

Mark – A Restored Servant

A few years ago, a woman by the name of Barbara Thiering wrote a book called *The Book that Jesus Wrote- John's Gospel*, in which she tried to make the case that Jesus wrote the Gospel of John. Her arguments were poor, and more sensationalist than scholarly, but there it was, claiming that Jesus wrote a book. But as most believing and unbelieving scholars know, Jesus Himself never wrote a book, while Incarnate among men. Instead, four men were chosen by God to record the life and words of Jesus Christ. They were Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Matthew was one of the apostles, a former tax-collector that followed Jesus. Matthew wrote to convince Jews that Jesus is the promised Messiah. John was also one of the twelve apostles, a former fisherman, nicknamed 'son of thunder' by Jesus. He wrote to Jews and Gentiles to show that Jesus is the Son of God who must be believed in. Luke was not an apostle, but he was a close friend and partner of Paul's. He was a Greek, who had probably converted to the Jewish religion even before becoming a Christian. He was a doctor, and he wrote to Gentiles to teach about the Son of Man.

So who was Mark, and why did God choose to use him to write one of the four accounts of the life of the Lord Jesus? The New Testament gives us several pieces of information about Mark. One of the reasons why the Bible is such a trustworthy book is because it shows you both the strengths and the weaknesses of its characters. No airbrushing or editing out embarrassing details. The Bible describes only one perfect Man – the Lord Jesus. But by recording the details of these imperfect men, we gain encouragement and hope. Mark's story is just such a life – a life with failure, and a life with lasting influence. As we peer into his life, we will see the clear lesson of his life, which happens to be one of the key themes of the Gospel of Mark.

I. His Home and Family

Acts 12:7-12 ⁷ Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, "Arise quickly!" And his chains fell off his hands. ⁸ Then the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and tie on your sandals"; and so he did. And he said to him, "Put on your garment and follow me." ⁹ So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰ When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. ¹¹ And when Peter had come to himself, he said, "Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people." ¹² So, when he had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying.

The situation here was that Herod had killed James the brother of John, and had imprisoned Peter, hoping to do the same to him. An angel released Peter and miraculously allowed him to escape. As soon as Peter is out on the streets of Jerusalem he heads straight for the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark.

This is our first introduction to Mark by name. His mother, apparently a widow, was wealthy enough to have a home large enough to host many Christians ("many were gathered together praying."). It seems her home was an early Christian meeting place. It is not impossible that it was the place where Jesus ate the Last Supper with his disciples.

Mark is the son of this godly woman, who hosted many in the early church in her home. He had lived in Jerusalem, and it may be that he had heard and seen the Lord himself. Two verses in Mark which seem like Mark's reference to himself may be found in chapter 14:

Mark 14:51-52 ⁵¹ Now a certain young man followed Him, having a linen cloth thrown around his naked body. And the young men laid hold of him, ⁵² and he left the linen cloth and fled from them naked.

Mark was also the cousin of Barnabas, the Barnabas we read so much of in the book of Acts.

Colossians 4:10 ¹⁰ Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, with Mark the cousin of Barnabas (about whom you received instructions: if he comes to you, welcome him),

During the church's early days in Jerusalem (A.D. 33-47) Mark no doubt became familiar with Peter's preaching. If he was not already born again, it must have been during this time that he came to personal faith in Jesus Christ. Peter's calling him "my son" (1 Peter 5:13) may mean Mark became a Christian through Peter's influence.

That's how Mark began his Christian walk. But Mark's life becomes really interesting when we turn to his service in the book of Acts.

II. His Imperfect Service

Acts 12:25 - 13:5 ⁵ And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their ministry, and they also took with them John whose surname was Mark. ^{NKJ} **Acts 13:1** Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³ Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away. ⁴ So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. ⁵ And when they arrived in Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. They also had John as their assistant.

Barnabas was a devout Jewish believer who had been sent out from Jerusalem to help with a new church in a city called Antioch. He had found Saul, and asked him to join him. After about a year, Barnabas and Saul went back down to Jerusalem to bring a gift to help the poor saints down there. When in Jerusalem, Barnabas' cousin Mark joins them and they return to Antioch.

Now the church at Antioch commissions Barnabas and Saul to go on a missionary journey. They take John Mark as their assistant.

But it wasn't easy. Travel in the ancient world was difficult and uncomfortable. Sea voyages were dangerous, and could be quite miserable. You lived at the mercy of the hospitality of others, or else you had to sleep in dirty and dangerous inns. You were often in danger from bands of robbers. Aside from that, the missionary team encountered a sorcerer who opposed them. What was Mark's response?

Acts 13:13 ¹³ Now when Paul and his party set sail from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John, departing from them, returned to Jerusalem.

For an unstated reason he returned home to Jerusalem. We don't know why, but it may be that John Mark simply didn't like missionary life. He got tired of the uncertainty, the danger, the dependence, the hardship, the sacrifice of serving God full-time. Perhaps the life he had gotten used to in Jerusalem was a fairly comfortable, wealthy life, and he was simply too soft, too pampered to handle what missions or ministry requires.

Whatever the reason, this was the low point in Mark's life. He had volunteered for service, but then backed out when the going got tough. He deserted in the middle of the battle. He went AWOL

precisely when the team needed him most. He demonstrated a selfish immaturity that no doubt hurt the ministry of Paul and Barnabas.

It was the kind of service let-down that a real soldier of the faith like Paul didn't take lightly. A little while later, it came up again.

Acts 15:36-41 ³⁶ Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing." ³⁷ Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. ³⁸ But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. ³⁹ Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; ⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God. ⁴¹ And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Barnabas, ever the encourager, wanted to give his cousin a second chance. Paul, the cool-headed strategist was not going to risk another missionary journey with a deserter. Paul takes Silas, and begins his second missionary journey, while Barnabas takes Mark with him and serves on the island of Cyprus.

