

## REDEEMING – A Six-Week Lenten Study Guide

### Introduction:

Lent is a season of reflection, repentance, and renewal. In this six-week worship series, “**REDEEMING**,” we will reclaim and restore the true meaning of words, ideas, and experiences that have been misused or misunderstood. Each week focuses on “redeeming” a key concept – finding its authentic Christian significance in light of Scripture, the teachings of the United Methodist Church (UMC) and John Wesley (founder of the Methodist movement), and our calling as disciples. Use this guide for personal devotion or small group discussion. Each session provides background on United Methodist/Wesleyan teaching, historical misuses, a theological reflection for today, relevant scriptures, discussion questions, and practical applications for both individuals and congregations.

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## Week 1: Redeeming Forgiveness

### United Methodist & Wesleyan Teachings on Forgiveness

Forgiveness is at the heart of the gospel. United Methodists teach that we are saved by God’s grace through faith – a gift that includes the complete forgiveness of our sins through Jesus Christ. John Wesley wrote that “**Justification is another word for pardon... the forgiveness of all our sins.**” In other words, when we repent and trust in Christ, God graciously pardons us and we are *accepted by God*. Wesley’s own conversion story at Aldersgate Street was an experience of feeling his sins “taken away” and knowing he was saved from sin and death. Wesley also stressed that forgiven people must forgive others. He famously replied to a man who boasted, “I never forgive,” by saying: “**Then I hope, sir, you never sin.**” In Wesley’s view and Methodist teaching, forgiving others is a natural response to God’s mercy – we pray “*forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*” In early Methodist small groups, members who strayed were guided back with loving correction and forgiveness, following Jesus’ instruction to rebuke and then forgive a repentant brother. Thus, both receiving and granting forgiveness are essential in Wesleyan spirituality.

### Historical Misunderstandings or Misuses

Throughout history, the concept of forgiveness has sometimes been distorted. In the Middle Ages, the Church sold **indulgences** – essentially treating forgiveness as a commodity to be purchased, which sparked the Reformation. At times people have misunderstood forgiveness as “*cheap grace*,” assuming God’s pardon means sin “doesn’t matter” or that we can continue wrongdoing without repentance. On the other extreme, some have refused to forgive at all, nursing grudges or seeking revenge, contrary to Jesus’ teachings. Forgiveness has also been misused when people are pressured to “forgive and forget” serious abuse or injustice without any accountability for the wrongdoer – a distortion that confuses true forgiveness with enabling harm. These misunderstandings rob forgiveness of its power and beauty. Instead of being a path to freedom and reconciliation, forgiveness wrongly applied became either a trivial transaction or an oppressive demand.

### Redeeming Forgiveness – A Theological Reflection for Today

**What does it mean to redeem forgiveness?** It means recovering forgiveness as a holy gift that heals and transforms relationships. In the church today, we reclaim that **God’s forgiveness is free but not cheap** – it was accomplished through the costly grace of Christ’s death and resurrection. When God forgives us, the “slate is wiped clean,” and we are freed from guilt and shame. Knowing this, we respond with gratitude and a desire to turn from sin. Redeeming forgiveness also means teaching that forgiving others is not optional but a command from Jesus that leads to freedom. True forgiveness is an act of *grace*, not a denial of justice. It does **not** mean we condone evil or eliminate consequences; rather, it releases our own hearts from bitterness and entrusts ultimate justice to God. Within the Church, we can correct past abuses by **combining forgiveness with accountability** –

for example, offering pastoral care and grace to both victims and offenders, while still addressing wrongdoing (see Week 5 on Accountability). John Wesley modeled this balance by insisting his societies “*watch over one another in love,*” gently restoring those who repent. In a redeemed understanding, forgiveness becomes a source of unity and peace: it allows us to live as a reconciled community where past hurts do not hold us captive. As Colossians 3:13 urges, “*Forgive each other; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you forgive.*” We forgive because we are forgiven. In reclaiming forgiveness, we offer the world a powerful witness of God’s mercy that mends what is broken.

## Scripture Readings

- **Luke 15:11-32** – Parable of the Prodigal Son, illustrating the Father’s lavish forgiveness and welcome.
- **Matthew 18:21-35** – Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, a warning to forgive others from the heart (and Peter’s question about forgiving “seventy-seven times”).
- **Ephesians 4:31-32** – “Put away all bitterness... forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”
- **Psalms 103:8-12** – “The Lord is merciful and gracious... He does not deal with us according to our sins... as far as east is from west, so far He removes our transgressions.”

## Discussion Questions for Small Groups

- What comes to mind when you hear the word *forgiveness*? Have you ever seen forgiveness misunderstood or misused in church or society?
- Why do you think Jesus linked our forgiving others with God forgiving us (see Matthew 6:12, 14-15)? How do Wesley’s teachings echo this link?
- Share a time you experienced forgiveness (from God or another person). How did it affect you? Why is forgiveness freeing for both the giver and receiver?
- What is the difference between forgiving someone and excusing or condoning their behavior? How can we forgive while still pursuing justice or healthy boundaries?
- Are there people you find it hard to forgive or hard to ask forgiveness from? What steps could you take to begin “redeeming” those broken relationships with God’s help?

## Practical Applications – Living Out Forgiveness

- **For Individuals:** Spend time in prayer this week inviting God to search your heart. Is there someone you need to forgive? Write a letter (you may or may not send it) expressing forgiveness, or take another step toward reconciliation if appropriate. Conversely, is there someone from whom *you* need to seek forgiveness? Ask God for courage to apologize and make amends. Practice the habit of daily confession – honestly admit your sins to God and accept His pardon, as John Wesley encouraged through frequent Communion and prayer. This will keep you grounded in grace and more ready to extend grace to others.
- **For Congregations:** Create space for forgiveness in communal life. This could mean incorporating a time of confession and assurance of pardon in worship regularly, so that the congregation hears the promise of God’s forgiveness each week. Offer teaching on conflict resolution and Christian reconciliation, perhaps through a workshop or sermon series, so that members learn how to address hurts and extend forgiveness appropriately. If your church has experienced division or past conflicts, consider a service of healing where people can silently or openly offer and receive forgiveness. Encourage small groups or Wesleyan-style class meetings to foster trust – as members “bear one another’s burdens” they can gently hold each other accountable and forgive slips or offenses in a safe environment. By practicing forgiveness openly, the church models to the world what God’s redeeming grace looks like in action.

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## Week 2: Redeeming Evangelism

### United Methodist & Wesleyan Teachings on Evangelism

*Evangelism* – sharing the good news of Jesus Christ – is central to the identity and mission of the Church. The United Methodist Church declares that “**The mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.**” Spreading the gospel is not just for a few; it is the calling of every disciple. John Wesley and the early Methodists were passionately evangelistic. Wesley famously told his preachers: “*It is not your business to preach so many times... but to save as many souls as you can. To bring as many sinners as you possibly can to repentance, and with all your power to build them up in holiness.*” Evangelism, for Wesley, was about **inviting people into a saving relationship with Christ and nurturing them in holy living**. He saw the world as his parish – no one was outside the reach of God’s love. Importantly, Wesleyan evangelism was not just preaching on a street corner; it was relational. Wesley emphasized “*means of grace*” like prayer, scripture study, and Christian fellowship as ways the Holy Spirit works to bring people to faith. Early Methodists combined **acts of love and hospitality** with the message of the gospel. In the UMC today, we stress that evangelism is driven by the Holy Spirit and expressed through genuine love for people. Every Christian is a witness – some may be gifted evangelists, but **all are called to share** how God’s grace has changed our lives. Evangelism in the Wesleyan spirit is warm-hearted and compassionate, seeking not to win arguments but to win hearts for Christ.

