

John Mark—The One Who Came Back

During the American Civil War there was a cavalry officer who was caught in a difficult battle predicament and forced to withdraw in haste. So he swung his horse around and rode hard toward his own lines. As he retreated an opposing soldier fired a shot that struck his horse in the rump. The effect this had on the officer we can only guess, but it greatly impressed the horse. Thereafter, the horse would not turn its rear to the enemy.

Besides motivating the horse, this incident likely had a positive effect on the officer's career, and greatly increased other people's estimate of his courage. We can only hope that was the outcome.

Sometimes Christians need just such an impetus to keep their spiritual life going in the right direction. Oft-times a person's spiritual life will go in the wrong direction. When that happens it is worthwhile to listen to what the prophet said to King Asa.

In Second Chronicles the 14th, 15th, and 16th Chapter the Bible tells us about Asa, king of Judah. Asa called upon the name of Jehovah, and the Lord routed the Ethiopians before the armies of Judah and Benjamin. The Ethiopians had attacked with an army of a million men, outnumbering Asa's army by nearly two to one. They also had chariots.

After the victory the prophet Azariah said to Asa,

2 Chronicles 15:2 "Listen to me Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin: the Lord is with you when you are with Him. And if you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you."¹

Later, in the 36th year of his reign Asa had war with the king of Israel, Baasha. Instead of calling on the Lord to deliver him, Asa took gold and silver from the treasury of the Temple and sent it to Ben-hadad, king of Syria. Asa asked the king of Syria to deliver him. So Ben-hadad delivered him.

¹ *New American Standard Bible : 1995 Update*. LaHabra, CA : The Lockman Foundation, 1995, S.

But Hanani the seer came to see Asa and said,

2 Chronicles 16:7 ... "Because you have relied on the king of Syria and have not relied on the Lord your God, therefore the army of the king of Syria has escaped out of your hand. 8 Were not the Ethiopians and the Lubim an immense army with very many chariots and horsemen? Yet, because you relied on the Lord, he delivered them into your hand. 9 For the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that he may strongly support those whose heart is completely His. You have acted foolishly in this. Indeed, from now on you will surely have wars."

You would think that if the Lord sent his prophet with a special message that the king would gladly and humbly receive it, but in Asa's case it did not happen.

Asa became angry with the seer and put him in prison. At the same time he oppressed some of the people. After that things got worse for Asa.

In verse 12 of Chapter 16 it says,

12 And in the thirty-ninth year of his reign Asa became diseased in his feet. His disease was severe, yet even in his disease he did not seek the Lord but the physicians.

Asa began well, but his example is that of a man whose trust in the Lord deteriorated. He ended up trusting in outsiders instead of the Lord.

Asa became a backslider.

In Mark the 14th Chapter, we read how the enemies of Jesus arrested him in the Garden of Gethsemane. It was about midnight in Jerusalem, and it was the Friday before the Passover which in that time they called The Day of Preparation. Jesus and the disciples had come down from the upper chamber. They had descended the hillside, crossed the bridge over the Kedron, and made their way to Gethsemane. At the time of the arrest the disciples were asleep. Even Peter, James and John slept, but Jesus was not

asleep. He had been praying. He told them to arise because His betrayer was at hand.

In the Garden of Gethsemane Judas approached Jesus and kissed him, and the scribes and chief priests laid hands on the Lord, and seized Him to drag him away. Peter drew his sword and smote Malchus, the servant of the High Priest, but Jesus healed Malchus.

In Mark, the Scripture says,

Mark 14:48 Jesus said to the Jews, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me, as though I were a robber?" 49 "Every day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me; but this has happened that the Scriptures might be fulfilled." 50 So all the Lord's disciples left Him and fled.

But a young man followed the arresting party as they bore their prisoner away. Oddly, the young man is wearing only a white linen garment. It attracts attention from the Temple Guard. One of the guards then lays hands on him evidently attempting to arrest him as well.

In his Gospel, Mark says,

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

Why did Mark record this incident in such remarkable detail? Only the name of the young man is wanting. Surely, it was Mark, himself. Who else would know that he wore only a "sheet over his naked body."

In the writer's style of that day Mark is telling us that he fled in fear from adversity. He abandoned the Lord to the enemy. Mark was now naked, without Christ, unprotected, revealed in his shame.

