

# Mark 15:36-39

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 23 July 2017

Preacher: David MacPherson

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. You've really got to hand it to Shakespeare. He had a way with words. And I wonder, is Jesus' last cry, loud cry as Mark describes it, just sound and fury signifying nothing? Perhaps at best signifying no more than the cruel and senseless end to a worthy if deluded life.

Well, Mark thinks otherwise. Verses 37 to 39 that we're going to be concentrating our attention on this morning form a distinct section within his passion narrative in which he describes the moment of Jesus' death preceded or accompanied by a loud cry, but also identifies two distinct but related outcomes of the death of Jesus, namely the tearing of the curtain in the temple and the confession of the centurion. It's very clear that this is Mark's intent to present the reality of the death of Jesus. He breathes his last, and as a result, these two things happen. And he records these two events that follow immediately upon and as a result of the death of Jesus. So, we have three elements to consider. We have the loud cry that Mark speaks of with a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. We have a torn curtain and we have a centurion's confession, the first, the death of Jesus being the immediate cause of the second and third element that we have to look at this morning. So, we'll begin with the loud cry, the death of Jesus. Mark doesn't just tell us that Jesus breathed his last. He could have said that and in that way informed us that the time had come and that Jesus died. But rather, he tells us that he did so with a loud cry. With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. What was that loud cry? Now, some have suggested that it was no more than an inarticulate final groan as death overcame another powerless victim.

But I think everything points in a very different direction. This was no inarticulate groan but a conscious and content-filled cry, which rather than begs the question, what was the content of this loud cry? And you might say intriguingly or frustratingly, Mark doesn't tell us. But he does make clear that the cry was significant in provoking the second of the two outcomes that we've highlighted, that is the centurion's confession. Because there we read in verse 39, when the centurion who stood there in front of Jesus heard his cry and saw how he died, he said. So, this loud cry was significant in provoking the confession of the centurion. That much is clear, even though Mark doesn't actually tell us the content of the loud cry. But it's clearly significant. And given that it's significant, it's important for us to try and establish the content of the cry. And in this, the parallel accounts can help us, and particularly John and Luke's account. All four Gospels speak of a loud cry, but only John and Luke tell us what Jesus actually cried out. Now, both provide different but complementary accounts of Jesus' final words. We want to just notice them in the order that we imagine they were spoken. We don't know for certain the order in which they were spoken, but there seems to be an order that would appear illogical, if you wish. And the first information we have given by John concerning the content of this loud cry is in John 19 and verse 30. So, if you want to turn with me or just listen as I read from John 19 and verse 30, there we read as follows, when he had received the drink,

Jesus said, it is finished. With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. And so, the manner in which John presents what Jesus says, it's very clear is that it was at the moment of his death, with that, having said that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. He breathed his last. And what were the words that Jesus expresses there? The content of this loud cry, well, it is these words, it is finished.

What was finished? Well, his life was finished. He was about to die. And that's certainly true, but more than this. This was a cry of triumph, announcing the completion of the mission commanded or commended to him by his Father. This was the conclusion of the same mission that Jesus spoke of with prophetic anticipation in the Garden of Gethsemane. There, just a page or two before in John's Gospel in chapter 17 and verse 4, Jesus is praying to the Father and He prays in this way, I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. It's interesting that the manner in which Jesus expresses himself, he hasn't yet gone to come, but he is still able to speak with this prophetic confidence of completing the work the Father had given him to do. And this is the mission that he is able to declare in this loud cry as having been completed. It is finished. Jesus had lived his life of perfect and sinless obedience, and he was now embracing his atoning death in the place of sinners, bearing the curse and punishment due to others. And so he cried in a loud cry, it is finished. It is done.

[ 7 : 06 ] Nothing more is required. Now, that has huge significance for us that we're not going to delve into in any detail this morning. But it certainly declares that there is nothing you can add and nothing you are required to add to what Jesus has already done for you. He has done all that is needful, all that is required for you to be brought back into fellowship and friendship with God. And all that we need to do is acknowledge what He has done and trust in what He has done in our place. But then in Luke 23 and verse 46, we have Luke's account of the final words of Jesus. And let's just quickly read what Luke says there. Luke 23 and verse 46, and we read as follows, Jesus called out with a loud voice, the very language that we find in Mark's Gospel. Jesus called out with a loud voice, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. When He had said this, He breathed His last. It's a loud cry. It's at the very moment of His death.

It practically accompanies His death. And Luke tells us that these were the words that Jesus pronounced, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. If the words, it is finished, were a cry of triumph, then these words are a cry of trust, that it seems reasonable, immediately followed the cry of triumph.

