



Christ Reformed Community Church

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“Hell Visits Calvary” Mark 15:33–41

We come in Mark’s Gospel to, I think, the most significant text in the entire book, Mark chapter 15. This morning we want to look at verses 33 through 41. I want you to stand to your feet in honor of the reading of God’s Word. The title of the message this morning: “Hell Visits Calvary.” Mark 15 beginning in verse 33:

And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And some of the bystanders hearing it said, “Behold, he is calling Elijah.” And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.” And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, [that is Jesus] saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!”

There were also women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. When he was in Galilee, they followed him and ministered to him, and there were also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem.

Thus ends the reading of God’s Holy Word. Please be seated. Let’s ask the Lord for His help.

Our Father in heaven, we are grateful for the clarity in which this passage teaches us a most central truth regarding Christianity, and that is the identity of Jesus Christ who was the Son of God. We thank You for that truth, and we pray that You might draw our hearts and our minds to that truth, through the study of Your sacred Word this morning. We pray these things in Jesus’ name. Amen.

It is that famous motif that we find running throughout the pages of the Bible in both the Old Testament and New Testament, the motif of prophet, priest and king, that the gospels when they tell us about the suffering of Jesus and His death reveal to us that Jesus Himself was, in fact, the ultimate Prophet, the ultimate Priest, and the ultimate King. He is, as our priest, the Mediator of a new covenant, and when we think of priests, we often think of the fact that they were mediators. They were mediators between God and man, offering sacrifices to God on behalf of the people. But in reality, all three of those offices, prophet, priest and king, are offices that function with that mediating sort of quality. The example would be Moses himself. We read about him in the Old Testament, who was not technically a priest, but the book of Galatians refers to Moses as the

mediator of the old covenant because it was through the agency of Moses that he brought the Law of God to the people of God. So, the prophets, the priests, and the kings were really all intermediaries between God and His people. The prophets mediated God’s Word to the people. They were God’s mouthpiece, God’s spokesman. First, God spoke to the prophet, and then the prophet spoke to the people on behalf of God. The priests mediated the peoples’ prayers to God. The priest mediated the sacrifices to God on behalf of the people, and the kings mediated God’s rule to His people.

All governments have been established by God, Romans 13:1, but it was in Israel, who was first ruled by judges and then by kings at the request of the people, it was understood that the king was God’s ruling representative to give to God’s people God’s ways, to mediate God’s rule in the arena of their civic life. But the Bible tells us that God ordained the Lord Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, to be the final Mediator, fulfilling all of the offices of prophet, priest and king, 1 Timothy 2:5, *“There is one mediator between God and men,”* and that is *“the man Christ Jesus.”* And there is a sense in which we’ve even been reminded of that this morning in worship because there’s a sense in which, although ministers of the gospel don’t strictly hold the office of prophet, priest and king, they nevertheless represent the principles behind such offices. When the Word of God is publicly read in corporate worship, and when the Word of God is preached in corporate worship, those are prophetic functions. And when the minister gives the prayer of adoration or the prayer of invocation, and when the minister prays on behalf of the people, confessing sins, and when the minister at the end gives the benediction, those are all priestly functions. Those are reserved, according to the Westminster Standards, for the ministers of the gospel; those ordained, educated, set apart by God to represent, in a sense, Christ to the people of God.

And that is why it’s interesting when we read Peter’s epistle in 1 Peter chapter 2 in a context in which he’s speaking about the suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ. Peter refers to Jesus as our Pastor, our Shepherd, our Overseer. 1 Peter 2: *“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. For you,”* Peter says, *“were straying like sheep, but have now”* come back to Christ who is *“Shepherd and Overseer of [our] souls.”* And like Old Testament prophets, it was this Jesus that we have seen. Like a prophet, He was despised. Like a prophet, He was abused. Like a prophet, He was mocked and rejected. We saw that last week and in previous weeks. As a King, we saw last week that Jesus was scornfully lifted high on a Roman cross which essentially served as His throne. And now we come to verses 33 through 41 where we see Jesus as a priest, and He’s not just any sort of priest, folks. He is the sacrifice, and He is the one sacrificed. As Jesus hangs upon the cross on Golgotha, He is entering the holy of holies for us, and there are many witnesses. We saw last week Simon the Cyrene carrying Jesus’ cross. We saw the thieves, one to the right and one to the left. We saw the mockers, and there’s more witnesses in our passage this morning, but the most important witness at Calvary wasn’t a person. It was God Himself who came to punish His only begotten Son in the place of sinners. This is why the prophet Isaiah says, *“It was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt.”* To say this, that when God comes to Calvary, He brings hell with Him.

He punished His first-born Son, and by coming to Calvary and visiting iniquity on His Son, the Son therefore brought us to God as our Mediator, as our High Priest. 1 Peter 3:18: *“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being*

put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.” Because of His cursed death, we are given eternal life. And if you remember, all the way at the beginning of Mark’s Gospel, chapter 1 and verse 1, Mark says, “*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*” Mark’s whole point in writing this gospel is to reveal to us what we see in verses 33 through 41. He has shown us that Jesus is the Son of God in a number of different ways: through the miracles Jesus performed, through the preaching that we see in the life of Jesus where people are amazed and they just know these are words from God, words from heaven. But Jesus most reveals His identity, ironically, in His death; that He is the holy Son of God. And in these verses, I want you to be ready because these are the most important verses in the entirety of Mark’s Gospel. It is these verses that will reveal to you the identity of Christ. It is in these verses that you will have full assurance of your salvation. It is in these verses that is the difference between heaven and hell. It is in these verses that is the difference between understanding the nature of God, understanding the Trinity, understanding the gospel itself because in these verses, verses 33 through 41, Mark provides the greatest evidence of Jesus’ identity as the Savior of sinners and the Holy Son of God.

