

“Mark: Gospel of the Servant King”

Mark 1:1; 10:45; 2 Tim. 4:11

I want to begin by asking a question—what is true greatness? The world around us has its own definition. We live in a world that measures greatness in terms of titles, platforms, and influence. We celebrate those who are served, not those who serve. But when the Son of God stepped onto the stage of human history, He completely redefined what greatness looks like. He didn’t climb over people to elevate Himself—He stooped to lift others up. Jesus said that in the kingdom of God, the way up is down. To exalt oneself is to be humbled by God, but to humble oneself is to be exalted by God. Servanthood is not a stepping-stone to greatness; it is greatness. And nowhere do we see that more clearly than in the life of the Lord Jesus, who “came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.” Mark’s gospel shows us what it means to follow a Servant King.

That brings up another question—what is the greatest way to win the hearts of people to faith in Christ? Is it through exciting worship services, engaging Bible preaching, or relevant ministry? Obviously, all of these are certainly important and have their place. Listen to what one person has said:

Ken Baugh — *“I can’t help but wonder if we’re missing something, because there are lots of churches that provide all these things, yet statistically, church attendance in America is declining, and more and more people are turning to alternative forms of spirituality rather than the person and work of Jesus Christ. Could it be, at least in part, that people are turning away from Jesus and His church because we as His followers have neglected to develop the one character trait that Jesus modeled for us over and over again?...What is this character trait? Servanthood.”*

And perhaps nobody in the New Testament understood the importance of this any more so than John Mark. With that in mind, turn with me in your Bibles to the gospel of Mark, and in a minute we will read a couple of verses. The New Testament begins with the four gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And throughout the centuries, believers have used four symbols to represent these gospels—a lion, an ox, a man, and an eagle. They have taken these symbols from the cherubim described in the book of Ezekiel and the four living creatures in the book of Revelation and have applied them to the gospels themselves. Matthew was written from the perspective of the Jewish mind, he spoke about the kingdom, and addressed his message to the Jews. Jesus is the Lion of the tribe of Judah. Luke was a physician, a Gentile who wrote from the perspective of the Greek mind, and he writes to present Jesus as the Son of Man who could have compassion on others because He took on their infirmities when He took on flesh and blood. John's gospel is written to show that Jesus is God in the flesh, the second Person of the trinity. For that reason, tradition has made the eagle the symbol of his gospel. Mark, however, is symbolized by the ox which is a beast of burden, a symbol of service. Jesus is presented as the King who stoops to serve.

And of those four, Mark may be the most overlooked. It is the shortest of the four gospels, only consisting of 16 chapters. Unlike Matthew and Luke which include the birth narratives of Jesus, Mark begins with the ministry of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus which inaugurates His earthly ministry. And while Matthew and Luke include longer teaching sections by Jesus, Mark's gospel will emphasize His actions. Mark is a fast paced action gospel, and one his favorite words to use is the word 'immediately' which occurs 42 times. The idea is that Mark is zeroing in on the ministry of Jesus by which He is revealed to be the Son

of God. He's not merely a historical figure, but He's a living reality, a Person who confronts us all today. In his very first sentence, Mark tells us that the Son of God has entered history, taken on the form of a Servant, and He has spoken to us, something which calls for decisive action on our part. What I want to do this morning is introduce you to Mark, both the man and his message.

1—The PROFILE of Mark, the man (2 Tim. 4:11)

“Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.”

The author of Mark's gospel doesn't come right out and say who he is, but church history tells us that it was John Mark who is mentioned a few places in the New Testament. One of the early church fathers wrote in the second century:

Papias — *“Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not indeed in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed Him, but afterward, he followed Peter, who adapted his teaching to the needs of his hearers so that Mark committed no error while he thus wrote some things as he remembered them. For he was careful of one thing, not to omit any of the things which he had heard, and not to state any of them falsely.”*

When you weigh the evidence that we find in Scripture, you will come to the conclusion that John Mark was not the kind of man you would expect to be used by God to record what many believe to be the very first account of Jesus' life and ministry. As a young man, Mark had distinguished himself early on as immature and unreliable. The jury was out on the depth of his commitment to the gospel. Starting strong but not being able to finish things seemed to be his pitiful track record. Like a runner who takes off when the gun fires, but stumbling and falling before he ever finds his stride.