Mark, without the Lord, was as Israel at Ai. There the sons of Israel acted unfaithfully in regard to the things under the ban, for Achan took some of the things under the ban. When they went up against Ai they were defeated. Joshua

says that "...the hearts of the people melted and became as water." Joshua 7:1-5.

But God expects his messengers to be stalwart and faithful. As He said to Ezekiel,

Ezekiel 2:1 ..., "Son of man, stand on your feet that I may speak with you." 2 And as He spoke to me the Spirit entered me and set me on my feet; and I heard Him speaking to me. 3 Then He said to me, "Son of man, I am sending you to the sons of Israel, to a rebellious people who have rebelled against Me; they and their fathers have transgressed against Me to this very day." 4 "And I am sending you to them who are stubborn and obstinate children; and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God.'" 5 "As for them, whether they listen or not--for they are a rebellious house--they will know that a prophet has been among them." 6 "And you, son of man, neither fear them nor fear their words, though thistles and thorns are with you and you sit on scorpions; neither fear their words nor be dismayed at their presence, for they are a rebellious house." 7 "But you shall speak My words to them whether they listen or not, for they are rebellious."

Should not the servant of the Lord be willing to maintain the Lord's charge even though thorns and thistles hinder him? Or have we become like Mark who fled in fear from the scorpions of adversity?

There is a story about a traveler who had retreated from trouble. One day he found himself in a logging camp. He watched as a lumberjack jabbed a hook into a log and separated it from the others. The rest floated on down the mountain stream. Wondering why the lumberjack separated that particular log, he asked the logger. The logger said, "All these logs may look alike to you, but over the years I've learned to tell the difference." The ones I let pass are from trees that grew in the valley. They were always protected from the storms. Their grain is coarse. This one I hooked to separate it from the others came from up on the mountain.

Up there it is tested by strong winds from the time it's a sapling. This toughens a tree, and gives it a fine grain. It will be saved for choice work. It's too good for ordinary lumber."

Macartney wrote, "Steel is made in the furnace. There is no wine until the grapes are crushed. The strongest characters are those who have faced the contrary winds.

"It is said that "They who go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; these see the works of the Lord, and his wonders in the deep."²

The lesson is this: You must go to experience; you must enter into risk to see. Because it is adversity that strengthens.

But John Mark fled.

All the Lord's friends had forsaken Him. Even so, Mark could have become a prisoner with him. He could have walked beside Him. He could have encouraged Him.

But in this, his first trial, he failed.

He wavered in doubt.

He fled, naked, through the streets of Jerusalem. He slid backwards.

Fifteen years later and it is springtime in the harbor of Antioch of Seleucia. The harbor is filled with wooden ships. Grain ships lie close to the wharf, taking on burdens that have come down from Mesopotamia through the mountain passes to Antioch. There are triremes, Roman naval vessels with three banks of oars. There is an imperial barge of the Roman Government. Everywhere there is confusion, animation, excitement, outcries, farewells, greetings, and a Babel of tongues. There is also a small vessel getting ready to sail. The rudder is set in its groove. The anchor is hoisted. Timbers creak. The sail is spreading into the freshening wind. The ship passes out of the harbor into the open sea where it turns its bow toward Cyprus. On the deck of the ship are three passengers. No one paid them much attention, yet these men have begun one of the most important

² Macartney, C.E., *Macartney's Illustrations*, Abingdon Press, 1945. cf. Psalm 107:23.

journeys in history. They are Saul of Tarsus (Paul), Barnabas, and John Mark.

They are bound for Cyprus where Barnabas was born. Mark accompanies these mighty preachers, going along as a helper.

The three journey through Cyprus. Then they take a ship for Perga in Pamphylia, on the southern shore of Asia Minor. From the deck of the ship the land appeared bleak and wild. Dangers lurked in those high passes. Paul wanted to depart for the high country of the interior, to preach.

But Mark refused to go.

He retreated from the conflict, from the adversity, from the "thorns and thistles."

It would not be right to cast his retreat in a different light.

Near the end of the American Civil war, when the Confederate armies were retreating toward Richmond. A lady of the South asked a Southerner how the battle was going, hoping she would get encouraging news. Not wanting to disappoint her he answered, "Well ma'am, due to the lie of the land where they're fightin', the Yankees are retreatin' forward, while we are advancin' backward.

The moral of the story is this: We might call it a strategic withdrawal, but it's still a retreat. It's still a defeat.