### Historical Misunderstandings or Misuses

Unfortunately, evangelism has at times gained a bad reputation due to misuse. In history, the zeal to “convert the world” sometimes entangled with empire and colonialism – for example, missions during the Age of Exploration often forced Western culture along with the gospel, doing spiritual good and harm in mixed measure. Forced conversions, the Crusades bearing the cross on flags, or coercive proselytism are extreme misuses of evangelism’s intent. In more recent times, some have associated “*evangelism*” with aggressive street preaching or televangelists promising prosperity – approaches that can seem manipulative, judgmental, or inauthentic. The word “evangelical” in popular culture has also taken on political overtones, causing some to shy away from anything labeled evangelism. Because of these misunderstandings, many well-meaning Christians feel hesitant or uncomfortable with evangelism, fearing it means pressuring people or behaving like a stereotype. Historically, another mistake is thinking evangelism is only the pastor’s job or an occasional event, rather than a lifestyle for all believers. When evangelism is misunderstood, churches either neglect it (staying inward-focused) or push it in unhealthy ways (focusing on numbers or using fear tactics). Such distortions stray from biblical evangelism, which should always be rooted in love, respect, and the genuine work of the Spirit.

### Redeeming Evangelism – A Theological Reflection for Today

To redeem evangelism, we must reclaim it as **good news sharing done in love**. Evangelism at its core simply means “bringing the *evangel* (gospel) to others” – introducing people to the abundant life and hope we have in Jesus. In our time, redeeming this concept involves **shifting from coercion to compassion**. We aren’t conquering people or winning a debate; we are bearing witness to God’s grace through our words *and* our actions. The UMC emphasizes an evangelism of **both invitation and integrity**. This means we warmly invite others into the faith through relationships – perhaps by sharing our personal testimony or extending an invitation to church – while also living a life that reflects Christ (so our witness has credibility). In Wesleyan terms, evangelism and social action go hand in hand. Meeting physical and emotional needs (feeding the hungry, befriending the lonely) often opens the door for spiritual conversations. In reclaiming evangelism, we see it not as a dreaded task but as a *natural overflow of joy*. Like the early disciples who said “we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20), we too share Christ because He has changed us. **Evangelism is for everyone** – not just preachers – and can be as simple as telling a friend how faith gives you hope, or praying with someone in crisis. It can also be inviting

someone to worship or a small group where they can experience Christian community. Redeemed evangelism is always respectful: it listens and dialogues rather than browbeats. It's motivated by love for the person, not by viewing them as a project. When we approach evangelism this way, we reflect John Wesley's blend of *earnestness* and *grace*. He taught that we should call people not only to momentary conversion but to ongoing discipleship – “making disciples,” not just “making converts.” In today's church, that means if someone responds to the gospel, we continue to walk with them, mentor them, and integrate them into the body of Christ. By reclaiming a holistic, loving approach to evangelism, we can remove the stigma and restore it as a joyous privilege: joining God in **sharing the redeeming love of Christ with all the world.**

## Scripture Readings

- **Matthew 28:18-20** – *The Great Commission*: Jesus commands us to “*go and make disciples of all nations,*” assuring He is with us always.
- **Acts 1:8** – Jesus' promise that the Holy Spirit will empower us to be His *witnesses... to the ends of the earth*. Evangelism is Spirit-led.
- **Romans 10:14-15** – Paul's argument that people cannot believe unless they hear the gospel: “*How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!*”
- **John 4:28-30, 39-42** – The Samaritan woman at the well becomes an eager evangelist to her village after encountering Jesus. A reminder that even new believers can share effectively from personal experience. (Optional additional reading: 1 Peter 3:15 – “*Always be ready to give an account of the hope that is in you, but do so with gentleness and respect.*”)

## Discussion Questions for Small Groups

- When you hear the word “evangelism,” what feelings or images come to mind? Have you had positive or negative experiences with evangelism in the past?
- John Wesley told his preachers their main business was to “*save souls.*” What do you think he meant by that, and how might that look for *all* Christians, not just preachers?
- Why do you think many people (maybe including us) feel hesitant about evangelism? Which misunderstandings discussed (e.g. fear of being pushy, bad examples in media) resonate with you?
- How can we share our faith authentically and respectfully today? What are some non-threatening ways to introduce spiritual conversations with friends or neighbors?
- The UMC mission statement talks about *making disciples* for the *transformation of the world*. In what ways can evangelism be about not only individual decisions but also changing the wider community/world for the better? How do personal conversion and social transformation go together?

## Practical Applications – Living Out Evangelism

- **For Individuals:** Pray this week for one person in your life who does not have a church home or a relationship with Christ. Ask God to show you how you might reach out to them in love. Perhaps you could share a bit of your own faith story with them, or simply let them know you're praying for them if they're going through a tough time. Practice **hospitality and invitation** – for example, invite a friend or coworker to join you for an event at church or a service project (sometimes a casual invitation to a church picnic or volunteering opportunity is less intimidating than a formal worship service). When the opportunity arises, speak about your faith naturally: e.g., “At church, we've been talking about hope, and it's really helped me...” – small remarks can open a door. Remember to listen to others' beliefs and questions; evangelism is a two-way conversation. Challenge yourself to step out of your comfort zone: maybe make a post on social media about something meaningful from a sermon or devotional (a way of witnessing to many).

Above all, **live in a way that reflects Christ's love** – your kindness, integrity, and compassion will often speak louder than words, and when you do share the gospel in words, it will ring true.

- **For Congregations:** Create an environment where evangelism is seen as a shared joy rather than a scary duty. As a church, you might organize **“invite a friend” Sundays** or community events that members can confidently ask neighbors to (e.g. a holiday concert, Vacation Bible School, a community service day) – be sure these are welcoming to newcomers. Offer training or workshops on personal evangelism, perhaps using Wesleyan examples, to equip members to share their faith story in 2-3 minutes and to extend an invitation. Evaluate your congregation's hospitality: are greeters in place, signage clear, follow-up done for visitors? Nothing “redeems” evangelism more than when a newcomer feels truly welcomed and loved at church. Emphasize that evangelism includes *acts of love*: plan outreach ministries like a neighborhood food pantry, tutoring program, or free coffee for commuters – and encourage volunteers to build genuine friendships through these. These relationships often lead to conversations about *why* we serve (our faith). Finally, celebrate evangelism stories: let people share testimonies of how they came to faith or how they've seen God work when they reached out. Hearing these will inspire the whole church to reclaim evangelism as a natural, life-giving part of discipleship, rather than something awkward or undesirable.

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## Week 3: Redeeming Inclusion

### United Methodist & Wesleyan Teachings on Inclusion

“Inclusion” in the Christian sense means embracing the God-given dignity and worth of **all** people and welcoming them into the fellowship of Christ. The United Methodist Church affirms that *“all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God.”* The UMC, in its Social Principles and official statements, insists that the church is open to people of every race, ethnicity, background, social status, gender, and ability. From the start, Methodism had an inclusive impulse. John Wesley’s theology was **“catholic”** (universal) in scope – he believed Christ died for *everyone*, not just a select few. He emphasized the *“all-inclusive embrace of Christ”*: the atonement is a gift for **“every person that ever was or will be born into the world.”** This belief in universal grace led Wesley to reach out beyond the walls of the church. He took the gospel to the fields, marketplaces, and prisons, preaching to coal miners and common laborers who were often neglected by the established church. He famously said, “The world is my parish,” indicating no one was outside his concern. Early Methodist societies were known for crossing some societal boundaries – poor and rich worshiped together, and women were included in roles like class leaders and even (informally) as exhortors or preachers on occasion. While 18th-century Methodism still had its limits, Wesley’s practices (such as opposing slavery and welcoming people of different social classes) laid groundwork for greater inclusion. United Methodist heritage, at its best, strives to reflect Galatians 3:28: *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”* We understand that Christ’s love and salvation are available to all people and that the Church should be a community where **anyone** can encounter God’s grace and find a home. “Open hearts, open minds, open doors” became a modern UM slogan, capturing our desire to be an inclusive church.

