

# The Finished Work

Brad Jersak

**T**he *finished work* has become a popular catchphrase. This reassuring phrase comes to us from Christ's dying declaration of divine love's great victory. "It is finished!" he cries with his final breath (John 19:30).

Although Christ's last words were likely spoken in Aramaic or Hebrew, the Greek word John the Beloved uses to translate Jesus' words in his eyewitness account is *tetelestai* (from *teleo*, the verb form of the noun *telos*). This bit of linguistic trivia matters because to John, Jesus was saying something far more than "it's over." *Tetelestai* is a proclamation of fulfillment. The Hebrew scriptures and Christ himself prophesied his suffering and death and these are now fulfilled.

But *tetelestai* also speaks of completion—God's great plan has come to its **fullness**—redemption has been decisively **accomplished**. The New Covenant now stands as a **completed** or "*finished work*."

## WHAT IS "FINISHED"?

Thus, the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth marks an *end* ... but what exactly has been finished, completed, accomplished or fulfilled? First, we might say that "***It is accomplished***" is the Father's full and final answer to his Son's request, "*Father, forgive them, they don't know what they're doing!*" It's as if we hear both sides of the Father-Son conversation through the Son's own mouth:

*"Father, forgive!"*

*"Son, for you: consider it done!"*

Amen. But this suggests some important questions. Does all forgiveness of sin occur at the Cross? Had God never forgiven anyone before Christ came? And had Christ never truly forgiven those he declared forgiven during his ministry?

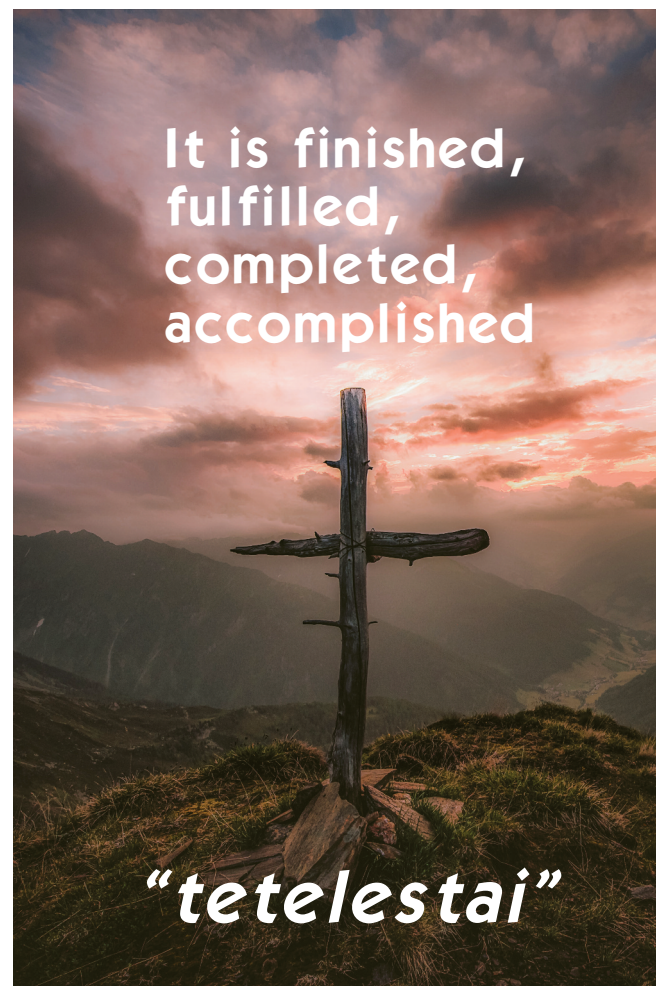
Was their forgiveness contingent on his forthcoming death? And how about after the Cross? Is asking for forgiveness after the Cross a denial of the "finished work"?

Did Christ not teach us to pray, "*Forgive us our*

*trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us?*" Or is that prayer defunct after Good Friday—a relic of the old covenant? Some think so. In fact, some of my friends say they are unable to pray the Lord's Prayer in good conscience for that reason.

