

It Is Finished!

John 19:28-30

When I was taught the basic mechanics of sermon preparation and delivery in seminary, I was instructed not to use Greek words in my preaching. The idea was that most people don't know Greek. The reason you preach in English is because that is the language we understand.

There is another related danger in using Greek words, one I often observe in young preachers, namely a desire to show off. To show off their education, and in the worse cases, to do so with evident and obvious pride. Perhaps the worse example of that I ever observed was in an ordination service, when a newly ordained pastor pronounced his first benediction as a minister of the gospel, in Hebrew. An eloquent and, I assume, flawless recitation of Numbers 6 completely and entirely in Hebrew. And though I have studied Hebrew myself, and I don't speak it or listen to it spoken, so even I missed the blessing of God speaking to me. He was showing off, rather than blessing God's people.

So I seldom use words from the original Greek or Hebrew language, unless I can use them for the sole purpose of helping you better understand the text that we are studying. Today is just such an occasion. And I want to focus on just one Greek word. The translation of that word is my sermon title, so my goal is not to show off, because actually my Greek is much more rusty than it was years ago. My goal is for you to know and understand more fully the work which Jesus Christ accomplished when he hung upon that Roman cross His accomplishment is so clear, "It is finished." The Greek word is tetelestai.

The emphasis of this Greek word, however, is not actually in the meaning itself but in the tense of the verb. So let me get just

a little bit technical in terms of Greek grammar in order to make this point that is so helpful. Understanding this grammatical point is the key to understanding this text. Tetelestai is in what is called the perfect tense. In Greek, there is a present tense, similar to English, that refers to continuing action. Imagine a line, representing that ongoing, continuing activity. If this word in verse 30 were in the present tense, Jesus would be saying, "I am finishing." But that isn't what he said!

There is also a tense in the Greek referring a once and for all past event, a dot. An event that happens once, with no reference to any continuing action. If that were the case here, Jesus would be saying, "I finished." What had to be done was done, in the past. That's the past tense, a once and for all single event from the past, a dot.

Then there is the perfect tense, which combines the two. A line and a dot. To visualize it, think of a line, of continuous action, followed by a dot, putting a definitive conclusion and end to the activity. Therefore, in this perfect tense, the action accomplished over a period of time is completed, and remains completed. That's tetelestai. And so, most fully, you could translate this one word of Jesus with this whole phrase, "I did everything necessary over a period of time to finish the work, I have now finished it completely and definitively at this moment, and it stands forever completely finished."

It is finished! That's our subject this morning. First of all,

I. JESUS FINISHED HIS SUFFERING.

Seldom, I fear, do I ever finish anything. The weeks come and go, and I end my sermon preparation simply because Sunday arrives. But seldom do I come to the end the week thinking that I have actually finished my work. So many things carry over from week to week.

Projects at our new house seem to take on the same character. They seem endless. I never really finish. Right now I'm working on closet storage space and a complete remodeling of our upstairs room. Then I have the kitchen. A new dishwasher sits off to the side, as of yet uninstalled. And our new gas stove is still awaiting the propane company coming to provide gas. I really enjoy doing that kind of work, and both the therapy and the exercise of it is good for me, but the point is that there is always something else waiting for my attention.

Too often our lives are well illustrated by the need to mow the lawn in the springtime. Never can you say, "It is finished." For almost as soon as you get done, the time comes to start all over again. You may finish for today, but the job doesn't stand finished and completed, once for all.

Not so for Jesus. For him, "It is finished." So just a brief review of the sequence of events upon the cross. Jesus was put upon the cross at the 3rd hour. From the 6th to the 9th hour darkness descends upon the land, during which time he cried out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

Then immediately after that, when it is again light, Jesus for the first time, accepted some relief for his suffering.

v.28-29

His suffering was finished. And you should realize that the word translated "accomplished" is the very same Greek word that I have been describing to you, translated "It is finished" in verse 30. Same word, same idea. And Jesus knows that his suffering is finished because he knew the Scripture, and he knew that he had fulfilled all that the Scripture required of him. For,

A. Jesus suffered in submission to Scripture.

His work was defined by Scripture, predicted by Scripture, determined by Scripture. He came to obey the Scripture. As he shows here.

v.28

The reference is,

Ps. 69:21 "They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink."

