

## A ONE-TIME SOMETIME FRIEND OF PAUL

It seemed like some of you were a bit surprised by a few of the comments I made about John Mark the other day. They were just comments in passing, so it crossed my mind that maybe some of you had never been properly introduced. Okay, so: John Mark, this is *The New Church*. And *The New Church*, this is John Mark.

Mark: Hi everybody. Nice of Bruce to invite me here. I have been trying to think of ways to introduce myself without dragging it out, or leaving too much out either. Probably I will do both.

But getting right into it: I deserted Barnabas and Paul and ran for home on the very first missionary journey. Later it cost them their friendship, since Barnabas was my cousin and he felt obligated to stick up for me. How would you like to look back and say, “I broke up one of the best friendships – and one of the most effective teams of evangelists – in the entire New Testament.” Of course I don’t like it! It makes me cringe every time I think of it. What makes it worse now is that I can barely remember why I was so scared. I mean, I can remember that I really *was* scared. But so what? Why was it all such a big deal in my head? Barnabas and Paul didn’t turn back. They kept right on going, and both of them made it back alive. Their journey changed the course of history, and changed the face of the Christian church forever. What is a little fear in comparison to that? But I guess we all have memories we don’t like very much.

In any case, I wasn’t thinking on such levels at the time – not even close. I just knew I had never been so far from home. We were at Perga, on the southern coast of what you call Turkey. And it was beautiful there. It is beautiful almost anywhere on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. But we were getting ready to head inland, through territory famous for brigands and pretty famous for malaria and some other dread diseases. The truth is, I had let some of the other travelers on the ship from Paphos (Cyprus) get to me. Looking back, I suspect they were exaggerating things just for my benefit. You know how sophomores talk to freshmen the world over. No doubt they were only teasing, but it had terrible consequences for me. The more I thought about where we were and where we were going, and how much I missed my family

and friends back in Jerusalem, well, the whole journey started to seem pointless and horrible to me. I was only twenty-three at the time. What good was I going to be anyway? Barnabas and Paul didn't really need me, I kept telling myself. They were both seasoned, middle-aged men. Why had I ever agreed to go on this trip in the first place? It had sounded pretty exciting back in the beginning, but not anymore. Terrifying was more like it.

Barnabas had been born on the island of Cyprus, so we had plenty of relatives there. It would be an easy thing to take the next ship back from Perga to Paphos, and then from there back to Jerusalem. Ah, back to Jerusalem! The idea of it seemed wondrous beyond the telling. It wasn't easy to tell Barnabas what I was planning to do, but I had my mind made up now. I was going home! Paul didn't say much. I could tell he was disgusted, even pretty angry, with me. But I didn't care. I just wanted to go home. So I did.

You may have figured out by now that I was a bit of a "momma's boy." My mother was a saint, and one of the leading members of the Christian church in Jerusalem. You have met her, actually, but maybe you don't realize it. In a minute we get to read the passage that mentions her. It's tucked away in the middle of a very fascinating story about Peter's near escape from death. The Apostle James was the first martyr among the twelve disciples that Jesus chose. It looked for sure like Peter would be next. But our movement was spreading faster than some people think. Some of the prison guards were already Christians, and they managed to sneak Peter out of prison before anybody caught on to what they were doing. I know you don't tell the story that way; you like to make everything even more magical and miraculous than it already is. It's an amazing story any way you come at it. But after Peter realized he was free, where did he go? Straight to my mother's house. She was wealthy, and we had one of the biggest homes of any Christian in Jerusalem. Peter knew that was where he would find a gathering of Jesus' followers. And poor Rhoda, one of our servant girls, has been getting teased about it ever since. She was so excited when she recognized Peter's voice that she ran to tell the others without even letting Peter in the door! (Acts 12:1-17)

So now you know a little bit more about my background. Hearing the stories about Jesus and our new faith was nothing new for me. Followers of Jesus had been gathering in our home ever since I was a young boy. Even Jesus came to our house a few times. Like everybody

else, I was sometimes surprised by what He taught us and how He put things. It was often exciting to listen to the conversations even after He left. But I was pretty young still and didn't realize how much was really going on. I especially didn't understand, until years later, how the Holy Spirit was already preparing me for my life's work. It didn't become my conscious passion until years later. But in many ways it was a pretty natural thing that I would end up being the first one to start collecting and writing down all the stories and sayings of Jesus.

