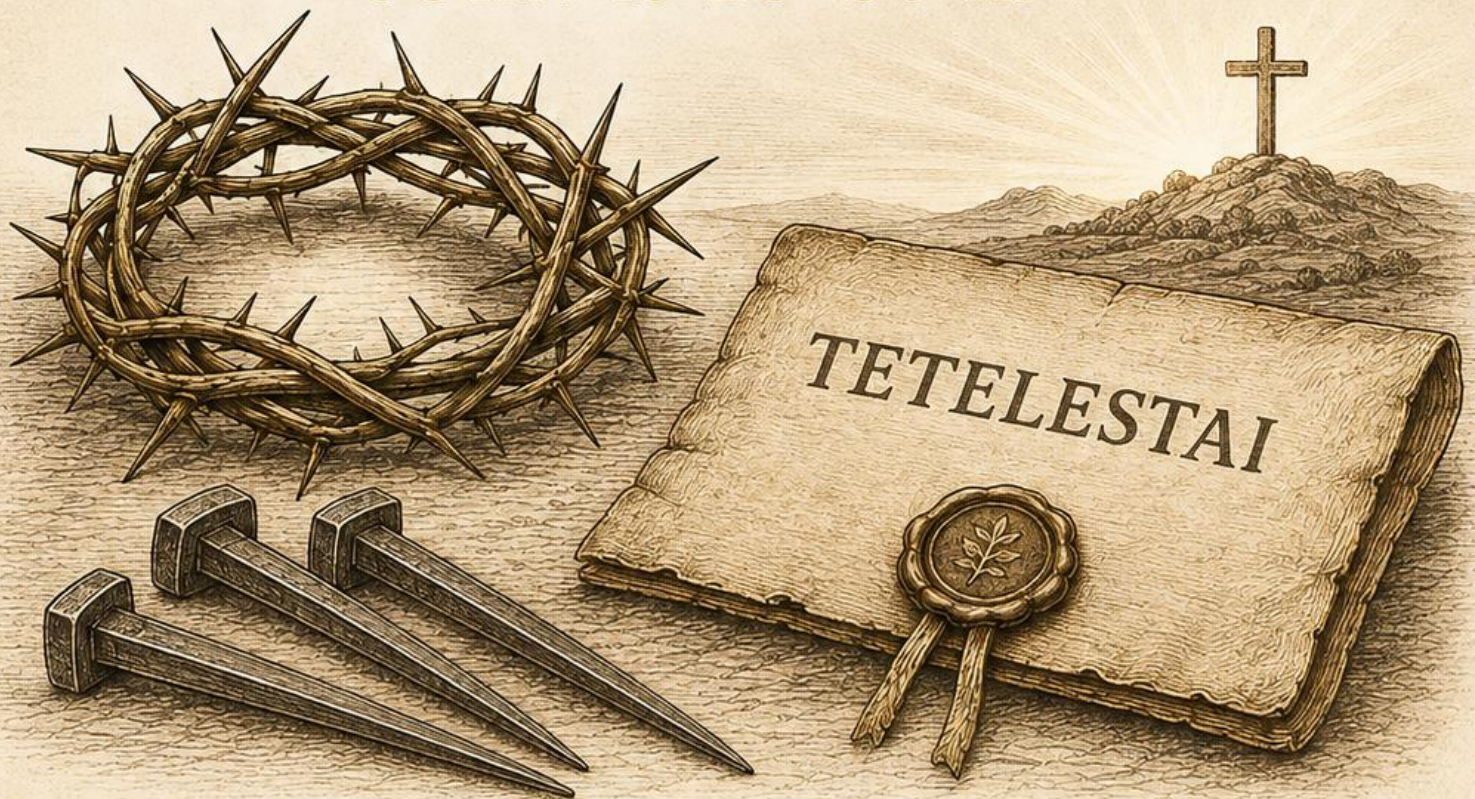



REASON TOGETHER CHURCH


WHAT DID JESUS MEAN WHEN HE SAID, 'IT IS FINISHED'?

—→ JOHN 19:28–30 KJV ←—



SERMON & PASTOR'S COMMENTARY


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John 19:28-30 KJV

Sermon Transcript

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

www.ReasonTogether.Church

Aloha, everyone, and welcome.

I am Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley, pastor of Reason Together Church.

Whether you are sitting here with us today...

or joining us online from somewhere else on Oahu...

somewhere across the mainland...

or somewhere far beyond these islands...

we are grateful that you have chosen to spend this time with us.

If this is your first time with us, we do not want to make a spectacle of you.

We do not want to put you on the spot.

We simply want you to know that you are welcome here.

Bring your questions.

Open your Bible.

And let's Reason Together the Word of God.

Before we open our Bibles, I want to take just a moment to speak plainly about giving.

Churches need money to operate.

That is simply the truth.

It costs money to keep the lights on.

It costs money to maintain a place where people can gather.

It costs money to provide ministry resources and to make our studies available to people online.

Our members have been faithful.

They provide what is needed for Reason Together Church to meet its obligations from week to week.

By God's grace, the bills are being paid...

the ministry is continuing...

and there is even a little money left in the bank.

We are also trying to save and raise money so that we can expand our online ministry and reach more people with these studies.

Is that a need?

Is it a want?

Perhaps it is some of both.