In total, there are five testimonies that Mark draws our attention to at the crucifixion of Jesus to demonstrate his central message—chapter 1, verse 1—that this gospel is about Jesus Christ the Son of God. And I want you to be ready because this is going to be a long sermon. We are not going to finish until we are finished because I want you to see the height and the breadth and the depth and the glory, not only of the person of Christ but of the salvation that has been procured for us through the obedience of the blessed Son of God. So, note with me first, the first testimony we see in this passage really concerns an unsuspecting testimony. It is verse 33, the testimony not of a person, but the testimony of the skies. Notice verse 33. Mark says, “*And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.*” Mark seems to be telling us here that the importance of Jesus’ death is dramatized by darkness, darkness in the very part of the day in which the sun is at its peak of power. The sixth hour refers to high noon, and Mark says, “*there was darkness over the whole land,*” from high noon, the sixth hour, until the ninth hour. The ninth hour would have been 3:00 p.m. So, from twelve o’clock to 3:00 p.m., there is darkness.

Now, there are several observatory questions that need to be answered. First of all, how far did this darkness extend? Well, verse 33 says that “*there was darkness over the whole land.*” Now the Greek word is *gē*. It could be translated “land or earth.” So, was this the entire earth, or was it just the entire land of Judea? Usually, context will indicate to us meanings of words when they have double meaning. For example, the Greek word *gynē* can be translated “wife” or it can be translated “woman.” And it matters how you translate it, but usually the context will indicate how to translate it. In this context, there’s really nothing noteworthy to indicate whether it’s referring to the whole earth or the land of Judea. So, we turn to history, and in history, we read that church fathers, Tertullian and Origen, for example, said that darkness went beyond Israel’s borders throughout the whole Roman Empire. But that question is really not the most important question.

That leads us to a second question, and that is not how far did the darkness extend, but what caused this darkness? And some people say, “Well this is just some sort of natural phenomenon. This is an eclipse.” But an eclipse does not occur during the full moon of Passover, and eclipses aren’t known to last three hours. So, some people have said, “Well, maybe this is some sort of dust storm that has blocked the sun.” You know, we were at Ligonier National Conference, and it was at a convention center, and we’re walking through the hotel, and there’s a group of people here for this

and a group of people here for that. And all of the sudden, I get out of the elevator, and I see a bunch a people walking toward me with a shirt on, and on the shirt, it says simply this: “Science did that.” [Laughter] And immediately, I wanted to walk up and say, “No, God did that because your problem is that science is your god.” There’s really no such thing as natural phenomena if you believe in a sovereign God, and Mark doesn’t present this as some sort of scientific, natural phenomena. This is a supernatural manifestation of God, and as we move further into verse 34 which we will get to, we will see that it is conveying deep theological meaning.

So, why did God send this darkness? And there are several angles from which to view this. First is the paradoxical angle. Darkness at high noon is a paradox. In other words, it’s the exact opposite of what anyone would expect, but it is a fitting sign for divine omnipotence as a symbol to those who had rejected the Light of the World. So, paradoxically, God shines light, as it were, on the significance of the death of His Son by causing light itself to disappear. That’s a paradox. There’s also the historical angle, because if you remember, Mark is writing to Roman Christians. They’re gentiles. They live in the capital city of Rome, and they were used to the custom that was noteworthy in that time which bestowed honor to an important person whom they might call a human luminary or human light, someone like Julius Caesar; and so, it was said that when Julius Caesar died, there was comet that shown for seven days. And whether or not that’s true or not, I don’t know, but these were believed to be what were called divine eulogies in which nature itself was mourning the death of that human light. And it’s possible Mark is writing in a way familiar to his Roman readers in trying to draw some sort of parallel, but I believe what the Bible says, and what the Bible says is that this is literal darkness.

And when you study the Old Testament from the biblical angle, you see that darkness is always associated with God’s judgment. Darkness is always a sign of God’s judgment, and God will speak of darkness to a certain nation; that darkness will come over a nation because of their sin, or that the stars will fall from the sky or cease to give light, referring to human ruler of a nation who is wicked, and sometimes even to Israel herself. For example, in Zephaniah 1, the day of the Lord speaks about Babylon subjugation of Judah, the southern kingdom, that had a near fulfillment in God’s judgment on the Southern Kingdom. It speaks about darkness covering the land, also pointing forward to a future fulfillment, no doubt. Or Isaiah 5:30, on that day, “*And if one looks to the land, behold, darkness and distress; and the light is darkened by its clouds,*” speaks of judgment, but Isaiah gives hope to God’s people because Isaiah says that in Galilee of the nations, Isaiah 9:2, “*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.*” Or Isaiah 42:16: “*I will turn darkness into light,*” that Isaiah is saying, “Yes, God is going to judge His people, but ultimately, He will spare a remnant.”

