

Tetelestai, is more than a word for Easter

In many Easter sermons we are reminded that Jesus' final word from the cross, as recorded in John, was *Tetelestai!* which translated from the Greek means, "It is finished!"

Tetelestai is an incredible word and not just because it sounds great and is fun to say but for the multitude of meanings and implications wrapped up in it and the questions it inspires.

The main question inspired by this word that I would like to explore here is "What exactly did Jesus finish on the cross and what does it mean to me?"

Though Easter is the event that motivated my exploration of the word, tetelestai, the questions it raises, the implications of it, and the applications inspired by it, all go far beyond Easter and have a practical impact on how we live our daily lives as we attempt to be all Jesus wants us to be.

We'll start at the basics of the word and then end with application.

What was finished when Jesus cried "Tetelestai" as his last words from the cross?

In brief, now finished was the work of our salvation, the healing of the breach with our Creator. The price of our redemption was paid, peace with God was accomplished.

It was the ending of a story thousands of years in the making. The making of this story is one of the reasons why I encourage everyone to read their Bibles in chronological order.

The story of redemption is progressive, and it is only when you read it chronologically are you able to clearly see God's work through the ages.

Allow me to briefly review it—

In the beginning humanity was created to walk with God in a perfect paradise forever. Adam and Eve lived in peace and harmony with each other, their Creator, and their world.

But somehow, somehow, that was not enough for them.

They wanted the one thing God told them they could not have—to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Satan entered their paradise and promised them special knowledge, something they thought God was keeping from them, if they did eat the fruit.

We know what happened next. They trusted Satan rather than God. They thought they knew better than God did what was best for them.

Instead of the wisdom they thought they were getting

The consequences of their actions were far more terrifying and far-reaching than they could have foreseen.

Their actions introduced death and evil into the world and a future of estrangement from God, sadness, sin, hunger, and pain.

But the same God who created them understood completely what they had done. He also knew Adam and Eve on their own could not do anything to right what had gone wrong.

There was no “do-over.” Blaming each other, blaming the serpent, sorrow and regret had no effect on the consequences—they were inevitable. Humanity could never heal the rift they created.

But just as the consequences of sin are inevitable, it was also inevitable as part of the character of God that He would respond in grace and love

Because of that, at the same time God told Adam and Eve the judgement for their sins, He also promised that one day salvation for them would come and the breach would be healed.

From Genesis to Jesus’ cry of tetelestai on the cross the Bible tells the story of how God worked out that salvation to a predetermined conclusion throughout human history.

Thousands of years intervened. The Old Testament tells the story of how God focused on one man, Abraham, and one people, Israel as His living messengers to show that He was not finished with humanity, that He was working out a plan of salvation. The rest of the Old Testament story of kings and prophets, the faith and failure, all led up to the climax of the salvation story centered in the life and sacrificial death of Jesus.

All the Easter sermons about tetelestai tell the story of how God’s salvation plan was complete when Jesus died on the cross. That makes sense, it is all well and good, but as I thought about it, the lengthy human history leading to Jesus’ death on the cross raised additional questions I’d now like to explore.

Why did it take so long?

Why the millennia of stories of humanity struggling and suffering; why the pain and death, why the horrors and tragedies of human history? Why does human suffering continue for what Adam and Eve did?

God being an all-powerful God, why couldn’t He simply make it better immediately after the Fall? If you really love someone, don’t you give them what they want as soon as you can?

We obviously know the answer to that question is “no.” Anyone who cares for a child knows that if you give a child what they want immediately after they want it, you will end up with a spoiled child.

I think more than a lesson in good child raising is going on here

There are aspects of the character of God that He will not violate, even though one of his characteristics is that He is all-powerful. He cannot lie. He cannot quit acting in love. There are limits he will not violate that we cannot comprehend. Perhaps the long story of salvation was what it was, is what it is, because it could not be any other way.

Perhaps it has taken so long, from our human viewpoint to illustrate in a way nothing else could the immensity of evil in a choice to turn away from God and at the same time the immensity of grace from a loving God to work through history the long-term plan of salvation.

