

THE GOSPEL OF ANOTHER CHANCE

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

John Mark was a cousin of Barnabas who gave him his first chance for service when he invited him to come from Jerusalem to Antioch and then on the first missionary tour with Barnabas and Saul. It is surprising how little the average Bible reader knows about Mark. The average person merely knows that he was the author of the gospel that bears his name, but they know little of him.

Mark came from a home which had played an outstanding part in the life of the early church. His mother, Mary, had permitted her house to be used as the meeting place of the disciples in Jerusalem. It was there that they met for weekly worship. Happy the young man who begins life in a home where God has an altar and Jesus is a familiar friend! His youthful environment was good, for in his home he met the leading spirits of early Christianity. The twelve apostles, James the brother of Jesus, Barnabas, Mary the mother of Jesus, other women, Philip, and many others whose names we do not know frequently came to his home. It is a great education and opportunity for young people to live in a home where the great and good of earth meet. Mark was fortunate also in the love and great friendship of Barnabas, who was always on the lookout for young men whom he could help.

When first mentioned, Mark was already a Christian. He had been won to Christ through the personal influence of Simon Peter. He immediately won a large place in the esteem of the brethren. Barnabas and Saul invited Mark to accompany them to Antioch. He consented to go because he thought it would be a pleasant journey, a chance for him to be of some service, and an opportunity to be with two great men. There is nothing that appeals to a young man more strongly than a really great man. Hero worship is natural with youth. In Antioch, Mark would be able to see for himself what the Holy Spirit was doing with and for the Greeks.

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. After they had reached Antioch, they were led on and out into a world campaign for Christ upon a quest full of adventure and uncertainty. The very novelty of it all would appeal to a young man like Mark. Barnabas and Paul wanted him to go on with them and explained how they needed him and could make his journey useful as well as enjoyable. Mark was not essential to the expedition. He had not been selected by the Spirit. He had not been formally delegated by the church in Antioch. He was an extra hand or an attendant, taken by Barnabas and Paul on their own responsibility. Clearly his work was subordinate to that of Barnabas and Paul. It was personal, not evangelistic, service to which he was called. His work included minor details which could be delegated safely to a younger man, such as arrangements for travel, the provision of food and lodging, conveying messages, negotiating interviews, talking to inquirers, and perhaps assisting in the administration of the ordinance of baptism. There may have been overflow meetings where he could exercise his gifts as a preacher of the gospel. At any rate, this unhardened city boy, this lad of wealth and ease, took leave of his widowed mother, his beloved home and city, to go with Paul and Barnabas as a missionary to foreign parts. So, we read in the book of Acts that "Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia." So far as Mark is concerned, let us note:--

I. His Retreat

To begin with, all went well. Mark felt he had found his vocation. There was all the glamour of novelty about it -- new places to visit, new friendships to make, new claims to stake out for Christ. But, Mark's decision to become a missionary, as is true of missionaries to this day, meant the giving up of much and enduring of much; it meant the undergoing of many hardships, and the hardships were as yet unknown to Mark. But as the days went on, one thought began to trouble him. Were they not wandering too far from their base? Many a night he would have given anything to have been back in Jerusalem. I imagine that it was in the dead of night when Paul and Barnabas were asleep that Mark was wakeful, and was striding up and down alone by himself in the dark. "I can't go on," he is saying. "I ought never to have come. O home, home -- I'm weary for my home!" And then another voice speaks, and it is the voice of Jesus. "You are not going to leave Me, are you? Don't you love Me any more?" Then he says, "Yes, Lord, I love you with all my heart, but, Lord, I don't think I was built for this. I'm not like Paul and Barnabas with their iron nerves and their lion hearts -- I'm just one of your ordinary people, Jesus: and it is asking too much of me." Then the voice of the Tempter says, "Recant man! Retreat!" "And John departed from them and returned to Jerusalem." In the morning when Paul and Barnabas arose to continue their journey, there was no Mark there. He had retreated, and they went on their way alone.

