved *by* God, *from* God, *for* God” (121).

4. *God the Peacemaker: How Atonement Brings Shalom* by Graham A. Cole (2009), 296pp.

This is a technical but reader-friendly addition in the NSBT series (New Studies in Biblical Theology). And not only is it detailed and readable, but I found it to be deeply moving, too. Many times throughout this book as I read about the atoning sacrifice of our Savior I ceased reading, looked up from the book, and broke into song. (In the interest of full disclosure, this often happens when I read. I am a noisy reader and often break into song while reading.)

God the Peacemaker is a wonderful book that explains why God’s intention to restore shalom (peace) to his creation requires the death of Christ. Cole writes in the introduction:

We live in a troubled world. As I write, there are reports of a devastating cyclone in Myanmar, an earthquake in China, fighting in the Sudan and Iraq, shooting death after shooting death on the south side of Chicago. The list could go on and on. The waste of human life is enormous. ... Yet Christians believe in a good God who as the Creator has never lost interest in his world. The key evidence and the chief symbol of

that divine commitment is the cross of Christ. ... Central to the divine strategy is Christ, his coming and his cross. The troubles and calamities will end (19).

In recent years there have been many books that emphasize God's restoration of shalom, but too few that highlight the central role of the cross in this plan.

5. *Scandalous: The Cross and Resurrection of Jesus* by D.A. Carson (2010), 176pp.

In the preface Carson writes,

Nothing is more central to the Bible than Jesus' death and resurrection. The entire Bible pivots on one weekend in Jerusalem about two thousand years ago. Attempts to make sense of the Bible that do not give prolonged thought to integrating the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are doomed to failure, at best exercises in irrelevance (11).

This book is not only not doomed to failure but destined to serve readers in their appreciation of the gospel as Carson expounds on both the death and resurrection of the Savior. As Mark Dever says in his endorsement, "This professor can preach. These are model messages on crucial passages." They are crucial passages, presented as a model of exegesis and exposition. The book is developed around five core passages: Matthew 27:27–51, Romans 3:21–26, Revelation 12, John 11:1–53, and John 20:24–31. Pastors can easily adapt this structure and use these passages to develop a sermon series to serve their churches.

6. *Atonement*, edited by Gabriel N.E. Fluhrer (2010), 142 pages.

This is a compilation of messages delivered over the years at the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology. Contributors include J.I. Packer, R.C. Sproul, and Sinclair Ferguson. In his preface, editor Gabriel Fluhrer opens the book with these pointed words: "This is a book about blood and it soaks every page" (ix). And a little later he writes,

Today, along with other great doctrines of the Christian faith, the doctrine of the blood atonement of Christ is under attack. It is derided as 'cosmic child abuse' and traded for a grandfatherly sentimentalism that muffles the piercing cries of the Savior being nailed to the cross. The

pride of our sin dilutes the simple, clear, and shocking teaching of the New Testament: God killed his perfect Son to save hate-filled rebels from the wrath they deserve (x).

The messages included in this book were finely chosen.

7. *It Is Well: Expositions on Substitutionary Atonement* by Mark Dever and Michael Lawrence (2010), 224pp.

This series of sermons was published out of concern over the neglect of the gospel in the life of local churches. In the preface Dever writes,

Have you wondered about the cross lately? Have you wondered where it is in your own church, or in your own life? It's our prayer that these meditations will help you re-center your life on God's sacrifice for us in Christ and join in the celebration that's going on eternally as the saints in heaven praise God for the Lamb who was slain for us (15).

Like Carson's, this book can provide a pastor with a sermon series on the gospel. The 14 sermons are presented in canonical order on these texts: Exodus 12, Leviticus 16, Isaiah 52:13–53:12, Mark 10:45, Mark 15:33–34, John 3:14–18, 11:47–52, Romans 3:21–26, 4:25, 5:8–10, 8:1–4, Galatians 3:10–13, 1 Peter 2:21–25, and 3:18.

8. *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* by Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach (2007), 384pp.