Whatever the reason—the story of humanity’s salvation had a predetermined ending and when Jesus died on the cross, he declared it with the cry—“It is finished!” or in the Greek New Testament, “Tetelestai!”

Scholars and commentators have made much of tetelestai

Some have commented that it was a word used to mark the cancellation of debts and how the death of Christ paid the debt we owed to God. That debt was illustrated in the sacrificial system through the thousands of years of Jewish history where an innocent lamb was sacrificed as a temporary covering for sin.

Jesus’ death was the final payment.

No more sacrifices were necessary after Jesus died.

Even the grammar of the word illustrates the finality of his actions. Tetelestai is in the Greek aorist tense—which means that it defines an action that took place in a point in time and has consequences that continue indefinitely. Jesus’ death on the cross was a one-time action and the effects of it last forever.

All the comments above are accurate about the Greek word, tetelestai, and the meanings just mentioned are what the readers of the Greek the New Testament would have understood from the word itself.

But there is one picky little issue here that bothered me

I could not help myself, though I feel guilty about even asking this question about the word tetelestai. I felt guilty because I do not want what I am going to bring up to cast a bad light on the many sermons that share what I just did—that Jesus’ death on the cross finished the long work of salvation that God planned from the time Adam and Eve sinned.

The meaning of tetelestai is accurate, the implications of the translation of the word are valid, and the word itself is a great reminder of the finality and glorious work of Jesus’ death on the cross.

The picky little issue remained because I kept researching and confirmed that.....

Tetelestai was not what Jesus actually said

He did not speak Greek from the cross. He spoke Aramaic.

None of the gospels are written in Aramaic, they are all written in Greek. They do quote one phrase in Aramaic from the cross when Jesus *cried* “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani (my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?)*” a quote from Ps. 22. Why they quote this cry of abandonment in Aramaic, but not Jesus’s final cry. Why they quoted one in Aramaic and not the other, we do not know.

Some might argue and rightfully so, that it does not matter that he spoke Aramaic and not Greek as the meaning of tetelestai is clear and the translation of the word he actually spoke into Greek is accurate.

Yet looking at the possible Aramaic word of what Jesus actually said adds additional depth and meaning to his final word.

So, what did he say?

One suggestion by a number of scholars is that the phrase he spoke was *mashelem*.

The root of the word *mashelem* word is *shelem*, which comes from a word many are familiar with—shalom, which means peace.

The meaning of the Biblical concept of shalom is not merely the absence of conflict, but an all-encompassing wholeness, restoration, tranquility. It is a way of living totally at rest with and in God.

It is the kind of peace Jesus promised when He said, “*I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart! And the peace I give is not fragile like the peace the world gives. So, do not be troubled or afraid*” (John 14:27, TLB).

Prior to that—

Shalom, peace, is part of the oldest benediction in the Bible, recorded in Numbers 6:24-26, NIV:

²⁴ *The LORD bless you
and keep you;*
²⁵ *the LORD make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;*
²⁶ *the LORD turn his face toward you
and give you peace.[shalom]*

When we add the Hebrew tense to the root word, *mashelem* could be translated, “the peace has been accomplished.”

From this we see that *mashelem* is a little more expansive in its meaning than *tetelestai* as it tells us ***what is finished***—in this case the conflict between humanity and our Creator. We are now at peace.

A relationship of peace, of shalom was the relationship God created people to have with Him in the Garden of Eden and that is the relationship humanity will have when all

things are restored in the new heaven and the new earth. That is the shalom, the peace, the *mashelem* Jesus accomplished with his death on the cross.

That is an astounding future to look forward to, but my restless heart has one more question—

If ultimate spiritual peace between us and God was accomplished why aren't we experiencing peace now?

The work of securing our salvation may be finished. In some massively cosmic way, a conflict between humanity and God might be at peace, but when I look at my life, my daily struggles, and the battles the world has been fighting with the pandemic and wars raging, though I can't deny there are times of supernatural inner peace in the midst of all that is going on, why do so many struggles continue?

