

The Cry from the Cross

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[0 : 00] Pilate delivered Jesus over to them to be crucified.! So they took Jesus, and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called the Place of the 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, 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 priest of the Jews said to Pilate, do not write 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.

When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts.

[1 : 13] 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 Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, 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 : 26] A jar full of sour wine stood there. So they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, it is finished.

And he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. Since it was the day of preparation and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath, for that Sabbath was a high day, the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away.

So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness.

His testimony is true and he knows that he is telling the truth that you also may believe. For these things took place that the scripture might be fulfilled.

[3 : 41] Not one of his bones will be broken. And again, another scripture says, they will look on him whom they have pierced. Good evening, friends.

Very good to see you all. Well, now we've just heard these wonderful words. The last words that Jesus uttered on the cross before he died. It is finished.

And in this Good Friday sermon, I want to ask the question, what was finished? And what was it about the death of Jesus on the cross that is so central to the completeness or the finished nature of the Christian faith?

Now, the meaning of Jesus's death is set out for us very plainly in the Bible. But so important is it that it's no surprise to find that the cross has been a fruitful source of dispute and disagreement. I remember, for example, many years ago being involved in a one-day conference for training lay preachers in the Church of England. I'd been invited to give one of the lectures at this conference.

[4 : 51] And after the lecture was over, there was time allowed for questions and discussion. And a young woman stood up and said in an emotionally charged voice, Of course, the cross was a

failure.

Well, I had to take issue with her. I don't know what kind of wild and wayward theology she'd been reading. But it was a reminder to me that the human spirit by nature does not want to accept the reality of sin or the reality that God's anger against sin needs to be propitiated.

It is, after all, a very humbling thing to accept that we are sinners. And it's very humbling to accept that we can't solve our sin problem by ourselves.

But once we've come to accept that Jesus died to do for us what we were powerless to do for ourselves, we're then wonderfully liberated because we're assured that our sin is forgiven.

The cross of Jesus has always been central to the Christian faith. It's the most prominent symbol of Christianity. It's to be seen everywhere in church buildings, in stained glass windows, sometimes on people's lapels as a badge.

[6 : 05] Even secular artists like Salvador Dali have made powerful pictorial representations of it. It's also the very center of gravity in the New Testament's teaching of the gospel.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John devote something like one third of their gospels to the cross and the events leading up to it. And as you read through the letters of the apostle Paul, you quickly find that the death of Jesus is the linchpin of all his theology, the linchpin of his good news.

As Paul puts it in Colossians chapter 1 verse 20, through Jesus, God was pleased to reconcile all things to himself, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

In other words, the cross brings reconciliation, not only between God and mankind, but reconciliation throughout the universe. It was in itself, of course, a dreadful event, utterly barbaric. Crucifixion is one of the cruelest forms of torture that we human beings have ever invented. And yet we call this day Good Friday, not Bad Friday.

[7 : 22] What then does the cross mean? And why is it good? Is it simply an example of how to bear unjust suffering bravely? Well, it is that, certainly.

But the New Testament tells us that it has a much greater and more wonderful meaning, that it's not merely an example, but an accomplishment. Something happened there, a transaction, an achievement.

Something was finished there so that Jesus could cry triumphantly, it is finished. So let's turn to our reading here, the last reading which you'll find printed in John chapter 19.

And let's look together at this great final cry that Jesus uttered. You'll see it there in verse 30. He received the sour wine, and then he said, it is finished, and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Now that cry is expressed in three simple English words. But in the Greek text, it is a single word, *tetelestai*. And that means it is accomplished or completed or fulfilled.

[8 : 31] And the idea is not simply that something is now ended, but rather that something has been brought to a satisfying and triumphant conclusion. So what does this great word *tetelestai* mean?

Well, let me start at the low level of our own experience of life. There's something in human nature that wants to bring any task to completion.

When I was quite a young boy, my father used to drill it into me, never to leave a job half done. If I was, for example, cleaning out a rabbit hutch or weeding a small flower bed, he would say to me, make sure you don't stop until it's all done.