### Historical Misunderstandings or Misuses

The Church has not always lived up to the ideal of inclusion. History shows many painful examples of exclusion in Christian communities. At times, **cultural or personal prejudices** have been baptized as theology, leading churches to bar certain groups. For instance, in previous centuries, some American churches (including Methodist denominations) were racially segregated – African Americans were often forced to worship in balconies or separate services, which eventually led to the formation of independent Black Methodist denominations. It took until 1968 for the Methodist Church to eliminate the segregated Central Jurisdiction, fully integrating African American conferences. Similarly, women were long excluded from formal leadership; it wasn’t until 1956 that the Methodist Church ordained women, despite the fact that women like Mary Bosanquet Fletcher were preaching in Wesley’s day. There have also been exclusions based on disability, economic status, or other factors – perhaps not official, but through neglect or lack of welcome (e.g., buildings inaccessible to those with disabilities, ministries not considering the needs of people on the margins). In recent decades, debates in the UMC about LGBTQ+ inclusion have revealed how the church can struggle with who is fully welcomed. Even the word “inclusion” itself can be misunderstood: some fear it means “anything goes” or abandoning core doctrine, while others have used it almost as a buzzword without doing the real work of welcome. Misuses occur when churches **claim to welcome all** but then treat certain people as second-class or try to make everyone conform to one mold. On the flip side, some communities have misconstrued inclusion to mean there should be no standards or call to transformation, which isn’t truly loving either. These misunderstandings have caused hurt and kept the church from reflecting the breadth of God’s kingdom.

### Redeeming Inclusion – A Theological Reflection for Today

To redeem *“inclusion,”* we return to Jesus’ example and the biblical vision of the Church as a **body with many parts**. Jesus consistently reached out to those on the margins – he ate with sinners and tax collectors, touched lepers, honored women and Samaritans, and welcomed children. In Christ, **all are invited**. Redeeming inclusion



means the Church actively works to remove barriers that keep people from Christ. It's not a passive "we don't mind if you come" but an active **seeking and embracing** of those who have been left out. For us today, that might mean intentionally including people across racial and cultural lines, across generations, and across social or economic divides. It also means making room for people with different life experiences and questions, showing that *you belong before you believe or behave "perfectly."* Wesleyan theology supports this: prevenient grace (the grace that goes before) is already at work in every person's life, so we meet people with the assumption that God is drawing them, and we should do nothing to hinder that. **Inclusion, redeemed, is grounded in love and truth.** It doesn't mean watering down the gospel; it means presenting the gospel to *every* person as someone loved by God. John Wesley would say we must hold both *holiness* and *hospitality* together. For example, in Wesley's class meetings, all who "desired to flee the wrath to come" were welcome, and once inside, they helped each other grow in Christ. In a redeemed inclusive church, diversity is celebrated as a gift of God. We see that God's family is richer when all sorts of people are present. Practically, this calls churches to self-examination: Who is missing in our pews or leadership? Why? How can we actively welcome them? It may involve repentance for past exclusion and a commitment to "*do no harm*" going forward. Reclaiming inclusion also challenges us to go beyond mere tokenism – it's not just about opening the church doors, but also opening our **hearts and minds** (as the UM motto says). It means listening to those who have felt excluded and learning from them. It means ensuring our programs, worship styles, and language aren't unintentionally alienating people. Theologically, we affirm that in the kingdom of God, *every tribe, tongue, and nation* are gathered – a beautiful mosaic (Revelation 7:9). By redeeming inclusion, we become a truer foretaste of that heavenly community here and now. In short, a redeemed inclusion proclaims: *Anyone can come to Jesus, and everyone who comes finds a place at His table.* No one is beyond the reach of grace, and no one should be beyond the embrace of the church.

## Scripture Readings

- **Acts 10:34-35** – Peter's revelation at Cornelius's house: "*I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him.*" (The story of Acts 10–11 details the inclusion of Gentiles into the Church.)
- **Luke 19:1-10** – Jesus welcomes Zacchaeus, a despised tax collector, demonstrating that "*the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost*" and surprising the crowd by including a sinner.
- **Mark 2:15-17** – Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners; "*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick... I came not to call the righteous but sinners.*" Inclusion of the outcasts is Jesus' mission.
- **Galatians 3:26-28** – In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female – all are one in Jesus. Our primary identity is belonging to Christ, not the labels society puts on us. (Optional: James 2:1-9 – a warning against showing favoritism to the rich over the poor in church; a call to treat everyone equally as beloved by God.)

## Discussion Questions for Small Groups

- Who are some groups of people (in society or in our community) that you think have felt *excluded* or unwelcome in churches? Why might they feel that way?
- When have you personally experienced being an "outsider" who was welcomed in? What did that teach you about inclusion? Conversely, have you ever felt excluded by a church? How did that affect your faith?
- John Wesley taught that God's grace is for **everyone** and that all people are of sacred worth. How should this theological conviction shape the way we treat and invite others?

- What fears or concerns sometimes make Christians resistant to full inclusion? (For example, fear of change, discomfort with differences, theological disagreements, etc.) How can we address those fears while still affirming the call to welcome all?
- In what practical ways could our church become more inclusive? Think about worship, programs, leadership, physical accessibility, language, etc. What changes or actions might help *redeem inclusion* in our context so that “*open doors*” is more than a slogan?

### Practical Applications – Living Out Inclusion

- **For Individuals:** A simple but powerful practice is to **expand your circle**. This week, make an effort to reach out to someone who is different from you or who might often be left out. It could be as small as inviting a quiet newcomer at church to join your row, having a conversation with a coworker of a different background, or befriending a neighbor who seems lonely. Intentionally listen to their story. By building one-on-one relationships across dividing lines, we live out Christ’s love. Educate yourself on experiences of groups that have felt excluded from church. For example, read about Christians with disabilities, or believers from other ethnic backgrounds, or LGBTQ+ Christians – hearing their perspectives (through books or personal conversations) can grow your empathy and understanding. In your daily life, practice using inclusive language – avoid jokes or remarks that stereotype or belittle any group of people. In prayer, ask God to reveal any implicit biases you carry and to help you see *every person* as He does: beloved and redeemable. Commit to **hospitality** as a personal ministry: perhaps host a dinner and intentionally mix friends from church with neighbors who don’t attend, so new relationships form. Small acts like these build a culture of inclusion from the ground up.
- **For Congregations:** Do an “inclusivity audit” of your church’s life. Assemble a small team to assess areas such as: **Welcoming Practices** (Are greeters intentionally greeting *all* persons? Do we follow up with visitors? Are our church materials and website inviting and representative of the diversity of God’s family?), **Worship** (Is there a balance of styles and expressions that might connect with different ages, cultures, etc.? Are various voices included in worship leadership – readers, musicians, etc. – so people see themselves?), **Facilities** (Are there physical barriers that exclude those with disabilities? e.g. do we have ramps, accessible restrooms, hearing assistance?), **Ministries** (Do our small groups, Sunday Schools, fellowship events cater only to certain demographics, or do we offer a place for everyone? Are new people integrated easily or do cliques form?). Based on what you find, take concrete steps: maybe install a wheelchair ramp or add signage in multiple languages if needed; start a new group that reaches a missing demographic (young adults, single parents, etc.); or provide cultural competency training for leaders. Another application: intentionally partner with a congregation or community group of a different background. For example, a primarily Anglo church might partner with a Black or immigrant congregation for occasional joint services or mission projects – building understanding and unity. Encourage **diverse leadership**: seek out qualified people from under-represented groups for committees, staff, teaching roles. On a worship level, consider observing “*Invitation Sundays*” where members are encouraged to bring someone new, and ensure the service is especially welcoming and explanatory for those unfamiliar with church. Finally, adopt a practice of radical hospitality: not just greeting people at the door, but truly **inviting them into the life** of the church – extending Christ’s welcome by saying, “We’re so glad you’re here. There’s a place for you.” As the congregation lives into this redeemed inclusion, it will become known as a community where anyone who hungers for God’s love can “come as they are” and be met with open arms.



