

## Acts 15:36-41 Receiving a Second Chance –John Mark

### Introduction

Does he or she deserve another chance? This kind of question is raised repeatedly every day in every village or town or city across the globe. We cannot interact with our fellow sinful human beings without needing to offer and to receive forgiveness. Life is full of situations where redemption is required and sometimes sought; and reconciliation may be an incredible triumph in the face of extraordinary adversity. These vital issues are at the core of our faith indeed of the Christian gospel and at the same time stand in bold contradiction of the values of the secular world around us. What is sadder is that they sometimes stand in contradiction to the way in which some Christians and Churches conduct their affairs as well. II Corinthians 5:17-19 states these wonderful and extraordinary words: *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!* <sup>18</sup>*All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: <sup>19</sup>that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.* This follows naturally from the reconciling work of God in Christ in bringing sinners into fellowship with God and He with us as Paul also declares in that same chapter: *that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.* <sup>20</sup>*We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup>God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (II Corinthians 5:19-21).* Our calling is to follow our Lord's example, described for us by Paul in Philippians chapter two: *If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, <sup>2</sup>then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. <sup>3</sup>Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup>Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:* We struggle at times not to love the world in general which is aspirational! rather our difficulty can be with relating to particular individuals. Our words and actions at times can be misunderstood or misjudged because another person had only a partial grasp of the context in which they were experienced. Or our silence or inactivity may equally be interpreted in an inadequate manner. We live in a society where marital unfaithfulness is rife and many families struggle with dysfunctional relationships between some of their members; let alone tensions in many a workplace or school playground; in such a social context the Bible presents to us the story of John Mark, both to challenge and inspire us in our relationships with other people.

### 1.The Past

(a) **Mark's Potential** John Mark is a character that appears more in the New Testament than we often realise. He was privileged to grow up in a devout Jewish home that acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah. It was a wealthy home in Jerusalem that had a large public room upstairs that Jesus and His disciples used for the Last Supper. It is also likely that they used it

on other occasions as well that are not recorded in the Gospel accounts. It appears likely that Mark may have been eavesdropping on the conversations of Jesus and His disciples at the Last Supper. What is certain is that he followed them to the Garden of Gethsemane dressed only in a linen garment. He was so close to the action at the time of Jesus' arrest that the soldiers who came to apprehend Jesus grabbed hold of some of His followers also and Mark was included amongst their number, but after a struggle this teenager got away, but left his ripped clothes in the hands of the soldier in question as he ran home naked through the dark and deserted streets of that ancient city. (Mark 14:51-52: *A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, <sup>52</sup>he fled naked, leaving his garment behind.*) His home was the main base of the Jerusalem Church and was used for many meetings of that congregation, probably exclusively so prior to the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). No-one could have had a more fortunate upbringing as a young follower of Jesus. A person can grow up in a Christian home without having committed their life to Christ. This is a sad reality that many Christian families experience regarding a number of their members. We have to trust and pray that if we have faithfully presented Christ and the gospel message to them and sought to live a God-honouring life that they will come back to acknowledging Him later in their lives. In the light of this experience it is no surprise that Acts 13:5 recorded with reference to Saul and Barnabas's first missionary journey that *John was with them as their helper*. A young man brought up with household servants to do the chores, carry the bags and generally do all the things he may not have wished to have done, was now occupying that position himself for the sake of Christ. How would he adjust to this new situation? How do we when our life circumstances are radically changed, especially to our disadvantage? Most of us have our struggles as we find it difficult to work through some of the issues that can come up when our problems arise. We need to ask the Lord for His strength to get through these times day by day. (b) **Mark's Problem** On the second part of that journey on the leg in southern and central Turkey we hear of Mark once again in Acts 13:13: *From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem.* Was the thrill of getting invited to go on the first missionary journey fading fast? Was it more difficult than he had ever imagined? Were the challenges he experienced overwhelming to that young man? Almost certainly it was his first time away from home was it homesickness? A Christian couple I know who served in Northern Thailand recounted vividly the experience they had on that term of service overseas. Regrettably the mission agency concerned only wanted them to stay for four years when a much longer period of time would have been more profitable. The climate was a challenge to begin with. Humidity was 100% for most of the year just standing around let alone engaging in some form of exercise and clothes were totally soaked with sweat within a few minutes of putting them on. Language studies were hard but they did their very best with Thai and after completing language school headed up north to their place of service ready to try out the few words they had mastered in the native language. However, all the people at the school and Christian community where they worked were from the hill tribes, most of whom spoke no Thai only a varied assortment of other languages! This was a good placement. Their professional skills were required in that community and they did a good job, yet there was much frustration concerning what they wanted to say and do, but did not have the linguistic skills to match. Remember to pray for our missionaries overseas who may gloss over their frustrations and present a rosy picture in home leave meetings. But the reality on the ground can be a real struggle at times. John Mark certainly had found that and chosen to go home. We must not be quick to condemn him. How many of us have been tempted to walk away from ministry positions or to decline taking them up when approached because we do not want the hassles or to give the commitment that it would cost. Is that you this morning? Did God speak to you

