

JOHN MARK

African Roots

John Mark was born in Cyrene in Africa. His Jewish parents belonged to the Levite tribe. They were described as righteous, God-fearing and wealthy. Early in John Mark's childhood nomadic tribes invaded the region robbing and pillaging, looting livestock and stealing valuables. Mark's parents suffered the loss of most of their possessions and so migrated to Jerusalem.

Privileged Upbringing

John Mark was given a good education and became fluent in Hebrew, Greek and Latin. His family was described as very religious and they were closely connected with the Lord Jesus during His earthly ministry. The Apostle Peter was the cousin of Mark's father. Barnabas was Mark's cousin. His mother Mary played an active role in the early days of the church in Jerusalem. Her upper room was used for the Passover supper which was used by the Lord Jesus for His Last Supper with his disciples. It was in the same upper room that the Lord appeared to the disciples after His Resurrection. And it is also believed that it was in the same upper room that the church was gathered in prayer when the Holy Spirit came upon them on the Day of Pentecost.

Eyewitness for the Gospel

John Mark was present at the wedding at Cana in Galilee (John 2:1-11). Church tradition identified young Mark as one of the seventy disciples sent out to proclaim the Gospel (Luke 10:1-17). Mark was also identified as the man who had been carrying the jar when the two disciples were sent to prepare a place for the celebration of the Passover (Mark 14:13-14; Luke 21:11).

John Mark was the young man who, on the night that the Lord was betrayed and arrested, was following Jesus wearing a linen garment, and when they seized him he fled naked leaving his garment behind (Mark 14:51-52).

Active in Acts

John Mark accompanied the Apostle Peter on his missionary outreaches in Jerusalem and Judea. It was in his mother's home that the church met for prayer when the Apostle Peter was imprisoned (Acts 12:12).

When his uncle Barnabas (Colossians 4:10) and Paul returned from Jerusalem they brought John Mark with them to Antioch (Acts 12:25).

Desertion and Disgrace

When the Apostle Paul and Barnabas were sent off on that first great missionary journey by the Church at Antioch, John Mark went with them. After their successful outreach in Cyprus, they travelled to Perga in Pamphylia where John Mark left them to return to Jerusalem. The Scriptures do not mention his reasons. Whether it was the dangers or homesickness, whether his zeal had ebbed, or his courage had failed him, Mark deserted the elderly Barnabas and the sickly Paul, leaving them to scale the mountain passes to the Pisidian Antioch by themselves (Acts 13:13).

Disagreement and Division

When Paul and Barnabas set off on their second missionary journey "*Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with him, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas...*" Acts 15:36-40

Recovery and Restoration

Happily, however, that is not the last we hear of John Mark. Despite this unpromising beginning to his missionary career, John Mark came back and was later reconciled with Paul, proving himself in the field to become, in later years, a faithful co-worker with Paul. We read in Colossians 4:10: *“My fellow prisoner, Aristarchus, sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.”*

“Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry.”

2 Timothy 4:11

From initially being a failure, a deserter, a quitter, a man who had put his hand to the plow but looked back and gone backward, causing a sharp disagreement and division between his cousin Barnabas and the Apostle Paul, John Mark had gone on to repent, to restore, to make restitution and to rebuild Paul's trust in him. So much so that Paul, in his pastoral letter to Timothy, describes Mark as *“helpful to me in my ministry.”* Paul also mentions Mark as one of his co-workers in his letter to Philemon.

Back to Africa

We need to turn to church history to find out what happened between that separation at the beginning of the second missionary journey, and the later reconciliation and restoration with the Apostle Paul.

Barnabas died and was buried on the island of Cyprus. After the death of his cousin, Barnabas, Mark was guided to go back to North Africa to preach the Gospel in Pentapolis, his birthplace in Cyrene.

Alexandria

After establishing a church in Pentapolis, Mark travelled to Alexandria in Egypt. At that time Alexandria was considered one of the greatest centres of culture and learning in world. It was certainly the greatest city in Africa. It's colonnaded streets were as wide as two hundred feet. The museum and library of Alexandria were some of the most impressive and imposing buildings anywhere on the continent. They contained some of the rarest and best of human achievements including several million scrolls and books. Greek philosophers, Hebrew Rabbis, Persian and Indian seers, and Egyptian teachers gathered to discuss and debate world and life views.

Yet, Alexandria at that time was also notorious for the drunkenness, decadence, debauchery and extravagant fashions of the very rich.

