

A MAN WHO FAILED AND THEN MADE GOOD

"Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry." II Timothy 4:11b.

John Mark, the son of Mary, and a relative of Barnabas, was blessed with a praying mother, a fact which meant much to his life. His mother invited praying people into her home, knowing that her son would be blessed through their prayers. She permitted her house to be used as the meeting-place of the disciples in Jerusalem for periods of worship. Blessed indeed is the young man who begins life in a home where God has an altar and Christ is a familiar friend!

In his childhood home, Mark met the leading spirits of early Christianity, including the twelve apostles. It is a great education and opportunity for children to be reared in a home where the godly meet. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of the associates and environment of young people. If young Christians are to grow spiritually, they must have fellowship with those who have had a vital Christian experience and with those who enjoy a faithful Christian walk. Mark was fortunate, also, in the friendship and love of Barnabas who was, perhaps, the most highly esteemed Christian, next to the apostles.

It seems that Simon Peter had the privilege and honor of winning John Mark to Christ, for he referred to him as "Mark, my son" (I Peter 5:13). Quite likely Barnabas is the man who really led Mark to active service for Christ. Mark immediately won the esteem of his brethren. It is no matter for surprise, therefore, that when Barnabas and Paul were planning for their first missionary journey, and were discussing together what young man they should take with them as their minister, that Barnabas should at once think of John Mark and say to Paul, "Mark is the very man for us."

Paul readily accepted the recommendation of Barnabas and John Mark was invited to accompany them on the tour as their helper. It is not quite clear what Mark was called upon to do in his work with Barnabas and Paul. It was a personal service for which he was chosen. His work included minor details such as arrangements for travel, the provision of food and lodging, conveying messages, negotiating interviews, talking to inquirers, helping with the singing and perhaps assisting in the administration of the ordinance of baptism. There may have been some overflow meetings where he exercised his gift as a preacher of the gospel. He was an "extra hand" for any service that was needed. For that matter, all work is important when it has to do with the spread of the gospel of Christ. Mark accepted the invitation to accompany Barnabas and Paul because he thought it would be a pleasant journey, a chance for him to be with two great men, and an opportunity to be of some service. Due to the element of hero worship in youth, there is nothing that appeals to a young man more strongly than a really great man!

The noble trio went forth. Barnabas had been made gentle and sympathetic by long experience and many contacts with multitudes of people. Paul had become a fearless and peerless preacher of

the crucified Christ. Mark was full of the enthusiasm, the idealism and the daring of youth. The very novelty and adventure of that campaign for Christ naturally appealed to a young man like Mark. Barnabas and Paul wanted him to go with them. Mark had not been selected by the Holy Spirit nor formally set aside by the church in Antioch. He was simply an attendant, taken by Barnabas and Paul on their own responsibility.

When Mark left with Barnabas and Paul he was bubbling over with enthusiasm, and no wonder, because he was going to see the world. He had the best of companionship, for Paul was a giant, the greatest of the great, and Barnabas was wonderfully understanding and lovingly considerate. Mark was engaged in the most thrilling kind of service, that of winning men from the bondage of Satan and the power of sin.

The first place they visited was Cyprus, and there they enjoyed the favor of the governor, Sergius Paulus, and Mark's enthusiasm was at the boiling-point. From Cyprus they took ship to Perga, on the southern shore of Asia Minor. There Barnabas and Paul expressed their intention to cross the Taurus Mountains and travel inland. It so happened, however, that not only were these mountains rough and toilsome to cross, but they had a reputation of being infested with outlaws. At the prospect of these hardships and dangers Mark's enthusiasm began to simmer down. He began to feel he had had enough of missionary work.

I. His Retreat.

At first all went well. There was all the glamour of novelty about what Mark was doing -- new places to visit, new friendships to make and new claims to stake for Christ. But his work meant the giving up of much and the enduring of much, and hardships were as yet unknown to Mark. As the days went by, Mark wondered if they were not wandering too far from their base. While the others slept at night, Mark was awake and saying to himself, "I can't go on. I ought never to have come. I'm weary for my home." Can't you imagine the Lord saying to him, "You are not going to leave My work, are you? Don't you love Me any more?" Then he would say, "Yes, Lord, I love Thee with all my heart, but, Lord, I don't think I was built for this. I'm not like Barnabas and Paul -- I'm just one of the ordinary people, and it is asking too much of me." Then the voice of the Tempter said, "Recant man! Retreat!" Just as Barnabas and Paul were about to depart for the high country of the interior, Mark left them, turned back and returned to Jerusalem.