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## Week 4: Redeeming Pain (Suffering and Struggle)

### United Methodist & Wesleyan Teachings on Pain and Suffering

Suffering and pain are an inevitable part of the human journey, and Christianity does not shy away from this reality. United Methodist theology affirms that we live in a fallen, imperfect world where suffering happens, yet we also trust in a God who is compassionate and present with us in our pain. John Wesley grappled with the question of why a good God allows suffering. In one sermon, he admitted **we may never fully know “why sin and its attendant pain” exist in the world** – in this life, human understanding cannot completely answer it. Importantly, Wesley was clear about what *is not* the answer: suffering is **not** sent by God to punish or torment us. “*Our good God does not send suffering,*” Wesley taught; such pain and evil are “entirely contrary” to God’s loving nature. United Methodist teaching echoes this: we reject the idea that every tragedy (natural disaster, illness, etc.) is a direct act of God’s judgment. Instead, we understand that much suffering is a result of living in a world marred by human sin and natural fragility – “*things go wrong*” in creation, as one UM theologian put it. At the same time, we affirm that **God’s grace is active amid suffering**. Wesley preached that while we might not know the cause of each hardship, we can be sure of God’s character: God is “*loving to every man, and his mercy is over all his works.*” God cares deeply about our pain and promises to be with us in every trial. The name of Jesus, *Emmanuel*, means “God with us” – a core truth we cling to. Furthermore, Wesley and the broader Methodist tradition emphasize that God can **redeem suffering** – using even painful experiences to bring about growth, deeper faith, compassion, and hope. This doesn’t mean God wills the pain, but God can work through it. Methodists see value in practices like praying for healing (we believe in God’s power to heal) while also supporting medical care and counsel, combining prayer with practical aid. We also value the ministry of presence – simply being with those who suffer – reflecting God’s own presence with us. A key piece of our theology is the cross: God Himself in Christ suffered on the cross, which forever assures us that *God understands our pain* and has taken part in it. In sum, United Methodists view suffering through the lens of the cross and resurrection: real pain, but real hope of redemption. As Wesley wrote, even when we can’t understand suffering, we trust that God is “concerned every moment” for us and that we are never alone.

### Historical Misunderstandings or Misuses

People have long tried to explain or respond to suffering, but not all responses have been helpful – some are downright harmful. One common misunderstanding in history is the tendency to blame the victim or assume all suffering is punishment. In biblical times, even Jesus’ disciples asked whose sin caused a man to be born blind (John 9:1-3); many cultures have echoed this idea that if you’re suffering, you must have angered the divine. We see this when tragedies (like earthquakes or disease outbreaks) have been labeled as *God’s wrath* for societal sins – an interpretation Wesley adamantly disagreed with. Another misuse is the **prosperity gospel** notion: that “good Christians” will always be healthy and successful, so if you suffer, your faith must be weak. This is not Wesleyan at all – Wesley faced many hardships and saw even the holiest people endure trials. On the flip side, some have glorified suffering in an unhealthy way, suggesting that more pain automatically makes you more holy. In certain eras, extreme ascetics would inflict pain on themselves (self-flagellation, extreme fasting) trying to please God. Wesley did value discipline, but he also valued health and reason; he even wrote medical advice for the poor to alleviate their suffering. Another misuse: advising people in abusive or unjust situations to simply “carry your cross” and endure – unfortunately, some Christians have used the idea of suffering as a virtue to keep victims silent or complacent in abuse. That is a grave distortion. True Christian teaching never justifies evil or calls it good. The idea of “*redeeming pain*” has been misunderstood if one thinks it means *seeking* pain or failing to prevent suffering that can be prevented. Historically, the church sometimes offered *pat answers* for suffering – like “It’s God’s will” – instead of empathy. These missteps have made many recoil from the topic, feeling that Christianity wanted them either to blame themselves, ignore medical help, or accept injustice under a pious veneer.

## Redeeming Pain – A Theological Reflection for Today

Redeeming the concept of pain means **finding God’s redemptive purposes and presence amid suffering**, without calling the pain itself good. It’s about transforming our understanding of suffering from something that leads to despair or false guilt into something that, while still painful, can deepen our relationship with God and others. In practical terms, a redeemed view of pain first **shatters the myth** that if you suffer, God must be angry with you or absent. At the cross, we see the opposite: God himself suffers out of love for the world – Jesus crying, “*My God, why have You forsaken me?*” and yet ultimately entrusting Himself to the Father. Because of Jesus, we know God is with us when we cry out “why?”. As the UMC’s teaching highlights, **God is present in our suffering** like a loving parent sitting bedside with a sick child. When we reclaim this truth, those who suffer can move from feeling *abandoned* by God to realizing they are *accompanied* by God. Secondly, redeeming pain means the church re-commits to **compassionate ministry** rather than judgment. Instead of asking like the disciples, “Who sinned that this person suffers?”, we ask, “How can God’s works be displayed in this situation?”. Jesus answered the disciples’ question about the blind man by healing him, showing that the response to suffering should be works of mercy, healing, and love. For the church today, this means that whenever we encounter pain – whether illness, grief, mental anguish, or societal tragedies – we seek to be agents of God’s comfort and restoration. We join in “displaying God’s mighty works” by caring for the sick, feeding the hungry, counseling the hurting. This is how *God redeems pain: by bringing good out of it*, often through the loving actions of God’s people. John Wesley would point to acts of mercy as means of grace; when we bandage wounds or weep with those who weep, we become channels of God’s redeeming grace in suffering. Additionally, a redeemed understanding of pain recognizes that **suffering can deepen our soul** in ways that ease and comfort cannot. Romans 5:3-5 teaches that suffering, endured with faith, can produce perseverance, character, and hope. While we don’t seek suffering, when it comes, we can open ourselves to learning and growth. Many can testify that in times of trial they experienced God’s presence more intimately or had their priorities purified. Wesley might call this a sanctifying effect – not that the suffering itself is good, but God can use it to refine us like fire refines gold. Finally, redeeming pain involves embracing *hope*. Christian faith proclaims that pain and death do not have the last word – **resurrection does**. Every Lent leads to Easter. In the midst of pain, we hold on to the promise that God will ultimately “*wipe away every tear*” and “*make all things new.*” That hope doesn’t erase our current sorrow, but it sustains us. It also motivates us to fight needless suffering here and now (because we know God’s will is wholeness and life, not misery). So we pray for healing, we work for justice (to alleviate the suffering of the oppressed), and we support one another, confident that “*suffering produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us*” (Rom 5:4-5) because of God’s love poured into our hearts. In summary, a redeemed view of pain in the church is honest about the reality of suffering, *rejects simplistic blame*, affirms God’s compassionate presence, and actively participates in God’s work to bring comfort and redemption out of tragedy. This gives meaning to our struggles and empowers us to minister to a hurting world with authenticity and hope.

