



MARK, THE MAN, MADE SERVANT

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Mark

First Message

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Seventy-one thousand people went to hear Billy Graham during his three-night crusade in the San Jose Arena. Almost five thousand people came forward. Why did all those thousands come to hear an unsophisticated country preacher who is approaching eighty years of age? And what was it that brought all those people forward? I think it was two things: the purity of the message, and the integrity of the messenger. The message was untainted by show, manipulation or false promises. It was pure gospel. And it was delivered by a messenger untainted by the love of money, power or sex. What a rare combination in this day and age. And what better motivation to read the great evangelist's autobiography, *Just As I Am*.

As we begin a new series in the gospel of Mark today, I want to return to the simplicity of that message by studying together the very first gospel written. The gospels were an utterly new literary genre. Nothing like them existed before in the ancient world. And the message of the gospels, of course, has totally transformed Western civilization.

Did you ever wonder how these gospel stories got written down and who wrote them? Before we look at the message itself, I want to focus on the life of the messenger who gave us the first gospel. This is the story of a man who grew up in wealth and privilege only to taste the bitter fruit of failure, but God used that failure to turn him into an extraordinary servant. One reason this book has such power is that the life of the messenger was shaped by its message itself. So when we read the theme verse at the center of the story, where Jesus describes his mission in these words,

For even 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, NASB),

we begin to realize how deeply this theme resonated in the life of the writer, Mark. For him, each word contained an sea of emotion, because God made him into such a servant.

I. Mark's Background: Privilege & Opportunity

A. His life of privilege

Who was this John Mark? John was his Hebrew name, Mark his Greek name. Because he is referred to as Mark, the son of Mary (Acts 12:12), it is likely that his father had died young and that the boy grew up fatherless. His mother Mary apparently was a wealthy widow

whose home became the stage for the early disciples of Jesus. Since our Lord had very few contacts in Jerusalem, this home could well have been the site for the Last Supper. Some scholars surmise that it might even have been Mark himself who made preparations for that evening by carrying a jug of water on his head, thereby giving the secret signal for the location where the disciples would partake of their final Passover meal with Jesus.

Though Mark was not an apostle, some of the church fathers include him as one of the seventy who were sent out by the Lord. It is highly probable that he was an eyewitness to Jesus' arrest. The following cryptic description appears only in Mark's gospel of an event that occurred during that arrest in Gethsemane:

And a certain young man was following Him, wearing nothing but a linen sheet over his naked body; and they seized him. But he left the linen sheet behind, and escaped naked (Mark 14:51-52).

Michael Green¹ speculates that this anonymous young man could have well been Mark. "He was just a young man of sixteen or seventeen trying to sleep on the roof of his home in Jerusalem, one evening in April, a time when the temperature can rise to 80 or 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Unable to sleep, and having a sense of foreboding, Mark climbed down the drain pipe of his house, made his way to the Kidron, crossed the stream, and entered the darkness of Gethsemane. There he was captured by the sight of the Lord in prayer. Suddenly, Jesus is besieged by the lights of torches. Mark hears the swish of swords being drawn. Then comes the kiss of Judas. Mark himself is grabbed by soldiers, but he escapes, running away naked, leaving behind his linen robe." Perhaps this is prefiguring Jesus, who would escape the grave naked, leaving his linen wrappings behind. Theodore Zahn comments: "Mark paints a small picture of himself in the corner of his work."

After the resurrection, Mark's home continued to be the hub of church life for the apostles (Acts 1:13; 12:12). This was where they held an emergency prayer meeting for Peter, who had been jailed by King Herod. Herod had just executed James, the brother of John, and it looked as if Peter would be next. In a scene filled with first-hand detail and playful humor, the Lord answers the prayers of the apostles. The sleeping Peter is awakened by an angel, who walks him out of prison. The apostle, in a stupor, is not sure whether he's dreaming or having a vision until he's safely outside. When Peter makes his return to the house under the cover of dark-

ness, a servant girl named Rhoda hears him knocking at the gate. Overcome with excitement that it is Peter who is outside, she runs to tell the others but forgets to open the gate, leaving the quaking fugitive outside. Meanwhile, inside the house, the dull disciples refuse to believe the girl, and they continue praying. Peter has to keep pounding on the door to be let in. This is the home Mark grew up in. What an exciting place it must have been!

