“There is a yearning today for a faith that is real, deep, and authentic. Such faith keeps marketing at arm’s length and escapes from cultural compromises because both are pathways into superficiality and emptiness. This book addresses that yearning with clarity and conviction and, along the way, connects its readers with what Christians in their best moments have always believed.”

DAVID WELLS, DISTINGUISHED RESEARCH PROFESSOR, GORDON-CONWELL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Loving, teaching, and rightly handling the Word of God is a pastor’s privilege and responsibility. According to the authors of Proclaiming a Cross-centered Theology, if a pastor understands what the Word says about God, man, and the curse, about Christ and his substitutionary atonement, and about the call to repentance and sacrifice, that pastor will develop and preach a sound theology. And sound theology is essential to faithful, joy-filled ministry.

In this penetrating volume authors Mark Dever, J. Ligon Duncan III, C. J. Mahaney, and R. Albert Mohler Jr. are joined by Thabiti Anyabwile, John MacArthur, John Piper, and R. C. Sproul in exploring the church’s need for faithful proclamation. Together they call preachers, teachers, and students of the Word to cross-centered, scripturally-saturated thinking. These messages—first presented at the 2008 Together for the Gospel Conference—have been prepared, says Mark Dever, “with the assumption that there is widespread agreement about the gospel across denominational lines but also with the conviction that the gospel is widely under attack. Some of those assaults are deliberate and intended; others are not. Some are subtle; others are obvious frontal assaults. It is with a love primarily for the gospel that these messages were given. And it is with this same love that they are now brought together and presented to you.”

Building the church has always involved the sword along with the trowel. Contention and contradiction is a necessary part of preaching, as all faithful pastors know. While some may love such fights, we intend to love the gospel. It is because of that love—not a mere love of fighting and contending—that we are willing to contend for these matters.

“Excerpt from the Introduction by Mark Dever"
INTRODUCTION

The great English preacher C. H. Spurgeon recounted one of the more unusual experiences of his highly unusual life. He was headed to Haverhill in Suffolk and, due to rail delays, was running late for a preaching engagement. I’ll let him pick up the story here:

So it happened that I reached the appointed place considerably behind time. Like sensible people, they had begun their worship, and had proceeded as far as the sermon. As I neared the chapel, I perceived that someone was in the pulpit preaching, and who should the preacher be but my dear and venerable grandfather! He saw me as I came in at the front door, and made my way up the aisle, and at once he said, “Here comes my grandson! He may preach the gospel better than I can, but he cannot preach a better gospel; can you, Charles?” As I pressed through the throng, I answered, “You can preach better than I can. Pray go on.” But he would not agree to that. I must take the sermon, and so I did, going on with the subject there and then, just where he left off.¹

That great gospel is the subject of this volume (and the Together for the Gospel Conference at which a spoken version of these chapters was first presented). This volume is prepared with the assumption that there is widespread agreement about the gospel across denominational lines, but also with the conviction that the gospel is widely under attack. Some of those assaults are deliberate and intended; others are not. Some are subtle; others are obvious frontal assaults. It is with a love primarily for the gospel that these messages

¹ The original story ends in the middle of the sentence “going on with the subject there and then, just where he left off.” The note continues: “—then he took the subject where he left off, and made the same application as if he had not been interrupted. There never was an opening for such a sermon as he delivered.”
were given. And it is with this same love that they are now brought together and presented to you.

The participants were given a free hand to choose and frame their own messages. We have all been a part of conversations and discussions about these issues, many with one another. We have all felt the need to contend for these matters. The tone of this conference was defensive, in the sense that pastoral work is partly defensive—defending the sheep against wolves in sheep’s clothing. Building the church has always involved the sword along with the trowel. Contention and contradiction is a necessary part of preaching, as all faithful pastors know. While some may love such fights, we intend to love the gospel. It is because of that love—not a mere love of fighting and contending itself—that we are willing to contend for these matters.

