

## Introducing Mark's Gospel: Mark and Peter - Flawed But Redeemed People

### Introduction

At the start of my ministry here at Laidley and Hatton Vale Uniting Churches I've decided to look at the Gospel According to Mark / Mark's Gospel. Why would I start with Mark's Gospel? Is it my favourite Gospel? No, it's not actually, that would be John's Gospel. Is it because it's fast paced? Not really, but if it helps to keep people awake when I'm speaking, all the better. Is it because it's the shortest Gospel? No, though that probably doesn't hurt either.

The reason why we're looking at Mark's Gospel is because it's a narrative which help us to have hope in our lives and in the life of our church. Specifically, we gain hope as we see how people are presented. As an example, we can consider the three key figures in the creation of this narrative.

The first person involved in the creation of this narrative is, of course, Jesus. Mark's Gospel is more accurately titled, "The Gospel According to Mark." This is the good news about Jesus from Mark's perspective. Mark tells us as much in his first sentence, "The Beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God."

Who are the other two principle figures involved in the creation of this narrative? The second person should also not come as a surprise to us, and that is Mark. While Mark's gospel is, in some sense, anonymous, in that there is no author directly identified in the text, from very early on it has been held that this account was written by Mark, who was also known as John Mark.

The Apostle Simon Peter had a very close relationship with Mark and in his first letter describes Mark as his "son". It is an early church tradition that Mark was writing under the instruction, or working with the collected notes, of Simon Peter. If this is the case, with Mark using information from Peter, Peter is the third primary figure in the creation of Mark's Gospel.

This morning we're going to skim over a number of parts of the New Testament to see how Peter and Mark are both quite flawed characters. However, while Peter and Mark both suffered notable failures, their failures did not end up defining them with both being significantly used by God.

Today we have already confessed the church's failure to care for the most vulnerable in our midst and we have prayed for healing and restoration. Likewise, I come here to Laidley and Hatton Vale Uniting Churches aware of some of the pains and hurts which you have experienced from others but also which you have caused to yourselves.

You are flawed congregations. Don't worry though, I'll fit in because I am flawed myself. However, just like with Peter and Mark, our flaws are not the end of our story. The reason we're starting with Mark's Gospel is because in the Gospel we find hope for our lives and for the life of the church. We're starting with the Gospel because we all need to focus our hearts, our minds, and indeed our whole lives on the person of Jesus. Jesus is the one who redeems us and shapes us so that we can be used by God as individuals and as churches.

### Flaws in Peter and Mark (Mark - Mark 14:48-52; Acts 15:36-41; Peter - Mark 8:31-33; 14:66-72; Galatians 2:11-14)

What then are the flaws or failings which we see in Mark and Peter? As Mark's failings are somewhat simpler, we'll look at Mark first. The first questionable action I'll mention is a slightly amusing and comparatively mild issue but we're not really sure if it is Mark who's in mind here. The person in question is the young man reported in Mark 14:66-72. There we read about the followers deserting Jesus,

““Am I leading a rebellion,” said Jesus, “that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled.” Then everyone deserted him and fled.

A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind.”

It's not certain that this young man is actually Mark but there is an early tradition that saw the inclusion of this story as Mark giving a little wink to his presence. This little account also prompts people to speculate that this is an embarrassed acknowledgement from Mark (after all, fleeing naked is pretty embarrassing) that there was a flaw in his character which meant that he would shoot through when the going got tough.

While the reference to the young man in Mark's Gospel may or may not be Mark, Mark's difficulties in enduring tough situations is clearly brought out in Acts 15 when Paul and Barnabas are planning another missionary journey. Beginning in verse 36 we read,

“Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.” Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, 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. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose

Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.”

Wow! The powerful and effective missionary partnership of Paul and Barnabas is brought undone because Barnabas wanted to give his cousin Mark another chance whereas Paul wasn't willing to take the risk. I wonder how Mark must have felt when he saw this partnership dissolve? It's painful to know that we have character flaws but it can be even more painful when we realise that our flaws will not just negatively impact ourselves but often impact those whom we have relationships with and further afield. I've been prompted to think this past week about the flaws in my life which have a negative impact on other and I haven't really enjoyed those thoughts.

Mark's inability to endure difficult circumstances may be regarded as relatively minor but it had significant consequences for people he was serving with. What about Peter? What failings do we see in Peter's life.

We first see Peter getting things pretty badly wrong in Mark 8. After Peter has gone out on a limb to correctly identify Jesus as the Messiah, in verses 31 to 33 we realise that Peter's idea of what Messiah meant was different to Jesus'.

“[Jesus] then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.””

Peter's failure to understand the type of Messiah Jesus was wasn't good but it's not as if he was denying that he knew Jesus or anything like that! I wonder if Peter would say something like, “I may not be the sharpest tool in the shed, but I'm here! I'm committed! You won't catch me running off when the going gets tough!” Well, many of us know that Peter did say something similar to this and we have the situation recorded in Mark 14:

““You will all fall away,” Jesus told them, “for it is written: “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’ But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.”

Peter declared, “Even if all fall away, I will not.”

“Truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times.”

But Peter insisted emphatically, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.” And all the others said the same.”

Unfortunately, for all Peter’s self-confidence, we know what happened after Jesus was arrested. We read about Peter’s actions at the end of Mark 14,

“While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him. “You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus,” she said.

But he denied it. “I don’t know or understand what you’re talking about,” he said, and went out into the entryway.

When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, “This fellow is one of them.” Again he denied it.