Mark retreated.

The Scriptures do not say why Mark deserted them. Perhaps it was just homesickness? Perhaps he was tired? Or, maybe he feared the dangers of the interior where Paul wanted to go? Whatever his reason, he deserted them in Pamphylia, and did not go with them to the work. In the face of the danger, Mark deserted Paul and the elderly Barnabas, and left them to scale the mountain passes by themselves.

He took a ship back to Syria and home.

As Luke wrote in Acts,

Acts 13:13 John departing from them returned to Jerusalem."

John Mark failed his second trial.

On the First Missionary Journey, Paul had Barnabas with him. God many times sends his disciples out by two. Paul had intellect, and knowledge of the Law of Moses. But he needed an even-tempered partner, a man of consolation and exhortation. The two together did what neither could have done alone. The Christian ministry is frequently like that. No one has all the talents. There is no such thing as the complete human being. Every person has a rough spot somewhere, or a defect that hinders. A companion can compensate.

One of the reasons the church is not more successful is because it does not recognize the different gifts that the Spirit endows different members.

When we look back on this first pair of evangelists, Paul appears to tower over Barnabas. But we cannot be sure that by God's measure the difference is so great. Paul left the footprints on the pages of history. But nobody knows how much Barnabas contributed to the endurance and strength that kept the feet moving.

In Acts Chapter 15, Luke wrote,

Acts 15:36 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." 37 And Barnabas was desirous of taking John, called Mark, along with them also. 38 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. 39 And there arose such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. 40 But Paul chose Silas and departed, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord.

Luke records Paul's differences with Barnabas as a disagreement over John Mark. There may have been other differences as well.

Some time before this incident, Paul clashed with Peter and the "party of the circumcision." Even "Barnabas had

been carried away by their insincerity."³ At that time Paul must have felt the defection of Barnabas bitterly.

So now, Barnabas is not won over to Paul's opinion that he be identified without reservation with the Gentile churches. Barnabas was a Levite, a man devoted to the Law of Moses for many years, and he had sided with the opinion that arose from the church in Jerusalem.

Also, John Mark was the son of a woman named Mary who dwelt in Jerusalem, and a cousin of Barnabas. All these things would have had some effect on the partnership of Paul and Barnabas. But Luke says in Acts Chapter 15 that Paul and Barnabas disagreed about taking Mark with them. And so sharp was their disagreement that the two old friends separated and went different ways.

It is sad to see great partnerships break up. Paul and Barnabas were great companions. I wonder if John Mark could have avoided blaming himself for the breakup. He knew how well they had worked together. He knew he had come between them. And at what cost?

Also, Paul may have been a difficult man to get along with. Few geniuses are easy companions. They set high standards. They labor long and hard. Others, less spiritually endowed find the standards too high. Too difficult.

John Mark, in turning back on the first journey, showed Paul that he was a quitter.

I had a friend named Luis Gil who had a poster that he hung on the wall of our office. It was a picture of a boy who wanted to be a football player, but found the rigors of the sport too hard. He is pictured sitting, in a dirty uniform, with his face in his hands, saying, "I quit." On a hill behind him is a cross with the Savior hanging on it, crucified. A caption beneath the cross says, "I didn't."

Barnabas was not a demanding person. He wanted to give Mark another chance. Paul was convinced they needed a man of finer material. More mettle. So, Barnabas went off to Cyprus with John Mark. Paul went northward with Silas.

³ Galatians 2:11-13.

Paul set high standards, but it is from high standards that the best work proceeds. The one who expects the best from us—more than we feel they have the right to expect—is the one we recognize later as the one who drew us to greater heights.

The Lord's standards are like that.

In the making of a honeybee, the queen lays each egg in a six-sided cell. Each cell is filled with enough pollen and honey to feed on until the egg reaches a certain stage of maturity. The top of the cell is then sealed with a capsule of wax.

When the occupant of the cell has eaten all the food, it is then time for the little bee to get out. But the wax seal prevents an easy exit! The opening is so narrow that the bee must push and struggle to get out. Yet in the agony of its exit, the bee rubs off the membrane that encases its wings. After the struggle, when it emerges, the bee can fly. If an insect gets into the hive and eats the wax capsules, the young bees crawl out without any effort.

But they cannot fly.

Mature relatives must then sting them to death.

