

God's Restoration In Mark

Lord, we thank You that You did not just hand us a list of Your demands, and ask us to live up to Your standards. You have been patient with us, working within us, working with us, and walking alongside to encourage us so that we can be made more like You. This morning we pray that You would help us understand the work of Your restoration. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

I would like to share with you what I learned about John Mark and God's restoration. John Mark is the author of the Gospel according to Mark. John is his Hebrew name, and Mark is his Roman name. Often he is simply called Mark in the Bible, and a few times it is just John. Now what has John Mark done? Other than his being the author of the Gospel of Mark, nothing else is written about him in the four Gospels.

We have to move to the book of Acts chapter 12 where Mark is first introduced as the son of a woman named Mary. And here it is talking about Peter after the angel set him free from prison.

Acts 12:12-13: "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. And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer."

At that time King Herod had killed James, the brother of John, and he saw that his action actually pleased the Jews. Therefore, he arrested Peter with the intention of making him his next victim. But the angel came at night to the prison and rescued him. Peter then went back to the place where the believers of the early church were gathering to meet and pray. The Bible identified the place as Mary's house. When Peter knocked on the door, a maid by the name of Rhoda came to answer. Perhaps there are too many people in the Bible named Mary so Mark's mother's name was brought in so that we can distinguish this Mary from the other ones called Mary.

From the two verses we just read, we discover a few things about Mark. He came from a rather well-to-do family who lived in a big house with servants. Mark's parents must have been dedicated believers to make their house available as the center for church activities. Mark probably was a teenager at that time, and it is likely that he attended church meetings regularly and had opportunities to interact with some of the saints going in and out of their home.

Another thing we discover about Mark according to Colossians chapter 4 is that he was a cousin to Barnabas who was the leader of the early church. So Mark had everything going for him, at least in terms of ministry. Earlier we speculated that he attended church meetings regularly because he was interested in joining what we call full-time ministry. As a matter of fact, he later got a job as a helper to Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey to Cyprus. If Mark had been brought up in this country, somebody would probably have written something about him in his school yearbook next to his picture: "The most likely to succeed in ministry."

The First Missionary Journey

So the first missionary journey started out from Antioch to proclaim the good news to the Gentiles, but something happened along the way. When the missionary team reached Perga in Pamphylia, Mark left the team. The reason was not given in the Bible. Perhaps a missionary's life was too tough for him, and it was more than Mark had anticipated. Or it could simply have been a matter of being homesick.

When I left home for college in America, I thought I would never get homesick. That was just a word reserved for the timid. I lived in a dormitory with 600 other students, and when the first Christmas break came, I suddenly realized I could pack my suitcase like anybody else and leave. But I had no place to go, and I found out that old Enoch was not that tough after all.

Mark was a young man, but Paul remembered his early departure well. In Paul's eyes Mark was a defector, a coward. Then Mark disappeared for two chapters in the book of Acts and reappeared in chapter 15.

Acts 15:36-38: "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.' Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. 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."

Does One Mistake Disqualify Us for Ministry?

When it was about time for Paul's second missionary journey, Barnabas was determined to take Mark along, but Paul would not hear of it. He considered Mark as a deserter who had turned his back on the work of God. The Bible says, "Paul insisted," and Barnabas also insisted. They both insisted, and the argument became so intense that finally Paul decided to take Silas in one direction, and Barnabas took Mark and went to Cyprus. In other words, they parted company; they split. John Mark who was once considered the most likely to succeed in ministry had now become the source of dissension in the early church. He was the one who broke up the missionary team that was sent from the church of Antioch. Mark must have asked himself this question: "Would one mistake disqualify me for missionary journeys for life?" And the answer from Paul was a definite "Yes!" As far as Paul was concerned, there was no room for quitters like Mark in the mission field.

Perhaps we too have made a mistake, and it has had a long lasting effect in our lives. Something happened in the past and still we are feeling the hurt and the pain; there is still a cloud. John Mark was in hot water, but thank God, Barnabas was unwilling to leave young Mark behind. He took Mark under his wing and spent time mentoring him. Through Barnabas God started His work of restoration in Mark, giving him another chance.