I am not entirely sure where one ends and the other begins.

But I want to make something else equally clear.

If you are our guest today, we are not asking you for money.

You honor us with your presence, and that is more than enough.

We are not using this moment to ask our members to give more than they already give.

We are not placing an appeal before those watching online.

We simply do not pressure people for money here at Reason Together Church.

We will mention what the church is doing.

We will sometimes mention what we would like to do.

Then we leave the matter between you and God.

If you decide that you want to help, we are grateful.

If you decide that you do not, we are still grateful that you are here.

There will never be any pressure, guilt or manipulation attached to giving in this church.

That is all I wanted to say about it today.

Now, let's return to the regular part of our study.

Let us pray.

Our Heavenly Father...

thank You for allowing us to gather around Your Word.

Thank You for every person in this room and every person joining us from somewhere else.

For the next few moments, help us set aside distractions...

assumptions...

traditions...

and opinions that we may have repeated without examining them.

We are not asking only for more information.

We are asking for understanding.

Teach us to love truth enough to test what we hear...

and to love one another enough to do it without arrogance.

Be near to the person who is hurting.

Encourage the person who is discouraged.

Give hope to the person who feels that his or her failures are too great to be forgiven.

And help every one of us see Jesus more clearly.

In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

Today we are asking a question about three of the most important words ever spoken.

Our question is...

What did Jesus mean when He said, "It is finished"?

Please open your Bible to John chapter 19.

We will begin with verses 28 through 30.

John 19:28 says...

"After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst."

Verse 29...

"Now there was set a vessel full of vinegar: and they filled a sponge with vinegar, and put it upon hyssop, and put it to his mouth."

And verse 30...

"When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost."

It is finished.

Not...

I am finished.

It is finished.

Something had been completed.

Something had been accomplished.

Something had reached the end for which it had been intended.

But what was it?

I recently heard a short video explaining the Greek word recorded in John 19:30.

That Greek word is tetelestai.

The speaker explained that the word was supposedly used in three different settings in the ancient world.

He said that in business it meant that a debt had been paid in full.

He said that in a courtroom it meant that a sentence had been fully served.

And he said that in a military setting it meant that the battle had been won.

That is a powerful presentation.

It preaches very well.
The debt of sin is paid.
The judgment for sin has been borne.
The battle against sin, death and Satan has been won.
I heard that and thought...
That would be a wonderful part of a Reason Together Study.
Then I did what we are supposed to do here.
I opened the Bible.
I examined the word.
I looked for the historical evidence behind the explanation.
And I discovered something important.
The Biblical conclusions are much stronger than the word history used to support them.
But the historical explanation itself has some serious problems.
That gives us a choice.
We could ignore the problems because we like the conclusion.
We could repeat an attractive story because it helps make a good sermon.
Or we could reason together through the evidence and allow Scripture to give us an even firmer foundation.
That third choice is the Reason Together choice.
We do not need a questionable illustration to make the cross powerful.
The cross is powerful because of what God says happened there.
Let us begin with the word itself.
The word John records is tetelestai.
It comes from the Greek verb teleo.
The ordinary meaning is to finish...
to complete...
to accomplish...
or to bring something to its intended end.
Tetelestai is in what Greek grammar calls the perfect tense.
That does not mean that we have discovered a magical tense with an entire sermon hidden inside it.

It means that the action has been completed and the completed result stands.

It has been accomplished.

It stands accomplished.

It has been finished.

It stands finished.

That is already a magnificent declaration.

We do not need to decorate it with claims that the evidence cannot carry.

You may have heard that ancient merchants stamped tetelestai across a receipt when a bill was paid.

That claim has circulated in churches for many years.

It was based on ancient tax receipts that contained an abbreviated Greek term.

For a time, some scholars believed that abbreviation represented tetelestai.

But when the receipts were examined more carefully, the complete word found on the unabridged examples was a different Greek word.

It referred specifically to taxes having been paid.

It was not the word John used in John 19:30.

The available ancient receipts do not establish that tetelestai meant "paid in full."

Now, the root verb can sometimes be used in connection with paying something.

But the surrounding words must tell us that a tax, toll or obligation is being paid.

Words receive their particular meaning from their context.

The English word "finished" works the same way.

If I say, "I finished paying the mortgage," payment is involved.

If I say, "I finished mowing the lawn," payment is not involved.

If I say, "I finished my lunch," I hope nobody concludes that I paid off a legal debt with a sandwich.

The word "finished" tells us that something was completed.

The rest of the sentence tells us what was completed.

The same caution applies to the judicial and military claims.

I have not found dependable ancient evidence showing that tetelestai was a formal courtroom declaration meaning that a criminal sentence had been served.

I have not found dependable evidence showing that it was a special military cry meaning that a

battle had been won.

Perhaps someone will eventually produce clear ancient evidence for one of those uses.

If that happens, we can examine it.

But until then, we should not present an interesting possibility as an established historical fact.

That does not mean the speaker intended to mislead anyone.

Most likely, he repeated something he had heard from another preacher...

who heard it from another preacher...

who found it in a sermon illustration somewhere.

That is how these things often travel.

Good people repeat claims that sound right because they support something they already know is true.

But Biblical truth does not need us to improve its evidence.

If the evidence is weak, we say that it is weak.