Why are we still fighting inside and out?

Where is the finished work? Where is the peace it bought by the death of Christ?

Similar to my previous question and answer of why did God take so long to work out the plan of salvation through the thousands of years of Old Testament history—we don't ultimately know the answer to that question and we don't know the answer to this one either, to why if peace has been accomplished on the cross yet why there is so much war inside us and outside in our world.

Though we do not have a definitive answer why, it can help us accept our current situation when we understand this situation, like many others in the Christian faith is a paradox.

A paradox according to Dictionary.com is a "self-contradictory statement or proposition that when investigated or explained may prove to be well founded or true." In other words, two things that appear to be contradictory, yet may on a level we may not fully comprehend, be true.

That Jesus death brought us finished peace and that we do not experience that peace at this time is a paradox in this way.

One of my seminary professors years ago said that paradoxes were at the core of the Christian faith.

The reality that Jesus is both divine and human is a paradox. That the Bible a product of human creation and yet divine authorship is a paradox. That God is in control of all things and yet we have free choice is a paradox. Both parts of each statement seem to contradict each other, yet both are true.

Though unfortunately I do not remember which professor or which class this came from, I have found it comforting over the years to know we do not have to explain or understand every paradox in the Christian faith for me to trust the Creator of them.

Here we have the paradox of tetelestai, of mashelem the finished work of Christ on the cross, the accomplishment of peace with God, and yet the reality of the battles we still fight and lack of peace in our lives.

Both are realities are true—God’s peace and our current battles.

It is useful to examine this paradox; it is our reality after all, and ask why does God have us go through so many battles between His finished work on the cross and His wrapping up of human history?

I would like to share an analogy that I have found helpful and some advice from the Bible on how we ought to live until our time on earth is finished—how to live between the reality of peace accomplished and our complete experience of it.

The analogy that helps me, and I hope it will help you live in this in-between time—is that of ongoing spiritual warfare

Though something was finished on the cross, we are obviously still involved in a war. Eph 6:12 tells us we *“For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.”* Chapter 6 in Ephesians continues with encouragements to how to arm ourselves for this battle.

Jesus is very blunt about our situation in Luke 11:23 and the Message translation makes His point clear: *“This is war, and there is no neutral ground. If you’re not on my side, you’re the enemy; if you’re not helping, you’re making things worse.”*

In many places the New Testament is filled with analogies of spiritual warfare and the history of the church is filled with the history of spiritual and physical battles in the name of Christ.

So here we are—on the one hand we have Jesus’ cry of tetelestai on Good Friday and His glorious resurrection on Easter—on the other hand we have the often-brutal battles, warfare, inside and outside, big and small battles that flood our lives the Monday after Easter and every day after that.

That we are in a war is obvious, but one more analogy helps me make the most sense of it

I think that for Christians today, our experience of struggle, though peace has been won is like it was between the time of the battle of D-day when the Allies hit the beaches in Normandy on June 6, 1944 and the final unconditional surrender by Germany on May 7, 1945 (not to diminish the battles that continued in the Pacific, but for this discussion I’m only going to focus on the European theater of war).

With the Allied victory on the beaches of Normandy, considered one of the greatest military offensives in the history of the world, the outcome of the war was decided. It was finished, the outcome of peace was assured. Germany would not win the war. But the war was not over.

When Jesus proclaimed “Tetelestai!” victory was assured. But the war is not over.

Of the many stories and battles that took place in the intervening time, I would like to comment on two of them from World War 2 that I trust will give us additional inspiration and insight on how to live in our ongoing spiritual battles between the D-Day of the cross and the final victory at the end of time.

Two helpful analogies from World War 2 related to spiritual warfare

The first is the story of the French Resistance in Paris. D-Day was on May 7, 1945, but Paris was not liberated until August 25, 1944. As they had during the four years of German occupation, the French Resistance in Paris continued to fight. They could not quit because of the success of D-Day. They had to stay strong; they worked hard to encourage others.

“Victory is coming! We will be liberated!” was their message and that message was lived out in their actions.

