

A Meditation on “Tetelestai”

John 19:30

April 22, 2011

We have watched over these days as Jesus has made His way to the cross. We have seen this afternoon the process by which He suffered and the pain He felt. Most recently we have seen Him provide for His mother, cry out in anguish to His Father, and ask for a drink. Now Jesus speaks again. *“It is finished”*.

As with, *“I am thirsty,”* the Greek scriptures record Jesus’ saying here as one word: in this case, “tetelestai.” It was a word with many uses and several meanings, but one defining concept that lay behind all of them. That concept is the end of something.

This passage is usually translated, “It is finished,” and this is a good translation because it points to the finality and close of Jesus’ earthly ministry and saving activity. Jesus, in dying on the cross, had played His part in God’s redemptive story. He had done what the Father had sent Him to do. He had faithfully carried out the mission the Father had given Him. He had taught, performed miracles, and lived His life all according to the Father’s will. He had gone to the places He was sent, and He had done the things He was sent to do. As He had said in prayer to His Father the night before, *“I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.”* (John 17:4) Since then He had been arrested, and stood before the Sanhedrin, Pilate, and Herod. He had been beaten, mocked and scorned. He had carried His cross to Golgotha, was nailed to it, and been hung up for all to see. Now, all that was left was to

stop breathing and then be laid in the grave. Jesus’ work was done. *“Tetelestai—It is finished.”*

Yet the word means more than that. As a financial and tax term it also meant that the debt was paid. As it was written or stamped on receipts, bills of sale, and loan documents it carried the meaning, “Paid in Full.” It marked the end of debt owed. Not only was Jesus’ work done, but the debt sin owed to God was paid in full through His sacrifice. Jesus no longer had work to do on the earth, but His ministry and sacrifice were not the only things that were finished. Also finished was our debt to God caused by our sin.

There is a tendency to try and ignore the uncomfortableness of God’s glory and holy wrath in today’s world. We want a God that never gets angry because then we never have to worry about Him being angry with us. To deny the need for God to pour His wrath on sin and not let it go unpunished is to miss much of the meaning of Jesus’ statement here and to rob it of its greatest depth.

God decreed from the beginning that the soul who sins will die. We all owe God our lives because we have all sinned and fallen short of His glory. We are not what He designed and created us to be. We deserve to be recipients of His wrath as the result.

Yet Jesus’ death on the cross pays the debt our sin creates. Because the Father accepted the sacrifice of His innocent Son on behalf of we who are guilty, our debt to God, the requirement that we die, has been fulfilled. As Jesus died He declared our accounts with God, “Paid in full”!

John goes on to tell us. “*With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*” (v.30) The thing not missed here is that Jesus gave up His spirit. He had said, “*The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.*” (John 10:17,18) In telling us Jesus gave up His spirit, John tells us Jesus’ was right in this declaration He made. He chose the cross, not because it was easy, but because it was necessary. He willed to die because it was only by His death that we might have life. He chose the time of His death. Jesus did not go to the cross as the hapless victim of some injustice. He willingly died, the just for the unjust, as the only sufficient sacrifice for our sin. He knew what He was doing. He knew what it meant. He gave up His life for the salvation of all who would believe in Him.

“*It is finished.*” It’s done. That’s it. There’s nothing more to do. What more could be done? God’s curse has been fulfilled. God’s wrath has been brought to bear and its fury spent. As Jesus struggled for breath and His life poured out down and around that cross, death was immanent and the penalty for sin was surely paid. The chastisement for our sin has been placed on Jesus and by His stripes we can now be healed.

The most important truth we find in this word is it’s completeness. The word is in the passive perfect tense. God’s wrath had been poured out on Jesus. The righteous anger of God over the sin that had been heaped on Jesus was satisfied. It had been done to Jesus and the

end, His death and burial, were sure. “*Tetelestai—It is finished.*”

It is also something that has been done for us and is in the past. Our salvation, the righteousness of God, is not ours by virtue of anything we do or have done. It is ours by virtue of what Jesus accomplished on the cross, and only through what Jesus did on the cross. As Jesus spoke this word He declared that the purpose for which He had come, that those who believe in Him might have life and have it to the full, to seek and save those who are lost, to glorify His Father, all these things and more were completed in Jesus’ crucifixion. As He came to the end and His death was sure, He declared this truth. God’s saving work was done! His redemption of His people was complete!