Maybe you can identify with that. All of us should be able to because we all know the sting of failure in one way or another. Whether its a failed marriage, failure in parenting, or moral failure. I heard about a college student who wrote the following letter to her parents:

“Dear mom and dad, Just thought I’d drop you a note to clue you in on my plans. I’ve fallen in love with a guy named Jim. He quit high school after 11th grade to get married, but about a year ago he got a divorce. We’ve been going steady for two months and plan to get married in the fall. Until then, I’ve decided to move into his apartment (I think I might be pregnant). At any rate, I dropped out of school last week, although I’d like to finish college sometime in the future.”

Then, on the next page, the letter continued...

“Mom and dad, I just want you to know that everything I’ve written so far in this letter is false. NONE of it is true. But, it is true that I got a C- in French and flunked a Math exam. But hey, at least you don’t have to worry about some guy named Jim!”

Perspective is everything when it comes failure. The fact of the matter is that you can’t come to faith in the Savior until you first come to grips with your own failure to keep His law. Failure is the welcome mat to the door that enters the kingdom. If you’re convinced that God accepts you on the basis of your own accomplishments, then you will see yourself as a success. Successful people don’t see their need for grace, but failures do. And grace is what they get!

(Small door into the Church of the Nativity)

A painful start

Based on what we read in Acts 12, Mark more than likely lived in Jerusalem with his mother whose name was Mary. We know that Peter was a frequent visitor in the home, for Acts 12:12 says that many of the believers were gathered together for prayer in her home, praying for Peter's release from Herod's prison. Herod had killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when Herod saw that it gave him favor with the Jews, he arrested Peter and was determined to put him to death as well.

Acts 12:5—“So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.”

The Bible says that late at night, the angel of the Lord stood next to Peter, woke him up, and led him out of the prison. It was a divine deliverance! And when he realized it, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. Which means that more than likely, young Mark witnessed that miraculous event.

A few years later, Mark would be given an opportunity to take a more active role in the Jerusalem church. When his cousin Barnabas arrives from Antioch, who together with Saul had brought a relief offering to the Jerusalem church, invite Mark to join their ministry and accompany them back to Antioch.

Acts 12:25—“And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.”

As the church continued growing, a shift had taken place as the epicenter of Christianity moved from Jerusalem to Antioch. Missionary help was needed, so Mark joins the team. So that after serving for a period of time with Saul and Barnabas in Antioch, Acts 13:5 says Mark is invited to assist them on their first

missionary journey. They sail to Cyprus and make their way across the island, preaching the gospel, when they encounter some satanic opposition. There's a confrontation, but it leads to the conversion of the proconsul. But when the time came for them to move on to the next place, verse 13 says that John Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem. When the going got tough, he went back home.

In that sense, Mark is really a profile in quitting before you ever really get started. We never quit something because its easy. No, we quit when things get hard. Adversity and disillusionment takes its toll. We convince ourselves that we were really never cut out for it anyway.

During pilot training, one of the most frightening moments is when the instructor introduces stall recovery. The plane is intentionally slowed until it begins to shake and lose lift. Everything in a beginner pilot's instincts screams, "This is wrong! Pull up harder!" But pulling up makes the situation worse. The only way through the danger is to push forward and lower the nose, trusting the process, even though it feels counterintuitive and uncomfortable. If a student quits at that moment because it feels too hard or too scary, they never become a pilot.

When turbulence comes and we begin to lose lift, instincts may be to pull up when what we really need to do is put our nose to the grind and press on. Mark quit too soon, and it would be a decision that he no doubt lived to regret. But failure isn't final. Failure doesn't have to have the last word in our lives.

A patient restoration

By the time we get to Acts 15, a few years have gone by and Paul and Barnabas are about to head out on a second missionary journey.

Acts 15:37-40—“Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed.”

Mark becomes a controversial lightning rod. Paul needed someone he could trust, and the bridges had been burned in his mind as far as Mark was concerned. But Barnabas, son of encouragement, determines to take Mark with him. And it had to be a thing that helped bolster his confidence. Paul is quick to dismiss him, but Barnabas is patient and will help restore him to a place of usefulness.

