

# “It Is Finished”

## The Fifty-Ninth in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

*Texts: John 19:16b-30; Psalm 22:1-24*

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It is easy for Christians to talk about the death of Jesus in the abstract. We study and debate the nature and the extent of the atonement. We speak of the cross as the basis for our salvation because through Christ’s suffering we find the forgiveness of sin—Jesus was punished for us and in our place. But it is much harder for us to consider the horrible suffering which Jesus actually endured to save us from our sins—the agonizing physical pain Jesus felt, the shame of the humiliation and mocking he received from his enemies, being rejected by his people (Israel), and then, finally, being abandoned by his own disciples during his hour of need. We cannot begin to comprehend that moment when Jesus became the object of the Father’s wrath. We should not be morbid or unduly curious about the details of the death of Jesus, but at times (on Good Friday or when we read the Passion Narratives of the gospels) it is important to consider the details and agony of the death of our Savior so that we never forget that it was the person who saves us, who endured so much for us and in our place.

With the drama building verse by verse, we have come to the central moment in John’s Passion narrative, the death of Jesus by crucifixion at the hands of the Roman occupiers of Israel (John 19:16b-30). There has been a certain inevitability about this moment from the time we first began our series—we were prepared for it early-on in the Gospel when John the Baptist “*saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’*” It is only as John’s Gospel unfolds that we learn that Jesus must suffer and die to “*take away the sin of the world.*” Jesus himself has repeatedly spoken of an hour yet to come when God will be glorified, when Jesus saves his people from their sins.

Once this hour arrives and we learn what it is that Jesus must endure to save us from our sin, it still strikes the reader of John’s Gospel that everything which Jesus says, does, and then endures as recounted by John, is done in order to accomplish the salvation of all those given by the Father to the Son, and to whom the merits of Jesus will be applied through the work of the Holy Spirit (the blessed Comforter whom Jesus will ask the Father to send). The death of Jesus on a Roman cross is not a random event, or an accident of history. The cross was foreordained by God. There is no salvation of sinners without it. As R. C. Sproul often puts it, through the cross of Christ, we are saved by God *from* God.

But the death of Jesus is also the culmination of a whole series of improbable historical events recounted by John, in which after entering Jerusalem in triumph, Jesus is soon rejected by his people (Israel), betrayed by one of his own (Judas), denied by one of his closest disciples (Peter), arrested, tried, and found guilty before the high priest, then abandoned by the other disciples, before ending up in the Roman military headquarters in Jerusalem before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, with a crowd outside Pilate’s headquarters demanding Jesus’ death.

Although it is clear to everyone—including Pilate—that Jesus was completely innocent, Jesus had been found guilty on trumped-up charges, and through false testimony from “witnesses.” This verdict was then ratified by the Sanhedrin. Throughout the time Jesus was before him, Pilate repeatedly looked for ways to release Jesus—even flogging and mocking him in an attempt to satisfy the Jews. Nevertheless, Pilate finally gave into pressure from the Jews when they threatened to report to King Herod and Emperor Tiberias that Pilate refused to execute a man found guilty of sedition. Furthermore, it was clear to Pilate that a riot was a real possibility. After declaring Jesus’ innocence and then washing his hands of the

matter, Pilate ordered Jesus' execution at the hands of one of his crucifixion teams.

Having made the fateful decision to give in to the demands of the angry mob—the mob being stirred on by the high priest's men—John tells us in verse 16 that Pilate “*delivered [Jesus] over to them to be crucified.*” The “them” here is most certainly the soldiers who are mentioned later on in the chapter. Jesus' fate is sealed because his hour has come and it is the Father's will that he now suffer and die. Although Jesus can summon a legion of angels to rescue him, he does not. He will drink the cup of the Father's wrath down to the bitter dregs. It is the Father's will that he do so.

Crucifixion is one of the most brutal forms of execution known to man, and the Romans were very efficient at it. This mode of capital punishment was greatly feared because the victim suffers excruciating pain before dying—not only from the nail wounds in the hands and/or wrists, and feet, but the victims suffers horrible muscle cramps. The victim is placed at an angle, with a wooden seat placed in such a way that the victim can rest, which only prolongs the struggle, making the pain more intense when the wind pipe begins to close. Those put to death in this manner eventually expend their strength struggling to breathe. If the victim does not die of blood loss and shock from the flogging, they died of asphyxiation when they become too weak to hold themselves up to keep their wind pipe open. The Romans learned that a scourging beforehand weakened the victim sufficiently so that they died after a few hours on the cross—and if not, the Romans broke the victim's legs with a cross beam so that death by suffocation came very quickly. Not even a Roman soldier wanted to work overtime.

