

It is Finished!

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[0 : 00] Later on in the service, Edward will be preaching to us again from John's Gospel, and we're going to read that now together. John chapter 19, and we're reading verses 17 through to 30.

John chapter 19, verses 17 to 30, page 905 in the Church Visitor's Bibles. So they took Jesus, and he went out, bearing his own cross to the place called the Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha.

There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them. Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross.

It read, Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek.

So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, do not write to the King of the Jews, but rather this man said, I am King of the Jews. Pilate answered, what I have written, I have written.

[1 : 22] When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier, also his tunic.

But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. So they said to one another, let us not tear it, but cast lots for it, to see whose it shall be.

This was to fulfill the scripture which says, they divided my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots. So the soldiers did these things.

But standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary, the wife of Kompas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, her, woman, behold your son.

Then he said to the disciple, behold your mother. And from that hour, the disciple took her to his own home. After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said to fulfill the scripture, I thirst.

[2 : 32] A jar full of sour wine stood there, so he put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received a sour wine, he said, it is finished.

And he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. Amen. This is God's word. Well, good morning, friends.

Let's bow our heads at this point and we'll ask the Lord to bless us from his word, from the words of the Bible. As Moses wrote, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.

God, our father, we acknowledge gladly that it's your words that sustain us and build us up, that give us life. So we pray that you will speak to us afresh today.

Our hearts are ready to receive. Our wills are ready to obey. And deep inside us, we're ready to rejoice and to give thanks at the great blessings that you have given us and continue to give us.

[3 : 52] So please speak to us and help us, we pray in Jesus name. Amen. Well, friends, let's turn to John's gospel, chapter 19.

Again, you might like to look at verses 28, 29 and 30, which you'll find at the top of page 906 in our church Bibles.

John chapter 19, verses 28 to 30. Now, I want to take today the great words, word, actually, it's a single word in Greek, but the great word that Jesus uttered just before he died.

And you'll see it there in verse 30. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, it is finished. Now, as I say, it's just one word in the Greek.

It's the word *tetelestai*. And it could equally well be translated. It is accomplished or it is completed. So the idea is not simply that something has come to an end, but that something has been brought to a good and satisfactory and triumphant conclusion.

[5 : 03] So I want to ask this morning, just what did Jesus mean when he cried out, it is finished? Well, let me start off at the low level of our own human experience of life.

There's something in our human nature that wants to bring a task to completion. When I was a young boy and I had free Saturday mornings, I would do little jobs at home, for example, cleaning out the rabbit hutch.

And my father would say to me, Edward, make sure that you get that job properly done. Don't just stop partway through. Make sure it's properly done and finished. There's something in all of us that finds satisfaction in doing a job thoroughly and properly.

If you're making a rockery in your garden, you rejoice and feel glad, if tired, when it's finally done. If you're a dressmaker, I cannot speak from personal experience, but if you're a dressmaker and you're making a beautiful dress for a bride or a bridesmaid, I imagine that when the last stitch has been stitched, you feel happy.

Now, where did this sense of wanting to complete a job properly come from? Well, surely it reflects something in God himself because we are made in his image.

[6 : 18] We learn to be workers because God is the worker. We learn to complete our tasks because we're like him. We reflect his characteristics. This is one reason why it's so frustrating and difficult for a person to be unemployed.

Unemployment frustrates our God-given desire to work and to get tasks completed. God, then, in whose image we are made, is not only a worker, but he is one who completes the tasks that he undertakes.

Now, in the Bible, there are many smaller instances of God starting and then completing various projects. But there are three great moments in the Bible when God completes three great and wonderful tasks or works.

And those three great moments come at the beginning, then in the middle, and then at the very end of the great story that the Bible tells. The first of those three moments is the moment when God finishes the creation.

Now, as you know, Genesis chapter 1 tells us of the six days of creation and of all that God did during those six days. And then the second chapter of Genesis begins like this.

[7 : 32] Thus, the heavens and the earth were finished and all the host of them. And on the seventh day, God finished his work and rested from all the work that he had done.

Now, he rested not because he was tired, but because the work was complete. On the seventh day, God finished all his work. So that's the first great moment of completion.

It comes right at the beginning of the story. The third great moment of completion is going to come at the very end. It hasn't come yet, but it's going to come at the end.