When Erasmus wrote his quasi-irenic treatise On the Freedom of the Will, he wrote, “I take no delight in assertions.” Luther responded in Lutherly fashion:

It is not the mark of a Christian mind to take no delight in assertions; on the contrary, a man must delight in assertions or he will be no Christian. And by assertion . . . I mean a constant adhering, affirming, confessing, maintaining, and an invincible persevering. . . . Nothing is better known or more common among Christians than assertion. Take away assertions and you take away Christianity. Why, the Holy Spirit is given them from heaven, that a Christian may glorify Christ and confess him even unto death—unless it is not asserting when one dies for one’s confession and assertion.²

It is in a Luther-like sense of confessing that the preachers contributing to this volume offer these assertions.

Ligon Duncan begins this volume as he began that conference. He entered the lists asserting that systematic theology is a worthwhile task. Indeed, in days when the narrative form of biblical
theology is attracting great (and deserved) attention, it is too often being pitted against systematic theology. Ligon defends the usefulness and necessity of systematic theology with clarity and vigor. A pastor must remember the truths in this chapter or risk losing the gospel itself.

Next up is Thabiti Anyabwile. Thabiti was new to the Together for the Gospel (T4G) conference as a speaker. He has been a friend of most of ours for years, being a member and elder at Capitol Hill Baptist Church and now the pastor of First Baptist Church, Grand Cayman. We have shared conferences and weekends with him and have been instructed by his teaching and edified by the testimony of God’s amazing grace in his life. (Before his conversion, Thabiti was a nationally recognized college speaker on African-American studies. He had also been a practicing Muslim.) In his address at Together for the Gospel, Thabiti challenged us to recognize that the category of “race” is irredeemable. It brings far more confusion than light, more contention than understanding, more prejudice than impartial judgment. As you turn to that chapter—perhaps the most explosive of the conference—open your mind and get ready to think.

John MacArthur delivered a message on human depravity that was a model of clear thinking. In it, John masterfully assembled the witness of Scripture (in the very way Ligon had encouraged us the previous day) on this vital topic. John showed that a mistake here is a mistake in the foundation of understanding the nature of our problem. He laid out challenges currently facing this doctrine and concluded by calling us to be faithful to this aspect of the message, no matter how hard we may find such faithfulness.

The next message was mine. I had been mulling over for some time the confusion about the content of the gospel. The message came together as I reviewed notes I had made some months earlier about various issues that needed “addressing.” I began to notice that each one evidenced a distortion of the gospel. With encourage-
ment from my T4G brothers—and the Capitol Hill Baptist congregation—I worked and reworked the material until I felt I got close to saying what I wanted to say. I wanted to get evangelicals talking about what the gospel is exactly. Of course, they were having that conversation before this message was given, but I wanted to add my voice to the call for clarity on the gospel. What is the core of the gospel? And how important is clarity on that core? I wanted to encourage a continuing priority on evangelism in the local church. I said to friends at the time that I understood that “gospel” could be used in a broader sense, but I was speaking about the heart of it, without which no other news is “good news.” In order to bring further clarity, I’ve appended a wonderful brief piece by Greg Gilbert on exactly this point.

R. C. Sproul brought to the conference what many felt was the most devotionally rich meditation on the sacrifice of Christ. And he did it by meditating upon the curse motif in the Old Testament! In his own inimitable conversational style, with wide learning and profound biblical understanding, R. C. took us on a tour of Old Testament practices, verbally painting scenes before our eyes. Again and again, as we stared into the depth of those practices, we began to see the cross of Christ more and more clearly until, well, let me simply encourage you to read what I heard many call “the best I’ve ever heard R. C.” And, I promise—it’s not R. C. you’ll be glorifying when you’re done.

During the second night of the conference, Al Mohler brought a new depth of care to the topic of the atonement. This conference in many ways was birthed out of our concern that the atonement is being misconceived and mistaught in too many evangelical books and churches. It was Al who decided to wade into the sea of literature and explain to us what has happened. With a mastery of the literature that is both exceptional and yet typical of our well-read friend, he led us to see the lines of misunderstanding—of attack—that have been laid down against Christ’s death being in the place of
INTRODUCTION

sinners. His conference message, now here in print, should serve as a guide to the literature and, even more fundamentally, to thinking carefully about the atoning work of Christ.