about some form of Christian service this week, last week or in the last few months or even further back and you knocked it back because you didn't want to do it? If God is bring that back to your mind just now then can I ask you to think again because if God calls you to serve Him in a particular ministry then He may keep gently reminded you that He hasn't forgotten. I did that with respect to the pastoral ministry. It was the one thing I told God I wouldn't do! We must never rush into ministry without recognising the cost. Jesus in Luke 14:28-30 told this story to make a point: *Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it?* <sup>29</sup>*For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him,* <sup>30</sup>*saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'* We have an example of this in Scotland in the beautiful west highland community of Oban where **McCaig's Folly** towers over the town. It was built over a three year period starting in 1897, by John Stewart McCaig an Oban banker of considerable wealth, as the cost of the folly was in the region of £5000. Ultimately it was a pointless (and unfinished) memorial to himself; it was built in the style of the Roman Coliseum; there was, in part, a desire to help local young people during a time of high unemployment in the area. McCaig employed local stone-masons who were without work during the winter months. It was therefore during these months only when construction was undertaken between 1895 and 1902. McCaig had planned a more elaborate structure, containing a museum and art gallery, but his death brought an end to the money and the construction stopped with only the outer walls completed [information obtained from various internet websites connected to Oban] Too many projects in God's work likewise can start with the best of intentions, but it is so much better when they are well planned and successfully executed to the glory of God. Can God count on you to be a person who stays the course and completes the tasks entrusted to you?

## **2. The Present**

(a) **Paul's View** (Acts 15:36-8; 40-41) *Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing."* <sup>37</sup>*Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them,* <sup>38</sup>*but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work.* <sup>40</sup>*but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.* <sup>41</sup>*He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.* Paul is a tough and determined man who had little sympathy for human weaknesses. There is no doubt that a less robust individual could never have survived the punishment he endured for the sake of Christ. Prior to his conversion he was dishing out the beatings, but after his conversion for a great deal longer he was on the receiving end –and with no complaints. I suspect I would be less accepting of such hardship and telling the Lord so! How about you? In the light of such a character it is not a surprise that he took a dim view of John Mark going home halfway through the previous missionary journey. It appears to be obvious that this young man who had experienced such a sheltered life was ill-prepared for the difficulties he experienced. Unlike the former Jerusalem University student, Saul, who had lived away from home for some years and was quite independent of his biological family, the same was certainly not true of John Mark. What can we learn from this situation? First of all as we look at how Barnabas and Saul /Paul viewed this young man it reminds us that God has made us all different. We have different personalities and temperaments. Our experience of life varies greatly. When we follow Christ it does not negate or remove our previous life experience. Our past has a significant shaping

influence on our present speech and actions and will continue to do so to varying degrees into the future. We must be careful not to judge one another inappropriately. Another person's circumstances are different to yours and mine and our calling is to encourage one another to be the best we can be for the sake of Christ and the gospel. We could be too hard on other people or too lenient with respect to inappropriate speech or conduct. However, the bottom line is do I genuinely love my brothers and sisters in Christ with (however weak) a Christ-like love that genuinely wants the very best for them? This is the practical (agape) love that the New Testament commends to us. One test of a claim to love one another is to ask –how often do you pray for other people in the congregation? How many people do you make an effort to speak to before or especially after a worship service? Is it your close friends or, for example, if you saw someone new to the church attending would you go over and offer a brief word of welcome? Or if someone was on their own in the hall after the service –would you be willing to make a point of greeting them to ensure that they were not left on their own, maybe even including them in a conversation you were having with some other people? These are just some of many types of things that a Christian might consider doing for the sake of Christ. It is not a huge thing that Jesus asks us to do –in relational terms- it can be a simple thing that shows we care and are taking an interest in the life of another person. This headstrong, firebrand for Jesus would accomplish great things for God in His life, but Paul had a great deal to learn –which he did –about relationships with fellow Christians and the whole idea of team-building. (b) **Barnabas's View** (Acts 15:37-39) <sup>37</sup>*Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them,* <sup>38</sup>*but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work.* <sup>39</sup>*They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus...* Here is an older man with more experience of life and people who had himself mentored Saul as a young Christian; now he takes under his wing John Mark, determined that the potential he had as a witness for Jesus would be realised. Barnabas (a name others gave to him, as his real name was Joseph (Acts 4:36), whose name means literally 'son of encouragement', made a point throughout his life of mentoring and supporting younger Christians and helping them grow in their faith. Are you here as an older man or woman who could be an encourager to younger people of your own gender? If we all made a point each week of trying to find genuinely encouraging comments to affirm other people in the church and had the mindset of a Barnabas, what a difference it would make in a church to one with the mindset of young Saul, who at that stage in his life could only see the weak points in the lives of other people, rather than their strengths. After all it was Barnabas who stood by Saul when the Jerusalem Church nearly turned down his application for membership on the grounds of his doubtful past. Acts 9:26-27 stated: *When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple.* <sup>27</sup>*But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.* Are there any individuals who stood by you in your earliest years as a Christian? Thank God for the people whose names have come to your mind. Maybe later you might even want to encourage them with a card or phone call or a visit in the coming weeks or months as you honour them for providing spiritual care for you. Barnabas had pleaded for this young man (Saul) to be given another

