

Behold Finished Redemption!

John 19:28-30

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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,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. – John 19:28-30, ESV

When Things Look Bad . . .

“The Darkest Hour is just before the Dawn.” You’ve almost certainly heard this famous expression several times. It’s been in wide circulation for hundreds of years. As far as we know, it was an Englishman, theologian Thomas Fuller, who first wrote this idea down, in 1650: “It is always darkest just before the Day dawneth.”

But is that true? Very often it is, of course, but not always. More to the point, this saying (which I actually like) is often misused to say that no matter how dark things are, just hold on, because they’re bound to get better. But that’s not always true, is it? Sometimes, they’re just going to get worse. Jeremiah and Kathryn have been enjoying *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, both the books and the Netflix series, which is strange to me, because it’s just a spiraling downward from misery to misery. I suppose it probably ends well, except that Lemony Snicket keeps warning us over and over again that it doesn’t.

What we see here in John 19 is something different. Christians have adopted their own version of “the darkest hour is just before the dawn,” by saying, “It may look like as dark as Good Friday, but hold on, Sunday’s comin’!” The idea is that the death of Jesus was dark, sad and tragic, but three days later, He rose again, so in the same way we need to hold on when things seem hopeless because “Sunday’s comin’”!

As much as that thought can be encouraging, I think it also misses what is true and what we see happening here in John 19. Yes, the death of Christ on the cross is dark, sad, evil and troubling. The chief priests’ calculating conspiracy, Judas’ selfish betrayal, Pilate’s cowardly compromise with injustice, the disciples’ abandonment of their Master, Mary’s deep grief at the death of her Son, Jesus’ suffering and anguish is deep, physically and even more so spiritually. And yet, this scene is not a tragedy but a triumph. This scene is not the failure of Jesus’ mission but its fulfillment.

When things seem really bad and everything seems really dark, maybe what we need most is not just patience to hold on until things get better, but rather a change of perspective to help us see what God is doing in the situation, so we can see His purposes and His good hand at work. Yes, we often need patience, but maybe we need faith even more. Nowhere is that truth clearer and more powerful than in the last word from Jesus on the cross in the Gospel of John, “It is finished!”

A. Behold the Man Upon the Cross, v. 28

As we come back to the cross today, we find Jesus thirsting: *After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), “I thirst.”*

Jesus was and is truly human, a real man. He had been beaten twice, once as a flogging to seek to satisfy the Jewish leaders’ desire for blood, and then again as a scourging to break Him and prepare Him to die. He had

carried His own cross to the point of utter exhaustion, at which point Simon of Cyrene carried his cross the rest of the way. He had been nailed to the cross and had been hanging on it in the hot Judean mid-day sun for some time. He was thirsty. Psalm 22:15 describes the agony this way: *“my tongue sticks to my jaws.”*

And yet, the focus here in John 19:28 is not primarily on Jesus’ physical suffering and the extremity of His thirst, although that is real. No, the emphasis is on fulfillment: *“Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture).”* The word translated “finished” and the word translated “to fulfill” are variations on the same word. The New Testament uses two words to speak of how Jesus fulfills the Scriptures. The more common word, translated in the ESV as fulfilled, means “to fill up.” It’s also the same word that Luke uses in Luke 2 to say of Mary, “the time came for her to give birth” – the time was full for or the days were completed her to give birth. This is also the same word in Galatians 4:4, “In the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son.” Earlier here in John 19, John uses this words to refer to the soldiers’ gambling for Jesus’ inner garment in verse 24:

*“This was to fulfill the Scripture which says,
“They divided my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots.””*

But the word used here in verse 28 twice is different. It’s not the word best translated as fulfill but as finish or complete. I think John uses it twice here in verse 28, as a change from the word he normally uses, to prepare us for the final word from Jesus, *“It is finished.”*

But notice what Jesus is thinking about, even as He thirsts so severely that His tongue sticks to His jaws. He is thinking about the reality that all things have now been fulfilled. He has been betrayed. He has been condemned. He has had His hands and feet pierced. He has felt the abandonment of His Father and has cried out *“My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?”* The soldiers have gambled for His clothing. If you read Psalm 22, you’ll see that so much of this is specifically listed there, that it seems as if Jesus has been reciting Psalm 22 in His mind as a checklist of what is to be accomplished, what must be finished. Even His severe thirst is right there in Psalm 22.

All has been now finished. All things had been completed.

