

My name is John Mark, although many people just call me Mark. I'm not quite sure why Luke chose me to tell my story. My name only appears a few times in the book of *Acts*. Some of those times are not very flattering...but true.

Perhaps the good doctor chose me because I was the Forrest Gump of my time. My life wasn't like a box of chocolates, I never tasted shrimp, and I never played ping pong. But, I was around the most important people at the most critical times of the early church. And, I did help Doctor Luke in a unique way.

I wouldn't say that I grew up rich and spoiled. But if you said it, I might not deny it. We did have a big house where many people could meet, and we did have servants. My mother and my cousin, Barnabas, and I spent time with every apostle and every important Christian who came through Jerusalem.¹ Peter often complained that I was "under his feet every time he turned around", but nobody loved me like Peter. In fact, he thought of me as his own son.²

She won't admit it, but I think my mother asked Cousin Barnabas to take me on one of his journeys in hopes it would help me grow up and be a real man. I never knew him to turn down his favorite cousin, so I guess he was just waiting until a convenient trip came along. When he and Paul brought

¹ Col. 4:10

² 1 Peter 5:13

a contribution from Antioch to the church in Jerusalem, I think my mother finally got her way.

I don't think Paul was excited about it, but when Barnabas and Paul left Jerusalem, I was with them.³ At that point in time, Barnabas was the leader of their evangelical team. My mother probably didn't know our team would soon be aboard a dangerous, leaky old boat. The trip with Barnabas was much harder and more dangerous than I ever dreamed, not glamorous at all. I missed my mother and my life back in Jerusalem.

We arrived in Cyprus, and I expected that my cousin and I would spend a few weeks visiting relatives. Many of them had stayed in my house in Jerusalem whenever they attended the special feast days. Growing up, each Passover was a big family reunion. We had family in from Cyprus and other lands as well. When there were tens of thousands of visitors in a small city like Jerusalem, every room was needed, and many people still had to camp outside the city gates.

Once our team got to Cyprus, Paul and Barnabas spent all of their time teaching in the synagogues and in the streets. I was uncomfortable being around those poor strangers, especially those afflicted with terrible diseases. As we traveled across Cyprus, things got worse, not better.

We finally crossed the whole island on the rough Roman Road, and ended at Paphos, the home of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. He was widely known as an intelligent man. I was so excited when he sent for us, because I wanted to learn from him.

In Jerusalem, we Jews were not allowed to have close contact with Romans, and they certainly were not excited to have close contact with us. I wanted

³ Acts 12:25

to learn more about the Roman Empire. I wanted to hear about faraway places and exotic people. I wanted to learn in an atmosphere where the Jewish leaders would not be a danger to me. From his point of view, I wanted to understand Roman politics and why we Jews were such a problem.

Barnabas and Paul entered the chambers of Sergius Paulus, with me following behind as their assistant. Instead of the things that most interested me, Sergius Paulus wanted to hear the Word of God, which is exactly what Barnabas and Paul wanted to talk about. They began to tell about Jesus, and it quickly became clear that Sergius Paulus was intrigued, and even began to believe. And that was when chaos began.

The attendant of Sergius Paulus was a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, or Elymas the Sorcerer. Through his evil actions, he soon attained a lot of influence over the Roman proconsul, and had attained wealth by doing so. He quickly saw the end of his good deal, and began to oppose Barnabas and Paul.

Paul, full of the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right!" Paul went on to condemn him and ended with this curse, "The hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be so blind that you won't see the sun." Immediately he was blind... he needed someone to lead him by the hand.

Needless to say, Sergius Paulus believed in the Lord, because he was amazed at the teaching of Barnabas and Paul, and understood that their miracle was real. I was pleased that Sergius Paulus became a believer, but sad I never got to have a long conversation with him.

By the time we left Cyprus, I had just about had my fill of everything. Then, instead of my cousin, Barnabas, being the clear leader, it became clear that

Paul was taking over leadership. The events with Sergius Paulus had turned the tide. I was so disillusioned, I just packed it in. I got on a boat and bought passage back to Israel. I abandoned Barnabas and Paul when they needed me the most.

By the time I got to Jerusalem, I realized what a coward I had been and how humiliated I would be in front of Christians who had already been withstanding intense persecution from the Jews. Like a little spoiled brat, I sneaked into my house and hid out in my room.

But Peter was not going to let me off so easily. The next day he came knocking at my door. I refused to answer, he said, "Little boy, I'm going to knock once more, and if you don't open the door, I will kick it down." I knew he would, I opened the door and waited for him to start cussing at me like the uncouth fisherman he was.

