

Sermon 9th August 2020

I really don't like how the book of Jonah finishes. I want to know how the conversation on the hillside between Jonah and God concludes. Did Jonah finally learn to care about the Ninevites, or did he continue to sit there boiling in his anger waiting for God to smite the Ninevites? We just don't know what effect God's decision not to give up on Jonah had on the rest of Jonah's life, I find that annoying.

There is a similarish story of someone in the Bible who refuses to continue with a Missionary Journey and runs away from his companions. However, unlike Jonah's story in his story we can see how God's decision not to give up on a him shaped the rest of his life.

In the 1980s researchers for the World Almanac and Book of Facts asked 2000 American teens to name prominent people they admired and wanted to be like. Those most frequently mentioned by the teens as their heroes were celebrities such as Burt Reynolds, Richard Pryor, Steve Martin, and the late John Belushi.

Commenting on this, columnist Sidney J. Harris lamented the fact that every one of the 30 prominent personalities who were named was either an entertainer or an athlete. He noted that statesmen, authors, painters, musicians, architects, doctors, and astronauts failed to capture the imagination of those teens. He suggested that the heroes and heroines created by our society are people who have made it big, but not necessarily people who have done big things.

This morning we are going to look at John also called Mark a man who would probably never make into anyone's top ten of prominent people in the Bible. Strangely and wrongly John also called Mark, when he is remembered, is remembered for abandoning Barnabas and Paul on their first Missionary journey. This betrayal damaged Paul and Barnabas's relationship after they disagreed about bringing him on their next Missionary trip. Please note that the disagreement did not permanently damage the love and respect that Paul and Barnabas entertained for one another. Paul would later affectionately mention Barnabas as being worthy of monetary support in his work of proclaiming the gospel **1 Cor. 9:6**.

We are going to look at, and rather than call him “John also known as Mark” let’s just go with John Mark. John Marks refusal to continue with the Missionary journey is in many ways is similar to Jonah refusal to go to Nineveh and his story demonstrates how God deals with our disobedience and redeems our failures.

John Marks mother’s name was Mary and it was their home in Jerusalem that was used as a meeting place for the early church. John Mark may have been the nameless man carrying a jar of water **Mark 14:13** that led the disciples to the Upper Room where Jesus hosted his last Passover meal. It was at Mary’s house that the Christians gathered to pray when Peter was in prison **Acts 12:12**. In spite of the danger of persecution, she provided the meeting place for the new church. Her home was large enough to host them and she had a servant who guarded the door. Can you imagine what marvellous opportunities John Mark had to learn from and get to know the apostles and perhaps even Paul when he visited with the Christians in his mother’s home?

His uncle was Barnabas, Mary’s brother. Barnabas was a respected, trusted leader in the new church. His generosity led him to sell his land and use the money to support the fledgling church. It was Barnabas who befriended Paul after his conversion and urged the Apostles to accept him. When news came to the Jerusalem church about the new, different church in Antioch, Barnabas was sent there to see if it was a trusted group. It was Barnabas who found this new church worthy of support and brought Paul from Tarsus to help him lead the church. It was Barnabas that was chosen along with Paul to be the first foreign missionaries sent out by the church at Antioch

Peter called John Mark “my Son” **1 Peter 5:13** inferring he may have been the person who led him to trust Jesus or he had assumed a spiritual fatherly role in his life. This relationship would be important in John Marks later life as we will see.

Barnabas and Paul asked John Mark to join them on this first missionary journey. At that point Barnabas was the team leader. **Acts 13:5** makes note “John Mark was with them as their helper.” Though it is obvious he was to be their “goffer”, he was aboard that first mission trip. He would have the opportunity to learn and serve. He was

fortunate to be among them. When they arrived in Cyprus, John Mark observed the power of God at work in the Governor's house. He saw this important pagan leader embrace Christianity.

Just after witnessing the remarkable events on Cyprus John Mark was faced with making a decision at the next stop on the trip. Something had happened on this first leg of the journey that was a challenge to John Mark, and he quit the team and went home. It has been suggested that John got homesick or missed his mother or he tired of his helper role on the team. It has also been suggested that he looked ahead to the next part of the journey, a long hike through rough and dangerous mountains, and chose not to go.