Why did he turn back from the work? Why did he flicker in the crisis and retreat? Some think it was because of homesickness. Some think it was because of anxiety for his mother's safety since she was liable to persecution. Some think it was because of home duties. Some think it was because he was anxious to rejoin Simon Peter. Some think it was because of a fear of the perils incident to the journey -- in other words, because he was a coward. Others think it was because he objected to the offer of salvation to the Gentiles on the condition of faith alone. Other believe it was due to jealousy, that is, he could not stand to see his cousin, Barnabas, have to take second place. Oh, the tragedy of a soul's recantation!

II. His Remorse

Here we see Mark back in Jerusalem. The homesick man has come home. Away yonder among the mountains of Asia he had thought, "If only I could see Jerusalem, how happy I should be!" Well, here he is in Jerusalem. Is he happy now? Look at him. All the dear and familiar things had lost their savour. Happy in Jerusalem? Call him rather the most wretched man on earth. After recantation and retreat, 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. "Where are Paul and Barnabas tonight?" he is wondering.

III. His Restoration

Whatever the reason for Mark's ugly desertion, the irrevocable act was done. He had betrayed his trust. His good name was soiled with dishonor and suspicion. He was branded "unfaithful." But what cannot be recalled can be repented of; what cannot be undone, can be forgiven; and 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 mission tour, Mark was also ready to go. Tolerant Barnabas was ready to give the young man a chance to redeem himself and so suggested that they take him along. But Paul flatly refused! He had no faith in Mark. He was convinced that Mark was not made of the right kind of stuff for pioneer missionary work. He would not agree to take another chance with this quitter. "He could not trust a staff which had once broken in his hand." You know the story of how that sharp contention led to a separation, Barnabas going off with Mark, and Paul with Silas. It is sad to see these comrades in many a trial and companions in many a victory part company and that because of the cowardice and instability of Mark, the quitter.

It is an hour of crisis for Mark. His sad blunder has placed him in a most embarrassing position. He has been branded as one who could not be trusted. Mark is down. Will he turn cynic and fade from the Christian drama, or will he own his blunder and slowly rise to favor and worth again? What will be his next move?

How do we account for the recovery of Mark? Probably the most effective agency was the rebuke of Paul. Mark had a great tendency to be soft and indolent and weak. He needed somebody to cut him to the quick. He needed a good, sharp rebuke. He needed to be shaken into wakefulness. This 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 been saved because some brave Paul had the courage to look him squarely in the eye and tell him exactly what is wrong. Peter also had some part in Mark's recovery and restoration. Peter had himself been a quitter. He had known what it was to make a terrible and disgraceful failure. And Mark heard and believed and started again. This coward redeemed his reputation, and proved himself a true hero of Christ, so that Paul took him to his heart again. Paul said, "Take Mark, and bring him with thee; for he is profitable to me for the ministry."

That is the familiar story. And this is the blessed and most glorious truth which it stands to announce to all who have ears to hear; the past can be blotted out. Thank God for the gospel of another chance. The gospel of hope for the hopeless, love for the unlovable, heroism for the worst coward, white shining robes for the most ragged, clean-hearted purity for the vilest, inward peace and a great serenity for spirits torn and frantic with regret.

This useless man, Mark, became a useful man. And the fact that Mark came back is most heartening to me. It gives me hope for myself. It gives me hope for you. For we have all failed somewhat; we have all been quitters in some measure. We have not done our best. We have not realized our largest possibilities. In some measure we are failures. What hope is there for us in our failures? This big hope -- we may start again. The final difference between the defeated and the successful is that the defeated let one great failure overcome him and the successful had the courage to begin again after a failure. Just remember this:--no failure need be final.

IV. His Reparation

How did Mark atone? How did he repair the damage he had done? He became an evangelist. He wrote a book. He gave the world a Life of Jesus, the first Gospel to be written. Multitudes of people, who had never seen Jesus in the flesh, met Him in the pages of Mark's book, and entered upon the high road leading to salvation. And still today after all these years Mark is introducing men and women of every race and religion to Jesus, and setting them face to face with the redeeming Son of God. That was his atonement and was it not a glorious reparation?

What then of ourselves? Is there any reparation we can offer? We can compose a life of Jesus. We can write evangels in deeds and character. We can enable men to see Jesus. We can live in such a way as to let others feel the power and see the beauty of Jesus.