

It Is Finished! • John 19:30

One of the most solemn experiences a person can have is to watch another person die. I will tell you that as I have heard from others and as I have listened to dying men, as I have heard their words, never once, in my experience at least, have I ever heard a voice raised. It's always been quite and still. It's always been that the words spoken have been soft words, almost whispered words. However, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell us that in his dying moments, Jesus spoke not with softness but that he shouted out with a loud voice. Although Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell us that he spoke with that volume, it is only John who tells us what Jesus actually said.

Most unusual about Jesus was not the volume. It was not even the words that he spoke. It was the victory. It was the amazing phenomenon that what he spoke was not despair, but was victory.

John 19:30 records that "when he had received the drink, Jesus said, 'It is finished.' With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit."

Recently I was ministering in the city of Omaha. I wanted to come back to the Twin Cities late on Sunday after my meetings were over because I had another appointment for early on Monday morning. Let me tell you, it's not an easy task to fly out of Omaha at night. They close Omaha around five-thirty in the afternoon. It's just hard to get much of anywhere. The only flight that I could get was an American Airlines flight to Des Moines, Iowa, and they wouldn't ticket me on the next flight because it was only about ten minutes or so apart. But I thought I could make it.

The American Airlines flight out of Omaha ran late, and it was crowded. They gave me the last seat in the airplane, which meant that I had to wait for the entire plane to empty so that, by the time I got to the front the plane, the flight I had hoped to connect with was already gone.

Now, the next flight was to leave three hours later, and if you want an exciting three hours, don't try the Des Moines airport. It's not a very exciting place to spend three hours.

But then I found out that the flight I was wait-

ing for to leave Des Moines hadn't even arrived by the time it was supposed to leave Des Moines. It had been delayed in its journey from Miami to St. Louis because there was fog or something in St. Louis and it had been delayed leaving out of Miami. So what started out to be a very simple transaction ended up being a seven-hour ordeal. I probably could have driven from Omaha to Minneapolis in the time that it took to fly.

I arrived back in Minneapolis about one o'clock on Monday morning and was exhausted. I didn't think too much about the crew and how tired they must be after the ordeal that they had gone through until I walked up the aisle of that DC-9 and looked through the cockpit door. I watched and listened as I saw the two pilots going through a checklist. A checklist to shut down the plane and do whatever had to be done to shut down that flight and complete it. They had been through an ordeal far worse than mine. They had been through the whole process of traveling from one part of the country to another in order to get to their destination. And they'd reached it. They had come to the appointed place and everyone had arrived safely. They had succeeded, and there must have been a special sense of satisfaction amidst the exhaustion as they went through the checklist and finally said, "It's finished."

That's the kind of finish that Jesus expressed when he spoke from Calvary's cross. The long, long, long journey was over. The appointed destination that God had prescribed had been reached. Jesus' mission was accomplished. He had succeeded in all that he had set out to do. So it wasn't a voice of desperation. It wasn't frustration. It wasn't the release of agony so much as it was a declaration that what he had set out to do he had done. It was mission accomplished. It is finished! And it's no wonder that he shouted out those words.

But what did he mean when he said that? In English it's three words. It is finished. In Greek it's just one word: tetelestai. In that single recorded word of Jesus - tetelestai - are three powerful meanings.

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What does it mean? It means prophecy has been fulfilled. All the way through from thousands of years before Jesus' birth to hundreds of years before Jesus' birth there were prophecies repeated all the way through the Old Testament telling, sometimes with amazing specificity and with amazing precision, all the details of Jesus' life. For example we're told in Isaiah 7:14 that Jesus would be born of a virgin. We're told in Micah chapter 5:2 that he would be born in the city of Bethlehem. How many people do you know of where their name and their place of birth is predicted hundreds of years before they're born? It's impossible. It's unthinkable. It's certainly extraordinary.

Hosea 11:1 predicts that this child, this Messiah, will come out of Egypt. But everyone knew that he would be a Jew. How would he come out of Egypt? But, of course, he did because the edict of King Herod, the slaughter of the infants, forced the holy family to flee to the south and to take refuge in Egypt and then, later on, come out of Egypt back to Palestine.