The apostle John puts it like this in the book of Revelation, chapter 21, verse 5. And he who was seated on the throne said, behold, I'm making all things new.

And he said to me, it is done. I'm the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end. Now, think of those two great moments, the first at the very beginning of the Bible and the second at the very end.

[8 : 37] And bear in mind that that third final moment is still in the future from our point of view. What is going on in those two great moments of completion? Well, to put it very simply, at the beginning, God completed the old creation.

And at the end, God is going to complete the new creation when he ushers in the new world, which will be inhabited by all his people. But the bringing in of the new world to be populated by all God's people will only be possible because of the second great act of finishing.

And that is the moment when Jesus cried on the cross. It is finished and then bowed his head and gave up his spirit. Now, let me try and explain why the completion of the third great work depends upon the completion of the second great work.

We can be quite sure that God is never taken by surprise. He is always known the end from the beginning. So when he made the world and placed in it the first man, the first woman, it was a grief to him, a great sadness to him.

But no surprise when they rebelled against him. He said to the man in Genesis chapter three, where are you? But he knew where he was and he knew that the man was in hiding from him.

[10 : 02] And he said to the woman, what is this that you have done? But he knew what she had done. He was not surprised. And when in Genesis chapter three, God pronounces judgment and sentence upon Adam and Eve, he spells out the consequences of their sin.

And the consequences could hardly be more severe. The woman will not only experience pain in childbirth, but her relationship to her husband will be damaged.

Wedlock, you might say, will become deadlock, a battle of the sexes for domination. As for the man, his work, which beforehand was pleasant and delightful to him, that work will become toil and drudgery.

The ground itself will be cursed and will only yield food at the cost of much sweat and toil. It will grow thorns and thistles and only produce the wheat and the barley at the expense of hard manual labor.

That's still like that, isn't it today? Because we're still in the old creation. But most severe of all, God condemns man to death in Genesis chapter three.

[11 : 13] Death was not part of the original blueprint. But God imposed it upon the human race because of our defiance of his authority. The wages of sin has always been death.

So God says to Adam, by the sweat of your face, you shall eat bread till you return to the ground. For out of it you were taken. Dust you are.

And to dust you will return. Pulverization. That's God's sentence upon the rebel race. And we are still finally reduced to dust after our physical death because we are still part of the old creation.

So everything, the whole picture changes during the course of Genesis chapter three. Before Genesis three, Adam and Eve live in the Garden of Eden in pure paradise.

Their relationship with God is a relationship of love and joy and obedience. And their relationship with each other, the man and his wife, is a marriage of complete harmony and bliss.

[12 : 14] And the soil of the garden, the earth itself, produces wonderful crops. Adam farms the soil, but his work is a delight to him and a joy. So the man at that stage is in harmony with his maker, with his wife, and with his environment.

But after Genesis three, man is expelled from the garden, from paradise. His friendship with God is shattered. His marriage becomes a war zone. His farming becomes toil.

And the whole environment becomes hostile and difficult. And his life becomes dominated by the approach of death. And that gruesome end overtakes him finally, as it has overtaken every man and woman ever since.

Now, like Adam and Eve, after Genesis chapter three, we too are living in the old creation. We're under sentence of death. And we deserve that sentence every bit as much as Adam did.

We can't just blame it all on Adam and his disobedience. Because the truth is that each one of us personally has defied God and has wanted to assert our independence of him.

[13 : 26] In Psalm 90, the only psalm written by Moses, Moses reflects on the events of Genesis chapter three. Psalm 90 is, in a sense, a kind of commentary on Genesis three.

And in that psalm, Moses says this to God. You sweep men away as with a flood. They're like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning. In the morning, it flourishes and is renewed.

In the evening, it fades and withers. For all our days pass away under your wrath. We bring our years to an end like a sigh. The years of our life are 70 or even by reason of strength, 80.

Yet their span is but toil and trouble. They are soon gone and we fly away. Who considers the power of your anger and your wrath according to the fear of you?

What a question for Moses to ask. Who considers the power of your anger? The shopper as she hurries up Buchanan Street to buy a nice handbag in John Lewis's.

[14 : 35] She's not considering the power of God's anger, is she? The schoolboy as he waits at the end of the summer holidays to hear his results from his exams.