Has God used someone like that in your life? When others were justified in their criticism, some ‘Barnabas’ gave you a second chance at things.

Joel 2:25—“I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten.”

While God doesn’t reverse time, He redeems it—giving meaning, fruit, and even joy that outweighs what was lost (Romans 8:28). What looked irreversible isn’t beyond His reach. He can take the mess we’ve made, turn it around, and somehow use it to make us better people.

A productive finish

Thankfully, Mark doesn’t slip off the pages of history and disappear in his failure. Barnabas takes him under his wing. So that a few years later, he emerges once again with Paul in prison and is one of those who are assisting him. How they

were reconciled, we don't really know. But I imagine Barnabas had something to do with it. Paul will go on to write:

Colossians 4:10—“Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him).”

2 Timothy 4:11 — “Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.”

Pay attention to that word ‘useful’ or ‘profitable’ as it may be read in other translations. I thought about that word this week, and as I did so, I discovered something. It is a word that is only used twice in the New Testament, both times in 2 Timothy. Here its translated ‘useful.’ But you’ll also find it a couple chapters earlier in:

2 Timothy 2:20-22—“Now in a great house there are not vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work. So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness.”

Set apart as holy, useful to the Master. And then Paul uses it again a couple of chapters later to describe Mark, ‘useful to me for ministry.’ And what do you think the significance of its meaning is? The amazing grace of God! It is as if Paul says, “Mark, formerly you dropped the ball, you quit missionary service and turned away from a tremendous life of possibility and service, went home again to your mother, back to what was easy and familiar, quit the front line of the battle, you’re still useful for the Master’s use!”

It is testimony to the patience of our God! I'm so glad that Jesus is so patient with us, aren't you? Where would we be if He weren't? Failure will not have the last word over the man or woman who surrenders his or her life to Jesus.

A poem I read captures it well:

*They on the heights are not the souls
Who never erred or went astray,
Or reached those high rewarding goals
Along a smooth, flower-bordered way.
Nay, they who stand where first comes dawn
Are those who stumbled but went on.*

All of us stumble and fall. What matters is whether or not we get up and keep pressing on in the grace of God.

Charles Swindoll — *“We don’t know specifically what happened after Barnabas took Mark to Cyprus that turned the wavering young disciple into a sturdy pillar of the Christian movement, but two things are clear. First, the personal investment of Barnabas proved crucial. Second, Mark eventually understood that followers of Christ must be servants and that discipleship requires sacrifice.”*

That’s a look at the profile of Mark, the man. Now, let’s consider a second thing:

2—The PURPOSE of Mark, the message (1:1; 10:45)

“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God...For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”

When Mark wrote his ‘good news’ about Jesus nearly two thousand years ago, his Gospel was a first of its kind. In fact, a lot of scholars think that Mark might

have been the first of the four gospels to be written. What makes Mark unique is this—it wasn't written merely as a biography of the life of Jesus. Instead, it was written with the intention of persuading its readers to embrace the truth that Jesus is the Son of God. He says as much in the very first verse!

To confirm Jesus' identity

This theme with which Mark writes, the identity of Jesus of Nazareth, is one that reappears throughout its 16 chapters. In 8:27, Mark records how Jesus Himself posed a question to His disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" Of course the crowds had their ideas. Some thought He was John the Baptist come back from the dead. Others thought He was Elijah or one of the prophets. But then Jesus asks a more direct and specific question of His disciples:

"But who do you say that I am?"

That is, "As My disciples, those who have followed Me up close and personal, who have seen My miracles, who have witnessed My power being demonstrated—who do you all say that I am?" The 'you' there is second person plural, it is meant to intentionally distinguish the group of disciples from the rest of the world. It is easy to voice the opinions of others. It may be trendy to follow the latest theories or ideas espoused by the world. However, it is another thing altogether when Jesus confronts us directly. Who do you say that I am? Not the crowds, not the religious elites, not the Romans—you. Not your spouse, not the preacher, not your mom or your dad—you.

