

## “Tetelestai!”

“He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15).

When he had received the drink, Jesus said, “**It is finished.**”  
With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit (John 19:30).

<sup>30</sup> οτε ουν ελαβεν το οξος [ο] ησους ειπεν τετελεσται και κλινας την κεφαλην παρεδωκεν το πνευμα.

Genesis 3:8-24; John 19:30, 20:1-8; Revelation 21:1-4, 22:1-6 <sup>1</sup>

The heavenly court was gathered for a solemn assembly. The leaders of the Council of the Archangels had requested an audience with God. “With all due respect, Sir, we have serious concerns about your plan to create another race of free beings. In our opinion, your last creation hasn’t turned out so well. As you know, Lucifer and his rebel army continue to wreak havoc in the cosmos even to this very moment. Are you really sure that you want to go ahead with this ‘human’ thing?” . . . .

. . . And God formed Adam and Eve of dust and breathed the breath of life into their nostrils; and they became living beings. God planted then a garden in the east, in Eden. There he put the persons whom he had formed.<sup>2</sup>

“Oh, no, Eve! I think he’s coming. He’s walking in the garden in the coolness of the day.”

### “WHERE ARE YOU?”

“Can’t you see, all-seeing Seer? I’m picking daisies here with Mother Eve, daisies of good and evil . . . she loves me, she loves me not.”

### “WHO TOLD YOU THAT YOU WERE NAKED?”

“This is good. Who told me, Lord? So tell me when I’m sick; or maybe that I ought to see the barber; but I can manage this one by myself.”

### “THEN HAVE YOU EATEN OF THE TREE?”

“THE tree? Good grief! You plant existence in a forest, a veritable jungle where one cannot discern his right hand from his left, and then expect me to distinguish tree from tree! I skipped the merit badge for trees. I am no forest ranger. Trees. Be more specific: the tree of life . . . the tree of the knowledge of good and evil . . . the tree which grows “in the midst” . . . the tree “from which you told us not to eat.”

“Let’s face it, Lord, this is unreasonable. You ask about a tree; forget your silly tree. I will “confess”—the woman whom YOU gave to be with me, she gave me fruit.”

### “WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?”

“Oh, all right. No more than this: we take the gift with thanks but spurn the Giver’s counsel for its use; or at the very worst, the gift accepted, we reject the Giver.

It may be said we were tricked (a term in any case untrue, since, if deceived, we wished to be deceived). But we were not. We gained the promised knowledge, and we live, enjoying it.

<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 16, 2017 – SonRise Service.

<sup>2</sup> This dialogue is a selected modification of Section I of *Come Sweet Death* by B. D. Napier (Boston: United Church Press, 1967), pp, 16-29.

“YOU are the problem, Lord. You force us into disobedience. The theologians want to call it pride, or even by the stronger term, rebellion. But this is nonsense. It is our nature to spurn the docile role of subjugation; to be not merely creature, but creator; to stand . . . alone.

“You give us all creation, to be sure—then shake a disembodied godly finger in our faces about a special tree. Well, God Almighty—if you are almighty—*let us be free of you . . . or let us die*. . . . It is the same, you say, you stubborn God? Then count me out, I say—and come, sweet death!”

**“I WILL GREATLY MULTIPLY YOUR PAIN IN BEARING CHILDREN. CURSED IS THE GROUND BECAUSE OF YOU; NOW EAT OF IT IN TOIL. SINCE DUST YOU ARE, TO DUST YOU SHALL RETURN.”** Then God sent Adam and Eve away . . . to till the ground from which they had been taken.

“This is a fine romance. A fine romance this is. A beautiful relationship—the Potter and his animated clay; Creator and his free, creative creature; the Father and his independent son—a beautiful relationship is fractured for nothing but a silly little tree. For you, an empty, loveless, lonely garden; for me, frustrated, unfulfilled existence. Congratulations, God and Man. *Well done.*

“Sweet Eve, you say you thought you heard him laugh? I heard him say, **‘HOW CAN I GIVE YOU UP? HOW CAN I HAND YOU OVER?’** Then a word about another silly little tree—an antidotal tree, a redemptive tree. And then—this must be when you thought he laughed—I think I heard him sob.

*“I think he wept.” . . .*

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. . . Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” . . . No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him (Revelation 21:1-4, 22:3).

**Between these two scenes, my friends, lies all of human history.** Between these two scenes is your story and my story. Between these two scenes lies what we know as “The Passion of Christ,” or “Holy Week.” Between these two scenes lies Good Friday, that awful Day on which God made Him who had no Sin to BE Sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21). And between these two scenes lies Resurrection Sunday, that glorious Day on which Jesus rose from the grave, having defeated Death itself, and having opened the Way for us to return Home to God. Here’s one of the first accounts of that moment . . .

*Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”*

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. **The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen.** Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed (John 20:1-8).

My friend, Gene Eller, who was for many years the Headmaster of the Nazareth Christian School in Israel, pointed out that this description of Jesus' head cloth is far more important than it may first appear. Gene told me that in those days, servants were not allowed to speak to their masters. At the end of the day, if they had accomplished all that had been assigned, they would simply appear before the master with their head cloth folded in their hands. The folded head cloth was the symbol that meant, "it is finished." Have you got goose bumps yet?