This must have been a powerfully humiliating experience for Mark. Perhaps you experienced what it was like at school to be one of the last ones picked for a team. No one wants to be picked last because it suggests no one wants you, no one thinks much of you. What must Mark have felt to have Paul, the premier missionary say, "I refuse to work with him."

Maybe you have had some kind of experience in your Christian life where you really blew it. You messed things up in a big way - perhaps to the point where another Christian didn't want to keep working with you or fellowshiping with you. And worst of all, like Mark, you know you didn't deserve to still be used by God.

What did you do? What have you done? Some people retreat into permanent spectator mode. Others live in perpetual self-pity, excusing themselves from further service or progress in their Christian lives based on their previous failures. Some people become bitter, blaming people and circumstances and others, angry at the world for their initial failures.

What did Mark do? Well, Mark disappears from the scene for 10 years. We don't know what happened in those 10 years, but then he re-appears. And when he re-appears, it is in the place we least expect him.

III. His Improved Service

Philemon 1:23-24 ²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, ²⁴ as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers.

When Paul writes the letter of Philemon, along with Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians, where is he? He is in prison in Rome. Paul is in prison in Rome for the first time. And guess who is a fellow worker alongside Paul during this Roman imprisonment? Mark.

Somewhere in those 10 years, something had changed. Something had to have changed in Mark for Paul to have wanted him alongside him. And Mark himself had to have been the sort of man who didn't hold grudges, or keep petty resentments.

While the Bible doesn't tell us what Mark did on those 10 years, there are certain things we can

assume he did not do:

He didn't give up on serving God because of his failure on his first missionary journey.

He didn't become an anonymous spectator in a church, because of having been embarrassed.

He didn't become a bitter critic, scorning the service and zeal and initiative of the rest of God's servants.

He didn't live in a state of paralysed guilt, mourning his failure and unable to get over it.

If Mark had done any of those things, he would have been worse off 10 years later than he was when Paul had first experienced his desertion. Had Mark done any of those things, he would not have been found at Paul's side 10 years later.

What did Mark probably do? He confessed his sin and repented of it. He accepted the full forgiveness of God. He probably asked Barnabas and Paul for forgiveness. He offered himself as a servant to be used in whatever capacity. He accepted whatever assignments he received, and embraced their hardships where he needed to. He was willing to serve in the shadows if he needed to. He kept serving those 10 years.

Those are the marks of a servant. A servant humbles himself. A servant does what is needed. A servant does not seek glory. A servant finishes the task.

The theme of the Gospel of Mark is Jesus the Servant-Son. Probably the key verse of the whole book is 10:45:

"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many

This was how Christ was. This is the aspect of Christ that Mark focused on. Perhaps it was because he had learned it by hard experience.

One of the principles that Jesus taught was that the one who serves is exalted. Mark served in the shadows. But after Paul's release from prison, Mark apparently remained in Rome, and Peter arrived. Peter says that Mark is with him in 1 Peter 5:13. Many think this was the time when Mark composed the Gospel of Mark – sitting together with Peter, hearing the eyewitness report of the life of Christ.

This servant, who had served quietly on the island of Cyprus, picking up the tatters of his reputation, who served quietly alongside a man in prison, now becomes an instrument for the Holy Spirit to write what we believe was the very first Gospel. Mark pioneers a new kind of literature, a book that Matthew and Luke would both use, and a book which would become part of the eternal Word of God, read by billions of people.

It's the story of Christ's words recorded in Mark.

Mark 9:35 ³⁵ *And He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all."*

As you reflect on your own Christian life, what have you done in the face of failure? Retreat? Become bitter? Wallow in guilt? Or have you learnt the secret of a servant? Confess, get up, start again, volunteer, be present, be faithful.

Mark did not only have improved service, but because of it, he had:

IV. His Imperishable Reward

2 Timothy 4:9-11 ⁹ Be diligent to come to me quickly; ¹⁰ for Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed for Thessalonica -- Crescens for Galatia, Titus for Dalmatia. ¹¹ Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry.

Second Timothy is the last letter that Paul wrote. He was imprisoned for a second time in Rome, probably around the year 67 or 68. Mark had left Rome during Nero's persecution. Here Paul, shortly before he was to be beheaded, writes to Timothy who is in Ephesus. This is a touching, personal letter from a father in the faith to his son in the faith. It is filled with personal requests.

Paul talks to Timothy, who still stands with him in these last days, Demas has not. Demas has deserted, and apparently deserted permanently, having loved this present world. Only Luke is there. And if there is one person that Paul wants at his side, one person that Timothy must collect and bring with him to Rome – it is Mark. Twenty years after his desertion, twenty years after Paul's absolute refusal to work with him or travel with him, Mark is now Paul's person of choice to spend his last months with.

Mark, unlike Demas is going to finish. Demas started with a *yes*, and ended with a *no*. Mark started with a *yes*, had a *no*, and ended with a *yes*.

Matthew 21:28-31 ²⁸ "But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go, work today in my vineyard.' ²⁹ "He answered and said, 'I will not,' but afterward he regretted it and went. ³⁰ "Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, 'I go, sir,' but he did not go. ³¹ "Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said to Him, "The first."

It doesn't matter how well you start, or how many falls you have. What matters is how you finish. Paul has some words about what awaits those who finish:

2 Timothy 4:6-8 ⁶ For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.

God has grace for people who drop the ball, and get up. God has grace for those who sin and repent. God has grace for those who stumble but persevere. That's what a servant does.

Mark was not an apostle, a famous speaker, or a great leader. Mark was a faithful servant. Though he failed at times, he got back up, and carried on. His legacy is a book read by billions, and an eternal reward.