

V. Biblical Biographies from the Bible
Biblical Biographies: Who? Why? How?
“Portrait #4: John Mark—A Life Portrait”
Acts 12:1–17, 13:1–14, 15:36–41; Colossians 4:10;
I Peter 5:12; II Timothy 4:9–11
Dr. Harry L. Reeder III
October 6, 2019 • Evening Sermon

This is our fourth portrait in this series and I’m consciously and intentionally choosing what I call the ‘B’ characters or supporting characters. It’s like there are certain character actors that show up in a film that really helps define the film. We have looked at Enoch, Nathan the Prophet, and Silas who was a preacher/leader at the church of Jerusalem. In our next study we’ll look at the life of Deborah and hopefully after that we’ll look at Miriam.

When biographies are studied much care needs to be taken with them because you don’t want to just say here are your moral lessons from this life, now go do this. There seems to be a movement among Christians and preachers today that every biographical study, if it’s not a type of Christ or they can’t be invented as a type of Christ, then you don’t preach on them. That’s just not true. One commentator has counted that there are 349 biographies and only 67 of them finish strong. So why would the Bible put all those biographies in there if we’re not supposed to learn something? We know that all Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness.

Secondly we want to see what God’s grace did in their life. Thirdly, we want to see what they did by God’s grace that was so profound and where they faltered. So we get to see not only their beauty marks of grace but the warts and pimples of when they stumble. Finally whenever the life is part of a prophecy that is prophetic or is a type that is pointing us in a very specific way to Christ we want to learn from it.

In this study we will be looking at John Mark. This is one of my favorite ones because of what surrounds this narrative. We will look at around three key texts and look at his origin, his calling and his legacy. John would have been his Hebrew name and his Roman or Greek name would have been Marcus or Mark. In the Bible he is known as John Mark or John called Mark which he is referred to from time to time. After we look at his origin and calling I will conclude by giving you five legacies we can take away from his life. To start we need to look first at Acts 12 where the days of Steven’s persecution is intensifying.

Acts 12:1–17 says [1] *About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. [2] He killed James the brother of John with the sword, [3] and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. [4] And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. [5] So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.*

[6] *Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. [7] And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, “Get up quickly.” And the chains fell off his hands. (Miracle number one) [8] And the angel said to him, “Dress yourself and put on your sandals.” And he did so. And he said to him, “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.” [9] And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel*

was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. [10] When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate (miracle two) leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord (miracle three), and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. [11] When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."

[12] When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. [13] And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer.

[14] Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. [15] They said to her, "You are out of your mind." But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, "It is his angel!" [16] But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. [17] But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Tell these things to James and to the brothers." Then he departed and went to another place.

You might be thinking this is a contradiction in the Bible because it said earlier that James was dead. There are not only a lot of Marys in the Bible but there are a number of James' as well. This was not the James the brother of John but this would be James the brother of Jesus who would become the pastor at the church of Jerusalem until he is cast down from the pinnacle of the temple as extra Biblical material would tell us. This is the James that writes the book of James in the Bible. Another brother of Jesus whose name is Jude will write the book of Jude. When I get to heaven I want to meet Luke because I get the sense that Luke loves a good story. I grew up in a family of good story tellers and Luke is telling a good story here.

Basically he is telling us that Peter thinks he is in a dream and then he finally realizes if he keeps walking by these prison guards that he actually is being set free by the hand of the Lord. Peter automatically goes to a house where he knows he is going to find Christians and that is the house of Mary who is the mother of John Mark. Those in that house are praying for Peter's release at the time Peter shows up at the door. Rhoda, who answers the door, is so excited because seeing Peter is an answer to prayer that she doesn't even invite him in but runs to tell those praying that he is at the door.

Their response to Rhoda is basically 'how could he be, he is in prison!' This is called answered prayer and the answer for this one was 'yes' and Luke is obviously bringing out the humor of that point but we now have been introduced for the first time to John Mark and his mother who is likely a widow for there is no mention of her husband. Mary's house that is spoken of here in Acts is either one of many house churches in Jerusalem or it's a very key house so I'd like you to remember that. Now let's look at Acts 13 and we will see with the persecution happening the church has spread to Antioch.

Acts 13:1–3 says *[1] Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. [2] While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul (later to be called Paul) for the work (the first missionary journey) to which I have called them." [3] Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.*

In this text we are given the five leaders at the church at Antioch as far as we see in this description, it is painstakingly making a point to us. None of them are from Antioch. They are

all imported by the providence of God and when they send missionaries out, they send their two best out. The sending took place in the context of gathered worship or another way to look at this in the context of the means of grace being applied. Let's continue in the passage.

