

## **“Conversations on the Cross 6”**

Reading: John 12:12-16, 19:28-37

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The great American orator and baseball player Yogi Berra once famously said, “It ain’t over ‘til it’s over,” and my understanding is that he made that comment right before his team made an unlikely comeback for their season. Yogi Berra is famous for saying things that sound quite silly at first but then catch you and make you think. So, on the surface, of course it’s not over until it’s over; that’s what *over* means. But as you think about it, he’s making a rather hopeful statement: our team may be falling apart now, but we’re not done yet, so there’s still a chance, no matter how small. The flip side of this would be the despairing cry that now it really is over. We’re defeated. It’s done, it’s over, we lost, and now there is no more chance of a comeback.

Things would seem to be really, truly over for you when you’re dead, at least as far as those who outlive you are concerned. If you’re trying to do some great thing and change the world, dying prematurely means you’re finished. It’s over. Yes, someone else might rise up and carry the torch you leave behind, but your part of the story is over. Especially if you are so completely crushed that your enemies have triumphed over you in every possible way, and your followers have scattered in fear for their lives, and everyone who ever believed in you is now questioning whether their faith was misplaced because of your defeat, it’s over.

We might think that’s what Jesus is saying to us in today’s word from the cross, the last of His words before His death recorded in John’s gospel. Maybe He’s using His last, dying gasp to express gratitude that the torture is over, that He won’t have to endure any more, that He’s defeated and humiliated but at least the misery is now at an end. Finally, it’s over, thank God. Maybe Jesus is saying that *He’s* finished, that He has nothing left to give and no more hope. He’s crushed. He’s finished.

But that’s not what He says. In this word from the cross, Jesus points us to a mystery: “It is finished.” *What* is finished? And in what sense is it finished with His last, tortured breath? It would almost make more sense if He had said what Yogi Berra said, that it ain’t over ‘til it’s over, so that even as His corpse is hanging from the cross we would have some sense that He was looking forward to some continuation of His mission in a greater sense, that He’s making a hopefully and triumphant statement to His enemies. You may *think* you’ve won, but it ain’t over ‘til it’s over. But that’s not what He says. “It is finished.” *What* is finished?

The Greek word that John uses there to record what Jesus probably said in Aramaic does not have that sense of defeat. When Jesus says, “It is finished,” He does not mean, “It is over.” There is no sense of giving up or giving in here. Instead, “finished” here has a sense of being complete, done, brought to fullness. Whatever “it” is, Jesus is saying that this moment on the cross signifies that it is now complete as it was intended to be completed.

It is finished in the way that we all hope to finish the tasks and works on our to-do lists; the job is done. My to-do list is *never* finished. I have mine on my computer, and I have it set to renew certain tasks every day, so even if I complete my tasks for one day, I know that by tomorrow, I’m going to have to do the dishes again. In fact, I even put things on there like drinking coffee and taking a shower, not because I would forget to do them otherwise, but so that I can have something to cross

off early on in my day. No matter how haywire the day may have gone, at least I finished my coffee and my shower. With all of the wonderful things about modern life, one of our curses today, I think, is that we so rarely get the chance to feel *finished*. The to-do list never gets shorter, the schedule is never empty. Even in church, the preacher is always putting pressure on me to keep growing, so I never feel finished. It's good to finish things, and that's the sense of the word John wants us to hear from Jesus.

So Jesus is telling us that His brutal, tortured death and shaming on the cross is actually the completion of His task. "It is finished." What is *it*? *It* is the mission of the Messiah that Jesus arrived with the purpose of completing, and the cross is that mission's completion. Jesus being crucified is not a distraction from the mission, it is not an accident or a mistake or an unforeseen tragic end to an otherwise beautiful life, it is the method for finishing what Jesus started. The mission of God's Messiah always included the cross as part of the plan.

So Jesus isn't saying that it's over, He's saying that it's finished. What is finished? The mission of the Messiah is finished. So the next question then becomes, in what sense is it finished?

We know that there's more to the story, of course. We're still in the season of Lent, so we're focusing on the cross and not yet focusing on the resurrection, but even so, we all know that the work of Jesus did not end on the cross. In what way, then, was His work complete? An example that comes to mind for me would be how a lot of dramas or romantic comedies tell the story of how an unlikely pair of young lovers overcomes all odds to arrive at the point of finally declaring their love for one another and getting engaged to be married. If it's a movie, they spend the entire ninety minutes or two hours telling that story, and the story ends with that climactic proposal. But of course we all know, if we think about it, that the story is hardly *finished*. The couple on the screen may have finished one chapter of their relationship, and maybe it's even the most important or exciting chapter, but there's another chapter after that, and probably another and another. Falling in love and getting married is not the end of any couple's story; the whole point of that chapter is to set the stage for those people living their lives together.