There were many ways they fought the German occupation

In my work as a church communicator, I have been fascinated by their work as the communications they produced were as important in their war efforts as their physical battles.

They set up clandestine printing presses; they published newsletters and posters; they operated secret wireless radio channels (the podcasting of their day).

History records their communications kept others encouraged, fighting, and ultimately victorious.

This was no comfortable communication job in a safe church office; they operated behind enemy lines often without support, reliable supplies, or any hope of making it out alive.

Though their guerilla tactics and communications projects might appear small in the larger scheme of the war, they were vital to the overall victory. A rail line blown up, a road blocked, a bridge destroyed, a population encouraged to resist by wireless messages, a poster, or newsletter with a message to not give up, to hold on until victory arrived—each and every action made an immeasurable difference in the outcome of the war.

They knew if they were caught, torture, imprisonment, and death awaited them. They were not given the honor of a captured soldier—when caught they were brutalized by the German Army that they successfully defeated again and again. A number of them committed suicide in prison rather than give up the names of their comrades under torture.

Second, the Battle of the Bulge

A personal note here—before I started researching this topic, which for me means running down any number of interesting tangents to pull together what seems necessary in my final conclusions, I realized I was wrong in what I had always thought about the Battle of the Bulge.

It took place much later in the war than I had assumed before I started my research. It took place after D-Day when the outcome of the war was certain.

This dating reality is important to me personally and emotionally. I will explain why in a bit, but it reinforced to me the importance of a proper chronology to understand any historical event—which is why I recommend we read the Bible chronologically to correctly understand the Bible.

I have extensive material on why read your Bibles in chronological order, the life-changing benefits of it, why they aren't in chronological order, and schedules and commentary to help you do this on www.Bible805.com. Do check it out.

Now, back to the Battle of the Bulge itself

In addition to the underground resistance, there were larger battles fought after D-day that give us some insight on what it means to fight after the overall outcome of the war is decided. In World War 2, after D-Day, battles continued—the largest being the Battle of the Bulge, the last German offensive of the war.

History.com describes it this way, *“Hitler’s mid-December timing of the attack—one of the bloodiest of the war—was strategic, as freezing rain, thick fog, deep snow drifts and record-breaking low temperatures brutalized the American troops. More than 15,000 “cold injuries”—trench foot, pneumonia, frostbite—were reported that winter.”*

The battle lasted over a month

During that month, there were over 100,000 casualties and 19,000 died.

They were particularly tragic, in many ways unnecessary deaths, because these deaths did not contribute to either strategic advantage or the outcome of the war.

My uncle, my father's only brother was one of them. We have the postcard that he wrote to his family on Christmas eve from the battlefield and his Purple Heart medal. They never recovered his body and my grandmother, a widow who lived alone on a farm in Nebraska, always hoped he would come home.

Of course, he never did. The sadness of his death and loss of an only brother and second son colored our family history as it did thousands of other families, who lost even more. My father came home from the war after fighting in North Africa, Italy, and ending the war as one of the mop-up troops at Hiroshima. For many families no one came home and those who did were never whole. The costs paid by the resistance and the Allied armies between D-day and the end of the war were great.

But not everyone paid a price at that time; not everyone was against the Nazis

When Germany took control, some cooperated; they were collaborators. For a time, might made right; the easy way seemed the prudent way.

Collaborators sided with the Nazis. It may have started as simply not standing up for a Jewish neighbor. For some it progressed until they oppressed, betrayed, and sometimes killed friends and neighbors, now labeled enemies by Germany.

Perhaps the money was too good, perhaps their fear too great. Collaboration seemed like the smart thing to do, until it was not.

Collaborators do well when a war is raging. They are despised when it is over.

I would love to go on and on tell more war stories. I am inspired by military history as the analogies to spiritual warfare abound, but we need to move on.

