

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

The greatest word ever spoken

Presented by Steve Cooper

Good morning! What's the greatest word that's ever been spoken? Countless words have been uttered in so many centuries in so many languages. There have been many famous speeches that have moved millions and important announcements that have changed the world. What about the countless intimate conversations that have altered the course of history? Is it possible to identify one word that is the greatest word ever spoken?

I believe it **is** possible. This morning I want us to consider one word recorded in the Bible that was spoken by Jesus as he was about to die on the cross. It's a word we translate in English with 3 words: 'It is finished'. If we understand what Jesus meant by that word, it gives us a foundation on which we can stake our lives. Let's explore together this greatest word ever spoken.

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John's Gospel records that as Jesus was about to die on the cross, 'knowing that all was now finished ... [Jesus] said "It is finished"; and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.' (that's in John 19:30). It's those final words of Jesus 'It is finished' we are reflecting on today. These 3 words are the translation in English of one single word in the original language. That word is *tetelestai*.

Jesus was aware all through his earthly ministry that he had come to fulfil a special task given him by his Heavenly Father. John reminds us that Jesus said: 'For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him' (John 3:17). Later he said 'My food is the do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work' (4:34). Close to his betrayal, John records a prayer Jesus prayed to his Father: 'I have brought you glory on earth by accomplishing the work you gave me to do' (John 17:4). And so, on the brink of death, Jesus gives his last cry: 'It's finished!' 'It's all done!' 'It's complete!'

This single word cried out by Jesus in his final agony, *tetelestai*, is a word that people would write on a bill after it had been paid. The bill is dealt with. It's finished. The price has been paid. Jesus was thinking of the huge debt that every person owes to God. All of us have sinned and rebelled against our good Creator. We've ignored him and gone our own way. God is rightfully angry at our sin, and we owe him a debt we could never pay. But Jesus came and willingly allowed himself to be sacrificed in our place. As he suffered on the cross, Jesus was bearing the weight of our sin. But at the end, just as he died, he was able to cry that his work is now complete.

One of the great Christian leaders and missionaries of the 19th century was James Hudson Taylor. His life was transformed when he first discovered these words of Jesus, 'It is finished!' Taylor was a teenager at the time. He found a booklet in his father's library that presented an interesting Christian story. He scampered off to the hay loft, threw himself on the hay, and plunged into the booklet. Hudson Taylor was entranced by the phrase 'The finished work of Christ!' He was captivated by Jesus words 'It is finished!' If, he asked himself, as he lay upon the hay, if the whole work was finished, and the whole debt paid upon the cross, what is there left for me to do? 'And then', he later wrote, 'there dawned upon me the joyous conviction that there

was nothing in the world to be done but to fall upon my knees, accept the Saviour, and praise him for evermore.’ At last Taylor rose from his bed in the soft hay that he may kneel on the hard floor of the loft and surrender his young life to the Saviour who had surrendered everything for him.

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Just before he died on the cross, Jesus cried out: ‘It is finished!’ It’s really only one word in the original language: and it’s the greatest word ever uttered. Despite the terrible pain and suffering Jesus endured for us on the cross, he was able to still experience some satisfaction that he had completed his task and done the will of the Father.

Think of it this way: there are two high points in the Bible where God expresses satisfaction with what he has done. The first time is in the opening chapter of the Bible, where after the Lord completed his work of creation, he declared ‘It is very good’ (Genesis 1:31). The second time is this word spoken by God’s Son on the cross, when the work of rescue and deliverance was accomplished, and he cried out ‘It is finished!’

It’s a grand thing when someone comes to the end of their life and is satisfied, despite the suffering and pain, that they have done the task God gave them. I think of the last hours of the famous English church historian the Venerable Bede. He lived 13 centuries ago. As an elderly man Bede set himself to translate the Gospel of John into English. One of his young students, Cuthbert, has left us with the touching record. As the work approached completion Bede was obviously drawing close to death. The aged scholar was wracked with pain; sleep eluded him; he could scarcely breathe. The young man who wrote at his dictation urged Bede to stop the project. But Bede wouldn’t rest. They came finally to the last chapter of the Gospel; could Bede possibly live till it was done?

