

# COMPLETION OF THE CROSS

**SERIES: SEVEN LAST WORDS**



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John 19:30  
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There is a mythical place that I've heard about. It is a place of rest and peace. It is a place of wide open spaces. I've actually seen this place once or twice with my own eyes, but it vanished quickly, even before I'd really been able to enjoy it. This legendary place is called by an ancient name. It is "Inbox Zero."

How many emails do you currently have in your inbox? Inbox Zero is when you have no emails in your inbox. It's that place where you have responded to, filed, or taken action on every item in your email inbox. Everything has been addressed. Like many people, I use my email inbox as a to-do list. Inbox Zero means I have finished everything.

Can you imagine not having anything left to do? Most of you don't have the time to imagine it because you're sitting there thinking about what you need to get done this afternoon. There's always something more to get done. For students, one more paper or problem set. For professionals, one more email to read and respond to. For stay at home parents, one more meal or activity with the kids. I think it is safe to say that more than any other culture in history; we live in a world of tasks, checkboxes, calendars, and inboxes. Nothing is ever complete.

That is part of what makes what we are looking at this morning so incredibly powerful. This morning we are on week six of our seven week Lenten series called *Seven Last Words*. We've been looking at the seven statements that Jesus made from the cross as a way of diving more deeply into the mystery of the crucifixion. The cross lies at the heart of what we believe. Yet there is so much mystery surrounding it.

This week we consider the sixth word from the cross. In the gospel of John, it is the last thing Jesus says. It is a statement of victory, accomplishment, and completion. In Greek, it is one single word. Jesus says simply, "It is finished."

As we look at this simple statement, we're going to think about it from a lot of different angles. First, we'll think about the idea of completion and about how the entire biblical story has been leading up to this moment. Then we'll ask the obvious, but difficult question of what it is that Jesus finished. This will lead us to think a bit about

what theologians call the "atonement." Finally, we'll think about what Jesus finished on the cross and how it affects our lives and whether we act as if we believe it.

Basically, what I want to convince us of this morning is that in this moment everything changed. These words of Jesus marked a cosmic turning point in the history of history. In that moment everything changed. We need to understand what everything was—how everything changed. Then we need to understand what that changes for us.

This will be in some ways, the most theological discussion that we've had as we've been looking at these statements from the cross. It won't be theology that is disconnected from our lives though. We will see this morning that what we believe about the cross—that's theology—comes into our lives in very real and practical ways all the time. So let's see what Jesus meant when he said, "It is finished."

## It is Finished

Let's start by reading the passage as it is recorded in the gospel of John. This statement comes immediately after the statement we looked at last week that had to do with thirst. In fact, it's possible that last week's statement was in some ways a preparation for this week. Part of why Jesus was thirsty and wanted a drink may have been so that he could make the proclamation that we are hearing today. Here is how John records it.

John 19:30

**<sup>30</sup>When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.**

Both Matthew and Mark record that Jesus cried out in a loud voice just before dying. It's possible that this is the content of that loud cry. That helps us to understand how Jesus meant this. This is not Jesus finally succumbing to all of his pain. It's not what happens when you're exhausted and you can't go on and you simply say, "I'm done." Jesus isn't wiped out. This is a joyful exclamation. This statement is often called the Word of Victory.

The word being used here is from the Greek verb *teleo*. It has the sense of arriving at a goal, coming to an end, and reaching the purpose for which something exists. Jesus used this word several other times throughout the gospel of John. Listen to how he used it in John 4:34, “‘My food,’ said Jesus, ‘is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.’”

Apparently, Jesus understands the goal of his life as doing the works that God has given him to do. His life is a mission, given to him by the Father, which he must complete. His whole life has been leading up to this moment. With this cry, Jesus declares that he has accomplished everything that the Father sent him to accomplish. It’s done. It’s really done.