He declares that He has completed His work and immediately then addresses to His Father these words, this cry of trust, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. It's helpful to note that the verb employed here in Mark's Gospel translated commit, into your hands I commit my spirit carries the sense of Jesus consciously and deliberately delivering up His life into the hands and care of His Father.

Death will not overcome Him without His say-so. He hands over His life and He does so into the care of His Father.

As He emerges from His darkest hour, Jesus is able once again to address God as His Father. We noticed a few weeks ago in the very depth of His suffering, He cried out to God, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani, unable to pronounce the word Father or Abba, but now He is able to do so again.

[ 9 : 49 ] And surely He did cry out in Aramaic, Abba, into your hands, Abba, I commit my spirit. And so, He embraces death and He does so with this cry of trust. So, we have the loud cry that accompanied the death of Jesus. But Mark also records two outcomes that this death secures for us. And the first is described for us or illustrated for us by this event that takes place in the temple, the manner in which this curtain is torn in two. There we read in verse 38, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. Now, this is all very dramatic, but what does it mean? Just to complicate matters a little, but there were two curtains in the temple. There was a curtain separating the court of the women from the holy place or the temple itself, we might say. There was a temple complex with the different courts and then within the temple complex there was the temple itself per se. And there was this curtain that separated this court of the women from the holy place or the temple. But then within the temple, there was also a curtain that separated the holy place from the most holy place or the holy of holies, as it's sometimes described. The holy of holies, as you know, was the inner sanctuary that the high priest entered once a year on the day of atonement to make atonement or secure forgiveness for his own sins and the sins of the people. So, you have these two curtains. Mark simply tells us that the curtain was torn into which of these two curtains is he speaking of. We're not told, and so either is possible.

If it was the first curtain, it would certainly have been a more public demonstration of God's response to the death of Jesus. That first curtain was visible to the multitudes who were there in the temple.

But I think we have good reason to believe that Mark is speaking of the second curtain, the curtain that separated the holy place from the most holy place. And among the reasons we have for coming to that conclusion, we have the testimony of the writer to the letter, or of the letter to the Hebrews, who provides, we might say, a commentary or explanation of the significance of this event. And he does so with reference, very explicit reference to the second curtain, the one dividing or protecting, if you wish, the most holy place. Now, Hebrews deals with that in some detail. We're not going to do that this morning, but let me just quickly draw your attention to what we find in Hebrews 6 and verse 19. In Hebrews 6 and verse 19, we read this, we have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary, the holy of holies, behind the curtain, this curtain that was torn in two, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever in the order of Melchizedek, one who doesn't have to go in year by year, but who now resides there in the most holy place.

Jesus is presented here by the writer to the Hebrews as having entered the inner sanctuary behind the curtain. And he's done so, we're told, on our behalf. But not only on our behalf, but as the one who leads us into the holy of holies as we trust in Jesus as our high priest and Savior. By the death of Jesus, the curtain was not only removed, but torn from top to bottom. But let's just delve a little more into this matter. What's the significance of this tearing of the curtain? We've identified which curtain it was, the location of the curtain, how it protected this most holy place. So, let's just think a little bit more about that. The curtain served, indeed it was designed to separate sinners, the likes of you and me, from the presence of God. That was its purpose. It was designed to separate us from God, to keep us away from God, for our own good, for our own well-being, because we couldn't possibly enter into the presence of God, sinners as we are. That was its purpose. The holy of holies was the place of God's dwelling and presence on earth and amongst His people. It was a place of such holiness and glory that sinful men could not enter in. The curtain was a magnificent 60-foot-high no entrance sign.

That's what it was. It was saying, it is forbidden for you to come beyond this curtain. You must not enter in here, for here God dwells. Who could enter the most holy place? Well, we might put it in this language, only the holiest man, the high priest, from the holiest nation, the people of Israel, on the holiest day, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, could enter the holiest place, and then only with a blood sacrifice, granting Him protection as He entered into that most holy place.

[ 15 : 49 ] That's the purpose that the curtain served. But we're told by Mark that this curtain that served this purpose was torn from top to bottom. And this was very deliberately and explicitly an act of God.

The very direction in which the curtain was torn from top to bottom points to that reality. God is the author of this act of destruction. We might even call it this act of divine vandalism as the curtain is torn from top to bottom.

Now, why would God destroy the curtain that He Himself had appointed and required? Well, God the Father was declaring that the death of Jesus had opened up a way for sinners to approach Him, to know Him, to enter into His very presence. The Father is announcing the outcome of His Son's death, and at the same time, declaring His Amen to the words of His Son, the Son, it is finished. The Son cried out with a loud cry, it is finished. And the Father declares, Amen, and tears the curtain from top to bottom.