Frankly, I don't buy it. But then how do we see forgiveness in relationship to "the finished work"? Briefly, the Scriptures describe forgiveness before the Cross, at the Cross and after the Cross:

**Forgiveness before the Cross:** The message of the prophet Hosea is that God has always been free to forgive from the very



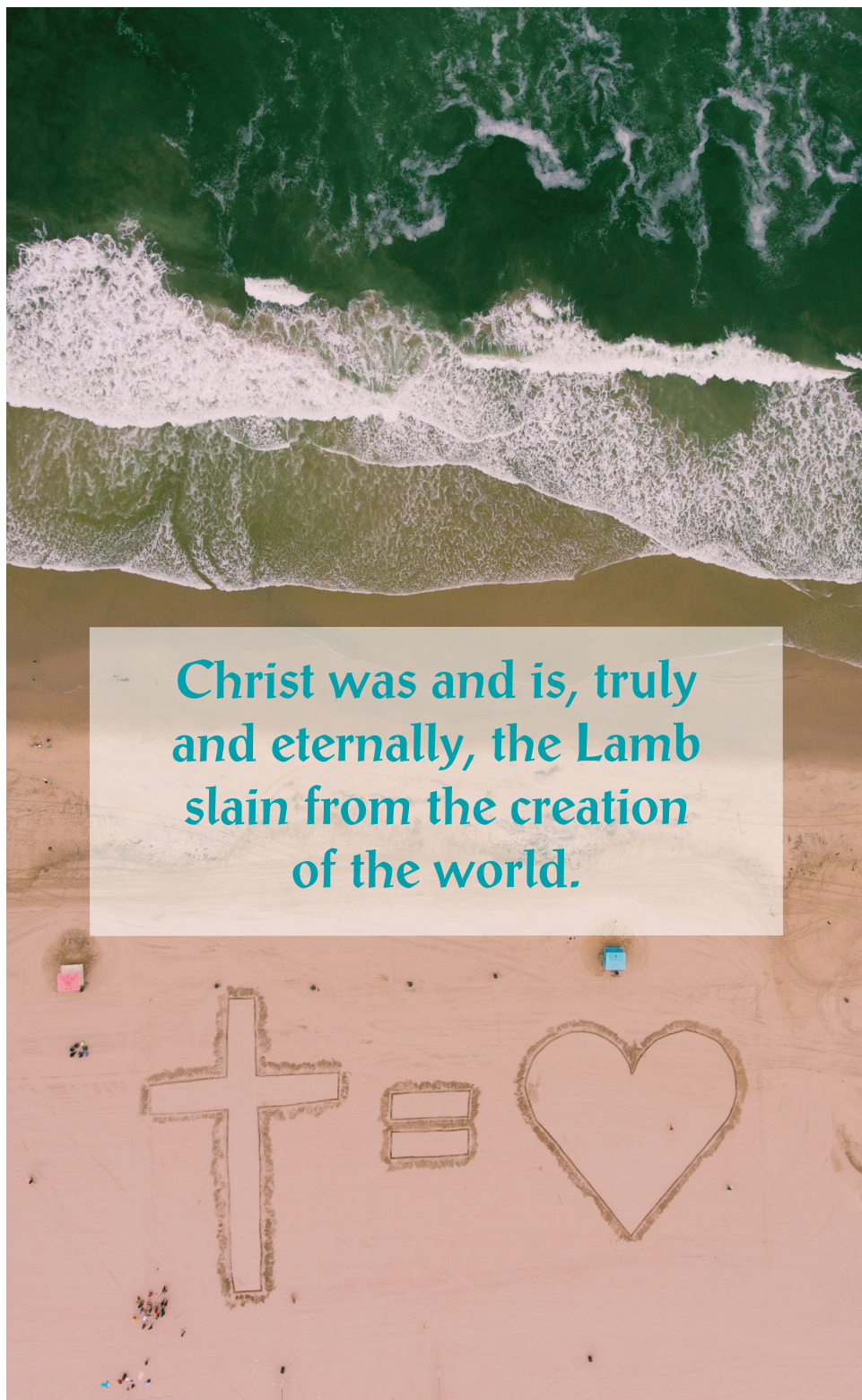
beginning, prior even to repentance. Christ spoke the words of forgiveness to many who had not even asked for it, and that kindness generated their response of love and faith. Forgiveness was not held in trust or waiting on deposit until Jesus died. It's a mercy that the people of God had experienced through the ages.