Anyway, I grew up in a large and prosperous home. Everybody knew us and knew where we lived. There was a steady stream of visitors, and they talked about many things. But the big excitement was about Jesus. What had He done or said now? And there were the endless arguments and opinions about whether He had done something really stupid or really brilliant. Meanwhile, the people who liked Him most and believed in Him most were getting more and more worried and concerned for Him.

On the more personal side, I grew up thinking I was special. Well, I *am* special; we all are. But you know what I mean: Extra special. Like I didn't have to do my share of the chores, and the common trials and tribulations of life were for other less-gifted people. I did have many privileges, it's true. I was better educated than most. I could read and write in both Hebrew and Greek, and of course I spoke Aramaic fluently. One of the reasons Paul was so eager for me to come on that first journey was because he knew I could tell people more of the stories about Jesus than anybody else he knew. Well, at least he was happy about my coming along until I deserted them. Long afterward, I began to realize what a bitter disappointment this must have been for Paul. He had never been a follower of Jesus during His earthly ministry. Quite the opposite. So Paul thought I could fill in the gaps where his own personal knowledge was weakest. He knew that all the new converts would want to know everything they could find out about Jesus' life and ministry among us. So Paul was counting on me a lot more than I realized at the time. And I let him down a lot more than I realized at the time too. God forgive me.

In a way, I guess, my mistake represents one of the big bugaboos for Christians ever since: We are forever saying too much or too little, or saying it at the wrong time or to the wrong people. I came to realize that I had a special task concerning spreading our Message. We are all Message-bearers if we love and follow Jesus. But we each have to find our own way, our own style. And it is never as easy to carry the Message as some people try to make it sound. I ran away from doing it when I was

young. My guess is that some of you have run away from it in various ways and times too. But of course that's your business.

I think some of this will come clearer faster if I can show you our map for just a minute.

Jerusalem you all know. Damascus and Syrian Antioch were the only significant churches outside of Palestine before the first missionary journey. Paul had been converted just outside of Damascus, on his way to arrest and persecute Christians there. Afterward, he had gone to the holy mountain (Sinai), as some of us do when our lives are shaken apart. Then Paul had visited Christians in Jerusalem, though most of them were still really scared of him. Finally the disciples shipped him home to Tarsus. Paul was such a new convert and so overzealous that it looked like he might get everybody killed outright. Nobody heard anything about him or from him for the next twelve years. Guess he was rethinking and restudying the Scriptures and everything he had ever learned in the new light of the Resurrected Jesus.

Then things got really interesting in Antioch, with Gentiles wanting to join the church. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to get Paul. They came back to Antioch together, and preached and taught there for a whole year. Then the church at Antioch, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, laid hands on Paul and Barnabas and sent them off on the first missionary journey. (You call that "ordination" today.) Right here at Perga is where I deserted them. I went home to Jerusalem and they went on into central Turkey, where, as you know, Paul got beat up, stoned, and left for dead. They were persecuted wherever they went. That's what happens if you carry a Message about God's love.

When I ran home to Jerusalem, it was in the spring of A.D. 48. Now we need to jump to the year 50 A.D. Paul and Barnabas had returned from their first journey and then had been sent to Jerusalem for a kind of council of Christian leaders. The church at Antioch wanted to see if there was some way to bring a little more peace and unanimity among Christians over the Gentile issue. Perhaps you don't realize it, but after Jesus' death and resurrection, this was the hottest issue and the hottest battle in the entire New Testament. Could Gentiles join the church, and if so, on what basis? You know how it goes: all are welcome, but mostly welcome if you do things our way. So there were lots of factions and lots of very heated arguments over who was really, truly Christian, and on what basis, and whether you had to convert all the way to Judaism

to be truly acceptable to God. Most of us *did* believe that, to begin with – just as we had been taught to believe it for over a thousand years. If it hadn't been for Paul, I guess most of us would still believe it. Anyway, the council at Jerusalem quieted things down for a while, at least on the surface. But underneath it was never as true or lasting an agreement as we all tried to pretend. We don't have time to get into that here, though if you dig very deep, you will uncover some arguments that are still going on today. And churches are splitting over some of these issues still today. But you don't want that to happen to your church – I hope.