One of my favorite feelings of all time is one I had as a student. It happened at the end of every quarter or semester. It’s the feeling that I had walking out of my last final exam. I can still picture several specific times during both undergrad and seminary or walking out of that exam room and heading home with such an incredible feeling of exhilaration. Everything that I had worked for during many long weeks was completed. At least for the next few days, I had no responsibilities. I was free. What an incredible feeling.

You know that feeling too. You know what it feels like to complete some big task; to get a degree; to build a house; to finish a project; to finish something. It’s an exhilarating feeling.

This is what Jesus proclaimed. But for Jesus, it wasn’t just a project; it was the very purpose of his life. But it’s even more than that. Jesus said that his food was to finish the Father’s work. There is the implication that his Father began this work some time ago. Jesus had completed something that God had already started. What’s actually finished is the work that God had been doing throughout the history of the world.

So what is that work? What has God been doing? Both Matthew and Luke record John the Baptist sending messengers to Jesus at one point to find out who he really is. They asked him whether he was the one they had been waiting for or whether they should look for someone else. This is how he replied in Luke 7:22, “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.”

In answer to their question, Jesus quotes promises from

the prophet Isaiah. Many centuries earlier, Isaiah had spoken about a time that was coming when things would be different. Life on earth would change. Justice would be done. Sickness would be healed. Oppression would stop. To this simple question about who he was, Jesus told people to look around and decide for themselves. Can’t you see that everything is changing? Can’t you see that what the prophets dreamed of is actually happening?

This was the work that Jesus came to complete. The work that God has promised to do long ago: to remake this world that he had created, but which had taken a turn for the worse. In this moment, everything changed.

The Bible is a storybook. It is not an encyclopedia that answers all our questions about how things work. It is not an instruction manual for determining how we should make every decision that we face in life. It is not a collection of different opinions on what God is like. Part of what makes the Bible incredible is that it is a narrative, written over hundreds of years by different human authors, yet it all comes together as one seamless story with a beginning, dramatic buildup, a climax, and an incredible resolution. The Bible tells a story. It just happens to be true and it just happens to be the story that we are living in.

This is a good time to mention that we are planning a special project as a church starting this coming fall. What we plan to do as a whole church, from children’s ministry to the main service, to any of the other groups that want to participate, is work our way through the Bible. We will do this as a chronological narrative, trying to understand how all the parts of the story fit together and get an appreciation of the biblical narrative from a broader perspective than what we get looking at smaller passages. You will hear more about this in the next several months.

What we need to understand here is the story that the Bible tells begins with, “In the beginning.” It tells of a terrible tragedy that marred life as we know it for all time. Then it records God’s steady and intentional plan throughout history to restore what had been lost. That story involves individuals and nations, kings and queens, shepherds and swordsmen. There are some really promising moments and some desperately dark times. People act with incredible courage and unbelievable stupidity. The whole story leads up to this moment. This is what Jesus declared when he said with a victorious cry: “It is finished.”

For me, the way this story unfolds is one of the strongest demonstrations that everything we believe is true. This book makes history make sense. It explains how all the

pieces fit together in a way that connects with all the things that I feel day-to-day. This story explains all the big stuff in a way that makes sense of all the little stuff that I feel, experience, and observe. I can't believe that this story could be fabricated over thousands of years by different people. It all fits together too well. But it does that without being predictable. No one before Jesus would have expected the Christ on a cross and yet there he is at the climax of the story.

In this moment, everything changed.

## The Atonement

Now we need to go deeper. If everything changed, what happened? How did a man on a cross change the world as we know it? What we believe is like no other religious system. It centers around a historical event: a young Jew on a hill outside Jerusalem being executed by an oppressive regime. How could that moment have changed anything? Even more, what could that moment have to do with us?

Put simply: why did Jesus die? What happened at the cross?

This is what theologians call the "atonement." It's a very special usage of the word. Some versions of the Bible use this word to translate certain words in the Old or New Testament. That's a bit different than what we're talking about here. We're talking about the "atonement" as a theological category. You can think of it as the mechanism for salvation. Atonement is what Christ did on the cross. Atonement is why he died. The word, as theologians use it, does not give any answers to those questions—it just creates a category for us to consider various answers. For our purposes, atonement is the "it" in "It is finished."

