

session 1

A Man Hanging on a Tree

Prepare

FOCUS STATEMENT

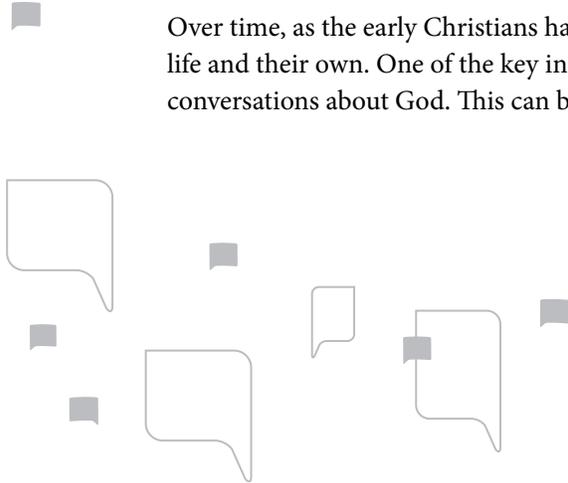
If, as Christians confess, the cross is the place where we see God revealed most fully, then we need to reconsider all of our assumptions and statements about God in light of what happens to Jesus, the man “hanging on a tree.”

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

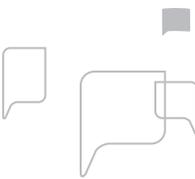
Even though the cross stands at the center of our faith lives, we often don't pause to consider its meaning and significance. Perhaps because we see it almost everywhere—in churches; on signs and bumper stickers; worn as jewelry; used as imagery in art, film, and television—we forget what a powerful and even troubling image it was for the first Christians.

When you read the Bible carefully, however, you soon realize two important things about the cross. First, no one expected God's promised Messiah to be crucified. The very fact that Jesus died on a cross was at first a huge problem. If this is the way God chose to be revealed to the world, those early Christians reasoned, then they needed to rethink everything they thought they knew about God, the world, and their faith. In many ways, the whole New Testament is the attempt of those early believers to make sense of their Scriptures (what we now call the Old Testament) and their experience in light of the cross.

Second, we realize that even as the cross was unexpected, even more so was the resurrection—so unexpected, in fact, that no one in the four Gospels at first believes the message of Christ's resurrection. Sometimes this news creates fear, sometimes doubt, sometimes questions, but at first none of Jesus' disciples believes the good news. Noticing this helps us not only recognize how amazing the resurrection was and is, but also helps us to be patient with ourselves as we try to make sense of our lives in light of Jesus' cross and resurrection.



Over time, as the early Christians had more time to reflect on the cross, it shaped their reflections about Jesus' life and their own. One of the key insights they had regarding the cross was that it shapes all of our thinking and conversations about God. This can be challenging, as we often tend to think about God primarily in terms of the



qualities or attributes we think God must have. That is, we think about God in terms of God being omnipotent (“all powerful”), omniscient (“all knowing”), all just, all holy, etc. These “all” qualities make sense to us, because God just seems “bigger” than anything we can imagine. But the challenge of thinking about God in terms of God’s power and size is that we soon realize this God is so far beyond us that we lose all hope of knowing and being known by this God. Eventually, we realize that we cannot expect to connect with this kind of God and certainly can’t expect to be found acceptable by this God. While God may be all holy, all just, all powerful, and all the rest, we most certainly are not.

This was just the struggle that engaged the life and work of a sixteenth-century monk by the name of Martin Luther. Luther became convinced of two things that still animate Christian faith, life, and theology today. First, the God of attributes—all holy, all just, etc.—can ultimately only terrify us because we will never measure up to such a God. Second, in the cross of Jesus we see another side of God—perhaps even a different God than we’d imagined altogether—revealed. This God is not only powerful but also vulnerable. This God is not only just but also forgiving. This God is not only all-knowing but loving. In fact, Luther suggests that we need to redefine what we mean by words like *power* and *justice* in light of what we see God actually do in Jesus—namely, come and proclaim a kingdom of forgiveness and love and then die for us on the cross.

In this way, the cross shapes all that we say and think about God, revealing to us a God we probably would never expect but recognize we desperately need. We will therefore begin our journey by looking at the four accounts of Jesus’ death and resurrection in the four Gospels.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

The curious thing about the cross is that as central as it is to the Christian faith, as much as we hear it referenced, we don’t really talk about it all that much. That is, we don’t talk about what it means, what it accomplishes, why Jesus had to die, or whether Jesus had to die. So take a few moments and ask yourself how much you really know about the cross. Could you explain to someone who didn’t know much about Christianity why the cross is important? If not, what questions are surfaced by this exercise? What do you wonder about? What might some of the participants in your group wonder about? Keep in mind that all the questions that arise are good questions, and your job isn’t to answer them but to provide a space for them to be voiced.

