

# No Matter How You Start, Finish Well!

---

A. Timothy Heijermans  
Christian Community Church, Luxembourg

25 February 2018  
Colossians 4:10

## INTRODUCTION

It's not just how we begin that's all that important—how we finish matters more. Maybe most.

When we think about it, many of us here this morning didn't receive all that great a start in life. Many come from homes where Christ was a swear word. Many of us lacked a stable family where both mom and dad were faithful to each other, from marriage vow through death. Even fewer had parents who were both born again.

Some of us have been abused as children. Some of us have fallen into immorality. Some of us have had abortions. Not all of us had a chance to get an advanced education. Many of us come from the lower classes in our native lands. Some of us have been in trouble with the law. Some struggle with a handicap that has plagued us for years. No, not all of us have had a privileged start to life.

On the other hand, some of us have gotten off to a very privileged start in life. Some have been reared in a committed Christian environment through no fault of their own. Many have received financial advantages, with parents earning a strong salary, enabling us to travel, to get advanced degrees, to be clothed attractively, to eat well, to sleep comfortably, and to enjoy the latest technology. These jump-starts to life do not guarantee we will be successful, but they ought to be a leg up on life.

So here's the good news: God has made it His business to rescue us from the way we began life—whether weakly or strongly—and to turn us toward a new path. Our past need not determine our future! If we began weak, we can finish strong by His grace! And if we began with privilege, we need not finish by spending our lives in frivolous things!

That's what we want to see in our biography this morning of a certain John Mark of Jerusalem, a member of Barnabas' and Saul's budding missionary team to Cyprus and Pamphylia. We see his name in Colossians 4, which is why we're taking time to look again at his life, which held great promise early on. Nonetheless he failed when he should have succeeded. But his failure is not the end of his story in Scripture. Like him, we can turn and learn from failures and finish strong.

## I. JOHN MARK'S POTENTIAL

---

I said this young man had promise. How? Observe four things we know about him from the New Testament.

### A. HIS FAMILY

Remember the account about Peter's escape from prison in Acts 12:12? That text hints that John Mark grew up in a privileged home. His mother Mary was almost certainly a woman of better-than average means. At least she had a house large enough to welcome part of the church in Jerusalem for a respectably sized prayer meeting. She was a believer who gave some kind of leadership to her family, of which we know nothing else. The Bible never mentions the name of John Mark's father, so it is very possible that she was a Jewish widow.

### B. HIS LOCAL CHURCH

As part of the church in Jerusalem John Mark had access to other committed Christians who were going through persecution after the death of Stephen. He had seen how brothers and sisters were standing firm in the face of trials. Certainly this was instructive. He was a witness to the church's sharing sacrificially with one another in those early days. He probably personally knew some of the key people Luke introduces in the book of Acts.

### C. HIS EXPOSURE TO JESUS CHRIST

An interesting tradition from at least the 13th century in Egypt suggests that John Mark was the young man who was with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and who turned and ran for his life when the guard came to arrest the Lord (Mark 14.51). Why else would the author Mark insert this trivial detail in a solemn story? This is quite possibly John Mark's way of saying "I was there", a little like the painter Raphael, who sketched in his own face at the far right of the famous Vatican museum fresco, "The School of Athens", painted in Pope Julius II's library. The apostle John did something similar in his gospel when he referred to himself as the "disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 21.20). Men usually wore two garments; one was an undergarment (a *chitôn*) and the other an outer garment (a *sindôn*), usually made of wool. Wealthy people, however, wore an outer garment of linen. When the guard grabbed this young man he wriggled out of the linen outer

garment and ran for his life completely naked—he had no undergarment. We do not know the reasons why he was clothed this way, but it reminds us of Adam in the Garden of Eden, except in reverse (Adam fled and covered himself; John Mark fled uncovered). Jesus was so forsaken that a young man was willing to run away in complete humiliation from Jesus' confrontation with the law. If this tradition is correct, then John Mark was with Jesus and the apostles in the Garden and saw the inner workings of that fateful night.

#### D. HIS DISCIPLES

In addition to having a believing mother, John Mark was privileged to have contact with some of the finest Christians of the first century church. His uncle was Barnabas, a Jew of Cypriot birth and the leader of the first missionary journey from Antioch. Barnabas had brought his cousin John Mark back to Antioch with him after having given a financial gift from the Antioch church to the believers in Jerusalem. That was the basis for John Mark's becoming the "helper" (*huperétés*, "under-rower in a galley, servant, attendant") for the missionary team (Acts 13:5). In addition to the relationship with Barnabas, which was family, John Mark also knew Peter from Jerusalem. We'll see how this plays out a little later.

It all makes for an impressive way to launch a vocation as a missionary worker! John Mark had a great start. But then something happened. Let's try to piece things together . . .

