

The Heart of the Gospel: Gethsemane to the Burial of Christ

Chapter 19: “It Is Finished!”

[Brian Schwertley](#)

After receiving the sour wine, Christ uttered His sixth statement from the cross: “It is finished” (Jn. 19:30). This is the most remarkable and important statement that Jesus spoke from the cross. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say this brief statement is the most important made in the history of mankind. Jesus Christ, who of His own volition relinquished the indescribable glory of the throne room of heaven; who voluntarily lived a life of humiliation and rejection; who lived under the law and obeyed it in exhaustive detail; who suffered the horrors of hell and the abandonment of the cross, could now say, “I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do” (Jn. 17:4). These words of supreme victory ought to be precious to every believer because the Savior has finished redemption for His people. These dying words of the Redeemer also stand as a wall of iron against all theological perversions of the doctrine of salvation. There are a number of things to note regarding our Lord’s shout of victory.

First, this statement in the Greek language consists of only one word: *tetelestai* (perfect passive indicative of *teleo*). “The rendering, ‘It is finished!’ conveys only half the meaning. For the verb *teleo* fundamentally denotes ‘to carry out’ the will of somebody, whether of oneself or another, and so to fulfill obligations or carry out religious acts. ‘It is accomplished!’ renders that aspect of the word. Doubtless both meanings of the term, the temporal and the theological, are intended here.”¹ Jesus finished His redemptive work and thus accomplished all that the Father had given Him to do.

The verb tense used denotes a progressive action over time that has now been brought to completion. The Savior had been perfectly obeying His Father’s will throughout the whole course of His earthly life (a life that involved suffering and humiliation) and He had *especially* been suffering vicariously since entering the garden of Gethsemane (the period of His mysterious agony) which began around 17 hours before His death (about 10:00 pm Thursday evening). All of this (the active and passive obedience of Christ) was now finished, completed or accomplished. The entire work of redemption, which included fulfilling the law and bearing the law’s curse for sin, has been accomplished by Jesus. Nothing more needs to be done.

But didn’t our Lord have to be buried and resurrected before His redemptive work was truly finished? While the resurrection of Christ is absolutely essential in Christian soteriology, it is important to recognize that the resurrection of the Lord was an *inescapable consequence* of the Savior’s redemptive obedience. That’s why the author of Hebrews says that “God...brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead...through the blood of the everlasting covenant” (13:20). The Bible teaches that our Lord’s bloody sacrificial death caused or resulted in the resurrection. The Savior’s atoning work on the cross was so perfect, complete and sufficient that the resurrection was the reward and vindication of it. By the resurrection God publicly declared that Jesus’ work was perfect and fully accepted. “When the Bible says, ‘If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins’ (1 Corinthians 15:17), the point is not that the resurrection is

¹ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 352.

the price paid for our sins. The point is that the resurrection proves that the death of Jesus is an all-sufficient price. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then his death was a failure, God did not vindicate his sin-bearing achievement, and we are still in our sins.”²

But as we all know, God gloriously vindicated His Son. Once Jesus paid the price in full for sin by His perfect sacrifice and conquered sin and death, death could not permanently hold Him. Thus the Redeemer said, “I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and death” (Rev. 1:18). The vicarious suffering or atonement of the Savior is the foundation of salvation and the resurrection is the reward for Christ’s active and passive obedience. The bloody sacrifice was the victory that secured “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Mt. 28:18) at the resurrection.

Second, what is the precise meaning of our Lord’s cry, “It is finished”? The passage itself does not explicitly tell us what is finished. Therefore, expositors have interpreted the shout in both a broad and narrow manner. The commentators who view this expression through the broad lens of Scripture will point to many things that were brought to completion by our Lord’s vicarious suffering and death. a) There are the many prophecies regarding the suffering of the Messiah. Every one of them was perfectly fulfilled. b) There are the ceremonial laws: the animal sacrifices, the temple, incense, and the priesthood (i.e. all the types and shadows which pointed to Jesus’ redemptive work). c) There is the condemning power of the law for God’s people. Christ’s sacrificial death covered the sins and ended the curse of the law for all believers past, present and future. Because of the Redeemer’s victory, every one is justified the moment they believe. d) The Jewish nation as the expression of the visible church was brought to an end. The separation between Jew and Gentile was now finished and done away forever. e) “The iron reign of sin and Satan, of death and hell, were now broken in pieces by this stone cut out of the mountains without hands.”³ f) The Mosaic administration of the covenant grace with its rites, ceremonies, festivals, national borders, and peculiar, sundry judicial laws (i.e. national laws that were not moral in character) was now finished. g) And the Savior’s redemptive work of expiation, propitiation, redemption and reconciliation was now completed.