chance to that Jerusalem congregation. Now he is giving John Mark another chance to honour God in his life. This is not because he is a younger relative. In Colossians 4:10 Paul wrote in one of his prison letters from Rome -*My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas...* it was in Barnabas's character to give younger Christians an opportunity to learn from their mistakes, by providing in a structured environment a safe place to develop the gifts and calling God had entrusted to them. Do we show the patience we should to one another? Or is there someone you need to apologise to even today for being irritable or less than gracious towards in your service for Him? It was a costly ministry for Barnabas to insist on training John Mark rather than going with Paul. His profile in the wider Christian community would fall significantly as he would be ministering in less prominent places. It was a bad 'career' move if he wished to get noticed and honoured by an increasing circle of Christian admirers, but Barnabas was only interested in doing what he believed God would have him do. We live in a celebrity age and its corrosive values at times appear to affect the church of Jesus Christ and image and performance can become more prominent than more foundational issues of substance amongst God's people. Barnabas was a person who was so in tune with God that he could not be pressured into adopting less godly ways of behaving. He knew that spiritual maturity could not be attained in a day or even week-long course on that subject. Here was an inspirational Christian. In a moment of quiet reflection later today –if you can find one – ask yourself who am I closer to in the way I relate to other people: impatient and critical Saul or understanding and patient Barnabas? You may even (if rather brave) want to try out this exercise with a close Christian friend –by that I mean someone who knows you really well and who would not be afraid to tell you exactly how they saw the situation. The test for all of us is this: how can I move closer to being a 'Barnabas' to other people for the glory of God? It may be worthwhile observing older Christians you admire and asking them how they were helped to grow in Christ-likeness on their own spiritual journey over the years.

### **3. The Future**

(a) **Paul's Opinion** Towards the end of his life while a prisoner in Rome, the apostle Paul wrote a whole series of letters to individuals and churches commenting on a wide variety of issues and mentioning dozens of people with whom he had been associated. Here are the two comments Paul made about Mark. The first one here was written at the end of his life, possibly the last letter he wrote before his execution by Nero. It was written to the young pastor at Ephesus, Timothy, who was a close associate of Paul. What did he say about Mark? *Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because **he is helpful to me in my ministry.*** (II Timothy 4:11). Up to twenty years may have passed since these critical words about Mark, cited in Acts 15, had been spoken. What a transformation had taken place in his life for Paul to view him in this new way. Or had there been a change also in Paul? Had he become older and wiser? In a second letter from his confinement in Rome, this time to the Church at Colossae in Turkey, Paul wrote: *My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; **if he comes to you, welcome him**)* Colossians 4:10. Mark is also mentioned in a separate letter around the same time to the leader of the Colossian Church, Philemon. In a list of people who *send you*

*greetings* is *Mark* who along with these other people is named as *my fellow-workers* (Philemon 23-24). Paul has not gone soft in his old age. In his very last letter to Timothy Paul was unequivocal in his high standards of Christian discipleship. *Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus*, he wrote in II Timothy 2:3. I think that Mark undoubtedly had matured in his faith and was a great help to Paul in future years. The challenge to us all is this: how can I be more of a Barnabas and encourage other Christians to progress in their faith, rather than one who looks for faults and weaknesses to criticise like Paul had done in his earlier years? some young Christians who do not have experienced mature Christians at home or in their close circle of friends may need particular support and encouragement and mentoring, as Saul did – ask yourself what can I do for God in this area? Don't worry if nothing specific comes to mind, being open and available to God is what is most important. He can prompt you over time to assist and support other Christians. (b) **Peter's Opinion** (I Peter 5:13) *She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark.* Mark was to spend a lot of time with Peter, ironically another believer who needed a second chance to get his ministry for God back on track. It was during his time with Peter that Mark wrote his gospel, based on Peter's testimony and sermons that he preached. I Peter was written by Silas, a prominent member of Paul's missionary team, at a time when he was working with Peter and Mark in Rome (I Peter 5:12-13), in support of that relatively young church planted by ordinary Christians. To refer to Mark as *my son Mark* is an extraordinarily affectionate expression. What a transformation in the life of this young man. Praise God for second chances! Are you here this morning in need of a second chance? Please ask God for forgiveness and invite Him afresh to take charge of your life? Has God been speaking to you today about someone you can encourage in the faith? Please make a note of that and act upon it as soon as it is practical. The symbol most central to the Christian faith is the cross that reminds us of the cost of our redemption and the gift of grace. Please accept that gift for yourself and bless others also as you endeavour to share it also with them, for Jesus' sake Amen.