All day Mark walked through the market places and streets of Alexandria. Towards evening a strap of his sandal was torn and he turned to the first cobbler's shop. As the cobbler was working the awl pierced his hand and he took God's Name in vain. Mark picked up some clay and applied it to the wound, prayed for him and the man's hand was miraculously healed.

Then, taking his cue from the cobbler's blasphemous statement, he started to talk to him about the Creator God, the Eternal Judge, and of His Son the Redeemer, our Lord Jesus Christ. The cobbler, Ananias, surrendered his life to Christ and invited the evangelist to stay in his home. Ananias and his family were baptised - becoming the first fruits of the church founded by the evangelist Mark. This was in 61 AD.

Soon many other Alexandrians were converted and the Christian faith grew dramatically. The authorities became alarmed and the local Christians pleaded with Mark to leave town until the threat has passed.

Called To Rome

Mark travelled to Pentapolis and visited the church that he had planted. It was about this time that he received the invitation from Paul to join him in Rome. Hearing that Mark had been forced to leave

Egypt because of the hostility of the authorities, Paul had sent for Mark to join him in Rome. Later on, Paul testified to Mark's usefulness in his ministry (2 Timothy 4:11).

Writing the Gospel

Mark also later became a co-worker with the Apostle Peter (1 Peter 5:13). It was under the Apostolic authority of Peter that the Gospel according to St. Mark was written.

Laying Foundations for the Future

Both the Apostles Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome in 64AD. Mark returned to Alexandria in 65AD. He found the Christians firm in the Faith and growing in grace and boldness. Mark established the School of Alexandria to defend Christianity against the Philosophical School of Alexandria. He wrote the Liturgy of the Holy Eucharist which was later modified by Saint Cyril. Many miracles were attributed to his ministry and many converts were won to the Faith.

Persecution Erupts

In the year 68AD Resurrection Sunday fell on the same day as the Serapis Feast. A mob of heathen idolators who had gathered in the Serapis Temple in Alexandria were whipped up into a frenzy and poured out to attack the Christians who were celebrating the Resurrection. Mark was seized and dragged by ropes throughout the city. The mob chanted: *"The ox must be led to Baucalis"* Baucalis was one of the idols that was worshipped with sacrifices of oxen.

Light in the Darkness

In the evening the bruised and bleeding evangelist was thrown into a dark prison. There he was encouraged by an angel who told him: *"Now your hour has come O Mark, the good minister, to receive your recompense. Be encouraged for your name has been written in the Book of Life."*

Mark thanked God for sending His angel to him and then he had a vision of the Saviour Himself who declared: *"Peace be to you, Mark, my disciple and evangelist! Be strong, for tomorrow you shall receive the Crown of Martyrdom."* Mark rejoiced with loud shouts of praise to the Lord Jesus.

The Crown of Martyrdom

The next morning the pagans came in and this time tied the rope around his neck. Mark was dragged in the triumphal procession of Serapis throughout the city until his head was severed from his body. As the pagans fell upon his body to mutilate it, they attempted to burn his remains. But the wind blew and the rail fell in torrents. Thunder and lightning dispersed the frenzied mob and the Believers were able to retrieve his body and head to bury under the church he had founded.

Mark and the Lions

The Gospel of Mark has always been symbolized by a lion. There are many stories that associate Mark with lions. One story related by the Coptic historian Severus Ebn-el-Mokafa described an event earlier in his life when John Mark was walking with his father Arostalls in Jordan. Two lions were striding towards them, and his terrified father instructed John Mark to flee for his life. However the young boy assured his father that the Lord God would protect them. He began to pray and the lions passed by without harming them.

An Enduring Legacy

From being one of the original seventy evangelists sent out by the Lord Jesus, John Mark preached the Gospel throughout Judea, Asia Minor, Italy, Cyrene and Egypt. The churches he established in Egypt have flourished, despite having endured nearly fourteen centuries of Islamic persecution. Many of the prayers and liturgies that he originally drafted found their way into the Book of Common Prayer compiled by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer during the English Reformation.

The Gospel of Mark was the first Gospel to be written, and it is the shortest. It also relates the most miracles.

The life of John Mark teaches us that failure does not need to be final. By God's grace, our sins can be forgiven and our weaknesses can be turned to strength in Him.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders, and the sin that so easily entangles us and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes upon Jesus, the Author and Perfector of our Faith.” Hebrews 12:1-2

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