

Good Friday 2023

"Do You Understand What You are Reading?"

*Thou hast suffered great affliction and hast borne it patiently,
Even death by crucifixion, fully to atone for me;
Thou didst choose to be tormented that my doom should be prevented.
Thousand, thousand thanks shall be, dearest Jesus, unto Thee. Amen.*
(TLH 151)

The texts that will form the basis for our meditation this evening are found in the Gospels of John and Matthew:

ESV (John 19:30) *When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*

ESV (Matthew 27:51) *And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.*

This is God's Word. Humbly asking our God to bless our Good Friday study of His Word, so we pray, **"Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."** Amen.

Fellow Christians, when Phillip approached the chariot of the high-ranking government official from Ethiopia, whom we today know simply as "the Eunuch," he asked him a simple and yet compelling question: **"Do you understand what you are reading?"** You will recall that the man was reading from the Old Testament Book of Isaiah, and his answer to Phillip's question was equally telling: **"How can I, unless someone guides me?"**

You and I need to ask ourselves that same question every time we encounter the Word of God – **"Do I understand what I am reading?"** We ask that question of ourselves this evening as we consider two very familiar elements of Good Friday: Jesus' statement **"It is finished"** and the tearing of the temple curtain.

Good Friday itself is a wonderfully difficult event for God's people – the most difficult of all Christian observances. No other Christian celebration offers the same mixture of sorrow and joy; of pain and comfort; of horror and happiness – and all in connection with the death of our holy, innocent Lord Jesus. It can all be very confusing – which is not exactly what we are looking for in a church service or religious observance. Perhaps the most difficult or confusing aspect of Good Friday and the death of our Savior is

understanding just what emotions God deems appropriate for his children on this most solemn occasion. While on this day we commemorate our Lord's death, we also know that he did not remain in the grave, having been raised by the Father on the third day. Our emotions are further confused by the fact that heaven's door was opened for us by our Lord's innocent death on this night, which makes this morbid scene a true victory celebration for sinful and desperate mankind. It explains how and why on Maundy Thursday we can sing the words we do and mean every one of them:

*The death of Jesus Christ, our Lord, we celebrate with one accord;
It is our comfort in distress, our heart's sweet joy and happiness.*
(TLH 163 s.1)

Yet the questions remain: What would our God have us do? Do we rejoice, or do we mourn? Are we to feel sorrow or joy? Thanksgiving or shame? Or are we supposed to experience all of these emotions in the course of our commemoration of Good Friday?

To rightly commemorate the most important elements of Good Friday, remember this simple truth: *Thank Jesus not so much for doing what we could have done for ourselves (though unpleasant in the extreme) but for doing what we could not do. Give thanks to our Savior-God on this day for doing what no one else could ever have done.* You and I could have been punished physically. We could never, however, have offered a sinless life as payment for all the accumulated transgressions of mankind. What we see on Good Friday is the culmination, the grand finale, of the epic struggle between Good and Evil, between Jesus and Satan. We see Jesus, in other words, accomplishing for us that which we never could.

The devil has been astonishingly successful in his efforts to pervert and undermine even the simplest and most basic truths of the Christian faith – including what exactly happened on Good Friday. No matter how clearly God spoke to us in his Word, still human beings are so easily confused and misguided. The most straight-forward thoughts and words that God communicated to us, in perfect clarity, we somehow miss, or misunderstand. Even the most basic Biblical facts need to be visited and revisited or their truths are lost to us. That is why we can never stop asking ourselves that simple question: **"Do I understand what I am reading?"**

So this evening we first revisit Jesus' simple declaration at the moment of his death, and ask of ourselves: *Do I really understand what Jesus meant when he said, "It is finished"?* We need to ask the question in large part because the devil has waged such an effective disinformation campaign, and in part because we are so easily confused, deceived, and misled. We are sheep that absolutely love to wander.

To help us to understand what Jesus' simple declaration means, we examine first what it *could have been misconstrued to mean*, and for definitive answers we need only consult the godless world around us. They are, after all, those who have adopted these alternate meanings.

The first misunderstanding is that when Jesus said, **"It is finished!"** he meant simply that he recognized that his life, and therefore also his suffering, were about to end – he recognized his own impending, imminent death. This is yet another half-truth, and it serves as a perfect example of the evil represented by all half-truths. There's a reason even secular courts require witnesses to *"swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."* This explanation of Jesus' words is a half-truth in that *of course* Jesus knew that he was about to die, or, more accurately, that he was about to **"bow his head and give up his spirit"**. The language here actually indicates that Jesus wasn't killed; he willingly gave up his life – which was why both the soldiers and Pilate were surprised at how quickly Jesus died. The lie is that that's all that Jesus was saying.

