

The Cry from the Cross. 'It is finished'

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[0 : 0 0] Welcome everybody to our Good Friday service. Let me read to you from John's Gospel, chapter 19. 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, 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, The King of the Jews, but rather, This man said, I am the 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, one part for each soldier, also his tunic.

[1 : 2 0] But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. So they said to one another, Let's 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.

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.

[2 : 4 1] 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 the 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.

Not one of his bones will be broken. And again, another scripture says, They will look on him whom they have pierced.

[3 : 53] If you have your Bible close to hand, perhaps you could turn to John's Gospel, chapter 19. We've just heard those 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 and the finished nature of the Christian faith?

The meaning of the death of Jesus 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 leaders in the Church of England. And I'd been invited to give one of the lectures at this day conference.

And after my lecture was over, a certain time was 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.

[5 : 11] 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 either the reality of sin or the reality that God's anger against sin needs to be propitiated.

It is very humbling to accept that we are sinners. It's very humbling to accept that we can't solve our sin problem by ourselves.

But once we have come to accept that Jesus died to do for us what we were powerless to do for ourselves, we're wonderfully liberated because we are 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. You see it everywhere, on church buildings, in stained glass windows, on people's lapel badges.

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

[6 : 26] Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John devote something like one-third of their gospels to the cross and the events leading up to it. 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.

For example, he puts it like this in Colossians chapter 1. 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 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.

So what does the cross mean? Why is it good? Is it simply an example of how to bear unjust suffering bravely? Well, it is that, certainly.

[7 : 41] But the New Testament tells us that it has a much greater and much 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 John's Gospel, chapter 19, and the passage that we heard read a few minutes ago.

And let's look further at this great final cry that Jesus uttered. There it is, you'll see, 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 English in just three words, but in the Greek text, it is a single word, tetelestai.

And that means it is accomplished or completed or fulfilled. So the idea is not simply that something is now ended, but rather that something has been brought to a satisfying and triumphant conclusion.

[8 : 50] What then does this great word 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 a 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. So if it was a Saturday morning and I was 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 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 come from?

Surely, it reflects something in God himself because we are made in his image. We learn to be workers because God is a worker and we learn to complete our tasks because we're like him.

[10 : 05] We reflect his characteristics. This is one reason why it's so frustrating and difficult to be unemployed. Unemployment frustrates our God-given desire to work and to get our tasks completed.

God, then, in whose image we are made, is not only a worker but one who completes the tasks that he undertakes.

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 moments come at the beginning of the great story, in the middle of the great story, and at the end of the great story. The first is the moment when God finishes the creation.

Genesis chapter 1 tells us of the six days of creation and of all that God did during them. And then Genesis chapter 2 begins like this. Thus the heavens and the earth were finished and all the host of them.

[11 : 15] 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 complete.

On the seventh day, God finished his work. So the first great moment of completion comes right at the beginning. The third great moment of completion will come right 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. It is done. Now, think of those two great moments at the very beginning of the Bible and at the very end.

But bear in mind that that final moment is still in the future from our point of view now. What is going on in those two great moments of completion? Well, to put it simply, at the beginning, God completed the old creation 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.

[12 : 38] 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, which is the moment when Jesus cried, It is finished, and then bowed his head and died.

So let me try to explain why the completion of the third great work depends upon 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 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 from him. And he said to the woman, What is this that you have done?

But he knew what she had done. And when God then pronounces judgment and sentence upon Adam and Eve, he spells out the consequences of their sin. And the consequences could hardly be more severe.

[13 : 51] 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 where each of the sexes tries to dominate the other.

As for the man, his work, formerly so 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. Now, it's 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. 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.

[15 : 03] 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 with God was one of love and joy and obedience. their relationship with each other, 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 then 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. Their friendship with God is shattered. Their marriage becomes a war zone. Their farming becomes toil.

[16 : 10] 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 3, we too live in the old creation under this same sentence of death. And we deserve that sentence every bit as much as Adam did.

We can't simply put the blame on him and his disobedience because the truth is that each one of us has personally 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. In a sense, it's almost a commentary on Genesis chapter 3. Let me quote.

[17 : 12] Moses says 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. And then Moses says, Who considers the power of your anger and your wrath according to the fear of you?

What a question for Moses to put to God. Who considers the power of your anger? Think of that in terms of today. Are people today stopping to consider the power of the wrath of God?

Think of the anxious businessman in the midst of this virus crisis. Is he considering the power of God's anger? He's looking at his balance sheets, painfully aware that his income is in steep decline.

[18 : 25] But is he aware of the anger of God or of the gospel of God? Think of the university students who are not clear at the moment if they're going to be able to graduate this year and they're wondering if there's going to be a job to go to in the autumn.

They're not thinking of 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.

This is the plight of mankind that we live out our 70 or 80 years under the righteous anger of God. Our fundamental problem is not economics or politics or climate change or COVID-19.

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?

[19 : 40] Well let me try to show how in John's gospel his task or his work is described. John records throughout the gospel 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 and there were many confrontations with the religious leaders in Jerusalem.

But there was one thing, one tremendous moment towards which Jesus focused all his mental energies and he described it as the hour or the time or my hour.

No need to turn up the references here but let me give the main examples of this from John's gospel. The first time comes in chapter 2 at the famous wedding in Cana where Jesus turns the water into wine.

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

[20 : 49] My hour has not yet come. Then a bit later on in chapter 7, Jesus is having an uncomfortable conversation with his brothers in Galilee.

and his brothers are encouraging him to go south to Jerusalem to celebrate one of the Jewish festivals. But he says to his brothers, I'm not going to the festival in Jerusalem because my time has not yet come.