## II. JOHN MARK'S FAILURE

---

When we come to Acts 13:13 we're surprised to read this statement: "Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphilia; and John left (*apochôreô*, "leave, depart") them and returned to Jerusalem". No big deal, right? Travel plans change every day. But this departure from the team to regain Jerusalem was out of the ordinary. We discover this when we peek ahead into Acts 15:36-41. There we discover that Paul said some stern things about John Mark: "he had deserted them (*apostanta*, "fallen away") in Pamphilia and had not gone with them to the work" (15:38). Desertion? That's another matter! That term Luke uses to describe John Mark's departure is the same one we find in 1 Timothy 4:1 for people who "depart" from the faith and in Hebrews 3:12 for those who "depart" from the living God. It simply means to "leave" or "withdraw", but the tone is more negative than the one we see in 13:13. As far as Paul was concerned, John Mark didn't just leave—he left them in the lurch!

But why would a grand fellow like John Mark abandon the work when things were just getting warmed up? Luke does not give us all the details, but we can imagine several reasons why it could have happened. And we'll take a moment to speculate because the solutions we'll come up with are the things that may plague us all at one time or another. Consider four possible reasons . . .

#### A. FEAR

Keep in mind what the team had just come through. Paul and Barnabas had given the gospel to the Jews in Cyprus' synagogues. And Mark had been witness to a raw head-to-head confrontation with demonic power in Sergius Paulus' office. Remember what Paul did to arrest Elymas the magician's attention by striking him blind for a season? John Mark had doubtless experienced some of the persecution the Jews had brought to bear upon the Christians in Jerusalem, but this kind of opposition was something new. And intimidating! When they moved into Pamphylia they were going into a part of the world known for its paganism and its roadway robbers. Possibly it was all quite a stretch for a young man reared in the familiarity of Jerusalem's Jewish traditions. And perhaps John Mark just got a bad case of knocking knees and decided it was time to go home. Have you ever turned back from a task to which God has called you because you feared going forward? Have the mountains of Pamphylia looked too foreboding to you, so you turned back? We cannot do God's work when we allow fear to get the better of us. Jesus always urged His disciples not to fear, but instead to trust Him. Faith is always the antidote to fear. But it takes time to grasp this.

#### B. FAMILY TIES

Some have suggested that because the persecution of Christians was continuing in Jerusalem, and the famine foreseen by Agabus was beginning to bite, John Mark decided to go back home to care for his widowed mother. Others wonder if he was a bit of a "mama's boy", since he returned not to Antioch, where he had spent some time with Barnabas and Paul in the new church, but to his home. It's not wrong to care for aged parents in times of difficulty. But it looks from Paul's perspective later on like John Mark was reneging on his commitments—and commitments were commitments!

It is important to meet the needs of family members. But to use this as an excuse to abandon serving the Lord violates Jesus' own instructions in Luke 9:57-52: "*And as they were going along the road, someone said to Him, 'I will follow You wherever You go'. And Jesus said to him, 'The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head'. And He said to another, 'Follow Me'. But he said, 'Permit me first to go and bury my father'. But He said to him, 'Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God'. And another also said, 'I will follow*

*You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home'. But Jesus said to him, 'No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God' ”.*

This can be an issue for some of us, too. Love for Christ and His church must come even before love for family. That's radical, and John Mark may have had to wrestle with this problem.

### C. JEALOUSY

There's another noteworthy change in the text of Acts 15. Until this point Uncle Barnabas has been the leader of this venture. Every time they've been mentioned we've read about Barnabas and Saul.

But from this point on in Acts it will be “Paul and Barnabas”. Paul will have pulled ahead to take the leadership of the venture. And that's the way it will be until the end of this missionary trip. Gentle Barnabas will be in the back seat. They say “blood is thicker than water” (family ties are stronger than friendship). So maybe John Mark was a bit peeved that his family was being edged out by Paul's commanding new presence.

Has jealousy overtaken you and caused you to abandon your ministry? Envy drove the Jewish leaders to give Christ over to Pilate; it can ruin your future, too.

### D. DOCTRINAL CONFLICT

John Mark was a Jew from Jerusalem, the beating heart of the Jewish faith. Of course Barnabas was Jewish, too, but he was from Cyprus. The missionary trip was taking the team into pure Gentile territory, and it may be that the question of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles was a sticky item at this point in the development of the church of Jesus Christ—even among the missionary team. Paul would write later about how the question set him against Peter in Antioch (Galatians 2:13). He would mention that even Barnabas was carried along in Peter's error when he refused to eat with Gentiles. So perhaps even at this early date there was some discussion about it within the team. The matter is not officially resolved until the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15.

Differences in conviction divide teams, that's for sure. We cannot work together if we teach opposing views. That is why we must always seek increasing unity in what we believe and teach.

## III. JOHN MARK'S COME-BACK

---

The story has a happy ending! John Mark finished well, because in the sovereign plan of God three men gave John Mark a second chance . . .