And so Jesus says, “I thirst” to fulfill Scripture, to finish the Scriptural portrait. Are His words a reference to the thirst of Psalm 22. Maybe, but probably not. We don’t have a Psalm which specifically has the words “I thirst,” but we have the reference to thirst in Psalm 22, and we have another reference to thirst in Psalm 69, which is even more clear and powerful and is probably behind Jesus’ words. After all, Jesus is already very thirsty. He doesn’t have to say it out loud. But Psalm 69:21 says

*They gave me poison for food,
and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.*

So, Jesus says “I thirst” out loud, so that the soldiers who have just gambled for His clothing will now respond to His thirst by giving Him sour wine.

B. Behold the Cruel Sin of Man, v. 29

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.

What is sour wine? It's basically a watery vinegar. Watery red wine vinegar. It was the cheapest form of red wine available, and the soldiers had a jar of it with them. I'm sure when Jesus saw it, He probably thought, "Well, there's my sour wine."

Think about this for a minute: If you are really, really thirsty, so thirsty your tongue is sticking to your jaw, and you are severely dehydrated, what do you want to drink? I'm guessing that Red Wine Vinegar is not really high on your list of desired drinks in that moment.

The soldiers are not responding to Jesus' thirst with relieving compassion. And it's not that the jar of sour wine was the only thing they had on hand. They must have had some water handy, working out in the hot sun. No, these men, who have just gambled for Jesus' last earthly possession, His undergarment, and who had already heard Him pray for them, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" Yes, the cruelty in their hearts is deep enough that they have taken all of His clothing and now offer Him vinegar in His hour of extreme thirst.

We need to see ourselves in these soldiers. We don't need to judge and condemn them, but we need to see how similar we are to them, and how it was our sin that held Him there. In the words of the great theologians, U2 –

*I was there when they crucified my Lord
I held the scabbard when the soldier drew his sword
I threw the dice when they pierced his side
But I've seen love conquer the great divide*

C. Behold Finished Redemption, v. 30

When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Once Jesus received the sour wine from the soldiers, the last detail of His atoning work was completed, and so He said the most beautiful and powerful word that has ever been spoken by any human being ever. In our English Bibles, this is three words – "It is finished," but in Greek it is just one word, *tetelestai!* And it's such a rich, full word that it's hard to translate fully. It has been finished. It is fulfilled. It is accomplished. It is paid in full.

It's also a word that could be misunderstood, if you take the wrong perspective on it. In 1906, German musician and missionary to Africa Dr. Albert Schweitzer published a book. *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*. In this best-selling book, Dr. Schweitzer claims that Jesus never intended to die on the cross. Rather, Schweitzer believed that Jesus went to the cross hoping to trigger an apocalyptic crisis that would force God's hand and bring about the end of the world. As He took His dying breaths, Jesus realized that His efforts failed. Dr. Schweitzer saw Jesus' cry from the cross, "It is finished!" not as a cry of victory but as a desperate declaration of defeat.

But Dr. Schweitzer was wrong, tragically wrong. Jesus was not crying out in despair about the end of His life and mission, but He was declaring in joy the fulfillment and accomplishment of all He had come into the world to do. *Tetelestai* is the original and true "Mission Accomplished"!

John is trying to help us understand this meaning of this word by using versions of it in verse 28. All things have been accomplished. Jesus did all He did to complete Scripture.

So, what was finished? What was accomplished? What was completed?

I. Finished Purposes

The purposes of God from the beginning of Creation were finished now by Christ on the cross. Why did God create all things? For the display of His own glory and the expression of His love! And now, how is God most glorified and His love most clearly displayed? On the cross!

God created man in His image to reflect His character. Yet Adam and Eve sinned against God and fell from their exalted position over creation as God's image-bearers. Instead of reigning over creation under God's hand, Adam chose to rebel against God and put himself under the dominion of Satan, a creature. On the cross, Jesus defeated the devil and completed His rescue of God's fallen image-bearer.

So, the major purposes of God in creation – the display of His glory, the expression of His love, and humanity created in His image to exercise dominion over creation – these things stained by sin and obscured by the Fall are now gloriously rescued and restored at the cross.

2. Finished Promises

As God's purposes were completed, His promises were also finished. God had made many great and precious promises to His people, and on the cross Jesus kept every one of them. Some of these promises were given in words, promises spoken to the serpent, to Abraham and to David, promises given through Isaiah and Micah:

- The serpent was told that when he crushed the heel of the seed of the woman, the woman's seed would crush his head.
- Abraham was promised that his offspring would bring blessing to all nations of the world.
- David was told that one of his descendants would reign as king forever.

On the cross, Jesus fully paid for all our sins with His precious blood, crushing the head of the serpent, bringing the blessing of forgiveness and redemption to all nations, and being crowned and lifted up as king forever, which is why Pilate proclaimed "Behold, you king!" and why he wrote "Jesus Christ, king of the Jews" on the cross.