That’s all language of judgment and darkness, and some people believe that Amos 8:9 is on Mark’s mind which says, “*‘And on that day,’ declares the Lord GOD, ‘I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight.’*” It’s possible. But it is interesting that when Peter preaches on the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2, he quotes from Joel chapter 2, and what he quotes is the fact that “*The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the LORD comes, the great and magnificent day. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the LORD shall be saved.*” Jesus spoke about darkness that would come in AD 70. Remember that in the Olivet Discourse in Mark 13:24–27? We won’t take the time to look at it, but there’s also language of darkness, speaking about the judgment of God on Israel. You get

the idea that when Jesus came and when Jesus died upon the cross, God sent literal darkness as a symbol of His darkness of judgment, darkness of judgment that would come upon ethnic Israel and upon the temple in AD 70. Yes, that is part of it, perhaps also thinking about the darkness at creation, Genesis 1:2, from which God created light. He formed the universe *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, and that runs parallel to the new creation and the new covenant with the coming of Christ, who is the Light of the World.

So that theologically putting all of this together, Jesus hung in literal darkness from 12:00 to 3:00, as verse 33 says, but this is a statement about God from God concerning the darkness of judgment. And Mark is telling his readers, “This is not a divine eulogy mourning the death of Jesus. This is a sign of judgment upon the head of Jesus, the Son of God.” You remember the plague of darkness in the Old Testament, right? In Exodus chapter 10, the words that God gave Moses:

Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness to be felt.’ So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was pitch darkness in all the land of Egypt three days. They did not see one another, nor did anyone rise from his place for three days, but all the people of Israel had light where they lived.

And you remember that right after this, the angel of death visited the land, and he only protected the homes of those who smeared the blood of the lamb on their homes, and those Israelites who obeyed were saved from God’s wrath. They were saved from God’s judgment in the middle of the night. They were delivered from Egypt, and I think Mark is clueing us into this by denoting this darkness. This is a theological statement, that Jesus is bringing about a new exodus for His people. And the way that we know that is that God was sending the wrath of His darkness upon His Son with a plague of darkness throughout Israel and the Roman Empire because Jesus, as Paul says, 1 Corinthians 5:7, is “*Our Passover [lamb], who has been sacrificed.*” We have been delivered from the bondage that we have to sin and to Satan, and that is why Matthew quotes Hosea 11: “*Out of Egypt I [have] called my son,*” thus preserving Jesus at the beginning of His life from the Pharaoh baby-killing copycat, Herod, and Jesus’ life was preserved. They were delivered out of Egypt. They were protected by God, but here at Calvary, God would not spare His first-born Son. Instead, He would send the darkness of judgment upon His only begotten Son for all of the witnesses to see so that even the skies themselves would give testimony to this reality.

The darkness is God speaking the gospel and speaking in particular the theology of substitutionary atonement. It’s as if the Father turned away the light of His countenance, refusing to look upon His Son the same way He looked upon Him at the beginning of His ministry when He said, “*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*” Instead, that darkness was a sign, 2 Corinthians 5:21, that Jesus was made “*sin for us.*” Galatians 3:13, that He became a curse for us. Isaiah 53: “*He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities.*” Isaiah 53, that the iniquities of His people was laid on Him. First Peter 2:24, that He “*Bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness,*” that Jesus bore all of the lies and all of the thefts and all the adulteries and all the hatred and all the wickedness of all His elect people. And on the cross, God the Father was silent to Jesus’ prayers, while Jesus was silent to His accusers. And there, Jesus underwent the cosmic trauma of separation from God who is Light and in whom is no darkness at all, and yet that’s exactly what God gave His Son. Hell came to Calvary and Jesus descends into its darkness. This is the climax of Mark’s Gospel.

“For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many,” Mark 10:45. This is the blood of Jesus, “*the blood of the covenant,*” as Jesus called it in the upper room, “*which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*” All of the mocking and all of the reviling from 9:00 a.m. to noon is silent now that the darkness has come. I mean, this even runs—it’s amazing to me because this, the depth of it, even runs parallel to Psalm 19: “*The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words,*” but God’s voice is heard, and that is exactly what happened here in verse 33. This is not the darkness of Satan; this is the darkness of God. This isn’t some natural catastrophe; this is literally supernaturally a darkness that God sends. And there upon the cross of Calvary, the Son is alone in the darkness of the cross. His separation from God is not just felt, beloved, it is real, and we have to be careful here because the ontological unity of the Trinity was never broken. If that was the case, then the whole universe would have collapsed at that moment because Jesus, as the second person of the Trinity, holds all things together by the word of His power, and He never ceased to be God. But as true man, His human nature was repugnant to God because He was representing the evil of God’s people; and so, the holy nature of the Father demanded separation from Jesus’ human nature.

Again, it’s not that God the Father was wholly absent. Far worse! God the Father was present, but He was present in the darkness of judgment, and He cut off His Son. And when you read through the Bible about God’s presence, it’s always in language of the comfort of His light. Psalm 27: “*The LORD is my light and d my salvation; whom shall I fear?*” Psalm 104:2: God covers Himself “*with light as with a cloak.*” Isaiah 60:20: You have the Lord for an “*everlasting light,*” Isaiah says. Habakkuk 3:4: “*His radiance is like the sunlight; He has rays flashing [forth] from His hand.*” But it’s also true at the same time, God’s presence is not merely depicted as light. That is for comfort’s sake, but at times, God’s presence is depicted by darkness; and that, my friends, is exactly what hell is. The ultimate eternal judgment of hell is not the absence of God’s presence; it’s the judgment of God’s presence. That’s why Jesus calls hell “*outer darkness,*” a place of “*weeping and gnashing of teeth,*” a place in which angels were cast into hell, false teachers who are committed to the “*pits of darkness.*” And so, here’s the point from verse 33, don’t miss this. The darkness at Calvary depicts not the absence of God but the terrifying presence where He came down to Golgotha and unleashed behind that darkness the full fury of His holy wrath, not against sinners, but against the sin bearer, the spotless Lamb of God. That’s what the Bible teaches.

