“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.”

Any word, symbol or event that’s overused tends to become meaningless. In Western society the crucifixion of Jesus is one such overused thing. Some of us have heard the story too many times, and it leaves us feeling cold. We may see crosses everywhere, but they seem like only stiff, wooden objects unrelated, really, to anything in our lives. The account in these verses, however, puts a real human story behind the symbol. John was the young disciple whom Jesus loved, standing near his cross. Now, well into his old age he records details that only someone who had been there would know. His account is very intimate. He tells of Jesus’ undergarment, of his words to his mother, of his thirst just before his death, and that after his death, his legs were not broken but his side was pierced. We learn from John’s account that Jesus really was human, and that he really did die. But what does it all mean? John sums it up in Jesus’ final words: “It is finished.” These words had a special meaning to Jesus, but today we also want to think about what these words really mean to each of us.

Look at verses 16b–18. The first thing we notice here is that Jesus carried his own cross. Though he’d been up all night and been flogged, he still carried his own cross. He carried it as his mission from God. The next thing we notice is that his crucifixion took place at Golgotha, known as “the Place of the Skull.” In Latin it’s translated as “Calvary.” It was outside the city walls, a bleak place of death. It also was a place where many people passed by on their way into the city (20a). Finally, we see that Jesus was crucified there in between two others. It seems to have been done in a hurry, to make Jesus look guiltier. Crucifixion was a Roman method of execution reserved for slaves. People were stripped naked, nailed to wooden crosses and hung up for everyone to see until they slowly died of asphyxiation. It was a horrible way to die.

Though three men were crucified, the focus is on Jesus. Look at verse 19. These written notices were posted to identify what the person was being executed for. Some said, “Robber.” Others said, “Murderer.” But Jesus’ notice was different. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” How weird! When he personally examined him earlier that morning, Pilate could find no basis for a charge against Jesus. Nothing Jesus ever did warranted him being arrested, not to mention executed. The only controversy about Jesus was the notion that he was the King of the Jews, the Messiah. Just before he pronounced his verdict, Pilate told the Jews that Jesus was their king (15). Still they insisted on crucifying him. Pilate realized that Jesus really was a king, but not the kind most people think of. Jesus refused to engage in any political or military struggle to gain power. He told Pilate his kingdom was not of this world. He kept talking about truth.

Look at verse 20. John notes the translation into three major languages. Aramaic was for the local people in Palestine. Latin was for people associated with Rome. Greek was for those who’d come for the Passover from all over the Empire. God in his sovereign will had had this sign posted in these languages, to proclaim to all peoples that Jesus on the cross is our true spiritual King, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (1:29b). Revelation 5:9 speaks of Jesus: “You are worthy… because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.” Jesus is not some phony politician or evil oppressor. He was slain and shed his own blood to save us and bring us back to God, no matter who we are. This Jesus is our Spiritual King. He deserves all our loyalty, all our love, even our very lives.

Look at verses 21–22. This written notice hurt the pride of the chief priests, for it said such a humiliated, disgraced person was their king. They tried pushing Pilate again to do what they wanted. This time he refused. Perhaps it was to spite them, or maybe it was because even Pilate had begun to believe.

The other three Gospels briefly mention how the executioners gambled for Jesus’ clothing at the foot of his cross (Mt27:35; Mk15:26; Lk23:34). But John goes into it more deeply, with detail that only an eyewitness could have known. Look at verses 23–24. The soldiers could have just divided the clothing. But because his undergarment was so valuable they decided not to tear it into four pieces but to cast lots for it. It shows their mentality. They valued the undergarment more than the man who wore it. As executioners they must have seen so many men squirming and moaning that they’d become numb to the suffering. All they could think about in this situation was getting something. They had no mercy; they were heartless and their minds were petty. They revealed the dark, ugly side of humanity. But the author saw even in the soldiers’ meanness that God was doing something. Psalm 22 is the most frequently quoted psalm in the New Testament. Many parts of it were fulfilled exactly in the details of Jesus’ crucifixion. Verse 18 tells even of his clothes being divided and men casting lots for his garment. In the midst of human depravity, prophecy was being fulfilled. It’s amazing. It shows that God was in control of Jesus’ crucifixion, using everything to prove who Jesus is and to fulfill his own plan. Through this we can know that, no matter how dark things may seem, God is still in control of all things and people.