So let's try to pick up the story at the painful part. (Acts 13:13-14; 15:36-41)

I had gone back to Antioch from Jerusalem with Paul and Barnabas. Not long afterward, when they started talking about going on a second missionary journey, the big quarrel took place – the rift that tore up the team of Barnabas and Paul. Paul could be pretty passionate about a lot of things, but I had seldom seen Barnabas really angry. He was trying to defend me, and he wanted me to be given a second chance. It was somehow very important to him that I become a strong Christian leader. Paul's insistence that I not come on the second journey did not fit at all into Barnabas' scheme of things; it was not the way Barnabas saw it. But Paul had been so disappointed the first time that he didn't want to try for a second betrayal. And the truth is, I had not given Paul much reason to think that I had changed my attitude very much. I had not yet *repented*, as we say in our circles. So Paul and Barnabas parted company. A very, very sad moment indeed.

Barnabas and I went off to Cyprus, while Paul and Silas headed overland on foot, back to visit the churches Paul and Barnabas had started already on their first journey – the churches of Galatia. From there they planned to travel on into new territory, if all went well. That's a whole different story. But Barnabas and I were on a ship bound for Cyprus. On that voyage, I made another mistake. It was a silly but important mistake, at least for me. You have time to talk and think and stare at the sea when you are on a sailing ship. Of course, I had heard the argument between Paul and Barnabas. I had heard Paul make some pretty uncomplimentary remarks about me. It hurt my feelings and hooked my ego, as some of you say. And I had seen how angry Barnabas had been toward Paul. So I guess I must have wanted Barnabas to reassure me some more that Paul was wrong and that I was really a good guy in my cousin's eyes. I really did look up to Barnabas. Most people did.

Anyway, I said something about Paul being an overeager zealot, and taking himself too seriously. Barnabas was usually pretty easygoing and even-tempered. Guess that's why most everybody liked him so much. But my remarks really displeased him. "Look Mark," he said, "I think Paul was wrong, and I told him so. And we may never be real friends again, in this lifetime. But I never want to hear even a whisper of disrespect for him out of your mouth ever again. Paul is the most fearless, faithful, conscientious, and prayerful believer you are ever likely to meet. Don't ever forget that. I traveled with him, and I have seen him face and walk into every kind of anger, danger, and physical threat this world can throw at a man. And always it was because of his deep love for our Lord Jesus. So if he was wrong this time, he has a few mistakes coming to him. And by the way, you haven't proved him wrong yet."

Then Barnabas said something that broke my heart. He said, "I love you, Mark. And I believe the Holy Spirit has great plans for you. But I also pray that some day you will have even half the courage of my brother, Saul. So until you have as many scars on your back as Paul has on his, you would do well to keep a respectful tone in your voice when you speak of him."

In that moment, I realized how much Barnabas really loved Paul. And I realized how much it had cost him to break from Paul and come with me. Maybe some of you know the feeling: When something twists deep inside you and there is no more pretending that what you did was okay. Suddenly none of your excuses work anymore and you no longer have any use for them. It is what it is – and time to change your life, or die trying. I was fine on the outside, but I was never the same on the inside, not ever again. I wanted to find some way to be useful to Jesus. And some way, though it didn't seem very likely at the time, to earn back Barnabas' respect – and maybe even one day, in some distant future, the forgiveness of Paul.

It wasn't very long after that, actually, that I started doing what I was really meant to do. I didn't even realize it at the time. It all started happening sort of naturally, without my even thinking about it beyond the realities and the natural affairs of the moment. But churches were starting to spring up all over the place. Not what *you* think of as churches; just small gatherings of people meeting with each other – house churches. They all had one thing in common: They wanted to know more about "The WAY," as we called it. And that meant they were especially hungry to hear more about Jesus. What was He really like? What had He said?

What stories could anybody tell about Him, or the people He had healed, or the conversations He had with friends, or even the exchanges He had with His enemies? People were desperately hungry to hear more about Jesus.