The lesson is: The Lord made the honey bee. Before you give up in whatever service to the Lord you are selected to render, remember the bee. If things are too easy, your faith will not grow.

Some people are content to carry the yoke of Christ alone. They don't have much need for fellowship. Other people are different. Paul did need fellowship in his work. He needed friendship, and support. He needed the cooperation of other men and women who shared the faith.

In 2 Timothy Chapter 4, Paul wrote,

2 Timothy 4:6 "I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time for my departure has come. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; 8 in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to

me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing."

Paul had come to the sunset of his earthly life. He is about to end his missionary journeys at Rome. As he writes, clouds and darkness surround him, but there are rays of light. Paul is in a dungeon. A cold, damp, circular dungeon, just behind Capitoline Hill, near and alongside the Roman Forum. There, by some unknown hand, perhaps Luke, he writes his last letter. He does not expect the Lord to deliver him again. He is now ready to be offered up, to be executed. He will die as he has lived—in the faith.

Paul was no backslider. Once his course was set he never wavered. Yet, before the end comes he wants to spend the time well.

He writes to Timothy at Ephesus. He tells him to come before winter, to bring the books with him, the writing materials. A cloak he left behind in the house of Carpus at Troas. Luke, he says, is with him. But Demas has forsaken him. Demas loved the world of that time, and so made shipwreck of his faith. Crescens has gone to Galatia. Titus to Dalmatia. Tychicus he has sent to Ephesus. Only Luke is with him.

So he writes to Timothy, and tells him to "come before winter." There is only one other thing he wants Timothy to bring with him. There is one other person he wants to be there with him in his final hours.

Jesus wanted Peter, James and John. These three to watch with him in His hours of trial before His arrest.

Now, Paul wants three, Timothy, Luke and one other Christian.

And who was this other man? Was it Onesimus? Epaphroditus, Aquila, Tertius, Titus or any other of that group of stalwart friends?

No.

The Apostle writes, "Take Mark, and bring him with you; for he is useful to me for ministering."

In that final hour, with the shadow of death over him, Paul wants Mark. Mark, who fled naked through the streets of Jerusalem when he ought to have stood beside the Lord.

Mark, who left Jesus in the hands of His enemies.

Mark, who left his companions to climb the rugged mountains of Middle Asia, alone, to ford swollen rivers, to face the mobs of Antioch and Lystra, and Iconium.

Mark, who went back.

Mark, the quitter who feared to go on.

Mark, who separated one of the strongest friendships in the Scriptural record.

Mark, whom Paul had once rejected.

"Bring him with you," he said, "for he is useful to me for ministering."

So Mark passes the record of the New Testament. He had failed in so many previous accounts. But now he passes with laurels.

The lesson we take away from the scriptural record of Mark is this: It takes more than one defeat to make a failure. It takes more than one fault to ruin.

Mark had failed twice, nay, many times.

But by repentance, and perseverance, by friendship and patience, he became not the Mark who failed, but the Mark who came back.

Mark lived to re-establish himself in the good graces of the man whose intellect dwarfed the New Testament times.

He lived to write the most graphic account of the life of Jesus. That is the biography of the man who failed more than once, but who persisted and eventually succeeded.

All of us have problems in life. Mark had his.

Nevertheless, like Mark, we are expected to overcome them.

There was a man named Elkington who served as a Colonel in the British Army during the 1st World War. Records show that in the early part of the war Colonel Elkington was cashiered. The charges against him were "conduct unbecoming an officer," but that was a euphemism for cowardice in the face of the enemy. The Army dropped his name from the rolls of the honored soldiers.

Disgraced, Elkington went to Paris. In Paris, he changed his name and tried to begin a new life. Finally, he joined the French Foreign Legion. Evidently, he had a change of heart, for wherever the Foreign Legion went into action, Elkington made himself conspicuous by his bravery and gallantry. After a particular feat of heroism the government of France decorated him. In some way his true identity was exposed, and someone brought the facts to the attention of the British government.

The result was that they gave his commission back to him. So, he resumed his old name and title. He even rejoined his old regiment at the front. So it happened by wounds and bravery he won back the rank and the honors that cowardice had forfeited for him.

In Revelation the Scripture says,

Revelation 3:18 I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire, that you may become rich, and white garments, that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and eyesalve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. 19 Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore and repent. 20 Behold I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him and he with Me. 21 He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. 22 He who has an ear let him hear...