If something is possible but uncertain, we say that it is possible but uncertain.

And when Scripture speaks clearly, we stand confidently on Scripture.

So if tetelestai means "it has been finished" or "it has been accomplished," we return to our original question.

What was finished?

The safest way to answer is not to search for a hidden commercial code...

or a forgotten courtroom formula...

or a military slogan.

The safest way is to let John explain John.

Long before Jesus reached the cross, He spoke about a work that the Father had given Him to finish.

In John 4:34, Jesus said...

"My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work."

That was the direction of His entire earthly ministry.

He had not come merely to offer moral advice.

He had not come merely to perform miracles.

He had not come merely to gather admirers.

He came to do the will of the Father and finish the work the Father had given Him.

In John 5:36, Jesus said...

"But I have greater witness than that of John: for the works which the Father hath given me to finish, the same works that I do, bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me."

The works pointed to who He was.

Every miracle...

every act of mercy...

every word of truth...

and every step toward Calvary belonged to the mission given by the Father.

Then, on the night before the crucifixion, Jesus prayed in John 17:4...

"I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do."

The cross was already before Him.

He had committed Himself completely to the Father's will.

And then we reach John 19.

The betrayal has occurred.

The false accusations have been made.

The scourging has taken place.

The crown of thorns has been pressed onto His head.

The nails have been driven.

Jesus has been lifted between earth and heaven.

The sinless Son of God has offered Himself for sinners.

And John tells us in verse 28 that Jesus knew "that all things were now accomplished."

John then says it happened "that the scripture might be fulfilled."

Accomplished.

Fulfilled.

Finished.

John places those ideas beside one another.

The immediate context tells us what Jesus meant.

The work appointed by the Father had been completed through His obedient life and sacrificial death.

The Scriptures concerning His suffering had been fulfilled.

Nothing remained to be added to His sacrifice.

No second Savior would be required.

No additional blood would have to be shed.

No future offering could improve what the Lamb of God accomplished at Calvary.

Hebrews 10:12 says...

"But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God."

One sacrifice.

For sins.

For ever.

That is the finished work of the cross.

But we should also be careful about what Jesus did not mean.

He did not mean that every event in God's plan had already taken place.

Jesus had not yet risen from the dead.

He had not yet appeared to His disciples.

He had not yet ascended to the Father.

The Holy Ghost had not yet been poured out at Pentecost.

The Gospel had not yet been carried to the nations.

Christ had not yet returned.

Death had not yet been finally destroyed.

When Jesus said, "It is finished," He was not saying, "Nothing else will ever happen."

He was declaring that the work being accomplished through His suffering and sacrificial death had reached its intended completion.

The resurrection did not correct a failure at the cross.

The resurrection vindicated the One who died and demonstrated His victory over death.

And we must never separate the two as though the resurrection were an optional appendix.

First Corinthians 15:17 says...

"And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins."

The cross and resurrection belong to the one saving Gospel.

Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.

He was buried.

And He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.

So here is the careful conclusion.

At the cross, Christ completed the sacrificial work the Father had given Him.

The price would never need to be paid again.

The sacrifice would never need to be repeated.

The Scriptures concerning His suffering reached their fulfillment.

The work of Calvary stands complete.

Now we can return to the three conclusions from the video.

Was the debt of our sin paid?

Yes.

Not because tetelestai secretly means "paid in full" in every context...

but because Scripture directly tells us what Christ did with the debt against us.

Listen to Colossians 2:13 and 14...

"And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses;"

"Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross."

There was something against us.

There was a record we could not erase.

There was a debt we could not satisfy through our own righteousness.

Christ took it out of the way...

nailing it to His cross.

We do not need a disputed story about ancient receipts.

We have the plain words of Scripture.

The debt of the believing sinner is forgiven because of the completed work of Christ.

Was the judgment for sin borne?

Yes.

Not because we have proven that tetelestai was stamped on a prison document when a sentence ended...

but because Isaiah 53:5 and 6 say...

"But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed."

"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all."

He was wounded for our transgressions.

He was bruised for our iniquities.

The chastisement connected to our peace was upon Him.

The Lord laid our iniquity upon Him.

First Peter 2:24 says...

"Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed."

The judgment did not disappear because God decided sin did not matter.

The judgment fell upon the willing Substitute.

Jesus did not die because He had sinned.

He died because we had sinned.

The innocent suffered for the guilty so that the guilty could be reconciled to God.

And Romans 8:1 declares...

"There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit."

Was the battle won?

Yes.

Not because we have established tetelestai as the official shout of a returning Roman commander...

but because Colossians 2:15 says...

"And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it."

Hebrews 2:14 and 15 explain...

"Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil;"

"And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage."

Through death, Christ defeated the power of death.

The cross appeared to be Satan's victory.

