

Living Under The Cross

How living beneath the cross from day to day transforms us

By Pastor Eddie Idefonso



I became a Christian when I was 27 years old. A pastor told me about the cross of Christ. I believed then, as I believe now, that what Christ accomplished on the cross meant salvation for me. I have not wavered in my basic belief since that significant moment of conversion.

That belief, however, has not spared me from the difficulty—even the agony—of discerning what it means to apply Christ’s work on the cross to my daily life. I know that the cross of Christ has saved me. I wonder why it has not changed me, at least to the degree I expect and want.

I know that the cross of Christ has delivered me from sin, yet I still struggle with sinful habits every day. I believe that Christ suffered for me on the cross, yet I still wonder what Christ’s suffering on the cross has to say about my own suffering. I realize that the cross has achieved peace among enemies, yet I am aware of many hostile and broken relationships in the Christian community. I want to know how the cross of Christ can change the way we live in ordinary life.

Seeing Sin from under the Cross

The first way the cross can transform our day-to-day living is to provide us with the power and means to tackle sinful habits. It provides a simple but profound principle: We have *died* to those habits. We can nail them to the cross. Say no. Stop.

It is, of course, easier said than done. St. Augustine understood sin’s grip simply by observing his own life, which he then reflected on in his famous *Confessions*. He argued that though evil has nothing of value to offer us, it gives the appearance of good in order to attract us. But the good it offers is always at the wrong time, in the wrong place, under the wrong circumstances. Still, our perverted nature propels us toward such evil. Before we know it, we are bound to it. “The truth is that disordered lust springs from a perverted will; when lust is pandered to, a habit is formed; when habit is not checked, it hardens into compulsion” is how Augustine described the process.

If these habits are so destructive, why is it so hard to put them to death? Because doing so makes us feel as if *we* are dying, not just the sin in us. Take food, for instance. As all of us know, good food in large quantities can become habit forming. It can lead to gluttony. Gluttony concerns not merely the quantity of food we eat, which is bad enough; it also concerns our attitude about food, our preoccupation with it, our impatience when

we do not get it fast enough, and our resentment when we are deprived of it. Gluttony is a nasty, ugly habit.

Imagine for a moment that you struggle with the sin of gluttony. You are a Christian, and you have confessed your gluttony to God and have received assurance of forgiveness. But you are bothered and perplexed because gluttony still rules your life. Forgiveness, in other words, has not led to change. So what should you do?

One day, while reading your Bible, you stumble across this text from the Apostle Paul: **And so, because [Jesus] died, sin has no power over him; and now he lives his life in fellowship with God. In the same way you are to think of yourselves as dead, so far as sin is concerned, but living in fellowship with God through Christ Jesus.** *Romans 6:10–11, TEV*

Perplexed, you look for other texts to illumine the one you just read. A passage from Hebrews makes it clearer:

Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end. He did not give up because of the cross! On the contrary, because of the joy that was waiting for him, he thought nothing of the disgrace of dying on the cross, and he is now seated at the right side of God's throne. *Hebrews 12:2, TEV*

You want to die to your gluttony. You decide to say no to it. You put it to death. Of course, your gluttonous habit makes a big fuss, crying out that if you sacrifice eating as much and often as you want, then you will die of starvation and lose all pleasure in life. But in faith you tell yourself that you will not die; only the vicious habit that is hurting you will die. You choose, instead, to believe Scripture—that there is joy before you, a kind of resurrection of your life. You assume that you will actually experience greater pleasure by living for God rather than for your stomach. You risk giving up the sin because you believe that, though you will suffer immediate loss, in the long run you will gain something far greater. **You will experience the wonder and joy of living in and for God, who is the giver of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17).** You remember the words Jesus spoke in the face of temptation: **“Man does not live on bread alone” (Luke 4:4).** You recall that **His true food was to do the will of His Father in heaven (John 4:34). He said of Himself that He is the bread of life, and the bread He feeds us will satisfy us for eternity (John 6:35–59).** So you dare to die to the sin of gluttony. That death, you believe, will prepare you to receive a different kind of food that only God can give, the food of obedience, joy, and divine approval.