As we look at the examples of the Resistance, the Allied armies, and the collaborators, here are thoughts on the application of these lessons for our battles

C.S. Lewis described our situation in this in-between time (between the cry of tetelestai and the return of Jesus making all things new) in *Mere Christianity* where he said, *“Enemy-occupied territory—that is what this world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage.”*

That certainly fit the description of the resistance fighters and it also sounds like a description of the heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11. They knew they were in “enemy-occupied territory.” They were not focused on this earth and what they could get out of it, but instead, as Heb.11:13 says, *“These men [people] of faith I have mentioned died without ever receiving all that God had promised them; but they saw it all awaiting them on ahead and were glad, for they agreed that this earth was not their real home but that they were just strangers visiting down here.”*

A vision beyond themselves

Beyond the oppression of their current circumstances is what the heroes of the faith, the Resistance fighters, the thousands of unnamed Allied troops who fought the final battles of WW2 had in common.

The vision was of a final victory and though they did not experience it as yet, they saw it, they held firm, and fought for it.

The Apostle Paul had the same focus when he said, *“But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God”* (Acts 20:24 KJV).

The “none of these things” he refers to were not little irritations

He was rejected by the religious and intellectual world he had grown up in when he declared that Jesus was the Messiah.

When he followed Jesus’s call to preach that message, it did not result in what we would call a “successful” ministry. He would go to a town, preach for a time, and then either get kicked out, imprisoned, stoned, flogged, or almost killed.

He would leave that town and go to the next one. The process of proclamation and rejection followed. His ministry ended by Paul being imprisoned in a Roman underground dungeon and taken from it to be beheaded.

That is the history of his life

And amid all those challenges, he did not let himself be distracted from his goal. Note the phrase that defines his goal—it was to “finish my course” and as you might have already realized, here is the Greek word, “teleo.”

It is from the same root word as “tetelestai,” meaning “to finish.”

Strong’s Concordance expands the meaning of “to finish” in this way “to make perfect, complete, to carry through completely, to accomplish, bring to an end, to add what is yet wanting in order to render a thing full, to bring to a close or fulfilment.”

Paul did not allow anything—not rejection, not pain, not suffering, or imprisonment, or anything else distract him from the ending point God had given him to “testify to the gospel of the grace of God.” Paul’s life in fulfilling goal that was not easy, but untold multitudes of people will live forever with God because of his tenacity in preaching and in writing a large part of what makes up our New Testament today.

Paul’s life also illustrates that what we do to finish our race is not only about us

Paul stayed connected with many people he ministered to and with, but there were many others he knew nothing about who his writings influenced. He had no idea of the multitudes who would read what he wrote. He did not judge his success by how many “likes” he got or the immediate popularity or not of his message.

Ultimately only God knows how our lives touch others but the lesson for us in this is that what we do, how we live during the in-between time does not impact us alone.

A friend reminded me of Russell Crowe in *Gladiator*, when he said, “What we do in life echoes through eternity.” How we conduct ourselves in the battles before our Rightful King makes his authority known is important. What we say or do to create echoes through eternity matters.

The echoes through eternity matter to more than the earthly people who view our lives

Here again are mysteries and unanswered questions, but when we look at the book of Job (please see my lessons on Genesis and Job, answers to the big questions of life on www.Bible805.com), the earliest of all written material in our Bible, in the first chapter God asks Satan, who has been wandering the earth, *“Have considered my servant Job? (Job 1:8)”*

This short piece is not the place to go into all the implications of that statement and the many lessons that follow from it (see again my other lessons on Job for that), but the thing to note here is that this exchange between God and Satan was prompted by their observation of Job’s life was whether it witnessed to a trust in God or not.

Consider that for a moment—Almighty God and the Adversary observing a human and what he has done and will do.

Job went through horrific suffering and loss, and though he was restored, he had no idea in his earthly life that his life was on display for hosts of heaven to see if he trusted God when all God blessed him with was taken away.