Personally, I admire what Barnabas did for Mark. As a relative Barnabas must have known Mark for a long time. He knew Mark had a heart to serve the Lord, therefore he did not judge Mark because of his inexperience or his past mistake. Barnabas understood that walking with the

Lord changes people's lives, and the more time you spend on walking with the Lord, the more changes will take place. It is called sanctification.

So who is this Barnabas? According to Acts chapter 4 his real name is Joseph, but the apostles called him Barnabas which means "son of encouragement" or "son of consolation." Paul gave this nickname or title to Barnabas in order to build up both physically and spiritually the struggling members in Antioch. In addition, before Paul's conversion he persecuted the church, bringing believers from the street to the prison. It was Barnabas who sought him out and listened to his story and introduced him to the disciples in Jerusalem. Gradually, the saints in Jerusalem accepted Paul. Now John Mark was the target of Barnabas's rescue mission.

Like Barnabas we Christians are called to be encouragers, especially to those who are weak in faith and struggling. We never know when our little acts of faith can benefit others. The ripple effect from our action can somehow cheer somebody up, comfort them, give them hope when they are down. But you say that because Barnabas was the leader of the church, he had the ability to throw a lifesaver to John Mark. Actually, God does not always use the big guns for His rescue squad. Often God just uses ordinary believers, people like you and me to run the errands for Him usually in an ordinary manner. But the results can be equally effective.

A town once got flooded as water began rising rapidly, and a pastor found himself waiting to be rescued on the roof top of the church building. A boat came and asked him to join him but the pastor refused to get in because he believed God would come and rescue him. A second boat came; still the pastor refused to get in. A third boat came, and the pastor still refused to get in. All this time he was expecting that the Lord would come to rescue him in a miraculous fashion. Unfortunately, the miracle never came, and the pastor was drowned. When he reached heaven, he complained to Jesus, "How come you did not answer my prayers?" Jesus said, "I did." "You did? What did You do? And Jesus replied, "I sent a boat to you three times, but you refused to get in."

We are Never Alone

We can learn a few lessons from the story of Mark. Usually, when we think we are alone or when we are worshipping Him God is near. But the Lord's presence is not limited to the setting of tranquility. Even in the storm the Lord can be found. For example, in Matthew chapter 14 the disciples were struggling against a stormy sea all night. At 4 o'clock in the morning something unthinkable happened. The disciples spotted someone or something coming over the water toward them. In their minds it must be a ghost. "It is a ghost; it is a ghost!" They were all scared. They did not expect Jesus to come to them this way, but neither do we. So the Lord had to calm them down. "It is Me!" And the Lord says the same thing to us in the midst of storms, "Do not be afraid; have courage." We can always count on the Lord who is willing and ready to give us a hand. So we should encourage each other that our Lord is never too far away to hear our cry.

Maybe John Mark was in hot water, but the Lord never left him. I am glad Mark did not stay down. He managed to get up on his feet and join Barnabas on the second missionary journey to Cyprus.

A Skiing Trip

Soon after my school work was done, I had the opportunity to meet a pastor from Singapore. He was telling me his experience with his host family in Minnesota. When winter arrived, the host family wanted to take him on their skiing vacation. This pastor who had never seen snow before coming to this country, initially declined, but the host family kept insisting, “If you do not go skiing with us you will miss the fun of your life.” Eventually, the pastor relented. At this point I took a second look at the pastor. He appeared to be in his sixties. At that time I was young and sixty sounded old. Anyway, he did not look like an athlete to me. If anything, he looked like a kind mild-mannered kindhearted grandfather type of a preacher. “And you are going to ski!?”

