

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Character Forged in Crisis

(Character sketches from Scripture)

The Messy Middle

(Acts 13, 15; 2 Timothy 4; A look at the life of John Mark)

Study #8

Introduction: Taking next steps...

When Paul wrote to the church at Colossae, he included this gem: ***[Colossians 2:6] Therefore, as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him.***

Paul described life with Jesus using the vocabulary of walking. Read through the New Testament and you'll find lots of analogies to living by faith to taking a walk.

Hence, our "Next Steps" church motto. We take a "Next Steps" walk with Jesus. We help each other take "Next Steps" walks with Jesus.

Generally, we learn to walk early in life. It's not long before we master walking, moving on to running, skipping, and jumping. And all is well in the walking world...until something isn't.

Some years ago, after some years of successful walking, I began having walking problems. It was a knee thing, which I won't go into, because that would lead to complaining, and we can't have any of that.

This past year, I dealt with my walking problems, and had both of my knees replaced. (My knees are named July and October.)

I won't tell you about the rehab, either, which could also land me in the complaining ditch. But I can tell you that the rehab required

some time and work to get to where I don't limp, can exercise again, and can now even hike again.

Some of you can relate to an experience of rehabbing a knee or some other joint after an injury or a surgery.

My knee rehab experience has driven home the truth that when I injure myself, spiritually (when I sin; when I stumble in my walk with Jesus), some rehab is required before I walk normally again.

Today our eighth and final character sketch finds us exploring the life of a man who stumbled, went through an extensive rehab, and walked again.

In some ways, this is the message I've most wanted to give in this series. And even though there are lots of unanswered questions in this person's story, it's the one that I hope will give everyone here today hope for a God-honoring, Jesus-centered, abundant-life future.

Today, we'll look at the story of John Mark.

A Promising Start

Family Ties (Acts 12:12)

Death of James; Prison for Peter (Acts 12:1-5)

The first time we read Mark's name¹ is in Acts, chapter 12. Mark is mentioned in conjunction with a prayer meeting.

The Apostle James (the brother of the Apostle John) had just been put to death by King Herod.

When Herod saw that this unjust act of persecution pleased the Jewish leaders, he had the Apostle Peter arrested and put in prison.

¹ I'll refer to him throughout as Mark. "John" is the Jewish name he was given, meaning "The LORD is gracious;" "Mark is the Roman name.

Not surprisingly, and especially after what had happened to James, **[Acts 12:5]...prayer for [Peter] was being made to God intensely by the church.**

We believe that Herod's plan was to keep Peter in jail overnight and then bring him out to put him to death. God had other plans...

Peter's release (Acts 12:6-11)

Peter was sleeping between two soldiers in the jail, bound with two chains, when an angel woke Peter up by striking him on the side.

Peter's chains fell off and the angel led him out of his cell, past sleeping guards, and outside the prison where he found himself standing all alone, the angel having disappeared.

When he realized that he wasn't dreaming,² he immediately went straight to a home where he was sure that his Christian family would be praying for him.

Prayer meeting at Mary's house (Acts 12:12)

As Luke tells us, **[Acts 12:12] And when he realized this** (that he had actually been set free by an angel!), **he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John, who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.**

As soon as he entered the house, Peter told those who had been praying everything that had happened. And there was much rejoicing at Peter's release.³

The character of our sketch today is John Mark. Mark's mother, a woman named Mary, was a believer in Jesus and was a prominent part of the church in Jerusalem.

That is why Peter knew that it would be in Mary's home that the prayer warriors would gather to pray for his release from jail.

All we learn about Mark from this one verse is that his mother was a believer (his spiritual roots dated back to his youth) and that the home in which he was raised was a ministry-rich environment.⁴

We believe that he was a young-ish man because of a reference we find in Mark 15. The verse recounts the disciples all fleeing from Jesus when the Romans and Jews arrested him.

[Mark 14:51] A young man was following Him, wearing nothing but a linen sheet over his naked body; and they seized him. [52] But he pulled free of the linen sheet and escaped naked.

