

Rev. Gregory Gibbons
Lola Park Lutheran Church
Redford, MI 48239

John 19:30

NAMES OF WONDROUS LOVE – THE ALPHA AND THE OMEGA

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Today is Good Friday. It is a very special and solemn day. The altar has been stripped. The cross is draped in black. The songs are not peppy, but slow and solemn. This is the day that we observe the death of Jesus. Some of you remember when everything stopped on Good Friday afternoon from noon to 3:00 p.m. Almost all businesses were closed, and the churches were full of people. Children would ask, "Why is the bank closing at noon?" They would be told what Good Friday meant. Today most businesses would require you to take at least a half day of vacation and fewer and fewer congregations even have afternoon services.

A very strange thing is going on here. Yes, we observe the death of a person, but that person is also the very Son of God. Jesus is the eternal Son of God who cannot die, yet he dies. The old German hymn translates, "O sorrow dread! God himself is dead!" How can such a thing be? It is a day that each and every one of us should spend in quiet contemplation. We can talk all we want to about the members of the Sanhedrin and Pontius Pilate and the Jewish mob and the Roman soldiers, but at the end of the day, my sins put Jesus on the cross and he stayed on the cross for my sins.

As I contemplate my sins, they take me back throughout my entire life. I remember fighting with my sister and hitting her simply because she was there. I remember telling lies to my parents. There are a lot of things I really don't want to go into about high school or college, but I'm not proud of them. I did not always take people's words and actions in the kindest possible way. I did not help and befriend my neighbor in every bodily need. I did not lead a pure and decent life in word and deed. I did not do all I could to help my neighbor improve and protect his property and business. I did not use God's name correctly by calling upon it in every trouble, praying, praising, and giving thanks. I sinned by the bad things I did, and I sinned by the good things I failed to do. Each and every one of those sins took my Savior to the cross.

This afternoon we will look at the phrase "the Alpha and the Omega." Perhaps you know that they are the first and the last letters of the Greek alphabet. Jesus said in the book of Revelation: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End." Why do we consider this such a special name? Think of how we use this phrase in our language. If a hardware store advertises, "We have everything from A to Z" they claim that you don't have to go anywhere else. They have everything you will possibly need for the task you are looking to do. Maybe that is true, maybe it isn't. When Jesus says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega," it is true. Jesus is everything we need for salvation. He is THE ALPHA AND THE OMEGA.

Jesus had been on the cross for over six hours. He had been subjected to so many painful atrocities. Physically he had suffered the blows of being punched in the face, being whipped by the Romans, having a crown of thorns pressed into his forehead and of course the agony of crucifixion. The Roman soldiers could make a crucifixion last for three or four days by manipulating a number of things. This one would be different. This one would be over that afternoon for a number of reasons. Jesus had physically suffered more than most who were crucified. Emotionally he had to be hurt by having been betrayed by one of his disciples, denied by another and forsaken by the rest. Many pilgrims welcomed him to Jerusalem by placing their cloaks and palm branches as he came on Sunday. At least some of them were now involved in the mob crying out, "Crucify him!"

Darkness covered the earth for three of those hours. From noon to three when the sun should have been at its zenith and daylight the brightest, an eerie darkness came over the entire earth. The man on the center cross would let out an agonizing cry: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Those were the words originally penned in Psalm 22. These were words we just sang a few minutes ago. These were words that would be fulfilled by the Messiah. He would be alone, forsaken by God.

Truly this man suffered in a way that the Roman soldiers had never seen before. Some perhaps had been veterans of many crucifixions. They saw men who were as tough as nails break down at their deserved punishment. The crowd may have demanded Jesus' death, but he faced death like no other. He asked forgiveness for his enemies. He promised paradise to a dying thief. He looked out for the welfare of his mother. When all was said and done, the centurion and his men would exclaim, "Truly this was a righteous man! Truly this was the Son of God!" The Holy Spirit would lead them to make that expression of faith.

Crucifixion victims were left to bake in the hot sun. Sometimes soldiers would be merciful and offer the criminals a sedative to help ease the pain. Jesus would refuse that drink. He would suffer the full agony of the cross with all of his senses. And then things would change. The total darkness was lifted. He would cry out, "I am thirsty!" This showed his humanity. The drink of cheap wine vinegar would allow him to moisten his parched lips and speak once again.