I John 4:10: He was “*the propitiation for our sins.*” Romans 4:25, “[Jesus] was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.” Hebrews 9:28: He has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. So, His justice is meted out on sin so that we are declared just. First Corinthians 15:3: “*Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,*” so we could be raised. You think about it this way; God the Father operated in accordance with His perfect justice, His pure holiness in His releasing a punishment on His Son equal to the full measure of eternal wrath so that Jesus suffered the tortures of hell. For those three hours, for those three hours of darkness, all of eternal hell was compressed into that short period, relatively speaking, of agony, that Jesus being infinite suffered in a finite period of time what we being finite would have suffered in an infinite period of time. He drunk down hell for you and for me. He drunk the cup of wrath, the cup of the Father down to the last dregs, and the judgment and

the darkness did not end until the ninth hour, three o’clock. You see, it’s not the physical pain that you need to focus on.

In the second testimony that we move to in verse 34, we see that the crucifixion proves Jesus was the Son of God in a way that His death has universal implications, not because of the physical pain but because of the spiritual separation. So, the testimony of the skies in verse 33 moves us, in verse 34, to the testimony of the Son. Let’s let Jesus speak for Himself. And don’t take my word for it—what does Jesus say? Verse 34: “*And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’*” At the ninth hour, Jesus cries this. That is when the darkness ended, and this darkness, obviously, Mark is linking to this statement because the darkness itself symbolizes the agony that Jesus expresses here in verse 34. So earlier, I read for us Psalm chapter 22: “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest.*” Jesus by quoting Psalm 22 was acknowledging the darkness of the sky as being symbolic of His separation from God the Father.

Now, Mark quotes the Aramaic version in verse 35, “*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*” which He then translates into the Greek, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” because His readers are gentiles. But here we see Jesus who preached the Old Testament. He was a preacher of the Old Testament. We see Him dying with Scripture on His lips. This isn’t a cry of doubt. It is a cry of faith. He knew that He was fulfilling the prophecy of Psalm 22. He knew that He was fulfilling the plan that He had made with the Father and with the Holy Spirit from before the foundation of the world, which raises a supremely important question touched upon earlier in verse 33, and that is this: How could God forsake God? Well, we must start with eliminating what cannot be. First of all, that doesn’t mean there was ever a time the Father stopped loving the Son. Go read John 17. The love between the Father and the Son is eternal, so the separation can’t mean that. Secondly, it can’t mean that the Son rejected the Father so that now the Father is rejecting the Son. So it must mean that in some way we don’t fully understand—there’s mystery to it—God the Father abandoned or deserted the Son’s human nature because that human nature represented sin.

In fact, that word *forsaken* has the idea of “abandoned” but not a forever abandonment because notice even in Jesus’ deep distress, He’s still calling out to God, right? “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* This isn’t a separation ontologically between the persons of the Trinity. This is still His God, and He still has faith in the plan of God, so the nature of the abandonment is not—listen to me—it is not the ontological separation of the second person of the Trinity from the first person but the human nature of Jesus lost temporary communion with the Father. That’s the hell that Jesus endured. That is the godforsakenness that Calvin speaks about where the Father judges the Son as the Son drinks down the Father’s cup of judgment. So, this is what MacArthur says, and I quote: “That separation or abandonment by the Father was not one of nature or essence. The Lord Jesus never ceased to be the second member of the Trinity; rather, it was a separation of the loving communion He had eternally known with the Father.” Besides the fact that the Father couldn’t have separated fully because the Father was present. He wasn’t absent at the cross; He was present in judgment. There was never a separation ontologically.

Now, you all remember in the Old Testament, especially if you were a young kid in Sunday school reading the story about God commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son, his only son, at Mount Moriah. And you know the story. God commands him to do that, and Abraham is faithful. He makes preparations to do that. His son, Isaac, is involved in those preparations, and I believe it's pretty certain that Isaac understood what was taking place. He was old enough to understand, and he had the faith of his father. This isn't a father taking advantage of a young boy. This is a young boy understanding exactly what he is doing in carrying that wood—to be sacrificed. But at the last second, an angel speaking on behalf of God calls down from heaven and stops Abraham. That was Mount Moriah. But this is Mount Calvary, and there is no angel that stops the judgment of the Father. There is no angel that is sent to rescue the Son. You remember when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness by the devil? And it was so difficult for forty days that at the end of that, the Bible says God sent angels to minister to Him. You remember in the garden when Jesus sweat drops of blood in the agony of knowing He would drink down the wrath of His Father, that cup? One of the gospel writers tells us at the end of that, angels were sent to minister to Jesus.