The last day of the conference, John Piper brought the cross into our own lives and ministries. He posed the question, “How does the supremacy of Christ create radical Christian sacrifice?” Looking through the last few chapters of Hebrews, John called for us to live radical lives so as to have radical ministries. He called us to be God’s men. He called us to be certain that in such a ministry suffering will come. He inspired us with the example of the late Sir Norman Anderson, a brilliant Christian scholar in London who taught Islamic law for years and who suffered a great deal in his life, though without apparent bitterness. (I had the privilege of knowing Sir Norman a bit, and he was as strikingly kind as he was brilliant.) John helped us examine what caused such willingness to suffer, and he turned us to the Savior to see how Christ’s person and saving work is displayed in our suffering. As a result, I, along with many others, felt compelled to follow Christ “outside the camp.” We pray that you will resolve to do the same as you meditate on this chapter.

The final message was once again given by the conference pastor C. J. Mahaney. C. J. preached a wonderful message titled “Sustaining the Pastor’s Soul.” He presented Paul as an example of one who suffered without complaint and served with obvious joy, regardless of the circumstances. And he called us to be “happy pastors,” too. What was it he repeatedly said? “How striking that the one with the most responsibility was the one with the most joy.” Many times since hearing this, when I have been tempted to complain, I have thought of Paul’s example and been rebuked and, as C. J. would say, “adjusted.” Looking at Paul’s letter to the Philippians, C. J. helped us consider Paul’s foundational gratitude to God, his continuing faith in God, and finally, and most convictingly, his love for others. C. J. brings the great commands to love God and neighbor specifically to the pastoral ministry through the example of the
great apostle. Even though this message appears as the book’s last chapter, if you’re a pastor and feeling particularly pressed, let me suggest that you begin there.

Well, what remains now is for you to read the volume and be built up. Thank God for his faithfulness to his covenant, even to the point of Christ’s death on the cross. This is good news indeed!

—Mark Dever, October 2008, for Ligon Duncan, Albert Mohler, and C. J. Mahaney
CHAPTER 5

THE CURSE MOTIF OF THE ATONEMENT

R. C. Sproul

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.” Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

Galatians 3:10–14

For over fifty years I have studied and read a host of tomes written about the meaning of the cross of Christ, and yet I still believe that I have not been able to do anything more than touch the surface of the depths and the riches that are contained in that moment of redemptive history. I suspect that when my eyes open in heaven for the first time, I will be absolutely staggered by the sudden increase of understanding that will come to me when I behold the Lamb who was slain and hear angels and archangels singing in my ears,
“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing” (Rev. 5:12), and when I see the apostle Paul and say, “Thank you for knowing nothing but Christ and him crucified.”

When we go to the New Testament and read not only the narrative event of the cross but the many didactic expressions that explain to us its meaning and significance, I think we are soon aware that there is no one image or dimension that can comprehensively explain the cross. Rather, we find many images and metaphors that would indicate that the cross is a multifaceted event. It is by no means one-dimensional. It is as a magnificent tapestry woven by several distinct brightly hued threads that, when brought together, give us a magnificent finished work of art.

When the New Testament speaks of the atonement of Jesus, it does so in terms of substitution; it calls attention to a death that in some way was vicarious. The New Testament speaks of the satisfaction of the justice and wrath of God. In Scripture we see the metaphor of the kinsman redeemer who paid the bridal price to purchase his bride with his blood, releasing her from bondage. We see that motif used in the New Testament when it speaks of ransom that is paid. We find the motif of victory over Satan and the powers of darkness when the serpent’s head is crushed under the bruised heel of the Redeemer.

But one image, one aspect, of the atonement has receded in our day almost into obscurity. We have been made aware of present-day attempts to preach a more gentle and kind gospel. In our effort to communicate the work of Christ more kindly we flee from any mention of a curse inflicted by God upon his Son. We shrink in horror from the words of the prophet Isaiah (chap. 53) that describe the ministry of the suffering servant of Israel and tells us that it pleased the Lord to bruise him. Can you take that in? Somehow the Father took pleasure in bruising the Son when he set before him that awful cup of divine wrath. How could the Father be pleased by bruising
his Son were it not for his eternal purpose through that bruising to restore us as his children?