## Scripture Readings

- **John 9:1-7** – Jesus heals a man born blind. Notably, He refutes the disciples’ assumption that the man’s or his parents’ sin caused the blindness. Instead, Jesus focuses on doing God’s works to bring healing, illustrating a redeemed approach to suffering (see John 9:1-3 in particular).
- **2 Corinthians 12:7-10** – Paul’s “thorn in the flesh.” Paul begs for his suffering to be removed, but the Lord tells him, “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*” Paul learns that reliance on God amid weakness can be a greater testimony.
- **Romans 5:3-5** – Paul writes that “*suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,*” and that God’s love sustains us. A key text on God bringing growth out of trials.
- **Psalms 22:1-5, 24** – A psalm of lament that Jesus quoted on the cross (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”). It’s a model of crying out honestly in pain, yet still trusting God. Verse 24 affirms God does not hide His face from the afflicted but hears when they cry.

(Optional: James 1:2-4 – “Count it all joy when you face trials... because you know the testing of your faith produces perseverance,” and 1 Peter 4:12-13 – do not be surprised by suffering as a Christian, but rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings.)

## Discussion Questions for Small Groups

- “Why does a loving God allow suffering?” is a hard question we all confront. How do the Wesley/UMC insights (that we may not fully know *why*, but we do know God’s character and presence help you wrestle with this question?
- Have you ever felt that suffering was being interpreted as God’s punishment or as your own fault? How did that affect your view of God? How does the teaching that “*suffering is not sent by God*” change or reinforce your perspective?
- Share about a time of pain or difficulty in your life. In hindsight, can you see any ways that God brought growth, change, or unexpected good out of that experience? (It’s okay if you’re not at a point to see that yet. We all have unresolved pains.)
- What are some unhelpful things Christians sometimes say to people who are suffering? (e.g., “It must be God’s will,” “Just have more faith,” etc.) Why are these responses problematic? What could we say or do instead that would be more compassionate or faithful?
- How can we as a church community better support those who are in pain (whether physical illness, grief, mental health struggles, etc.)? Brainstorm both spiritual supports (prayer, scripture, encouragement) and practical helps (meals, visits, financial aid, etc.). How does “redeeming pain” call us to action?

## Practical Applications – Living with Hope and Helping in Suffering

- **For Individuals:** If you are personally going through a season of pain (grief, illness, stress, etc.), give yourself permission to lament and seek support. The Psalms are a great guide – try writing your own prayer in the style of a lament Psalm, honestly pouring out your feelings to God. Know that such honest prayer is an act of faith, not lack of it. Consider reaching out to a pastor, a counselor, or a trusted Christian friend to talk or pray with you – don’t walk through the valley alone. If you are *not* in a crisis right now, commit to **being present for someone who is**. Perhaps you know someone in the church or neighborhood who is hurting: this week, call them or send a note to let them know you care. Offer specific help (“Can I bring you dinner? Can I drive you to your appointment? I’d love to just sit with you if you need a friend.”). Often those in pain won’t ask, but your gentle offer can be a lifeline. In your personal devotions, meditate on Scriptures of comfort (like Psalm 23 or Romans 8:35-39) to strengthen your theology of suffering. You might also keep a “gratitude journal,” especially if you’re struggling – noting small blessings each day can bolster hope that God is still at work. Another application: educate yourself on how to respond to specific types of suffering – for instance, learn a bit about grief stages or how to support someone with depression. This can make you a more empathetic companion. Above all, practice **the ministry of presence** – sometimes just quietly sitting with a person in pain, letting them know you’re there and you care, is the most Christ-like thing you can do.
- **For Congregations:** To put faith into action, a church can develop ministries specifically aimed at supporting people in pain. Start or strengthen a **care ministry**: for example, organize a meals team for those who are ill or grieving, create a prayer shawl knitting group that prays for and gifts shawls to the sick, or train a Stephen Ministry team (lay caregivers who provide one-on-one support to those in crisis). Host support groups: maybe a grief support group, a divorce recovery workshop, or a caregivers’ respite group – these provide safe space to share and heal. Incorporate prayers for those who suffer in every worship service (not just generic, but specific without breaking confidentiality – e.g., pray for those recovering from surgery, those battling addiction, those dealing with anxiety, etc., so people know the church

acknowledges their struggles). Offer an annual **Service of Lament or Healing**, perhaps around All Saints' Day or in Lent, where people can light candles or receive anointing and prayer for healing. Such services communicate that it's okay to not be okay, and that God meets us there. Engage in outreach that relieves suffering in the broader community: support your local food pantry, participate in disaster relief collections (UMCOR kits as mentioned in the UMC article, partner with organizations fighting poverty or domestic violence. Teaching-wise, ensure that in sermons and studies, leaders address suffering honestly – share testimonies of people who have walked through trials with God's help. The church might also compile a list of trustworthy counselors or agencies to which members can be referred when professional help is needed; this reduces stigma in seeking help. Finally, continually remind the congregation of our hope: perhaps conclude services with a song or affirmation of God's faithfulness in hard times (like "It Is Well with My Soul," a hymn born out of tragedy, or an assurance such as Romans 8). By actively **being the hands and feet of Christ** to those in pain and by fostering an environment where burdens can be shared (as early Methodists did, "bearing one another's burdens," the church truly redeems the experience of pain – transforming it from something that isolates and destroys into something that, through love, can lead to deeper solidarity, faith, and ultimately, healing.

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## Week 5: Redeeming Accountability

### United Methodist & Wesleyan Teachings on Accountability

Accountability in the Christian context means lovingly holding one another to the commitments of our faith – helping each other stay true to Christ. In Methodist tradition, accountability has always been a **positive, communal practice**, not just punitive. John Wesley organized the early Methodists into small groups (Class Meetings and Bands) precisely for mutual accountability and spiritual growth. He believed this recaptured a New Testament pattern of believers watching over one another in love. In a letter, Wesley observed that the first Christians met in groups to **“instruct, rebuke, exhort, and pray with and for each other”** as needed. Each week in the class meetings, members would honestly answer questions about their soul – sharing victories and struggles. This wasn’t meant to shame anyone, but to encourage repentance, growth, and perseverance. Key principles in Wesleyan accountability included *“bearing one another’s burdens”* and *“speaking the truth in love.”* The United Methodist Church today, as heir to this practice, encourages forms of accountability through small groups, mentoring, and the general expectation that members watch out for each other’s welfare. Even our membership vows imply accountability – we pledge to uphold the church by our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness, and the community of faith helps us live out those vows. Wesley’s General Rules for Methodist societies (do no harm, do good, attend upon God’s ordinances) were essentially an accountability covenant; if someone persistently violated them and refused correction, they might be gently put out of the society until they were ready to repent. But the goal was always restoration. **Accountability, Wesley-style, was relational and grace-filled.** It was mutual – even leaders were held accountable. Wesley himself met with a group for frank discussion of his own temptations and failures. In modern UMC life, we emphasize *“Christian conferencing”* (holy conversation) and covenant groups as means of grace. When done right, accountability is a form of discipleship: we help each other become more like Christ. It reflects the biblical idea that *“iron sharpens iron”* (Proverbs 27:17) and that we are indeed our brother’s/sister’s keeper in the family of God.

