



# Clinging to the CROSS

A son says goodbye to his father. | GREG ASIMAKOULOPOULOS

**L**ike most pastors, my father had a fascination with the cross. He loved hymns that celebrated the mystery of Good Friday. His study at church had more than a few books on the atonement. Unlike many of his evangelical colleagues, the wall over his desk boasted a crucifix. Even when my dad transitioned from pastoral ministry into the business world, that wooden crucifix graced his office.

As a successful businessman in his community, my dad maintained his spiritual disciplines of Bible study and prayer. His favorite activity each day was the hour he spent before breakfast in his favorite chair with an open Bible in his lap and a pen in his

hand. On more than one occasion he told me how much he anticipated his appointment with his heavenly Father each morning. He could hardly wait to see what insights he would glean from God's word.

When I became a pastor, my dad enjoyed comparing notes. He would often relate observations he had mined from his personal study. He would share sermon illustrations he had discovered in real life he thought I could use. He would suggest ways I might approach preaching a particular text. Similarly, I would regularly give him a preview of a forthcoming series I was planning or walk him through my outline of next Sunday's sermon.

Without fail, whenever I shared

how I was planning to preach on the cross, he would say: Remember, Greg, the message of the cross is not so much the physical torture Christ endured. It's the fact that the sinless Son of God bore the sin of the world as he suffered, bled, and died.

It's not an overstatement to say my dad gloried in the cross. He saw in it a source of healing in life and in death. It was a mystery he held on to in both pleasant and challenging times.

During my father's fourteen-year battle with cancer, he often meditated on Isaiah 53:5: "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (TNIV).

My dad hoped for complete healing. When that did not appear to be God's plan he took comfort knowing that he had lived seven years longer than most with his particular diagnosis. When his oncologist indicated my dad had just weeks to live, I asked my congregation to pray for dying grace.

One afternoon when I stopped at the home of a church member who was battling throat cancer, his wife said she had something for my dad. She proceeded to hold out a small hand-carved wooden cross. "It's a holding cross," she explained. "It's asymmetrically shaped so that it fits easily in your fingers as a meditation tool." Someone had given one to her husband, and she had purchased one for my dad.

A couple days later I made the two-and-a-half-hour drive that had become a weekly pilgrimage. As I held out the cross to my dad, I explained its shape and told him about the woman who had bought it for him. His eyes teared up and he smiled. It was as if he had been given a million dollars.

For the last month of my dad's life, he clutched that little olivewood cross continuously. Whether watching his favorite cable news channel, *The Price Is Right*, or a Gaither Homecoming video, he held tightly to that cross. As members of his small group dropped by to visit or the hospice nurses attended to his needs, he clung to the cross. What had been his focus in living defined his hope in dying.

The night my dad died, I sat by his bed reading the Bible to him. Although he was unresponsive to my voice, his right hand continued to cradle that little cross. He was holding it securely when he took his last breath.

At his memorial service we sang "The Old Rugged Cross." The familiar lyrics have a new meaning for me now: "So I'll cherish the old rugged cross 'til my trophies at last I lay down. I will cling to the old rugged cross and exchange it someday for a crown." ■

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## Discovering a Mission in Wood

When Steve Forbes began making holding crosses four years ago, he never dreamed that they would become prayer aids for people all across the country.

While working as a corporate trainer, Steve made his first cross for his wife, Linda. A friend had bought a similar cross in England, and Linda, a Covenant minister, liked it so much that she asked Steve to make one for her. Then friends started to ask for their own. One Chicago-area pastor gave a cross to a friend in Washington who had cancer, and that man's wife bought one for Greg Asimakoupoulos's father (see accompanying article).

"When I make the crosses, at some point I pray over them," Steve says, "whether it's while I'm cutting them out, while I'm sanding them, or while I'm finishing them."

Many people who buy a cross for themselves end up giving it to someone in crisis, Steve says. "So it's really a ministry in that regard."

Each cross is shaped to feel comfortable when cradled in the palm, so it is not symmetrical. Some people carry the cross in their pocket as a reminder to pray throughout the day. Some keep theirs at a desk or prayer corner to help them pray each morning or evening.

"It is really just an aid for prayer and meditation and focus," Steve says. "St. John of the Cross talks about the dark night of the soul. It's the concept of not knowing what to pray, not knowing how to pray—the spiritual desolation that arises sometimes. The cross provides a focus and a method of praying without praying, or praying from the soul without words."

Steve has experimented with different types of wood. The crosses vary in texture from silky-smooth to rough, and he tries to make sure each one includes a specific focal point—perhaps a visual interest, such as a unique grain pattern, or a tactile focus, such as a flaw in the wood.

For three years Steve made the crosses on the side, but when the company he worked for declared bankruptcy and he lost his job, creating hand crosses took on new meaning for him. He expanded his work to include communion sets, nativity collections, and wall crosses, as well as home accessories in the Arts and Crafts architectural style.

After making a number of crosses, Steve began to hear about people with serious illnesses who found comfort in them. In February Steve's own mother died after a sudden illness. She held one of Steve's crosses the entire time she was in the hospital and died with it in her hand. Her family buried it with her.

Steve talks about his own experience with cancer two years ago, describing long nights in the hospital when he couldn't sleep. "I was certainly going through a time when I couldn't pray. Holding the cross, I found, took my mind away from the pain."

For more information on Steve Forbes or to order a cross, go to his website at <http://missioninwood.com> or contact him at 773-410-2750. ■



Steve Forbes