It was actually the instrument of Satan's defeat.
The religious leaders believed they had silenced Jesus.
Rome believed it had disposed of another condemned man.
The disciples believed their hope had died.
But heaven knew that the Lamb had completed the sacrifice.
And on the third day, the empty tomb would make the victory visible.
So the debt was paid.
The judgment was borne.
The victory was secured.
Those are Biblical truths.
We simply reached them by allowing Scripture to say what Scripture says.
That is important because our faith should not collapse when one favorite illustration proves inaccurate.
Perhaps you have heard someone say...
"If that receipt story is not true, does that mean Jesus did not pay for sin?"
No.
The receipt story can fail and the cross still stands.
Perhaps someone asks...
"If tetelestai was not a courtroom formula, does that mean there is still condemnation for the believer?"
No.
Romans 8:1 still stands.
Perhaps someone asks...
"If it was not a military slogan, does that mean Christ did not defeat Satan?"
No.
Colossians 2 and Hebrews 2 still stand.
Our doctrine rests on the Word of God...
not on the creativity of a sermon illustration.
Now let us bring this truth home.
If the work of Christ is finished, why do so many people spend their lives trying to add something to it?

We try to add our good behavior.

We try to add religious ceremonies.

We try to add church attendance.

We try to add charitable giving.

We try to add regret, tears and promises that we will do better next time.

None of those things can improve the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Imagine standing before the cross while Jesus says, "It is finished"...

and answering...

"Lord, I think Your work needs a little help from me."

What could we add?

What sin could our good works remove?

What stain could our money wash away?

What human ceremony could make the blood of Christ more sufficient?

Ephesians 2:8 and 9 say...

"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:"

"Not of works, lest any man should boast."

Salvation is not Christ doing most of the work while we complete the final portion.

Salvation rests entirely upon what Christ has accomplished.

But there is another error on the opposite side.

Some people hear "It is finished" and conclude that nothing matters after they profess faith.

They imagine that because Christ's saving work is complete, the Christian life requires no growth...

no obedience...

no repentance...

and no transformation.

That is not what Jesus meant either.

Christ's work for our salvation is finished.

God's work in the believer continues.

Philippians 1:6 says...

"Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ."

The foundation is finished.

Our growth upon that foundation continues.

The sacrifice is complete.

Our learning to live as people redeemed by that sacrifice continues.

We do not obey in order to persuade Christ to save us.

We obey because the Christ who saved us is now changing us.

There is a difference between trying to earn salvation and living gratefully because salvation has been given.

There is also a difference between saying that Christ's work is sufficient and saying that everyone is automatically saved.

The price has been provided.

The invitation is offered.

But Scripture still calls each person to believe.

John 3:16 says...

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

Whosoever believeth.

Verse 18 continues...

"He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God."

The finished work of Christ is not permission to remain in unbelief.

It is the reason the invitation can be offered to every sinner.

You do not have to finish what Jesus left incomplete.

You are called to trust what Jesus completed.

Maybe you came into this study carrying years of guilt.

You know what you did.

You know whom you hurt.

You know the thoughts you have hidden from everyone else.

And perhaps you have quietly concluded that Jesus could save other people...
but your debt is too large.

Listen again to His words.

It is finished.

He did not say...

"It is nearly finished, except for the worst thing you have done."

He did not say...

"It is finished for respectable people, but not for someone like you."

He did not say...

"It is finished if you can make yourself worthy first."

Grace is offered to the unworthy because there are no other kinds of sinners.

The question is not whether you can pay for your past.

The question is whether you will trust the One who gave Himself for you.

Perhaps someone else needs a different reminder.

You trusted Christ years ago...

but you still live as though your standing before God rises and falls with every good day and bad day.

When you do well, you imagine that God loves you more.

When you fail, you imagine that the sacrifice has somehow become insufficient.

Christian, your confidence is not in the perfection of your performance.

Your confidence is in the perfection of Christ's completed work.

That is not an excuse to tolerate sin.

It is the security from which we confess sin, rise again and continue following Him.

We do not approach God boasting about our record.

We approach God trusting Christ's record.

We do not point to what we have finished.

We point to what He finished.

And perhaps another person has never thought seriously about any of this.

You have heard about the cross.

You may own a Bible.

You may attend church occasionally.

You may even agree that Jesus was a great teacher.

But you have never personally placed your faith in Him.

Knowing that Jesus said, "It is finished," is not the same as trusting His finished work.

Knowing the Greek word tetelestai cannot save you.

Winning a theological argument cannot save you.

Finding errors in somebody else's sermon cannot save you.

Jesus saves.

And He is accessible to you right now.

You do not need to be inside this building.

You do not need a pastor standing beside you.

You do not need to wait for a particular song or a particular emotional feeling.

You can come to Christ where you are.

Begin by admitting the truth about your sin.

Do not excuse it.

Do not compare yourself with someone who appears worse.

Agree with God that you are a sinner in need of a Savior.

Believe that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for your sins...

that He was buried...

and that He rose again.

Repent.

Turn from trusting yourself, your religion or your good works.

Place your faith in Christ alone.

Romans 10:9 says...

"That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved."

Romans 10:13 says...

"For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Prayer is not a magic formula.

Repeating somebody else's words cannot save a person who does not believe them.

But if you are ready to trust Christ, you can call upon Him in your own words.

You might pray something like this...

Lord Jesus...

I know that I am a sinner.

I cannot save myself and I cannot undo my past.

I believe that You died for my sins...

that You were buried...

and that You rose again.

I repent of my sin and place my faith in You alone.

Please forgive me, save me and begin Your work in my life.

Thank You for doing what I could never do for myself.

In Jesus' name...

Amen.

Those words do not save you because they were arranged in the correct order.

Christ saves the person who genuinely calls upon Him in faith.