Jesus had to die on the cross in order to usher in new life. Our stubborn sins must also die if we are to fully experience the joy and freedom of the new life He purchased for us. **To live under the cross is to keep the nails handy.**

Seeing Suffering from under the Cross

The same cross that has the power to free us from stubborn sin also has the power to transform our perspective of and response to suffering.

In the past few years, I have changed my mind about suffering. I spent decades avoiding it because I considered it an unmitigated evil. When at the age of 40 I found myself in circumstances that forced suffering upon me, I still believed that it was evil. Now I am not so sure. Not that I think the opposite, that suffering is an unqualified good. I believe it is ambiguous, an evil that can lead to good, a plague that God can redeem. Suffering reminds us of our desperate need for God and makes us aware of our dependence on grace. It is like a fire that forces an evacuation of a condemned house that had become a familiar and comfortable place to us. Once we get outside and into the open air, we begin to see what we were missing.

The cross-inflicted inconceivable suffering on Jesus. Jesus said that we, too, must bear a cross—which reminds us that we should not expect, and do not deserve, an easy life. Not that we should seek suffering. **Even Jesus dreaded the cross and asked His Father to spare Him from it (Luke 22:41–44).** We know, however—again through the cross—that suffering does not have the final word. The resurrection does.

In and of itself, the cross was bad. It serves as undeniable evidence of the evil of the human heart, because people just like us ordered Jesus' execution and mocked Him while He hung there in agony. But the cross was also good. It accomplished the world's redemption. We can, therefore, rejoice, knowing that God will use our suffering to change our lives. **He will form character in us (Romans 5:3–4), awaken hope in us (Romans 5:5), and work all things together for our good (Romans 8:28).**

Several years ago, I preached a series of messages about suffering on the radio. I have received many letters from people who wanted to tell me their own stories of suffering. I have asked permission from a few to tell their stories to others. One woman, Mary, was in a terrible automobile accident when she was only five years old. Her grandmother, aunt, and only sibling—a younger brother—were killed. She, the only survivor, was trapped in that chamber of death for more than an hour before an emergency crew could get her out. It took her parents, who were touring Europe at the time, three days to get home. By the time they arrived, she had retreated into a cocoon of silence that lasted for nearly two years. Gradually, she emerged from her silence and returned to normal, or so it seemed.

Mary forgot the accident, but the memory of it did not forget her. She was married in her 20s and had a baby. When her little son reached the age of her brother at the time of his death, the memories flooded back. She had a nervous breakdown and was institutionalized. That experience set her on a journey of pain, healing, and redemption.

She was well on her way to emotional and spiritual health when she wrote to me. She concluded her letter by admitting the obvious: She would never have chosen what had happened to her. ***“Let this cup pass from me,”*** she would have said to God. But she did not have a choice. She came to realize over time that her suffering had a good effect. It served God's redemptive purpose. She understood the tension in which Christians must live—the tension between human weakness and God's strength, life's afflictions and God's redemptive plan, catastrophic suffering (which she surely faced) and spiritual victory. She was living what Paul wrote: **“We are often troubled, but not crushed; sometimes in doubt, but never in despair; there are many enemies, but we are never without a friend; and though badly hurt at times, we are not destroyed. At all times**

we carry in our mortal bodies the death of Jesus, so that his life also may be seen in our bodies” (2 Cor. 4:8–10, TEV).

Mary embraced suffering so that God’s life could fill her up. It is a perspective she learned by living under the cross.

Seeing People from under the Cross

When we live under the cross of Christ, we will also see transformation in our relationships.

I used to be concerned about my natural limitations and weaknesses, and I wished that I could be rid of them. I wanted to be strong, independent, and competent. Now I am less concerned about my weaknesses and more concerned about my strengths.

My weaknesses remind me of my finitude and need, and they drive me to seek help from something or someone outside myself, namely God. My strengths, on the other hand, often deceive me into thinking I am greater than I really am. My strengths make me feel powerful and superior. I use them to assert myself over others.

The sad, violent, and destructive history of the world tells the story of human strength gone badly. Aryans dominated other races and exterminated millions of Jews (as well as other “undesirable” populations) because they thought Aryans alone embodied pure stock. Whites rule over blacks because they think they are superior to them. One political party mocks or dismisses another because it assumes it has the edge on truth. The worst cruelties done in world history have been done in the name of strength, not weakness.