Atonement may sound like a churchy word, but we're actually quite familiar with it. This past Christmas holiday I ate a lot. Rachel made seven layer bars and I think I ate a whole pan of them. So the first few weeks of January, I tried to eat less than normal to reverse some of that. That's atonement.

A few weeks ago, I got a parking ticket for parking longer than 4 hours in a 4 hour parking zone. That meant I had to write the city of Sunnyvale a check for \$53. That's atonement.

So with that in mind, let's think a bit about the theological category of the atonement. Many theologians consider the atonement to be the most important doctrine

that Christians believe. John Wesley said, "Nothing in the Christian system is of greater consequence than the doctrine of the atonement." Jesus Christ dying on the cross lies at the center of what we believe. It is the heart of the gospel; everything before leads up to it; everything after flows out from it.

As a kid, I remember a book that I had called 'The Way Things Work.' Living in a world of airplanes and telephones, toaster ovens and freight trains, it was fascinating to read about how those things worked. These were the things that shaped my daily life. Learning about gears and gasoline and electricity and circuits opened up my world. I understood what was happening around me.

That's what we're doing when we talk about theology. We are learning about the "The Way God Works." But there is always an inherent danger in theology that we have to be careful to avoid. We can get more enamored with ideas than with God. It has been said "all theology is doxology." That means that any pursuit of understanding God must lead to an appreciation of the glory of God. The ultimate goal of theology is worship, not knowledge. And as with any complicated matter, the more we understand, the more we realize we don't understand.

We're going to do a brief overview this morning of what we mean when we talk about the atonement, but we won't be able to go into much detail. I've scheduled some time this evening to do what I'm calling a "Theology Roundtable" to talk in more detail about the atonement. I'll go over some of the biblical and historical development of the atonement and we'll have time to ask questions and interact with some of the different ideas that are out there. So if you're intrigued by what we're talking about this morning and want some more discussion, come back tonight at 7:00 PM.

For the purposes of our discussion this morning, I want to start with a very brief introduction to some of the theories that people have suggested as a way of understanding the atonement. We'll go into a lot more detail tonight. Then we'll look at some of the biblical themes that come up in reference to the atonement. So we're going to talk about theories and themes.

The atonement is basically a description of a solution. The atonement is how God solved a particular problem. So how you understand the problem goes a long way in determining how you understand the solution.

If you come to me with a problem and I tell you the solution is to pour water over it, then you still don't know

how that will help. But if I tell you the problem, you can probably figure it out. If the problem is that I dropped my apple on the dirty ground, pouring water over it makes it clean. If the problem is that my drill is getting too hot, pouring water over it will cool it down. If the problem is that my lawn is turning brown, pouring water over it will give it the moisture it needs to grow. Pouring water over it is the solution to all those problems, but how it solves the problem depends entirely on what the problem is.

The atonement works the same way. Broadly, there are three different categories of theories around the atonement. There are more than three theories, but all of them fall somewhat into one of these three categories. Each of these categories of theories has a lot to do with how we understand the problem in the world. You can understand these three categories with these terms: victory, justice, and transformation.

If the problem is that evil seems to be winning, then God needs to win. He needs victory over evil and Satan. The first major category has to do with victory. People call the most common theory in this category “Christus Victor.” Christ is the victor. The idea is that at the cross, Christ defeated evil and death. Christ outsmarted Satan himself and won a major military victory that frees us from the power of sin and death.

One of the worship songs we sang earlier taps into this kind of understanding of the atonement.

*Christ is risen from the dead  
Trampling over death by death.*

The same song goes on to say

*Oh Church! Come stand in the light  
The glory of God has defeated the night.<sup>1</sup>*

That’s a classic statement of the Victory theory of the atonement.