So it was ski time, and they started at the beginner’s slope. The host family gave the pastor some instructions on how to ski before they left him for the steep slope. So this pastor started taking small steps, but soon he fell. That is when he realized it was not that easy to get up with all of the skiing gear on him. Just when he thought he could manage to stand on his feet, he fell again. Then he decided skiing was not much fun after all. So he retired to the sidelines and waited for the return of the host family. When the host family returned, they asked him: “Are you having fun skiing?” “What fun? I can hardly stand up.” “Oh, we are sorry; we forgot to teach you how to get back up in case you should fall.” So they showed him some maneuvers on how to get back up after a fall before they left him again for the steep slope. Like the previous time, the pastor took small steps and soon fell, but this time since he knew how to get back up after a fall, he was beginning to have some fun skiing.

Life is like that. We Christians are not ever perfect. We will make mistakes and fall again, but we can learn to get up and enjoy living again. On the other hand, Satan, our enemy, would like for us to stay down after we fall. One of his weapons against us is the arrow of discouragement. Our enemy wants us to entertain the thought of giving up and throwing in the towel, but we can learn from this pastor from Singapore. We must learn to get up; the Lord will forgive and restore us, and life can be a pleasant trip again.

Mark’s Relationship with Paul

Mark finally was able to sail out to Cyprus with his cousin, Barnabas, but this is not yet the end of our story. God used the time that Mark was alone with Barnabas to mold him, to make him a more useful vessel. Barnabas, the encourager, must have been a terrific mentor to help Mark grow. At the same time, Mark’s name disappeared again for a number of years. While we are on the subject of God’s restoration, you may ask, “What is Mark’s relationship with Paul. What happened there?” We know from Colossians chapter 4 that Paul had developed a respect and love for Mark later in life. We also know from Philemon 24 that Mark had worked closely with Paul during Paul’s first imprisonment in Rome.

Perhaps the most touching of Paul’s references to Mark comes from II Timothy 4:11. In his last days on earth, Paul asked Timothy to come to Rome and said to him: “If you can bring another person, would you please bring Mark with you, for Mark is very useful to me for ministry.” I believe it must have brought much comfort to Mark to hear Paul say that he was a valuable worker in Paul’s ministry. We know a statement like this does not come lightly from Paul. You will

remember that years ago Paul wished that he would never see Mark's face again in the mission field. Mark, the former deserter and a lowly ranked helper, must have gone through some tremendous character change in the process. At the same time, Paul must have increased in his capacity to forgive. He must have seen sanctification worked in other people. It is a beautiful picture of love, grace, perseverance and restoration.

A Third Mentor

God gave Barnabas and Paul to Mark as mentors, but knowing was not enough, God installed a third mentor for Mark behind the scenes. We know during those hidden years that Mark was with Peter. Evidently, Peter took Mark under his wing, mentoring him and discipling him. Mark spent a number of years with Peter and became a companion and a confidant of Peter. When Peter went to Rome, he took Mark with him. Mark followed Peter who preached everywhere in the streets and buildings of Rome, day after day. Mark became like a son to Peter. Therefore, when Peter wrote I Peter 5:13, he called Mark his son which is the designation of discipleship in the same way that Paul adopted Timothy as his spiritual son.

So why is it so important? Why does it matter? It is because after Peter died as a martyr in Rome, it was Mark who had collected all that Peter had remembered of what Jesus had said and done. Later, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit Mark was able to write accurately the Gospel according to Mark. But why was it necessary for Peter to be there? Well, Peter seemed to have benefited from God's restoration the most among the apostles because he tended to make more mistakes than the others. Who is more qualified than Peter to teach Mark on the subject of God's restoration? For example, there are two words in Mark 16:7: "And Peter." This incident was not recorded by other gospels, but they touched Peter deeply. Right after Jesus' resurrection the other disciples were excited to see Jesus again in Galilee, but not Peter. Peter told the other disciples, "You guys can go, but you have no idea what I did. I denied Jesus three times to His face, and each time He looked at me in the eye. I did a terrible thing, and He will never take me back." "But wait a minute," the other disciples tried to cut him off. "Jesus' invitation had your name specifically spelled out 'and Peter. '"And these two words turned Peter's tears of despair into tears of joy. How many more people hurt because of the same pile of sins, but they have discovered the same invitation from the Lord that sounded too good to be true. And they returned from their fall.