The Romans considered this form of punishment so extreme and humiliating that Roman citizens were exempt from crucifixion, even for serious crimes, unless personally ordered by the emperor. Only aliens, conquered peoples, traitors, assassins and terrorists were put to death in this manner. Crucifixions were always done in public, and was one of the ways Rome sent a very graphic and public warning not to challenge Roman power. Those crucified were shamed and degraded, and mocked and taunted by those who watched. The blood-thirsty Romans loved gladiatorial combat. They packed into stadiums to watch the enemies of Rome killed by exotic wild animals. People accustomed to such things for entertainment, found similar enjoyment gawking at those suffering in such a brutal and horrible way.

But at its heart, crucifixion was a sign to Rome's enemies “do not dare challenge Roman authority.” For someone like Jesus, who was put to death, ultimately, on the charge of sedition, crucifixion was to be expected. It was common for the condemned to die with a sign hanging around their neck recounting their crimes. Often times the dead bodies were left to rot in the sun for days until the cross bars were needed again, but under rare circumstances the dead were turned over to their families for burial, if the families still wanted the bodies after their loved ones had been so publically shamed and humiliated.

So, when John simply tells us “*so they took Jesus*” (at the end of verse 16), we can assume that it was at this point that Jesus was given the severe flogging with infamous the “cat-of-nine-tails” which would have ripped open Jesus' back and chest and thighs causing horrific pain and great loss of blood. Thankfully, John spares us the gory details but it must have been absolutely horrific. In verse 17, John details that Jesus, “*he went out,*” [from Pilate's headquarters], “*bearing his own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha.*” As firing squads often force victims to dig their own graves before they are shot and then fall into them, forcing someone to carry the instrument of their death is a means of further weakening and humiliating the victim.

After being flogged and now bleeding profusely, Jesus was forced to pick up the cross, by placing over his shoulder the joint where the upright beam (7-9 feet long) is tied or nailed to the crossbar. By the time

the victim carried the cross to the place where the upright beam would be placed in a hole carved in rock, and he would be too weak to resist when nails were driven through his wrists/hands and feet. According to Luke's account, after the flogging, Jesus was already too weak to carry the cross.

In Luke 23:26-31, Luke recounts what happened as Jesus was being taken to Golgotha. *“And as [the guards] led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus. And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. But turning to them Jesus said, ‘Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us,’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?”* In the midst of his painful agony, Jesus warns the citizens of Jerusalem of the final outcome of the covenant curses coming upon Israel, when in 70 A.D., a generation later, the full military might of Rome will leave Jerusalem sacked and burning, the temple completely destroyed, with the Jews to be dispersed to the ends of the earth. The hour has come for Jesus to die. But an hour will also come when Jerusalem will fall. On that terrible day there will be bitter weeping too.

Simon carried Jesus' cross to a place known as Golgotha, which comes from an Aramaic word meaning “skull.” The word most commonly used for this place (Calvary) comes from the Latin term for skull, *Calvaria*. There is a huge debate about where, exactly this took place. One school of thought holds that this is “Gordon's Calvary,” a skull-shaped rock formation not far from the wall of the city. Since the time of Jerome, (4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> century church father who translated the Latin Vulgate), most contend that this was a location immediately outside the northern wall of Jerusalem near the current site of the church of the Holy Sepulchre, and named for the number of skulls found there from previous crucifixions and executions. No one knows for sure, where the crucifixion took place.

John tells us that it was “*near the city*” (v. 20), it could be seen from a distance (according to Mark's Gospel—Mark 15:40) which suggests a hill or a small rise, it was near a road since passers-by are mentioned (Matthew 27:39), it was near a garden where Jesus was buried (John 19:41) and it had a name “the place of the skull.” It was to this very public and well-known place that Jesus was taken, and where he was crucified. In verse 18, John, matter of factly, tells us, “*there they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them.*” Jesus has been beaten, humiliated, flogged twice—the second time so brutally that he could not carry his own cross. Jesus was stripped naked, then nailed to a cross, which was then placed upright between two others convicted for sedition.

In Luke 23:39-43, we read that, “*one of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, ‘Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!’ But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.’ And he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ And [Jesus] said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’”* The word for criminal used by Luke is the same word John uses of Barabbas in John 18:40—it is much stronger than “robber.” The two men dying on either side of Jesus are guilty of fomenting insurrection, unlike the man dying between them, who welcomes one of them into heaven that very day. As we saw last time, the suffering-servant king of Isaiah's prophecy is now “*numbered with the transgressors*” (Isaiah 53:12).

Following Roman custom, Pilate mocks Jesus and identifies his crime for those who came to watch him

die. In verse 19, John tells us that “*Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, ‘Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.’*” The placard was written in three languages, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin, so that no passer-by, whatever their primary language might be, missed the point. The great irony is that John has spent much of the preceding chapters identifying the kingship of Jesus as the factor eventually culminating in his arrest, trial, and crucifixion.<sup>1</sup> This was indeed the charge upon which Pilate sentenced Jesus to this horrible fate—Jesus claimed to be the King of the Jews. The sign as written reflects Pilate’s final verdict, while at the same time mocking both the Jews and Jesus, their “king.”