No angels on Mount Calvary. This is hell. This is darkness. This is punishment. This is separation. This is Jesus, our substitute, and the Father sending no angel to spare His Son. This is the Son being forsaken to His torturers. Psalm 22 expresses that fact. Jesus came before God on Mount Calvary as the High Priest of His people, right? He's entering the presence of God's wrath and the holy of holies as it were, but here's the difference. He's carrying no sacrifice. He's only bringing Himself before the Father, and the Father must punish sin. There's no sacrifice in the hands of Jesus, so the Father sends His blazing hell upon His only begotten Son. He was simultaneously a priest and a sacrifice. Earlier Jesus had the comfort in John 16:32. He had this comfort. He told the disciples, “Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone.” In other words, “You're going to desert me,” but He still had this comfort because Jesus says at the end of John 16:32, “Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me.” But at Mount Calvary, the Father was not with the Son. There was separation. He was abandoned by the Father to the hands of His adversaries, to the hands of His torturers, but here's the good news. On that Good Friday, God brought good from the sacrifice of the Son from the evil that was done to Him. And that God the Father accepted the sacrifice of His Son is brought out in the next testimony.

We move from the testimony of the skies, verse 33; the testimony of the Son, verse 34; now to the testimony of the sanctuary, number three, verses 35 through 38. Notice verse 35: “And some of the bystanders hearing it said, ‘Behold, he is calling Elijah.’” So they hear the statement Jesus made: “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and they said, “Behold, he is calling Elijah.” Then verse 36: “And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, ‘Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.’” Now, what Jesus said, Psalm 22, was clear. The Bible says they heard it. So, they weren't confused, but the resemblance of that word “Eloi,” God, and the name “Elijah” is close enough that it seems—this is what I believe—the people are making a joke out of what Jesus was crying out. You remember Elijah, right, 2 Kings chapter 2, he was taken to heaven without dying? He escaped this earth without death, and perhaps more importantly, he was to come a second time as a forerunner to the Messiah. Remember Malachi 4:5 and 6? So, I think that this mockery involved making it look as though Jesus was wimping out, that He's calling forth to Elijah. “After all, He's your buddy, Jesus, right? He's your forerunner. You're on a first-name

basis with him. Oh, you’re calling out to Elijah, that he may take You up in a whirlwind to heaven, just like he was.” Ignorant—because who was really Elijah? Well, according to Jesus in Matthew 11, it was John the Baptist. Elijah didn’t literally come back. John the Baptist was like Elijah, and he was the forerunner to the Messiah.

But the mockery continues in verse 26. It says, *“Someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine.”* This is a reference probably to the cheap wine that was rationed to the soldiers. They put it on a reed, probably the same reed they had used to beat Jesus over the head, which made it more humiliating, and they gave it to Him to drink. And this was their smart aleck remark, saying, *“Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.”* They’re mocking Jesus. John 19:28 says that before this happened, Jesus made an interesting statement. He said, *“I am thirsty,”* and that’s when they brought this sour wine, and that’s when what we read in verse 37 happens, when *“Jesus uttered a loud cry.”* He then *“breathed his last.”* But we need to turn over to John 19 just for a moment because remember Mark is giving us an abbreviated depiction. There’s more that Jesus said. I mean, all Mark tells us in verse 37 is that *“Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last.”* Well, what was that loud cry? What did Jesus say? Wouldn’t you like to know? I want to know. John tells us. John 19:29: *“A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said,”* what? *“It is,”* what? *“finished,”* And just like Mark, he says, *“And he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.”* Jesus was ready for a drink because He knew that His kingdom was certain.

Remember, He told the disciples, *“I’m not going to drink of the fruit of the vine again until the kingdom.”* The kingdom has already come because the work of atonement is finished. He had absorbed the full three hours of hell sent to Him by the Father, and so He says, *“It is finished”* and He drinks the wine. Luke 23 tells us that *“with a loud voice”* Jesus also said, *“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”* So, back in Mark 15:37, that loud cry was a cry that the atonement was complete, that salvation was certain and final and finished. And when Jesus says, *“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit,”* that tells us that He voluntarily died. Please understand that. Isaiah 53:12 says, *“He poured out [himself] to death.”* John 10, Jesus’ words, *“I lay down my life for the sheep. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative.”* *“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”* He never ceased being God. No one could take His life unless He allowed them to. This is the sovereignty of God. Jesus wasn’t a victim in the sense that He couldn’t prevent dying. He easily could have prevented it. He chose not to, and *“with a loud voice, [said], ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit! It is finished!’”* with all the strength He could muster in His voice. He would return to the glory He once had with the Father. The separation no longer there, the reunion fully there, because in actual fact, this was His beloved Son in whom He was well pleased because He obeyed the Father to bring us salvation. And he took a friend with Him. Turn with me to Luke chapter 23. He took a friend with Him to paradise. We mentioned this last week, Luke 23:43. We pick up in verse 39:

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at [Jesus], saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

If there is ever any evidence of the doctrine of justification, which we love so much, if there is ever any evidence that you can do nothing to earn your salvation, nothing to keep your salvation, if there is any evidence in the world that salvation has always been by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, it's here on the cross when Jesus cries *“It is finished!”* after He had told the thief, *“Today you will be with me in paradise.”* I mean, the thief didn't even have an opportunity to be baptized. The thief didn't have an opportunity to join a Bible study, join a church. The thief didn't have an opportunity to demonstrate his good works because that's the gospel. And if you think you can do anything to earn your salvation, you are like the other thief. You will die in your sins. Tradition tells us the names of the two thieves were Zoatham and Chammatha. Zoatham and Chammatha. I have no clue which one was saved, but one was Jacob, and one was Esau because the reality is God gave that man the same faith He gave you; otherwise, a condemned criminal mocking Jesus would never repent, but that's exactly what happened.