I had been pretty young when Jesus walked among us. But, as I mentioned, I had been around, and sometimes I heard and saw Him. More importantly, people started telling me the stories they knew, and I started writing them down. Soon more and more people seemed to know that I was writing them down, so then even more people started telling me the stories they knew and the things they had seen and heard. I wasn't even thinking about a book yet; I was just writing down stories and incidents and sayings as they came to me and as people told them to me.

You have paper everywhere now, but we were hunting all the time for something to write on. A piece of parchment here, a little papyrus there – mostly already used. We would feel really fortunate if there was a little room at the bottom, or on the back, or even in the margins. But to buy a clean new sheet of papyrus was expensive, and parchment was even more expensive. If you are a writer today, you think the problem is what to say. But in my time, the problem was what to write it on. I always had more to say, but I was always running out of space. Some people are still complaining about my staccato style and all the times I was too brief to tell the story very well. But hey, I was doing better than anybody else was at the time. If anybody had wanted to treat me to a nice supply of clean sheets to write on, you would have a much better Gospel of Mark today. Sometimes we have to do the best we can with what we have.

Anyway, I wasn't thinking of putting it all together in a book, at least not yet. I was just saving all these scraps and pieces of papyrus and parchment with stories and sayings written wherever I could find a little free space. And they were all jumbled up together in a bag I carried around with me.

Inevitably, it dawned on me that it would be much better if I could put things together in some kind of order, and in narrative form, so people could have a clearer idea of what the story of Jesus was really like. You have to remember that most of our churches were already made up of people who had never met Jesus – had never even been to Palestine. So my task got clearer, and it was looking more important all the time. But it was not as easy to put all these fragments together in some

clear story form as most people seem mindlessly to assume. What did happen with Jesus, and when, and where? And what did Jesus really say on which occasion? I was constantly asking these questions of everybody who had known Him, every time I ran into any of them. Of course, they didn't remember all the details precisely either. Nor did they always agree with each other. So on the one hand, I was so eager and enthralled with what I was doing that I could sometimes hardly sleep at night. On the other hand, it was driving me crazy trying to get it all to fit together as clearly and accurately as possible. What I wrote down was never as good as I wanted it to be. Not even close. I simply did the best I could under the circumstances.

Lots of people in your time don't like to be reminded of such realities. They think it should be all cut-and-dried and exact and perfect, as if I'd had a computer to edit it on and save it to every time I heard a new story. Let me tell you that people were so eager for information about Jesus that I never had a chance to get my Gospel the way I wanted it. People were desperate to get copies of whatever I had written so far, so they could take them to communities that were scattered and growing all over the Mediterranean world. At first I tried to make some copies for them myself. But that slowed down the work I was doing to expand on what I had already written. I was constantly gathering more information and trying to put it into a more complete story. So I started letting anybody who could write at all help with the copying. And you know what happened: Some of them got it pretty close, and some of them didn't. I like to think they all tried to do the best job they could. Anyway, some of you are still reading what I wrote, or at least one of the copies of what I wrote. But there was never just one final version of my Gospel. I was always working on it. So the footnotes in your Bibles mention that some things appear in some ancient manuscripts but not in others. What do you expect?! Then some bright scholar in your time finds a version where I had added more but it doesn't appear in all the other versions, so they instantly conclude I never wrote that passage. *C'est la vie.*

More recently, some of your scholars have guessed about a source earlier than the Gospel of Mark. They call it "Q" (*Quelle* for "source"). There is no source for the source – that is, there is no document containing what is imagined to be "Q" material. It's just stories and sayings that both Matthew and Luke mention that do not appear in Mark. But I never had time to get all the stories I knew into the Gospel

I was trying to write. “Q” is just early me – early Mark – stuff I was still working on while I was trying to put it all together in one scroll.

Today a lot of your scholars are guessing that I wrote my Gospel somewhere between 60 and 65 A.D. (Some are even saying 80 to 85, but I won't even comment on that. Well okay, I will: This very late date is based entirely on the assumption that I could not have known about the coming destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. But Jesus had warned us about what was coming, though never giving a precise date. And some people assume that even Jesus could not have seen what was coming. The truth is, lots of people were worried about it for years before it happened.) But never mind 80 to 85 A.D.; even 60 to 65 A.D. is a sad guess. What do they think we were all doing between 50 and 65 A.D.? They think nobody wanted to hear more about Jesus for fifteen or twenty years? Writing is a lot of work, and it takes time to gather the information together. But I was busy trying, and I was writing pieces of it from 50 A.D. on. It's a minor detail to most people, I know, but it's one of my pet peeves: Why has it become popular to date everything as late as possible in your time? Do some people think that will keep them safe from believing too much? The truth is, I had a Gospel according to Mark, and pretty close to what you are now reading, already written and circulating by 55 A.D. – ten years earlier. And people everywhere were grateful for what I had written, and they were thanking me everywhere I went. It even began to seem like the shame of my early cowardice was mostly forgotten.