B. His life of opportunity

Some time later Mark is given a unique opportunity for ministry when he is chosen to accompany Barnabas and Paul on their first missionary journey. We find the account in Acts 12:

And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, taking along with them John, who was also called Mark.

Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. And when they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper (Acts 12:25-13:5).

Mark, who was cousin to Barnabas, was selected by both Paul and his cousin to be their helper. He would be their servant, assisting them by taking care of all the details, working as their travel agent and making whatever arrangements were necessary. In Greek literature, the term helper was used also of one who made the arrangements for funerals.

So we find Mark, a privileged youth, invited to be part of something much bigger than himself. At the critical moment of history he would accompany leaders who were on the cutting edge of the Christian movement. But the opportunity proved short-lived.

II. Mark, the Man: Failed Service

Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John left them and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13).

Perga of Pamphylia was a swampy area infested with mosquitoes; it was a place where malaria was rampant. As a result, Paul and Barnabas decided to head for the higher country of Psidian Antioch, at an elevation of five thousand feet (where only the most robust of mosquitoes made their home!). But this too presented diffi-

culty—a torturous climb, for instance, the danger of highway robbers, etc. For some reason, Mark abandoned the mission. Why he left his comrades we do not know. Was it fear of robbers, the treacherous conditions of the journey, or the fear of malaria in the swamp-infested region of Perga? Was it the change in relationship between Paul and Barnabas? We simply do not know. What we do know is the disagreement was serious enough to cause a split between Paul and Barnabas on their second missionary journey, as Paul refused to grant Mark a second chance.

The argument is set out in Acts 15:

And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." And Barnabas was desirous of taking John, called Mark, along with them also. But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had *deserted them* in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and departed, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord (Acts 15:36-40).

Who was right? Listen to the wise words of Ray Stedman: "To Paul, the mission was more important than the man; to Barnabas, the man was more important than the mission. Each was correct according to his viewpoint and gift, but wrong to split over it." But for Mark came the painful realization that the whirl of life that was going on around him had nothing to do with him or his character. He was being buoyed along on the stream of success by the life and character of others. It was not because of who he was, but because of who he knew and where he grew up.

How painful it must have been for Mark to be labeled a failure and be shunned by the leading apostle of the Christian movement! Yet he could not hide. His own home was still the center for Christian life for Jerusalem. Everywhere he turned, every face he met reminded him of his failure.

What does God do when we come to the painful realization that we are failures? The good news of the gospel is that God does not discard us. Instead, he uses our failure as the gateway to make us his servants.

III. Mark, the Man, Made Servant

A. Embraced by family who believed in him

Barnabas, the one who believed that "the man is more important than the mission," takes Mark back to Cyprus (Acts 15:39), to serve on a smaller scale mission. God doesn't throw away his failed servants. He grants them new opportunities of service on a smaller scale, under the umbrella of acceptance. There is nothing that motivates better than having people believe in you, especially members of your own family.

B. Embraced by an apostle who understood failure

Mark is then given even more privilege and opportunity in his association with Peter. The apostle, a man who well understood the meaning of failure, drew him under his wing and adopted him as his own son (1 Pet 5:13). “Son” was an endearing term used by the rabbis for special pupils whom they desired to pour their lives into. So the young man who had no father is now adopted by a man who longed for sons. Because of these two relationships, Mark is restored to service. He would go on to become a worldwide traveler for the gospel, his journeys taking him to Jerusalem, Cyprus, Turkey, Rome and Egypt.

As we look at this this servant Mark today, four outstanding character traits are especially evident.

IV. The Marks of a True Servant

A. Humility

When Mark is presented with the right opportunity, he goes back to the one who scathingly criticized and rejected him, the apostle Paul, and serves him at the time when he is most vulnerable—during his imprisonment (Col 4:10). Such a visit proved most healing, so much so that, at the end of Paul’s life, in yet another prison, it is Mark whom the apostle deeply longs for and requests to visit him, since “he is useful to me for service” (2 Tim 4:11). What a turnabout! Here is a man given the highest accolade of servant by the very one who once labeled him as unfit for service! It takes great humility to set aside your pride to love and serve the one who initially rejected you, yet it was this humility that birthed a new creativity in Mark.