Such a simple thing isn't it? But this wasn't thirst like you or I have ever experienced it. This was the thirst described in,

Ps. 22:15 "...my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death."

There is a literal reality to those words, a thirst so extreme, so profound, that it was life threatening. A thirst that would cause a man's tongue to stick to the roof of his mouth. That's thirst! And that thirst, at this moment of death, adequately symbolizes the fullness of Christ's humanity and the depths of his human suffering.

This is his only complaint, as it were. His only spoken acknowledgment of the pain and suffering he endured, in his predestined role as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

We learn in Scripture many things about the sufferings of Jesus. We learn in Hebrews 5:8 that "He learned obedience by the things which He suffered." In Hebrews 2:10, we learn that he was made "perfect through sufferings."

That passage continues, telling us why this is so important, and how it benefits us.

Heb . 2:14 "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that

through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. 16 For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. 17 Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. 18 For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”

He is a high priest who suffered, therefore he can sympathize with us.

Heb. 4:15 “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

He suffered. And finished his suffering. And in that drink offered to him at this point, we see that,

B. Jesus’ suffering ended with refreshment. v.29

The same is recorded in Mat. 27:48. But remember, before those hours of darkness, when he was enduring the full wrath of God in judgment upon our sin, he took no drink.

Mat.27:33 “And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), 34 they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when he tasted it, he would not drink it.”

But now it is finished. The work is done. Now is the time for refreshment to begin.

Some commentators disagree about whether this was a kind and merciful act, offering him relief from his thirst, or whether it was a cruel and mocking act, giving him vinegar, or sour wine, instead of water. I tend to think that the first idea is correct, for it better explains this time of Christ’s life. The suffering was over, for we read in verse 30 that, “When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.”

It is finished. But Jesus’ purpose wasn’t merely to suffer. His work was not merely to die a martyr’s death, as powerful as such a death can be. Jesus came to do much more, and he accomplished much more. To be even more specific,

II. JESUS FINISHED HIS WORK OF REDEMPTION.

He was not merely a good example. His life message was not limited to the empty moralism, “Lay down your life for your friends.”

Instead, in doing so, he did something that we could never do ourselves. He didn’t provide us the opportunity to be saved. He didn’t die with some vague hope that some people might come to believe in him. He didn’t give us an example of what we have to do to be saved. He saved us. The work of our salvation was finished!

He actually redeemed us from our sins. He actually accomplished our salvation. At the cross. And he finished that work. That’s what he meant, when he said, “It is finished.”

It means that God reconciled us to himself.

2 Cor. 5:21 “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

That is what was finished by Jesus Christ, and we can not add to that work one bit. We are reconciled to God, through the cross. And when we express faith and demonstrate repentance, it is simply that the Holy Spirit is applying to us personally what Jesus Christ has already accomplished for us.

This is crucial, because it is what puts away the terribly oppressive burden of works-salvation. Understanding this is what keeps you from legalism, from thinking that your own law-keeping is the basis upon which you are found acceptable to God.

You see, we are made righteous in Christ. It is the righteousness of Jesus Christ that is credited to us that makes us acceptable to God! It is not what you do, it is what Christ has done for you. For,

A. Jesus fully satisfied the righteous requirements of the law.

And therefore, in Christ, we shall never face the threat of God's judgment of condemnation. Turn with me to,

Rom. 8:1 "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. 3 For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4 in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

The law cannot save a sinner. It can only condemn him. So we needed a law-keeper to keep the law in our place. That's Jesus. That's why it was necessary for him to obey the law perfectly.

So when God looks at a believer, he sees Christ. When he looks at you who believe in Christ, he sees a law-keeper, because the righteous requirements of the law were fully met, and they are credited or imputed to you and to me, by faith.

Therefore we also read in that great letter to the church at Rome,

Romans 5:18 "Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. 19 For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous."

By Christ's obedience, what theologians call his active obedience, by his perfect law-keeping, you and I are made to be righteous. We are declared to be righteous. We are accepted as righteous.

Now, how does that make you feel? If your answer is anything but a combination of humility and thanksgiving, then you haven't understood what I've been saying at all. If there is anything left in you that makes you think you deserved it or earned it yourself, you have missed my whole point. And if you think that there is something you yourself must accomplish, in addition to what Christ has accomplished for you, you don't understand this at all.