I wasn't only writing, of course. As important as that had become to me, I was mostly writing in my spare time. Naturally I was very active as part of Jesus' church. All of us were working to spread the Message, and we were encouraging each other to live the life that Jesus had revealed to us and invited us all into. It was changing people's lives everywhere. Nothing is more exciting or more important than that. But you all know that already. Or at least I hope you do, though I have to admit that some of what is going on in your churches today seems weird and confusing to those of us who were carrying the ministry back in the first century. Guess I'd better get off that subject pretty fast.

Anyway, most people know that I spent some time in Rome with Peter. Peter sort of adopted me as his spiritual son (I Peter 5:13), sort of like Paul adopted Timothy as his spiritual son. And of course, some of my stories came from Peter himself. But even Peter wasn't as clear about it all as you probably want to imagine. Just when I would think,

“Oh great! Finally I get to hear what really happened,” it would turn out that Peter wasn’t there on that occasion, or he was off talking to somebody and missed most of it. Just like in real life, isn’t it?

Happily, Luke and then Matthew were also busy picking up the stories and incidents that I had missed or hadn’t heard about, and both were putting them into longer Gospels. Their Gospels were not the complete story either, of course, but every little bit helps. And by the way, Luke’s Gospel was written and out there by 62 A.D., not around 75 or 80, as you are often told. But no time to go into that right now. Nobody is more grateful for their additions than I am. Even so, far too many things have been left out.

And now I can’t keep from quoting from two New Testament letters. First, *“Do your best to come to me soon, for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone off to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry. I have sent Tychicus to Ephesus. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments.”* (II Timothy 4:9-11)

Did you hear that!? That was Paul talking, or rather writing. It did actually and finally happen! Paul did forgive me, as soon as he realized I had really repented. So it ended as it should have begun: with me being useful in Paul’s ministry, as he most certainly was in mine. *Of course* I was useful; I was the one who knew and told so many stories about Jesus. Whenever I was with Paul after he would preach, the people would mob me with questions about this person or that event, or how did Jesus feel about this or what did He say about that. Sometimes I could even answer their questions. After all, there is never time to write down all you know. You heard Paul’s comment about bringing the books, but especially the parchments? Those parchments weren’t something he wanted to read. They were what he wanted to write on.

Paul also mentions me in his letter to Philemon, which a little bird told me you have been paying more attention to lately. About time, I say. Anyway, he says: *“Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.”* Yep, that’s me again – a fellow worker with Paul. The Lord is merciful, and sometimes the wounds and rifts are truly healed. You have no idea what that means to somebody like me. I never meant to do so much damage. I didn’t really understand all that was going on.

But I did the damage anyway. The wounds I caused and later felt are part of me, and part of my story. I was the spoiled brat who deserted the cause and ran home to Mommy.

But I am also the author of the earliest Gospel in the New Testament, and a friend and fellow worker with both Peter and Paul. And I am the first one who thought of writing down the stories and sayings of Jesus, and finally of trying to put them together into a book that would tell His story – at least some of it. I am the spoiled brat who found a way to be useful after all.

So if you are a coward, or have made a lot of mistakes, or have caused some serious trouble in other people's lives, don't give up. You may be exactly the person Jesus is looking for to carry on an important mission in His name. I doubt if you could have made a worse mess of it than I did, at least to start with. Anyway, my name is John Mark, and I want to urge and encourage you to hang in there. The hints and gifts and abilities and experiences that match what you were really sent here to accomplish are probably already playing peekaboo all over your life. And don't forget that Jesus always has a way of helping us with our true mission, if we can just get past enough of our fear to invite Him to do so. So may God bless you all.