While the broad interpretation of our Lord’s words is based on Scripture and is certainly true as an application of Christ’s words, it is likely that Jesus is speaking specifically about His redemptive work. “This specific work is now brought to a close. The Lamb of God has made his great sacrifice for the world. It is this that is now done. Our great Substitute has paid the great price of ransom, paid it to the uttermost farthing. ‘It is finished’ indeed!”⁴ “The limitation to the state of humiliation is obvious, from the fact that our Lord uttered it on the *cross*, where that humiliation had its end.”⁵ “That which is finished is the consciously suffered humiliation in body and in spirit. Not the serving, but the being a slave in humiliation; that observed from the active side, has now been finished. The torment of the payment, the suffering of the penalty, and both of these consciously, that is finished.”⁶

The essence of our Lord’s expiatory work was suffering. The Mediator paid the full penalty for sin on our behalf. These unparalleled sufferings were now brought to an end. Only seconds after these words Christ’s spirit would be in the presence of His Father. The Redeemer’s cry of agony because of the Father’s displeasure at the imputed sin upon Him would be replaced

² John Piper, *The Passion of Jesus Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 27.

³ Robert Hawker, *The Poor Man’s Morning and Evening Portions*, 292.

⁴ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel*, 1309.

⁵ E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, 2:422.

⁶ Klaas Schilder, *Christ Crucified*, 451.

by unspeakable joy. Jesus was going home. The Father was now smiling upon Him. The Mediator had been faithful and God was loving and delighting in His Son. Yes, it is true that His body had to go through the humiliation of burial, but during this time His soul was in heaven beholding the face of God. The Captain of our salvation fought the great battle and, by shedding His own blood, He triumphed over sin, Satan, death and hell. His victory cry, “It is finished” means the war (definitively speaking) is over. “And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death” (Col. 1:21-22).

Third, we ask, to whom was this victory cry directed? Although the passage does not answer this question directly, we can infer from the context that our Lord was announcing His victory to the Father. Given the fact that this announcement is made between two statements to the Father (“My God, My God...” [Mt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34] and “Father, into thy hand I commend my spirit” [Lk. 23:46]), it is likely that Jesus is speaking directly to God. “Father, it is finished. I have finished the work that You gave Me to do. I have satisfied your perfect justice with regard to precept and penalty.” “As the Son of God He reports to the Holy Trinity.”⁷ He has perfectly fulfilled His eternal promise given in the covenant of redemption (the *pactum salutis*) before the world even existed.

Although He was reporting His victory to the Father, He was doing so publicly and loudly. Christ wanted all those who were present, whether disciples, Roman guards, idle spectators or even hostile enemies, to know that His suffering unto death resulted in victory. The gospel of Jesus Christ is something that is public. It is to be announced to the whole world. This shout of victory is the object of our faith. It places the divine exclamation point upon the Savior’s redemptive obedience. It marks the centerpiece and pinnacle of all human history. The cry of victory ought to comfort our hearts. It should be the anchor of our assurance. “[L]et these dying words of...Jesus be made by thee as an answer to all thy prayers, and begin that song to the Lamb, which ere long, thou wilt fully and loudly sing among the church above—‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slain; for thou wast slain and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood.’”⁸

Fourth, there are a number of theological implications of the Redeemer’s victory cry. One implication is the perfection and sufficiency of Christ’s suffering and death on the cross. The author of Hebrews says, “By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.... But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right of God.... For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified” (10:10, 12, 14). By His suffering and death the Savior paid *the full price* or penalty for the sins of the elect (redemption). By removing all of a believing sinner’s sins (past, present and future) (expiation), Jesus removes all of God’s wrath against the sinner (propitiation). Consequently, the believing sinner is reconciled to God. Now, if our Lord paid the penalty in full, removed *all* of a believer’s sin and totally reconciled the believing sinner to God by His suffering and death, then what more needs to be done or what possibly can be added to the work of Christ?

