

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
March 25, 2018

It Is Finished

John 19:16b-37

Final words can be some of life's most important words. Sometimes they're words we speak to a loved one when we know that their death is near. Words like, "I love you." "Thank you." "I forgive you." "Forgive me." "I'll be okay." "Goodbye." "We'll see you again." And sometimes they're words spoken to us by the one who's dying. Words like the ones I just mentioned. Or the dying person may just call out someone's name, perhaps a spouse or a child. In some cases, the person's condition may leave them unable to speak. Or if they can speak, their words may be incoherent or unintelligible. And yet, whether clear or confusing, there's something about last words that sticks with us.

Most of us will never have our last words publicized. They'll remain a precious, or perhaps puzzling, memory to those who are with us when we die. Folks who are more famous draw more attention, in life and at death, so their final words are often preserved and propagated. Sir Winston Churchill's last words were, "I'm bored with it all." George Washington said, "It is well, I die hard, but am not afraid to go." Frontiersman Kit Carson said, "I just wish I had time for one more bowl of chili." Actor Michael Landon said, "You're right. It's time. I love you all." When abolitionist Harriet Tubman was dying, she gathered her family around and they sang together. Her last words were, "Swing low, sweet chariot."

In today's Scripture passage, John gathers us around the cross to hear Jesus' final words. It's fitting that we be here at Golgotha today. Easter is on its way. But if we only show up next Sunday at the empty tomb without having been here to the place of the Skull, then we don't experience the full story of God's work in the world. In other words, we can't really know the living Jesus unless we've listened to the dying Jesus.

John records three primary things that Jesus says from the cross. First, he insures that his death will not leave his mother desolate. He entrusts her to the beloved disciple. He says to Mary, "Dear woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother" (vv. 26-27). By this action, Jesus once again shows his love and care for those he leaves behind. It also shows that he is creating and forming a new community, comprised of his followers, who will, by the presence and power of the Spirit, love one another and continue Jesus' saving mission in the world.

Then, after an indication from John that we are witnessing the fulfillment of Scripture, Jesus says, "I am thirsty." Now at one level, these words simply reflect the physical pain and deprivation that Jesus has been through. But there's even more going on here. Remember that John is a skilled player on words. He's fond of symbolism in the way that he tells the story of Jesus. He could be pointing to the significance of Jesus as the Passover Lamb. He could be contrasting the "sour wine" with the "good wine" at Jesus' miracle in Cana. Or he could be pointing to the cup of suffering which Jesus is prepared to consume. Whatever John's intent, we see Jesus willingly embracing his death. He's not a helpless victim, but the active agent who is completing what God sent him to do.

That's why his final words are, "It is finished." Not "finished" in the sense of a failure, as if Jesus was just a would-be Messiah whose vision of the kingdom of God has been crushed by the powers that be. As Richard John Neuhaus wrote:

For one thing, it appears that he is finished. By any ordinary measure this is not completion, but poignant failure. It is death. It is the demolition of all those grand hopes he had aroused. He started out announcing the coming of the kingdom of God, and he ends up here. Some kingdom. Some king. The jeering crowds around the cross are having the last laugh.¹

But as Neuhaus and many others have pointed out, "It is finished" doesn't mean defeated, beaten, or in despair. Nor does it mean "finished" in the sense of over and done with, as if to say that at least now the worst has passed and Jesus is no longer suffering. All those things may be true, but Jesus' last words mean much more than that.

"It is finished" basically means brought to consummation or fulfillment. What gets translated into English as three words is actually just one word in the Greek of the New Testament. The term has to do with something being completed or perfected. So Jesus is saying that in his dying, his purpose for coming into the world is fulfilled. His ministry has reached its ultimate and final purpose. His mission is accomplished.

Earlier in John's Gospel, after his conversation with a Samaritan woman, Jesus' disciples try to get him to eat. But Jesus makes it clear to them that he is strengthened and supported by more than just bread. The thing that most sustains him is his vocation. "My food," says Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work" (4:34). And what is the work, the purpose, for which the Father has sent Jesus into the world? If we go back to the opening chapter of John's Gospel, John the Baptist points to Jesus and says, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (1:29). So from the beginning, Jesus is God's way of healing the world's brokenness. Jesus is God's way of forgiving our sins. Jesus is God's way of redeeming us. Jesus is God's way of bringing us out of the bondage of death and into the freedom of life. "For God so loved the world. . ." (3:16).

And now, at the cross, the project of redemption that God set in motion is reaching its climax. God is on the verge of doing what we could never do for ourselves, securing our forgiveness and resurrection. Everything has been moving toward this moment. Earlier in the week, Jesus had said, "Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour" (12:27). Now the final tick of the divine clock has come. The One who has existed eternally, before the existence of time or space, is condemning an old world and bringing into existence a new world. Light triumphing over darkness. Righteousness overcoming sin. Life victorious over death.