God can use losers; God can use imperfect people like Peter, like John, like us. God still uses losers today. For example, in 2011 our scientific society held the international meeting in Shanghai, China. I returned to China for the first time in fifty years. I felt on my way to China that I needed to acknowledge God's help in my life's long journey, but I did not wish to use the word "God" because the Buddhists and the Muslims used the same word for their deity. So I decided to use "Christ" for distinction.

In this country you have the term "high school dropout." At least they have reached high school. What about me? I could not even get into high school in China. To make a long story short, years later God gave me far more than a GED, a high school equivalent diploma. As a result I was able to participate in these international meetings on brain trauma. When it was my turn to speak, I told the audience that the last time I was in Shanghai I could not even get into high school,

but Christ found me; Christ saved me; Christ's name is to be praised. I could not wait another fifty years to publicly express my gratitude to the Lord. If God can use someone like me, He certainly can work with you.

Traditionally, the Catholic Church considered Peter as their first pope. Let's assume this was the case. As a Catholic priest Peter had to listen to other people's confessions. Let's suppose he is listening to a young man confessing his sins. Had Peter lived an infallible life, he would probably be very upset listening to this young man's confession. "Son, how could you do these things? I have been a Christian all my life, and I have never done anything close to what you did." Oh, fortunately, Peter's life was not sin free. He committed his fair number of blunders in life, but now he changed; he had developed a better understanding and compassion for other fellow-men. He would probably tell this young man, "Son, it is no fun to live a guilt-laden life. When I was young, I too made foolish mistakes, but the Lord Jesus forgave me and restored me. Just come to the Lord and ask for His forgiveness. Remember to tell the Lord that you need His help."

Let Our Past Mistakes Define our future

Wouldn't it be great to have someone like Peter put his arm around John Mark said to him, "I know what it is like, but if you will repent and follow the Lord, the Lord will restore you and use you."

Don't let our past mistakes define our future. The Lord is actively working in us to make us to be like Him. No matter the extent of our mistakes, we can learn from them and allow God to continue working out the sanctification process in us.

In our Christian journey we often find life is like riding a roller coaster; it is continually going up and coming down. In our lives we will fall and we will get up. We will fall and we will get up. Like John Mark we can ask God for forgiveness and the courage to endure. Because God is infinite, He allows us not just one more chance in our life. By God's grace He will give us all the chances that we ever ask of Him and ever need. But we will continue to fall, and we will get up. I know I sound like a broken record, but the process will continue to repeat until the day we die. And all of us who have failed and have gotten back up, who have failed and have gotten up, know that there will come a day when we will face the Father and hear words from Him which may surprise most of us, if not all of us, "Well done, you good and faithful."

The question is: "Have you gotten up? Are you enduring by the grace of Christ?" The Lord knows our heart. We were reminded two weeks ago of the remnant in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. They were not perfect people, but they are called the overcomers because they had a heart for the Lord, and they took action to rebuild the city of Jerusalem.

As I look back on John Mark, my first impression is, "John Mark, you are so lucky. What a privilege to have Barnabas, Paul and Peter as your mentors for the work of God's restoration." How about us? I am smiling here because brothers and sisters, all of us, all Christians can have the Lord Jesus Himself and the Holy Spirit as our life-long partners in the school of God. Our God is a God of mercy, therefore we should encourage each other not to give up, not to throw in the towel but walk worthy of our calling.

Let's pray:

Lord, in spite of failure in our past, You still see value and make sure we have all the chances to be restored. You promise Yourself and the Holy Spirit to be our Mentors in our life journey. We are just like John Mark; we are nothing more than a lowly ranked helper, but You treat us, every one of us here, as the apple of Your eye. What a privilege that we can talk to You and walk with You every day. We thank You for loving us. In Jesus name. Amen.