

**What does “It is finished” mean?
A word study of John 19:30
A Series on What is Atonement: Part 1**

During His crucifixion, the last words of Jesus Christ were recorded to have been seven phrases. The sixth phrase, recorded only by John, was “It is finished.” What did He finish on the cross?

Of the four Gospels, John is believed to be the only one originally written in Greek, and while it is believed that Jesus spoke in Aramaic, there appears to be no record of any Semitic words here.

“It is finished” is the translation of the Greek term “tetelestai.”

It is the perfect indicative mood of the Greek verb “teleō,” which means “to bring to an end” or “to complete.”

The mood and tense of a verb indicates the attitude of the speaker and Jesus’ grammar reveals the following:

Perfect tense: the action was completed in the past with results continuing in the present. While Jesus finished the work He finished that day, the results are still in effect today.

Indicative mood: the act that took place or condition is an objective fact. The work that Jesus finished was definite and real.

Furthermore, Jesus speaks in a passive voice, which indicates that He is receiving or subjected to an action without responding or initiating a response. The work that Jesus was doing was in the passive sense!

With His own words recorded in the Gospels, Jesus reveals that He had a priority in doing His Father’s work:

Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work (John 4:34).

“For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day (John 6:38-39).

And Jesus reveals that He had a purpose in life and in death. Was Jesus utterance of “tetelestai” referring to the work He accomplished in life, death or both?

What was Jesus’ work in life?

At the conclusion to the Upper Room Discourse (John 14, 15, 16), John 17 is known as the “Lord’s High Priestly Prayer.” It is here where Jesus makes several prayer requests which emphasize the work His Father gave Him; it was His purpose in life:

1. Glorify God. The crucifixion would glorify Jesus for His perfect obedience and unwavering passion to consummate His death of atonement. God would be glorified for providing the means for His grace and forgiveness (John 17:1, 4-5).

Jesus wanted the world to know this quality of God that encompassed His greatness / authority and His moral perfection / beauty; it was a quality that human beings could recognize and respond in worship, praise, confess and petition.

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2. Teach.

Teach the eleven disciples who the one true God was so that they could have a relationship with Him. The Greek word for “know” describes an intimate personal relationship; eternal life is not simply an endless existence (John 17:3).

Teach the eleven disciples that He was sent by God and was the means for eternal life (John 17:2-3, 7-8). As Jesus was sent by God, the disciples were given to Him by God (John 17:2, 6, 9, 24).

Teach the eleven disciples the word of God (John 17:6-8). Jesus’ life was the word of God and basis for the New Testament (John 1:1).

3. Protect the early spiritual growth of the eleven disciples (John 17:12).

4. Sanctify and send all Believers out to the world to testify in the deity of Jesus and the means of eternal life (John 17:14-21).

5. Share God’s glory with Believers. God’s glory was God’s moral beauty and perfection of His character which was seen visibly in the life of Jesus Christ. This quality of God’s character is now shared by Jesus with Believers who are being transformed into God’s image (John 17:22-24).

What was Jesus’ work in death?

While on His way to Jerusalem, Jesus reveals to His disciples the reason for His predictions of death; He was to “give His life a ransom for many” (Matt 20:28, Mark 10:45).

The Greek term for “ransom” is “lutron” which is defined “as a means of loosing.” Thus the essential character of His death is to pay the price to free the lives of others.

For our natural tendency to disobey the moral laws of God, Paul teaches in Romans 6:23 that the “wages of sin is death.” God’s hates sin and His judgment of it (sin of any kind) is death, and this judgment is the ransom Jesus pays on our behalf.

Jesus gave His life as a ransom by paying the judicial penalty for sin and satisfying the wrath of God.

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Can the mood and tense of a verb and the voice that Jesus spoke of “tetelestai” provide information as to whether He was referring to His work in life or death?

Jesus	Perfect Tense	Indicative Mood	Passive Voice?
Work in life	The New Testament endures today as the result of Jesus’ life on earth.	The New Testament is objective fact.	No
Work in death	The means for salvation is still available to all.	Jesus Christ did atone for the sins of human beings.	Yes. Jesus passively received God’s judgment for sin.

From the grammar that Jesus used, it appears that “tetelestai” was referring to His work in death (it is finished!). While this is difficult to know with certainty, two other pieces of data provides further support of this interpretation.

1. In the “Lord’s High Priestly Prayer” of John 17, Jesus indicates in verse 4 that He had finished the work, which was in reference to His work in life. This statement is not in the context of His death.
2. In some Greek documents of the first and second century, the term “tetelestai” was used to indicate the full payment of a debt. (2)

References:

1. Vine WE, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, London: Oliphants Ltd. (1981).
2. Moulton JH and Mulligan G, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources*, Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co. (1976), p.630.