

“They’re Real People! — John Mark”

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Colossians 4:10-11

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), ¹¹ and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. [ESV]

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One of the people who left his mark on the New Testament is a young man name John Mark. It was common in the first century for Jews to have two names, a Hebrew/Aramaic name, and a Greek name. John Mark demonstrates this: John is the English form of the Hebrew name *Yochanan*; Mark is the English form of the Greco-Roman name *Marcos*.

We first meet John Mark in the Garden of Gethsemane. He is not mentioned by name, but that fact is one of the reasons we believe that it’s really him. John Mark recorded this mysterious memory:

“And a young man followed Him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body. And they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked.” [Mark 14:51-52 ESV]

Why do we think that this is John Mark? Because, like the Apostle John who never referred to himself by name in his Gospel, referring instead to “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” so John Mark mentions his own presence when Christ was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane without using his name. It has been commonly believed from earliest times that this was John Mark, running away from the awful scene naked. He barely escaped being arrested along with Jesus. He wasn’t alone in the fleeing — “They *all* left Him and fled.” [Mark 14:50 ESV]. He was quite young when this happened, probably a teenager.

The next time we meet him is in Luke’s *Book of the Acts of the Apostles*; he is at home in Jerusalem with his mother, Mary. Peter, after having been arrested by King Herod Agrippa, was miraculously released from prison. He thought he was dreaming at first, but it finally dawned on him that he was free.

“When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.” [Acts 12:12 ESV]

The reaction at the house of Mary was poignant. As he knocked on the gate, a young servant girl answered “Who is it?” Instead of opening the door to him, she ran back into the house, exclaiming, “Peter’s at the door!”

“Recognizing Peter’s voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate.” [Acts 12:14 ESV]

In typical adult fashion, they didn’t believe her. The idea that Peter had escaped prison was too preposterous. John Mark was among them.

“They said to her, ‘You are out of your mind.’ But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept

saying, ‘It is his angel!’ But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed.” [Acts 12:15-16 ESV]

Peter stayed with them long enough to tell the story of what happened, and then he wisely left the area, knowing that Herod’s minions would be looking for him. The guards paid dearly with their lives!

“And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then Peter went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there.” [Acts 12:19 ESV]

Fortunately for everyone, Herod died a short time later. [Acts 12:20-23]

At that same time, Saul and Barnabas, having brought the financial relief from Antioch to the starving in Jerusalem, returned to Antioch, bringing the young John Mark, Barnabas’ cousin, with them.

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

It is at this time that John Mark enters into public evangelism. The congregation, under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit, ordained Barnabas and Saul for evangelism to the Gentiles of Asia Minor.

“While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.” [Acts 13:2-3 ESV]

Their first stop was Salamis on Cyprus, sailing from the port of Seleucia. Accompanying them was the young teenager, John Mark.

“When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them.” [Acts 13:5 ESV]

It had to be a culture shock for John Mark. He was a good Jewish boy from Jerusalem, after all. Here he was in the midst of a radically different Greco-Roman culture, with all of its idols and excess.

One of his first experiences was an encounter with a Jewish magician named Elymas Bar Jesus.

“When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus.” [Acts 13:6 ESV]

The Proconsul of Cyprus — Sergius Paulus — was under Elymas’ spell. Yet Sergius wanted to hear what Barnabas and Saul had to say.

“He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.” [Acts 13:7-8 ESV]

John Mark witnessed first hand the battle between good and evil when Saul, now called Paul, confronted the deceiving charlatan.

“But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, ‘You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and

you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time.’ Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand.” [Acts 13:9-11 ESV]

That was exactly what was needed to convert the Proconul.

“Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.” [Acts 13:12 ESV]

Quintus Sergius Paulus thus became a Christian.

However, John Mark was homesick. As the team traveled onward to Perga in Pamphylia, John Mark went back home. Mark was a wimp.

“Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem, but they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia.” [Acts 13:13-14 ESV]

We don’t see John Mark again until Paul and Barnabas began preparations for a second evangelistic tour. This time, however, Paul was adamantly opposed to taking John Mark with them — after all, Mark had wimped out early in the previous journey.

“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, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.” [Acts 15:37-40 ESV]

So the evangelistic team broke up. These mighty preachers were human after all. Barnabas took his young cousin with him to Cyprus, and Paul took Silas with him to Asia Minor. The one team of two became two teams of four, doubling their effectiveness.

Fortunately, Paul did not hold his grudge against the wimp forever. We meet John Mark again in Paul’s Letter to the Church of Colossae:

“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), and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.” [Colossians 4:10-11 ESV]

The teenager who had wimped out was now a comfort to Paul in his imprisonment. Later, Paul wrote to his student, Timothy —

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

Yes, John Mark, the wimp, had become indispensable to Paul’s ministry.

Peter also thought of John Mark with fondness, wistfully calling him “Mark, my son.” [1 Peter 3:15]

John Mark literally left his mark on Christianity for the next 2,000 years, however. According to Eusebius, the 4th century Church historian, Mark recorded Peter’s remembrances of Jesus in the Gospel which bears his name — the *Gospel According to Mark*.

However, Mark did much more. According to the same historian, Mark carried the Gospel into Egypt where he founded the Coptic Orthodox Church. [Eusebius, *History of the Church*, Book 2, Chapters 15, 16, 24.]. Our debt to John Mark, the former wimp, is eternal.