

## THE GOSPEL OF MARK, - THE MAN BEHIND THE MESSAGE

Many years ago John Blanchard produced a little evangelistic publication called, "Read Mark Learn". It very simply brought the reader through the Gospel of Mark and explained the work and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus, of course, wrote no autobiography. However, the Holy Spirit selected four men, - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, - to record their accounts of the life, work, death, and resurrection of the Lord. These accounts, therefore, - since the Holy Spirit is the source and director of what the writers have written, - contain no error for they are 'God-breathed'. Along with all of Scripture, they are inerrant, inspired and infallible. This is the reason for their perfect harmony in recording Jesus' ministry.

When the Gospel of Mark was written there were already New Testament writings in existence. For example, the epistle of James and Paul's letter to the Galatians were among the first of the New Testament books to have been circulated. The reason for the epistles to be distributed first was that false teachings and false prophets had made their way into a number of the churches and it was necessary for them to be given proper teaching and instruction.

The Gospels were not written until mid-way through the first century because these practical issues had to be dealt with, and also because there remained a number of eye-witnesses who had known and been with Jesus. For example, Paul wrote, I Cor. 15:3 For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; <sup>4</sup> And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: <sup>5</sup> And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: <sup>6</sup> After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. <sup>7</sup> After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. <sup>8</sup> And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time.

... They would have told many of the stories relating to the earthly ministry of Jesus. Concerning the Gospels, either Matthew or Mark was the first to be written, then Luke, and finally the Gospel of John.

There were a number of other 'gospels' written (known as the "Apocryphal Gospels"), - among them the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Barnabas, - but only the four Gospels we have were accepted by the Church as inspired Scriptures.

Whilst there is a harmony among the four Gospels, the individuality of the four authors comes through. Matthew was a tax-collector, Mark was a young man who came from Jerusalem, Luke was a physician, and John was a fisherman. Matthew's Gospel was aimed more at the Jewish readership, Mark to the Romans, Luke to the Gentiles, - and perhaps the Greeks in particular, - while John's Gospel stretched across the different boundaries.

Whereas John's Gospel is 'deep' and profound as it examines the character of the Person of the Lord Jesus by using the evidence of His claims and His miracles Mark, on the other hand, is 'simpler' and direct. That doesn't mean his Gospel is in any way inferior because it doesn't contain long discourses of teaching (as for example, the Sermon on the Mount) ... but it primarily is an 'action Gospel', Mk. 10:45 The Son of man came not to be ministered [διακονέω] unto, but to minister [διακονέω], and to give his life a ransom for many. ... Indeed, *no* passage of Scripture is inferior to any other since *all* scripture is given by inspiration of God (II Tim. 3:16).

In the ancient world most of the people were illiterate, - they couldn't read, - and this Gospel ... when it was being read to them, - especially in the Roman world, - was a fast-paced and flowing story that could be grasped and hold the interest and attention of its hearers.

To begin our study of the Gospel we are going to look at **Mark, The Man behind the Message.**

When Matthew wrote his Gospel he didn't identify himself in any forthright manner, - he quietly included his testimony of meeting Christ, Mt. 9:9, *And as Jesus passed forth from thence, he saw a man, named Matthew, sitting at the receipt of custom: and he saith unto him, Follow me. And he arose, and followed him.*

Similarly, John referred to himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved (Jn. 19:26; 20:2; 21:7,20). Luke was a physician (Col. 4:14), and in the writing of his Gospel he used the proper medical terms ... but still withheld his name.

Concerning Mark, there is a little note in his Gospel hidden away. It relates to the occasion in the Garden of Gethsemane when Judas Iscariot came with the Jewish leaders to arrest Jesus. At that point, the disciples abandoned Jesus ... then, in Mk. 14:51 we read *And there followed him a certain young man, having a linen cloth cast about his naked body; and the young men laid hold on him: <sup>52</sup> And he left the linen cloth, and fled from them naked. ... Just about every commentator identifies Mark as that young man! ... That was him saying, "I was there too!"*

To find out more about Mark we need to go to the Acts of the Apostles. ... The Gospels end with the resurrection and the great commission. The Book of Acts, then, begins where the Gospels ended ... with Jesus telling His disciples, Acts 1:8 ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. ...

In the opening twelve chapters of Acts we read of how the Gospel is first preached in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria. In chapter thirteen, the preaching of the Gospel is then widened as it begins to be introduced to unto the uttermost part of the earth. ... Peter is the dominant preacher in the first twelve chapters, relating to the preaching carried out in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, - all Jewish territory ... while Paul is the dominant preacher in chapters thirteen to twenty-eight, where the Gospel is spread beyond the borders of Israel, to the Gentiles.