So when we say that Jesus finished His mission on the cross, that is not to say that He retired after that. The mission is finished, but its impact is still reverberating across history. It is finished, but it is still changing lives. It is finished, but its mystery is still being revealed. It is finished, but it is not over.

There on that cross, Jesus' mission of faithfulness was finished. He was on the verge of death, and yet He had remained faithful to His Father all along, and that had been His mission. If we're going to understand how Jesus' mission was finished, we have to realize how often He was tempted to abandon His mission, or to ruin His mission by trying to accomplish it in some way other than the cross. We think of the story of how Satan came and tempted Jesus at the start of His ministry, and the temptation was to receive all of the power and glory of Lordship without any of the sacrifice and suffering. We think of Peter boldly telling Jesus that the disciples would not let Jesus be crucified; and the implication was that they would fight to bring about His kingdom. This was a temptation. We think of this story we celebrate today, of Jesus entering Jerusalem as a triumphant king, and the people were singing His praises — it was a temptation. It was appropriate for them to hail Him as king, because that's what He was, but Jesus would not build His eternal kingdom by riding the wave of

the people's popularity. They're praising Him today, but mocking Him in a few days. He had to be faithful to His mission of humility and love, not glory and power. His life was full of opportunities to try to bring about the work of God through means that were not godly, but Jesus remained faithful until His last breath, and so that mission was finished.

There on that cross, Jesus' mission of sacrifice was finished. He had lived a life of one perfectly devoted to God. Our guilt was laid on Him; by His stripes we are healed. The need for someone to offer a complete solution to the problem of sin was finished by Jesus on the cross. He was the sacrifice great enough to do away with the need for any more sacrifices, because of His faithfulness unto death for our sakes.

And so there on that cross, Jesus' mission of reconciliation was also finished. He was the one who was able to bridge the gulf between God and humanity. The problem of sin cut us off from God, and even among the Jews, who had been specially chosen and crafted and wooed by God for generations, that problem kept rearing its head. The people who were made for God could not know Him because of their blindness, and so they kept wandering astray. We suffer from the same problem. But on the cross, Jesus reveals God to us, and through His sacrifice He opens the way to God for us. Those who were broken and sundered from God and from one another can know a finished reconciliation because of Jesus on the cross.

Therefore, on that cross, Jesus' mission of creation was finished. Where the old race of humanity had followed their father Adam into rejection of God and His ways, the new race of humanity was birthed in Christ to be faithful to God no matter the cost. There, right in the midst of the old creation, right while humans were at their worst, Jesus created a new humanity, a new people of God, one that is willing to include and forgive and love even the worst of us. This mission was finished — not over, but finished, completed, on that cross.

So as Jesus is breathing His last, He knows that His mission is finished. The curse is broken, the tide has turned, the mission is complete, the sacrifice is made, the covenant is sealed, the relationship is reconciled, the temptations have been resisted. He wants those gathered around His feet to hear that they have misunderstood His mission, and that in spite of their mocking and abuse, He has been faithful and successful in that mission.

All of the work that was necessary for reconciliation with God and for inclusion in the new creation of God's kingdom was finished there on that cross. The question that faces each of us today is whether we are finished, too. Is the work of Jesus finished in you? That's not to suggest that we get to the point where we don't have room for growth, but I know that in my life with God I've sometimes gotten stuck going around and around, never letting Him finish a work in me. Sometimes we get stuck on one sin we've committed, or we doubt whether the blood of Christ really has done a complete work in me, or we refuse to listen to some counsel or encouragement from a spiritual mentor, and the result is that we never let God finish one work in us and move on to the next one. We don't finish being immature Christians, or we don't finish being afraid or resentful or lustful.

On the cross, Jesus declared that His mission was finished. His sacrifice is powerful. Maybe we think of the cross as being artistic, or historical, or dramatic, or tragic, but is it the act of God that

finishes us? Do we see it as being the necessary part of our completed lives? Does it close one chapter for us and begin an entirely new chapter?

The Christian life is marked by God convicting us of an area that needs change or growth, followed by our repentance, our commitment to stop going in that direction and start in a new one. Our repentance leads us to consecrate ourselves anew to Him, to set our lives apart for His service, and as we do that, one work is finished and a new one can begin. This is the life of Christian growth. This is our last word from the cross before Easter, the last one in the season of Lent during which we examine ourselves and cast aside our sin. What does Christ need to finish in you?



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