The way is now open. All can come in. And the writer to the Hebrews picks up on this reality in chapter 10 of His letter. And we'll just read a couple of verses there. Chapter 10 of Hebrews and from verse 19.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place, that which nobody could have done before, we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus.

[ 17 : 27 ] On the grounds of what Jesus has secured by His death, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is His body. And since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart, in full assurance of faith.

And the writer goes on. All are welcome. The way is open for all without distinction.

And so the question for us this morning, for you this morning, is will you draw near? That is the encouragement that we are being given. Let us draw near. The way is open. There is no obstacle to prevent us.

Let us draw near. But of course, this applies not only to us and the privilege that we enjoy as believers of drawing near to God on the grounds of what has been secured by the death of Jesus.

It also has implications for our mission. We are to reach out to all. We are to welcome all. We are to exclude no one. The curtain has been torn from top to bottom.

[ 18 : 37 ] The obstacle that was in place has been removed. And so as we can draw near, so we can invite others. And we can invite everybody to draw near. This is the first outcome.

The death of Jesus has opened up the way to God. But there is a second related outcome that Mark records for us here in these verses. The experience of a real, live, flesh and blood sinner being brought into the very presence of God.

What has been made possible by the death is now shown, illustrated in the life of a real sinner. You see, access to God is not only some theoretical possibility, but as Mark records the events, is actually happening right there at the foot of the cross.

And that brings us to the second outcome, the centurion's confession. We want to consider the confession in two ways. What provoked the confession of the centurion, and what was his confession?

And Mark gives us the answer to both of these questions. First of all, what provoked his confession? Well, Mark tells us there very explicitly in verse 39, When the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, Surely this man was the Son of God.

[ 20 : 01 ] So with great precision, Mark tells us what it was that led the centurion to speak in the way that he spoke, to confess this truth in the manner that he did so.

Note the significance also of just these words that we could easily pass by without giving much attention to, where it says that the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus.

And in this way, Mark is making it very clear that this man, this centurion, saw and heard everything. It was his job to see and hear everything. Perhaps more so than anybody else at Calvary that day, this centurion saw and heard everything.

Even the women who so loved Jesus looked on from afar. They might have missed some of the whispers, some of the groans, but this centurion was right there. He had to be right there.

It was his duty to be right there at the foot of the cross. And so he hears everything. And as he hears everything, every whisper, every cry, every prayer directed to the father, every tender word directed to his mother, and we could go on, everything.

[ 21 : 13 ] But perhaps especially what sealed the deal in leading him to confess in the manner that he confessed were the words of that last cry.

As Mark makes very clear, he heard his cry. And the reference surely is to the cry that Mark has just spoken of in verse 37 with a loud cry.

He heard that cry. He heard the cry of triumph. It is finished. He heard the cry of trust. Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.

And he witnessed how he died. Now the centurion had witnessed countless deaths, but none had died like this man. This is what provoked his confession.

The loud cry, the content of it. But what was his confession? Well, again, Mark tells us, surely this man was the son of God. It's very important for us to note the significance of this confession, and particularly the title employed by the centurion.

[ 22 : 21 ] Surely this man was the son of God. And it's particularly significant in the context of Mark's gospel. And let me explain why.

Because this really is hugely significant, the language that the centurion uses. As I say, particularly in the context of the account that Mark gives us. Because if we go back, and if you remember, I don't know how many months ago it was, probably over a year ago, to when we began Mark's gospel.

What is it we find at the very beginning of Mark's gospel? Where, as it were, Mark sets out his stall. What it is that he's talking about? Who he's talking about? And what does he tell us?

There in the very first verse of this gospel, the beginning of the gospel, the beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, the son of God. So at the very beginning, Mark says, this is who I'm talking about.

This is the man I'm going to describe for you, the son of God. And here, at this epic moment in the life and mission of Jesus, what is it that the centurion declares?

[ 23 : 28 ] Surely this man was the son of God. And then, of course, in that very same first chapter, in chapter 1, we have the father acknowledging Jesus as the son of God, as his son at his baptism.

But then in what follows, and what follows in the gospel, though heaven recognized the identity of Jesus, earth failed to recognize.

Throughout Mark's gospel, no disciple addresses or describes Jesus in these terms. Only now, at the cross, on the lips of a Roman soldier, is this confession heard.

Surely this man was the son of God. But there's a question that's often posed, and it's a reasonable question. Did the centurion know or understand what he was saying?

And some suggest a very minimalist response to that, and say, well, yes, he used this language, and it's the kind of language that was in currency, even in pagan religion, the idea of a God-man.