As the ‘change-over’ was taking place great things were happening among the Jews as far away from Jerusalem as Phenice (in Crete), Cyprus and Antioch (Acts 11:19 ... preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only). When news of this great work reached the believers in Jerusalem a man called Barnabas sought out Saul of Tarsus and for a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch (Acts 11:26). ... They were preaching *to the Jews* in these places.

Now, during this exciting time when the Gospel was being advanced, a prophet called Agabus prophesied 11:28 there should be great dearth throughout all the world (οἰκουμένη): which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar. <sup>29</sup> Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea: <sup>30</sup> Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul. Barnabas and Saul, - as he was known then, - were sent with ‘food packages’ from the churches outside the affected area to the believers in Jerusalem to relieve their distress.

King Herod Agrippa I was an Idumean, an Edomite ... he didn’t like the Jews, and they didn’t like him ... but he nonetheless knew it was to his advantage that he should keep them ‘on side’. So, when he heard how the Jewish leaders were against the rise of the new Christian sect he took his opportunity, Acts 12:1 Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. <sup>2</sup> And he killed James the brother of John with the sword, - the first apostle to be martyred. When he saw how killing a Christian pleased the Jews, he went for the ‘greatest prize’ at that time, he proceeded further to take Peter also (v.3). ...

This was ‘open season’ on the Church ... and so Peter was arrested and imprisoned (v.5), with the intention of killing him too.

However, there was a special prayer meeting going on, - Acts 12:5 prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him, - one of which was held in the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark (12:12). ... And when Peter was miraculously freed by the angel from the prison (v.7-10), the house he went to belonged to the mother of John Mark (v.12)! This is the first time the name is mentioned, - John was a Jewish name meaning “favoured by God”, and Mark was a Gentile name meaning “hammer”. ... At this stage, though, Mark is very much in the shadow of his mother, - it was *her* home ... she was most probably a fairly well-off widow.

So here, for the first time, we meet Mark ... and we also see how he has this connection, - through the family, especially his mother, - with Peter, albeit fairly loose. Nevertheless, Peter has been in Mark’s home!

Now, at the end of chapter twelve, Barnabas and Saul of Tarsus had been pastoring the church in Antioch for about a year ... and they have come ‘up’ to Jerusalem with the gifts for the believers there. ... Then we read, v.25 And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem [*to Antioch*], when they had fulfilled their ministry [*of leaving the ‘food packages’ with the church in Jerusalem*], and took with them John, whose surname was Mark ... Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch, and the only person they took back with them from Jerusalem was John Mark. He wasn’t a preacher, or a pastor, or an evangelist, or an apostle, or a prophet ... or even a leader! He simply was an ordinary young man Barnabas and Saul took with them when they returned to Antioch to *help* them in the work. He had no fancy title or job description, other than being a helper.

Why take John Mark? He was taken because he was the cousin of Barnabas. Barnabas knew him and trusted him ... and saw potential in him for the work of the Lord. Barnabas, after all, was an ‘encourager’. Once again, - to re-emphasise, - Mark was not a pastor or a leader ... the leaders are mentioned in 13:1, Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

So what was Mark’s purpose? Well, the Holy Spirit (v.2) sent Barnabas and Saul to Cyprus on their first missionary journey (v.4) ... v.5 And when they were at Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews: and they had also

John [Mark] to their minister [ὑπηρέτης, *a galley-slave!*]. ... He was a helper who simply got on with any work he was given to do.

It went well for a while, and then something happened. It followed the incident with Elymas the sorcerer (v.8ff.) ... and then when Paul and his company loosed from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia: and John departing from them returned to Jerusalem (v.13). ... Mark left them, with the implication he deserted them. We never like to see someone working along with us, and then they disappear, - but that was what happened to Mark! ... He left Paul and Barnabas 'in the lurch', and went back home!

And he didn't go back to the church in Antioch who had sent him out trusting him to serve along with the two preachers. No, he went back to Jerusalem ... and he seems to have disappeared for a few years.

The next time he 'comes on to the scene' is recorded in Acts 15:36, *And some days after Paul said unto Barnabas, Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they do. 37 And Barnabas determined to take with them John, whose surname was Mark. ... No way!* Paul had not forgotten how Mark had deserted them ... and no way was he going to allow *that* to happen again! ... And we see how determined to take John Mark Barnabas was ... but Paul was equally determined! ... v.38 *But Paul thought not good to take him with them, who departed from them [ἀφίστημι, i.e. deserted] from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work. 39 And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder [ἀποχωρίζω, separated, severed] one from the other. ... It caused a rift between Paul and Barnabas that had the potential to mar their ministries. Paul simply didn't trust John Mark because he believed him to have shown a lack of courage and commitment. Put bluntly, Paul saw him as a defector and a deserter!*

We don't hear anything about Mark for another ten years or so, - he disappears from off the scene. He is next mentioned, - *surprisingly*, - in the letter Paul wrote from Rome to the Church at Colosse, during apostle's first imprisonment (61-63 AD), 4:10 *Aristarchus my fellowprisoner saluteth you, and Marcus, sister's son to Barnabas, (touching whom ye received commandments: if he come unto you, receive him). ... Welcome him back!*

What has happened?! Similarly, in Philemon v.23 we read, *There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus; 24 Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers.* ... This is now Paul's second imprisonment in Rome (66-67 AD) ... after which he was going to be martyred for the faith, and he was including Mark as one of his *fellowlabourers* ...

