

Exegetical Brief: John 19:28—"I Am Thirsty" and the Fulfillment of Scripture

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The enormity of God's love for us is most stunningly displayed upon the cross. During our Good Friday observances each year we have opportunity to ponder the words Jesus spoke from the cross as he paid the penalty of our sins and secured our salvation. These seven sentences expose the heart of the Suffering Servant of the Lord, and they are rich in appropriation for us Christians who watch at the foot of the cross through our worship. "What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul!"

Blessed is the pastor who expounds the full meaning of these seven words in his Tenebrae devotions. Perplexed may be the pastor in preaching the full meaning of Christ's fifth word from the cross: "I am thirsty" (John 19:28). That our Savior would utter these words reminds us of his intense suffering. This is certain. But the way the Evangelist introduces Jesus' fifth word gives us more to think about, more to share with God's people. Consider the text:

Μετὰ τοῦτο εἰδὼς ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὅτι ἤδη πάντα τετέλεσται ἵνα τελειωθῇ ἡ γραφή λέγει Διψῶ

The fact of the fifth word is that Jesus said, "I am thirsty." The reasons why he uttered these words are subject to exegetical debate. How do we "shade" the participle εἰδὼς? What of the ὅτι clause? And the all-important question as far as understanding the fifth word is concerned: what does the ἵνα clause modify?

Most English versions understand the participle εἰδὼς to be attendant to the circumstance of the main verb in the verse. Thus, Jesus' "knowing" accompanied his "saying." What did Jesus know as he spoke? That's where the ὅτι clause comes in. It gives us the content of what Jesus knew. Note the subject and verb in the ὅτι clause: πάντα τετέλεσται. What Jesus knew as he spoke his word was that all things had been accomplished. The perfect tense of John's verb emphasizes how completely Christ's sacrifice upon the cross had gone according to God's plan, as well as how far-reaching the effects of that accomplished plan would be. There was nothing more for Jesus to do upon the cross to win our salvation. All things had been accomplished. This is John's inspired testimony. In fact, Jesus himself would leave no doubt just moments later by using the same τετέλεσται as his sixth word from the cross (John 19:30).

How shall we understand John's ἵνα clause? The favorite interpretation of commentators and translators has been to understand it as a purpose clause. The statistics are on this side. Most ἵνα clauses in the New Testament are of the purpose/intended result variety and, according to Hendriksen's famous analysis in the introduction to his commentary, the ratio of ἵνα purpose clauses to all other ἵνα clauses in John's Gospel is 5-2. Even if we agree that this ἵνα expresses purpose, there still remains a question: what does it modify, the verb preceding or the verb following? Another way of asking the question: does the ἵνα clause express the purpose of all things being accomplished (τετέλεσται) or the purpose of Jesus' saying "I am thirsty" (λέγει Διψῶ)?

All the English versions consulted seem to lean toward taking the ἵνα clause with what follows. In other words, the purpose of Christ's words "I am thirsty" was to fulfill the Scripture. Some translations go so far as to render the τελειωθῇ in the ἵνα clause as "to make (the Scripture) come true." In footnotes and margins we are then told that the Scriptures that were "fulfilled" or "came true" by Jesus' fifth word from the cross are Psalm 22:15 and 69:21.

The exegete-preacher might want to take a second look at this interpretation, however, since it raises a number of questions. First, there's the placement of the ἵνα clause. The only reason a ἵνα clause would come *before* the verb it modifies would be for special emphasis. There does not seem to be such a special emphasis here. Besides, the preceding clause ("Jesus, knowing that all things had already been accomplished") leads naturally into a modifying ἵνα clause. This is especially true if we understand the ἵνα clause to be a content clause, something ἵνα often introduces in John's style of writing. Now consider the meaning of the Evangelist's introduction to Jesus' fifth word. Before he said "I am thirsty" our Savior knew in his divine soul that all things

for our salvation had already been accomplished, namely, that the Scripture had been brought to its goal in his perfect sacrifice.

This idea seems to fit better with the verb within the ἵνα clause, τελειόω. If John had wanted to speak of a specific Scripture passage (like Psalm 22:15 or 69:21) being fulfilled in Jesus' "I am thirsty," why not use the verb he uses everywhere else for Christ's fulfilling Old Testament passages, πληρόω? Indeed, that is the verb he used just a few verses earlier (19:24) to state how the soldiers' casting lots for Jesus' seamless garment was the fulfillment of a specific Old Testament passage (Psalm 22:18). But instead of πληρόω John uses τελειόω when referring to Scripture in our passage. One would think John is not emphasizing the fulfillment of a *specific* passage but rather the fact that *all* the Scriptures that foretold the Suffering Servant's sacrifice found their goal in the Christ who went to the cross that dark Friday.

What is being suggested is a slight shift in our understanding of "I am thirsty." The grammar and vocabulary of the verse need to be stretched a bit for that fifth word to be the direct fulfillment of a specific Old Testament passage. It would seem to be more natural to understand "I am thirsty" as the suffering request of the perfect Substitute who knew his sacrifice had been completed according to God's plan. Then, and only then, would he accept a drink.

Jesus, in your thirst and pain,
While your wounds the lifeblood drain,
Thus fulfilling Scripture's plan:
Hear us, holy Jesus! (CW 139:5)