

Jesus' Final Exam

By Deacon Bob Waters

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This evening's Good Friday message was written by Deacon Bob Waters. The text for this meditation comes from the Gospel of St. John chapter 19, verse 30.

“So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, “It is finished!” And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit.” John 19:30

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

When Evelyn and I went to college, we were at a small university at the time numbering about 6,000 students. We had the usual number of classes, featuring at least a mid-term examination and a final examination. Some classes had more exams than that, but nearly all classes had final exams. There was even a finals week so that not all the exams were given the same day. We struggled through tests throughout our years in higher education and had to study for each one. Some of those exams were murder. We did just about anything in order to pass those tests--including cramming and cheating, at least in my case. I remember once having cheat cards under my jacket as I took a history final. I used them some, and did all right, but as I was leaving to turn in my exam paper, all my 3X5 cards fell out of the bottom of my jacket. As I look back, I think it must have looked like one of those round balls that have a polar bear or sled in them, that, when turned over, cause white flakes to swirl around in the liquid and float to the floor.

Since the Lord had a plan for me later in life, He allowed one of my fraternity brothers to witness the event and distract the professor while I gathered up the cards. Man, was I sweating. Of course, I barely knew the Lord's Name at the time, so it never crossed my mind to thank Him. But, you know, we all have exams of one kind or another at various times in our lives. They are almost always tests in which God is looking at our threshold of faith. And most of us cheat in one way or another. Most of us usually get away with cheating too. But the important thing here is that we sometimes fail too.

Christian history is full of failed exams. All of them have to do with faith in one way or another, just as mine did. One is recorded in Numbers when God told the Israelites to go and scout the promised land. Moses sent 12 scouts who spent 40 days checking things out. When they returned, they all proclaimed the land to be fabulous, but 10 of them said they could never conquer the inhabitants. Only two, Joshua and Caleb, had enough faith to say that God would deliver the land into their hands. Well, the Israelites failed the test and refused to go take the land. They did not realize their mistake until God struck the 10 spies with the plague and told the Israelites that they would wander in the desert for 40 years. Then they decided to go against God's judgement and marched against Canaan, ending in a devastating defeat. God is a rough grader.

Peter also had a final exam. He, of course, proclaimed that he would never desert Christ, even if he was putting his life in danger. But when his test came, around the fire in the courtyard, around the place where Jesus was being tried, he denied that he even knew the Savior. He failed when the cock crowed at his third denial. Jesus had told him he would fail, and he did. He had tried to cheat, but too many people around the fire recognized him and called him on his identity. He then went off and wept bitterly until after the resurrection.

God is a hard grader. Of course, Peter gets all the blame, but all of the 12 failed the exam in one way or another. But, one failed more miserably than the others. Judas.

Judas was given a final exam too. In the upper room, he was given an opportunity to partake in the Passover meal. Jesus had given him the place of honor and mentioned several times that the one who betrayed Him was the most cursed of all men. He even told them that He knew who the betrayer was, and let Judas know by giving him the bread dipped in the bitter herbs first. Judas ignored all the warnings and went ahead with his plan by leading the soldiers to capture Jesus in Gethsemane. Even then, he was really given one final test when Jesus asked, "Do you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?" a sign of love and loyalty. Judas flunked too and, when he realized his mistake, he returned the blood money and hanged himself. God is a hard grader.

But today, we remember final exam day for Jesus. Jesus had many tests during His three years. First, He was tempted by Satan after His baptism. We all remember that He was taken into the desert where Satan offered Him kingdoms if He would just quit His job and worship the prince of this world. By using scripture, Jesus overcame the three temptations and passed His first

exam. Scripture tells us that Satan left Him until a more opportune time. I think that time came when Peter tried to talk Him out of going to Jerusalem. Jesus recognized the test. He said, "Get behind me, Satan" He knew who the tempter was.