Yes, that is odd. But many Bible scholars believe that this is Mark identifying himself in the narrative. He was affirming that he was an eyewitness of Jesus' arrest.

That he refers to himself as a **"young man"** probably means that he was in his late teens to somewhere in his 20's when Jesus died. As we meet him in Acts, he's a few years older, but still a young man.

Evidently, Mark showed great potential as a servant of Jesus. I say that because early on, he was taken under the wings of two of the major leaders of the early church, Barnabas and Saul (the Apostle Paul), to be mentored in ministry.

On the Job Training in Ministry

After the "famine relief" visit (Acts 11:27-30; 12:25)

We read in Acts 11 about a visit to the church at Antioch from some prophets who had come from Jerusalem. These prophets brought news of impending famine that would be felt **"all over the world."** (v. 28)

² At first, Peter thought this was all a vision / dream. Acts 12:9, 11.

³ See the story of Peter's knocking at the door of the house in Acts 12. It's funny.

⁴ It has been suggested by many (including the renowned Jewish scholar, Alfred Edersheim) that Mary's home in Jerusalem was the site of the last supper and of the gathering on the day of Pentecost. This is conjecture, but very possible.

The Christians in Antioch were deeply concerned for their brothers and sisters living in Judea, knowing that this famine would hit their persecuted Christian family hard.

So, [29]...to the extent that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brothers and sisters living in Judea.

They sent Barnabas and Saul / Paul to Jerusalem with the gift of financial assistance (v. 30), spent some time visiting with the apostles and elders while there,⁵ and then returned to Antioch...with Mark.

[Acts 12:25] And Barnabas and Saul returned when they had fulfilled their mission to Jerusalem, taking along with them John, who was also called Mark.

Something about Mark so impressed Barnabas and Saul that they brought Mark back to Antioch with them to train the younger man in ministry, to mentor him, to help him grow in Jesus.

And, once in Antioch, Mark must have distinguished himself even more.

I say that because when Barnabas and Saul left Antioch to go on a missions trip, they took Mark along with them.

On the First Missionary Journey (Acts 13:5)

Barnabas and Saul commissioned (13:1-4)

After the Holy Spirit made it clear that He wanted Barnabas and Paul to go traveling, the church commissioned them. That was all great.

But Barnabas and Saul knew that adding a third member to their team would be helpful - and they knew just the man to add.

John Mark (Mark) was their helper / go-fer (13:5)

[5] When they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John (that is, John Mark) as their helper.⁶

The three men left Antioch and sailed on the Mediterranean to Barnabas's home island of Cyprus to do pioneering missions work.

I picture Barnabas and Saul preaching, teaching, evangelizing. I picture Mark helping out where he could with the preaching and teaching - and cooking and cleaning, since he was their helper.

These three evangelized the Jews in the city of Salamis. Then they traveled the length of the island to Paphos where they met with spiritual warfare - and came out victorious for Jesus by Jesus' power!⁷

After a brief time at Paphos, they left the island of Cyprus and headed for the Asian mainland.

[13a] Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia.

From the seacoast town of Perga, they looked north into a region called Galatia. That's where they were headed.

The way forward would have looked daunting. The Taurus Mountains were Rockies-like. It was dangerous territory.

The road leading to the first major city, Pisidian Antioch, was fraught with the dangers of terrible weather, treacherous terrain, and roadside bandits.

Ahead of them were some nine hundred miles of hard travel.

⁶ Mark had not been "*set apart*" like Barnabas and Saul had been. But the Holy Spirit didn't exclude him. Barnabas and Saul had freedom to bring Mark along.

⁷ A false magician named Elymas (or Bar-Jesus) was kept from standing in the way of an honest seeker after God. And that seeker, Sergius Paulus, who was the Roman proconsul of the whole island, believed in Jesus!

⁵ See Galatians 2:1-10.

They were planning to engage in the same activities in Galatia that they had been involved with on the island of Cyprus. They would preach and preach and evangelize and make disciples.