The second category of atonement theories has to do with justice. In this system, the problem in the world is understood as a violation of God’s holiness. This is the category that many of you are probably familiar with. The most common theory here is called “penal substitution.” On the cross, Christ suffered punishment as our substitute. He endured the penalty that we deserved so that we don’t have to. This is probably the way that the atonement was described to you when you first put your faith in Christ.

Another one of the lyrics we sang earlier proclaims the

atonement in these terms.

*Till on that cross as Jesus died  
The wrath of God was satisfied  
For every sin on Him was laid  
Here in the death of Christ I live.<sup>2</sup>*

That’s Penal Substitutionary Atonement.

So we have victory theories and justice theories. The final category could be called transformation. This category sees us as the problem. The main problem isn’t Satan. It isn’t God’s wrath. The main problem is us. We need to be changed. At the cross, Jesus did something that changes us.

The most common example of this theory is called the Moral Influence theory of the atonement. The basic idea is that at the cross, Christ demonstrated his perfect love for us. That love becomes an inspiration to us to change our lives and live in obedience to God. Other theories that fall into this category emphasize the example that Jesus gave us on the cross; of perfect self-sacrifice and obedience, or the power of the cross to heal us and return us to the Old Testament sense of shalom that was lost when sin entered the world.

This last category was evident in one more set of lyrics we sang this morning:

*I give my life to follow  
Everything I believe in.<sup>3</sup>*

This is a tricky theory to find though. It’s true that faith in Christ transforms us, but most ways of thinking don’t claim that the atonement is how that happens. Jesus is certainly our example, but that’s not the primary thing that happened on the cross. It’s often more liberal Christian theology that understands the atonement in this way.

Right about now, some of you are saying, “aren’t all of these the problems?” Isn’t all of this just different ways of describing the same thing? Yes and no. All theologians acknowledge that each of these is true in a sense. The question people are asking isn’t “What does the atonement have to do with victory, justice, or transformation?” The question is which system describes the heart of what happened and which ones are secondary or not accurate at all?

Victory. Justice. Transformation. These are the major categories of theories to describe the atonement. This is what theologians have come up with. What theologians (at least the good ones) are doing is trying to understand how the Bible talks about atonement and fit it into some

system that makes sense. The New Testament authors explain the atonement in a lot of different ways. There is no one single metaphor used to describe what happened at the cross. Lots of metaphors are used.

So let's look at five of the most prominent themes that are used to describe what happened at the cross. In the New Testament, the cross is described in relational terms, commercial terms, judicial terms, religious terms, and military terms. When you put all of these metaphors together, you get a way of understanding the atonement, but each individual metaphor sheds a different kind of light on what is meant by the atonement.

One of the main Scriptural themes for atonement is a relational theme. The relationship between God and his people was fractured by their rebellion. God and man had a broken relationship. That relationship needed to be healed. Jesus died on the cross to bring reconciliation between God and his people. His sacrifice on the cross repaired man's relationship with God. In a relational world, we are reconciled. Listen to Colossians 1:19-20, "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."

We live in a world of relationships, so we understand relationships. We know what it's like to have a broken relationship and we long for reconciliation. That's what the cross offers.

But we also live in a world of commerce. We buy things, we sell things, and we trade things. All throughout history, commerce has been a major part of life, whether we're using PayPal to buy an iPhone or trading some wheat for a goat. It's all the same. In the world of commerce, something valuable is redeemed by paying the price for it. This is another way the Scripture describes the cross. In a commercial world, we are redeemed. Listen to Ephesians 1:7-8, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding."

These are commercial words being used. God's grace is pictured as riches. Those riches are lavished upon us. Lavish is a financial word used of abundant resources. Redemption is a marketplace term used when you buy something back. Christ's death is a price that was paid to purchase us so that we could belong to God. We know about prices. We know about buying things. The atonement is pictured as a commercial transaction. God

is the buyer. We are the product.

We also live in a legal world of laws, courts, and judges. We get in trouble when we drive too fast. We get in trouble if we steal or hurt someone. In legal terms, we are guilty of crimes against God. This is another way the New Testament authors use to describe the atonement. In a legal world, we are justified. Here's Romans 5:1-2, "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God."