The tests in the book of Job are not presented as a one-time, unique situation

I don’t find that a comforting thought. I make enough of a mess of my life on my own without demonic interference, but Ephesians 6:12, whether I like it or not, there is an ongoing battle when it says, *“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”*

Not only are we not exempt from spiritual warfare, but the Apostle Peter tells us Satan continues to do the same thing today that he did when he was wandering the earth in the book of Job when in 1 Peter 5:8 where he cautions believers, to *“Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”*

This reality of unseen personages and powers at the edges of our perception is unsettling

We do not know how much or when they interfere in our lives, but we need to be alert to that reality as Peter reminds us. Peter also reminds us in verse nine that we are to resist them and in Ephesians six tells us to do that with the full armor of God.

We have no idea of the spiritual forces taking note of our actions and watching to see if we keep our faith in God and trust in Him in good times and challenging times.

I pray our faith stands up to whatever tests and accusations Satan throws at us.

With that in mind

As I've shared before, sometimes, when life is particularly difficult and it is hard to trust that God does love me and has the best in mind for me, when everything inside me, like Job's wife wants to "curse God and die," I like to shake my fist at the heavens and say out-loud, "I believe You are *a good God.*"

I want to shout out an echo into eternity and in some tiny way show Satan and whatever spiritual hosts who may be watching that I do not trust God only when things are going well, and I am blessed. I trust Him when I am confused, crushed, and in a puddle of tears because I know the real battle is over and a coming victory is assured.

In conclusion, what should we do now?

What are our tasks as we celebrate that Jesus finished the work of salvation, that the peace is accomplished, and yet we still fight?

First take time to evaluate our lives. Honestly ask if are we engaged in the great campaign of sabotage for the kingdom of God or are we living as a collaborator with an earthly kingdom that will not last?

Are we going along with what the world tells us is our best life now, that we deserve everything we want, that if we can dream it, we can do it, and the assorted claptrap of affirmations on social media and best-selling books that constantly push us to focus on ourselves?

We might not think of overtly sinning; we might even focus on "good things," but do we see in the use of our time and money a primary focus on ourselves, on what makes *us* feel good above all else?

Do we tell ourselves that later, when whatever happens that we are waiting for to happen, that THEN we will focus on others and doing more God-centered things?

Are we ignoring the needs of others—knowing the needs of the world and our neighborhood are immense? We cannot claim we know nothing about them because the media constantly bombards us with the cruel reality of suffering around us.

Don't just feel bad or do a nice thing here and there. Learn to live like a resistance fighter

The French Resistance was not a disorganized gang of anti-German fanatics. Behind their guerilla actions they had extensive training manuals, tactics, and a code of conduct. We do well to follow their example.

If you are unsure of what it means to a resistance fighter for the Kingdom of God or if you are uncertain of what your calling, your assignment from God is, your Bible will tell you. Your Bible is your manual for training, tactics, and code of conduct. It has inspiring stories and specific advice on how to fight the good fight.

It will equip you for the war, warn you of dangers, encourage you when you are exhausted with trying. My place in the battle is to help you get the resources of the Bible into your life. Bible805.com exists to help you know, trust, and apply the Bible—please make good use of it. There are links to podcasts, videos, and many resources.

Regardless of any resource there or encouragement from any source, an essential part of your drill as a good fighter your battles is that you....

Read your Bible daily

As you read, journal about what it is telling you. Ask God to let you know what you need to do to “finish your course with joy.”

Start with obedience to simple things and that obedience will tune your heart to an attitude of listening to God that can grow into obedience in greater areas.

Attempt to look beyond the pains and pleasures of this earth to what is eternal as you set your goals and dream your dreams for the Kingdom of God.

Do now for God what you intend to do in an uncertain future, because for each of us the battle will be over before we expect it to be.

Determine to finish well

Whether death takes you home to Jesus or whether you are alive when He returns and finally liberates planet earth, what will be your report to your Commander in Chief?

Will you cringe as a collaborator or celebrate as part of the Resistance Army for the Kingdom of God?

If you aren't sure; if you want to make changes to step up and fight for the glory of your Lord before the hosts of heaven, start today.

I pray when we are called to give an account of how we fought our battles that we will all celebrate—having fought the good fight and finished the work Jesus called each of us to do. With victory, may we shout, ***tetelestai!***

It is finished, the victory is won, the battle over, the peace is accomplished, forevermore.