

### ***Word of Triumph***

*“Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.”* So prayed our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane in the hours immediately before his arrest. He naturally recoiled in horror at the prospect of drinking the foaming wine of God’s wrath. But his prayer went on, *“Nevertheless not my will but yours be done.”* It was for the purpose of drinking that cup that he had come into the world. There was no other way to atone for the sins of all mankind, and so he willingly drank it down to its bitter dregs. And last week as we considered the fifth word from the cross, *“I thirst”*, we saw how drinking from that cup literally drained him of bodily moisture, and also what was worse, it emptied him of the special relationship he had shared with his Father from eternity past. As the cup of wrath was poured out completely, so was he; and he was left hanging on the cross withered and dried out—a empty container that formerly held the life and light of the world.

But now every drop of God’s righteous anger has been absorbed in Jesus. He’s taken it all in—endured it all—and he has reached the end of the atonement. And we all understand what it means to come to the conclusion of an especially prolonged and grueling task. There’s a sense of relief and deep satisfaction—particularly if the job has been done well. We see it even in God himself in the first chapter of Genesis when he creates the world. When he finishes all his creative work, he sits back to rest and admire what he has made; and he pronounces his approval: *“This is good”*. And now, on the cross, Jesus has just completed the far more difficult task of taking upon himself all in the creation that was *not good* because of the curse of sin. He has done the monumental work that makes it possible to restore the creation to its proper state of being. And having reached the end of his labors, he cries out in a loud voice, *“It is finished!”*

Earlier, in the center of his passion, we heard him give voice to the despair and agony of the damned when he said, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* It was a cry of lost confusion. And when he said, *“I thirst”*, we heard of his desperate need for some sign of God’s favor. But now we detect strength and confidence. This is a mighty shout of victory. But if you had been present to hear the shout, the view before you would look like anything but a victory. You would see a dying, twisted, tortured, shriveled body, covered in blood and sweat. The picture would not match the caption. And today there are many people, some of them, sadly, even within Christian community, who cannot reconcile this shout of triumphant achievement with what seems to be the moment of utmost defeat. So, I’d like to spend a few moments considering what it is that our Lord is referring to when he says, *“It is finished.”*

First, and perhaps most obviously, his suffering is ended. We noted in earlier meditations that Christ offered himself up willingly. In a very real sense, he volunteered to be tortured and nailed to the cross. What we sometimes overlook is that he *stayed* on the cross voluntarily. As the Son of God, he could have used his power to come down at any time—and it’s a powerful witness to his infinite love that in his darkest hours he didn’t do just that.

But beyond that, as I’ve pointed out before, the cruel genius of crucifixion is that the victim would like very much to die and be done with his suffering—but he can’t. It’s not possible. That’s because an ordinary human being cannot choose to die of suffocation, which is how crucifixion kills. So, if he attempts to remain in the lower position, suspended

only by his arms in which it is not possible to take a breath, very soon the oxygen-starved brain will go into panic and force the victim to involuntarily push up with his legs so that he's high enough to allow his lungs to take in some air. So, while the conscious mind wishes to die, the survival instinct of the unconscious flesh forces the body to live and the agony to go on. Crucifixion literally makes a person his own worse enemy. And if you understand the struggle within a Christian between his two natures, the new man seeking to destroy the old sinful flesh and the old flesh always coming back to rear its ugly head, you see that crucifixion is the perfect picture of the Christian life. It gives new meaning to expressions like "I have been crucified with Christ" and "Take up your cross and follow me"—but I'll save that for another sermon. My point here is that after Christ says the words, "It is finished", he dies *voluntarily*. He chooses the moment to end the pain—which means he could have done it at *any* time. He knew how much suffering had to be endured to atone for the world's sin—and I'll remind you again that because he is both God and man, the bodily suffering we see is only the tip of the iceberg. But now he announces that all the necessary suffering has been completed: his passion is at an end.