If you trusted Christ today and you are here with us, please speak with me after the service.

I would be honored to pray with you, answer your questions and help connect you with other believers.

If you are joining us remotely, visit www.ReasonTogether.Church and use the contact page to tell us about your decision or ask for help finding a faithful church near you.

Do not walk alone when Christ has given us a family of believers with whom to walk.

Now let us answer today's question one final time.

What did Jesus mean when He said, "It is finished"?

He declared that the work the Father had given Him to accomplish through His earthly ministry and sacrificial death had been completed.

The Scriptures concerning His suffering had been fulfilled.

The sacrifice for sin would never need to be repeated.

Because His work was completed...

the sinner's debt can be forgiven...

the sinner's judgment was borne by the willing Substitute...

and Christ's victory over sin, death and Satan is secure.

Tetelestai does not need three legendary definitions to become powerful.

It is powerful because the Son of God finished the work the Father gave Him to do.

It is finished.

It stands finished.

And everyone who places faith in Jesus Christ can rest in what He accomplished.

Let us pray.

Our Heavenly Father...

thank You for sending Your Son.

Thank You that Jesus did not turn away from the cross.

Thank You that He completed the work You gave Him.

Forgive us for the times we have tried to add our own goodness to His finished sacrifice.

Forgive us for the times we have treated grace as an excuse to resist Your work in our lives.

Give assurance to the believer who is carrying unnecessary condemnation.

Give conviction to the person who has heard the Gospel but has not yet believed.

Give courage to anyone who trusted Christ today.

Teach us to test every claim carefully...

to speak truth humbly...

and to build our faith upon Your Word.

Help us leave this place resting in what Christ has finished...

and faithfully continuing the work You have given us to do.

In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

Before you leave, if you are visiting with us for the first time, there is a guest card available.

We ask only for your first name and email address.

That is all.

And I hope you will join us in the Reason Together Cafe.

There is free coffee made with locally grown coffee...

an RTC mug waiting to be filled...

and, as always, free refills on conversations.

The sermon may be finished...

but the conversation does not have to be.

Until we reason together again...

Aloha...

and to our first-time guests...

Aloha Nui Loa.

REASON TOGETHER STUDIES

PASTOR’S COMMENTARY

WHAT DID JESUS MEAN WHEN HE SAID, “IT IS FINISHED”?

What did Christ complete at the cross?

John 19:28-30 KJV

“When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost.” John 19:30

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

Pastor & Teacher

Commentary in Brief

CENTRAL CONCLUSION Jesus declared that the Father-given work accomplished through His earthly ministry and sacrificial death had reached its intended completion. The Scriptures concerning His suffering were fulfilled and His sacrifice for sin would never need to be repeated. The word John records means completed or accomplished. It does not reliably carry three separate technical definitions from commerce, criminal sentencing and warfare.

The study began with an appealing short video. The speaker said *tetelestai* meant that a debt had been paid in full, a sentence had been fully served and a battle had been won. Those three ideas produce a powerful Gospel presentation because Scripture truly teaches that Christ removes the sinner’s debt, bears judgment and triumphs over hostile powers.

The difficulty is not with those Biblical conclusions. The difficulty is with the historical explanation used to reach them. The familiar ancient-receipt claim rests on an abbreviation that appears to represent a different Greek word connected with tax payment. Dependable evidence has not been located for the proposed courtroom formula or official military cry.

A weak illustration does not weaken the cross. John gives us a stronger path. He repeatedly records Jesus speaking about doing the Father’s will and finishing the work the Father gave Him. At the cross, John places accomplished, fulfilled and finished beside one another. The context identifies the completed work more securely than an imported commercial slogan ever could.

This commentary expands the Biblical reasoning behind the sermon. It develops the Greek and historical questions, distinguishes what was finished from what remained future and traces the themes of debt, judgment and victory through direct Scripture. Its purpose is not merely to correct a popular claim. Its purpose is to help readers rest in the completed work of the crucified and risen Christ.

1. An Attractive Claim Still Requires Examination

Truthful Conclusions Can Be Reached by a Weak Route

The threefold explanation is memorable because it gathers major Gospel truths into one sentence. The sinner owes what he cannot pay. The sinner stands under judgment. The sinner faces enemies he cannot defeat. Christ acts where the sinner is helpless. Every part of that theological movement can be defended from Scripture.

Yet a conclusion does not make every supporting argument true. A preacher may state a sound doctrine and then attach an illustration that has been repeated so often that nobody remembers where it began. Once an illustration is accepted within Christian circles, repetition can begin to feel like documentation. Confidence replaces citation and familiarity replaces verification.

REASON TOGETHER PRINCIPLE We do not honor truth by protecting weak evidence. When the support fails, we keep the Biblical conclusion and rebuild the argument from Scripture.

2. John’s Immediate Context Supplies the First Answer

Accomplished, Fulfilled and Finished

“After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst.” John 19:28

“When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost.” John 19:30

John does not leave the word isolated. Before Jesus speaks, He knows that all things relevant to the scene are accomplished. John then connects the final action with the fulfillment of Scripture. Jesus receives the vinegar, announces completion, bows His head and gives up the ghost.

The declaration is not, ‘I am finished.’ Jesus is not confessing defeat or announcing that His enemies have successfully ended Him. He says, ‘It is finished.’ Something appointed has reached its goal. The nearby words accomplished and fulfilled tell the reader what kind of completion John has in view.

