“IT IS FINISHED”

John 19:16b–42

Key Verse: 19:30

“When he had received the drink, Jesus said, ‘It is finished.’ With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.”

Have you ever thought about people’s last words when they were dying? Sometimes a person’s last words say a lot about him or her. Robert Louis Stevenson’s last words were, “Does my face look strange?” James Joyce’s last words were, “Does nobody understand?” Winston Churchill’s last words were, “I’m bored with it all.” But Jesus’ last words were, “It is finished.” His are at once simple yet powerful, and very telling words. And they are recorded only by John. What is he trying to tell us? May God speak to us through his words today.

Look at verse 16b. Pilate had just handed Jesus over to the Jewish leaders to be crucified. So now the Roman soldiers took charge of him to carry out the sentence. Look at verse 17. John emphasizes here that Jesus carried his own cross. Jesus had shared glory with the Father before the world began (17:5); he was the most exalted, the highest person who ever lived on earth. But unlike other privileged people, Jesus did not pay someone else to do the menial task assigned to him; he carried his own cross. He didn’t shirk his responsibility. Jesus carrying his own cross is our true role model.

Verse 17 tells us that they went out to the place of the Skull. In Hebrew it was called “Golgotha.” It was a place of execution outside the city walls of Jerusalem. There was a road nearby where many people traveled in and out of the city (20). It was a dark, horrible place with a mass grave. Look at verse 18. Until now there has been no mention of these two others. Obviously they were brought out hurriedly in order to be executed along with Jesus. They crucified Jesus in between them to make him look guilty like them (cf. Isa53:12).

Crucifixion was a horrible form of execution. The person had to carry one of the beams of the cross out to his execution place, where he would be stripped naked and his hands nailed to it. Then the beam and the man would be lifted up and attached to the tall beam already stuck in the ground, and the man’s feet would be nailed down as well. Death would come very slowly, sometimes taking several days. Hanging there bleeding in the hot sun, getting weaker and weaker, it would become increasingly difficult to breathe. To do so, the person would push up with his feet and pull with his arms, causing more pain. The Roman statesman Cicero called it “a cruel and disgusting penalty.” Josephus the Jewish historian called it “the worst of deaths.” In their evilness this is what the Jewish leaders wanted done to Jesus.

Look at verses 19–22. Like the other Gospels, John tells us of this written notice fastened to the cross. It read “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” Sounds pretty standard. But John goes into more detail. He tells us there was a struggle between the Jewish leaders and Pilate over this notice. The Jewish leaders felt that it hurt their pride, because to them, Jesus could never be their King, especially now that he is crucified. But after having been pushed around by them all morning during the trial, Pilate would be pushed no more. Some think that Pilate with this notice was simply making mockery of the Jews. Others believe that after speaking personally with Jesus, Pilate became convinced that Jesus really was the King of the Jews. In any case, John tells us the notice was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. The Romans wanted everyone in Jerusalem during Passover, no matter where they were from, to know why Jesus was being executed. On one level, this notice was a warning, saying Jesus was dying this way because he was a rebel against Rome. But on another level it was proclaiming the ultimate truth about Jesus. It proclaims Jesus of Nazareth as the true King, not just of the Jewish people, but King of kings and Lord of lords, the one worthy of worship from every tribe and language and people and nation (Rev5:9; 7:9; 17:14; 19:16). This notice written in three languages was like a prophecy of how the gospel would go out to the whole world.

Look at verse 23. Like the other Gospels, John also tells us how the Roman soldiers gambled for Jesus’ clothing. But again, John goes into greater detail. He mentions the seamless undergarment that Jesus wore. Only someone who’d been close to Jesus would have known this detail. The undergarment was like a tunic worn under a robe, and the soldiers were careful not to tear it, because to them it was very valuable. Jesus was poor, so obviously somebody had given it to him as a gift, and now the soldiers were gambling for it. Why does John spend time describing this? It’s to show us the soldiers’ mentality. At the foot of the cross of Jesus, all they were thinking about was what they could get. Their butchery and barbarism seemed inhuman. But John writes in verse 24, “This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled that said, ‘They divided my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.’” It’s the first of three times in this passage that John mentions the fulfillment of Scripture. This time it was the prophecy of Psalm 22:18. Even in the bleakest of moments, God was working out his sovereign will, and showing us that Jesus really is the promised Messiah.