In contrast to the four heartless soldiers, John next draws our attention to four women near the cross. Look at verses 25–27. They were his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. According to verse 26, John himself was also there among them. All the other disciples had fled; none of them were there to support Jesus during his greatest suffering. They were afraid for their own lives. To stamp out the Jesus Movement, the authorities were interested in arresting his disciples as well, but in their society no one would bother these women grieving at the cross. These women were there for one simple reason: they loved Jesus. They loved him more than anyone else in the world. Their hearts were completely broken at the horror that had come upon him so suddenly, and they wanted to follow him to the very end.

Look at verse 26a. It says, “When Jesus saw his mother there…” Jesus was dying on a cross. He was in great agony. But at this moment he noticed his mother standing nearby. He was able to transcend his own suffering and grasp how painful this whole experience must have been for her. To others, she was just one of those grieving ladies. But Jesus understood her heart as a mother watching her beloved son die in such a ghastly way. To Jesus, his mother’s grief mattered. Her endless tears mattered. Her grief must have broken his heart as her son. He also saw the disciple whom he loved standing nearby her. He understood that this young man also loved him and needed his love. To comfort them both, Jesus said from his cross, “Dear woman, here is your son,” and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” Even in his own pain, Jesus empathized with those who’d been closest to him, and he didn’t seek their comfort; *he* comforted *them*. Jesus was on a mission from God; he was determined to obey his Father’s will at any cost. But his mission didn’t make him heartless. His mission didn’t eradicate his tender humanity. And this man on a cross wasn’t a static object or an archaic picture. He was real. He lived among us and shared in our humanity. He’s like us, fully human in every way. He’s merciful, and he’s able to help us (Heb2:14–18). He can truly empathize with our weaknesses, and he invites us all to approach his throne of grace with confidence to receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Heb4:15–16). We need to realize as we follow him how much we need to grow in his image, how much we need to learn how to understand and care for those whose hearts are troubled, pained or broken.

Look at verse 28. Jesus felt his life ebbing away. He knew his mission was coming to an end. Only at this moment did he say, “I am thirsty.” He’d been flogged, bleeding and hanging under the hot Middle Eastern sun for hours. He was so dehydrated his thirst was part of his torture. But he put accomplishing his mission ahead of his physical needs. Only John records these words of Jesus from the cross. In part he was dispelling a myth. As the gospel spread to certain parts of the Roman Empire, some people began saying that Jesus, as divine, couldn’t really have been in the flesh, which they regarded as inherently evil; he only *appeared* to be. But John the eyewitness remembered all the details. He remembered that suffering, dehydrated Jesus said, just before he died, “I am thirsty.” It was further proof that Jesus was fully human. John adds that Jesus said this intentionally, to fulfill the prophecy of Psalm 69:21.

Look at verse 29. This was not the wine mixed with myrrh that Mark’s Gospel tells us someone offered Jesus just before he was crucified, to dull the pain. He had refused that sedative because he resolved to drink the cup of suffering the Father had given him (18:11). The jar of wine vinegar mentioned here was for the soldiers to drink. They offered it to Jesus in a sponge on a stick, as a kind of mockery (Mk15:36; Lk23:36). This time, Jesus received the drink (30a).