CENTRAL OBSERVATION The immediate scene contains mission language and fulfillment language. It contains no receipt, judicial discharge or battlefield report.

3. What Tetelestai Actually Communicates

The Form John Records

Tetelestai is the perfect passive indicative, third person singular form of the Greek verb *teleo*. In ordinary explanation, the verb means to finish, complete, accomplish, fulfil or bring something to its intended end. The perfect form presents a completed action with a resulting state.

That grammar allows a careful statement: it has been accomplished and stands accomplished. It has been finished and stands finished. This is already a magnificent declaration. It does not need a collection of secret definitions to become powerful.

Greek tense should not be treated as a container holding an entire theology. Grammar contributes to meaning, but context identifies the work that has been completed. The inspired text gives us the word in a sentence, the sentence in a paragraph and the paragraph within John’s account of Jesus’ Father-given mission.

The Language Jesus Spoke

It is also wise to say that tetelestai is the Greek word John records. The Gospel is written in Greek. We cannot establish with certainty from the verse which language Jesus vocalized at the cross. The authority of the interpretation does not depend upon reconstructing an unrecorded Aramaic or Hebrew expression. It rests on the inspired Greek text John has given us.

4. Lexical Range Is Not Contextual Meaning

A Word Can Be Used in More Than One Setting

The verb *teleo* can be used where payment is involved. Standard lexical evidence includes contexts concerning taxes, duties or tolls. That fact shows semantic range. It does not prove that payment is the meaning of every occurrence or that paid in full is hidden inside John 19:30.

English provides an easy comparison. A person can finish paying a mortgage, finish mowing a lawn or finish eating lunch. The verb finish tells us that something reached completion. The object and surrounding words tell us what was completed. No responsible reader takes a payment sense from one sentence and inserts it into every other use of the verb.

CENTRAL DISTINCTION A possible meaning in one context is not the necessary meaning in another. John’s context, not the word’s entire range, governs John 19:30.

5. The Ancient Receipt Story Must Be Qualified

The Abbreviation Behind the Popular Claim

The claim that merchants routinely wrote tetelestai across paid bills has circulated widely in sermons, devotionals and teaching notes. Its modern popularity is connected to ancient tax receipts containing an abbreviated Greek expression. The abbreviation was once associated with tetelestai in popular Christian explanation.

The stronger evaluation is that complete examples identify the abbreviation as a form of a different verb referring specifically to taxes having been paid. Gary Manning Jr. reports that the abbreviation represented tetelonētai rather than tetelestai. He also reports finding no ancient receipt or debt document in which the exact word of John 19:30 carries the claimed paid-in-full formula.

This does not prove that no ancient speaker could ever use teleo in a sentence involving payment. It proves something narrower and important: the well-known receipt story has not established what preachers often say it establishes. The evidence does not justify presenting the illustration as a settled fact from the ancient marketplace.

PASTORAL CAUTION A story may be emotionally useful and historically uncertain at the same time. Christian teaching should label the uncertainty rather than conceal it.

6. The Courtroom and Battlefield Claims

Possibility Is Not Documentation

The judicial claim says tetelestai was a formal declaration that a criminal sentence had been completely served. The military claim says it was an official cry that a battle had been won. No dependable ancient document has been located establishing either specialized formula.

A common verb for completion could naturally appear in a sentence about completing a punishment or ending a conflict. That possibility is not enough. To establish a technical courtroom notation or military slogan, a teacher should be able to identify an ancient source, provide the wording and show the expression functioning in that setting.

Until such evidence is produced, the two claims should not be stated as historical facts. This conclusion is not an accusation that the video speaker intended to mislead anyone. The more likely explanation is that he repeated an attractive tradition received from other Christian teachers.

REASON TOGETHER PRINCIPLE Charity concerns the person. Accuracy concerns the claim. We can treat a speaker charitably while testing the evidence carefully.

7. Let John Explain John

The Work Given by the Father

“My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work.” John 4:34

Jesus describes the Father’s will and work as the purpose that sustains Him. His signs, teaching, compassion, confrontation and movement toward the cross all belong to the mission for which He was sent.

“But I have greater witness than that of John: for the works which the Father hath given me to finish, the same works that I do, bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me.” John 5:36

The works bear witness to His identity and divine commission. Jesus is not inventing His own program. He acts as the sent Son, carrying out what the Father has given Him to complete.

“I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do.”
John 17:4

On the night before the crucifixion, Jesus speaks with the cross directly before Him. His obedience is settled. John 19:30 then brings that mission language to its climactic declaration. The Father-given work has reached the completion appointed for Calvary.

8. What Was Finished at the Cross

The Sacrificial Work Reached Its Intended End

Jesus completed the work of obedient self-offering that culminated in His death for sinners. The Scriptures concerning His suffering were fulfilled. The Lamb of God gave Himself. Nothing remained to be added to make His sacrifice sufficient and no future offering could improve what He accomplished.

“But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God.” **Hebrews 10:12**

Hebrews supplies the once-for-all doctrinal language. The sacrifice is not repeated because it was not deficient. Another Savior is not required. Additional blood is not needed. Human merit does not complete a portion Jesus left unfinished.

