

Mark 15:37-39 <sup>37</sup> Jesus cried out with a loud voice and breathed his last. <sup>38</sup> The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. <sup>39</sup> When the centurion who stood facing him saw how he cried out and breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!”

Longinus. According to tradition or legends or both, that was the name of the centurion in charge of the crucifixion of Jesus. And the stories don’t end there, either. Not by a long ways. This Longinus is said to have been a 12-year veteran of the Roman legions; by then nearly blind, until he stabbed his lance into Jesus’ side to verify the death, and some blood splashed into his eyes and cured him completely; from there, he drew the assignment to guard Jesus’ grave and after witnessing the resurrection was the only one of the soldiers who couldn’t be bribed into covering it up, so he was beheaded by the other soldiers. Or the longer ending where he studied under the apostles, and became a monk for years before being tortured and again beheaded for his faith. And if you think those stories about Longinus are interesting, they are nothing compared to the travelogues about his famous spear, which after a long and storied career supposedly ended up in one of the columns at St. Peter’s cathedral at Rome. But as for the truthfulness of any of it – we don’t know. We really don’t know any of it, not the claims of martyrdom, or even whether he was the one watching the sepulcher or piercing Jesus’ side, we don’t even know if his name even was Longinus. About this centurion there is really only one thing we know for sure; because there is only one thing about him that God chose to record in His holy Word. And that’s this simple but amazing confession he makes at the critical point in human history. “Truly this man was the Son of God!” A bold confession made under very difficult circumstances. The kind of confession, which if any of us could have just one thing remembered about us, wouldn’t it be great if that was what it was? Oh, yeah, him. Or, oh yeah, her. I don’t really know much about that person except that he or she made a bold confession of Jesus in a hostile environment.

After all, that’s what it was for this centurion, Longinus or whatever his name happened to be. He is known for his bold confession. A confession that was not made in the easiest of circumstances. When he called Jesus the Son of God, he had to have known the trouble he could be causing for himself. After all, that was the charge Jesus was being executed for in the first place. Remember, at the trials before Annas and Caiaphas, how they couldn’t get their stories together on any of the trumped up charges, so right when it looked like the whole case was falling apart, the high priest Caiaphas tries to get Jesus to make a statement they could use against Him. So he asks point blank, “Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” And when Jesus affirms, “I am,” that’s it. The high priest does his tearing the robes bit and everyone starts shouting “blasphemy.” That’s what they would charge Him with and that’s what they would have Him executed for. And that’s what they told Pilate: “We have a law, and according to that law He must die, because He claimed to be the Son of God.” So I’m guessing it couldn’t have been too popular a thing for this officer in charge of Golgatha to blurt out, “He really was the Son of God!” I don’t think I would have wanted to be in his shoes. I mean if Pontius Pilate was so worried about what this mob could do to him and his career, what about this poor guy. Not only would he have to face the ranting and raving of those religious leaders who had worked themselves into a frenzy over Jesus, but there would be his fellow soldiers, those coworkers he would have to be around every day. And of course if word got back to his superiors, like Pontius Pilate, it could have the imprisonment and torture and death the legends describe. I don’t know how you say “discretion is the better part of valor in Latin or Greek,” but you’d think this centurion would have been a little more reluctant to make such an unpopular confession.

That maybe he would have been a little more like me, and maybe like some of you. The way we can generally find plenty of good reasons to keep quiet when there is a hostile environment or when confessing Christ might be unpopular. One of those things that’s easy when it’s easy. When

we're here at church and others are confessing their faith, well then it's no big deal. In fact, we might almost feel pressured *to* say something. But other times, it can be pretty tough. A world that hates Jesus isn't going to think too highly of those who take their stand for Him. It's not always the easiest or most fun thing to confess our faith. So we can come up with some pretty convincing reasons to keep quiet. I'm going to look stupid in front of my friends. They won't be as likely to include me in their fun. Well, you know, if I'm too vocal about this Jesus stuff it could have a negative impact on my career. Wouldn't want people to think I'm strange. Or my new favorite rationalization: "Oh, I probably should say something, but then there would be a whole big huge conversation that I don't have time for and it probably wouldn't help anyway. It just wouldn't be worth it for me to take a stand here and now." But what am I doing then? If I just pick my spots and confess Jesus when it's easy. But when it's difficult, aren't those the times and places God can best use us to bring His Word to those who need it the most? Those are the times when God's law is needed to convict someone's conscience; to break down the damning deception of self-righteousness; to shake someone up who is on cruise-control to hell. Those are the times when God's saving Gospel is so needed to soothe the depressed sinner, to wake up the spiritually blind, to bring to life those dead in sin so they don't stay dead forever. Those are the kinds of things that often take place when confessing the Savior is the toughest. And really those are also chances for tremendous blessings from God to us. Opportunities to show our appreciation. Opportunities to grow in faith. Opportunities to get counted in with Jesus. Great blessings and great reason to follow Jesus with a bold confession, no matter what the circumstances.