SESSION INSTRUCTIONS

1. Read chapter one in *Making Sense of the Cross* and this Leader Guide session completely. Highlight or underline any portions you wish to emphasize with the group. Note also any bonus activities you want to do.

TIP

Giving voice to our questions or even doubts about the meaning of the cross and resurrection may be challenging for many Christians, as it is something we feel we should “just know.” Stress early and often that there are no dumb questions and that one of the reasons we may not have reflected much on the cross is precisely because it is considered so central. Remind participants that the cross is so important that it deserves not just our attention but also our questions, as we learn the most when we acknowledge what we’re curious about, wonder about, and question.

TIP

If possible, distribute copies of *Making Sense of the Cross* to participants before the first session and invite them to read the introduction and chapter one, “A Man Hanging on a Tree.” Be prepared to recap the chapter for any group members who did not have the book or were not able to do the advance reading.

2. If you plan to do any special activities, collect all the materials you'll need. Each session will call for chart paper and markers or another means to collect insights and questions.

FACILITATOR'S PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer for those who will be coming to this class, for yourself, and for the session ahead. If it is helpful, you may use this prayer as a guide:

Dear God, bless each one who comes to this study, and bless me as a leader. Open our ears, hearts, and minds so that we may come to know you more deeply as we learn together about you through our study and conversation about the death and resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Gather (10 minutes)

WELCOME AND CHECK-IN

Welcome the group. Small group study may be a new experience for some, and it is important for people to feel welcome and secure. Provide name tags and make time for introductions. Snacks, or even a meal together to celebrate this new venture, can help the group feel more comfortable.

OPENING PRAYER

Dear God, we gather together with questions, hopes, and dreams. Some of these we can name; some are hard to put words to. But we trust that you know our needs and will use this time of study and conversation to help meet them. Bless our time together as we listen to and learn from each other, from Christians through the centuries, and from your Word, that we may grow in our relationship with you and each other. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

INSIGHTS AND QUESTIONS (IQ) TIME

Invite participants to share any insights they had while reading chapter one. List these insights on chart paper where all can see.

Ask the group to share any questions they have about what they read. Collect these on chart paper as well.

Set the lists aside so you can return to them at the end of the session.

SUPPLIES

- Name tags
- Pens
- Snacks or a meal (optional)
- Chart paper
- Markers
- Copies of *Making Sense of the Cross*

TIP

Reassure group members that all questions and insights are welcome. There are no "wrong" questions or insights. If you go around the room to give everyone a chance to participate, make sure people know it's all right to "pass" or not offer an insight or question.

Join the Conversation (20 minutes)

VIDEO INTRODUCTION

Watch the video segment for session one. The course author will introduce the key concepts from the book and prepare the group for the activities that follow.

CONVERSATION STARTER

Read these quotations from chapter one of *Making Sense of the Cross*; then invite the participants to discuss the questions that follow.

“When Jesus died, all the hopes his early followers had about him and for him died, too. The one they thought would redeem them, the one they’d called “Messiah” and “Son of God,” was now dead. So when they experienced the resurrected Jesus—or, in the case of the Gospel writers, heard about the resurrected Jesus—they realized God was up to something they had never, ever expected. It took them a while—and I mean a long while—to figure it out, but ultimately they were convinced that Jesus’ death and resurrection changed everything.” (p. 12)

“Because what you see in Jesus is what you get in God—I like that!—you need to rethink all the talk about God’s attributes in light of what actually happens to Jesus. And once Luther did that he realized that the God we see in Jesus is quite different from the God-of-attributes he’d imagined. Luther says that this God—the one revealed in Jesus on the cross—is vulnerable rather than powerful, approachable rather than distant, and is someone you can count on receiving mercy and grace from rather than judgment. Ultimately, Luther observes, this God is the one who understands everything we go through because, in Jesus, God went through it all too, even death.” (p. 20)

Discuss:

1. Put yourself in the place of Jesus’ disciples during and just after his crucifixion. What are some emotions you might experience? How would this event affect your faith and your sense of the future?
2. Now imagine hearing that Jesus has been raised. How would you react? How would this affect your view of the cross and your ideas about how God works in the world?
3. What are some adjectives you might use to describe God? What kind of picture of God do these words offer? How are these words shaped by what you see in Jesus’ cross and resurrection?
4. What difference does it make to remember that God, in Jesus, knows what it’s like to be human?