The scribe at last said: ‘And now, dear master, only one sentence remains!’ He read the words and the dying Bede feebly recited the English equivalents. ‘It is finished, dear master!’ cried the youth excitedly. ‘Ay, *it is finished*’ echoed the dying man; ‘lift me up, place me at that window of my cell at which I have so often prayed to God. Now glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit!’ And, with these triumphant words, the beautiful spirit of Bede passed to its rest and its reward.

The Venerable Bede died knowing he had finished his task, his work for God complete. Yet the word spoken by Jesus on the cross, ‘It is finished!’, is so much more profound and moving. Jesus had accomplished so much more in his death. He suffered for you and me, he absorbed the just wrath of God for our sin, he paid the price, he dealt with our debt.

I love the words of the old hymn ‘Man of Sorrows’. ‘Lifted up was he to die, “It is finished!” was his cry: Now in heaven exalted high: Hallelujah! what a Saviour!’

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We’re moved by the words Jesus cried from the cross as he died: ‘It is finished!’ But as humans we find it hard to accept that the work of God’s rescue for our sin is completed and accomplished. We don’t like to be told there is nothing for us to add to what Christ has done for us on the cross. We want to ‘do’ something to make sure our sins are dealt with and we’re in a right relationship with God.

Yet Hudson Taylor got it right when, as a teenager, he grasped that with Jesus’ sacrifice ‘the whole work was finished and the whole debt paid’. ‘There is nothing for me to do,’ he wrote, ‘but to fall down on my knees, accept the Saviour and praise him for evermore.’ The chapter in Taylor’s biography that tells of this spiritual turning point is entitled ‘*The Finished Work of Christ*,’ and it’s headed by the quotation: ‘Upon a life I did not live, Upon a death I did not die, Another’s life, Another’s death, I stake my whole eternity.’

When Jesus looked upon his work on the cross to rescue us from sin, he cried triumphantly ‘*Tetelestai*’ ‘It is finished!’ It’s not possible for us to add to the finished work of Jesus by trying to be good in order to please God.

There are times when any addition is a subtraction. Some years ago, the White House in Washington where the U.S. President lives was being worked on by painters and decorators. Two large entrance doors had been painted to represent black walnut. The contractor ordered his men to scrape and clean them in readiness for repainting, and they set to work. But when their knives penetrated to the solid timber, they discovered to their astonishment that it was heavy mahogany of the most exquisite natural grain! The work of that earlier decorator, instead of adding to the beauty of the timber, had only concealed its essential and inherent glory. We may try to add to the wonders of creation and of what Jesus has accomplished on the cross; but you can never add without subtracting. ‘*It is finished!*’

A young man once asked a Christian evangelist: ‘what must *I* do to be saved?’ The evangelist sensed that the young man was flippant, so he said: ‘You’re too late! You want to know what *you* must do to be saved, and I tell you that you’re hundreds of years too late! The work of salvation is done, completed, *finished!* It was finished on the cross; Jesus said so with the last breath that he drew! What more do you want?’ Startled and humbled, the young man eventually knelt in glad thanksgiving, and staked his life on the finished, completed work of Christ. His gratitude for so perfect a Saviour spilled over in future years into a joyful life of serving the Lord Jesus and living for God’s good purposes.

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The greatest word ever spoken was cried by Jesus triumphantly on the cross, just as he drew his last breath. He said *tetelestai!* ‘It is finished!’ The offence of our sin before almighty God is now dealt with. The bill is settled. The price has been paid. Jesus’ work is now complete. We can rest in him and trust in his perfect accomplishment.

‘Heavenly Father, we are humbled and so deeply grateful that your Son finished the work of paying for our sin. Your mercy and grace is truly amazing. Jesus is now our crucified Saviour and risen Lord. We trust in him alone, we fall in humble worship before you, we accept the Saviour and praise him for evermore. May we celebrate today and every day that the work of the Lord Jesus is complete and finished. Amen.’

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Acknowledgment: Some of the material used in this message is from F.W. Boreham, *A Handful of Stars* (London: The Epworth Press, 1922), chapter 9 ‘Hudson Taylor’s Text.’