He's not thinking about the power of God's anger. And yet the power of God's anger is the determining factor in his life. It's the inexorable force that will turn his work into toil and will bring him at last to dust and to his coffin.

This is the plight of man that we live out our 70 or 80 years under the anger of God. Our fundamental problem is not economics, nor politics, nor social justice, nor climate change.

Our problem lies in the words that God spoke to Adam. In the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die. And it was because of that problem that the Son of God had something to do, something to finish, something to accomplish.

What was it then that Jesus came to do and to finish? Well, let me try to show how in John's Gospel his task or his work is described.

[15 : 47] Now, there are many things, of course, that Jesus did in the course of John's Gospel. There were times when he called people to follow him. Then there were miracles of healing, miracles of power over the forces of nature.

There were extended teaching sessions to the disciples. There were many confrontations with the religious leaders in Jerusalem. But there was one thing, there was one tremendous moment towards which Jesus focused all his mental energies.

And he described it as the hour or my hour. Let me give you some examples of this. No need to turn this up unless you particularly want to.

But the first time comes in chapter two at the famous wedding at Cana in Galilee when Jesus turned the water into wine. His mother Mary comes to him and says, They have no wine.

And he replies, Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come. A bit later on in chapter seven, Jesus is having an uncomfortable conversation with his brothers in Galilee.

[16 : 55] And his brothers encourage him to go south to Jerusalem because there's a festival coming up. But he says, I'm not going to that feast in Jerusalem because my time has not yet come.

But a year or two later, when we get to chapter 12, and it's only six days to go before the Passover, Jesus says, The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

And he immediately gives us a clue as to what he means by that, because he goes on to say, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone.

But if it dies, it bears much fruit. So the hour is his death, and his death is the moment of his glory. And his death, he says, is going to be very fruitful.

Then we learn a bit more from the beginning of chapter 13. John writes this in chapter 13, verse 1. Now, before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

[18 : 11] So the hour is not only the moment of his death, it's also his departure. When he's preparing to leave this world and to return to his Father who sent him. But in chapter 17, verse 1, Jesus prays to God the Father, and he says, Father, the hour has come.

Glorify your Son, that the Son may glorify you. And then he says, chapter 17, verse 4. I glorified you on earth, having accomplished, completed the work that you gave me to do.

Now, that prayer was spoken on the Thursday evening, just a few hours before the crucifixion. The work wasn't going to be finally completed until mid-afternoon on the following day, when Jesus breathed his last.

But so certain is Jesus of carrying it through, that he's able to say on the Thursday evening that he has already accomplished or finished the work given to him by God the Father.

And it's rather wonderful to see, throughout John's Gospel, how John portrays Jesus' purposeful, steady approach to the cross. His work, his mission, was not going to be completed until he had laid down his life.

[19 : 31] And the laying down of his life is a purposeful, intentional act over which he had full control. Now, that's not the way that death normally comes to a human being.

The normal thing is that death overtakes us, and we're powerless to resist it. You and I cannot decide that we're going to die in April or October or in such and such a year or in such and such another year.

But Jesus purposefully laid down his life at the time of the annual Passover sacrifice because he knew that he was the Passover lamb. It was purposeful, all purposeful on his part.

He said in John's Gospel, chapter 10, I'm the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. And in the same chapter, he also says, no one takes my life from me.

Not as though I'm clay in anybody's hands. Nobody takes my life from me. I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again.

[20 : 37] This charge, this authority, I've received from my father. So his death didn't just happen to him. It was he who organized its timing. It appeared to be happening to him.

But it was he who was causing it to happen at that particular point. So let's come back to chapter 19 and verse 28, where we're just a minute or two before his actual death.

And look how John puts it in verse 28. After this, knowing that all was now finished, Jesus said to fulfill the scripture, I thirst.

So he knew that his great task was then completed. But his throat was so dry from the bodily torture and asphyxiation, and I guess the heat of Palestine, that he needed to have something to moisten his vocal cords, so that he could give expression to the great word.

So he manages to say, I'm thirsty. Somebody takes pity on him, holds up some sour wine to his mouth, and he manages to drink just enough to give him the voice power to cry out, it is finished, tetelestai.