But a year or two later when we reach chapter 12 of the gospel, it's only six days now 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 the hour is the hour of his death, and his death is the moment of his glory, and his death is going to be very fruitful.

[21 : 56] We learn a bit more from the beginning of chapter 13. John writes this in 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.

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

Glorify your Son, that the Son may glorify you. And then he says a verse or two later, I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.

Notice that phrase, having accomplished the work. the great hour is the hour at which the work is accomplished or finished. Now that prayer was spoken on the Thursday evening, just a few hours before the crucifixion.

The work was not going to be finally completed until mid afternoon on the Friday, when Jesus actually died. But so certain is he 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 the Father.

[23 : 21] 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 he had full control.

Yes, he had full control over his death. And that's not the way in which 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 whether we're going to die in July or October or in this year or that year. But Jesus purposefully laid down his life at the time of his own decision.

And that was at the annual Passover sacrifice because he knew that he was the Passover Lamb. it was all purposeful on his part. How do we know this?

[24 : 25] 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 in chapter 10 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 in the way that it did. So let's come back to chapter 19 and verse 28.

At this point, Jesus is just about to die. 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 asphyxiation, and he needed something to moisten his vocal chords so that he could give expression to his last great word.

[25 : 41] So he manages to say, I'm thirsty. Somebody takes pity on him and gets a drop of sour wine up to his mouth, and he manages to drink just enough to give him the voice power to cry out, it is finished.

Matthew and Mark both record simply that Jesus uttered a loud cry just before breathing his last. But John was standing right there beside the cross, and he heard the word that Jesus uttered, finished, accomplished, done.

What then has Jesus accomplished? Let me try and answer this question under four brief headings. First, the cross fulfilled many Old Testament prophecies.

In fact, John the evangelist is careful to point this out in this very chapter. Look back to verse 24. The soldiers have crucified Jesus and they've got hold of his garments, and they're dividing them up.

In fact, they've got his seamless tunic in their hands. So in verse 24, they say to each other, let us not tear it, this tunic, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be.

[26 : 54] This was to fulfill the scripture which says, they divided my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots. That quotation is taken from Psalm 22, the psalm that begins, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

It's a prophecy about the suffering Messiah, written by King David a thousand years before Jesus was crucified. Then look again at verse 28.

After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said, to fulfill the scripture, I thirst. Then look on to verse 33. But when they came to Jesus, this is the soldiers who crucified him, and they saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.

And how does John account for that? We'll look on to verse 36. For these things took place that the scripture might be fulfilled, not one of his bones will be broken.

And then verse 37. And again, another scripture says, they will look on him whom they have pierced. And the piercing of Jesus is recorded there in verse 34.

[28 : 09] Now, the first two of these quotations are taken from the Psalms. The third about the bones not being broken is from the law of Moses from Exodus. And the last one is from the prophets from Zechariah.

So Jesus was accomplishing or fulfilling what the Old Testament had foretold about him. His death fulfilled many other Old Testament prophecies as well.

And why is this so important? Because it authenticates him and it authenticates his death. The point is made that this had always been God's purpose.

Far from his death being a random event or a failure, it was the very thing that the law, the prophets and the Psalms had foretold. Those who knew their Old Testaments would say, yes, this is the very thing that we've been waiting for.

The scriptures are being fulfilled or accomplished. Then secondly, by his death, Jesus has overcome the world.

[29 : 15] He said to the apostles back in chapter 16, in the world you will have tribulation, but take heart, I have overcome the world.

Now 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 power to bring us down, to overwhelm us and condemn us.

But Jesus has achieved victory over the power of the world. Then thirdly, by his death, Jesus absorbed the anger of God.

God settled and righteous antagonism towards human rebellion. our rebellion, our sin, was always our problem. God was angry with the human race.

Now he loved the human race so much, but he had to bring it to the bar of his judgment. But the accomplishment of Jesus is that he, representing the human race, stepped forward and to use the Bible's language, drank the cup of God's anger so that God's anger was spent and exhausted.

[30 : 31] In fact, when Jesus cried out, I thirst, it may have been not simply that he was thirsty, but that he knew he had to drink the cup of God's anger against human sin.

It's almost as though he was saying, I'm thirsty for it, I have to drink it and do it. In fact, he'd said to Peter in the previous chapter, back at verse 11, shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?

So by his death, he drank the cup of God's anger and exhausted it. And then fourth, and most wonderfully for us, on the cross, Jesus bore the penalty of our sin in our place.

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

As the old hymn puts it, he died that we might be forgiven. So, friends, we have every reason to rejoice and to be grateful.

[31 : 41] This great cry, it is finished, echoes across the world. It echoes still. It can never be silenced. It gives us assurance from Jesus' own lips 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 all those 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 sin's penalty in our place.

We have a very great savior. If you know these things, be reassured today that they're true. But if you've never done this before, will you come to Jesus and kneel in your heart and mind before that figure hanging on the cross?

[33 : 03] And will you listen to him as he says, it is finished? And will you then 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. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray.

Lord Jesus, we bow before you today and thank you with all our hearts that you were willing to leave your throne and your kingly crown in heaven so as to come to earth to rescue us.

We don't deserve your loving kindness because we've been rebels. but we remember your words that greater love has no man than this, that a man should lay down his life for his friends.

What a friend you have been to us. So we trust you, our crucified and risen Lord. Bless us, we pray, and help us to rejoice forever in the freedom and forgiveness that your death has won for us.

[34 : 17] We ask it in your holy name. Amen. Amen.