Above all else, this understanding dramatically trivializes what Jesus actually said. In fact it is a clever way to divert mankind's attention away from the work that Jesus came to carry out and to focus instead only on his physical suffering and death. It is the superficial product of those minds that know nothing *but* this life, and nothing at all of the life to come. It is something the "life well lived" and "bucket list" crowd might say, or those that believe that earthly suffering must be avoided at all costs, including ending your own time of grace. It is a trivial and superficial misunderstanding of exactly what a unique, amazing, life-changing event was taking place on Calvary.

Many who do recognize the spiritual component of Jesus' mission nonetheless also misconstrue what Jesus said. Their explanation is that what Jesus actually meant was that *his part* was now finished or completed. This perversion of what Jesus actually said was necessary for them to be able to perpetuate their greater lie: that Jesus came to earth to do his part, and now we must do ours. You are no doubt aware, for example, that many of those who attend church regularly are still taught that Jesus died to pay only for the sins with which they were born, and that each individual must, through good works, pay for the sins they have

committed. For that to be true, Jesus would had to have said, **"My part is finished."** Yet even here we need to identify another half-truth, and a damning half-truth at that. The true part was that Jesus' work was completed when he died on the cross. The lie part is that Jesus' work was only part of the necessary sin payment. It was, in fact, all.

So much confusion. So many different "interpretations." What did Jesus actually say? What did he mean? How can we ever know for sure? Simple answer: *Let's look at what he actually said. Let's let Jesus himself tell us what he meant, and thereby also learn how you and I are to understand his words.*

First of all, what Jesus actually spoke was not "words" but "word" – one Greek word, not three, and it was pronounced "te-těl-es-tai". The grammar of this one word spoken by our dying Savior is critical to our correct understanding of exactly what he communicated to us. Make no mistake. He fully intended for the world to hear him. This was not something Jesus said only to himself – which would likely have been the case had he meant *"My life (or my suffering) is finished."* In fact the thought is not unreasonable that Jesus asked for and accepted the sour wine in part to enable the world to hear from his parched throat and mouth the last two things he said: **"It is finished"** and **"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."**

What is it then that we learn from the grammar of that one word, "te-těl-es-tai"? The form Jesus used was very precise. For those interested in such things, he used a perfect, indicative, passive, 3rd person form of the Greek word which means *"to do or finish, to carrying out an action or objective."*

Bear with me here, because this is exactly how we sift all error from the truth of God's Word. This is how we remove every vestige, every last shred, of man's opinion and let Jesus alone speak to us.

Since Jesus used the 3rd person form, rather than the 1st, he did not say *"I am finished"* but *"It is finished."* The use of the passive tells us that "it" didn't finish itself, "it" was finished – obviously by Jesus.

Jesus also used the perfect indicative form of the word for *"do, complete, finish."* This form tells us several things. It serves to intensify a completed action (*totally, absolutely finished or completed*), it indicates that the results abide into the present (*what I did still affects you today*), and it emphasizes the completion of that abiding result (*though it affects you still today, you can add nothing to it*).

What does that leave us with? A clear understanding of *exactly* what Jesus said and *exactly* what he intended to communicate to the world. “It” was the work he came to earth to do, and that work was to provide the perfect, sinless sacrifice for the sins of the world. He was the **“Lamb of God”** who came to **“take away the sins of the world.”** At the moment of his death, that work was both completely finished and perfectly complete. The results of his work extend or abide into the present. What Jesus did not only *was* complete, it *is* complete. Nothing need be added because nothing *can* be added. That’s what complete means. Any attempt to add to what is already perfect and complete can only bring degradation and ruin. At the moment of his death, with this one word, Jesus assured us that the payment for the sins of the world was complete for all time and eternity, that that payment was perfect and whole in every possible way, and that you and I today are simply the beneficiaries, ourselves adding nothing. Quite a word.