But there is the curse motif that seems utterly foreign to us, particularly in this time in history. When we speak today of the idea of curse, what do we think of? We think perhaps of a voodoo witch doctor that places pins in a doll made to replicate his enemy. We think of an occultist who is involved in witchcraft, putting spells and hexes upon people. The very word *curse* in our culture suggests some kind of superstition, but in biblical categories there is nothing superstitious about it.

**Blessings and Curses in Biblical History**

The idea of the curse is deeply rooted in biblical history. We need only to go to the opening chapters of Genesis to the record of the fall of man, the event that provoked from God his anathema on the serpent, who was cursed to go around on his belly. The curse was then given to the earth itself: it would bring forth thorns and briars, making it difficult for Adam to live by the toil of his brow. The curse also brought excruciating (I choose that word carefully) pain to women during childbirth.

But not only do we find this idea of curse early in Genesis, but if we fast-forward to the giving of the law under Moses, we see that God attached to the covenant he made with his people at Sinai a positive sanction and a negative sanction. The positive sanction is articulated there in terms of the concept of blessedness:

If you faithfully obey the voice of the **LORD** your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the **LORD** your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the **LORD** your God. Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds and the young
of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out. (Deut. 28:1–6)

God adds that if his people keep his Word, he will bless them—in the city and the country, when they rise up and lie down. God will bless them in the kitchen, the bedroom, and the living room. He will bless their fields, their goats, their sheep, and their cows. If they keep his Word, their lives will be nothing but an experience of divine benediction and blessedness. But God goes on to say:

If you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or to be careful to do all his commandments and his statues that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out. (vv. 15–19)

In the kitchen, in the living room, in the bedroom, in the garage—cursed.

One of the things I love about Christmas is the singing of carols. One of my favorites is “Joy to the World”:

\[
\text{No more let sins and sorrows grow,} \\
\text{Nor thorns infest the ground;} \\
\text{He comes to make His blessings flow} \\
\text{Far as the curse is found,} \\
\text{Far as the curse is found,} \\
\text{Far as, far as, the curse is found.}
\]

How far do we find that curse? The apostle Paul says that the whole creation groans together in travail waiting for the manifestation of the
sons of God. We live on a planet that is under the curse of God. I’d like to take some time to explore the significance of God’s divine curse.

**Oracles of Weal and Woe**

When the prophets of the Old Testament spoke—not their opinions but the word that God placed in their mouths—the favorite method the prophets used to express the word of God was the oracle. It seems that sometimes the only place we see the concept of the oracle is in Greek mythology, such as in the Oracle of Delphi, where we find people going to self-appointed prophets to get a divine pronouncement. Well, there were oracles before Delphi—there was one called Isaiah and others called Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, Ezekiel, and Daniel. They used the oracular form to communicate the Word of God.

There were two basic kinds of oracles known to the prophets. There was the oracle of weal, which was an oracle of good news, an announcement of prosperity coming from the hand of God, and there was the oracle of woe, an announcement of doom also coming from the hand of God. The oracle of weal was typically uttered by the use of the term *blessed*, the pronouncement of a divine benediction.

David begins the Psalms:

_Blessed is the man_  
_who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,_  
_nor stands in the way of sinners,_  
_nor sits in the seat of scoffers;_  
_but his delight is in the law of the Lord,_  
_and on his law he meditates day and night._

*He is like a tree*  
_planted by streams of water_  
_that yields its fruit in its season,_  
_and its leaf does not wither.*
In all that he does, he prospers.
The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. (Ps. 1:1–4)

How often did our Lord exercise the function of the prophet and make oracular pronouncements such as he did on the Sermon on the Mount? There he looked to his disciples and said, “Blessed are the poor. . . Blessed are those who mourn. . . Blessed are the meek. . . Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. . . Blessed are the pure in heart. . . Blessed are the peacemakers. . . Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake” (Matt. 5:3–10). We call that section of the sermon “the Beatitudes” because Jesus pronounces the blessing of God upon certain people.