Pilate knew full well when the Jews told him in verse 15 “*we have no king but Caesar,*” they did so out of pure political expediency. They would have told Pilate anything he wanted to hear in order to convince him to put Jesus to death. Pilate finally gave the Jews what they wanted, and likely out of anger and disgust at what had just happened outside his headquarters, he took the opportunity of Jesus’ crucifixion to remind all the citizens of Jerusalem that Caesar is king over Israel, and any Jew claiming the messianic office had better not push things too far. So, as the sign indicates, here hangs their king, beaten, naked, and crucified for all to see. Rome will have the last word—that is until Easter Sunday.

Yet, as John has emphasized throughout his gospel (and especially in the Upper Room Discourse and Passion Narrative), the unbelief throughout Israel, Jesus’ rejection by his own people—despite the fact that his signs and wonders proved he was from God—the scheming and plotting of the Sanhedrin, Pilate finding Jesus innocent before finally giving in and then mocking the whole process—all of this, fulfills Old Testament prophecy. Jesus must obey the Father’s will to accomplish our salvation. He must endure all of these horrible things—including crucifixion at the hands of the pagan Romans—so as to save us from our sins. Jesus will obey the Father unto death.

I made this point last time, but must make it again. Pilate mocks Jesus with a sign identifying his crimes. But the reader of John knows the irony here. Jesus is king of the Jews! Jesus is Caesar’s Lord. He is Pilate’s Lord. Jesus is the Sanhedrin’s Lord. In the providence of God, and according to his sovereign will, Pilate’s personal anger with the Jews, and his frustration with Jesus’ answers to his questions, provoked the governor to attempt to shame both the Jews and Jesus, and in doing so, Pilate ends up correctly identifying for all to see that Jesus is Israel’s king. The sign on the cross tells the truth. Jesus is hanging there for us and in our place. The true king of Israel is also God’s suffering servant.

The extent of unbelief in God’s messianic promises, and the Sanhedrin’s contempt for Jesus becomes tragically clear in the following incident. As John tells us in verses 20-22, the Jews went back to Pilate to complain about the sign the governor had ordered to made and posted above Jesus’ head. “*Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek. So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, ‘Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but rather, ‘This man said, I am King of the Jews.’ Pilate answered, ‘What I have written I have written.’*” Pilate has given the Sanhedrin exactly what it wants, and still, they demand more, this time complaining about the inscription mocking Jesus. Pilate has washed his hands of the whole thing. He is finished with this entire business until Easter Sunday when reports that the tomb is empty, and that Jesus has risen from the dead reach his ears. But as of now, he’s done with it all.

It was also a Roman custom that the soldiers putting condemned prisoners to death got to keep the clothes and property of their victims. In our own age, it is hard to conceive of even wanting a dead man’s

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<sup>1</sup> Carson, The Gospel According to John, 611.

undergarment (which was a linen tunic), or an outer garment, usually a robe, worn for years by someone in a hot and dusty climate. Jesus also had a belt, sandals, and some sort of head covering. The act of divvying up the condemned man's possessions is yet further humiliation and provides the soldiers with the spoils of war—a universal custom at the time. If the garments were suitable, they could be worn, or given to family—it is not like there is a *Men's Warehouse* or a shopping mall nearby. Clothing was handmade, cloth was expensive, and most people owned one such garment for most of their lives, mending it as needed. The soldier could also sell or barter these items for something better. John recounts how, “*when the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom, so they said to one another, ‘Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be.’*”

Again, what seems like a completely random act, typical of Roman soldiers who had seen so many crucifixions that they had grown expectant of looting the dead man's property, is far from a random act. John tells us that “*this was to fulfill the Scripture which says, ‘they divided my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.’*” John cites the LXX version of Psalm 22:18 (part of our Old Testament lesson). The opening words of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Psalm are also cited by Jesus according to both Mark and Matthew. In Matthew 26:45-46, we read that “*from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ that is, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’*”

In Psalm 22, as David was being mocked by his opponents, he felt abandoned by YHWH, and even envisioned his clothing being divided up to show how alone he felt (of course, he was not alone, although that is how David felt).<sup>2</sup> The 22<sup>nd</sup> Psalm ultimately points to Jesus, and not only does Jesus himself quote from it while hanging on the cross, John sees in this Psalm a remarkable prophecy of Jesus' executioners dividing his clothing in fulfillment of this Psalm. That one who is clothed in eternity past in unspeakable glory, is now naked when his garments are taken from him by those putting him to death. Jesus must bear this humiliation and shame for us and in our place.<sup>3</sup>

At times, the Bible sets two things like this—human action and God's sovereignty—side by side without making any attempt to resolve the seeming conflict. It has been said facetiously, of course, that the Lord has left such things unresolved so as to provide future employment for theologians and philosophers, who otherwise would be overly worried about whether or not someone wanted french fries to go with their order. But the relationship of divine sovereignty and human freedom is an important matter and theologians have done much to resolve some of the tensions left for us by John—a matter beyond our time and interest in this sermon.