There would be miracles and healings AND there would be hardships and opposition and persecution. But lives would be transformed. This was what the church at Antioch had sent them out for in the first place.

All of that was in front of these three men as they got off the boat at Perga.

What we have seen so far has been Mark at the beginning of his Jesus-serving career. His future is bright and filled with promise.

What I'm going to do now is fast forward roughly fifteen years to see Mark as an older, more mature man. In what we'll see now, Mark was a seasoned servant of Jesus.

First, let's remember that Mark wrote a very important book.

A Very Stable and Effective End

Author of a Gospel (We call it "Mark")

Even though there is no claim in the book that Mark wrote the second Gospel, there is little doubt that John Mark was the author of the Gospel of Mark.⁸

Mark added tremendously to our knowledge of Jesus by writing this account of His life.

And, no, Mark didn't have a ringside seat to all the miracles or teachings of Jesus like Matthew and John had. But he did have access to the whole story of Jesus via a friendship with the Apostle Peter.

We believe that Peter had a very close relationship with Mark and his family. After all, Mark's mother, Mary, gathered other believers to pray for Peter when he was jailed by Herod. (Acts 12)

Plus, Peter mentioned Mark in his first letter.

Very Close to the Apostle Peter

The readers of Peter's letters were dispersed and persecuted Christians living outside of Judea.

When Peter sent final greetings to this group, he wrote, **[1 Peter 5:13] She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings, and so does my son, Mark.**

So, the Apostle Peter had a close relationship with Mark. So did the Apostle Paul.

Highly Esteemed by the Apostle Paul

Be sure to welcome Mark! (Colossians 4:10)

At the end of Paul's letter to the Colossians, he sent greetings from some friends who were helping him out while he was in prison.

[Colossians 4:10] Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, sends you his greetings; and also Barnabas' cousin Mark (about whom you received instructions; if he comes to you, welcome him)

There is warmth there. The sense is, *"If Mark comes your way, welcome him with open arms. Deal with him kindly."*

We hear the same high regard for Mark at the end of the little letter Paul wrote to his friend, Philemon.

Mark, my "fellow worker" in the Gospel (Philemon 24)

⁸ Donald Guthrie writes, *"So strong is the early Christian testimony that Mark was the author of this Gospel that we need to little more than mention this attestation."* No argument is necessary. New Testament Introduction, p. 69.

[Philemon 23] Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, [24] as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

Mark was Paul's "**fellow worker**" in the Gospel. This speaks to Mark's effectiveness in serving Jesus. "**Fellow worker**" implies diligence, seriousness, and willingness to suffer. That was Mark.

Finally, there is the same thought, but even more personal, in Paul's final letter, this one written from a Roman dungeon.

Mark, useful to me for service (2 Timothy 4:11)

Paul was asking Timothy to visit him one last time, just before he was to be put to death by Rome. He wrote, ***[2 Timothy 4:11] Only Luke is with me. Take along Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service.***

"Timothy, don't come alone. Bring Mark!" Mark was a useful servant of Jesus who would be a great help to Paul.

So, what a treat it is to see the trajectory of John Mark's life with Jesus.

Starting off in a Jesus- and ministry-centered home with a Christian mother, even as a young man he was viewed as having real potential by two of the early church's finest leaders.

They mentored him in Antioch and then invited him to join them on the First [ever] Missionary Journey.

To that very promising start we have now added a very solid and stable maturity.

However, that isn't the whole story of John Mark. In between his promising start and commendable end, there is a messy middle.

A Messy Middle

Mark's Ministry Failure (Acts 13:13)

Mark's desertion

Let's go back to that First Missionary Journey.

Right after Paul, Barnabas, and Mark landed on the Asian coast at the city of Perga, and just as they were making plans to head inland toward Galatia, Mark, the helper, did something very unhelpful.

[13b]...but John left them and returned to Jerusalem.