And because of this, we have—I've not forgotten the third point—we have the sanctuary in the temple giving testimony to the effectiveness of Christ's work on the cross. What happens in verse 38? Mark says, *“And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.”* Wow! There were actually two curtains in the temple. It's not immediately clear which one is being spoken about. One curtain or veil is called a veil that was meant to guard the Holy Place. It sort of separated the court of Israel from the rest. It was a thick tapestry woven, depicting earth, sea, and the heavens, symbolizing God's universe, and Josephus tells us it had a panorama of the heavens on it. The other curtain is the one you're more familiar with. It's the one that guarded the holy of holies, the place the priest entered once a year on the Day of Atonement to make sacrifice for the people, a cubicle of thirty square feet, blue, purple, and scarlet interwoven into white linen fabric, these beautiful colors forming a mass of cherubim, the guardian angel of holiness. And you say, “Why?” Well, because those cherubim depicted on that curtain were guarding the entrance to the presence of God, just like the cherubim were stationed in Genesis 3 at the east of the garden after the fall with a flaming sword which turned in every direction, guarding the way to the tree of life. No man could enter that presence of God without being killed, and Jesus entered it as our High Priest with no sacrifice. He was killed.

It was a walk of suicide into the holy of holies because He would receive the blazing hell of God because He represented us. This too was not the result of an accident. Can we get past that? This isn't some sort of catastrophe. You say, “Well, there was an earthquake and the earth trembled.” Yeah, but the Bible says in Matthew 27 that the curtain ripped first and then the earthquake. It wasn't the earthquake that caused it. This wasn't done by man either because notice verse 38. It says it wasn't torn from bottom to top, as if a man did it. It was torn from top to bottom, as if God sovereignly took His hand down from heaven and ripped it Himself because God is bearing witness through the sanctuary, through the holy of holies, to tell us something about the death of Jesus, and it's simply this; the curse is now reversed, that entrance into God's holy presence comes along the trail of blood that Jesus left. *“Therefore, [brothers, since] we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus,”* Hebrews 10 says, *“by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God.”* This is our assurance of hope. Hebrews 6:19: *“We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain.”* Jesus did that. That's why the veil was torn. And so, this tearing of the curtain of the temple occurred—notice this—at the

moment of Jesus’ death and the moment that Jesus cries “*It is finished!*” the veil is rent. And you should think back probably to the parallel in the old covenant to Mount Sinai when there was an earthquake, there was fire, there was the threat of God’s judgment, the penalty for breaking the Law of God when God gave the law to Israel. There was darkness.

Well, now at Mount Calvary there is an earthquake, there is darkness, but there is not the giving of the law because the law has been fulfilled and obeyed by Christ. There is no threat of judgment because Jesus absorbed that for you, dying in your place. “*For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.*” He did it all. “*For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit,*” Romans 8:3–4. That’s the gospel. And while it’s true we don’t know exactly which curtain was torn—both have theological significance—if it was that first curtain that was torn, the one that separated the Holy Place from the rest of the temple, that sort of first curtain, the one with the panorama of heaven, then you find it’s parallel, I think, in the baptism of Jesus by John. What happened at the end of that baptism? The heavens were rent. The Spirit of God descended like a dove upon Jesus, and the Father said, “*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,*” as if to say, Jesus is coming down from heaven, ripping the skies open to come down. And at Jesus’ baptism unto death, that same heaven is ripped open for Jesus to go back up, and to go back up and to enter the holy of holies to represent His elect sinners. And if it’s that second curtain, the one that didn’t have the panorama of the heavens but the one that had the cherubim, then access to the new garden has been granted. The cherubim—this is the easiest way I can put it—by that curtain being rent, lost their jobs. And by the way, all those priests that were on the council, those former high priests, they were out of a job too.

God was sending a message, was He not? “You think you’re so religious, Israel? You think you can earn salvation? How’s this for you? I don’t need your curtain. I don’t need your priests. The old covenant is abolished. The new covenant is ratified.” All other temple activity is essentially null and void, and in forty years, AD 70, that’s exactly what happened because the Romans destroyed the temple. This is all a prelude to the inevitability of the destruction of the temple, which is highly symbolic of God’s establishment of a new covenant and the reality that we cannot earn our salvation. It is Christ alone who earned it for us. He is the only priest that matters. I run into this all the time. People call me “Father so-and-so, Father Andrew, Father Smith.” I always correct them. “Look, I’m not a priest, but since you brought it up, I can tell you about the great High Priest that died for sinners like you. The only way I can help you is by taking you to that Priest for you to confess your sins to that Priest. I’m not a father, I’m not a priest, I’m not a savior.” That’s our job, right? We point others to Christ, not to ourselves, not to our own righteousness, not to our own goodness. We don’t build ourselves up. It must be about Christ. And for fifteen hundred years, the only man allowed to enter the holy of holies, the only man who even dared to enter was the high priest, and Jesus was the last High Priest to enter. So, the sanctuary itself gives testimony to what God is doing through Christ at Calvary.