Because it's all about that one truth to confess. That's what did it for the centurion. After all, this guy wasn't acting like Jesus was the Son of God at 9 a.m. At nine, Jesus was just some criminal, another day at the office, someone else to be put to death. The centurion probably didn't even flinch as the spikes were pounded through Jesus into the cross. He certainly didn't do anything to stop the abuse that was heaped on Jesus by the spectators. Didn't even move a muscle when the Lord called out in agony, "I thirst." But now at three in the afternoon, no threats to his safety or livelihood, no hostile crowd, no temptations to wait for a more convenient time, no worries of how foolish am I going to look, could keep him from yelling out, "**Truly this was the Son of God!**" So what happened? What took place in those six hours that could make such a change? That could extract such a bold confession. What made the difference? Here it says, "**When the centurion heard His cry and saw how He died...**" This centurion heard the truth, and he saw the truth. The Bible tells us faith isn't something someone searches for and finds, and it's not something that just drops in out of the blue. But Romans 10:17, "**Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message comes through the word of Christ.**" And the word of Christ was there for this soldier. Those incredible words from the cross, the amazing statements we read a little earlier in the story of Jesus' sacrifice. Jesus forgiving those who were wrongly putting Him to death. Thinking more of His friends and His mother than of Himself. Promising an undeserving thief eternal life in His kingdom.

And, He heard the truth of Jesus' cry, it says here. No doubt that strong cry, "It is finished!" Finished. The loud and clear, one word, call of victory. Finished. Not just His intense suffering. But everything He had come to this earth to do. The sins He had come to pay for. The guilt He had come to erase. It was all taken care of. This was the clear cry of victory. The serpent's head which had struck its painful bite was crushed. Every evil power was put on notice. Jesus had taken every shot sin, the devil and hell could dish out and had carried the day. At that moment He could look and see every sinner ever and know for sure He had not missed a single one. Not that centurion; and not any of us. There wasn't a sinner anywhere for whom payment had not been sufficiently made. This was it, the sacrifice made once and for all. It was finished.

The truth that God illustrated with a very dramatic special effect, verse 38: “The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.” The curtain in the temple separating the holy place from the holy of holies, where no one dared approach. Except for the one high priest, and him only once a year. And even that was a fearsome thing, as he came after sacrifices were made for his sins, carrying blood to sprinkle on the mercy seat inside. All of it graphically demonstrating the truth of what God’s prophet Isaiah had said, “It is your guilt that has separated you from your God...so that he does not hear...” Sin is a very serious thing. It cuts off access to a holy God. A sacrifice was necessary and a go-between. Mediation was required. Required and fulfilled perfectly in the one and only high priest who had no sins of His own to pay for. The sacrifice for sin that didn’t need to be repeated day after day, because it really could and did remove all the guilt of all sin. So when that price was paid, the huge curtain – 60 feet by 30 feet and as thick as a man’s hand was instantly torn in two from top to bottom. It had outlived its usefulness. It was not needed anymore. So God didn’t just fold it up and set it aside. He tore it in half, never to have it hung up again. What His Son had done up there on the cross once and for all ripped up the barrier between us and God. Now the centurion didn’t see this. The priests who would have been performing the afternoon sacrifice about this time sure would have noticed. But the centurion didn’t need to see it. He had heard Jesus’ word and saw how He died.

As you and I have also seen and heard. And as the followers of Christ said in Acts chapter 4: Now “we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.” That’s really what it means to follow Christ. To confess Him. Oh, it’s not always something dramatic like person from the news who confesses his Savior before being shot to death. Or the Christians we hear about killed in places like North Korea, or by Nigeria’s Boko Haram. But it doesn’t have to be like that. We have plenty of other chances every day. Like with our co-workers and neighbors who are always so eager to tell us about the things that are most important to them. We can share the most important thing in our lives and hope it can change theirs too. Or even in front of church-going people who think they are boldly confessing their Lord but they’re really boldly confessing themselves. We can make a stand and tell them it’s all about Jesus, not about us or what we do or how we feel. Or like so many of our young people, doing the right things by God, speaking up, making stands for their Savior even when they know it’s going to bring name-calling and derision and being cast out from the “cool group.” and actually that should be considered a great honor, as Peter says in his first epistle: “Rejoice whenever you are sharing in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted in connection with the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you... If you suffer for being a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God in connection with this name.” Being a Christian, knowing we have perfect forgiveness, knowing we have eternal life for sure – it’s definitely nothing to be ashamed of and it’s definitely something to want others to have. So if like the centurion you had just one sentence written about you, what would you want to be known for? Be known for knowing Jesus. That’s what God knows you for. Amen.