APPROVED SUMMARY The work of Calvary stands complete. Christ’s sacrifice can be received, rejected or misunderstood, but it cannot be supplemented or improved.

9. What Had Not Yet Happened

Finished Does Not Mean Nothing Remained

Jesus had not yet risen bodily from the dead. He had not yet appeared to the disciples, ascended to the Father or taken His place at the Father’s right hand. The Holy Ghost had not yet been poured out at Pentecost. The Gospel had not yet been carried to the nations. Christ’s return and the final destruction of death remained future.

The word finished must therefore be limited by the work in view. Jesus did not announce that every event in God’s redemptive plan had already occurred. He announced the completion of the appointed work being accomplished through His obedient life and sacrificial death.

“And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins.” **1 Corinthians 15:17**

The resurrection did not repair a failed cross, but neither can it be reduced to an optional appendix. The cross and resurrection belong to one saving Gospel. Christ died for our sins, was buried and rose again according to the Scriptures.

10. The Sinner’s Debt Is Removed

The Doctrine Does Not Depend on a Receipt

“Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross.” **Colossians 2:14**

Scripture presents a record against sinners. We cannot erase it through improved behavior, religious activity, charitable giving or sincere promises about the future. God takes the hostile record out of the way through the cross.

The sermon can therefore proclaim that Christ dealt fully with the sinner’s debt. That truth is stronger when it is built on Colossians than when it depends on a disputed story about merchant receipts. If the illustration fails, the doctrine remains because the Scripture remains.

PASTORAL ASSURANCE The believer’s confidence rests in what Christ accomplished, not in the historical accuracy of a favorite sermon illustration.

11. The Sinner’s Judgment Was Borne

The Willing Substitute

“But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.” **Isaiah 53:5**

“Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed.” **1 Peter 2:24**

The judgment theme does not need an undocumented prison release formula. Isaiah says the Servant was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities. Peter says Christ bore our sins in His own body on the tree. The punishment did not vanish because sin ceased to matter. The willing Substitute bore what sinners could not survive and could not remove.

“There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.” **Romans 8:1**

No condemnation is the believer’s present standing in Christ. It is not earned by having a perfect week. It is not lost whenever the believer recognizes another failure. The foundation is Christ’s completed sacrifice.

12. Christ’s Victory Is Secure

Victory Established by Direct Scripture

“And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it.” **Colossians 2:15**

“That through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil.” **Hebrews 2:14**

The battle theme is also Biblically certain. Christ disarmed hostile powers and triumphed over them. Through death He broke the devil’s power of death and delivered those held in bondage through fear. The cross looked like the triumph of darkness, but it became the instrument through which darkness was defeated.

The empty tomb made the victory visible. The risen Christ is not merely a survivor of crucifixion. He is Lord over death. The church can proclaim victory confidently without inventing an official cry from an ancient Roman commander.

CENTRAL DISTINCTION Debt removed, judgment borne and victory secured are Biblical consequences of Christ’s work. They are not three hidden dictionary definitions inside tetelestai.

13. The Finished Work Excludes Human Boasting

We Do Not Complete the Final Percentage

“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.” Ephesians 2:8-9

Human beings naturally want a contribution they can point to. We offer good behavior, religious ceremonies, church attendance, generosity, regret or promises of reform. These may have proper places in Christian life, but none can improve Christ’s sacrifice or remove sin as a competing source of righteousness.

Salvation is not Christ performing most of the work while the sinner completes the remaining portion. Faith does not add value to the sacrifice. Faith receives the Savior and rests in what He has done.

PASTORAL QUESTION What could any sinner add after the Son of God has said, ‘It is finished’?

14. Finished Work Does Not Mean Universal Salvation

The Invitation Must Still Be Received

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” John 3:16

“He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” John 3:18

The sufficiency of Christ’s work does not erase the distinction between belief and unbelief. Scripture does not teach that every person is automatically reconciled merely because the sacrifice is complete. It calls the sinner to believe on the Son.

The sinner is not asked to finish what Jesus left incomplete. The sinner is called to stop trusting self, religion and personal goodness and to trust the crucified and risen Christ. The completeness of the work makes the invitation secure. It does not make faith unnecessary.

15. Finished Work Does Not Excuse Moral Indifference

God’s Work in the Believer Continues

“Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.” Philippians 1:6

The sacrifice that secures salvation is finished. God’s transforming work in the believer continues. These statements are not rivals. They describe different works. The Christian does not obey to persuade Christ to save him. He obeys because he belongs to the Christ who saved him and is changing him.

Grace is not permission to make peace with sin. First Peter 2:24 says Christ bore our sins so that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness. The finished sacrifice establishes the new life. It does not cancel it.

PASTORAL BALANCE We reject both the attempt to earn salvation and the attempt to use salvation as an excuse for refusing God’s work in us.

16. How to Correct a Popular Christian Claim

Accuracy Without Arrogance

A study like this can become spiritually unhealthy if the reader enjoys finding another preacher wrong more than discovering what Scripture says. The speaker’s intent was to celebrate the cross. He most likely repeated material he believed to be reliable. The proper response is not ridicule.

At the same time, charity does not require silence about evidence. A respectful correction identifies the claim, explains the problem, limits the conclusion and supplies a better Biblical foundation. It avoids assigning motives and refuses to exaggerate certainty in either direction.