Malachi 3:1 tells in prediction about John the Baptist who will prepare the way and get everybody ready for the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. Zechariah 9:9 predicts the triumphal entry of Jesus into the city of Jerusalem. Isaiah 53, perhaps the most solemn of all the Old Testament predictions, gives the graphic description of Jesus' suffering. It tells in advance that he would be despised and rejected. That he would become a substitutionary atonement for sinners. That he would be killed with wicked men and that he would be buried with the rich.

Even the words that he spoke are predicted. Psalm 22:1 had the sense and advance echo of the words of Jesus when he said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And later on in the 22nd Psalm we are told in advance, remember hundreds of years before Jesus was even born, that his garments would be divided up amongst the soldiers as he was crucified. All predictions. All in need of fulfillment. All pointing onward, onward, onward, onward to the cross.

There was a painting made some years ago - maybe you've seen it - of the boy Jesus as he stood one day looking out the window of Joseph's carpenter shop. He stood looking out the window with his hands braced on either side of the window frame, looking out, watching whatever was going on in

the street. The bright sunlight that came past his body through the window cast a shadow on the wall behind him. The shadow was not of a little boy with his hands up on the window sides but the larger shadow of a man with arms outstretched being crucified.

From the moment he was born in Bethlehem until the moment the nails were hammered through his hands and feet, Jesus Christ was fulfilling prophecy. Prophecy after prophecy after prophecy that God had revealed to men and women centuries and millennia before. Jesus lived from the day he was born in the shadow of the cross. He was born to die. He had a mission. A mission to be fulfilled. God had sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but so that the world through his Son might be saved.

When it came down to the closing moments of Jesus' ministry, we are told in Luke 18:31 that Jesus turned to his disciples and said, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled."

Jesus lived with that sense of prophecy and the fulfillment of prophecy in all that he did, so that when he spoke those words in the final moments of his crucifixion and said, "It is finished!" - tetelestai! - he was saying that every prophecy had been fulfilled precisely as it should have been. Every prophecy is exact. Every assignment done. Every item on the list was checked. Tetelestai! It's finished! Tetelestai! It means the prophecy has been fulfilled.

But there is a second powerful meaning in that one Greek word. It is the meaning of payment made. The word tetelestai was used many different ways. One of them was by businessmen. Businessmen would write upon contracts when they had been paid in full: 'tetelestai.' It meant 'paid in full'. So that if one Greek businessman owed another Greek businessman a thousand drachma and a year later, as the contract specified, that thousand drachma with interest was repaid, then the man who had lent the money would take the piece of paper and write the Greek word 'tetelestai' on it. Just as we have loan agreements - IOU's - today and we stamp them with a rubber stamp that says: 'paid in full.' When Jesus Christ died on the cross he paid in full the penalty for human sin.

You probably know that prior to the time of Jesus there were many animal sacrifices made by Jews and by other religions, as well. Tens of thou-

sands, hundreds of thousands of them, actually. There were times when the number of animal sacrifices in ancient days was so great that blood literally ran in the streets. But we also know that the accumulation of all the animal sacrifices ever made could not together, all added up, ever result in adequate payment for human sin.

But when Jesus Christ died on the cross, he alone did what every animal and human sacrifice previously could not accomplish; he paid the full price. There need never again be any other sacrifice.

Do you want to know an interesting observation from history? Animal sacrifices essentially stopped. It was in the year AD 70 when Titus and his Roman armies destroyed the city of Jerusalem.

They also destroyed the temple. And with the possible exception of some rare instances here and there around the world, for all practical purposes, in AD 70 the Jews worldwide stopped making sacrifices and have not resumed them until this day.

The Romans and the Greeks also had animal sacrifices throughout the empire. But they also diminished during the first century until it was not too many decades after Jesus died on the cross that the Romans and the Greeks, too, stopped making animal sacrifices. Not because they had turned to Christianity, but for some undefined reason. Perhaps God had unconsciously put in the human consciousness the awareness that there was no longer a need. The payment for sin was done and finished.

The song of heaven, according to Revelation 5, says, "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation." That's it. Paid in full!

Jesus made an interesting illustration about debtors and the payment of debt. It's in Matthew 18:23-27. Jesus spoke to those that were his disciples and hearers and gave an interesting analogy. He said:

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to

him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

"The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go."