The victory cry, “It is finished,” means the Savior’s work of sacrifice is done. “Its absolute perfection means that it is *a single sacrifice for sins* and that its effectiveness is *for all time*, and thus it can never be added to or repeated.”⁹ There is finality to the Mediator’s redemptive work precisely because it was perfect, sufficient and efficacious. As a result of this

⁷ Ibid, 455.

⁸ Robert Hawker, *The Poor Man’s Morning and Evening Portions*, 293.

⁹ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 400.

perfect sacrifice, Jesus was invested with unlimited power and dominion at the resurrection and now sits exalted at the right hand of God the Father. The effects of this perfect sacrifice permeate all human history. The resurrected King now progressively gathers in His elect (i.e. those purchased with His blood); and, He will also judge and subjugate all rebels against His throne. “The Redeemer having perfected His great work, now calmly awaits the fulfillment of the Father’s promise: cf. 1 Cor. 15:25-27.”¹⁰ Turretin comments, “[T]he satisfaction of Christ was so perfect and sufficient that he most fully satisfied for all our sins by the one offering of himself, not only for our guilt, but also for both temporal and eternal punishment. Henceforth there are no more propitiatory offerings or satisfaction to be made for sin, either in this life or after it, although believers are often subjected to the chastisement of God to promote their penitence and sanctification.”¹¹

The sufficiency and perfection of Jesus’ work completely overturns Roman Catholic doctrines such as the mass, purgatory and human merit in relation to justification. In the mass the papal church claims that Christ is re-sacrificed. Their own creeds say, “If anyone says that in the mass a true and real sacrifice is not offered to God...let him be anathema” (Council of Trent, 22nd sess., can. 1). “If anyone says that...Christ...did not ordain that...other priests should offer His own body and blood, let him be anathema” (Can. 3). In fact, the ritual of the mass is the most central aspect of the Roman Catholic faith. It is the centerpiece and climax of all their worship services, performed thousands of times each day throughout the world in Romanist churches. Yet, it is totally unbiblical and antithetical to our Lord’s statement, “It is finished.” The mass presupposes that the Savior’s suffering and death on the cross *did not complete* the task of redemption. It assumes that the work of expiation and propitiation must continue throughout history performed by the Roman Catholic sacerdotal priesthood.

But the Bible teaches that the Roman Catholic mass is wicked and sinful, for it denies the sufficiency and efficacy of Christ’s atoning work on Calvary. The author of Hebrews rebukes the papal church: “such a High Priest [Jesus] was fitting for us...who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people’s, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself” (7:26, 27). “He entered the Most Holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption” (9:12). “Once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself” (9:26). “Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many” (9:28). Paul writes, “Christ having been raised from the dead, dies no more.... He died to sin once for all” (Rom. 6:9-10). Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes,

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is an announcement, a proclamation to the whole universe by God that His Son has completed the work of atonement and of redemption and of salvation. That is the apostle’s argument here. He says, We know this, that Christ being (having been) raised from the dead dieth no more. Why? Because there is no need for Him to die any more. He does not go on dying, He has done that once and for ever. The resurrection proves that; it proves that He has finished the work and that the end in view has been accomplished.¹²

The most common denial of the words, “It is finished” (or the sufficiency, necessity and efficacy of Christ’s atoning work) by our modern “anti-Christian” culture is the very common idea that repentance or turning over a new leaf can secure pardon from sin. While repentance, as

¹⁰ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews*, 568.

¹¹ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994), 2:439.

¹² D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 6* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 99-100.

biblically defined, always accompanies salvation as a fruit of regeneration and saving faith, the idea that repenting and being a “good” person gets one into heaven must be rejected for the following reasons.