[ 24 : 38 ] And so, in some sense, well, the centurion picked up on language he was familiar with and applied it to this one who had died in a very remarkable way. What do we conclude concerning his understanding?

Well, he was certainly sure about what he said. He says as much in the language he uses. Surely this man was the son of God. But did he understand the significance of that language?

Now, I'm sure, or I imagine, he didn't understand in full measure the import or meaning of his confession. He didn't, I imagine, realize with what theological precision he was expressing the doctrine of the two natures of Jesus.

This man was the son of God. It's really quite astonishing that the centurion would declare such a profound doctrinal truth concerning who Jesus is.

And yet he does. Did he understand that? Did he have a full grasp of the theological implications of the language he uses? Well, I imagine that he didn't. But I do believe that he spoke with a genuine and spirit-granted understanding and certainty.

[ 25 : 50 ] He recognized Jesus in a significant measure for who he was in a way that no other man had done before. And how could the centurion have come to such insightful understanding?

Well, this can only be the work of the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God was guiding his mind and soul and steps beyond the veil into the very presence of God.

Remember what Jesus said to Thomas, If you have seen me, you have seen the Father. Well, the centurion saw Jesus. He saw Jesus for who he was. Surely this man was the Son of God.

The centurion was brought on that cursed mountain outside Jerusalem into the Holy of Holies. And just pause and consider this extraordinary twist in the tale of this great event.

Who will be the first to venture beyond the veil by the way opened up by Jesus? The man who crucified him.

[ 26 : 57 ] Now, isn't that quite a remarkable twist in the tale? The very man responsible for his execution. The very man responsible for the nailing of the nails in his hands.

He is the one who has granted this huge privilege of going beyond the veil and seeing Jesus for who he is. Entering into the presence of God.

Recognizing Jesus as the Son of God. Well, let's just track back for a brief moment to this insight granted to the centurion by the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit continues to open the eyes of sinners that they might see Jesus. Just last Sunday we had some folks around for lunch and one of our guests shared the testimony of somebody they knew who became a Christian by reading...

Now, just wait for this. I'm not making this up. Just last Sunday I was told the story of this person who became a Christian by reading the first verse of Mark's Gospel. Here I've got a little Mark's Gospel.

[ 28 : 03 ] And we've just made reference to it. But let's just remind ourselves. The beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. You say, well, how could somebody become a Christian by reading that verse?

Well, this man did. By reading this verse. Why was that? Well, because the Spirit of God illuminated the understanding of this man to be brought to an appreciation of the implications of this momentous declaration.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And I wonder, and I speak for myself, and I challenge you to consider this with me.

I wonder if we have lost that confidence in the convicting and convincing power of the Holy Spirit. I wonder if that's something we need to, with the help of God and with the help of God's Spirit, to have rekindled in us.

I've brought, actually, as a wee challenge for all of us, I'd ordered these Gospels, Mark's Gospels, a while back. And for the simple reason that the Bible Society were offering them for free and never wanted to turn down a free offer, I got a few boxes of these Gospels.

[ 29 : 19 ] If you believe that the Holy Spirit is able to use the reading of this Gospel to bring a sinner to faith, then take one. There's one on the table at the back.

There's one on the table in the foyer there. Take one and give it to somebody and pray that as they read, if God chooses in some dramatic way reading the first verse, or maybe God will have them read the whole Gospel.

Maybe He'll have them come to you and ask questions about the Gospel. Maybe it will take a moment. Maybe it will take a decade. But give it to somebody in the confidence that God is able to use His Word to convict and to persuade and to draw men and women to faith in His Son.

With a loud cry, we're told, Jesus breathed His last. Sound and fury signifying nothing. Rather, a cry of triumph and trust signifying everything.

The way to God, for you, for me, for everyone, has been opened. The curtain has been torn from top to bottom. The way is open and the invitation is extended.

[ 30 : 34 ] Let us then draw near with confidence into the presence and embrace of the living and true God. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for Your Son. We thank You for Jesus. We thank You for who He is, the Son of God. We thank You for what He has done.

We thank You for the mission that He was given and the mission that He completed. We thank You for His obedience and an obedience that was even unto death and death on a cross.

We thank You for what the death of Jesus has secured for us. We thank You for the way that has been opened up, for the curtain that has been torn in two, for the manner in which sinners such as we are, as we trust in Jesus, can go beyond the veil and enter into the inner sanctuary and enjoy the presence and the friendship and the company of God.

And we pray that as we draw near, so we would also invite others to draw near, to share with others the good news, that the way is open, that there is no obstacle that has not already been removed, and invite others to put their trust in Jesus as their Savior, that they too might know what it is to enter in to the most holy place and the very presence of God.

[ 31 : 58 ] And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.