He came in, sat by me on the bed, and started... crying. His big hands shaking, he couldn't even talk for probably ten minutes but it seemed like an hour. He said, "John Mark, let me tell you about the time I abandoned Jesus." He went on to tell me the story about denying the Lord three times. I had heard the story many times, but this time he added some details that broke my heart.

Peter told about the last time he saw Jesus on the banks of the Sea of Galilee and how Jesus asked him if Peter loved him, three times. His voice broke when he told me the whole story of offering only a second-rate love to Jesus.⁴ Then, his voice became joyful ...he knew Jesus had forgiven him completely when the Holy Spirit came to him on Pentecost. He said that Jesus doesn't see me as John Mark, but as John Mark empowered by the Holy Spirit.

⁴ John 21:15-19

Peter told me that someday, someday, I would be mature enough to go on a missionary journey with Barnabas and Paul again. That Paul was extraordinarily tough, but if I proved to be faithful, he would forgive me and allow me to work alongside him. Peter had respect and admiration for Paul that was unsurpassed, and his prediction gave me great hope.

Then he said the most important thing to me that anybody has ever said to me, he said. "John Mark, you needed to fail at this so you would be humble enough to do the work the Holy Spirit has in mind for you... to do something extraordinary." He said The Holy Spirit had given me time and talent and resources The biggest gift was being with all of the people who were around Jesus and the people who-were important in the Sanhedrin. He told me that God blessed my family with money not so I could be comfortable, but that was my ticket to be around those people.

Peter said, "Your task is to start writing the very first account of the life of Jesus." He said he wished it was going to be called The Gospel According to Peter, but instead, he said "It will be named after you...The Gospel According to Mark."

For the next year, I wrote that story of Jesus' life. It was actually a fairly simple task. My family had access to the best writing materials and teachers in the Temple. Every day, well-known Christians dropped by our house and told me their histories. Most important, though, were the nearly daily visits from Peter. Peter had experienced Jesus for three years and knew everything about him. John used to call himself, "the one whom Jesus loved." Now, I would never call John a liar, but I bet Jesus loved Peter equally as much. I also bet that Peter made Jesus laugh much more than John did.

After a few years, and several re-writes, Peter was satisfied with what we had written. It was frustrating to me, though, because I knew so many more

stories that I wanted to include. "shorter was better than longer," he said, so I stopped when he was happy.

That's how the good Doctor Luke and I became even better friends. When he began looking for resources for his first book, my little scroll was one of the first things he encountered. I'm pleased he found it to be of help, and I'm pleased that his book was more detailed and told more about Jesus' life than mine did.

When Luke started his second book, I was curious to see how he would treat my small part in it. He treated me very fairly in the first part of *Acts*. I was a spoiled brat, and he portrayed me with great generosity. When Barnabas wanted to include me on another journey, Paul refused to take me. Their disagreement caused Barnabas and Paul to split, and that made me sad. Barnabas would take me on his evangelical trip, and Paul would take Silas.

What I didn't understand at that time was that Barnabas would need to spend extra time in my training, time that Paul did not have. Barnabas spent an extraordinary amount of time teaching me how to treat other people with compassion and kindness, showing me how to teach the Gospel in an encouraging way, helping me become a useful assistant. Not his assistant, but how to be a useful assistant to Paul. Barnabas was the most humble man I ever met, and he needed to teach me humility...a quality not common to rich young people.

Although Luke did not disclose the final outcome in *Acts*, it turned out that Barnabas and the Holy Spirit succeeded in my training. Paul finally allowed me to work with him. Eventually he even found me to be valuable to him. In fact, next to Timothy and Titus, I became his favorite assistant and I was

faithful to him to the end of his life.⁵ One of the biggest perks of the job was that I got to spend much time with Luke. That is how we first became friends.

We all have our little secrets. One of mine? People have speculated that I was the rich young ruler in the story Jesus told⁶. Many people have speculated that I am the young man who fled naked the night Jesus was arrested.⁷ The undeniable answers are this...I am the rich young ruler, and I am that young man. But you probably are, too. Almost all of us have blessings that we are loathe to give up, even if they have no value when compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing the Lord Jesus Christ.⁸ Almost all of us have fled when it was time to take up the cause of Christ. It took Barnabas a few years to encourage me to value things correctly and to be courageous. So, my parting encouragement to you is this... the Holy Spirit will empower you to have the right values and to be courageous in the cause of Christ if you allow him to.

Peter always laughed at helping Paul without him knowing it, but my training with Paul helped me become a better assistant for Peter, too. You didn't think an old Galilean fisherman could write two insightful letters in perfect Greek without a little help, did you?⁹

⁵ Col. 4:10, Phil. 1:24, 2 Timothy 4:11

⁶ Luke 18:18-20

⁷ Mark 14:50-51

⁸ Phil. 3:8

⁹ 1 Peter 5:13