REASON TOGETHER PRINCIPLE Test every claim, speak with humility and let stronger Scripture replace weaker tradition.

17. Assurance Rests in Christ’s Record

For the Believer Who Still Lives Under Condemnation

Some believers understand grace in doctrine but live as though their standing before God rises and falls with every day’s performance. A good day makes them feel accepted. A failure makes them wonder whether Christ’s sacrifice has become insufficient.

Christian assurance is not confidence that our performance has become flawless. It is confidence that Christ’s sacrifice is sufficient. That confidence does not make confession unnecessary. It gives the believer courage to confess honestly, rise again and continue following Christ without trying to pay for forgiven sin through self-punishment.

PASTORAL APPEAL Do not point to what you have finished. Point to what Christ finished.

18. The Question Ultimately Leads to Christ

More Than a Correct Word Study

A person can pronounce tetelestai correctly, understand the perfect tense and identify the receipt error while remaining separated from God. Language study cannot save. Historical correction cannot save. Winning an argument about John 19:30 cannot save.

Jesus saves. He completed the sacrificial work, died for sins, was buried and rose again. The proper response is not merely admiration for a finished work. It is personal faith in the One who finished it.

The guilty person does not need to make himself worthy before coming. Grace is offered to the unworthy because there are no other kinds of sinners. The question is not whether we can repair our past. The question is whether we will trust the Savior who gave Himself for us.

Questions for Personal Reflection

- Have I repeated an attractive Christian claim without asking whether the evidence supports it?
- Do I understand the difference between a word’s possible range and its meaning in a particular context?
- Am I trying to add my behavior, religion or generosity to Christ’s completed sacrifice?
- Do I live under condemnation that Christ has already answered for those who are in Him?
- Have I confused the finished work of salvation with God’s continuing work of transformation in the believer?

- Can I correct a weak claim without becoming proud or uncharitable toward the person who repeated it?
- Have I personally placed my faith in the crucified and risen Christ?

A Personal Invitation to Salvation

You may carry a debt you cannot erase. You may know that your sin deserves judgment. You may feel defeated by guilt, habit, fear or the power of death. The Gospel does not tell you to solve those problems before coming to Christ.

The Bible says that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. It also says that Christ died for our sins, was buried and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. Jesus completed the work you could never perform for yourself.

“That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.” **Romans 10:9**

“For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” **Romans 10:13**

There is no magical prayer formula. Jesus saves. Speak to Him honestly. Admit that you are a sinner. Believe that He died for your sins and rose again. Repent of trusting yourself, your religion or your good works. Place your faith in Christ alone.

If you have made that decision, speak with a faithful Christian pastor or contact Reason Together Church through www.ReasonTogether.Church. We would be honored to pray with you and help you begin walking with Christ.

A Closing Prayer

Our Heavenly Father,

Thank You for sending Your Son and for giving us a Word that can withstand honest examination. Teach us to value truth more than a memorable illustration and to speak correction with humility rather than pride.

Thank You that Jesus completed the work You gave Him. Thank You that His sacrifice does not need to be repeated or improved. Thank You that the cross and empty tomb give certain hope to sinners.

Give assurance to believers who are carrying condemnation. Keep us from trying to earn what grace provides. Keep us also from using grace as an excuse to resist Your continuing work in our lives.

Draw unbelievers to Christ. Help them admit their sin, believe the Gospel, repent and place faith in Jesus alone. Teach all of us to rest in what Christ has finished and faithfully continue the work You have given us to do.

In Jesus’ name we pray.

Amen.

Selected Sources

Primary Scripture

John 19:28-30 KJV, with supporting use of John 4:34; John 5:36; John 17:4; Hebrews 10:12; 1 Corinthians 15:17; Colossians 2:13-15; Isaiah 53:5-6; 1 Peter 2:24; Romans 8:1; Hebrews 2:14-15; Ephesians 2:8-9; Philippians 1:6; John 3:16-18 and Romans 10:9, 13.

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Receipt-Claim Evaluation

Manning, Gary Jr. “Paid in Full? The Meaning of Tetelestai in Jesus’ Final Words.” Biola University, The Good Book Blog, 2022. [Read the article](#)

Triggering Media

Howerton, Josh. Short public video presenting the commercial, judicial and military claims. Used as the study trigger, not as historical documentation. [Facebook video](#)

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Written Preservation of the Argument

Holy Wild. “Tetelestai.” Hope Notes Blog, April 28, 2026. Used to document the popular threefold presentation. [Read the page](#)

Interpretive Cautions

The commentary distinguishes the ordinary completion sense of tetelestai from payment-related uses of the broader verb in contexts that identify a tax, toll or duty. It does not claim certainty about the language Jesus vocalized. It does not present the receipt, courtroom or military claims as established ancient formulas. It preserves the resurrection as essential to the Gospel and does not treat the completed sacrifice as universal salvation or permission for moral indifference.

Pastoral Note

This commentary accompanies the approved Reason Together Study. It does not replace the sermon transcript or internal Study Vault. Its purpose is to provide a readable public explanation of the principal Biblical reasoning, preserve lexical, historical and pastoral cautions and help readers apply the study faithfully.

REASON TOGETHER Bring your questions. Open your Bible. Let’s Reason Together the Word of God.