But God's promises came in many forms beyond words. They were given in redemptive events in history, in ceremonies, in signs, and Jesus fulfilled these, too:

1. Jesus fulfilled Noah's ark, as His cross has become the ark of refuge, to carry us safely through God's judgment into the New Heavens and the New Earth.
2. Jesus fulfilled the Passover Lamb, by shedding His blood to protect us from the wrath of God and so that God's mercy would rest on us instead of His judgment.
3. Jesus fulfilled the sacrifices of the Tabernacle and Temple under the Mosaic Law, as His blood shed on the cross accomplished what all the blood of bulls and goats could never accomplish.
4. Jesus fulfilled the high priesthood. Even as he was condemned to die by the chief priests of Israel, He hung on the cross as both sacrifice and high priest over the people of God, suspended between heaven and earth and making intercession by His blood between a holy God and a sinful people.

5. Jesus' fulfillment of the Mosaic Worship system was demonstrated by the tearing of the veil in the Temple upon His death.
6. Jesus fulfilled the covenant of circumcision by being cut off for us, and so we can now baptize babies with water and no longer need to shed blood, since the blood of Jesus has already been shed.
7. Jesus fulfilled the agony of David in the Psalms of Lament, as we can see most clearly in Psalms 22 & 69 but also in many others.

So, God's purposes and promises are finished, completed, and Jesus' cry, "Tetelestai!" affirm that.

3. Finished Security

But Jesus' cry has more significance still. One place where people in the Roman world of Jesus' day would have seen the word "Tetelestai" written and sometimes stamped would have been on receipts for purchases and for the settlement of debts. In these contexts, "tetelestai" carries the force of "Paid in Full"!

Jesus was able to complete the purposes and promises of God because He paid the full price of all of our sins. The debt was settled, accounts were cleared, and He cried out "Paid in FULL!"

This has profound significance for us and our spiritual security. I remember having a discussion with a pastor friend of mine who is an Arminian in the Wesleyan/Holiness/Pentecostal tradition. He could not wrap his head around the idea that Jesus' death on the cross could wipe clean even future sins he had not yet committed. He thought that it worked like this: You sin, you confess your sin, and then the blood of Jesus cleanses you from that sin. After that, you try really hard to keep your slate clean.

But remember this: All of your sin was yet-future for Jesus when He hung on the cross. You weren't even going to be born for almost 2,000 years when the Son of God was pierced, bleeding, agonizing between heaven and earth. If Jesus died for your sins, He died for your sins that were yet-future. And it is not your sincere repentance that cleanses you of your sin, but it is the blood of Jesus shed on the cross almost 2,000 years before you existed.

What does that mean? When Jesus cried out "Tetelestai!" He meant that every sin you have ever committed, every sin you are committing right now, and every sin you ever will commit in the future were ALL paid for, paid in FULL! That means you can't sin your way out of God's grace. You can't blow it one too many times so God just decides to give up on you. If you are forgiven at all, you are forgiven in FULL.

Of course, that's only true if you are forgiven at all. Jesus dies to pay for all of the sins of all of God's people. All of those who would come to faith in Him, all who would confess His name, all who would come to the cross for forgiveness, have had their record of debt cancelled.

Here's how Colossians 2:13-14 puts it:

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. (ESV)

And this is how I John 1:7 puts it:

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. – (ESV)

Having cried out this final word, Jesus gave up His spirit. Luke 23:45 tells us that, as He did so, he cried, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” Once again, Jesus could call God “Father” and not just “My God, My God,” because the satisfaction for sin had been made, and He was now going back to His Father.

Conclusion: Are You Resting and Trusting?

Mercy Me sings that the Gospel is not just good news but the best news ever, and it is! It is the best news ever and Jesus summarizes it in just one word, the best word ever, *tetelestai*.

Charles H Spurgeon said TETELESTAI conveys, *“an ocean of meaning in a drop of language, a mere drop. It would need all the other words that ever were spoken, or ever can be spoken, to explain this one word. It is altogether immeasurable. It is high; I cannot attain to it. It is deep; I cannot fathom it. IT IS FINISHED is the most charming note in all of Calvary’s music. The fire has passed upon the Lamb. He has borne the whole of the wrath that was due to His people. This is the royal dish of the feast of love.”*

Have you heard this word deep in your soul? Have you received the best news ever in the depth of your heart? Are you resting in Him and trusting in Him alone, now and always? The work is finished, the price has been paid, the purposes and promises of God have been completed. Receive and rest on Him alone!