The oracle of doom, in contrast, was normally prefaced by the word woe. When Amos pronounced the judgments of God on the nations he said, “Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! . . . Woe to those who are at ease in Zion. . . Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory” (Amos 5:18; 6:1, 4). When Isaiah beheld the unveiled holiness of God, he pronounced an oracle of doom upon himself because he understood God (Isa. 6:5).

We love to hear the story of blessedness, but we never want to hear the woe. Besides ours, I don’t think there has been a culture in the history of the world that has experienced more discontinuity at that level. Everywhere in America we see automobiles with bumper stickers that read God Bless America. After 9/11 Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell suggested that perhaps the events of that day were God’s judgments upon America, and the outrage of the press was so severe they had to recant their musings on that point. We believe in a God who is infinitely capable of blessing people but is utterly incapable of cursing them. When I was a young Christian, I heard a sermon from Billy Graham in which he said, “If God does not judge America, he’s going to have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah.” But the idea of God bringing judgment and wrath and
curse upon a nation has been expurgated from our Bibles and from our theologies.

The Hebrew Benediction

If you really want to understand what it meant to a Jew to be cursed, I think the simplest way is to look at the famous Hebrew benediction in the Old Testament, one which clergy often use as the concluding benediction in a church service:

\[
\text{The \ Lord bless you and keep you;}
\text{the \ Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;}
\text{the \ Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.}
\]

(Num. 6:24–26)

The structure of that famous benediction follows a common Hebrew poetic form known as parallelism. There are various types of parallelism in Hebrew literature. There’s antithetical parallelism in which ideas are set in contrast one to another. There is synthetic parallelism, which contains a building crescendo of ideas. But one of the most common forms of parallelism is synonymous parallelism, and, as the words suggest, this type restates something with different words. There is no clearer example of synonymous parallelism anywhere in Scripture than in the benediction in Numbers 6, where exactly the same thing is said in three different ways. If you don’t understand one line of it, then look to the next one, and maybe it will reveal to you the meaning.

We see in the benediction three stanzas with two elements in each one: “bless” and “keep”; “face shine” and “be gracious”; and “lift up the light of his countenance” and “give you peace.” For the Jew, to be blessed by God was to be bathed in the refulgent glory that emanates from his face. “The Lord bless you” means “the Lord make his face to shine upon you.” Is this not what Moses begged for on the mountain when he asked to see God? Yet God told him that no man
can see him and live. So God carved out a niche in the rock and placed Moses in the cleft of it, and God allowed Moses to see a glimpse of his backward parts but not of his face. After Moses had gotten that brief glance of the back side of God, his face shone for an extended period of time. But what the Jew longed for was to see God's face, just once.

The Jews’ ultimate hope was the same hope that is given to us in the New Testament, the final eschatological hope of the beatific vision: “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). Don’t you want to see him? The hardest thing about being a Christian is serving a God you have never seen, which is why the Jew asked for that.

There is a scene in the movie *Ben Hur* where Ben has been reduced to slavery and is being dragged behind his captor. They finally come to a well in the midst of the desert. Ben’s lips are parched and he is overcome with thirst. All of a sudden we see someone come out of the shadows, and he stoops over and gives Ben a cup of cold water. The camera is positioned to reflect Ben Hur’s vision. As he looks up into the face of the one giving him the water, Ben’s face begins to shine. The viewer doesn’t have to be told who gave him the drink of water; it is understood that the Lord Jesus made his face to shine upon this slave.

But my purpose here is not to explain the blessing of God but its polar opposite, its antithesis, which again can be seen in vivid contrast to the benediction. The supreme malediction would read something like this: “May the Lord curse you and abandon you. May the Lord keep you in darkness and give you only judgment without grace. May the Lord turn his back upon you and remove his peace from you forever.”

**The Core of the Gospel**

There are several animals involved in the ritual performed on the Day of Atonement. Before the high priest can enter into the Most
Holy Place (which he alone can do only one day each year), he must make a blood sacrifice and go through an elaborate process of purification. There are two more animals involved, one that is killed and another that survives. The one that is killed yields blood, which the high priest takes into the inner sanctum and sprinkles on the mercy seat to bring reconciliation. Yet, in this drama there is no power in that blood other than its pointing forward to the blood of the Lamb, even as the blood on the doorposts on the night of Passover pointed beyond itself to Christ.