He didn't return to the sending church, Antioch. He went back to Jerusalem, his home city.⁹

And lest you think otherwise, this departure was a defection. It was not a move agreed-upon or blessed by Paul and Barnabas.

Mark abandoned the mission. He deserted his fellow missionaries.¹⁰

We don't know why Mark left, although numerous explanations have been offered.

The "why" of his desertion

Some have suggested that he resented his Uncle Barnabas taking a backseat to the leadership of this new guy, Paul.

Others wonder if he was having second thoughts about taking the Gospel to the Gentiles.

Some have guessed either Paul or Barnabas were proposing a ministry strategy with which John Mark was uncomfortable.

Or that Paul had contracted a disease (malaria was a common in the lowlands around Perga), and that seeing this, Mark got scared and headed back to Jerusalem.¹¹

⁹ At least one scholar has suggested that he returned to his mother...

¹⁰ From a respected Greek lexicon (Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich), the word used here (*αποχωρησας*) - means "to desert."

My own opinion is that Mark knew that the road they were taking led to dangerous places, that threats lay around every bend, and that the travel was going to be disagreeable.

We really don't know why he left, only that he left. But that he left had major implications for his two partners.

The "so what" of Mark's desertion

Mark's absence for the rest of the journey would have surely made the whole trip much more difficult for Paul and Barnabas.

He was to have been their helper. Now the work of three was going to be done by two. The danger and persecution would be faced by two, not three, the loads carried by two, not three.

But the two carried on.

They made it through the long travel, tough weather, the never-ending work of the ministry, and the severe opposition at Iconium and especially Lystra, where Paul was stoned nearly to death.

Finally, and victoriously, the two made it back to Antioch, to the church that had sent them out on this mission. (Acts 14:24-28)

Then, eventually, the two (Paul and Barnabas) began talking about taking another missions trip.

Fallout from the Failure (Acts 15:36-39a)

Planning for a second trip (v. 36)

[36] After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are."

¹¹ In Galatians (4:13), he says that he preached there because of an illness.

They wanted to check up on their friends in Galatia, to teach them more about Jesus. They wanted to be sure that the young believers continued to stand strong in the face of opposition.

But, as the planning for a second trip commenced, a problem surfaced. They disagreed about taking Mark on Trip #2.

The dilemma posed by the deserter (vv. 37-38)

[37] Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also.¹² [38] But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them¹³ in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.

Barnabas and Mark were kin, so Barnabas wanted to take his younger cousin along. Paul considered Mark's desertion inexcusable. He said, "No way!"

The disagreement between the two continued. It intensified and the situation deteriorated.

Parting Ways (v. 39a)

[39a] And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated¹⁴ from one another.

The dilemma about what to do with the deserter resulted in the dissolution of the partnership of Paul and Barnabas.

¹² I think it is clear that Mark was in Antioch or they would not have been discussing the possibility of taking him on trip #2.

¹³ Regardless of how understanding and compassionate we might be, Paul's assessment of Mark's departure was correct. He was wrong to have left. The manner in which Paul and Barnabas dealt with the defector (Paul shunned him; Barnabas sought to restore him) reflects their differing gifts and personalities. But there is no justification for Mark leaving Paul and Barnabas.

¹⁴ The word we translate "**separated**" is very closely related to the word that described Mark's desertion in Acts 13:13. It is a strong word, indicating a purposeful departure or withdrawal from partnership and relationship. (Not necessarily a permanent departure.)

It was an intense discussion, and we wonder...

Was Mark present when Paul and Barnabas were talking about whether or not to take Mark?

If he was there, how heartbreaking it would have been to have heard Paul, an older brother and friend, an important mentor, adamantly refuse to take him on the next trip.

If he wasn't there, he would soon hear the news second-hand from Cousin Barnabas, which might have been just as painful.

They did split up, though, and the Bible tells us that Paul chose to travel with Silas, a good man who was there in Antioch. They did well on their journey.

Mark, too, was left in good hands.

The First Step on the Way Back (Acts 15:39b)

[Acts 15:39b]...Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus.