First, being “sorry” for sin and changing the direction of one’s life for the better (e.g., Mr. Smith stopped getting drunk and began to serve the poor in a soup kitchen) cannot remove the guilt of sin or the liability of punishment that sin deserves. Even if an unregenerate person could from the heart begin a holy life (which biblically speaking is impossible), it would at best only change the *subjective state* of the sinner. However, it could not (no matter how hard the person tried) change the fact of the *objective guilt* that is a consequence of every sin committed. Nowhere in the Bible is it taught that guilt can be lessened or eliminated by “good works.” In fact, Paul says, “By the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20). The idea that present “obedience” can atone for past sins was the invention of apostate rabbinic Judaism and was incorporated into Islam by Mohammed, who patched together a number of heresies in his new *made-up* religion. Variants of this heresy have found their way into the Roman Catholic Church, as in penance and works of supererogation.

Repentance cannot counteract the consequences of sin. “By sin the majesty of God is insulted; repentance has no effect in wiping off this reproach. By sin a debt is contracted to the divine law and justice; penitence makes no compensation for this debt. In [the] case of the breach of human laws, repentance is never looked upon as making legal compensation or removing the consequences of guilt.”¹³ The Bible explicitly teaches that the consequence of sin is real, objective guilt which results in death. Turning over a new leaf cannot eliminate the spiritual death penalty for sin. Only Christ’s suffering and death in the place of the believing sinner can deal with the consequences of sin.

Second, Paul teaches that people who attempt to be saved by good works are entangled in a yoke of bondage (read Gal. 5:1-4). The point the apostle is making is that people who attempt to be saved by repentance and good works are lost forever because: a) People who do not look *to Jesus alone* for salvation are severed from Christ. It is impossible to believe in Christ (which is an acknowledgement that you cannot save yourself) while simultaneously trusting in your own works (which is a claim that you are able to save yourself). If you look to your works in any way then you have rejected the perfect, complete, sufficient salvation achieved by the Savior. b) The only kind of obedience that would be acceptable in God’s sight would be an absolutely perfect and perpetual obedience in thought, word and deed from birth until death. A few years of so-called “clean living” cannot annul or erase a life of sin and a mountain of guilt. “If you add anything to Christ, you lose Christ. Salvation is in Christ alone by grace alone through faith alone.”¹⁴

Third, the Bible teaches that unregenerate sinners are incapable, apart from a sovereign work of God’s grace, of truly repenting. In fact, the work of the Holy Spirit in regenerating the hearts of sinners flows from and is dependent upon Jesus’ achieved redemption upon the cross. Our Lord’s perfect redemption is the fountain out of which flows regeneration, faith, repentance and sanctification. Union with Christ in His life, death, and resurrection guarantees that the elect sinner will be regenerated, sanctified and glorified. The Mediator saves His people from the guilt (justification) as well as the power of sin (sanctification). Everyone united to Christ will receive the gifts of faith (Eph. 2:8) and repentance (Ac. 5:31; 11:18). Therefore, people are not saved because they exercise some intrinsic power to repent. Rather, they repent because the efficacy of

¹³ William Symington, *On the Atonement and Intercession of Jesus Christ*, 61.

¹⁴ John R. W. Stott, *Only One Way: The Message of Galatians* (London: InterVarsity, 1968), 134.

the Savior's death first enables them to repent. In other words, repentance is a fruit of salvation and not the cause or even the instrument of it. Further, the Bible clearly teaches that "good works" are not actually good unless they flow from faith in Christ (cf. Rom. 8:7-8; 14:23). "Without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb. 11:4). "[T]here can be no works good in the sight of God but what flow from, and are connected with, the atonement. Good works can be performed only by those who are united to Christ by faith, that is, are in a justified state."¹⁵

Copyright 2007 © Brian M. Schwertley

[HOME PAGE](#)

¹⁵ William Symington, *On the Atonement and Intercession of Christ*, 64. Paul says, "Whatever is not from faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). Solomon says that even "the plowing of the wicked [is] sin" (Prov. 21:4). True faith in Christ, which issues forth from a regenerate heart, is the foundation of genuine virtue. An act which is outwardly good, but done to glorify self and Satan rather than Christ cannot please God. "The carnal mind is enmity against God" (Rom. 8:7-8). Paul is teaching that people who are not already regenerated and saved by Christ cannot even do one thing that is spiritually or truly good in God's sight. Obviously then, Jesus and His work of redemption is the only way to heaven. Christ is man's only hope of salvation.