

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Thursday, April 14, 2022
Maundy Thursday**

**TETELESTAI: IT IS FINISHED
John 19:16-30**

As when the Jewish people observe the Passover, as they have done for hundreds, even thousands, of years, this is a night for remembering. There is much to remember. Much to ponder in our hearts.

We could talk this evening about any or all of the events, encounters, conversations, or teachings of Jesus that took place between His arrival in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and His last supper with the disciples in the Upper Room on Thursday night, or up to His crucifixion, death, and burial on that Friday that seemed to be anything but “Good.”

We could talk about what took place in the Upper Room that night and the meaning of the sacrament Jesus instituted in bread and wine from the Passover meal. We could talk about what Jesus said and did in the Upper Room – not only in the establishment of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, but as He washed the feet of His disciples, giving them an unforgettable lesson in humility and servanthood, and as He gave them the “new commandment” to love one another, defining love by the example of His own life, which just goes to show how radical, how revolutionary, how powerful and transformative His love is for lost, broken, mixed-up, messed-up sinners like us.

We could talk about what happened after supper that night, when Jesus and the disciples (minus Judas, who had gone out by himself to carry out his betrayal of Jesus) went out of the city to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus agonized alone in prayer.

We could talk about the arrest of Jesus and the actions and reactions (or inaction) of His disciples. We could talk about His treatment by the religious leaders of Jerusalem and the temple police acting on their orders. We could talk about His treatment by the Romans and about Herod and his desire to have Jesus perform a miracle for him. We could talk about Pilate, the Roman governor of Jerusalem, about his wife’s warning to her husband not to have Jesus punished in any way, about Pilate’s recognition of Jesus’ innocence but his (Pilate’s) lack of moral courage to do what he knew was right, or about Pilate’s fruitless attempt to absolve himself of responsibility by washing his hands of the matter.

We could talk about the procession from the governor’s palace to the place of execution, known as Golgotha in Aramaic and Calvary in Latin. We could talk about the physical torment and abuse Jesus endured. We could talk about the two thieves who were crucified with Him, one on either side, and the contrast in their attitudes toward Jesus.

We could talk about the different characters in the story, some of whom I’ve already mentioned. The disciples. Judas. The religious leaders. Herod. Pilate. The two thieves

(probably insurrectionists) who were crucified with Him. The Roman soldiers who carried out the executions. Mary the mother of Jesus and the other women who followed Him faithfully.

We could talk about the “seven words” spoken by Jesus from the cross.

We could talk about any of these things tonight. What I want to focus on for a few minutes this evening is just one of those seven final statements of Jesus from the cross. It is the sixth of the seven last words of Jesus that have been handed down to us. It is found in John 19:30. In the Greek text of the New Testament, it is a single word: *Tetelestai*. Which means: “It is finished.”

In the New Testament, there are two very similar verbs which have very similar meanings: *Teleo* and *Teleioo*. Both have to do with finishing or completing something, or fulfilling something (such as a prophecy or a promise).

The verb *Teleioo* is used 24 times in the New Testament. Jesus uses this word in John 4:34, where He says to His disciples: “My food is to do the will of Him who sent me and *to finish* His work.”

In John 5:36, speaking to the religious leaders of the Jews, Jesus says: “The works my Father has given me *to finish* – the very works I am doing – testify that the Father has sent me.” In His high priestly prayer in John 17, Jesus says to God the Father: “I have brought You glory on earth by *finishing* the work You gave me to do.”

In each of these instances, Jesus is focused on the mission the Father has given Him and His resolve *to finish* it, to bring it to completion.

Paul also uses this word in Acts 20:24. He was on his way to Jerusalem, on the final leg of his third missionary journey. He stopped in Miletus, on the eastern coast of the Aegean Sea, to meet with the leaders from the church in Ephesus. In his farewell message to them he said: “Compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.... I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is *to finish* the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace” (20:22, 24).

The other verb, *Teleo*, occurs 27 times in the New Testament. Paul uses it in 2 Timothy 4:7, where he says: “I have fought the good fight, I have *finished* the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for His appearing” (4:7-8). Which includes you and me, if our hearts are set on Christ.

It is this verb that John uses in verse 28 in his description of Jesus’ crucifixion. He says: “Knowing that everything had now been *finished*, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said: “I am thirsty.”“ The soldiers at the cross gave Him some cheap wine vinegar on a sponge, fulfilling the prophecy of Psalm 69:21, which says: “They gave me vinegar for my thirst.”

Then, in verse 30, Jesus Himself uses this verb, uttering a single word (*Tetelestai*) as a declaration that the work of salvation has now been completed through His suffering and death on the cross. He who had no sin became sin – a sin offering – for us, so that in Him we could be set free from our sin and guilt and reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Tetelestai! It is one of the most beautiful and impactful words in the whole Bible. *It. Is. Finished.* In the death of Jesus, the work of salvation is done. This is one thing that sets the Christian faith apart from every other religion or religious system. In every other religion, salvation is spelled D-O. It is dependent on what people do. Christianity is different. Christianity is spelled D-O-N-E. Done. It is based on what Jesus has done for us. Nothing further needs to be done. In His grace and mercy, God has done it all. All we need to “do” is to receive the gift of salvation by faith – and even the faith to believe it and receive it is a gift from God.