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 when it's finally done and the last rock is in place.

If you're a dressmaker and you're making a dress for a bride or a bridesmaid, I imagine that when the last stitch is stitched, you feel happy. Now, where did this sense of wanting to complete a job properly, where did it come from?

[9 : 42] Well, surely it reflects something in God himself because we're made in his image. We learn to be workers because God himself is a 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 to be unemployed.

Unemployment frustrates this God-given desire to work and to get our tasks finished.

God, then, in whose image we are made, is not only a worker, but is one who completes the tasks that he undertakes. Now, in the Bible, there are many 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 these three moments come at the beginning of the great story of the Bible, in the middle of the great story, and at the very end of the great story.

The first is the moment when God finishes the creation. Genesis 1 tells us of the six days of creation and of all that God did during them.

[10:54] And then Genesis chapter 2 begins like this. 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 didn't rest because he was tired, but because the work was completed. On the seventh day, God finished his work. So the first great moment of completion comes right back at the beginning.

The third great moment of completion will come right at the very end. The Apostle John puts it like this in the book of Revelation, chapter 21. 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. It is done.

Now, think of those two great moments at the very beginning of the Bible and at the very end.

Though bear in mind that that 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 simply, at the beginning, God completed the old creation.

[12:14] And at the end, he will 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 of God's people will only be possible because of the second great act of finishing, which is this moment when Jesus cried, It is finished, and then bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Let me try and explain why the completion of the third great work depends on the completion of the second. We can be quite sure that God is never taken by surprise.

He has always known the end from the beginning. So when he made the world and he placed the first man and the first woman in the world, it was a grief to him, but no surprise when they rebelled against him.

He said to the man in Genesis chapter 3, Where are you? But he knew the answer to that question. He knew that Adam was trying to hide. And he said to the woman, What is this that you have done? But he knew what she had done. And when God promises judgment, sorry, when God pronounces judgment and sentence upon Adam and Eve, he then spells out the consequences of their sin.

[13:33] And the consequence 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 between the sexes where one sex tries to dominate the other. As for the man, his work, formerly pleasant and delightful, will become toil and drudgery.

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

It is still like that because we're still in the old creation. But most severe of all, God condemns mankind to death in Genesis chapter 3.

Death was not part of the original blueprint, but God imposed it upon the human race and justly so because of our defiance of his authority. The wages of sin has always been death.

[14:40] 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 shall return.

Pulverization. That is God's just sentence upon the rebel race. And we are still physically reduced to dust after our death because we are still in the old creation.

So everything changes in the course of Genesis chapter 3. Before Genesis 3, Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden in paradise. Their relationship to God is one of love and joy and obedience.

Their relationship to each other is a marriage of complete and happy harmony. And the soil of the garden produces wonderful crops. Adam farms the soil, but his work is a delight and a joy to him.

The man is in harmony with his maker, with his wife, and with his environment. But after Genesis 3, the man and woman are expelled from the garden.

[15 : 46] Their friendship with God is shattered. Their marriage becomes a war zone. Their farming becomes toil. Their environment becomes hostile and difficult.

And their life becomes dominated by the approach of death. And that gruesome end overtakes them finally, as it has overtaken every man and woman ever since.

And like Adam and Eve, after Genesis chapter 3, we too are living in the old creation under the same sentence of death. And we deserve that sentence every bit as much as Adam did.

We can't just put the blame on him and his disobedience. Because each one of us personally has defied God and wanted to assert our independence of him.

In the book of Psalms, there is one psalm, only one, written by Moses. And that is Psalm 90. It's a great and powerful psalm. And in it, Moses reflects on the events of Genesis chapter 3.

[16 : 46] He says to God, What a question for Moses to put to God.

Who considers the power of your anger? Are people today stopping to consider the power of the wrath of God? Think of the anxious businessman. Is he considering the power of God's anger? He's looking at his balance sheets. He's wondering if Mr. Trump's tariffs are going to put him out of business. But is he aware of the anger of God or of the gospel of God? Think of the university student who's about to graduate this year.