Secondly, we see that the separation between Jesus and his heavenly Father is finished. On the cross, Jesus, as both God and man, suffered spiritual death—that's what it means to be separated from God the Father. For three hours he was lost in the darkness of hell, which is the place where the light of God's grace and love never shines. It is a place of total, endless isolation, where there is never any hope or comfort. It is the place where those who loved only themselves are condemned forever to be only by themselves. And for Jesus, for whom to live *is* to love others, such isolation must have been far worse than any physical pain he endured. But now this too is ended. In death he releases his Spirit into his Father's loving hands. He anticipates a joyful reunion with his Father, and also with all us for whom his separation from God means that we will never suffer the same fate. For us too, the separation from God is finished.

And then we see that sin is finished. In the Roman world, every convicted criminal was given a sign or placard that displayed his name, his crime, and the sentence that the court had decreed. For those condemned to death by crucifixion, the signs were posted above their heads for all to read. But the same was true for those sentenced to be whipped, or imprisoned, or sent to the galleys, or any other sentence. They always had this sign that listed their crimes hanging above them, accusing them, reminding them of their guilt and the penalty they had to pay. But when the day came that the sentence had been carried out in full, the sign was taken down, and the warden or whoever was in charge of the prisoner wrote in big letters over the top of the sign one word: in Greek, "tetelestai"—"it is finished." It meant that the penalty had been paid. The sign was then handed to the newly released prisoner. It became for him a sort of receipt that proved that was a free man and not an escapee or fugitive from justice. Wherever he went in the Roman world, if someone or some authority claimed that he was wanted by the law for his crime, he could produce the receipt and say, "No, I paid for that crime already—you cannot convict me or sentence me again for it."

Jesus' victory shout, "Tetelestai"—"It is finished!" is that receipt for you and me. It is the proof to the guilty soul that Jesus paid the penalty, and that we can never be tried or convicted in the court of divine justice on account of our sins. It is this word from the cross that we can say to Satan whenever and as often as he accuses us and tries to burden us with doubt about our salvation ... when he makes us feel unworthy of God's love ... or when in life's trials he tries to convince us that God has cut us off or is punishing us for our sin. In such dark moments we can say to him, "No! Tetelestai! It is finished! My debt is paid. I cannot be charged again. I'm free in Christ Jesus." ... Okay, so maybe you won't say it in

Greek, but you get the idea ... but then again, it kind of rolls off the tongue ... tetelestai: it is finished.

Very well then, we've looked at what's finished; I'd like to consider very quickly what's been accomplished. First is that Scripture has been fulfilled. The promise God made to our first parents when they fell into sin and became subject to its curse has been kept: the serpent's head is crushed, Satan's power is through, and the Seed of the woman has had his heel struck by the serpent's venomous bite. It is the promise that God continued to make and expand to all of his people: that he himself would rescue them from bondage, destroy their oppressors, and lead them to a safe and prosperous land that they would possess forever. In the words, "It is finished", Jesus proclaims that God's Word is fulfilled and his promises are completed.

And then these Words of triumph tell us that the reconciliation of God and man has been effected. God once observed the wickedness of mankind and said, "My Spirit is not governing their hearts and minds", and so he withdrew himself so that we who chose to live without him might see the bitter end of that choice and desire something better. But he didn't want to leave it that way. His goal was to restore what we lost; and that was an intimate, personal, and meaningful relationship with him. So, he revealed himself to Abraham and his descendants. Israel was a nation with whom God dwelled, first in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple. But the Lord was always careful to keep barriers between himself and the people with whom he lived—not to protect himself from their sin, but rather to protect sinners from being destroyed by the consuming glory of his holiness. The primary barrier was the curtain in the Temple that hung before the Holy of Holies. Behind it, as any Jew could have told you, was the Holy Spirit of God. And that's where he remained because of our sin.

But when Christ shouted out his victorious "It is finished" and bowed his head in death, the curtain that separated God and man was torn from the top to the bottom—not to let us in there, but to let God's Spirit come out to where we live. Cleansed from sin by our Lord's death, God's Spirit can now make his home in us. No more barriers. No more separation. No more spiritual death. God and man are together in harmony once again. *That's* what has been accomplished. And that's why in life and in the hour of our death we can all raise the shout of triumph with our Lord, "It is finished!" In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***