If you subscribe to *Wednesday’s Word*, a weekly devotional from Paul Tripp, these words will probably sound familiar. Reflecting on the meaning of Jesus’ coming to us, Tripp writes:

It was the ultimate arrival
 By the ultimate person
 For the ultimate task
 To win the ultimate victory.
 He was like no other,
 God in the flesh.
 He was the Word,
 God’s living message of salvation.
 His arrival was God’s glory on display.
 He was God’s ultimate gift,
 All of the hope that what sin had broken
 Would finally be repaired,
 That people would finally
 Be reconciled to God.
 All of these hopes rested
 On His shoulders.

He came willingly
 Humbly
 Knowing He would not just preach
 The desperate need for a sacrifice.
 He would Himself be that
 Substitutionary
 Justifying
 Forgiving
 Reconciling
 Restoring
 Renewing sacrifice.

In every moment of every
 Situation
 Trial
 Location
 Relationship
 The perfection of His glory
 Shined.
 There had never been anyone
 Like Him
 Full of grace
 Full of truth.

It was the ultimate arrival
 By the ultimate person
 For the ultimate task
 To win the ultimate victory.
 Yet on this ultimate arrival
 One of the saddest things ever written
 Was recorded
 With these heartbreaking words:
 “He came to His own,
 And His own people
 Did not receive Him.”

Tripp then recounts the message of Isaiah 52-53, which Pastor Chris read earlier in this service, a passage that lays out what Jesus would endure on our account as He took up our pain and bore our suffering. He was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, given punishment He did not deserve, and wounded in our place, as the iniquity (sin) of us all was laid on Him (53:4-6).

He bore our sins in His body on the cross (1 Peter 2:24). Through His blood shed on the cross, He secured our forgiveness. Now and forever. There is nothing more for Jesus (or anyone) to do to accomplish our salvation. It. Is. Finished.

Do you hear what good news that is? Jesus did not say: “Well, I did the best I could. Now it’s up to you to do the rest.” No.

You may ask: What exactly did Jesus finish? There are several biblical answers. Jesus Himself said: “The Son of Man” (which is how He often referred to Himself) did not come to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45). He paid the ransom to rescue us from our enslavement to sin.

John 3:16 and 17 tell us why Jesus came: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.” This was the mission of Jesus. And He finished it in His suffering and death on the cross.

I John 3:8 says that “the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.” When Jesus was on the cross and then in the tomb, Satan was sure Jesus was finished. But Satan was wrong. What he thought was His ultimate triumph actually sealed his ultimate defeat.

We don’t see it yet. From the time of Adam and Eve in the Garden, we all know the sting of sin. We know the seduction of temptation. We know the weakness of our own will. We know all about the ways the devil tries to sabotage our faith, our witness, our relationships. But the blessed assurance we have through the death of Jesus on the cross is not that *Jesus* is finished. Nor that *we* are finished. But that *Satan* himself is finished. He is still our enemy, still the enemy of our souls. But he is a defeated enemy. His defeat was sealed on the cross. The cry of Jesus – “It is finished” – is a declaration of Satan’s defeat.

An interesting thing about the word *tetelestai*: It was found on ancient documents discovered in Egypt in the 19th century that date back to the time of the New Testament. The word *tetelestai* was part of the language of the marketplace. It was used to indicate that a real estate deed had been signed, or a business transaction completed. When a debt was satisfied, when a transaction was completed, they wrote *tetelestai*: It is complete. Paid in full.

Mary Sue and I have been enjoying the new TV series of *All Creatures Great and Small* on PBS. It is based on the memoirs of veterinarian James Herriot. The actor portraying Herriot in the new series is Nicholas Ralph, who played C.S. Lewis as a young man in the movie *The Most Reluctant Convert*. In the old series of *All Creatures*, there was an episode in which James took his wife Helen out to dinner at a fancy restaurant to celebrate their anniversary. His boss, Siegfried, encouraged him to do it, but James balked. He was a young veterinarian and couldn’t afford it. But Siegfried insisted, and James reluctantly agreed.

On their way to the restaurant, James and Helen stopped at a farm to examine a farmer’s horse. After finishing the exam, he returned to the car and drove to the restaurant, not realizing that his checkbook had fallen in the mud. No credit cards back in those days.

After the meal, James reached for his checkbook only to discover it was missing. Embarrassed, he tried to offer a way to make up for it.

“Not to worry,” said the waiter. “Your dinner has been taken care of.” Siegfried had paid for the dinner in advance. It was paid in full.

On the cross, when Jesus said: “It is finished,” it meant “paid in full.”

As I trust you have heard many times, salvation is free. It is a free gift. But it wasn’t cheap. It cost Jesus everything. It cost Him His life. He did it all. He paid it all for you and me. His declaration “It is finished” means *it is finished*.

I know a Christian leader who has the word *Tetelestai* tattooed on his arm to remind him that it really is finished, that Jesus did everything that needed to be done to save us from our sin

and guilt and hell, no matter how often or how badly we blow it, and to give us forgiveness and peace with God and the assurance of eternal life with Him.

Tonight, remember: *Tetelestai*. Remember it tomorrow and the next day and for as long as you live. What no one else could do, Jesus did. And It. Is. Finished.

Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.