

It Is Finished

Isaiah 52:13–53:12, John 19:16b-42 (ESV)

August 26, 2007

“It is finished,” said Jesus, and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. “It is finished.” As we have seen in other passages, correct understanding of the Scripture depends in this case upon knowing the antecedent of the pronoun. That is, when Jesus said, “It is finished,” to what does “it” refer? In its broadest and most general sense, “it” refers to his life on this earth, which came to an end immediately after he said this. Thus, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. His earthly life was finished, though as we know he was subsequently raised to a new, different, and eternal life.

At the same time, and more specifically, “it” refers to his suffering during the crucifixion, from which suffering he was released at the moment of his death. His suffering included pain. His suffering included humiliation, for as part of his crucifixion, he had been stripped naked. His suffering included having the sin of the world heaped upon him and becoming a curse on our account. When his earthly life was finished, his suffering was also finished.

Most particularly, as the purpose and effect of both his life and his suffering, “it” refers to his perfect obedience through suffering unto death, his perfect self-offering of his life to God for us, his refusal to give up faith in God even under the worst circumstances, his refusal to curse those who cursed him or to strike back at those who injured him, in short, his victory over sin, death, and evil, his bearing the punishment for our sin, his securing our forgiveness, and his accomplishment of our salvation, all to the glory of God. This is what it means that Jesus said, “It is finished.” Thus Jesus bowed his head in peace and gave up his spirit to God his Father. His earthly life was finished. His suffering was finished. His ministry in this life was finished.

Here we behold the strange phenomenon by which Jesus accomplished salvation in the midst of his apparent damnation. At the very moment when sin, death, and evil seemed to have crushed and conquered him, Jesus continued to be faithful to God who willed for him to be crushed, Jesus continued to be obedient to God and refused to become sinful himself, and Jesus willingly gave his life for us all instead of grasping it for himself alone. Evil was undone because it could not replicate itself in him. Sin was undone because he refused to be faithless or disobedient. Even death was undone not only because he did not fear it but also because God vindicated his faithfulness, his obedience, and his sacrifice. For

everything that Jesus stood in his life, he continued to stand in his death, unshaken by the combined assault of sin, death, and evil. This is the culmination of everything he said and did. Surely we appreciate his teachings. But here on the cross Jesus lived and died everything he had said with an integrity and excellence seen nowhere else in humanity.

It is significant that Jesus was crucified not simply as an evil deed done by the hands of evil men, which is certainly true, but also and far more importantly in fulfillment of the will of God as already revealed in and throughout the Scripture. It is written in Leviticus 16:27 (ESV) that the sacrifice whose blood was shed for the atonement of sin should be carried out of the camp. So was Jesus taken out of the city of Jerusalem. It is written in Deuteronomy 21:23 (ESV) that whoever is hanged on a tree is cursed by God. So did Jesus, though he was without sin, become on the cross a curse. It is written in Psalm 22:18 (ESV), “They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.” We have read that the soldiers did this with his clothing. It is written in Psalm 69:21 (ESV), “They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.” What David had written 1,000 years earlier came true for Jesus Christ on the cross.

It is also written in Isaiah 53:4-5 (ESV), “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows...He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.” Thus was Jesus whipped and crucified not for any criminality of his own but on our account. It is written in Exodus 12:46 (ESV) of the Passover lamb, “You shall not break any of its bones.” Thus with Jesus, who is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29 (ESV)), not one of his bones was broken. It is written in Zechariah 12:10 (ESV) that “the inhabitants of Jerusalem” would “look on him whom they have pierced.” Thus was Jesus, crucified outside Jerusalem, pierced with a spear, “and at once there came out blood and water.”

Moreover, it is written in John 3:16 (ESV), “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Now we see that God’s giving of his Son has to do not only with his birth but also and even more so with his death on the cross. It is written in John 10:11 (ESV), “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” This is not a parable. This is not an idealistic image. This is a statement of fact made good in his death on the cross. It is written in John 12:32 (ESV), “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” His hearers seemed not to have understood at the time. But whose heart could be so hard as not to be drawn to the Son of God as he gives himself for us on the cross? So it is that his

crucifixion was also his exaltation and enthronement and his cross was his throne from which he rules the world. Thanks be to God!