Acts 13:4–12 says [4] *So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus.* [5] *When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John (John Mark) to assist them.* [6] *When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus.* [7] *He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God.* [8] *But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.* [9] *But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him* [10] *and said, “You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?* [11] *And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time.” Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand.* [12] *Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.*

Paul's response to this magician is not the type of apologetic response that would necessarily win the person to the Lord but the response he is giving here is to respond every thought that is raised up against Jesus. He goes after both what he is saying and the one who is saying it. How do they keep explaining this movement of the church? They use the Word of the Lord and it continues to expand. The teaching of the Lord brought him to faith in Christ. Let's continue.

Acts 13:13–14a says [13] *Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John (John Mark) left them and returned to Jerusalem,* [14a] *but they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia.*

When they arrived back in Antioch they found out that from Jerusalem came opposition to their ministry. It was opposition that would even send people up to Galatia where they had ministered. It was an opposition of an error of the Gospel that was legalism where people were told they couldn't become a Christian in Jesus until they became a Jew in Moses and they had to be circumcised. These representatives claiming to be from James also send representatives up to Antioch and Paul will end up having a debate. Paul will also debate with Peter as well as Barnabas to some degree.

So they will have to establish the first general assembly in Acts 15 where all of the elders from the various churches are sent to address a number of theological issues. Then they send back a very clear message that Peter, James, Barnabas and all the rest sign off on, know the Gospel is one is saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone and you do not have to be circumcised first for it's not your works that save you but Christ that saves you. They were to be cognizant of Jewish evangelism but hold fast to the Gospel of saving grace. This is a Gospel that says 'no' to legalism and libertinism. Paul is thrilled at the outcome and is ready to go do another missionary journey, but they come back and have some preaching time to give all the directives out. Now let's look at Acts 15.

Acts 15:36–41 says [36] *And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.”* [37] *Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark.* [38] *But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them*

to the work. [39] And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, [40] but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. [41] And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

You get the first and second Presbyterian missionary teams here as they go off (smile). Why did Paul say ‘no’ to John Mark going with him? The obvious reason is that John Mark left the team before they got to the work in Pamphylia and they were going to be going through some of that area again on this second journey. John Mark is not a proven leader according to Paul yet Barnabas sees potential in anybody and everybody. So Barnabas argues for John Mark to have him on his team for there is a sharp disagreement according to the text about this. It is so sharp that they can’t bridge it. They can’t come up with an accommodation. So Barnabas takes John Mark and Paul takes Silas. This is the last thing you hear about Barnabas directly. The fruit of his ministry will come up in other parts of the Bible but he doesn’t come up. Yet this is not the last you will hear of John Mark.

Why is Paul so committed here? Paul believes in developing leaders and he knows there is a place to develop them. In fact, he calls for it, but in this moment for this ministry he did not feel John Mark was a proven leader. When you do a ministry you need to determine what leaders and what level of achievements you need. It seems as though Paul is going behind enemy lines on this next journey and he needs those who are proven leaders. He wants those who are tried and true to go and stick it out. They will plant churches who can develop leaders but he wants those who are already developed at this point and he didn’t see that in John Mark.

There may be a second reason he doesn’t want to take him. Now this is speculation on my part here. I don’t think it’s any accident of people opposing Paul and Barnabas’ ministry of taking the Gospel to the Gentiles and challenging that by Judaizers who come to Antioch when they return from the missionary trip. They come from Jerusalem so how would they have known about the ministry of Paul and Barnabas? My speculation is that John Mark came back and gave a report that may have been less than favorable at his immature state that was less than giving the judgment of charity to the accuracy of Paul’s ministry. Paul may be connecting some dots of people from Jerusalem coming up to challenge the Judaizers with John Mark having returned to Jerusalem reporting what had gone on from where he had left, when he was not supposed to leave. Again, this is speculation on my part but it’s at least something to consider.

Now I’d like to show you some more of John Mark’s ministry. Let’s look at I Peter 5. Here we find out that not only was Silas Peter’s secretary having finished his tour with Paul, but we also see someone else on Peter’s team. I Peter 5:12–13 says *[12] By Silvanus (Silas), a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it. [13] She who is at Babylon (a reference to Rome), who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark (John Mark), my son.*

So we see that John Mark was there in Rome (which was referred to as Babylon) with Peter and Silas. We don’t know what happened to Barnabas, but not only had John Mark matured but he gets put on a third team. While Silas is the secretary to write I Peter there is every evidence that this is the place and time that John Mark has come to the point that God entrusts to him, under the Apostolic authority of Peter, the writing of the Gospel of Mark.

