

June 17-23
New Testament Lesson # 24
“It Is Finished”
(Matthew 27; Mark 15; Luke 23; John 19)
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I. The Trial

At Jesus’ trial, the High Priest demanded whether Jesus considered Himself the Son of God. Jesus indicated He did. Upon these words the High Priest exploded crying, “Blasphemy!” In that accusation, **he laid his own sin upon the Christ**. Blasphemy means showing contempt for God. But Jesus *was* God, and thus it was Caiphas who spoke blasphemy. Thus Caiphas helped fulfill the witness of the Day of Atonement, when **Israel’s own sins would be laid upon an innocent scapegoat**.

In Gethsemane Jesus had already shouldered Caiphas’ sin. As Israel’s scapegoat, he had accepted his sins among all other men’s sins.

We must remember that it was the religious leaders of that day who led the people to reject Christ. **And we must remember that these leaders were not those who had the right to the priesthood. These particular leaders were false leaders, having obtained their religious leadership through bribery of secular leaders.**

They were not the ones who should have been the anointed leaders of God.

II. The Scourging

This was a very significant part of the Atonement. Adam and Eve, after their transgression, tried to conceal their nakedness and hide, no longer daring to appear in the presence of such Holy beings. Manifesting their mercy, the Father and Son provided a covering --- “coats of skin.” This was no casual act. **This covering required the sacrifice of a living creature. That creature was not only slain, but its skin stripped from its body.**

This ancient event taught of the sacrifice of Jesus the Christ.

Looking anew at what Jesus suffered, we recognize in His scourging He *was* likely stripped. That nakedness allowed the full extent of the scourging, to be “beaten from the upper back to the lower extremities of legs.”ⁱ

But beyond that, due to the sharp pieces of metal and bone attached to the leather straps which scourged him, Jesus’ skin would have been torn and opened repeatedly, exposing over and over again the underlying flesh.

Through the horrible event of scourging, not only His clothing, but much of the Savior’s *covering skin* was stripped away. Note one meaning of the Hebrew word for atonement means “a covering.” Now we can understand in fuller measure how “by his stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5). It was more than His taking upon Himself any lashes meant for us. Through the uncovering of both His garments and even His flesh, **He was providing His covering to cover us.**

And because of Jesus’ covering, the faithful and repentant can dare to enter again into God’s presence. Thus was wrought the at-one-ment. To make One is another meaning of the atonement.

III. The Fuller meaning of the Covering of Christ.

Jesus as Bridegroom covered His Bride

Jesus likely endured the mortification of nakedness more than in the eyes of the scourging soldiers. The truth is, Rome stripped their crucified victims and hung them in the most public of places so that the *many* could impute to them shame.

As we should learn from Adam and Eve, **all will feel shame for sins when facing God. But through repentance and faith in Christ's atonement, which is His fully offered covering, we may dare to stand there in peace.**

After the Lord deliberately established this truth through Adam and Eve, He continually reinforced and heightened its significance, as through Boaz and Ruth.

Many Biblical interpreters recognize Boaz served as a pattern for Jesus Christ --- as a "bridegroom." Ruth desired to be wed to Boaz. To do so, Ruth first *uncovered* his feet; then pleaded he *cover* her! "... spread therefore thy skirt over thine handmaid ..."(Ruth 3:9). The covering Boaz gave teaches of the greater covering Christ offers.

Furthermore, Ruth's story adds the marvelous truth **that we can not only be covered, but brought into His household as an intimate because of it.** ⁱⁱ

Again, teaching through prophecy and warning, the Lord stresses *the absolute need* for His covering. He warned once betrothed but now apostate Israel that unless they repent, He would *remove* the covering of His skirts, that the world may see Israel's nakedness (Nahum 3:5).

IV. The Lord also taught another aspect of these truths in a closely related way ---again in the ritual of *The Day of Atonement*.

The holiest place in the temple signified God's presence and was separated from men by a veil. That veil symbolized the great barrier between a Holy God and unworthy men. Only the high priest was allowed entrance, once a year, to sprinkle sacrificed blood from a goat on the mercy seat, for *forgiveness* of Israel's sins

Jesus fulfilled all the witnesses contained in this ritual. Before Gethsemane, He offered His High Priest's intercessory prayer (John 17). He prayed for Oneness. In Gethsemane and through scourging and crucifixion, he gave the offerings needed to achieve Oneness. His chief offering was His own Lamb's blood but made into the more rebellious goat's blood by taking upon Himself men's sins.

Jesus' blood was as blood sprinkled on the **true mercy seat --- God's heart**. Here was *His offering for At-one-ment, and for acceptance of His covering for men's nakedness*.