We know two things from the Day of Atonement. First, that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. We also learn from the author of Hebrews that the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin. But in the drama of the blood sacrifice that is sprinkled on the mercy seat, an act of propitiation is symbolized, which some brilliant translators in the middle of the twentieth century decided to take out of the New Testament, to their everlasting shame.

Those are two words at the core of the gospel—**propitiation** and **expiation**. They have the same root but different prefixes. People must understand propitiation and expiation if they are going to understand the gospel. I use the structure of my church, St. Andrew’s, as an illustration. The church is built in a classical style called the cruciform. If it is viewed from the air, the shape of our building forms a cross. Those who walk down the center aisle are reminded of the vertical piece of the cross. I tell my congregation to let it remind them of propitiation. In propitiation the Son does something to satisfy the justice and the wrath of the Father. It is a vertical translation, which was prefigured in the sacrifice made on the mercy seat.

Let’s not forget the other animal that liberal theologians try every which way to erase from the biblical record. I’m speaking of the goat, the scapegoat, which became the object of imputation when the priest lay his hands on the back of the animal, symboli-
cally indicating the transfer of the guilt of the people to the back of the goat. Afterward the goat was driven into the wilderness, outside the camp. In the middle of the camp, equidistant to every settlement of every tribe, was the tabernacle, which indicated that God was in the midst of his people. So to be driven out of camp, outside the covenant community, was to be driven to the place where the blessings of God did not reach. That’s what Christ did for us in expiation.

When on the cross, not only was the Father’s justice satisfied by the atoning work of the Son, but in bearing our sins the Lamb of God removed our sins from us as far as the east is from the west. He did it by being cursed. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’” (Gal. 3:13). He who is the incarnation of the glory of God became the very incarnation of the divine curse.

Many years ago I was asked by the Quaker community of Pennsylvania, the Society of Friends, to come to one of their meetings and explain to them the difference between the old covenant and the new covenant. I talked about the Day of Atonement in Israel and the crucifixion of Christ in the New Testament. As I spoke of Christ becoming cursed, my message was interrupted by a guy in the back who stood up and shouted, “That’s primitive and obscene!” I was taken aback, and just to give myself a chance to think I said, “What did you say?” as if I hadn’t heard him. (Everybody in the room heard him.)

With great hostility he repeated himself, so I told him that I loved the words he’d chosen. What could be more primitive than killing animals and placing the blood over the throne of God or taking a human being and pouring out his blood as a human sacrifice? One of the things I love about the gospel is that it wasn’t written merely for an agnostic elite group of scholars. The drama of redemption is communicated in terms so simple, so crass and primitive, that a child can understand it. I really like the second word he
used—obscene. If there ever was an obscenity that violates contemporary community standards, it was Jesus on the cross. After he became the scapegoat and the Father had imputed to him every sin of every one of his people, the most intense, dense concentration of evil ever experienced on this planet was exhibited. Jesus was the ultimate obscenity.

So what happened? God is too holy to look at sin. He could not bear to look at that concentrated monumental condensation of evil, so he averted his eyes from his Son. The light of his countenance was turned off. All blessedness was removed from his Son, whom he loved, and in its place was the full measure of the divine curse.

All the imagery that betrays the historical event of the cross is the imagery of the curse. It was necessary for the Scriptures to be fulfilled that Jesus not be crucified by Jews; he had to be delivered into the hands of the Gentiles. He had to be executed not by stoning but by Gentiles outside the camp so that the full measure of the curse and the darkness that attends it be visited upon Jesus.

**Forsaken**

God adds to these details astronomical perturbations. At midday he turned the lights out on the hill outside of Jerusalem so that when his face moved away, when the light of his countenance shut down, even the sun couldn’t shine on Calvary. Bearing the full measure of the curse, Christ screamed, “Eli, Eli lema sabachthani,” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46).