### Historical Misunderstandings or Misuses

“Accountability” can carry negative connotations because of past abuses or extremes. In history, some church contexts turned accountability into heavy-handed **legalism**. For instance, in certain eras of the Church, public confession of sins was required in humiliating ways, or sinners were harshly shunned rather than gently restored. The Scarlet Letter image of a condemned adulteress comes to mind – that’s accountability gone wrong, devoid of grace. The Inquisition and other such movements took the idea of enforcing doctrine/behavior to cruel extents (torture and punishment – a far cry from Wesleyan compassion!). Even within more familiar settings, perhaps you’ve heard of churches where members were “called out” or gossiped about for every minor failing, creating a culture of fear and secrecy rather than growth. On the other hand, there have been misunderstandings in the *absence* of accountability: some communities reacted against legalism so much that they swung to **cheap grace** – never challenging sinful or harmful behavior at all. That can lead to hypocrisy and a lack of integrity in the church. For example, if a leader falls into serious misconduct and the church sweeps it under the rug to avoid conflict, that’s a misuse (failing to protect the flock and honor holiness). In Methodist history, after Wesley, as Methodism became more “respectable,” the class meeting system waned and with it some of the healthy accountability; discipline of members (for things like excessive drinking or cruelty, etc.) became rare, and in some cases the church lost its distinct witness. Another misunderstanding is thinking accountability is only top-down – like only pastors holding members accountable. Wesley’s model was more mutual and peer-based. If it becomes one-directional or abusive (like an authoritarian leader dictating every aspect of people’s lives), it’s a distortion. Sadly, there have been cult-like groups that use “accountability” language to control and manipulate. These misuses – either *too harsh* or *too lax*, or implemented in the wrong spirit – have given the word a bad taste for some. People might equate accountability with judgment, invasion of privacy, or conflict.



## Redeeming Accountability – A Theological Reflection for Today

To redeem “*accountability*,” we need to reclaim it as **an act of love and community**, not a weapon of judgment. In a healthy church, accountability is about *helping each other stay on the path of discipleship* because we care about each other’s souls and the integrity of our witness. Think of it as spiritual friendship with honesty. Theologically, redeemed accountability starts with humility and mutuality: we recognize that **we all need grace and correction at times**. Wesley said there is no holiness but social holiness – we aren’t made holy in isolation. We need each other. A redeemed view of accountability is less about catching someone doing wrong and more about *coaching and encouraging* one another to do right. It asks, like Wesley’s band meeting question, “How is it with your soul?” on a regular basis, and then truly listens. In today’s church, this might take form in an accountability partner system or small groups where members covenant to check in on each other’s spiritual disciplines, temptations, and life choices in a confidential, supportive way. When someone strays or falls into sin, redeeming accountability means our goal is **redemption and restoration** of that person. Galatians 6:1 says if someone is caught in sin, “*you who are spiritual should restore them gently,*” and to watch yourself too. That captures the tone: gentle restoration, with awareness that any of us could stumble. In practice, if a member of the community is engaging in behavior harmful to themselves or others, a loving brother or sister (maybe a pastor or a close friend) would privately and prayerfully talk with them – not to condemn, but to call them back to wholeness. This is very different from gossip or public shaming. It’s done with consent and trust. Redeemed accountability also means **we invite accountability in our own lives**. Instead of hiding our struggles, we dare to confess them to a trusted fellow Christian, believing God’s grace meets us in honest confession (James 5:16). Wesley’s groups were safe spaces for such confession and prayer. The church today can foster this by teaching that seeking help or confessing struggle is a sign of strength, not weakness. Another aspect: *accountability to our commitments*. When we join a church, we make commitments (to support the church, to follow Jesus, etc.). In a redeemed system, the church regularly reminds folks of these and lovingly asks how we’re doing with them. For instance, some congregations use covenant cards or discipleship checklists (like: did I engage in worship, study, service, giving, and witness this quarter?) – not as “report cards” to grade, but as prompts to growth. Leadership accountability is also key: pastors and leaders should model being accountable (to supervisors, to the congregation, to ethics). The UMC has processes for clergy accountability and for addressing misconduct; when handled transparently and justly, it actually restores faith in the church’s integrity. Redeeming accountability fights the secrecy that allows abuse to fester. Instead, it shines light in the darkness in a healing way. Ultimately, **accountability redeemed is about love that refuses to let a brother or sister miss out on God’s best**. It says, “I care about you too much to not speak up if I see you harming yourself or others, and I invite you to do the same for me.” It’s like a spiritual “spotter” when lifting weights – there to help, not to scold. In a society that often says “mind your own business,” Christian accountability says “we belong to one another in Christ.” It’s counter-cultural, but when truly redeemed, it creates a church where people grow, hypocrites are transformed (not just tolerated), and those who wander find a path home. It reclaims discipline as *discipleship*. John Wesley managed this balance by having clear expectations but always undergirding them with grace and patient instruction. We can too. In short, redeeming accountability means transforming it from a negative concept of judgment into a positive practice of **supportive discipline** (think of discipline in the sense of training, like a disciple). It’s part of our sanctification process – and when done right, it strengthens the whole church, builds trust, and honors God.

## Scripture Readings

- **Matthew 18:15-17** – Jesus’ instructions on dealing with a brother or sister who sins against you: first talk one-on-one, then with two or three, etc. This outlines a gracious process for accountability and reconciliation within the community.
- **Galatians 6:1-2** – “*If anyone is caught in sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently... Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you fulfill the law of Christ.*” A foundational text for gentle restoration and mutual burden-bearing.



- **James 5:16** – “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.” This advocates mutual confession and prayer – a form of accountability that brings healing.
- **Proverbs 27:17** – “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” A reminder that we can improve each other through honest, sharpening interactions.
- **Hebrews 10:24-25** – “Let us consider how to spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together... but encouraging one another.” This speaks to consistent gathering and urging each other forward – essentially accountability to practice our faith.

## Discussion Questions for Small Groups

- How do you feel about the idea of “accountability” in church life? Have you had experiences (positive or negative) with some form of accountability or church discipline in the past?
- Looking at John Wesley’s class meetings, they asked members about their spiritual lives regularly and expected honest answers. How would you react if someone at church asked you, “How is your soul?” or “In what ways have you struggled with sin this week?” Do you find that intriguing, intimidating, or refreshing? Why?
- Why is mutual accountability important for growth in the Christian life? What risks are there if a church has no accountability among its members? (Consider the dangers of hidden sin or believers “going it alone.”)
- On the other hand, what are the dangers of *misusing* accountability? What principles can ensure that our attempts to hold one another accountable remain loving and not controlling or judgmental?
- What are some practical ways we, as a small group or congregation, could build a culture of redeemed accountability? (Think of ideas like forming accountability partners, setting group norms for honesty, offering confidentiality, leadership transparency, etc.) What steps would help people feel safe to be honest and receptive to feedback?

## Practical Applications – Building Loving Accountability

- **For Individuals:** Consider pairing up with a trusted friend as an **accountability partner** for a specific area of your spiritual life. For example, you might agree to check in by text mid-week and ask, “How’s your prayer time going?” or “Have you been able to stay sober this week?” – whatever the focus is (it could be a habit to build, like daily devotions, or a habit to break, like gossip or internet pornography). Choose someone you trust and give them permission to ask about it, and likewise be willing to ask them about their walk. This kind of one-on-one covenant can greatly help you stay on track and feel supported. Another individual practice: try journaling or tracking your spiritual disciplines and service. At the end of each week, do a self-accountability review: *Did I honor God in my actions? Where did I fail? Where can I seek God’s help to do better?* You might even share that journal with a mentor or spiritual friend. If you have wronged someone, hold yourself accountable by taking the initiative to apologize or make restitution – this personal responsibility is part of accountability too. On the flip side, if you see a fellow believer going through something concerning (maybe you notice they’ve withdrawn, or you’re aware of a harmful behavior), pray for guidance and then reach out. Perhaps say, “I’ve been worried about you; want to talk?” or gently express concern. It takes courage, but speaking the truth in love could be the nudge they need to seek help or repent. Lastly, be accountable in community participation: commit to showing up (for worship, small group, etc.) consistently. If you drift, respond to those who reach out. By simply being reliable, you practice a form of accountability to the community that strengthens everyone.
- **For Congregations:** To foster redeemed accountability, a church can reintroduce small group structures with an intentional focus on discipleship. Start **Wesley-style class meetings or band meetings:** small groups (perhaps 5-7 people for bands focused on deeper confession, or 10-12 for class meetings) that