Look at verse 25. It’s not there in English, but in Greek verse 25 begins with the word “but,” drawing a contrast between the four soldiers and the four women near the cross. What’s the contrast? It’s a contrast between blindness and sight, between selfishness and selflessness, between heartlessness and love, between cruelty and affection, between ruthlessness and loyalty, between materialism and valuing the one who’s worth far more than the world’s greatest treasures. In the very next verse we see that the disciple whom Jesus loved was also standing nearby. These four women and John couldn’t do much for Jesus in this situation, but they were *there*. Though the others had all left, they remained there to the end. They were there for one simple reason: they loved Jesus. We can be like the soldiers, focused only on what we can get, or like those near the cross, focused on Jesus, staying close to him, finding some way to serve him.

The word “near” in verse 25 can mean standing right beside. When we’re suffering or in trouble, people who we thought were our friends might turn out to be nowhere to be found. People burdened by their own problems don’t have the capacity to be there for others. In contrast, Proverbs 17:17 tells us, “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity.” So these people near his cross were not just his relatives; they were his true friends. They hoped their presence near him would somehow comfort him during his sufferings.

But what did Jesus do? Look at verses 26,27a. He’d been humiliated, shamed, beaten, nailed to a cross, was swollen, bruised and bleeding, but Jesus wasn’t thinking of himself; he was thinking of two people there whom he really loved—his mother and his beloved disciple. He was thinking of what *they* were going through, of how hard life would be for them without him. On the cross, in his last moments of life, Jesus noticed them there and spoke to them. As her eldest son, Jesus comforted his mother and provided a home for her as a widow. As a true friend, Jesus comforted John as well and entrusted him to be the caretaker of his own mother (27b). Jesus’ words of concern for these two loved ones shows us that while carrying out his mission from God, undergoing great personal suffering and sacrifice, Jesus did not lose his humanity.

Look at verse 28. These words tell us that until this point Jesus had been focused on obeying his Father’s will and fulfilling all his God-given duties. Only when he sensed that it was all now finished did he speak about his own personal need, his thirst. John is again showing us that Jesus, the Word who became flesh (1:14), wasn’t just a super spiritual man of mission; he really *was* fully human, experiencing all that we experience, including thirst.

In saying “I am thirsty,” Jesus was also fulfilling one of the prophecies of Scripture. Psalm 69:21 says, “They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst.” How mean! It was a kind of torment. Look at verse 29. This “wine vinegar” was cheap wine diluted with water that soldiers and other poor people would drink. It was very sour. When he was thirsty and near death, they gave Jesus such a sour drink, most likely as a prank. Though giving him a drink, they had no real pity; they were evil to Jesus to the end.

Read verse 30. It was such a quiet moment. His last words were so understated. He simply said, “It is finished,” and died. But it was more than just the end of life. His words show us that Jesus was on a mission from God. In this Gospel John tells us 40 times that God “sent” Jesus (3:34; 4:34; 5:23,24,30,36–38; 6:29,38,39,44,57; 7:16,18,28,29,33; 8:16,18,26,29,42; 9:4; 10:36; 11:42; 12:44,45,49; 13:20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5; 17:3,8,18,21,23,25; 20:21). Jesus was sent not to do his own will, but to do his Father’s will. He carefully followed whatever his Father showed him, did whatever his Father wanted, said whatever his Father wanted him to say, every step of the way. He carefully followed God’s time schedule for him (7:6,8,30; 8:20; 12:23,27; 13:1; 17:1). He was obedient to his Father’s plan for his life each day. Ultimately, his Father’s plan for him was to die on the cross as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, in fulfillment of all the Scriptures (1:29). By becoming the innocent, silent Lamb of God, suffering and sacrificing his life, Jesus was finishing his mission.