Here, the problem is pictured as a legal problem. We have broken the laws that God set in place and we are guilty. But the cross of Christ allows us to be justified. It takes away our guilt. Christ allows us access to stand before God. These are legal terms. It's a picture of a courtroom. God is the judge and the offended party at the same time. Because of what Jesus has done, we can stand innocent, justified of our wrong-doing.

In a relational world, we are reconciled. In a commercial world, we are redeemed. In a legal world, we are justified. And there's more.

It should come as no surprise that the Bible also uses religious imagery to describe the atonement. Jesus did come as a Jew, and most people consider following Jesus to be a religion. His death on the cross is also described in religious terms that Jews and non-Jews would be familiar with. In a religious world, Jesus was our sacrifice. In fact, Hebrews describes him as the perfect sacrifice. Here's Hebrews 9:14, "How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!"

Everyone in the first century was familiar with religious rituals of sacrifice. They knew about offering something valuable to a divine being in order to please him. Jews did this. Pagans did this. Everyone knew about sacrifices. So Jesus is described as not just another sacrifice, but The Sacrifice. He is the eternal sacrifice. He is completely unblemished. He cleanses us perfectly because he is perfect. He does what no sacrifice before has been able to do: perfectly please God.

There's one more primary image the New Testament uses and that is a military image. This has been another constant throughout history. People are always conquering and being conquered, attacking and being attacked,

defeating and being defeated. Jesus' death is often pictured as a brilliant military victory. Jesus outsmarted Satan and won the final battle. In a military world, Jesus triumphed over evil. Listen to Colossians 2:15, "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."

This is what great military leaders do. They go into battle. They win decisively and then they flaunt their victory, humiliating their defeated enemies. That's what Jesus did. He went into battle with the most brilliant tactic ever employed. He would defeat death by dying himself. When he died and rose again, he humiliated death and evil and proclaimed victory by the cross: the very tool that death and evil itself used to proclaim its own victory. The atonement is a triumph over evil.

In a relational world, we are reconciled. In a commercial world, we are redeemed. In a legal world, we are justified. In a religious world, Jesus is our sacrifice. In a military world, Jesus triumphed over evil.

There are a lot of different scriptural images for the atonement. Each of them draws from an area of human life that all cultures are familiar with: relationships, commerce, legal systems, religion, and the military. The atonement is a vast and complicated thing. The cross lies at the heart of what we believe and it has many facets to understanding and describing it.

We can never plumb the depths of all that the atonement means for us. I hope that exploring this gives us a sense of how big this is and how incredible God's work is in the world. This is what all of God's work has been leading up to. The cross is at the center. This is the heart of what we believe. Reconciliation. Redemption. Justification. Sacrifice. Triumph.

In this moment, everything changed. That's the atonement.

## **Rest in Christ's Atonement**

So we've seen how Jesus' words are a powerful statement of conclusion to a long era of God's work. We've tried to understand some of the different ways that work is described biblically and has been understood in history. Christ has completed this work of atonement. This is what we believe as Christians. But here's the problem: we don't really believe it. Of all the words of Jesus on the cross, this is one of the hardest to believe. We don't really believe it is finished.

But on the cross, Jesus says that atonement is finished. He did completely reconcile me to the Father. He did completely justify me. He did completely redeem me. Because he is my perfect sacrifice, God is completely pleased with me. Jesus did declare a complete victory on my behalf. The amazing application of all of this theology is that we can stop trying to atone for ourselves before God. We can rest in the fact that the atonement is complete. It is finished. Rest in Christ's atonement.

But most of us find that really hard to do. It's so hard to rest in what someone else has done. We want to pay things back ourselves. We want to fix the wrongs that we've caused. We want to earn our way back to God. We want to be worthy of his love. We don't want to accept his grace because we don't want to extend grace to others. We want to be in control so we want to atone for ourselves.