Now, I'll freely admit that there is a whole lot of *"Who knows what happened?"* between Mark's desertion from the missions trip and the solid, stable end of Mark's story that we've already seen.

Something happened that dramatically changed the trajectory of Mark's life, but Scripture doesn't supply the details.

So, I'm not going to try and create a narrative out of thin air, and say, *"Thus saith the Lord! This is what happened."*

But I am going to take the details we have and use some sanctified imagination to speculate - before marveling at the life-transforming power of God.

So, here goes...

A few (3-4 years?) years passed between Mark's desertion on the first trip and Paul's refusal to take Mark on the second trip.

During those years, Mark lived with the knowledge that he had let his two friends down. That would have been tough to live with.

But then came Paul's rejection of Mark in Antioch. I don't want to downplay the impact of that rejection. I think it would have been devastating to Mark.

That rejection might well have prompted personal reflection on Mark's part at a deeper level than he ever dared to go.

The trip from Perga to Cyprus might have been the start of some life changing reflection.

If he did turn reflective, he might have owned at a deeper level the hardship he had created for his friends when he deserted them.

If he had remained in a reflective state of mind, he would have seen the impacts of his desertion on himself, as well.

By leaving his two friends on that trip and heading back to Jerusalem, he avoided certain hardships, sure. But he also cheated himself out of the rich joy of seeing God at work.

Had he continued, he would have seen many more conversions and many more miracles. But he didn't see them because he left.

He would have had opportunities to baptize and to instruct young converts. But he didn't get those opportunities. He left.

Those honest and sober reflections would have softened the ground for Mark to pursue personal, internal, deep change.

Then, remember that he was sailing to Cyprus with Barnabas, Mr. Encouragement.

No doubt, Barnabas was intending that this trip would be a recovery trip for Mark. And Barnabas' wise encouragement could have been a powerful motivator for Mark to pursue change.

And who knows what other influences God brought into Mark's life to change him into the solid man he became?

So, whether on the ship, reflecting, or at Cyprus under the influence of Barnabas' encouragement, or later on, something powerful began to happen in Mark's soul.

God so worked in his life that character was forged. He became the man we knew he could become all the way back when we first met him at that prayer meeting at his mom's house in Jerusalem.

Conclusion:

Each of us here today is Mark. No Christian doesn't stumble. James, the half-brother of Jesus, writes, **[James 3:2] We all stumble in many ways.** Amen.

Some of our stumbles may be very public. Some of our stumbles are known only to us.

But we all do things we wish we wouldn't do and don't do things we wish we would do. We mess up. We even mess up in our attempts to serve Jesus.

We all need recovery. We all walk with a limp.

So, today's meditation on Scripture is not directed at all the John Marks out there. It is to all of us John Marks right here.

What we have seen today from the life of Mark has universal applicability. Which means there is hope for us all in the story of Mark.

The same God who changed Mark wants to bring about personal transformation in you. He will even use your stumbles as tools to forge deep, impactful, God-honoring character.

And here may be the key thought from the story of John Mark.

It's tempting to assume that the messy middle is the end of the story. If anyone had done that with Mark, they would have been wrong.

If they had looked at Mark as he deserted on that first trip, they might have written him off as useless, thinking that his desertion was the end of the story. But it wasn't the end. It was the middle.

Little did they know that Mark would eventually write one of the four books we rely on to learn about Jesus, that he would be called "**my son**" by the Apostle Peter and "**my fellow worker**" by the Apostle Paul. And that at the end of his life, it was Mark that Paul wanted by his side because he was so "**useful.**" (2 Timothy 4:11)

If you're in a mess right now, your story isn't over. It's still being written. There's a next chapter after this one. There's hope for a far better ending than your current mess. Stay alert to the power of reflection. Seek out those who will encourage your development.

And about that person you see who is in a mess, or who appears to be a mess, his story, her story isn't over yet, either.

The messiness you're seeing now can be followed by something glorious. And it just might be that you are the Barnabas who will set them on the path to recovery.