What difference does the crucifixion of Jesus Christ make for you and for me today? How shall we respond to this strange good news of the crucifixion? Let me suggest several ways. First, we are to believe. As John wrote in today's reading about the crucifixion, death, and burial of Jesus, "He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe." So are we to believe in the goodness of God toward us. God sacrificed his only Son for you and for me. God's Son willingly sacrificed himself for you and for me. God could have stopped this series of events at any point. Jesus Christ could have stopped this at any point. They both went through with this for your sake and for mine. Surely we can see that. Surely we can acknowledge that. Surely we can realize and understand that if God is for us, who can be against us (Romans 8:31 (ESV))? Surely we can believe. If the creation does not convince you of God, and if the incarnation does not convince you, surely the willing sacrifice involved in the crucifixion will lead and inspire you to believe.

Second, we are to rejoice. Faith leads us into the realization of the wonderful exchange which Christ has effected for us. He was stripped naked so that we might be clothed in his righteousness. He became a curse so that we might be forgiven of our sin and have the curse removed from us. He suffered and died so that we might live forever. On the cross, he took on everything that we deserve in order to give to us everything he deserved. Yes, I tell you, we are to rejoice in gratitude and in awe.

Third, we are to follow and to obey. The one who has given all for us calls us to give all for him. The one who has given his life to make us his own calls on us to give our lives as we become his own. The one who absorbed sin, death, and evil without striking back calls on each of us to become more Christlike every day. To say that he did not strike back is not to say that he acquiesced. He did not condone sin, death, and evil. In fact, what he did on the cross undid sin, death, and evil. But to say that he did not strike back is to say that we cannot fight sin, death, and evil by responding with more sin, death, and evil. If we do that, they have already won, replicating themselves in us and so extending their reign on earth. Christ has shown us how they are stopped. So we are to believe, to rejoice, and to follow and to obey.

It is our high privilege today to share in the baptism of an infant. We will baptize him in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. The water shows the washing away of sin. Our cleanness has been accomplished only by Christ's sacrifice on the cross, about which we have read today. The water also shows both that we are buried with Christ in his death and also that we are raised with Christ in his new life. Our eternal life has been accomplished only by God's vindication of Christ's sacrifice on the cross when he raised him from the tomb in

the same body but in a new, different, and eternal life, forever beyond the reach of sin, death, evil, disease, decay, decline, or pain. Thanks be to God! What difference does the crucifixion of Jesus Christ make for you and for me today? It makes all the difference in the world, and for that reason we baptize this child today.

“It is finished,” said Jesus, and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. “It is finished.” As we have seen in other passages, correct understanding of the Scripture depends in this case upon knowing the antecedent of the pronoun. That is, when Jesus said, “It is finished,” to what does “it” refer? “It” does not refer to the gospel. The book of the Gospel according to John has two more chapters, both having to do with the resurrection, and the gospel of Jesus Christ is still being preached today. The gospel is not finished with the crucifixion. “It” does not refer to the glory of God. God was glorified in the death of Jesus Christ, and God glorified Jesus Christ in his resurrection and ascension. The glory of God is not finished but is instead eternal. “It” does not refer to our salvation. Yes, our salvation was accomplished on the cross, so that the work of salvation is finished so that we need not and cannot add anything to it, but salvation itself is eternal and therefore is ongoing.

When Jesus said, “It is finished,” “it” refers to his perfect obedience through suffering unto death, his perfect self-offering of his life to God for us, his refusal to give up faith in God even under the worst circumstances, his refusal to curse those who cursed him or to strike back at those who injured him, his victory over sin, death, and evil, his bearing the punishment for our sin, his securing our forgiveness, and his accomplishment of our salvation, all to the glory of God. Thus Jesus bowed his head in peace and gave up his spirit to God his Father.

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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