Without a moment's hesitation, verse 29 says that Peter speaks up all of the sudden. That shouldn't surprise us, given what we know about Peter. Peter was none too shy. He says, "You are the Christ." In other words, "You are more than a prophet, more than a teacher, more than an itinerate preacher—You are the

Messiah. You are the God Man. You are our Hope of salvation.” It is a recognition that He is Deity wrapped up in perfect humanity. Peter confesses Him to be fulfillment of Israel’s Messianic hope. Jesus is the One the prophets foretold would come. He is David’s Son come to rule the nations from David’s throne.

As the Anointed One, He has come to bear our sins in His own body on the tree. He has come to suffer and die and be raised to life. He is now ascended into heaven and will one day appear again in glory. History is moving toward this ultimate destination and we come ever closer minute by minute, hour by hour, and day by day. Acts 17:31 says that God has a day fixed on His calendar by which He will judge the world by the Man He has ordained, which is why the question is of utmost importance. And so Mark wants us to know who this Jesus truly is.

To comfort those who suffer

A second purpose for which Mark writes involves providing comfort to those who were suffering for their faith. Earliest church history bears evidence that Mark wrote his gospel while living in Rome around the time of Peter’s death. It was time of intense persecution of believers under Nero who had set the city of Rome on fire and blamed it on the Christians. It was during the early days of this persecution that both Peter and Paul were martyred for their faith. As the furnace of affliction began to engulf the church, Mark no doubt felt compelled to encourage believers to remain faithful to the testimony of Jesus and to persevere under hardship.

C. Swindoll — *“Ministry that costs nothing accomplishes nothing. Consequently, faithful discipleship, even in times of hardship, is the theme that dominates Mark’s gospel and may have been the reason he felt compelled to write.”*

Given what we know about Mark’s background, it’s a lesson that he himself had learned. And so what he writes is all about Jesus, but the point is discipleship—its demands, its cost, its impact, and its rewards.

To call for a response

Before I finish up, maybe you’re wrestling with a sense of failure in your life over something. It could be anything. Be encouraged from the example of John Mark that failure is never final. Sometimes, it is the very thing that God uses to bring us to our breaking point. Unless you see your sin and need, and come to grips with your failure to do what is right in life, then you will never come to Christ. The door to the kingdom is low, and only those who stoop can enter. No one will ever strut their way into the kingdom. You’ve got to come by the way of the cross, the way of repentance and faith, trusting in Jesus alone who is our righteousness and salvation. He’s the Servant King who entered into our world in an act of humility, the perfect Son of God come to rescue sinners.

Donald Grey Barnhouse — *“I remember seeing pictures of George VI at his coronation, with his enormous jeweled crown, his ermine robes, and all the pomp that marked the occasion. It was very impressive. But I saw another picture of George VI where I truly knew him as king. The photograph showed the East End of London after it had been bombed by the Nazis into a heap of rubble. George VI was there with Winston Churchill to inspect the damage. He wore no crown or ermine robe, just a suit and a derby hat. He looked totally unremarkable, except for one thing. As he walked through the debris, he cried. As he saw the damage,*

his suffering people, the Union Jacks his subjects had draped over the wreckage of their homes, he wept. Churchill's memoirs record that as the people watched their king weeping in the midst of their ruin, they said again and again, 'He loves us. He loves us.'

The King who condescends! You may remember the song by Graham Kendrick:

From Heaven, You came helpless babe

Entered our world, your glory veiled

Not to be served but to serve

And give Your life that we might live

This is our God, The Servant King

He calls us now to follow Him

To bring our lives as a daily offering

Of worship to The Servant King

There in the garden of tears

My heavy load he chose to bear

His heart with sorrow was torn

"Yet not My will but Yours", He said

Come see His hands and His feet

The scars that speak of sacrifice

Hands that flung stars into space

To cruel nails surrendered

So let us learn how to serve

And in our lives enthrone Him

Each other's needs to prefer

For it is Christ we're serving

This is our God, The Servant King

He calls us now to follow Him

To bring our lives as a daily offering

Of worship to The Servant King

The Servant King! That's who Jesus is, and that is what we learn from Mark.