### A. A SECOND CHANCE WITH BARNABAS

There may have been other reasons for John Mark's abandoning the team at Pamphylia. We can only guess, but we know that Paul felt very strongly about this issue. So when the second missionary trip was launched a few years later (Acts 15:36-41), Paul got really intense about refusing to have John Mark on the new team. Barnabas suggested they give the fellow another go at it (15:37); Paul would have nothing of it (15:38). As a result the contention was as sharp between them as a swallow of vinegar. Barnabas sailed off to Cyprus with John Mark, deciding to return to his home territory with nephew in tow. The church in Antioch seems to have stood behind Paul and his new team member Silas (15:40) as they left to re-visit the churches Barnabas and Paul had launched a few years before.

As his boat sails over the horizon of the Mediterranean Sea, Barnabas pretty much disappears from the pages of Scripture. He's mentioned in passing only in Galatians and 1 Corinthians (9:6) without many details about where he was or what he was doing. But the memory that sticks is that Barnabas—the Son of encouragement—gave his nephew another crack at ministry. That's finishing well for both of them! John Mark could have pouted about the dispute and decided just to stay home, but he left Jerusalem and served abroad. That's finishing well! Thank you, Lord, for Barnabases!

### B. A SECOND CHANCE WITH PETER

But how about John Mark? Where does he crop up again? Does he disappear over the horizon with Uncle Barny? No! He reappears in several nooks of the New Testament. Look first of all at the end of Peter's first letter (1 Peter 5:13). There he's mentioned as one of the apostle Peter's close associates—his son in the faith—in the city of Babylon. It was from there that Peter had written his general letter through Silas, Paul's long-time associate.

We have other evidence of Peter's influence in John Mark's life. The ancient church historian Eusebius quoted from a work by Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis (AD 140). Papias referred to the apostle John, the Elder, in his description of the source of the gospel according to Mark: “*The Elder said this also: Mark, who*

*became Peter's interpreter, wrote accurately, though not in order, all that he remembered of the things said or done by the Lord. For he had neither heard the Lord nor had been one of His followers, but afterwards, as I said, he had followed Peter, who used to compose his discourses with a view to the needs of his hearers, but not as though he were drawing up a connected account of the Lord's sayings. So Mark made no mistake in thus recording some things just as he remembered them. For he was careful of this one thing, to omit none of the things he had heard and to make no untrue statements therein"* (Ecclesiastical History, 3.39.15).

Mark probably wrote the gospel of Mark with input from the apostle Peter at around AD 65-67 during the time of the persecutions of the Roman Christians. Mark underscored the true humanity of Jesus so that persecuted Christians would see in Jesus Christ their true example of suffering in the will of God. If all this is indeed accurate, then God really did turn around the life of this young man! Peter leaves traces of his memories of the ministry of Jesus in our minds when we read John Mark's collection in the gospel according to Mark. That's finishing well! Thank you, Lord, for Peters!

### **C. A SECOND CHANCE WITH PAUL**

And then there are three other wonderful passages to round out our assessment of John Mark. The first pair is in Colossians 4:10-11 and Philemon 24, where Paul says John Mark was with him in Rome (AD 61) during his imprisonment. Paul told the Colossian church to welcome John Mark if he traveled in their direction, for as one of the few fellow-workers of Jewish origin in his team, they had been an encouragement to him. In the letter to Philemon, a believer who likely lived in Colosse, Paul said that John Mark was one of his fellow-workers. Isn't that great? The fellow whom Paul refused to take with him went and visited him in prison in Rome and lifted his spirits! That's character! He became a colleague! That's finishing well!

One final passage: 2 Timothy 4:11. It's Paul's last canonical letter, written in around AD 67 only a short time before his martyrdom. In the final greetings to the church in Ephesus, Paul asks Timothy to pick up Mark and bring him to Rome, "*for he is useful to me for service*". Twenty years earlier this man had been a wash-out; now he was a useful member of the team. That's finishing well! Thank you, Lord, for Pauls!

In all of this we see the grace of God operating in a powerful way. Jesus is physically absent from the ascension on, but He is still working in people's lives by His Spirit through people who want to serve Him. Even when there's what seems a disastrous turn in the road, He has His arms open for making things right.

### **CONCLUSION**

Have you faced a defeat when people concluded you wouldn't amount to anything good? Take inspiration from John Mark. Don't let fear chain you. Don't let jealousy embitter you. Don't allow family ties turn you away from dedication to Christ. Don't proudly hold on to errors that swim against Scripture. Don't live in the past. What matters is how you finish. Finish well!

And if a person you've invested in quite heavily turns the wrong way, don't give up on him or her. You don't know where that person could end up if you gave him or her another chance. The Lord has done that for us thousands of times. Let's do as much for our brethren! By God's enabling, let's finish well, and let's help others do likewise!