Is he or she wondering if there's going to be a job in the autumn? Certainly. But they're not thinking about the power of God's anger. But they're not thinking about the power of God's anger. And yet the power of God's anger is the determining factor in their lives.

It is the inexorable force that will bring them at last to the dust from which they were formed. And this is the plight of mankind. That we live out our 70 or 80 years under the righteous anger of God.

[18 : 34] Our fundamental problem as a human race is not economics or politics or climate change. Our problem lies in the words that God spoke to Adam.

In the day you eat of it, you will surely die. Man is destined to die. That is our problem. And it was because of that problem that the Son of God had something to do.

Something to finish. Something to bring to completion. What was it then that Jesus came to do and to finish?

Well, let me try to show how in John's gospel this task or work is described. John, of course, records that Jesus did many things. There were times when he called people to follow him.

There were miracles of healing. Miracles of power over the forces of nature. There were extended teaching sessions for the disciples. There were many confrontations with the religious leaders in Jerusalem.

[19 : 35] But there was one thing, one tremendous moment, towards which Jesus focused all his mental energies. And he described it as the hour or my hour.

Let me give the main examples from John's gospel. The first comes in John chapter 2 at the famous wedding in Cana, where Jesus turned the water into wine. Remember the story?

The wine runs out. It's a very embarrassing situation for the host. And Jesus' mother comes to him and says, they have no wine. And he replies, woman, what has this to do with me?

My hour has not yet come. A bit later on, in chapter 7, Jesus is having an uncomfortable conversation with his brothers in Galilee.

And his brothers encourage him to go south to Jerusalem to celebrate one of the Jewish festivals. But he says to them, I'm not going to the feast in Jerusalem because my time has not yet come.

[20 : 37] But a year or two later, when we reach chapter 12 in the gospel, it's only six days to go before the Passover. And Jesus says, the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

And he immediately begins to explain what he means 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 this hour he talks about is the hour of his death. And his death is the moment of his glory.

And his death, he says, is going to be very fruitful. We learn a bit more about this from the beginning of chapter 13, where John writes, Now, before the feast of 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.

So the hour is not only his death, but also his departure from this world to go to the Father who had sent him. Then in chapter 17, verse 1, Jesus prays to God the Father, and he says, Father, the hour has come.

[21 : 55] Glorify your Son, that the Son may glorify you. And then he says a moment later, I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.

Now, just notice that phrase, having accomplished the work. The great hour is the hour at which the work is finished or accomplished. 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 Friday when Jesus actually died. 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 completed the work given to him by his 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. And the laying down of his life is a purposeful, intentional act over which Jesus had full control.

[23 : 06] He had full control over his death. Now, that's not normally the way that death comes to a human being. The normal thing is that death overtakes us and we're powerless to resist it.

You and I can't decide whether we're going to die in October or January or this year or next year.

But Jesus purposefully laid down his life at the time of his own decision, at the annual Passover sacrifice, because he was the Passover lamb, destined to take away the sin of the world.

It was all entirely purposeful on his part. How do we know this? Well, listen to what he says in John chapter 10. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

And a few verses later, he says this. No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and I have authority to take it up again.

You see, his death didn't just happen to him. It was he who organized everything about it. It appeared to be happening to him, but it was he who was causing it to happen.

[24 : 22] Well, let's come back to our chapter 19 and verse 28. At this point, Jesus is just about to die. So look at the words with me.

Verse 28. After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said to fulfill the scripture, I thirst. He knew that his great task was now completed, but his throat was dry from the bodily torture and the asphyxiation. And he needed something to moisten his vocal cords so that he could give expression to this last great word.

So he managed to say, I'm thirsty. And somebody took pity on him and got a drop of sour wine up to his lips. And he managed to drink just enough to give him the voice power to cry out, it is finished. Matthew and Mark both record that Jesus uttered a loud cry just before breathing his last. But John was standing right there, just beside the cross. And he heard that great word, finished, accomplished, done.