You don't add to Christ's work of redemption. You embrace it and receive it. You rest upon him alone for salvation. And you give thanks for it. Jesus finished his work. He obeyed the law perfectly for you and for me. And even more than that,

B. Jesus fully satisfied the righteous demands of justice.

This is what theologians call his passive obedience. He fulfilled what is portrayed in the OT sacrifices, especially the lamb

that was slain on the day of atonement every year. Jesus was that lamb, slain once and for all. He took upon himself the curse and the condemnation of God's justice and wrath. "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus."

Turn with me to,

Gal. 3:10 "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." 11 Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith." 12 But the law is not of faith, rather "The one who does them shall live by them." 13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"— 14 so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith."

But that is often denied in our own experiences! Isn't it? People try to do good, out of guilt. And when they can't seem to do enough, they say this, "I just can't forgive myself." Which really means, "I can't do enough to make up for my sin."

People will say, "I know what the gospel is, but the problem is with me, and I need to change first." Yet, instead, the response must be, you must repent of your sins and believe in Jesus Christ so that he will change you!

Oh, how oppressive it is to put ourselves under a curse, thinking that our performance of obedience determines our standing with God. We put ourselves under a curse if we think that we need to somehow make up for our own sins, or atone for them, by doing something. That is a very real barrier for the preaching of the gospel.

People of God, because "it is finished," there are no more accusations from Satan that can stand. There is no more threat of condemnation from the Lord. No more curses in the law. No more penalties of justice. Not after Jesus said, "It is finished." He finished his work of redemption.

In that context, let me say on this day we call GOOD Friday,

III. JESUS FINISHED HIS WORK WITH A TRIUMPHANT VICTORY.

The cross was a victory! For example, Col. 2:15 "He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them."

That's a reference to Christ's work upon the cross, and the real triumph of the cross was that God's will and God's purpose was accomplished. In Acts 2, we read that Paul spoke to the Jews about Jesus saying that he was "delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God."

And in Acts 4, Peter and John pray to God with these great words, "for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place."

So God's purpose was accomplished. The cross of Christ was a victory. It was,

A. A victory over the power of death.

Actually, death was finished. The power of death was conquered. The cross has made the final resurrection of the last day so certain that Paul writes to the Corinthians, and says,

1 Cor. 15:54 “Death is swallowed up in victory.” 55 “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” 56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Heb. 2:14 “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.”

Has the fear of death subjected you to slavery, to bondage? Apart from Christ, it should! But if you believe in Christ, you should know what it is to be set free from that fear. The victory is ours, victory from the fear of death, from the bondage of mortal life. Though we must live with the awareness of our mortality, and we know that we shall, therefore, die unless the Lord returns first, still we are not held in bondage to it. And here is the encouragement,

2 Cor. 4:16 “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. 17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”

That is the victory of the power of death, and it is as well a victory over the prince of death. The cross was,

B. A victory over the domain of Satan.

As I just read about Jesus from Hebrews 2, “through death He might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.”

Speaking of his own death, Jesus had told his disciples in, John 12:31 “Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out.”

When Jesus was hung upon the cross, the ruler of this world was cast out. And when Jesus was raised from the dead and ascended to the right hand of his father in heaven, he assumed a position,

Eph. 1:21 “...far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. 22 And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”

And so when we proclaim the Lord’s death, as we do in the sacrament here this morning, and when we consider Jesus hung upon a cross, we must focus on the victory of all that. Everything Jesus came to do he did. Everything that needed to be done was done. And in one great, final climactic event, as he hung upon the cross as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of his people, he declared with divine authority, “It is finished.”

You and I rarely finish anything, do we? Maybe someday I will finish that list of projects at my house. I really hope so. Though I’m sure that there will be others added. Maybe some week I will actually finish everything I really needed to accomplish that week. Maybe some night I will go bed and think to myself, “There is really nothing else I need to finish.”

Maybe. But probably not. I will probably never be able to say those things. Maybe, in the broader picture, if the Lord grants me long life and good health, I will be able to sense my own impending death and say, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe the Lord will bring me home even when I still think there is more of a race to be won. That's his choice.

But all of that uncertainty and all of that sense about my own continuing obligations is a great contrast to the work of Jesus Christ. So as we proclaim the Lord's death this morning, in word and sacrament, understand the fullness of the importance of these that one Greek word uttered by our Lord, one Greek word that summarizes the whole gospel, "It is finished."