B. Creativity

Not only did Mark become humble, he also became inventive. As the apostles were aging and dying, and with them their first-hand testimony about Jesus, Mark felt the necessity to preserve the oral teachings of Peter in some kind of written form. Mark had a background in languages. He knew Aramaic, and a little Hebrew, and he could read and write in Latin and Greek, even if his Greek was a bit crude. So he decided to use his languages for the Lord, to be the first to commit to writing the oral traditions about Jesus and his ministry. “The written form is as new as the gospel which it enshrines” (Michael Green). It was Mark who invented this new literary form of the gospel and deposited it for future generations. Papias, one of the earliest church fathers, who lived at the end of the first century, said this of him:

Mark became the interpreter of Peter and he wrote down accurately, but not in order, as much as he remembered of the sayings and doings of Christ. For he was not a hearer or a follower of the Lord, but afterwards, as I said, of Peter, who adapted his teachings to the needs of the moment and did not make an ordered exposition of the sayings of the Lord. And so Mark made no mistake when he thus wrote down some things as he remembered them; for he made it

his especial care to omit nothing of what he heard, and to make no false statement therein.²

This literary accomplishment is all the more noteworthy since Mark was handicapped (“stump-fingered”). Mark’s gospel was held in such high repute that both Matthew and Luke used it as the basis for their longer, more elaborate versions of the gospel. But Mark was the first to set down the account, so we can credit him with the invention of a brand new literary genre, the gospel.

C. Innovative

Mark also is credited by some scholars as being a key figure in the development of the *codex* (Latin for a “bound book”). Up to this time, all writing was done on scrolls. These were large, cumbersome documents which only the elite could afford. But someone came up with the idea of creating a new way of preserving writings in a bound form, using papyrus, held together with a wooden cover. This new book form (the *codex*) made writing more accessible and easier to distribute. It was much used by Christians. Over ninety per cent of the *codex* material which we possess from the second century is Christian. Mark could well have been one of the pioneers in this communications revolution.

We need fresh ways to preserve and share the gospel. Making the same old noises in our post-Christian culture won’t work. We need innovative servants, writers, poets, dramatists, and producers.

D. Adventurousome

Finally, we are told by the later church fathers that when Mark grew older, he went beyond his role as servant and became an evangelist. The fourth century church historian Eusebius said of him: “Mark was the first to be sent to Egypt and proclaimed the gospel he had written, and first established the church in Alexandria.”³ Whether Mark actually went to Alexandria or not we can’t say for sure, but we do know that there was a significant church in that city from a very early date.

I am reminded of our own Jim Foster. Jim never finished high school. He was a servant among us. He fixed our cars, he poured our coffee. He is married now to Nelly, his Romanian bride, and he is ministering in that country as an evangelist, using his languages for God. And in like manner, over the past ten years God has moved seven of our elders to new territories where he had ministries awaiting them.

These then are the characteristics of Mark as God’s servant: humble, creative, innovative and adventuresome.

Michael Green summarizes Mark’s story in these words:

God takes failures and makes them saints. Mark took his second chance. He turned his family pride into love and submission to one who had rejected him; turned his cowardice into courage, and went to pris-

on serve Paul; turned his return home into a new, daring creativity and new literary form; and moving beyond his role as servant, took on the apostolic role itself.

The elders who were introduced from this platform this morning are, in my opinion, servants par excellence. But I must tell you that each man, like Mark, became a servant through the gateway of failure. They have tasted failure either as fathers, husbands, or employees; they have tasted failure in their health and with their families. Some have tasted the bitter fruit of rejection by others in leadership positions. But in every case, like Mark, by the grace of God, someone believed in these men. They embraced us, gave us a second chance, and turned our story too into the gospel story, giving us an opportunity to learn to become servants.

*May God grant us the grace,
that we remain a place
of that Father's touch
and quickened pace
to seek and save
Mark's lost and lonely face
and in that fervent warmth
and holy embrace
restore them
one and all
servant
sons.
Amen.*

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1. I am indebted to Michael Green and his lectures at Regent College on the Gospel of Mark for much of the shape of my sermon.

2. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastic History (H.E.)* 3.39.14, in Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963) 27.

3. Eusebius, *H.E.* 2.16.1