SUPPLIES

- Making Sense of the Cross* DVD
- TV and DVD player (or computer, projection system, and screen)
- Copies of *Making Sense of the Cross*
- Session handout (p. 18)

TIP

Preview the DVD segment and take some notes. Set up DVD equipment before the session begins. If you will not be showing the DVD, summarize the “Chapter Overview” for the group.

TIP

Encourage the group to follow along in their books as you (or volunteers) read each quotation.

TIP

It may take a little while for people to move beyond thinking about the typical places where they've seen a cross, but once they get going, they may be surprised at just how many crosses they have seen. Be patient, invite them to be creative, and allow a little extra time if folks need it for brainstorming.

ACTIVITY: COUNTING CROSSES

Have participants form small groups of three or four. Invite them to brainstorm a list of places where they've seen crosses. Encourage them to think beyond crosses inside or outside church buildings, in jewelry, and on church signs. Where have they seen the cross used as a symbol in movies or television or advertisements? (Ask them to be as concrete as possible in their responses—which movie, what do they think the cross meant, and so on.) After the small groups have shared the results of their brainstorming, ask them to discuss what they think about all these crosses. What does the cross mean in our popular culture? In our religious culture? In our daily lives? Is there one meaning or many, and how does that shape their thinking about the cross?

Open Scripture (20 minutes)

SUPPLIES

- Bibles
- Session handout
- Copies of *Making Sense of the Cross*
- Scissors
- Glue sticks
- Small sheets of cardstock or construction paper
- Old magazines

1 CORINTHIANS 1:18–2:2

This passage is considered one of the central places in the writings of the Apostle Paul. Here he expresses his “theology of the cross” as he describes how unexpected, even startling, the cross was.

Discuss:

1. What does Paul mean by saying that “the message about the cross is foolishness” and a “stumbling block”? What about the cross is startling, scandalous, or troubling to you?
2. God was at work through the cross. Why was this so unexpected for those living in Paul’s time? In what ways is it unexpected or surprising in our own time?
3. Why do you think Paul links the “lowliness” of the cross to the humble natures of the people to whom he is writing?

TIP

Encourage people to save their collages so you can revisit them at the end of this course.

BONUS ACTIVITY: WHEN I THINK OF GOD . . .

Have available scissors, glue sticks, small sheets of cardstock or construction paper, and a variety of old magazines. Invite each person to page through the magazines and cut out pictures that help them imagine what God is like, then glue the images onto cardstock or construction paper to create a collage. Encourage volunteers to show their collages to the group and share what the various images mean to them.

Extending the Conversation (10 minutes)

LOOKING BACK

Review the lists of insights and questions from IQ Time. Which insights and questions have been answered or clarified? Which remain unanswered? Ask participants to share additional questions or insights that have surfaced during your time together.

LOOKING AHEAD

Direct the group to the session handout and review ways to prepare for your next meeting.

1. Before reading chapter two, write down some of your thoughts about the passion narrative—the story of Jesus’ crucifixion. What scenes do you remember most vividly? How would you summarize the plot?
2. Read at least *one* of the four Gospel accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection: Mark 14:26—16:8; Matthew 26:30—28:20; Luke 22:39—24:53; John 18:1—20:31. Compare your recollection of this story with the Gospel account you read.
3. Read chapter two in *Making Sense of the Cross*—“Portraits and Perspectives.”
4. Jot down any insights or questions you have after reading the chapter. In particular, pay attention to your reaction to the ideas that (a) the Gospels tell complementary but distinct stories of the cross, and (b) each author is making a distinct confession of faith that the church believed was important to preserve.

Optional: Rent and watch one of the many “life of Jesus” movies, for example, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (MGM, 1965), *Jesus of Nazareth* (Lions Gate, 1977), *The Passion of the Christ* (20th Century Fox, 2004). How is the cross portrayed? What scenes from the Gospel account(s) that you read did the director choose to include or leave out?

SUPPLIES

- Chart paper from IQ Time
- Copies of *Making Sense of the Cross*
- Session handout

TIP

You can help to enliven conversation next week by making sure that each of the Gospel accounts is being read by at least one person so that members can compare and contrast the accounts they read.

Session 1 Handout

A Man Hanging on a Tree

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