I've read that story many times and because I don't think in terms of talents I never particularly identified with it. So I did a little bit of research to try to figure out how much ten thousand talents was in today's currency. It's tough enough to translate currency from one country to another, but it's extraordinarily difficult to estimate what the value of ten thousand talents was then in terms of today's dollars in our economy. One thing we do know is

that a talent was roughly equivalent to fifteen years of wages for the average laborer in first century Palestine.

If you take the average yearly earning of a laborer in the United States today, perhaps it

would come somewhere in the range of twenty thousand dollars. If that's true and we were to multiply that out that means that the servant of the king had a debt somewhere in excess of two hundred million dollars. It's no wonder he asked the king to be patient in the repaying of that debt.

But figure it this way. Figure that he could pay it off without any further interest accruing and that he would have no other expenses. That means that it would have taken that servant one hundred fifty thousand years to pay off that debt. It's obvious what this is saying. It could not be paid. None of us, if you take whatever your annual income is and multiply it times a hundred fifty thousand, you know that there is no possible way ever you could begin to pay that debt. You couldn't even begin to keep up with the interest on that debt. It absolutely is impossible. The guy had a financial problem. He needed counseling.

The king forgave the debt, and that is what Jesus Christ did. When he died on the cross he paid our debt. We have a sin debt, a debt that with a hundred fifty thousand years of concerted effort we could never begin to pay. It is simply impossible for us to restore in terms of righteousness what we owe to

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God. So when Jesus Christ died on the cross and suffered there in our place at the end he said, "Tetelestai!" Paid in full! That's what it means. Payment made.

There's a third powerful meaning and that is the meaning of perfection reached. It was the eleventh century writer, theologian, and philosopher, Anselm of Canterbury, really one of the most brilliant characters in both the history of England and the history of the church of Jesus Christ, who wrote about some of the most complex of philosophical and theological problems. Anselm wrote that there is a great dilemma. He put it like this. Number one. Salvation can only be achieved by God himself. Number two. Salvation must be achieved by man himself. And as Anselm described it, that's an impossible dilemma.

Only God is big enough and good enough to provide salvation. However, man, because he is the delinquent, because he is the criminal, must provide it himself. It's a mystery. It's an impossibility. It is the greatest dilemma of all history. But, it was resolved by Jesus Christ in a perfect solution.

Only one person, Jesus Christ, was at the same time both God and man. Only he was able to provide the infinite salvation as God but able to represent humanity in the provision of that salvation. You see, Jesus is perfect. But what Jesus did was also perfect. He was himself the perfect sacrifice that forever atones for human sin. Hebrews 9:26 says, "[Christ] has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself." A perfect sacrifice.

Now we need to understand a simple principle here, and that is that you cannot improve upon perfection. 'Perfect' is something that cannot be modified in our English language, nor in truth and reality. You cannot say that was the 'most perfect' anything you ever saw. Something can't be the most perfect. It can't be very perfect. You never learned in seventh grade grammar to say 'perfect, perfecter, perfectest.' Because something can't be 'perfecter' or 'perfectest.' It's either perfect or it isn't perfect. And when Jesus cried out, "It is finished!" he announced the completion of his perfect, forever, sacrifice for our salvation.

That really is an issue of struggle with many of us as Christians. Somehow we are unwilling to accept the perfection of what Jesus Christ has done. And let's be honest about it. Many of us spend a

lifetime trying to perfect that which is already perfect. We say, "I know what Jesus Christ did and I accept that, but I have to make it better by some religious ritual, whether it be baptism or communion or church membership, or I have to have a perfect life. I have to somehow measure up, I have to add to what Jesus Christ did.

No, we don't have to add to what Jesus Christ did. You can't make perfect perfecter and perfectest. You cannot add to what Jesus Christ did in terms of salvation.

When I was a high school freshman my parents gave to me a pocket watch. I took it to school every day. I listened to it tick, and that was a lot more interesting than listening to my teacher teach! It was sort of the advance copy of a Walkman. I could hold it up to my ear and all through English, instead of listening to Mr. Bowman teaching ninth grade English, I could listen to it go tick, tick, tick, tick, tick.. That was really kind of exciting. Until one day I kind of got bored with that and I decided that I wanted to find out what made it tick.