The four soldiers cast lots to see who gets Jesus' seamless tunic, which probably worth more than Jesus' robe, sandals, or head covering. Their game of chance is, on one level, exactly that. They cast a die, a stone, a piece of bone (or whatever it was), with the one who called the outcome correctly getting the item. Yet the author of Proverbs tells us, “*the lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD*” (16:33). So, on another level the soldier's apparent random act fulfills in exacting detail a prophecy given hundreds of years earlier. The Scripture “*which says . . .*” must be fulfilled. And it is. John simply says, “*so the soldiers did these things.*” The prophecy in the 22<sup>nd</sup> Psalm shows us the depths

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<sup>2</sup> Carson, The Gospel According to John, 612.

<sup>3</sup> Ridderbos, The Gospel of John, 610.

of humiliation which Jesus, the Messiah, must endure.

Beginning in verse 25, John gives us a very poignant image from the scene still unfolding at the “place of the Skull.” He tells us “*standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.*” The male disciples (with the exception of John) are likely in hiding. But the women associated with Jesus and the disciples are steadfast in their devotion to Jesus. These four women will remain nearby until the inevitable end. Before the end did in fact come, John tells us that “*when Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold, your son!’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother!’ And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.*” As would be the case with an eyewitness account, John tells us who he saw there but does not think to mention himself.<sup>4</sup>

When Jesus gives to John the responsibility of taking care of Mary (Jesus’ mother), the implication is that Joseph has died by this time, and Jesus (as the oldest of his half-siblings) was responsible for Mary’s well-being. Even while enduring such terrible pain, Jesus obeys the law of God by honoring his mother. That Jesus assigns John the task of carrying for Mary undermines the Roman Catholic notion that Mary is the new Eve and mother of the church, supposedly because in this final act of Jesus in John’s Gospel Jesus symbolically assigns the church to Mary’s care, as the climax of his messianic mission.<sup>5</sup>

But it is virtually self-evident that the climax and final act of Jesus’ messianic mission comes in the following verse. John tells us that “*after this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), ‘I thirst.’*” Jesus appeals to the words of a messianic Psalm (Psalm 69:21) to ask for water. Even when suffering in unspeakable agony, and when asking for water, Jesus quotes the words of Scripture. John tells us that “*a jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, ‘It is finished,’ and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*” While Jesus refused to drink the wine mixed with myrrh (which dulled the pain), he will instead willingly drink the entire cup of the Father’s wrath. Here, just before he dies, Jesus takes a bit of wine, then speaks one word (loudly, as indicated by Mark 15:27), *tetelestai*, “*it is finished.*”

The pain and suffering of the beating, flogging, and crucifixion are now blessedly over, and for that we are relieved. But the physical pain and suffering was not the worst thing Jesus endured while hanging upon the cross. For one mysterious moment, Jesus became forsaken of the Father, the object of the Father’s wrath, to spare us from our sins which were imputed to Jesus so that he might be punished for us, and in our place. There are not words to describe the horror faced by Jesus when his heavenly Father—whom Jesus had known in perfect love from all eternity—turned his back upon his beloved son. But if we are to be saved from our sins, given eternal life, and faith, there is no other way. Jesus has consumed the last drop of the cup of wrath, and with that his messianic mission is finished. Jesus has accomplished our salvation. He has been obedient unto death

The Jews and Romans saw the corpse of a dead and humiliated Jesus hanging on that cross. But those who attempt to understand these things with the eyes of faith see something else. In John 17:4-5, Jesus declared, “*I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now,*

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<sup>4</sup> Morris, The Gospel According to John, 811.

<sup>5</sup> Carson, The Gospel According to John, 618-19.

*Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.”* Jesus’ prayer is now answered. As Jesus hangs on the cross, we now see the glory of God revealed.

Jesus did not endure these things because of Rome’s superior military might and the power of empire. In John 10:17-18, Jesus declared, *“For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may 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 I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”* Jesus will be buried for three days before we see that one who willingly laid down his life, will take it up again. In his final words from the cross, Jesus says “it is finished.” Jesus’ messianic mission is now over. The guilt of our sin has been removed, and our debt has been paid in full.

Jesus will be buried before sundown in accordance with Jewish law. Pilate is relieved. The Sanhedrin, no doubt gloats. But on the first day of the week, another phase of redemptive history is about to begin—Jesus will be raised from the dead and the whole world will be turned upside down!