[21 : 49] Matthew and Mark both record that Jesus uttered a loud cry just before breathing his last. But John, the author of this gospel, was standing right there just below the cross, and he heard the actual word, finished, accomplished, done.

What then had Jesus accomplished? Well, let me put it in the form of four simple points.

First, he brought to completion the full expression of his love. Now, I read this a few minutes ago, but let me read again chapter 13, verse 1.

Now, before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

That's a great phrase to think about. He loved them to the end. The Greek word for end is the word telos, which means the goal or the completion, and it's from the same group of words as that verb tetelestai.

[23 : 00] Isn't that a striking expression? He loved them right through to the end. He loved them to the point of completion. I think we can find parallels for that kind of love in our own experience.

I'll just give you one example. Years ago, in one of the parishes that I was working at in England, we had a woman in our congregation whose name was Alice Maloney. Alice is long dead now, but there she was in the congregation.

She was a widow, and she had two grown-up sons. One was able-bodied, and he'd married and had children and moved out of the district. But the other son, the younger son, Derek, was profoundly disabled, profoundly disabled.

He could eat, and he could smile, but that was just about all he could do. He couldn't speak. He couldn't walk. He could hardly stand up. Alice used to have various Christian friends who would call at her door on a Sunday morning, and they'd pick her and Derek up and the wheelchair and get them to church, and it would take two or three strong men to get him into church and sit him down.

Then Derek died suddenly at the age of 53. I think his mother must have been about 80. So I heard about this, and I went to see her as soon as I could, and she was, of course, very sad.

[24 : 14] But she said this to me, I'm so glad that I've been able to see it through. I've often asked the Lord God to take Derek before he takes me, and he's answered my prayer.

So she was able to love this deeply disabled son right the way through to the end. She completed her task, and it was 53 years of hard labor. Now, Jesus, similarly, has seen his job right the way through to the very end.

He loved his own to the end. If he'd stopped short of that final awful deed, he would not have loved us right through to the end. But he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

Nothing was going to deter him. He knew that he was the good shepherd preparing to lay down his life for the sheep. So it wouldn't have been enough for him to walk the streets and to do his teaching and healing and being kind to people.

There was this other thing that he had to do. It was the crowning glory of all his work to die so that his people should be saved. It was the full expression of his love.

[25 : 24] He loved them. He loved us to the end. Secondly, he brought to completion his victory over the world. He said to the apostles in chapter 16, verse 33, in the world, you will have tribulation, but take heart.

I have overcome the world. Now the world, that phrase the world in John's gospel means human life in the grip of the evil one. Human life defying God and resisting his loving authority.

And the world is our natural habitat. It's our native element. By nature, we belong to it. And unless Jesus rescues us from it, it will bring us down to condemnation in the end.

But Jesus, by his death, has overcome the power of the world. Everybody who belongs to him belongs no longer to the world. We've been brought into a new realm, a new country, a new world.

Thirdly, the third thing Jesus has brought to completion by his death is that he has absorbed the anger of God. God's settled and righteous antagonism towards human rebellion.

[26 : 38] Now, that was always our problem. God loved us. He has always loved us. But he was angry with us. And his anger needed to be propitiated.

But as we could not propitiate his anger ourselves, God provided the propitiation himself. As Paul puts it in Romans chapter 3, God put Christ Jesus forward as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith.

The anger of God is turned away by the blood of Christ shed in death. There is Jesus, the man, who represents the human race. And Jesus stepped forward and to use the Bible's language, he drank the cup of God's anger so that God's anger was spent and exhausted.

Just look with me again at verse 28 here in chapter 19. When Jesus said, I thirst, it may have been not simply that he was physically thirsty, but that he knew he had to drink the cup of God's anger against human sin.

So maybe he was saying, let me drain it now, right to the dregs. I thirst to do it. He's fully absorbed the anger of God by what he has done in drinking that cup.

[27 : 57] Then the fourth thing that Jesus finished, and this is such a comfort to us, is that he bore the penalty of our sins in our place. Or you might say he paid the penalty of our sins in our place.

And that word paid is a good word for us to use. This Greek word tetelestai, which is translated here, it is finished, it actually had an interesting secular use in the ancient Greek world.

If you owed money to a tradesman, he would make out a bill or an invoice for you. Let's say you owed him for 30 liters of olive oil or a bag of dried figs.