covenant to meet regularly and ask about each other's faith journeys. Provide training so group leaders know how to keep it grace-filled. Use Wesley's questions (like "Do I disobey God in anything?" or "Am I honest in all my acts and words?" as a guide, updated in approachable language. These questions from the General Rules still prick the conscience today! The church could have an annual *Covenant Renewal Service* (a Methodist tradition) where everyone is invited to recommit to God and be honest about their failings in a guided prayer – this sets a tone of corporate accountability before God in a supportive worship context. Develop a clear, redemptive process for handling serious misconduct if it arises (for example, if someone is harmed or a member falls into public scandal). If people know there's a fair and loving process – based on Matthew 18 – they will have more trust. Leaders should model accountability: pastors can share, appropriately, that they meet with a mentor or peer group for accountability; church boards can be transparent about decisions and finances (accountable to the congregation). Another idea: incorporate testimonies about transformation and being held accountable. If someone in the church overcame an addiction through an accountability relationship, and they're willing, let them share that story. It shows others that accountability is life-giving. The congregation might also create **covenant statements** for ministry teams or committees – e.g., a covenant for how we'll treat each other in meetings (speaking respectfully, keeping confidentiality, etc.) – and have members sign or voice agreement. When conflicts happen, instead of triangulating or gossiping, church members should be encouraged to go directly to the person (Matthew 18:15). Leaders can teach and coach this approach. Over time, these habits create a culture where holding one another to our Christian values is normal and appreciated. People begin to see "accountability" not as a scary word but as a synonym for "*discipleship community*." In such a church, someone struggling will know they can confess and be helped, and someone straying will know friends will lovingly call them back. That is the beauty of redeemed accountability: it "speaks the truth in love" so that all of us may grow up into the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:15).

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## Week 6: Redeeming Death on a Cross

### United Methodist & Wesleyan Teachings on the Cross (Christ's Death)

At the climax of Lent, we confront the most central paradox of our faith: the *death of Jesus on a cross* – an instrument of execution – as the means of our redemption. The United Methodist Church, in continuity with the historic Christian faith, teaches that Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross was God's ultimate act of redeeming love for the world. In our Articles of Religion (basic doctrinal statements from Wesley's day), Article XX states: **“The offering of Christ, once made, is that perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual.”** In other words, on the cross Jesus accomplished everything necessary for the forgiveness of sins and the salvation of humanity – nothing else needs to be or *can* be added to it. John Wesley wholeheartedly embraced this understanding. He preached Christ crucified as the foundation of our hope. Wesley didn't formulate a single rigid theory of atonement, but he drew from Scripture various metaphors – Christ paying our ransom, bearing our punishment, conquering Satan, and demonstrating God's love. What he was adamant about was that **Christ died for all** (universal atonement) and that this saving work is applied to us by grace through faith. He rejected any notion that Jesus' death was only for a predestined few; for Wesley and Methodists, *“the whole world”* means everyone. United Methodists today hold that the cross must be seen through the lens of the resurrection – Good Friday is not the end of the story, but without Good Friday, Easter's victory over sin would not be possible. The cross is the supreme revelation of God's love. As Romans 5:8 puts it, *“God proves His love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”* Wesley often echoed this, stressing the personal application: Christ died *for me, for you*. In Methodist hymns by Charles Wesley (John's brother), the cross is celebrated with wonder: *“Amazing love! How can it be, that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?”* This captures our theology: the Almighty God chose the way of the cross to save us. The UMC does not demand adherence to one atonement theory (whether substitution, ransom, moral influence, etc.); rather, we acknowledge the mystery that in the cross, God was reconciling the world to Himself (2 Cor 5:19). We lift high the cross as the sign of our salvation – that's why the cross is central in our church symbolism and liturgy. However, we also recognize that **apart from faith and understanding, the message of the cross can seem like “foolishness”** (1 Corinthians 1:18). Part of our task is to explain and *redeem the meaning* of Christ's death for people today so they see it not as morbid or archaic, but as the lifegiving act of God it truly is.

### Historical Misunderstandings or Misuses

The symbol of the cross and the doctrine of atonement have been misused or misconstrued in various ways over the centuries. Historically, one tragic misuse was during the Crusades and other religious wars – the cross, intended as a sign of self-giving love, was emblazoned on shields and banners as armies went into battle. Instead of representing sacrificial love, it became a rallying sign for violence and conquest. This not only led to bloodshed but also tainted the witness of Christianity. Another misuse is in anti-Semitism: some have blamed the Jewish people as “Christ-killers,” using the cross as an excuse to persecute Jews – an utter contradiction of the gospel (Jesus laid down His life willingly and forgave His executioners on the cross, saying “Father forgive them”). There have also been theological misunderstandings. For example, an overemphasis on God's wrath without God's love led some to picture the cross as the Father violently punishing the Son, almost as if God had to stop loving Jesus in order to love us. This caricature has made some people recoil from the idea of atonement, seeing it as “divine child abuse.” While the Bible does speak of Christ bearing the penalty of sin for us, the fuller truth is that *God was in Christ* – Father, Son, and Spirit together orchestrated this salvation out of love, not anger. In personal piety, some have separated the cross from the resurrection, living in a perpetual Good Friday without the hope of Easter – leading to an overly bleak or guilt-driven spirituality. Conversely, others skip the cross and go straight to victory, leading to triumphalism without understanding the cost of sin. Even in trivial ways, the cross can be misunderstood: it's worn as jewelry or seen merely as a decorative logo, losing sight of the fact that it represents a

real instrument of torture and the depths of Christ's sacrifice. Phrases like "this is my cross to bear" can be misapplied to almost any inconvenience, watering down the profound call of Jesus to take up our cross (which truly means a willingness to suffer or sacrifice for the sake of love). In summary, the world sometimes sees the cross as a symbol of hypocrisy (when Christians have done evil under its sign) or as foolish superstition. The challenge is that what Paul said remains true: *"The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."* We need to clarify that message, away from the distortions.