Read verse 30. Here John records the third and final time Jesus spoke from the cross. He first said, “Dear woman, here is your son; here is your mother.” Then he said, “I am thirsty.” Now he says, “It is finished.” In one sense, he meant his life on earth was finished, but in another, he meant he’d finished what his Father had sent him to do. It was not a cry of defeat; it was a cry of victory. His master passion had always been to finish the work the Father had given him (4:34; 17:4). When he finished it by dying on the cross, he glorified God. He revealed how great the Father’s love is, that he gave his one and only Son for the sin of the world (3:16). It must have been so hard for Jesus not to give up, to carry through with such a difficult mission to the end. But Jesus didn’t give up; he stayed on his cross of suffering until he could say at the very end, “It is finished.” He calls each of us to follow in his footsteps of suffering (1Pe2:21), to fight the good fight of the faith and finish the race (2Ti4:7).

“It is finished” also tell us of the great thing that happened when Jesus died. Through his death he took away our sins, once and for all (Heb7:27; 9:12; 10:10). It was at the same time universal *and* personal. Through his death, God’s plan to save the whole world was accomplished, yet he also died for each of us, that our sins might be done away with, that we might no longer be slaves to sin (Ro6:6). Jesus died so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness (1Pe2: 24). Not many people want to talk about it, but so many are suffering in their sin and guilt. The world religions all attempt to resolve this. They give some rituals, morals or ways to do penance. But none of it really works. In Western societies people pretend there’s no such thing as sin; they indulge in immorality boldly. Psychology tries to deflect guilt to our situation, or it tells us it’s socially conditioned. But this is not so persuasive. Underneath a veneer of normalcy, so many people are carrying a heavy load of sins and guilt. It makes us depressed and demoralized. Many people taking anti-depressants are actually trying to find relief from a gnawing sense of guilt. But only in Jesus’ death can our sin and guilt really be “finished.” Only the shed blood of Jesus can cleanse our guilty conscience (Heb9:14), give us the assurance of forgiveness and purify us from all sin (1Jn1:7,9). Romans 3:25 says, “God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.” The iron grip of sin and guilt on our souls is finished, if only we believe. 2 Corinthians 5:21 gives us the conclusive meaning of the words, “It is finished.” It says, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

John tells us that after Jesus died, some unusual things happened. Read verses 31–34. There are two more facts here that amazingly fulfill two more prophecies of Scripture. Read verses 36–37. God was still in control, using even the evil Jewish leaders and Roman soldiers to confirm that Jesus truly is the Messiah. For John, healthy faith in Jesus is not just emotional; it’s very rational, based on both historical facts and the corroboration of Scripture. Let’s read verse 35.

At the end of his account of the death of Jesus, John tells of two unlikely persons who appeared (38–42). They are Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, both members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council (Lk23:50,51; Jn3:1). They were highly educated and had positions that were at risk if they sided with Jesus. But after witnessing Jesus’ death, Joseph was no longer afraid of the Jewish leaders. Through watching Jesus die on the cross, the love of God came into his heart and drove out all his fear (1Jn4:18). Nicodemus came with him (39). He too had been so afraid in the past that he came to Jesus at night. But now he came publicly, with a 75-pound mixture of myrrh and aloes to bury Jesus with the dignity befitting a king. They brought the body down from the cross and laid it in Joseph’s own new tomb nearby (Mt27:60). When they received the love of God through the death of Jesus, they both began to give sacrificially. Usually, the corpses of crucified men were dumped into a common grave like garbage. If that had happened, it would have been impossible to verify Jesus’ death. But God used these two men to prove that Jesus in the tomb was the same Jesus who had died on the cross, setting the stage to prove that his resurrection was true.

In this passage we saw how God was in control, even in the darkest moments. We also saw how Jesus, who is God, was also fully human: He carried his own cross; his heart went out to his grieving mother; he endured tremendous thirst; and he carried out his mission until he gave his life. This Jesus is our King, and the King of all peoples of all languages and nations. His death can change the most fearful, unchangeable people. We especially thought about his last words: “It is finished.” May God help us to believe that in his death, our sins and guilt are finished. May God also help us to follow Jesus our Lord and finish the life work he gives us to do.