Why did Mark do this? Why did he flicker in the crisis and retreat? Maybe he got homesick, as he thought how good it was to have his mother wait on him, anticipate his slightest wish, and make ado over him as only mothers can. Maybe it was because of a fear of the perils incident to the journey; that he was too cowardly to press on. Could it be that he was jealous and could not stand to see his kinsman, Barnabas, have to take the second place? Anyway, Mark went home! Oh, the tragedy of being a quitter!

II. His Remorse.

The homesick young man has arrived at home. While he was in Asia he thought, "If only I could see Jerusalem, how happy I would be!" Well, here he is in Jerusalem. Is he happy now? Look at him and see. All the familiar things had lost their savour. Happy in Jerusalem? He was one of the most wretched men on earth. After his recantation and retreat, there was remorse. Thus, it always happens. Words cannot measure the remorse that gripped Mark in Jerusalem; but the grip of it was agony. In my imagination, I can see him at night, unable to sleep, rising from his bed, pacing to and fro in that upper room of many memories and wondering, "Where are Paul and Barnabas tonight?"

III. His Restoration.

Whatever the reason for Mark's ugly desertion, the irrevocable act was done. He had betrayed his trust. His name was soiled with suspicion and dishonor. He was branded "unfaithful." However, what cannot be recalled can cause one to truly repent; what cannot be undone can be forgiven. It is to the everlasting credit of John Mark that he broadened and deepened sufficiently to see his mistake and regret it.

Some two or three years later, when Paul and Barnabas were starting on another missionary tour, Mark was ready to go again. Tolerant Barnabas was ready to give the young man a chance to redeem himself, so he suggested to Paul that they take Mark along. But Paul refused to let Mark accompany them, deeming it neither right nor wise to take with them a cowardly quitter who had turned back on the previous journey just when the dangers were commencing. Paul was convinced that Mark was not made of the right kind of stuff for pioneer missionary work. Wanting a man who would endure the hardships of the journey and not go back home if the situation became difficult, Paul would not agree to take another chance with such a deserter. This led to a sad dispute between Paul and Barnabas, and to the separation of those two great men.

I shall not discuss who was right in this contention. There is much to be said for Paul's attitude and action; and there is also much to be said for Barnabas who pleaded that Mark might be given another chance. But dismissing the rights and wrongs of the dispute, this is the point to notice -- Mark became a bone of contention between Paul and Barnabas, contention so sharp that these two bosom friends and fellow-workers parted asunder. Unstable and unreliable men of Mark's type always create dissension. Men who blow hot and cold invariably cause division and strife, because others are never sure of them.

It was an hour of crisis for Mark. His sad blunder had placed him in a most embarrassing position. ^{he had been branded as} man who could not be trusted, and that cut him to the quick. What will be his next move? Will he turn cynic and fade from the Christian drama, or will he admit his failure and sin and slowly rise to favor and worth again?

How do we account for the recovery of Mark? Probably the most effective agency was the rebuke of Paul. Mark had the tendency to be soft, indolent and weak. He needed a good, sharp rebuke. He needed to be shaken into wakefulness. These things Paul did for him. When Paul refused to endanger the missionary enterprise by taking such a weakling along, Mark realized how hideously he had sinned. Many a man has made a remarkable recovery because some brave Paul had the courage to look him squarely in the eye and tell him exactly what was wrong. Another element in the restoration of Mark was the sympathy and kindness of Simon Peter, who could look back to that dark hour when he had failed so terribly in his hour of need.

This familiar story announces a blessed and glorious truth to all who have ears to hear, namely, the past can be blotted out. Thank God for the scriptural message of another chance, after one has failed miserably. The very fact that Mark came back is most heartening to us. It gives me hope for myself. It gives me hope for you. All have failed in some respects. All have been quitters in some measure. We have not done our best. We have not measured up to our possibilities. What hope is there for us in our failures? The possibility of overcoming our failures and making good in spite of them. Remember this: no failure need be final. There is always a way back home for the backslider. The life of Mark is a picture of a man who failed and then made good.

IV. His Reparation.

How did Mark atone for his failure? How did he repair the damage he had done? It was the love of God and His wonderful forgiveness that brought Mark back from failure and sin to the place of usefulness and honor. Oh, the depth of the riches of His marvelous grace and matchless love!

We can never tell what God has in store for the returning backslider. For Mark it was something unspeakably honorable, namely, God chose him to be the writer of the Gospel which bears his name. Multitudes, who had never seen Jesus Christ in the flesh, met Him in the pages of the Gospel according to Mark, trusted Him as their Saviour and were gloriously saved. The penning of this great book, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, was a glorious achievement indeed. Nobody rejoiced more over the change in Mark than did Paul. Mark's cup of joy was full when Paul again placed his confidence in him and sent for him. By the grace of God Mark had been changed, the strain of weakness had been eradicated, the worthless had become profitable, the fickle had become steadfast, and the coward had been transformed into a hero. What the Lord did for Mark, He can do for others.