When parents discipline their children, they are giving them the freedom of atonement. When I put my child in time out for disobeying me, I'm not just punishing them so they don't do it again. They have broken something important. They have broken a rule; they have damaged our relationship. Time out gives them a chance to atone. They might think they don't want to be disciplined, but apart from being disciplined, they will carry around their guilt forever. But after time-out, I ask for an apology and tell them I forgive them and it's over. Atonement has been completed. They are free and our relationship is restored.

We started out this series by recognizing that we need forgiveness. We need to be forgiven if things are ever going to be set right again. We need all these things: reconciliation, redemption, justification, sacrifice, and victory. They come to us because of Christ's death on the cross and subsequent resurrection. We can't experience the freedom of forgiveness if we don't really believe Jesus' words on the cross.

That's what Jesus completed, but so many of us are walking around as if that atonement isn't complete. We are convinced that God isn't happy with us. We think our relationship is broken. Or we are convinced that we belong to someone else. We think we are worthless and nobody wants us. Or we walk around with the guilt of things we've done: lies we've told, anger we've given in to, and lust we've allowed to lead us astray. We think we're still guilty. Or we think that we need to please God. That we need to do something huge, offer an incredible sacrifice, impress him, please him in some way. We pray and memorize all the right words and read the lines that religion gives us. Or we find ourselves defeated. We're unable to conquer the forces in our lives; the past that weighs us down; the

friends that tear us apart; the habits we just can't get over.

We walk around feeling abandoned, worthless, guilty, sinful, and defeated. But then we see Jesus on the cross and we hear him proclaim, "It is finished."

The amazing message of the gospel is that all of these things are available to us. We can be reconciled with God. We can be reconciled with each other. We can be redeemed from our worthlessness and low self-esteem. We can be justified from the guilt that plagues us and the shame that hangs over our head. We can be sure that God is pleased with us because the perfect sacrifice has been offered on our behalf. There's nothing more we can do to please God. And we can go out in victory because of what Jesus has done. We don't have to live defeated lives. We can be free. Through Christ, we have won!

When Christ declares that it is finished, it is the end of something. But it is an ending that is really a beginning. It is the beginning of a new age in the world. It is the beginning of new possibilities for our lives. It is the beginning of what we have always longed for. It is the beginning of what Jesus called "life to the full."

In that moment, everything changed. We can rest in Christ's atonement.

## Conclusion

One word in Greek, "It is finished." We love the feeling of finishing something, but it's an elusive feeling. We hardly ever get there. Even if you managed to clear out your email inbox before church this morning, it's probably not empty anymore. It's so hard for us to finish our work, but Christ did. He finished the work that he was sent to accomplish. It is finished.

The work that he finished was the repairing of the brokenness that was first introduced when Adam and Eve disobeyed their Creator in the midst of paradise. They broke something that needs to be fixed. Jesus died on the cross to fix it. That's the atonement. Some people think it has primarily to do with victory: God's triumph over evil. Some people think it has primarily to do with justice: Jesus making amends to the Father on our behalf. Some people think it has primarily to do with transformation: an example and inspiration for us to live like Christ.

Each of these has some truth to it whether there is one theory that holds them all together or not.

The New Testament authors use a lot of different metaphors to describe this atonement. In relational terms, it is reconciliation. In commercial terms, it is redemption. In judicial terms, it is justification. In religious terms, it is a perfect sacrifice. In military terms, it is a triumph.

This is what God has done, but the most important thing for us to realize this morning is that all of these things have been done completely. They have been finished. We are completely reconciled to God. We are completely redeemed. We are completely justified. Christ is a completely perfect sacrifice and God has triumphed completely.

There's nothing left for us to atone for. We can stop trying. We can rest in his atonement. At the end of his life, at the end of his work, Jesus declared "It is finished." In that moment everything changed. Can you rest in that?

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Matt Maher | Mia Fieldes. *Christ Has Risen*. CCLI Song No. 5242683  
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<sup>2</sup>Keith Getty | Stuart Townend. *In Christ Alone*. CCLI Song No. 3350395.  
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