Why do we think John Mark is the writer and author and that it happened under Peter? We have some extra Biblical affirmations. The Bishop of Hierapolis was a man named Papayas. A church historian later gives us the records of Papayas who tells us that John Mark was with Peter in Rome and that John Mark wrote the Gospel of Mark under Peter’s direction. When you

look at the Gospel of Mark you begin to see that it bears the marks of Peter in a number of ways and it bears the marks of John Mark.

One of those marks is where in other Gospels Peter comes off pretty well but is downplayed in John Mark, appropriate humility. There is another time where Peter should be coming off with affirmations but he understates things, where he probably made sure John Mark did that, but there are other times where in Mark's writings Peter doesn't come off so well yet doesn't get hidden in the Gospel of Mark. It gets evidenced in the Gospel of Mark. Mark unlike Matthew and Luke, does not go back to the birth of Jesus but picks up where Peter would have picked up which was at the baptism of Jesus. As it unfolds we see some things that may be related to it and I want to show you some in a moment.

Before I go there I want to look at Philemon. Philemon is another one of these prison epistles. Philemon 1:23–25 says [23] *Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, [24] and so do Mark (John Mark), Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. [25] The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.* Here John Mark is with Paul who is in prison in Rome. Now we see John Mark made his way to Rome after being with Peter, to be on Paul's team in Rome. Now I'd like to look at Colossians with one more passage after that.

Colossians 4:10–11 says [10] *Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him), [11] and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.*

Notice that the same people Paul mentions in Philemon he mentions in Colossians which were his team during his two year imprisonment. He had been in prison at Caesarea for two years and by appeal is now in prison in Rome for two years. With him in this first Romans imprisonment are these people mentioned, including John Mark. So John Mark has not only been on the team with Paul and Barnabas, then Barnabas, then Peter but now he is back with Paul and his team now in Rome.

Now I'd like to look at II Timothy 4 which is at the end of Paul's life where he is in his second Roman imprisonment as he is about to be put to death. Here Paul gives us a little more information on our biographical study of John Mark. II Timothy 4:9–11 says [9] *Do your best to come to me soon* (Paul talking to Timothy). [10] *For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia.* [11] *Luke alone is with me. Get Mark (John Mark) and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.*

Demas was mentioned in Philemon while he was holding fast to the truth of the Gospel but as Paul's life is in danger, Demas has left Paul and perhaps has left the faith. Yet here we find out Paul's evaluation of John Mark for he is very useful to Paul in ministry. John Mark at one time Paul didn't want and now he is useful. How did he get there? He got there with Barnabas, Peter and now Paul has had a part in his life for John Mark is now useful for ministry. Even more than that Paul says he is useful for ministry to Paul himself. That is astounding to me.

If you had been Barnabas who had been in an argument with Paul about the possibility of the usefulness of John Mark and Paul insists no to the point that you split up, as you are sitting later by a camp fire with John Mark, how would you have spoken about Paul? Most probably would have said something like 'Paul didn't have any use for you but I sure did.' I don't think that conversation ever took place here. In a later study, Lord willing, we will look at a

biographical sketch of Barnabas, but when Paul shows up the one who brings John Mark to the other Apostles is Barnabas. Barnabas is the one who brings John Mark to the ministry at Antioch. On the first missionary journey it is Barnabas and Paul yet when they get back it's Paul and Barnabas for Barnabas gladly became second violin when he had been first violin.

Barnabas then develops John Mark in such a way that not only is he useful for ministry but he will be useful to Peter for I Peter and the Gospel of Mark and then he will be put on Paul's team in Rome. John Mark will be with Paul in his last imprisonment and when Paul calls for him, he says he is useful for ministry. Because of Barnabas and Peter he becomes useful to Paul that John Mark could serve Paul even though Paul had rejected him. That is a powerful ministry that is done here for it tells us something about John Mark, Barnabas, Peter and the Apostle Paul. So I want to conclude by giving you some distillations.

What do we know from this? We know that John Mark was a cousin to a very wealthy man by the name of Barnabas. We know his mother Mary, likely a widow, had a house that was an epicenter point for the church in Jerusalem. It was the point that Peter automatically went to in order to find Christians when he was delivered. Here is another speculation. A house that was a gathering point for Christians in Jerusalem, does that sound familiar? What was a place where the church was birthed in Jerusalem? It was an Upper Room, where the first Lord's Supper had been given and they had assembled there after the ascension of Jesus to pray at Pentecost. It was also the place they were able to choose the right Apostle to replace Judas Iscariot – Mathias. There the early church is birthed.

There may have been another key place, like Mary's house separate from this, but I think there is a possibility that her house, where John Mark grew up, could have been the house that contained the Upper Room. It was a familiar go-to among Christians. If they prayed in the Upper Room in Acts 1, when they gathered for prayer praying for Peter's release maybe that is the same house. This is my speculation. It could have been a separate house from this but I want to show you something. Let's look at Mark's writing in Mark 14. I'm not through speculating. Here is one more.