### **Redeeming "Death on a Cross" – A Theological Reflection for Today**

To redeem the concept of "death on a cross," we must reclaim the **true meaning and power of Christ's crucifixion** and separate it from the negative baggage it's picked up. First, we reassert that the cross is **about love and redemption, not hate or coercion**. Jesus went to the cross not to wield power over others, but to *lay down His power*. As he said in John 15:13, *"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."* When we look at the cross, we should see the lengths to which God's love will go – even suffering humiliation and agony – to save us. In a redeemed understanding, the cross is the opposite of violence and hatred; it's God absorbing the violence and hatred of the world and responding with forgiveness. Recall that as He was dying, Jesus prayed, *"Father, forgive them."* Such mercy is what we lift up. We can confess ways the cross was misused historically (e.g., repent of times Christians used it in violence) and instead hold it forth as a sign of sacrificial love for all humanity. Secondly, we need to communicate that the cross is part of the **Good News**, not an embarrassment. Early Christians knew how strange it sounded to proclaim a crucified Messiah – it was a stumbling block to some – yet they gloried in it. We should do the same. Redeeming "death on a cross" means we **glory in the cross** (as Paul did in Galatians 6:14) because it's the means by which God dealt with our deepest problem (sin and separation from God). In preaching and teaching, we can emphasize how the cross demonstrates both the seriousness of sin and the greatness of grace. Sin is so serious it destroys life and separates us from God – so Jesus intervened, taking our place, to break sin's power. Grace is so great that God chose forgiveness over judgment – so Jesus took on the judgment *for us*. When people grasp this, the cross moves from seeming like a gruesome piece of history to a personal source of hope: "He died for *me*." John Wesley described that assurance at his Aldersgate conversion, feeling that Christ *"had taken away my sins, even mine."* That's the heart of redeeming the cross: helping each person know the salvation and pardon flowing from it. A redeemed view also embraces the paradox that *through death, God defeated death*. Jesus' death on the cross was not a defeat; it was the pathway to victory (the resurrection). So, we don't stop at the cross, but neither do we jump over it. We **integrate cross and resurrection** in our theology. For example, Holy Week services (Maundy Thursday, Good Friday) help us meditate on the cross, and then Easter celebrates the resurrection – both are essential. This guards against a shallow triumphalism. We acknowledge the suffering and cost (so we stay humble and grateful), and we proclaim the victory (so we stay joyful and confident). Redeeming "death on a cross" in daily life means we also understand Jesus' call, *"take up your cross and follow Me,"* in its true light. It's not about seeking pain. It's about willingness to sacrifice out of love and obedience, just as Jesus did. It means Christianity is not always easy – there is self-denial involved – but it is always driven by love. For instance, taking up our cross might mean enduring hardship or persecution for doing what is right, or giving up personal gain to serve others. When we do that, the concept of the cross is redeemed in our own practice: it becomes a symbol not just worn or admired, but *lived*. Finally, in a society that often avoids talk of death, redeeming the cross means we testify that **Jesus has transformed even death**. "Death on a cross" was the most shameful end in ancient times, yet Christians came to see it as a triumph. We can encourage believers today that because of Jesus' death and resurrection, we need not fear death or shame. The cross, once a symbol of shame, is now a symbol of hope. That's a profound reclamation! When we wear a cross or place it in our sanctuary, we do so not as an idol or mere fashion, but as a proclamation: *God's love conquers even death*. In summary, redeeming this theme means teaching and showing that the death of Jesus on the cross is the core of the gospel – the moment of our redemption – and clearing away misunderstandings by highlighting love, forgiveness, and victory. We make the cross central again in our hearts (not taking it for granted), so that when we say "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again," we truly cherish that first clause as much as the others.

## Scripture Readings

- **Mark 15:25-39** – The crucifixion account in Mark, including the centurion’s exclamation “*Truly this man was God’s Son!*” at Jesus’ death. Reading the narrative reminds us what Jesus endured and how people responded at the foot of the cross.
- **Luke 23:32-43** – Luke’s account emphasizing forgiveness and salvation on the cross: Jesus says “Father, forgive them” and promises the repentant thief, “*Today you will be with me in Paradise.*” This shows the redeeming power of the cross even as Jesus was dying.
- **1 Corinthians 1:18-25** – Paul’s teaching on the “word of the cross” being foolishness to some but the power and wisdom of God to those who believe. It addresses misunderstandings head-on and calls us to value God’s way above worldly wisdom.
- **Philippians 2:5-11** – The Christ hymn: Jesus “humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted Him...” This beautifully ties the cross to exaltation and shows Jesus’ attitude of humility we’re to emulate.
- **Hebrews 12:2-3** – An exhortation to look to Jesus, “*who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising its shame, and has taken His seat at the right hand of God.*” It encourages believers to endure hardship by remembering how Jesus faced the cross and triumphed.

## Discussion Questions for Small Groups

- What feelings or thoughts do you have when you contemplate the crucifixion of Jesus? Why is the cross central to our faith, and what does it personally mean to you?
- Have you ever struggled with understanding why Jesus had to die on a cross? What explanations or metaphors of atonement make the most sense to you (e.g., sacrifice, ransom, victory, example of love)?
- The cross has been used in wrong ways at times (e.g. as a symbol in wars or hateful actions). How can we as Christians counter those misuses and communicate the true message of the cross to others who might be skeptical of it?
- Jesus said “take up your cross and follow me.” In practical terms, what might “*taking up our cross*” look like in our lives today? Can you identify a situation where following Jesus cost you something or required sacrifice? How did that connect you to Christ’s experience?
- As we conclude this Lenten journey and approach Good Friday and Easter, how can focusing on the cross deepen our Easter joy? In what ways can we keep the significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection fresh in our hearts, and not let it become just a yearly routine or symbol?

## Practical Applications – Embracing the Cross of Christ

- **For Individuals:** During Holy Week (or even outside of it), take time to **meditate on the cross**. You might read through one of the gospel accounts of Jesus’ Passion slowly, or attend a Good Friday service, allowing yourself to feel the weight and love demonstrated there. If your church has a wooden cross for prayer or an altar rail, spend a few moments there in prayer, thanking Jesus for His sacrifice. A personal exercise: write down on paper some of your sins, regrets, or burdens that you want to surrender to Christ. Then nail that paper (or pin it) to a wooden cross (some people do this on Good Friday) or simply tear it up – symbolizing that Jesus nailed our sins to the cross and they are forgiven (Colossians 2:14). This can make redemption tangible. Another application is to **practice sacrificial love** in a specific way: for example, sacrifice some of your time, comfort, or resources to serve someone in need, as a way of “carrying the cross.” It could be volunteering an extra shift at a shelter, helping a neighbor with a difficult task, or giving generously beyond what’s easy. Do it intentionally in remembrance of Christ’s love. If you wear a cross necklace or have one

at home, use it as a prompt for prayer – whenever you notice it, say a quick prayer like, “Lord, thank you for the cross. Help me live its message today.” Consider learning a classic hymn about the cross (“When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” “Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross,” etc.) or a contemporary song (“Lead Me to the Cross”), and use music to keep your heart centered on Jesus’ redeeming death and resurrection.

- **For Congregations:** Help the church community *experience* the significance of the cross in worship and practice. For instance, some churches hold a **“Service of Nails”** on Good Friday where each person can come and hammer a nail into a large wooden cross – a somber, physical reminder that our sins put Him there, yet He forgives. Another idea is to have a *visual* or interactive element: drape the cross in black on Good Friday and then white or gold on Easter, symbolizing the transition from death to resurrection. Teach the congregation the meaning behind our rituals: if you have Holy Communion during Lent, explicitly connect the dots (Jesus said “This is my body... my blood... given for you”) so people link the sacrament to the cross. Perhaps create a **prayer station** in the sanctuary with a cross and available sticky notes or cards where people can leave prayer requests or confessions, to be “left at the foot of the cross.” In Christian education, consider a study on the significance of the cross – exploring different biblical images of atonement – to deepen understanding and clear misconceptions. Encourage the youth group to do a project on the symbols of Christianity, explaining why the cross, a symbol of suffering, is actually a symbol of hope – it could be enlightening for them to research and share. As a missional application, lead the congregation in **carrying the cross into the world**: plan a service activity that involves sacrifice and tie it to Christ’s example (for example, a day of manual labor fixing homes in a poor area – reflect together on how we’re “laying down our lives” in a small way for others). In preaching and teaching, do not shy away from talking about sin, sacrifice, and salvation – these themes redeem the power of the cross in the church’s proclamation. Finally, as Easter comes, **celebrate the victory of the cross**: perhaps have a time where people can share brief testimonies of what Jesus’ death and resurrection have done in their lives (e.g., “Because Jesus died and rose, I have been set free from \_\_\_\_”). Hearing these stories affirms that the cross is still changing lives today. By keeping the message of Christ’s death and resurrection central year-round – not only as doctrine to believe but as a way of life to emulate (in self-giving love) – the church will truly “redeem” the meaning of the cross for both itself and for the world that is watching. We will lift up Christ crucified and risen, trusting as He said that He “*will draw all people to Himself*” (John 12:32) when we do so.



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