But there’s yet a fourth testimony at Jesus’ crucifixion. This bears witness to Jesus’ identity as the Savior and Son of God, and that is the testimony of the soldier, verse 39. “*And when the centurion, that’s the soldier, “who stood facing him,” that is Jesus, “saw that in this way he breathed his last,*

he said, *‘Truly this man was the Son of God!’*” A centurion was a Roman soldier, an officer who was in charge of one hundred men, and this particular centurion was in charge of four men that he had selected that would oversee the crucifixion of the two thieves and of Jesus. Like Simon the Cyrene, who seemed to be at the wrong place at the wrong time but in God’s providence was actually in the right place at the right time, so too this centurion. It’s interesting that he says, Mark does, in verse 39, that the centurion stood facing Jesus. I mean, he has front row seats to the very way Jesus died, and he’s observing this, he’s watching it. Verse 39, Mark says, *“He saw that in this way [Jesus] breathed his last.”* You say, “In what way?” Well, everything we’ve been talking about: the darkness of the sky, the victory cry of Jesus, *“It is finished!”* the words to the thief, *“Today you’ll be with me in paradise.”* Perhaps also the words to John by Jesus that said, “Take care of my mother. She’s now your mother; and mother, he’s now your son.” The grace and the dignity by which He absorbed the scorn—all of that. As Peter says, He didn’t revile back, *“but kept entrusting Himself [to the Father in heaven] who judges justly.”*

All of that the centurion is seeing, and what does he say? What’s his testimony? What does he confess? The end of verse 39: *“Truly this man was the Son of God!”* Matthew 27 says that other men were with him, but Luke 23:47 says this man alone also began praising God and saying, *“Certainly this man was innocent!”* He doubles down. He doubles down. At a minimum, he’s declaring the deity of Jesus, right? “He’s truly the Son of God,” by a man who’s not a Jew. He’s a gentile. He hates the Jews, but he has seen in the trial of Jesus, Jesus’ dignity. He has seen in the trial of Jesus, the false accusations. He has seen in the trial of Jesus, even someone as wicked as Pilate, saying, “I can’t find anything wrong with this man.” He saw it all. So, to me, it is inescapable that this man was not merely claiming the deity of Jesus. He believed Jesus to be the Savior of sinners. This is a declaration of his faith in a doctrinal way, affirming the deity of Jesus, which is central to the gospel. This isn’t a statement that is minimalistic, “Oh, he believed.” This is a doctrinal statement. This man understood Jesus to be the Son of God, which obviously means he believed Him to be the Savior of sinners, and he believed Him to be his Savior. I mean, I don’t believe for one moment as some suppose, that because in the Greek there’s not a definite article before *“the Son of God”* that this man was just saying that Jesus was some sort of great hero of the ancient world, sort of giving a nice compliment to Him, not a statement of personal conviction, asserting that He’s the true Son of God.

But I’m going to be technical with you just for a moment. In koine Greek or ancient Greek, a definite predicate nominative omits the article when it precedes the verb, and that’s exactly what happens in verse 39. You don’t need the definite article. It’s understood. This man was affirming that Jesus was the Son of God, a man who was a pagan who was familiar with the fact that the Romans deified their rulers. They deified the emperors as a son of God. He didn’t say Jesus is a son of God; he says Jesus is *the* Son of God, affirming as a gentile that the King of the Jews is legitimately God’s Son. And remember, Mark’s audience are Romans. What do you think Mark’s trying to communicate by bringing that confession out? He’s trying to tell them, “Look, God came to save not just Jews but also gentiles.” He saved this centurion. By the way, tradition says that his name was Longinus (**laan-guh-nuhs**) or Longinus (**laan-juh-nuhs**), and that he traveled overseas with Joseph of Arimathea. We do know that as the Roman empire expanded—you can read about this in British history. It’s very fascinating to me because that’s where my family comes from. When the Roman empire extended into Great Britain, the way they extended was by sending their soldiers first. You would never go into the wild country of Scotland with those warriors unless you

were a warrior yourself. So they would station forts in Great Britain, and over a period of time, these Roman soldiers, some of whom had converted to Christ. Remember Cornelius, the centurion in Acts? Remember, this centurion, I believe, is a believer. Maybe they made their way to Great Britain, and maybe that’s why we have the gospel today was because of their witness. But it is explicit that what Mark wants us to understand is what he said at the beginning of his gospel, Mark 1:1. This is *“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus.”* Who is He? *“The Son of God.”* *“The Son of God.”* Confirmed at the beginning of the gospel, now confirmed at the end, especially significant because up to this point in Mark’s Gospel it’s only the Father who confirmed the deity of Jesus—Mark 1:11, Mark 9:7. And it’s only demons—Mark 3:11, Mark 5:7—who confirm that Jesus was the Son of God. Finally, we come to the end of the gospel, and it takes a gentile, not a Jew, to confirm that Jesus is the Son of God.

And there’s yet one final testimony. This passage reveals the identity of Jesus as the Savior of sinners, the Holy Son of God, the universal implications of the cross, through the testimony of the skies, verse 33; the testimony of the Son, verse 34; the testimony of the sanctuary, verse 34 through 38; the testimony of the soldier, verse 39; fifth, the testimony of the servants, verses 40 and 41. Notice verse 40: *“There were also women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome.”* Mark’s point is that these would be credible and critical eyewitnesses to the events surrounding the death of Jesus, and John tells us in John 19 that at first, they were right up next to the cross. That’s why Jesus could speak to His own mother and speak to John. But at some point, they moved away from the cross, perhaps because of the gruesome way in which Christ was dying or maybe they remained there until Jesus died. We don’t really know. But they were scared and they were confused, but they were there, these servants, these women, *“among whom were Mary Magdalene.”* This was a woman from Galilee, from Magdala, which was located on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, close to Capernaum. She was the woman in Luke, I think it was chapter 8, that was delivered by demons. Jesus delivered her, and she became a servant. She also stood at the tomb weeping. She’s the one that mistook Jesus to be the gardener in John 20. She was a servant, and so also *“Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses.”* She was also present at Christ’s burial. She was sent early Sunday morning to anoint Christ’s body for burial.