Jesus took that occasion to identify with the psalmist in Psalm 22 in order to call attention to those looking upon the spectacle that what they were witnessing was really a fulfillment of prophecy. I don’t think Jesus was in a Bible-quoting mood at the time. His cry was not, as Albert Schweitzer opined, the cry of a disillusioned prophet who had believed that God was going to rescue him at the eleventh hour and then felt forsaken. He didn’t just feel forsaken;
he was forsaken. For Jesus to become the curse, he had to be completely forsaken by the Father.

As I said, I’ve been thinking about these things for fifty years, and I can’t begin to penetrate all it meant for Jesus to be forsaken by God. But there is none of that to be found in the pseudo-gospels of our day. Every time I hear a preacher tell his people that God loves them unconditionally, I want to ask that the man be defrocked for such a violation of the Word of God. What pagan does not hear in that statement that he has no need of repentance, so he can continue in sin without fear, knowing that it’s all taken care of? There is a profound sense in which God does love people even in their corruption, but they are still under his anathema.

The Gospel—Our Only Hope

Just because a man is ordained is no guarantee that he is in the kingdom of God. The odds are astronomical that many are still under the curse of God. There are ordained men who have not yet fled to the cross, who are still counting on the nebulous idea of the unconditional love of God to get them through, or even worse, still thinking that they can get into the kingdom of God through their good works. They don’t understand that unless they perfectly obey the law of God, which they have not done for five minutes since they were born, they are under the curse of God. That is the reality we must make clear to our people—either they will bear the curse of God themselves or they will flee to the One who took it for them.

Thomas Aquinas once was asked whether he thought that Jesus enjoyed the beatific vision throughout his whole life. Thomas said, “I don’t know, but I’m sure that our Lord was able to see things that our sin keeps us from seeing.” Remember that the promise of the vision of God in the Beatitudes is the promise made to the pure of heart. The reason why we can’t see God with our eyes is not that we have a problem with our optic nerve. What prevents us from seeing God is our heart, our impurity. But Jesus had no impurity. So
obviously he had some experience of the beauty of the Father until that moment that our sin was placed upon him, and the One who was pure was pure no more, and God cursed him.

It was as if there was a cry from heaven, as if Jesus heard the words “God damn you,” because that’s what it meant to be cursed and under the anathema of the Father. I don’t understand that, but I know that it’s true. I know that every person who has not been covered by the righteousness of Christ draws every breath under the curse of God. If you believe that, you will stop adding to the gospel and start preaching it with clarity and boldness, because, dear friends, it is the only hope we have, and it is hope enough.
“There is a yearning today for a faith that is real, deep, and authentic. Such faith keeps marketing at arm’s length and escapes from cultural compromises because both are pathways into superficiality and emptiness. This book addresses that yearning with clarity and conviction and, along the way, connects its readers with what Christians in their best moments have always believed.”

DAVID WELLS, DISTINGUISHED RESEARCH PROFESSOR, GORDON-CONWELL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Loving, teaching, and rightly handling the Word of God is a pastor’s privilege and responsibility. According to the authors of Proclaiming a Cross-centered Theology, if a pastor understands what the Word says about God, man, and the curse, about Christ and his substitutionary atonement, and about the call to repentance and sacrifice, that pastor will develop and preach a sound theology. And sound theology is essential to faithful, joy-filled ministry.

In this penetrating volume authors Mark Dever, J. Ligon Duncan III, R. Albert Mohler Jr., C. J. Mahaney, and R. C. Sproul in exploring the church’s need for faithful proclamation. Together they call preachers, teachers, and students of the Word to cross-centered, scripturally-saturated thinking. These messages—first presented at the 2008 Together for the Gospel Conference—have been prepared, says Mark Dever, “with the assumption that there is widespread agreement about the gospel across denominational lines but also with the conviction that the gospel is widely under attack. Some of those assaults are deliberate and intended; others are not. Some are subtle; others are obvious frontal assaults. It is with a love primarily for the gospel that these messages were given. And it is with this same love that they are now brought together and presented to you.”

Excerpt from the Introduction by Mark Dever