He writes in his final letter, II Tim. 4:6 I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. <sup>7</sup> I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: <sup>8</sup> Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing. <sup>9</sup> Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me: <sup>10</sup> For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus unto Dalmatia. <sup>11</sup> Only Luke is with me. *Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry.* ... This means that from the time of his first imprisonment (61-63 AD), he had Mark at his side! In fact, during his second imprisonment, - on the brink of martyrdom, - he wanted Mark to be with him.

So what we have here is *the restored deserter*. He wasn't an Apostle, nor a prophet, nor a pastor, nor a teacher, nor an evangelist, nor a leader ... 'just' a helper ... And yet he was given the privilege of serving alongside such great giants of the faith. Despite deserting the great missionary Paul, Mark was, - in time, - restored to the Lord and later became so closely associated with Paul, ... so trusted by Paul that Paul would send him to the Colossian church on his behalf and that when Paul was facing death at the end of his life, the one person he asked to come in addition to Timothy was Mark. *Amazing!* ... Imagine the Lord would use someone like that! ... Here's a man, - Mark, - who had deserted the work, and yet God had restored him!

That is Mark's relationship with Paul ... what about his relationship with another great servant of God, Peter? Well, we have already seen how Peter knew the way to Mark's home ... but it wasn't the early acquaintance with Peter that's the most important. ... During those ten years when Mark was away from Paul, part of the time he was with Peter. Yes, he went back to Jerusalem, but he didn't stay in Jerusalem all the time. I Peter 5:13 tells us Peter was in 'Babylon', *The church that is at Babylon, elected together with you, saluteth you.* Whatever this 'Babylon' stands for, - and some claim it was the ancient codename among the Christians for Rome, while others argue vehemently Peter was never in Rome, - ... whatever 'Babylon' means, the significance of this verse for us is that Peter tells us Mark was with him, *The church that is at Babylon, elected together with you, saluteth you; and so doth Marcus my son.* ... Not his physical son, of course, but his spiritual son, - Peter was grateful to the Lord for having Mark by his side ... Mark was faithful in the work of the Lord!

And here he is ... After not such a good start, Mark had become a trusted companion to Paul, and then to Peter ... why is that so significant? It was significant because Peter had been with Jesus just about every hour of every day for three-and-a-half years ... and Peter was the source, - humanly speaking, - for

what is contained in the Gospel of Mark. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Mark wrote Peter's story.

How do we know that? The earliest statement about the Gospel of Mark was written by a 'bishop' called Papius, in AD 140. He said this, "Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered". Justin Martyr, writing in AD 150, referred to the Gospel of Mark as the memoirs of Peter. Irenaeus, writing in AD 185, described Mark as "the disciple and interpreter of Peter". It was well-known in the days of the early Church.

We have 'travelled a lot of ground' in our study of the man behind the message, - the kind of man God used to pen this Gospel concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. He was the most unlikely of people for God to use ... but God 'lifted him up onto his feet', - after he had deserted Paul and Barnabas, - and God used his gifts again for His glory. God gave this ordinary young man, - with all his faults and failings, - another opportunity to serve Him. ... God used him to write one of the accounts of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Mark told the story of Jesus ... and it continues to be so influential we are reading and studying it two thousand years later. That is how God employed this very ordinary young man in His service ... who had 'made a slip or two' in his earlier days. And He also gave him the privilege of being with Peter and Paul.

Here is a simple conclusion we can draw ... God never gives up on true people! He has a plan and a purpose for each one of us. He never casts us to the one side. He restores us and brings us to the place where we will bring Him glory. He might not always elevate us on the world's stage ... but to be a 'helper' in the Lord's work is a privilege greater than anything any of us deserves.

We must never underestimate what God is able to do with ordinary people whose hearts He touches and whose hands He equips, "Little is much when God is in it! Labour not for wealth or fame. There's a crown, - and you can win it, If you go in Jesus' Name."

Mark, - the man behind the message ... What is the Lord saying to you? You and I have made our mistakes ... but like Mark, the Lord has taken us back. He has us here in this fellowship to serve Him. He mightn't have you 'at the front' in any obvious position of particular importance ... but your contribution is as necessary to the work of the Lord here as John Mark's contribution was to Peter and Paul. ... I trust, as we study our way through this Gospel, we shall be privileged to know God's blessing upon our efforts for Him. Amen.