Do you have fantasies? I have all kind of fantasies. And in that particular day's fantasy I was a Swiss watchmaker. I didn't have all the tools, but I did have a compass from math class and I did have some paper clips and I have extraordinarily hard fingernails. So using all of those things, I started to take it apart. I had no trouble with the chain; it came right off. That was slick. I had a little bit more trouble with the back of the pocket watch. But, I'll tell you, as I got going I knew I had it under control. And I knew that I was going to improve on the quality and the timekeeping of that watch. Not that there was anything wrong with it, but I was going make it 'perfecter.'

It took most of *The Ancient Mariner* to get the back unscrewed, but I finally got it off. And the crystal came right off. It was amazing all those little brass things whirring around and clicking back and forth. I watched that for a while and listened to it tick. You can hear it better without the case.

Then I put it back on my desk and put the books up in front so the teacher couldn't see what was going on, and I started taking apart this metal plate that had some holes in it. I got those screws out, and all of a sudden, bong! It went all over the room. I mean, there were little wheels and things that hit the ceiling, they hit other people in the head, they hit the chalkboard. They were all over the floor. For-

tunately I got the spring, but the spring was bigger than the watch it started out in.

Now I would be lying to you if I told you I got it back together again because I never even began to find all the pieces. For my parents' sake, I did put what I could back in the case and screwed the lid back on again and tried to give the appearance that it had been fixed, but it had, once and for all, forever, been ruined.

I can't tell you what type of adolescent logic led me to believe that I could make something that worked fine work better. I don't understand that from an adult point of view, but I don't understand most adolescent logic, so somehow that's been buried in my teenage years. But there it was, and I couldn't do it. I couldn't improve upon perfection.

In much the same way, the work of Jesus Christ for our salvation is already perfect. It's already finished. Why then should we take our fingernails and our compasses and our paperclips and our good works and all the things that we want to use to make something that's already perfect. It can't be done. The finished work of Jesus Christ is finished! It's done! We cannot add to it. At best we can try somehow to subtract from it, but who would want to be so foolish, so stupid.

When Jesus Christ said, "It is finished!" salvation was finished. There he was moments from death and he said it. Tetelestai! It is finished! Prophecy fulfilled. Payment made. Perfection reached.

J. Hudson Taylor was the great missionary pioneer to inland China who founded the China Inland Mission. One day when he was in his teens he was left home alone and he was bored and he wanted to get something to read. He found a gospel tract, and although he was not particularly interested in the gospel story that was in the tract, he thought there might be some other interesting story in there, so he picked it up and started reading it. But he forgot the story. His attention, instead, was grabbed by one short little phrase that referred to the finished work of Christ.

Hudson Taylor, years later, wrote, "Then there dawned upon me the conviction that there was nothing for me to do but fall upon my knees, accept the Savior, and praise him for evermore."

The finished work of Christ. It is finished! You see, the finished work of Christ was the starting point for J. Hudson Taylor.

It's just like a race. You know the way a race-track goes around in a circle and the same line is the finish line and the starting line. When Jesus Christ said, "It is finished!" that was the completion of salvation. Prophecy was fulfilled. Payment was made. Perfection was reached. His work was done. It is that point—his finish line—that is our starting line. It is there that we accept Jesus Christ and all that he has done on the cross; it is there that we acknowledge him as Savior and Lord. It is there that we become Christians. It is finished! It is the beginning.

But, what about you? Have you begun what Jesus Christ finished in salvation? If you haven't, I plead with you, in Jesus' name, to begin today what he finished centuries ago. You can do that right now. You can pray a prayer something like this: Lord,

I've been trying my best and here you've already done it. I'm a sinner. I'm a sinner who has a debt I couldn't pay in a hundred fifty thousand years. So I'll accept what Jesus did on the cross for me. I will let his finish line become

my starting line. I will accept him now as Savior and Lord.

Oh, Father, how we thank you for what Jesus Christ has done, and how we praise you for the truth of tetelestai. It is finished! Prophecy has been fulfilled. Payment has been made. Perfection has been reached. Praise God, it is finished! Amen.

It is that point—his finish line—that is our starting line. It is there that we accept Jesus Christ and all that he has done on the cross; it is there that we acknowledge him as Savior and Lord.

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