But what a strange looking victory. A Messiah who got the death sentence. A God who got himself nailed to a cross. "On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross, / The emblem of suffering and shame." To human eyes, this whole scene has the look and feel of defeat and despair. Remember where we are. How can you expect any kind of win, any kind of good, any kind of hope, to come out of a place called Skull Hill? Actually, I have a small cross that answers that question. It depicts Jesus' death in the style of an icon. At the base of the cross is a skull. In some traditions of interpretation, the skull represents Adam and the reality of original sin. But through his death, Jesus has dealt with our sin, reconciled us to God, and opened the way out of the grave and into eternal life. In God's way of revealing his love and completing his plan, Skull Hill actually turns out to be Victory Mountain.

Let me take you to another place where there are millions of skulls. It's the country of Cambodia, in the late 1970s. During that time, the Khmer Rouge, a brutal, Communist-led regime, came into power. During its reign, nearly two million Cambodians died from violence, overwork, malnutrition, and mistreatment. Victims of the genocide were often buried in what were called the Killing Fields. The reality of their suffering has been preserved and transmitted through photographs, particularly pictures of skulls and other human bones.

One journalist tells the story of a pastor who, in 1999, came to a Cambodian village where he and his message about Jesus were warmly embraced. When he asked the villagers about their openness to the gospel, an old woman shuffled forward, bowed, grasped his hand, and said, "We have been waiting for you for twenty years." She went on to tell him the mysterious story about the God who had hung on a cross.

In 1979, Khmer Rouge soldiers had descended on their village, rounding up people and forcing them to dig their own graves. After they had finished digging, the villagers prepared themselves to die. Some called out to Buddha. Others screamed to demon spirits or to their ancestors. The journalist writes:

One of the women started to cry for help based on a childhood memory—a story her mother told her about a God who had hung on a cross. The woman prayed to that unknown God on a cross. Surely, if this God had known suffering, he would have compassion on their plight.

Suddenly, her solitary cry became one great wail as the entire village started praying to the God who had suffered and hung on a cross. As they continued facing their own graves, the wailing slowly turned to a quiet crying. There was an eerie silence in the muggy jungle air. Slowly, as they dared to turn around and face their captors, they discovered that the soldiers were gone.

As the old woman finished telling this story, she told [the pastor] that ever since that humid day from 20 years ago the villagers had been waiting, waiting for someone to come and share the rest of the story about the God who had hung on a cross.²

Though not everyone will be rescued in the way that those Cambodian villagers were, their experience shows us that the God we worship and serve, the God upon whom we call, is the God who hung on a cross. The God who is present in the Son, who uses his last breath to say, "It is finished." God's redemption of the world is complete.

This doesn't mean that all sin and suffering are over. We naturally ask, If what the gospel tells us is true, if God's saving purpose really is finished, then why do millions of Cambodians die in genocide? If it is finished, why is my loved one going through this horrible disease? If it is finished, why do teenagers keep getting killed in school shootings? If it is finished, why do I keep repeating the same harmful patterns of behavior? If it is finished, why do racial tensions persist and ethnic divisions widen? If it is finished, why does the gap between the rich and the poor never seem to shrink? If God has reconciled the world to himself in Christ, why doesn't the life of the world look more reconciled? If the kingdom has come in Christ, why doesn't my life, and the life of our congregation, look more like the kingdom?

Part of the answer lies in our own brokenness and our failure to repent. And part of the answer lies in God's patience and mercy. Remember that though "It is finished" are Jesus' last words on the cross, they are not his last words in the Gospel. There will be other words, spoken on the other side of Easter morning. Words like, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father" (20:17a). "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach

out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe" (20:27). "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (20:21).

So why is he sending us if the Father has already sent him, and he has already said, "It is finished"? Maybe a good way to put it is that we're still waiting for the finish of the finish. Or as Richard Neuhaus has put it, "It is finished.' But it is not over."³ God remains at work, implementing in our lives and in the world what he accomplished at the cross. This means that we can go about our worship, our work, and our witness in the world with confidence and assurance that what God has done at the cross cannot be undone. So your job and my job, as part of God's church, is to receive, live into, and live out the forgiveness we have through the Son, until that day when Christ comes again and "It is finished" is finished.

¹ Quoted by Sean Curnyn, "A Few More Thoughts on Richard John Neuhaus." The Cinch Review website. January 15, 2009. Accessed March 21, 2018 <<https://www.cinchreview.com/a-few-more-thoughts-on-richard-john-neuhaus/4689/>>.

² Doris I. Rosser and Ellen Vaughn, *The God Who Hung on the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 35-37.

³ Richard John Neuhaus, *Death on a Friday Afternoon: Meditations on the Last Words of Jesus from the Cross* (New York: Basic, 2000) n.p.