The cross exposes the danger of human strength, unmasking it for what it is—an attempt to thwart God. It was pharisaical religion and Roman law, both expressions of cultural achievement and strength that sent Jesus to the cross. Both were the products of enlightened people and sophisticated culture. The best of humanity, as it turned out, did the worst thing imaginable.

The Apostle Paul describes **“the dividing wall of hostility” (Ephes. 2:14)** that separates one person from another, or one group from another. That dividing wall represents strengths that we use to assert our superiority over others—our wealth, education, gender, ethnicity, party affiliation, culture. The cross tears down those walls. For example, Christ’s death broke down the wall of hostility that separated Jew from Gentile. **“He abolished the Jewish Law with its commandments and rules, in order to create out of the two races one new people in union with himself, in this way making peace. By his death on the cross Christ destroyed their enmity; by means of the cross he united both races into one body and brought them back to God” (Ephes. 2:15–16, TEV).** Jewish law made Gentiles outsiders and aliens, an unacceptable group of people. The cross exposed the vanity and emptiness of those laws. Peace resulted from the demolition of the wall between Jews and Gentiles. It does that to all walls.

The cross altered Paul’s attitude toward his former opponents. His pharisaical background no longer made him feel superior to others. Instead, he viewed people through the cross. He saw what the cross did to transform them. **“No longer, then, do we**

judge anyone by human standards. Even if at one time we judged Christ according to human standards, we no longer do so. When anyone is joined to Christ, he is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:16–17, TEV). Paul celebrated people, no matter what their background or culture, because the only thing that mattered to him was their relationship with Christ.

Thus at the end of his letter to the church in Rome, he gives personal greetings to dozens of people, though the majority were Gentiles, women, or slaves. Paul did not consider what they were in the eyes of culture but who they were through the work of Christ. The cross revolutionized the way he looked at people.

I use *Cry, the Beloved Country*, a novel written by Alan Paton, in one of the leadership classes I teach at the Pastor Training schools. It tells the story of a black South African pastor, Stephen Kumalo, who learns that his wayward son has murdered a white man who had devoted his life to racial reconciliation. The victim’s father, James Jarvis, is not sympathetic with his son’s convictions. In bitterness, he not only mourns the death of his son but also views his martyrdom as a waste of his son’s life.

But Jarvis’ heart begins to change when he reads his son’s writings, for they accuse white Christians such as Jarvis of being hypocrites. Their true religion, his son charges, is not the Christianity of the cross but white supremacy. Christianity exposes the evil of racism and brings reconciliation between enemies. When he sees his prejudice from under the cross, Jarvis is transformed.

When the two grieving fathers finally meet, James Jarvis is able to embrace Stephen Kumalo. The sacrificial death of his son liberates Jarvis to love a man he once considered an enemy. Reaching across racial and cultural barriers, he makes a new friend.

The story is fiction. The principle behind it is truth. The cross effected peace between Jew and Gentile. It has that same power today to reconcile feminist and traditionalist, black and white, liberal and conservative, fundamentalist and Pentecostal, Republican and Democrat. But there is a price to be paid. The cross will deprive us of the right to use our strengths to gain power over others. It forces us into a position of humility and vulnerability. It breaks down the dividing walls of hostility we create to have an advantage over opponents and enemies. It transforms relationships.

The Only Way to Life

The cross, then, is not simply the means of our salvation, although it is that to be sure! It is also the means of our *transformation*. It is the way of life we must follow if we want to close the gap between who we are in Christ (as His redeemed children) and how we live from day to day (as sinful humans in the world).

The cross brings good news on two levels. It promises to redeem us; it also promises to change us. Such change is bound to produce pain. It is painful to die to self, to embrace suffering, and to reconcile with opponents and enemies.

But it is worth it. I have followed Christ for many years now, and I am serious about my faith. I am not a perfect man. I still have many problems. But the problems are

different now. The foundation upon which I am building my life has become sturdier over time. I have died to some old habits, and it feels very good to be rid of them.

I have faced suffering and come through it with a deep sense of the goodness of God and the power of God's grace. I have made friends with people I would have spurned 20 years ago, yet I have not had to compromise basic convictions to do it. I have lived the Christian faith long enough to understand its incredible power. The cross has provided for me not only a way of salvation but also a way of life. It is the only way to live.