**Forgiveness at the Cross:** That said, the Cross is a “finished work” in that forgiveness and reconciliation are forever and always secured and sealed for all sin, for all people, for all time. At the Cross, Abba’s forgiveness is totalized and universalized, stretched out as high, long, deep and wide as his infinite love through the intercession of his beloved Son.

**Forgiveness after the Cross:** If that is so, why would we ask for forgiveness? Is that not a denial of the efficacy of the “finished work”? Are we implying it’s somehow *unfinished*? Not at all! Christ knows that with sin comes the guilt and shame from which emerge an impulse to hide. Like Adam and Eve, we experience alienation under the accusations of our frowning conscience.

Knowing this, Jesus prescribes a request for forgiveness so that we will come out of hiding, return to Abba’s house and discover that we’re *already* forgiven. The Lord’s Prayer and the practice of confession do not secure a forgiveness that was not given. They orient us to the “finished work” so that we run boldly to Abba instead of away from him. We receive and enjoy the “done deal”—the request is simply a way to open our hands to experience the “finished work” today.

When the same apostle John writes, *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness* (1 John 1:9), has he so quickly forgotten the “finished work” he alone reported? Not in the least! Again, he’s positioning us under the



cleansing waterfall of the “finished work” because we need to remember we’re already forgiven, and in remembering, we allow Abba’s love to wash out the sin itself and its effects.

For example, the cocaine addict who feels her powerlessness and shame is urged to become a truth-teller about her struggle (that’s confession of sin) so

she can hear Christ say *“It is finished”* to her personally and can begin the journey of having the addiction itself cleansed. It’s not enough for her to know she’s forgiven. She also longs to be healed of the disease that drives her substance-abuse and to be freed from the chains of her addiction. To her, “It is finished” is great news heard in the context of the rigorously honest confession of her need.

## THE “FINISHED WORK” DID NOT START AT THE CROSS

I find it necessary to clarify that the “finished work” did not actually begin at the Cross. Some preachers now actually teach everything Christ did or said prior to Good Friday was still an old covenant ministry to Jews and thus, not applicable to Christians. But while the work of Christ comes to its apex at the Cross, the new covenant project (aka kingdom of God) was initiated well before the nails were driven into our Lord’s hands. He was not just killing time or simply “born to die.” Let’s consider this by rewinding the Gospels from his Passion backward in time. Consider:

**Christ forgave throughout his earthly ministry:** He regularly announced God’s forgiveness to sinners prior to the Cross and even prior to their repentance. Forgiveness is a free act of grace on God’s part, not a *quid pro quo* transaction that first required repentance, restitution or punishment.

**Christ announced the establishment of his new kingdom:** We see him citing Isaiah 61 in his inaugural sermon at Nazareth, proclaiming the good news (gospel) of God’s Jubilee redemption. Having sat down, he says, *“Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing”* (Luke 4:21). Not “in three years when I’m crucified” but *today*. That’s why, from the beginning of his preaching ministry, Jesus said, *“The time has come,”* he said. *“The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”* (Mark 1:5). What

kingdom? What time? The era of the new covenant kingdom unveiled by God’s Son.

**Christ’s new covenant ministry was announced at his baptism:** Before Christ announced his kingdom through preaching, the Father, the Spirit and John the Baptist marked out his ordination at Jesus’ baptism. This is God’s beloved Son, the anointed Lamb who takes away the sins of the world. When the Lamb is slain on Good Friday? No. *Today!* But yes, because he *will be* slain. Immediately, Christ begins the “finished work” by entering the wilderness to face and overcome the tempter on our behalf. We might think of the wilderness tests as Christ’s D-day beachhead into the world of *this present darkness* (Ephesians 6:12 RSV). Or was it?

**Christ’s new covenant life was initiated at his conception:** Jesus’ “finished work” did not, in fact, begin at the Cross or in his preaching or in his baptism. The first landmark on the path to our redemption occurred when the Word became flesh. When deity and humanity were united in the womb of Mary in the person of Jesus Christ, that union marks the undoing of Adam’s fall and the dawning of a new humanity—the new covenant is launched. When God the Word assumed human nature, the incarnate Son set about redeeming humanity. This is the good news of the Incarnation and there’s *nothing* old covenant about that.