James the younger was an apostle, and then Salome is mentioned at the end of verse 40. That’s the sister of Jesus’ mother, Mary, also mother to the apostles John and James. Her husband was Zebedee. These servants were there, and verse 41 highlights their servanthood. Notice your Bibles. *“When he was in Galilee;”* that is Jesus, Mark says *“they,”* that is, these servants, *“they followed him and they followed him and ministered to him, and there were also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem.”* Right up until the end, these women ministered to Jesus. How did they do that? They weren’t apostles. They were not preachers. They were not deacons, but they were servants. They opened their home to Jesus. They prepared meals for Jesus and the apostolic band. They provided their money, some of whom were very wealthy. Later in Acts, they opened their homes for worship with the early church, and the church has a rich legacy of women who served behind the scenes. And if you’re a woman here this morning, these verses should encourage you because these women witnessed Jesus’ crucifixion and His resurrection. They give credible testimony to what we hold so valuable to the orthodoxy of the gospel itself. What is so central? The death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. But they had roles that were different than the apostles, and they served in ways that they didn’t want attention. And they served in the gentleness and the

humility and the meekness, submitting to their own husbands as they served Jesus and served the apostles, and that was taken through throughout the early church on into our own day. It was wonderful being at Ligonier and seeing folks from a previous church that I pastored, and there are members at that church who were part of a previous church that I pastored that went with me to the next church that I pastored. And they were telling me about these sweet older ladies who were nothing but servants to the ministry, and they’re old and dying, and yet they’re still serving—just like these women. They follow Jesus from Galilee, Mark says, all the way up to Jerusalem until the very end.

Mark ends the crucifixion with this, to say that all sinners—men, women, children, Jew, gentile—all have access to God one way, and that is through Jesus Christ. You don’t get to heaven any other way. You don’t receive salvation any other way. Hebrews 4:16: *“Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”* You see, the way that Mark describes the crucifixion teaches us about the substitutionary satisfaction view of the atonement, and that is so important, folks, because many people view God as if He loves everyone unconditionally, as if He is some sort of worldwide grandfather or heavenly Santa Claus. He loves everyone equally, unilaterally, forgiving sins, apart from the antiquated concepts of righteousness and justice; and my dear friends, that is not the true message of the gospel. That is not a loving message; that is a damning message because it misrepresents God. The Father never stopped loving the Son, but the Father did send His wrath on the Son because He never stopped loving His children from before the foundation of the world. The cross of the Bible tells us in the most clearest and powerful way that God demonstrated His grace and His justice because He did not wink at sin. He did not brush it under the rug. He sacrificed His only begotten Son. He went beyond what Abraham was willing to do. He killed His only begotten Son so that we could receive salvation. The full vengeance of God executed on Christ, sending hell, sending a curse for us so that the moral debt is paid, and it was paid in full. The Father accepted the satisfaction of that moral debt being paid. And yet we live in modern times, right? We know better than the Bible. You know, “God is all about love, and since He loves us so much, we don’t really owe God anything. He owes us everything; a happy life, a wealthy life, a healthy life.”

No, my dear friend. The only thing you and I deserve is eternal hell. It’s what the Bible teaches, and yet God gave His Son what He didn’t deserve, hell, at Calvary, so that we could receive what we don’t deserve, and that’s heaven, that’s salvation, that’s the gospel. The gospel wasn’t cheap. It was free to you, but it wasn’t free to Christ. He saved us by His death. So, the whole testimony of this passage is a testimony about the gospel. It’s so powerful because God has spoken to us in the sky. He’s spoken to us from the mouth of His Son. He’s spoken to us from the veil that was rent in the sanctuary. He’s spoken to us by a centurion that was responsible for murdering Jesus, and He spoke to us by these women who weren’t even preachers to tell us the good news of the gospel, and that is this; you can’t save yourself. And praise God, you can’t do it because if you could do it, you would screw it up and so would I. We come to the end of Jesus’ life, and we come to the end with a smile because we know it’s not the end of the story. He already said, *“It is finished!”* He didn’t say, “I’m finished.” He said, *“It is finished!”* But He wouldn’t be done because He would raise from the dead. He would commission the apostles. He would commission the church. He would give us duties and responsibilities, and most of all, He would give us a blessed hope to live with in the midst of a painful and sin-cursed world. Praise be to God.

Father, we thank You for Your truth and Your Word. It’s just so crystal clear to us that we must believe in a bloody gospel. We must believe in a gospel that, although never separates the first person from the Trinity from the second, nevertheless, there is the separation of communion as it pertains to the human nature of Jesus in which He absorbed the full fury of hell in our place. We are so grateful for that. We know that we are undeserving of so rich a salvation, but we do praise You that that salvation is ours. We thank You that Christ is ours. We thank You that, as we will see in the next couple of weeks, because of His resurrection, we have that blessed hope, the blessed hope of His return, the consummation of all things, the complete and total reverse of the curse, and eternity future. We thank You for these realities. Seal these truths to our hearts, we pray, in Jesus’ name. Amen.