Sadly, this book was needed because of distortions and criticisms of the doctrine of penal substitution. The book was designed to protect the church from errors that (to a surprising degree) have become popularized through those who are professing evangelicals. And *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* is a unique gift to the church.

But this book has immeasurable devotional value as well. And through this book and the passages they teach from, you will—by God's grace—survey the wondrous cross where the Prince of Glory died and will be freshly amazed by grace.

This book is necessary to help protect the gospel in the church, but also it's a personal gift to Christians in their study of what Mr. Stott calls "that

greatest and most glorious of all subjects, the cross of Christ.”

9. *Christ Alone: The Uniqueness Of Jesus As Savior* by Stephen Wellum (2017), 352pp.

Let the following sentences from Dr. Wellum’s outstanding book whet your appetite for this book:

“The work of our Lord Jesus Christ is unique and incomparable, and central to it is his death” (193).

“At the center of the NT, indeed all of Scripture, is the atoning work of Christ” (194).

“The Gospels are deliberately written to stress the centrality of Christ’s death for understanding his identity and work. Apart from the cross, we cannot grasp him and the entire rationale for his coming” (195).

“From beginning to end, Jesus viewed his death as central to his work” (197).

And I could go on and on. I recommend every Sovereign Grace pastor read this book, particularly the two chapters on penal substitution.

10. *Christ Crucified: Understanding the Atonement*, by Donald Macleod (2014), 272pp.

This book is a must-add to my list. What Mr. Macleod writes in the Preface explains why:

Any first-century missionary who prided himself on rapport with his audience would have kept silent about the cross. It was a ‘most vile death’, and the idea that the Son of God could save the world by dying would have seemed both scandalous and ridiculous.

Things are no different in the twenty-first century. Yet from first-century Corinth to modern Korea, the story of the cross, and the doctrine of penal substitution, have brought peace to millions who have faced the truth about themselves, and light, joy and power to drifting lives.

In my case, if I may paraphrase the dying words of John Knox, this is where I first cast my anchor; though the surrounding theological seas

have always had their own fascinations it is this rock that really matters. I owe it everything, and all that remains now is to see it from within the veil (9).

Regardless of the tumultuous theological seas that surround us at this time, may each Sovereign Grace pastor cast his anchor here at the cross. This book will help you to do just that.

BONUS: 11. *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* by D.A. Carson (2004), 144pp.

Finally, for me no list is complete without recommending D.A. Carson's fine book, *The Cross and Christian Ministry* for pastors or those who may aspire to ministry.

Page after page, my copy of this book is marked up. Sentences are underlined, checked, bracketed, starred—all simple reminders of this book's importance in my life.

From Carson's exposition of 1 Corinthians chapters one through four, it's clear the cross must occupy and enjoy the central place in my soul and in my pastoral ministry. But that cross is constantly in danger of being dismissed from the central place. And dismissed by what? According to Dr. Carson, "Relatively peripheral insights that take on far too much weight."

And here is another great quote from this book: "He [Paul] cannot long talk about Christian joy, or Christian ethics, or Christian fellowship, or the Christian doctrine of God, or anything else, without finally tying it to the cross. Paul is gospel-centered; he is cross-centered" (38).

Every time I preach, every text I address, every topic I teach, must be derived from and related to the cross. And at some point in my sermon that must be obvious to those who are listening. And if it's not obvious I have not truly preached the gospel or truly executed my unique pastoral role to serve them with the gospel. Dr. Carson goes on to discuss how this commitment to being cross-centered must shape not only our message but our style of ministry, too.

This whole book is peppered with choice wisdom to protect a pastor from assigning centrality and excessive authority to peripheral insights. *The Cross*

and Christian Ministry has defined (and still defines) pastoral ministry for me.

Reading about the Gospel

I am grateful that we have many wonderful (and affordable) books about the gospel of Jesus Christ. We need these books because we cannot read enough about the gospel. We cannot read enough about the gospel because we cannot grasp it well enough.

What a joy to recommend these books, each with the potential to impact your life as you preach the gospel to yourself daily!

Editors' note: A version of this article first appeared on the website of Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville.

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