

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (12-9-1999 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Acts 15:36-41

Additional Bible Reading: Acts 13:1-5,13

John Mark

Introduction

Paul's second missionary journey began on a sad note, which did not auger well for the future. Paul's desire was to visit the churches and converts he had been to on his first journey. This was not just to count heads, but because of his warm pastoral heart. But at an early stage of the journey, there was a serious quarrel between Paul and Barnabas, which led to a parting of the ways. The dispute was over John Mark.

John Mark came from a Jerusalem home. John was his Jewish name, and Marcus his Roman name. His mother was Mary, and since there is no mention of his father, we assume he was dead. Their house was the headquarters of the church in Jerusalem. It was the house Peter went to when he escaped from prison, a large well-to-do house with a courtyard and servant Rhoda. It may have been the house where the disciples assembled at Pentecost waiting for the coming of the Spirit. Mark would have known all the leading figures of the early church, and he knew the Lord Himself. Some have speculated that he was the young man in the Garden of Gethsemane that is referred to only in Mark's Gospel, who escaped by running away and leaving his cloak in the soldier's hands.

Our first encounters with Mark do not show him in good light, but in the end he makes good. He got a second chance – like Jonah in the Old Testament – and he took it, and all turned out well. Lots of people have been through the same experience, and have drawn much comfort from the character of John Mark.

The quarrel which John Mark caused

On the first missionary journey, Barnabas and Paul took Mark as their assistant. The Greek word used for his role, *σπηρευτης*, was the word used for an under rower in the lower bank of oars on the great slave propelled galleys. He may have been their secretary, courier, or made the domestic arrangements – the equivalent of the boy who makes the tea in our culture. All was well till they left Cyprus for the mainland. At Perga in Pamphylia, when Paul's plan was to head inland, Mark deserted them and went back to Jerusalem.

Why did he desert? Was he a coward, fearful of Paul's proposed route which was notorious for bandits? Did he not like the idea of the Gospel being shared with Gentiles? Was he finding the hardships of missionary life too tough after his soft upbringing? Did he resent the fact that his cousin, Barnabas, had taken second place to Paul? Was he homesick and wanted his mother? Or was he one of those people who is good at starting something but never finishes a task? Whatever his reason, in running home he failed the Lord and let down people who relied on him. He put self first.

Paul was deeply upset, and made up his mind that Mark would never accompany him again. Once bitten, twice shy. Barnabas, however, had a milder nature. He was prepared to put the past behind him. Besides, blood is thicker than water. He thought they should risk it and take Mark with them on their second missionary journey, give the lad another chance. As a result, there was a severe quarrel between the two great leaders of the church. παροξυσμος, meaning “sharp disagreement”, English “paroxysm” – sudden attack of emotion. They did not mince their words, each said his piece – and they parted company – Barnabas and Mark in one direction, and Paul and Silas in the other direction.

We hear no more about the work of Barnabas and Mark. So much must have taken place that we never read about. Though they went in different physical directions, they did not give up their Christian work. The situation was overruled by God for good. There were now two missionary expeditions instead of one. Twice as many people were reached. Even today God can overrule in the sad situation where a church splits and becomes two. The people involved may have regrets and be ashamed of their actions, but God’s grace is seen.

There are times when Christians have conscientiously and sincerely held different opinions, and the only thing to do has been to go in different directions. The main thing is not to let personal relationships be marred by bad feeling and criticism. Barnabas was still referred to in Paul’s later letters (Colossians, 2 Timothy, Philemon), still showing a love and respect for the man and his work.

Wesley and Whitefield parted company in 1742 over the issue of election and predestination. One followed the Arminian route, and the other the Calvinist route. But the two men maintained affection for each other. In 1770, Whitefield died, and Wesley was asked if he expected to see Whitefield in heaven. He replied, “No!” – and went on to explain, “He will be so near the Saviour and I will be so far away, with such a great crowd in between, that is why I shall not see him in heaven.”

The recovery which he made

Mark’s disappearance from the scene lasted for about 15-20 years. We know much about Paul in these years, and not much about Mark. Legend has it that Mark founded a church in Alexandria, and later in Venice, but we do not know this for certain. Then suddenly he makes three appearances in later epistles of Paul. **My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. If he comes to you, welcome him (Colossians 4:10). Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers (Philemon 23,24). Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry (2 Timothy 4:11).** Peter also wrote about the same time, **She who is in Babylon sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark (1 Peter 5:13).** What had happened to the deserter who had caused such trouble?