"It is finished!" is three words in English, but it was only one word in Greek—the word *Τετέλεσται!* (teTELlestai). **It was the greatest and most momentous word spoken since the creation of the world.**

So what was finished? The opening scene in the film *The Passion of the Christ* portrays Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane as He considers the dreadful hours that lie ahead. Jesus had told His disciples, "*There is a terrible baptism ahead of me, and I am under a heavy burden until it is accomplished*" (Luke 12:50).

Jesus had also told them, "*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost*" (Luke 19:10). In the Gethsemane scene in the film, Satan tries to use Jesus' human dread of physical pain to dissuade Him from His divine sacrifice that would set us free. As the scene ends, Satan releases a snake to attack Jesus, and Jesus crushes the snake's head with His foot.

Mel Gibson's portrayal of the serpent correctly makes a direct connection between the Garden of Gethsemane and the Garden of Eden. It was in Eden that God said to Satan, "*He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel*" (Genesis 3:15). That is to say, in the distant future Satan will wound God's Son at the Cross, but by that same Cross Satan's power will be destroyed.

As we've seen before, the Cross didn't catch Jesus by surprise. The Cross cast its shadow even over the manger of Bethlehem, for the Bible tells us that Jesus is "*the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world*" (Revelation 13:8). Jesus came "*once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself*" (Hebrews 9:26), and He is "*the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him*" (Hebrews 5:9).

So what was finished? Because of our sin, you and I "*were separate from Christ . . . without hope and without God in the world*" (Ephesians 2:12); but because of Calvary, God has forgiven "*all our sins. He canceled the record that contained the charges against us. He took it and destroyed it by nailing it to Christ's cross*" (Colossians 2:14, NLT). **That's what was finished!**

My friend Verlin Kruschwitz once said that Jesus made four things from the wood of Calvary's Cross: (1) He made the balance beam for a scale that shows the infinite worth of every person made in God's image; (2) He made a coffin in which to bury sin and death; (3) He made a ladder that takes us to heaven, a ladder let down from the top; and He made (4) a throne upon which he will reign for ever and ever as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. **That's what was finished!**

You've probably heard of John Muir, the famous explorer and naturalist for whom California's Muir Woods are named. In his book, *Travels in Alaska*, Muir told an amazing story of the Thlinkit and Sitka Indians, two tribes that readily accepted the preaching of the Gospel in Alaska in 1879. Here's what Muir recorded:

The Thlinkit tribes give a hearty welcome to Christian missionaries. In particular they are quick to accept the doctrine of the atonement, because they themselves practice it, although to many of the civilized whites it is a stumbling-block and rock of offense. As an example of their own doctrine of atonement they told Mr. Young and me one evening that 20 or 30 years ago [c. 1850] there was a bitter war between their own and the Sitka tribe, great fighters, and pretty evenly matched. After fighting all summer in a desultory, squabbling way, fighting now under cover, now in the open, watching for every chance for a shot, none of the women dared venture to the salmon-streams or berry-fields to procure their winter stock of food. At this crisis one of the Stickeen chiefs came out of his block-house fort into an open space midway between their fortified camps, and shouted that he wished to speak to the leader of the Sitkas.

When the Sitka chief appeared, he said: "My people are hungry. They dare not go to the salmon-streams or berry-fields for winter supplies, and if this war goes on much longer most of my people will die of hunger. We have fought long enough; let us make peace. You brave Sitka warriors go home, and we will go home, and we will all set out to dry salmon and berries before it is too late."

The Sitka chief replied: "You may well say let us stop fighting, when you have had the best of it. You have killed ten more of my tribe than we have killed of yours. Give us ten Stickeen men to balance our blood-account; then, and not till then, will we make peace and go home."

"Very well," replied the Stickeen chief, "you know my rank. You know that I am worth 10 common men and more. Take me, and make peace."

This noble offer was promptly accepted; the Stickeen chief stepped forward and was shot down in sight of the fighting bands. Peace was thus established, and all made haste to their homes and ordinary work. **That chief literally gave himself as a sacrifice for his people. He died that they might live.** *Therefore, when missionaries preached the doctrine of atonement, explaining that when all mankind had gone astray, had broken God's laws and deserved to die, God's son came forward, and, like the Stickeen chief, offered himself as a sacrifice to heal the cause of God's wrath and set all the people of the world free, the doctrine was readily accepted.*

"Yes, your words are good," they said. *"The Son of God, the Chief of chiefs, the Maker of all the world, must be worth more than all mankind put together; therefore, when His blood was shed, the salvation of the world was made sure."* **That's what was finished! . . .**

*. . . Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they were saying: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"*

*"Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power for ever and ever!"*

*The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped (Revelation 5:11-14).*

**"My sin**, oh the bliss of this glorious thought!  
**My sin**, not in part, but the whole,  
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more!  
*Praise the Lord, Praise the Lord, Oh my soul!"*

It is paid!  
It is completed!  
***It is finished!***

Τετέλεσται!