Both offerings were accepted. Just as Jesus finished His offering and yielded up His spirit, "the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom" (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38). The barrier was torn asunder. Jesus had opened the way; repentant men could reenter God's presence. ⁱⁱⁱ

But each person can only dare to enter that holy presence if he knows his nakedness has been revoked, and his sins covered (the Hebrew meaning of atonement), by Jesus the Christ.

V. The Crucifixion fulfilled the Concept of the Tree of Life

Christ's death upon the cross was the promised Tree of Life. The cross, made of the wood of a tree, reached into the heavens like a tree. Christ's flesh and blood which hung there were the fruits of that tree. *

In Genesis, man could not partake of that tree. But promise of its blessing were

continually given. Moses used a portion of a tree to turn bitter waters into sweet. Aaron's rod from a tree budded and brought forth fruit. These taught of Jesus upon the cross, a portion of a dead tree. And from it came sweet waters and new life. That the tree of Calvary was the tree of life was understood, written of, and painted by early Christians (Maxwell Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, p. 123).

The Book of Mormon similarly testifies of this truth. Nephi gains his understanding of the Tree of Life, the "Love of God," when he is shown Jesus' life, ending with His sacrifice upon the cross (1 Nephi 11:33). The "Love of God" was most manifest when Jesus' submitted Himself to be hung as Sinner, in total humiliation, upon a cross, for Us.

Christ, then, *became* the Tree of Life, partaking of a bitter fruit and offering His fruit instead, of which man could now partake and reenter the presence of God.

References to death upon a tree were part of the Mosaic Law. "... he that is hanged [on a tree] is accursed of God" (Deut. 21:23). Some say the Jewish leaders may have sought with particular diligence to see Jesus crucified, because they knew this portion of the Law. To them it meant if Christ were hung upon a tree, **He was accursed and could not possibly be the Messiah. Ironically, what they did not understand was that in doing so they helped fulfill His role as Messiah.**

The apostles later did understand. "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree" (Galatians 3:13).

Crucifixion itself was inflicted only upon slaves or the lowest of criminals. Furthermore, Christ was hung between two criminals. His death in this manner showed He accepted the role of slave in the bearing of our burdens (indeed, he'd been sold for the price of a slave) --- and the role of sinner for the sake of others' sins. "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin" (2 Corinthians 5:21.) **He hung upon a cross, a sign of sin, bearing our sins, and between two sinners, that man might be made sinless.**

VI. The Crucifixion fulfilled the concept of the Tree of Light

As Jesus' hanging on a cross was the True Tree of Life, it was also the True Tree of Light.

The lampstand (menorah) which burned perpetually in the temple before the Holy of Holies, had a central upright stem with six branches, and was considered a "tree of light." It was to be made of *beaten gold* (Exodus 27:20). Such specifics caused some Jews to believe **that someone would suffer so greatly they would glow with light** (Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: The Later Masters*, p.177). He who suffered greatly that He might radiate light was Jesus the Christ. The light which radiated from Him upon the cross was His Powerful, Perfect Example, lived in the bitterest of circumstances. He it is who lights the way into the Holy of Holies. And He was that light "set upon a hill."

ⁱ Kittel, G., ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co.) Vol. IV, p. 517

ⁱⁱ The Israelite bridegroom in traditional weddings symbolically covers the bride with a portion of his clothing.

ⁱⁱⁱ There are scholarly disputes about the temple veil being rent. The argument is that it could not have been the first heavier veil. The scriptures make it clear it was the veil before the Holy of Holies. And I am swayed by Edersheim, a Jew himself, who says of the priests who must have seen the veil, "And they all must have understood, that it meant that God's own hand had rent the Veil, and for ever deserted and

thrown open that Most Holy Place ...” Edersheim even suggests, referring to Acts 6:7, it may be due to this miraculous sign that many priests later became Christians. See Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (USA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), p. 895.

* Jesus being crucified upon a cross was very important. It was the prophesied form of His death, and the cross had a lot of significance for His death. (See Elder Gregory Schwitzer, “The Meaning of the Cross for Latter-day Saints,” *The Ensign*, July 2011, p. 26-28). Unfortunately, in time the symbol of the cross has come to be worshiped. (As previously, the Israelites had come into apostasy for worshipping the ephod, even though it was only meant to be a symbol. See Judges 8:27).

Therefore, in our teaching and study, we should come to appreciate and understand the significance of the cross. But the brethren are right in not using it as a perpetual fixture in our churches, to prevent its coming to be worshipped for itself.