Something must have caused a real change in Mark, though we do not know what. Did his conscience catch up with him because he had failed the Lord and failed his friends? Was it because he knew people knew what he had done and were talking about him? Maybe it was at the Lord’s Table, when he saw again the visible signs of

his Saviour's love for him, that he was reawakened and challenged. But one way or other, the prodigal came to himself and went back to the Father, asking for another chance. He had faced up to his failure, and decided to do something about it.

Thomas Cranmer, was asked to recant Protestantism, and when put under pressure he signed a document of recantation. Immediately he was horrified at himself for such weakness, and made it known that he recanted his recantation. Inevitably, he was sent to the stake. In front of the vast crowd gathered to watch him burn, he first thrust his hand into the fire, saying, "This unworthy hand which sinned, signing the first must be first to suffer." Only when it was blackened and consumed with the fire did he plunge his whole self into the flames.

What of ourselves? Have we failed this week? Are we feeling remorse over some shameful action or words or neglect? Are we prepared to do something about it, to get it off our heart and conscience? Mark's restoration speaks of the glorious truth that the past can be blotted out by God. The heaviest and most shameful burden under which we are staggering is not too heavy for Christ to deal with. Nothing is too shameful for Him to take into His pierced and royal hands and finally cast away. We can begin again, humbler and wiser this time. We must put things right if we can, and then avoid the mistakes of the past. Learn the lesson, and go on to live a life with years of service and blessing.

The Bible is full of characters who were knocked down but not knocked out. Failure was not the end. Consider Abraham, Moses, David, Peter and Mark. **Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Restore to me the joy of your salvation. A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise** (Psalm 51:1,7,12,17).

An accident happened in the laboratory of the chemist Faraday. A silver cup fell into a jar of a strong acid. It dissolved in the liquid. Faraday put the chemical mixture into a jar and the particles of silver sank to the bottom. The acid was drained off, but the silver was a shapeless mess. He took it to the silversmith who soon restored it to its former shape. It was a cause of wonder and delight to those who had watched its apparent destruction.

The debt in which Mark has placed us

We owe Mark a great deal. Obviously his experience of restoration is most helpful and encouraging. If it could be true of Mark, then it can be true of us. But there is something else he has left us, something which we can see, handle and read. It brings us into direct contact with him and his belief and message.

Between 50 and 70 AD, Mark was in Rome, and he took up his pen and wrote his account of the life of Jesus. His is the earliest and shortest and simplest of the Gospels. Almost certainly he was acting as Peter's secretary. He did not record things in order, but he wrote with great accuracy and care.

All but 31 verses of Mark's Gospel are repeated in Matthew's and Luke's accounts. So why is Mark's worth bothering about. Almost certainly, Matthew and Luke borrowed from Mark's writings for their own, since Mark's predates theirs. He tells us something about Jesus which we find nowhere else. It is also an example of very vivid writing, with life-like touches (e.g. that the 5000 sat on the green grass, that Jesus was asleep in the boat with his head on a cushion, the look of love Jesus had for the rich young ruler). He uses Jesus' actual Aramaic words (e.g. Talitha Cumi, Abba). He records Jesus' human emotions (e.g. indignation at his disciples, anger at the critics). He shows us Jesus, a man like us, touched with the feel of our infirmities. Alike us in all respects except He knew no sin. Yet at the same time, the mighty Son of God, the mighty miracle worker, and the one who gave His life as a ransom for many.

So with his own special emphasis on the life of Christ, we would be poorer if we did not have Mark's Gospel. Many who have been given a copy of Mark's Gospel have read it, and met Christ, and been led to trust Him as Lord and Saviour. Mark, through his Gospel, is still pointing people to Christ, and then enriching their understanding.

Conclusion

Mark was the deserter who, in the end, made good and left us all in his debt. This is a testimony to the grace, power and patience of Christ. The one who filled Paul with disgust was the one Paul wanted at the other end to be his helper. The Gospel is all about forgiveness of sin, the blotting out of failure, and the second chance available when in despair. Cowards are made heroes. There is strength for the weakling. Runaways are turned into evangelists. Mark was accepted again, made triumphant, and enabled others to see Jesus.