Jesus has just instituted the Lord's Supper in the Upper Room. He has left and gone to the Garden of Gethsemane. There He prays and gets arrested. As Jesus is arrested this is what we see in Mark 14:51–52 which says [51] *And a young man followed him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body. And they seized him,* [52] *but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked.* The writer of this Gospel does not name this young man but for some reason he wants you to know there was a young man there that this happened to him. Maybe the name of this young man was John Mark and maybe he doesn't want to give his name because he doesn't want to go down in history as 'the streaker' in Scripture. I acknowledge this is pure speculation on my part but I find it interesting that this is here.

John Mark would have been a young man at this time. If that house belonged to his mother and that Upper Room in that house was where he was. After the Lord's Supper they went out singing a hymn as they came up the Kidron Brook, could John Mark have seen them leave and followed them? He could have later that night gotten ready for bed as he put on a linen without putting on the proper underclothes, as he left that night to follow them not knowing what's about to happen. He follows them from a distance and when he writes the Gospel to tell us about it he finds a way to namelessly put himself there. Again, this is speculation on my part.

John Mark's calling was to be an author of the Bible, the Gospel of Mark under the authority of Peter as affirmed by Papayas, the Bishop of Hierapolis and Eusebius of Caesarea as well as other extra Biblical material. His calling was never to be the leader of the team but to be

a leader on the team. He was a leader on the team with Paul and Barnabas, the team with Barnabas, the team with Peter and when he went back on Paul's team. He is a man who has clearly been impacted by his mother, Mary, because in the Gospel of Mark it is John Mark who gives you the detailed identification at the cross and the resurrection of the women who, I am sure, were friends with his mother, that were last at the cross and first at the day of resurrection.

What is John Mark's legacy? Legacy number one is that he gives us the Gospel of Mark. The Gospel of Mark is unique and kind of like a docu-drama. It is clearly edited. For instance, when he talks of the demoniacs that get delivered the other Gospels tell us there are two of them and John Mark only focuses in on one of them. There are number of these in this Gospel where he gets to the point. Peter was the one overseeing him on this book and Peter was one who liked to get to the point as well.

Legacy number two is that he the testimony of a significant mentorship. Barnabas, Paul and Peter had an impact in his life and you see the testimony of these significant mentors in his life. Legacy number three is we see his response to mentors. He is able to learn from Barnabas and Peter and then move back to Paul. Legacy number four is that we also see that John Mark was never a directional visionary leader but he was a crucial tactical leader on the team. He did that on four different teams. Legacy number five is we see a man who is a testimony of God's providence. God's providence gave us this unique Gospel of John Mark. When I first came to Briarwood I was really wanting to preach on the book of Acts and we ended up being in this book for five years. When I look back at that I'm glad I preached on it but I also think maybe I should have jumped in with the Gospel of Mark. It is such a powerful Gospel. It is hard-hitting, fast-moving and he gives us insights that are extraordinary.

I love the Gospel of Mark and I think you will too if you study it. Humanly speaking, there is no way John Mark could have written that obviously without the Holy Spirit but just think of the impact of Barnabas, Peter and Paul in the writing of that Gospel. Where did John Mark write the Gospel of Mark? I think he wrote it in Rome. When did he write it? He wrote it right under Peter, after being trained with Barnabas and soon to be united back with Paul. All of God's providence came to bear to give you the unique Gospel of Mark.

Finally, I get to find out something about Paul that I never would have found out without John Mark being rejected, mentored by Barnabas, Peter and showing back up with Paul and here is Paul's verdict – Paul affirmed John Mark in Philemon, Colossians, and in II Timothy facing death says 'bring John Mark to me because he is useful in ministry to me.' This tells us that Paul didn't go back to defend his decision. He is willing to recognize he didn't take John Mark with him on that second missionary journey but he had no hesitation to tell us now that here is a man of God that is useful for him as he faces the sentence that will bring Paul to God. We see the humility of Paul affirming the one that he previously had rejected instead of him defending himself. I love these portraits, these biographies. I hope you do too. Get into the Bible so you can know not only the biggies but know people like John Mark. Let's pray.

Prayer:

God, thank You for the time we could be together in Your Word and the privilege to see how it unites in Your purpose and how it challenges us in so many areas so that we see the work of our Savior not only as Creator and Redeemer but also in His good Providence as He saves, frames, fashions, and forms sinners with all of our weaknesses through the strength of His grace to serve Him. Father, thank You for the testimony borne in John Mark and we give You the praise, in Jesus' Name, Amen.