What does it mean to us? First of all, it means that on the cross Jesus finished our salvation once and for all. Romans 6:10a says, “The death he died, he died to sin once for all…” Hebrews 7:27b says, “He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.” Hebrews 9:26b says, “But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.” Hebrews 10:10 says, “And by that will, we have been made holy by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” No other sacrifice for sin is necessary. Jesus finished it. We all try to do many things to make up for our wrongdoings. We say sorry. We bring a gift. We try to make amends. But really, before God there’s nothing we can do to get rid of our sin and guilt. No amount of religious activity can undo our sin. We simply need to look at Jesus on the cross and believe in him, that he died for my sins in my place.

Secondly, his words “It is finished” mean that in Jesus we are finished with our life of sin. Peter wrote, “Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies and detestable idolatry” (1Pe4:1–3). Paul wrote, “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” (Ro6:1–3) Honestly, we all struggle with our sin to some degree or another. We fail all the time. We can become so demoralized and depressed and feel hopeless and even afraid. We need to hear Jesus’ words, “It is finished.”

Thirdly, Jesus showed us a good example of how we should live our lives. He finished his mission from God. Likewise, in Christ we all receive both grace and apostleship (Ro1:5). We’re all called to follow in his footsteps, to suffer like him, to carry out God’s will in our own lives. We should never be deceived by a message of cheap grace. It’s never easy. Like Jesus, we’re tempted to give up, to give in, to save ourselves. In our human strength it’s not possible at all for us to finish, but in Jesus we can finish God’s mission for our lives. At the end of his life Paul wrote, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2Ti4:7). It was Jesus who enabled him to do so (Php4:13).

In verses 31–37 John goes into more details not recorded in the other Gospels. The Jewish leaders asked Pilate to have the legs of the three crucified men broken and their bodies taken down before 6pm, in order to keep the special Sabbath of Passover. The soldiers used a heavy mallet to break the legs of the other two men so that they would die faster. But when they came to Jesus, he already looked dead, no doubt because he’d already received such a severe flogging. To make sure, one of them poked his side with his spear. John says there was a sudden flow of blood and water. The tip of the spear likely punctured his pericardium, a double-walled sac in which our heart sits, and which has a clear fluid that looks like water. So when he was pierced in his side, it looked like both blood and water oozing out. What’s the point of this detail? Partly, it’s to again prove that Jesus really died, that he really was human. Maybe it also shows how sinners pierced Jesus in the heart. But mainly, the water and blood flowing from his side are what give us eternal life and real cleansing from sin (6:53,54; 1Jn1:7). We need to receive his shed blood by faith (Ro3:25). To emphasize it, John makes a special statement. Read verse 35. John wants us not just to hear about it, but to really believe the truth of Jesus’ death and shed blood for our sins.

Look at verses 36,37. In all these details John again sees God at work, fulfilling the prophecies of Scripture about Jesus. Not one of his bones were broken. Jesus is the perfect Lamb of God sacrificed for us. People looked on the one they had pierced. We too need to look on the one we have pierced to experience his divine grace. The Bible says that one day, even his enemies will see with their own eyes the one they have pierced (Rev1:7).

In verses 38–42, as in the other Gospels, John records Jesus’ burial by Joseph of Arimathea. But John also adds the story of Nicodemus, who came to Jesus at night back in chapter 3. Both these men were members of the ruling council of the Jews. They were elites, highly educated and wealthy. Because of their peers’ hostility towards Jesus, they both were afraid of openly identifying with Jesus. But when they saw how Jesus was crucified, they gained courage to come forward and give him a decent burial. The love of God demonstrated in the cross of Jesus drove out all their fear. Without them, Jesus would have been thrown into a mass grave, and it would have been hard to prove his resurrection. But they cared for his body with the greatest dignity with their own hands and gave him an honorable burial, and God used it preciously. Sometimes we too don’t know what we’re doing, but if we do things out of genuine love for Jesus, God still accepts it and uses it preciously.

Today we learned that Jesus who died on the cross was fully human, yet he died to save us from our sins. May God help us to hear his words today, “It is finished.” May he set us free from slavery to sin and all kinds of darkness and enable us to follow in his footsteps newly.