When you had the money, you'd walk into the shop, he'd present the bill, and as soon as you'd paid the bill, he would write across your bill this word tetelestai, done, paid.

So it was an ancient form of receipt. It was a written demonstration that you'd discharged your debt. Now it was just the same thing in this country, wasn't it, not long ago? I think we pay most of our things online these days.

[29 : 00] I hardly know. But we don't have bills quite in that old-fashioned way. But certainly, if you're more than 30 or so, you'll remember the bill that would come to you. And as soon as it's paid, you walk into the shop and the shopkeeper gets a rubber stamp with red ink on it and he stamps it and it says, paid.

And as soon as you see that word paid, you feel better, don't you? A little burden has been removed from your shoulders. You walk out of the shop and you buy yourself a jam donut because you're so happy.

You're freed from your debt, finally. Now when Jesus cried out, tetelestai, he meant it to be understood that the huge debt of our sin has now been paid in full by him.

He died there on the cross as our representative. Our very identity as sinners was tied up in his body. We were united with him in his death.

At some wonderful level that we can never fully understand, we were there with him. We were somehow in him as he died. He died as our representative and as our substitute.

[30 : 05] He did for us what we could never do for ourselves. In our impotence, in our complete helplessness, he did what was required. Tetelestai, done, finished, accomplished.

The debt is paid for us. The clean one has died for the unclean ones to make us clean. The rich one has died for the bankrupts so that we should become heirs of the kingdom of heaven.

But there's a problem that can lurk in the human heart and it might just be lurking in one or two hearts here this morning. The problem is that a person may think, but surely I can pay my debt myself.

Surely I ought to pay my debt myself. Surely God will look kindly on me and recognize that I do have something to offer to him. I mean, I've done wrong things, certainly. I've made some pretty bad mistakes, but underneath all that, I'm quite a good sort, really, and surely God will accept me and be willing to notice the better part of my nature rather than the bad part of my nature.

Now, the problem with that attitude is that it's entirely superficial. It doesn't begin to get to the heart of the problem. There was an English archbishop towards the end of the 11th century whose name was Anselm, and Anselm wrote a book about the reason why Christ became man, why Christ had to come to earth and die on the cross as a man.

[31 : 34] And in that book he wrote this to his readers, you have not yet considered how weighty a thing sin is. That's our problem.

We don't like to accept or acknowledge the seriousness, the weightiness of our sin. Our sin is the underlying natural shape and direction of our hearts.

By nature, we want to defy God. We want to throw off his kindly leadership and authority and to be our own masters. Actual sins are simply the outward demonstration of the underlying corruption of sin within.

If I lie or cheat or steal or go to bed with somebody I'm not married to, I'm committing sins, but those actual sins reveal the festering inner reality of my God-defying heart.

What each of us needs is to be radically humbled. The apostle Paul became a great servant of Christ, but only after he'd been radically humbled.

[32 : 39] And he wrote this about his experience in 1 Timothy chapter 1. Formerly, he says, I was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent man, but I received mercy, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me.

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. I received mercy, that's what he says, and what each of us needs is mercy from God, not commendation from God.

Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling. That's what the hymn writer said. What could we possibly bring to him that might commend us to him?

Good deeds? The prophet Isaiah said, all our righteous deeds are as filthy rags. We need to be radically humbled. We need to reach the point, the painful point, where we acknowledge that we are not by nature nice people, but sinners, sinners who need not to be praised by God, but rescued by him.

And when we have reached that very low point, when God has brought us right down to that lowest point, we then look up to that bruised figure hanging on the cross, and we hear his final cry, *tetelestai*, it is finished, paid for, accomplished, I have borne their sins and dealt with them.

[34 : 11] And it's then that the burden falls from our shoulders and we realize that we have been set free and forgiven. Well, let's bow our heads and we'll pray.

Almighty God, you are full of mercy, tender and loving mercy that we've not deserved and we're so glad and grateful, glad that you did not leave us to the consequences of our rebellion, but have sent a wonderful savior.

We're glad too that you've promised to rebuild our lives by sending your Holy Spirit to all who trust you. And we pray that you will continue that work and deepen it in the hearts of all of us so that we may serve you with joy, with understanding, with enthusiasm, and with great love.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.