And then to make sure that we could not *reasonably* misinterpret or misunderstand, God offered to mankind one last object lesson – the second familiar truth we want to be sure we understand: **“And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.”** The temple curtain prevented entrance into the inner sanctum of the temple (the Holy of Holies or Most Holy Place). That curtain represented sin, which had separated us from our God. The tearing of that curtain was God’s visual evidence that that sin barrier had been removed by Jesus’ death. This would not, *could* not have happened if Jesus had only accomplished *part* of our redemption (his part, but not ours), for sin would still remain and therefore also the barrier. The torn curtain was irrefutable visual evidence that what Jesus said was this: *“The full and complete payment for man’s sin stands for all time and eternity as having been paid in full, with the result that nothing now separates you from your God.”*

And remember there are no “throw-away words” in our Bibles. Every word proceeds from our holy, all-knowing God. So also here God didn’t just tell us that the temple curtain was **“torn in two”** but added the words **“from top to bottom.”** Man did not rend the barrier – from the bottom up. Man did not provide himself access. God did that - **“from top to bottom.”** Don’t miss the symbolic truth here that only God himself could remove the barrier we had erected by our sin, and this he did through the sacrificial death of his beloved Son.

So then all that remains is for you and me to apply the answers to these questions to ourselves: *“What do ‘It is finished’ and the torn curtain mean to me?”* They mean that Jesus has done all, *also for you*. Your sin has been removed forever and therefore can never be used as evidence to condemn you. Jesus did that. It means we need have no fear of being

called before God’s throne on the Day of Judgment. All of your sins have not only been paid for, God has promised you that he **“remembers them no more.”** It means that every time the devil tries to discourage or accuse you, you can point to Jesus’ simple word of completion (“te-tě-es-tai”) and the devil is robbed of any and all power over you. It means that you need add nothing to what your Savior has done, and that you can now place your full trust and confidence not in what you must now do but in what he has already done for you. The barrier that had separated you from your God – your own personal sins – has been removed. Not only do you therefore have direct and immediate access to the Creator of heaven and earth, nothing now stands between you and the heaven your Savior has prepared for you. Amen.

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As is our Good Friday custom, the congregation will be ushered from the sanctuary in silence following the closing hymn. Those in attendance are asked to leave the church quietly thereafter. We observe this custom in solemn commemoration of the death of our Lord, and yet we do so not as those who mourn without hope. We commemorate this solemn event as those who recognize that the debt for our sins was paid in full by our Lord Jesus on this night. There is a time to mourn and a time to rejoice. So also we solemnly observe the death of our Savior this evening (a time to mourn) but in full expectation that our Lord will turn our mourning into the joy of the empty tomb on Easter morning. All are therefore invited to gather here again on Easter morning for that greatest of all Christian celebrations.

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Good Friday Service

**St Paul Lutheran Church
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Michael Roehl – Pastor

Good Friday Service – April 7, 2023

The Opening Hymn – 143 (Verses 1-7)

“O Dearest Jesus, What Law Hast Thou Broken”

Invocation

Pastor: *In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

Congregation: *(Spoken) Amen.*

Confession and Absolution

P: *On this most solemn occasion we acknowledge that it was also our sin that caused the death of our Lord, and we therefore confess our sins in the words of the 51st Psalm:*

Psalm 51 *(Supplement page 28)*

P: *Jesus Christ, our Lord, paid the penalty for our sins upon Calvary's cross. Because of that sacrifice, I, according to His authority and by His command, announce to you that all of your sins are forgiven, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

All: Hymn 32 (Stanzas 1 & 3) *(Red Hymnal)*

Redeemed, restored, forgiven through Jesus precious blood,
Heirs of His home in heaven, oh, praise our pard'ning God!
Praise Him in tuneful measure who gave His Son to die;
Praise Him whose sev'n-fold treasures enrich and sanctify.

Dear Master, Thine the glory of each recovered soul.
Ah, who can tell the story of love that made us whole?
Not ours, not ours the merit; be Thine alone the praise
And ours a thankful spirit to serve Thee all our days.

The Final Passion History Reading *(Passion History Booklet)*

Hymn – 154 *(Sung by Soloists)*

“Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed”

The Apostolic Creed

I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,

Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended into hell.
The third day He rose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven
and is sitting at the right hand of God the Father almighty.
From there He will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy Christian Church
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins
the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 147

“O Christ, Thou Lamb of God”

The Sermon

^{ESV}**(John 19:30)** When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

^{ESV}**(Matthew 27:51)** And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

"Do You Understand What You are Reading?"

The Post Sermon Hymn – 172 *(Stanzas 1-2, 4, 9-10)*

"O Sacred Head Now Wounded"

The Prayer of the Day, followed by the Lord's Prayer

The Benediction

P: *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
And the love of God the Father,
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*

C: **Amen, Amen, Amen.** *(Sung by all)*

The Closing Hymn – 179

"On My Heart Imprint Thine Image"

Silent Prayer

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