[25 : 33] What then had Jesus accomplished? Well, let me try and answer that question briefly under four headings. First, the cross fulfilled many Old Testament prophecies.

And John the evangelist, you'll see, is careful to point this out in this very chapter. So look at verse 24. The soldiers who crucified Jesus got hold of his seamless tunic.

So they said, verse 24, to each other, 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. Now that quotation there is taken from Psalm 22, the psalm that begins, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? It's a prophecy of the suffering Messiah written by King David about a thousand years before Jesus was crucified.

Now look on to verse 28. Again, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said, to fulfill the scripture, I thirst. Then verse 33.

[26 : 46] But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. And how does John account for that? Well, look at verse 36. For these things took place that the scripture might be fulfilled.

Not one of his bones will be broken. And again, verse 37, another scripture says, they will look on him whom they have pierced, referring to the piercing of Jesus's side with a spear, which we read about in verse 34.

Now the first of those two quotations are taken from the Psalms. The third comes from the book of Exodus, from the law of Moses. And the fourth from the prophets, from the prophet Zechariah.

Jesus was accomplishing or fulfilling what the Old Testament had foretold about him. His death fulfilled many other Old Testament prophecies as well. But why is this important? It's important because it authenticates him and it authenticates his death. The point is that this had always been God's purpose. Far from his death being a failure or a random happening, it was the very thing which the law, the prophets, and the Psalms had foretold.

[28 : 03] And people who knew their Old Testaments would say, yes, this is the very thing that we've been waiting for. The scriptures are being fulfilled. Secondly, by his death, Jesus has overcome the world.

He had said this to his apostles back in chapter 16. In the world, you will have tribulation, but take heart, I've overcome the world.

And that word world means human life in the grip of the evil one, human life defying God and resisting his loving authority. And the world, in that sense, would have the power to bring us down, to overwhelm us and condemn us.

But Jesus has achieved victory over the power of the world. Third, by his death, Jesus absorbed the anger of God, God's settled and righteous antagonism towards human rebellion.

You see, our rebellion, our sin, that was always our problem. God was angry with the human race. He loved the human race, but he had to bring it to the bar of his judgment.

[29 : 17] But the accomplishment of Jesus is that he, representing the human race as the son of man, stepped forward and to use Bible language, drank the cup of God's anger so that God's anger was spent and exhausted.

In fact, 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 he was saying, I thirst, I have to drink it. In fact, he had said to Peter in the previous chapter at verse 11, shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?

But by his death, he drank the cup of God's anger. And then fourthly, and most wonderfully from our point of view, on the cross, he bore the penalty for our sin in our place.

The wages of sin is death. And on the cross, Jesus received those dreadful wages. We deserved to receive them, but Jesus stepped up and took them for us in our place so that we should not have to.

[30 : 28] As the old hymn puts it, he died that we might be forgiven. So friends, we have every reason to rejoice and be thankful. This great cry, it is finished, echoes across the world.

It echoes still. It can never be silenced. It gives us assurance from the lips of Jesus himself that the thing he came to do has been accomplished.

And it's because of his work on the cross that the third and final work of God can also be completed. The work of bringing in the new world, populated by everyone for whom Christ died.

If he had not accomplished his task on the cross, we could never be forgiven and our sin could never be dealt with. We would still be under the anger of God with no future but to be returned to the dust.

But his work is accomplished. He has fulfilled the prophecies. He has overcome the world. He has absorbed the anger of God against our sin and he has borne the penalty of sin in our place.

[31 : 37] Friends, we have a great Savior. If you know these things, be reassured that they're true. But if you've never done this before, will you come to Jesus?

Come to him? Will you, not physically, but in your heart and mind, kneel before that figure hanging on the cross and will you listen to him as he says, it is finished?

And will you thank him for dying in your place so that you can be free and forgiven so that you, in the end, can be part of the new creation? To come to him like that and to thank him is to become a Christian.

Amen. Amen. Amen. ■