**Christ’s “finished work” is already a done deal from eternity:** It was entirely necessary for the “finished work” to transpire in time—the Incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection were non-negotiable space-time events. But also, what materialized in history has forever been true in the heart and nature of God’s eternal, self-giving love. For Christ was and is, truly and eternally, *the Lamb slain from the creation of the world* (Revelation 13:8).

## THE “FINISHED WORK” DID NOT END AT THE CROSS

We’ve seen so far that the Cross can rightly be called “the finished work” because in his death, Christ “accomplished” forgiveness, redemption and reconciliation for all people. We’ve also seen that the redemption project preceded Good Friday in the birth, baptism and ministry of Jesus Christ. We now need to consider how “the finished work” unfolds beyond his crucifixion. That is, whatever “It is finished” meant to Jesus, he also foretold further acts pursuant to his cruciform triumph. These include at least five striking events without which the new covenant

would *not* come to its *telos* (fulfillment). They are:

- Christ's descent into *hades* to conquer death and rescue the dead;
- Christ's resurrection to become the firstborn of all the dead, ensuring our resurrection;
- Christ's ascension to the throne of grace at the right hand of his Father where he reigns as Lord of Love;
- Christ's gift of the Holy Spirit, poured out on all flesh on the Day of Pentecost;
- Christ's glorious second coming when he *consummates* his kingdom and makes all things eternally new.

when it's also being worked out in real life through the transforming work of the Spirit.

The apostle Paul describes a process: as we behold the glory of the "finished work," we are *being transfigured* from glory to glory into the image of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18). The word "*transfigured*" in verse 18 suggests a *metamorphosis*—a gradual but very real transformation. Our *telos* (what we shall finally become) will be perfect Christlikeness.

Here's a scandalous confession: I have not arrived. Nor have you. Some claim they have. Again, I'd like verification from their

through their denial. But for those open to serious reflection, I leave these questions for thought:

- Were Jesus' teachings old covenant? How would we read Luke 4?
- Are we ultimately Paul-followers or Christ-followers (like Paul was)? Did Paul understand the Kingdom of God better than God the Son?
- When Christ issues his "commandment" to love God and love your neighbor, do we regard that as legalism? Is his call to "obey" a trigger word? Do we imagine Jesus as a legalist who preached salvation by works?
- How do we understand our "participation" in grace?

Are we a docile Bride who never reciprocates God's love lest we are caught "striving," or do we actively join in the divine dance of relationship with the Holy Spirit?

- Is the message of *CWRm* too "Jesusy"? How shall we hear Greg Albrecht's rallying cry, "All Jesus, all the time"?

For our part, Christ's call to "*take up your Cross*" is an invitation to follow him on the Jesus Way. It is in no way contradictory to the "finished work" or the grace of the Holy Spirit, who transforms and empowers us for the Christlike faith and life. May God grant us all the grace and peace to *run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith* (Hebrews 12:1b-2a). □

**Brad Jersak** has served on PTM's editorial team since 2012.

## How do we understand our "participation" in grace? Are we a docile Bride who never reciprocates God's love ... or do we actively join in the divine dance of relationship with the Holy Spirit?

The historic Christian gospel includes all these essentials *subsequent* to the "finished work," yet we also believe Jesus' truth that "*It is finished.*" How so? Because his ministry would be *dependent on* and *indivisible from* the "done deal" of the Cross. This becomes personal when I reflect on my own faith journey.

### THE "FINISHED WORK" IS NOT FINISHED WITH ME

The "finished work" is not finished with me. If you need verification, ask my family. What Christ completed on the Cross is still being completed in me. We like to think of ourselves as "perfect in Christ" or "the righteousness of God"—that's all very well and good but only if or

spouse, partner and children. But I probably won't get it from the apostle John, who said,

*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us* (1 John 1:8-10).

Some teachers blow off this passage as inapplicable to Christians because they can't see how it aligns with their interpretation of the "finished work," even to the extreme of denying there's such a thing as sin at all. By that point, I'm happy to give them the last word because I'm not here to break