We could say that these words were the most important in the history of the human race. It is no exaggeration. It was important that these words be heard by all. We could not have them spoken so silently that people would say, "I think that he said..." They would be spoken with a loud voice so that all could hear. "It is finished!"

We say three short words. In Greek it is actually only one word. What is finished? Well, we certainly could say that Jesus' suffering was finished. That is what most would think as far as looking at these words. But was that what Jesus was referring to? Was this a salute to death and a goodbye to life? Was Jesus simply relieved that all the pain and torture was over, and he would never have to deal with such pain again?

These are not words of defeat, but rather the words of victory and conquest. The one who would soon bow his head was the one who had completed his mission. The Father had sent him from heaven to earth to accomplish something that only he could accomplish. He had to crush the head of Satan. He had to destroy the power of death forever. He had to take away the sting of sin. He had to live a perfect life of love in place of every human being who ever lived and let that perfection count for us. He had to take every last sin committed by every last sinner to the cross and pay the ransom price for it by suffering hell. And then he would have to rise from the dead on the third day. There might be a number of people who would volunteer for such a mission, but there was only one qualified to succeed. He is the one who was the Father's beloved Son, in whom the Father was well-pleased.

And he would succeed. These words announce Jesus' victory. His work of salvation was over. There was nothing more left to be done. The law had been fulfilled. The penalty for every sin had been paid in full and heaven's gates would be opened wide. That would be so visibly demonstrated that very afternoon as the people assembled in the Temple for the evening sacrifice. At the precise instant that Jesus died, the curtain of the Holy of Holies was torn in half from top to bottom. No longer would the blood of lambs and goats and oxen and other animals need to be shed day after day for the sins that separated us from God. There was one sacrifice for sin, the Lamb of God who was slain. His holy, precious blood covered the sin of the world.

Would you like a receipt? Most of the time I say, "No!" When I get a cup of coffee in the morning from McDonald's, I honestly don't know what I will do with my receipt for a senior coffee costing me a dollar. I do want a receipt for larger purchases. I need them for filing my taxes and I want it in case something goes wrong and I need to prove that my purchase was paid for.

The word Jesus spoke was written on tax bills in the Greek and Roman world. It pointed out that one's bill was paid in full. If a bill is paid in full, then that means that nothing more needs to be paid. On the bill of sin that we had rung up before God, our bill reads, "Paid in full" with the crimson blood of the very Son of God. Nothing, absolutely nothing more needs to be added. The Apostle Paul tells us, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Jesus took care of it from beginning to end, from Alpha to Omega.

That is the wonderful news we observe today. Our salvation is an accomplished fact. Jesus did it all. There are still those who feel that we somehow have to add something or that Jesus started the process, and we have to finish it by our good works. They are basically calling Jesus a liar. If Jesus says that it is finished, then it is finished. That is so comforting. Our salvation is either a gift of God's grace or it is something that we earn, at least in part. If it is something that we must earn, then there is always the matter of uncertainty. Have I done enough? Have I been truly penitent? Have my thoughts been pure as I did these things, or did I just go through the motions to get done with it? There is nothing that we do that is not tainted by sin. But when we look at what Christ did, we see that everything is pure and perfect. The dying thief on the cross did nothing but take Jesus at his word. He would be with Jesus in paradise that very day. We must do the same. It is finished!

As Jesus spoke those victorious words, he would bow his head and die. St. Luke tells us that he said, "Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit." Jesus was coming home. He had completed his mission. He laid down his life of his own volition and he would take his life up again on Easter Sunday.

Because Jesus died for us, we don't have to fear death. Death is something that is so feared by so many. Even though we live in a world where so many people try to convince themselves that there is no God, our consciences speak differently. We know that it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of a holy and righteous God. We do know the sins that have marked our lives from childhood.

But that debt has been paid in full. Death has lost its sting. It can no longer harm us. When we die, we will simply fall asleep and wake up in the arms of Jesus. We grieve over our sins this day. We see them all placed on the man on the cross. He took each and every one of them gladly and paid for all of them from Alpha to Omega. He is everything we could ever need, now and forever! AMEN.