He was tempted again in Gethsemane when He prayed, "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me." Satan had Him looking for a way out. He passed the test, though, when He said, "Yet not my will but Yours be done." We know this was a heavy burden because He went to the three chosen ones who were asleep and begged them to "pray that you are not tempted." Then when Judas came with the temple guard, Jesus passed another test. This was a very hard test, you know, because He could have called on armies of angels to get Him out of their grasp. He could have cheated in this way, but He didn't. But of course, His final exam came while He was nailed to the cross.

Many of you may remember when there was a great upheaval in the Christian world a few years ago, when Martin Scorsese decided to direct a film of a book by Nicolas Kazantzakis called the *Last Temptation of Christ*. The upheaval was caused by the movie portrayal of Jesus as a lustful man who was intimate with Mary Magdalene. He was also portrayed as a man who couldn't make up His mind as to what He would do in His life. He just drifted along and ended up on the cross instead of pursuing a definite plan.

Well, when I read the book 30 years ago, I didn't recognize that aspect of Christ's characterization. I only remember His final exam. Jesus had received the test in Gethsemane and when He returned from His third session in prayer, He was determined to continue with His mission because an angel from Heaven appeared to Him and strengthened Him. And, being in anguish, He prayed more earnestly, and His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground according to Luke 22:43-44. What do you think caused His anguish if it wasn't fear of His final exam?

The book takes an entire chapter describing Jesus' thoughts while on the cross. Actually, those thoughts were put there by Satan. He dreamed, being in the dull near comatose state He was in, what it would be like to not be the Messiah. Instead, He thought of Himself as just an ordinary man. He dreamed that He somehow got down from the cross before He died and sneaked off to another town, married and had children. He lived life as the carpenter that He was no doubt trained to be, making furniture, carts, and crosses for the Romans.

One day, He dreamed, Peter came to the town and found Him. Of course, Peter's entire world was shattered to find that the man he had thought to be the Messiah, the man he thought had died and rose from the grave, was just an ordinary man who had escaped death on the cross. Jesus, in His delusionary condition, saw that He had not only betrayed Peter's trust, but the trust of all those who had come to faith in Him as Messiah. When He saw what misery He would bring on the world, by following the challenges of the people who wanted Him to come down from the cross and save Himself, He refused. Once again, He recognized who was giving the exam--Satan. He stayed on the cross.

But outside the world of the Kazantzakis novel, God was indeed giving Him a test. God had placed all the sin of the world on His spirit and expected Him to take the punishment for our sin. God turned His face away from Him because God cannot stand to look at sin. Now, we all know that Jesus, being God, could have come down from the cross, sparing Himself both the physical and spiritual agony He was suffering. But He passed the final exam. He remained on the cross, taking the burden of our sin and its punishment to the very depths of Hell. This was the mission He was to accomplish while living on this earth, and He passed the final exam.

Back when I was in college, there was a system many of us yearned for. It was rumored that in larger universities, the classes were so large that people could be hired to take finals for a student. We all thought that would be great. Another story that floated around was of one professor who said that his students could use any references that they wanted, providing he or she could carry the reference into the class with him or her.

When exam day came, one enterprising student carried a graduate student into the room to take his final exam for him. That sounded even better. Actually, that is exactly what God did for us through Christ. He looked down at mid-term and said, "Those guys down there are never going to pass my final exam. I had better go down there Myself and pass the test for them." He did. He came to earth and stayed on the cross for the entire exam period, and when it was over, He declared, "It is finished!" Praise God that He passed the test for us and did not come down from the cross. He was able to withstand His last temptation, and we have been redeemed because of that.

Now, He gives us faith enough that we can confess our sin to Him and worship Him for His sacrifice as we are doing here tonight. Trusting God to forgive us, trusting that God accepted Christ's final exam with our name on it, as

our final exam. Have you really come to the place where you can confess from your heart that you cannot pass God's test, even if you fill your pockets with cheat sheets? Have you accepted the truth that your sin has been taken away from you at the cross? I pray that you have. Christ had many tests during His time on this earth, but praise God He passed His final exam securing a passing grade for you and me. Amen

“The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 4:7)