After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, “Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.” He began to call down curses, and he swore to them, “I don’t know this man you’re talking about.”

Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: “Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times.” And he broke down and wept.”

This is a sad account and I’m sure that many of us wonder whether we would react any differently were we in the same situation. There’s also part of us that would like to think that Peter’s failings were all before he was filled with the Holy Spirit, as recorded in Acts, and became a leader of the early church, but that’s not the case. In Galatians 2 we read how Peter significantly failed because of a combination of racism and poor theology. In verses 11 to 16 we read Paul’s account of a confrontation,

“When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas [that is Peter] in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? “We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.”

Peter’s failures are not to be lightly dismissed. Peter sought to tell Jesus the kind of Messiah he should be, he was proud to the point of being arrogant in believing that he wouldn’t fail, he denied his Lord, and even after Jesus’ ascension and receiving the Holy

Spirit with Peter rising to be a key leader of the church, he was racist against non-Jews and his actions threatened to split the church and dismantle the gospel of grace.

We also need to recognise the significance of our failings individually as well as corporately. How have I failed Christ by effectively denying him? Or in arrogance thought that I could tell Jesus where I needed help but wanted him to leave other parts of my life alone? As members of the church we must never hold that the church is the victim of a beat-up by the Royal Commission. The church's failures that led to the abuse of children, and in how cases of abuse were dealt with, has brought dishonour to the Lord's name and has damaged the message which we have to proclaim.

Unfortunately some people want to stop at this point. The church is too damaged and there's no hope for it. The church is full of hypocrites and so who'd want to be with them or like them. However, if we stop here we're not hearing the full story and we've forgotten the key principle figure in the creation of the Gospel, Jesus. Mark and Peter certainly have flaws in their character and committed serious failings but are these failings the end of their story? Fortunately, no.

### Redemption in Peter and Mark (Mark - Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:9-13; Peter - John 21:15-19; Acts 11:1-18; 2 Peter 3:15-17)

We need to see that there is more to Peter and Mark's stories and so see that God continues to work in people's lives, even through our failings. We start again with Mark and we've already heard that in his first letter Peter describes Mark as his son, but it will probably also encourage you to know that not only was Mark valuable to Peter and the church but Mark's relationship with Paul was also restored. In Colossians 4:10 it is clear that Mark has teamed up again with Paul, "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.)" and in 2 Timothy 4:9-13 we have an even stronger reference, "Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry. I sent Tychicus to Ephesus. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments." How interesting that when Paul is obviously feeling lonely with many friends and co-workers departing from him (with at least one of those for selfish reasons) Paul asks for Mark to come to him. Mark has proven himself useful in ministry after an earlier failure.

Barnabas was right to give Mark another chance and Mark has risen to the occasion. I'm so thankful for the Barnabas people in my life. People who gave me another chance but didn't let me stay with the flaws in my character but pushed me to grow and develop so that I would become useful in life and ministry.

And what about Peter? After Peter had tried to tell Jesus the kind of Messiah he should be which resulted in Peter being rebuked by Jesus, Peter continued to follow Jesus, learning from his life and teaching.

At the end of John's Gospel Peter is also reinstated to ministry and leadership of the disciples by Jesus. As Peter had denied Jesus three times, in John 21 we read how he three times declares his commitment to Christ.

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!"

Peter's restoration by Jesus shows us that failure is not final. Jesus still has plans for Peter. Peter's ministry was critical for the gospel being proclaimed to Jew's, Samaritans and Gentiles (and it was Peter's account of the Gentile's response and the Holy Spirit coming upon them that was today's reading from Acts 11).

However, I'm actually glad that Peter's failure is recorded in Galatians. It would be too easy otherwise for us in the church to give the impression, "well, we'll give you another chance but watch it!" Peter is given multiple second chances and not only was his relationship with Jesus restored and he was re-instated into ministry, but look at what Peter has to say about Paul's writings in 2 Peter 3,

“Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.”

I love Peter’s honesty. No, not everything Paul writes is easy to understand but Paul’s intent in his letters was for people to have peace with God and Paul’s letters should be held with the same authority as the rest of the Scriptures.

It’s easy for us to give thanks for the Barnabas people in our lives who give us another chance but do we also give thanks for the Paul people who rebuke us and correct our faulty thinking? Peter’s story reminds us failure is not final but there has to be a humble receiving of restoration as well as continued correction and growth.

### Conclusion - God’s Not Finished With Us

Now we’ve got to the end of this sermon and haven’t really looked at Jesus, the primary principle character in the creation of Mark’s Gospel. Don’t worry, we’re going to be focusing on Jesus over the rest of this series. While Mark and Peter’s lives were positively impacted by Barnabas and Paul, they were ultimately transformed by encountering Jesus. It’s interesting that the only time that Mark gives his own personal opinion in his Gospel is in that first sentence, “The Beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.” Jesus really is good news!

What application will you make from this sermon? Here are some suggestions: First, don’t define yourself by your past failures individually or as a church; Second, be thankful for the people who have either been like Barnabas, giving you another chance and helping you to grow through encouragement, or like Paul, who rebuked sin in your life and helped you to grow through deeper understanding (for some of us maybe we need to be honest that we haven’t always been open to such correction and set about changing that); Third, knowing that Jesus is the ultimate One who transformed Mark and Peter and it is Jesus and his message which gave direction to their lives, commit yourselves to getting to know Jesus better. You may like to do that by being faithful in hearing messages from Mark over the coming weeks and you may also like to go deeper by reading Mark yourself. I’m looking forward to going on this journey with you

[Pray to close]