However, the most realistic explanation is there was a change in leadership in the mission team. The journey started with Barnabas being the leader. In the events on Cyprus, Paul emerged as a powerful and persuasive leader and assumed the team leader role. In **Acts 13:13**, the scriptures say, "Paul and his companions sailed" highlighting the change in leadership. John Mark was possibly not comfortable with the change of leadership. Paul's style of leadership was probably radically different from that of Barnabas. It is probable, given Paul's driven nature that his expectations of team members were as demanding as the expectation he placed on himself. Whatever the reasons John Mark chose to desert his companions. Can you imagine the emotions on that trip home? Relief from the stress of Paul's demands could have soon changed to sorrow of a failed mission. He would have many days as he sailed back to Antioch to think about his desertion of Barnabas and Paul. On his return to Antioch he would have been met by those church leaders who sent him off. Were the leaders disappointed, angry, hurt or a mixture of them all, we don't know. I do think they would have many difficult questions for John Mark. John Mark would then have to make his way to Jerusalem, back to his Christian friends and his mother and face similar questions and reactions to his premature return home. While the stoic's axiom is "don't explain, don't complain", it would be hard for John Mark not to feel he had to do both. Whatever John Mark's reason for abandoning the missionary journey he probably had a hard time on his return home.

What would he do next? The scriptures are silent about the next few years. Did he go to church or drop out? Did he assume leadership roles or take a back seat? Did anyone understand and reach out to him? Perhaps Peter did. Perhaps he came to John Mark for help. Up to now the stories of Jesus' life were distributed only orally. One Apostle had already been killed, others would die off and the gospel story, the story of the life and ministry of Jesus, could die with them. The story of Jesus' life needed to be written down while these eyewitnesses were still alive. Perhaps at this point Peter enlisted John Mark to be his scribe and told him about all Jesus had said and done. However, it happened, this may have been the time John Mark wrote the Gospel of Mark, the first written record of Jesus' ministry for others to copy and distribute. Matthew and Luke would use this manuscript as they were led to write their Gospels. Sipping forward in time. Paul commonly used a scribe when composing his letters to the various churches. John Mark's previous experience scribing for Peter may be why Paul, twenty odd years later, asked that John Mark come to him because "he was useful to him" **2 Timothy 4:10**.

When the second missionary journey was being planned, Barnabas asked that John Mark be able to join them. Paul refused, calling him a "deserter." Barnabas saw more value for him to work with John Mark than go with Paul. Paul left with a new partner, Silas, and Barnabas left with John Mark to go back to Cyprus, the first port of call on their previous missionary journey. Though the rest of the New Testament there are only scattered references to John Mark. However, he does seem to find his place later in some of the churches Paul has planted. In Colossians 4:10 and Philemon, John Mark is mentioned as active in the ministry within these churches. John Mark's relationship with Paul was also restored. Paul commonly used a scribe when composing his letters to the various churches. John Mark's previous experience scribing for Peter may be why Paul, twenty odd years later, asked that John Mark come to him because "he was useful to him" **2 Timothy 4:10**.

Still God hadn't finished with John Mark yet. According to tradition, John Mark also founded the church in Alexandria (one of the most important churches in early Christianity) around 49 AD. This also makes him the first person to bring Christianity to Africa.

John Marks life is a vibrant picture of how God's determination not to give up on someone transform their life. God's love for John Mark took a young man who failed Him and worked through him to achieve something truly remarkable. Look at what God achieved through; John Mark returned to mission field, he wrote the first account of Jesus life, he was reconciled to Paul and ministered with him in several churches and he founded the first church in Africa. John Mark never made it big, but he did big things with God.

I really identify with Jonah; I see so much of myself in him so this is the ending I would like for Jonah. That Jonah repented and found compassion and forgiveness for the Ninevites in his heart and went on to do big things with God. But I fear despite God's continuing love and call to repentance Jonah may have sat on that hillside under the searing sun and until his hard heart eventually killed him.

Whatever the uncertainty of Jonah's fate we know John Mark responded to God's love and call to repentance. John Mark is a bit part player in the Bible, he is never prominent and yet he did great things with God despite his failure.

John Marks story can be our story too if we respond to God's loving call to return to Him, we can move past our failures and do big things with God.