

Acts 13:13

Learning From Failure and Success

In our text for this evening we are introduced to a man by the name of John. The Scripture tells us that this man John was also called Mark. Like a number of other apostles and disciples, John was known by two names. Mark (Marcus) was his Roman name, and John was his Jewish name. He is called *John* in Acts 13:5,13, and *Mark* in Acts 15:39 and 2 Timothy 4:11. His Roman name was used as the title of his Gospel probably to avoid the confusion of having 2 Gospel books of John.

John-Mark was the son of Mary, a prominent Christian woman from Jerusalem. He may have been born in or near Jerusalem where his mother lived during the New Testament time. There is no record of his father, but John-Mark is described as a cousin of Barnabas in Colossians 4:10.

John-Mark's mother's house was apparently a popular place for Christians, where many people gathered and prayed (Acts 12:12). It was the first place that the apostle Peter went to after an angel released him from Herod's prison in Acts 12:6-12.

Peter refers to John-Mark as "his son" in 1 Peter 5:13, so it is likely that Peter was involved in John-Mark's conversion.

It is quite likely that the "young man" spoken of in Mark 14:51-52 was John-Mark himself. We read "And there followed him a certain young man, having a linen cloth cast about his naked body; and the young men laid hold on him: And he left the linen cloth, and fled from them naked."

Only Mark records this mysterious episode. The "young man" (v.51) is not identified, but the consensus is that he is John-Mark. Why else would he insert such a trivial detail in so solemn a story? Was this John-Mark's way of saying, "I was there"? Why he was there was not explained.

John-Mark accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey but for some reason returned home to Jerusalem after they had traveled as far as Perga in Pamphylia (Acts 12:25; 13:13). It was this incident that later caused a "sharp disagreement" between Paul and Barnabas.

Paul refused to take John-Mark with him on another missionary journey, while Barnabas defended his young cousin in Acts 15:36-40. They did however reconcile at a later time because John-Mark was with Paul in his first imprisonment at Rome (Colossians 4:10, Philemon 1:24).

Later John-Mark was with Peter (1 Peter 5:13), and then with Timothy in Ephesus (2 Timothy 4:11). He then disappears from the record.

John-Mark was one of the privileged few to have seen and heard Jesus Christ during His human lifetime, and witnessed the birth and growth of the Christian church. He personally knew most of the greatest early Christians.

What can we learn from the life of John-Mark? In one sense John-Mark lived an extraordinary life: He wrote the Gospel of Mark; He assisted Paul and Peter in the church; He knew and loved the Lord Jesus Christ during his earthly ministry. But in another sense, John-Mark experienced the same failures, struggles, and successes that we experience as God's people. Therefore, the title of my message today is, *Learning From Failure and Success*.

1. We see Temptation to Fail

In Acts 13, Paul, Barnabas, and John-Mark were tempted to fail, and turn back from the ministry. John-Mark went back to the comfort and safety of his home in Jerusalem. However, Paul and Barnabas pressed on to Antioch where they preached in the Synagogue.

Although there were probably several reasons why John-Mark departed from Paul and Barnabas, I believe the greatest temptation John-Mark encountered was how difficult the work of Christ was. John-Mark might have reasoned, “Too many things are against us. How can we overcome such huge obstacles in our way? We are so small and outnumbered, what can we accomplish? The temptation to fail is real, and we face this temptation today in Prince George. Are we going to go back or go forward in the work of the Lord?”

The work of Christ can be difficult, dangerous, and full of hardships. The area where Paul, Barnabas, and John-Mark ministered, Pamphylia, was a hard, mountainous terrain. It was rugged and difficult to travel. The conditions were harsh and cruel. So it is with Prince George. The spiritual climate is hard and

indifferent to the gospel of Jesus Christ. However, we must not turn back as the people of God. We must press on in the work of the Lord. We must continue to put our hands to the plow and go ahead. It was at Pamphylia where John Mark quit, and returned to Jerusalem.

The word for *departing* in verse 13 is where we get our word apostasy from. John-Mark had deserted his post. Perhaps as he stared at the mountains of Pamphylia, the thought of defeat and difficult overwhelmed his soul. “I can’t climb those mountains,” so he reasoned. They are too big and too hard. Therefore John-Mark turned back to Jerusalem. The temptation to turn back because of difficulty and hardship had a strong hold on John-Mark.

We see in the Old Testament how difficult it was for Lot and his wife to leave Sodom and Gomorrah. They loved the world too much. Lot’s wife didn’t want to leave that wicked city. She wanted to stay. The city had a strong hold on her, and when she looked back, an indication that her heart was still in the city, she was turned into a pillar of salt.

Does the world have a strong hold on your heart? Is it difficult for you to leave your sin and trust in Jesus Christ?

In the book of Ruth we read of Naomi and her family leaving Israel for the comforts and pleasures of Moab. Moab was the place where people could find ease and prosperity for the flesh but not for the soul. Therefore, Naomi and her family turned back to Moab, and left behind the privileges and blessings of the covenant in Israel.

We read in the book of Revelation how the church in Laodicea “left their first love,” Jesus Christ. They turned back and loved other things, and they lost their affection and devotion for the Lord.

Perhaps you are here today and you are facing the mountains of Pamphylia in your life, and you find walking with the Lord is too difficult and hard. There even times when you just want to quit and depart like John-Mark. Why set yourself up for failure? What did Paul and Barnabas do? They pressed on. They overcame the temptation of difficulty and hardship because they would not fail.

You could say that John-Mark **went**. Paul and Barnabas were **sent**. It is clear from Acts 13 that Paul and Barnabas were men chosen and sent by God, “...the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they **sent** them away. So they, being **sent** forth by the Holy Ghost, departed unto Seleucia; and from thence they sailed to Cyprus.”

Therefore John-Mark went and failed. Paul and Barnabas were sent and persevered. They were able to resist the temptation of hardship and difficulty and press on in the work of the gospel. Those who are called by Christ will persevere in the work of Christ because Christ will provide for them.

First thing we see is the temptation to fail.

2. We see Learning from Failure

What did John-Mark learn from his failures and what can we learn from our failures?

John-Mark missed out on spiritual blessings. He lost out on the privileges and opportunities of being under a ministry like the Apostle Paul and Barnabas.

Before Pamphylia, we read in Acts. 13:5, that John-Mark was helpful to Paul and Barnabas, “And when they were at Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews: and they had also John to their minister.”

The word *minister* has the idea of an under rower below a ship. On the deck you had the captain and the sailors. Below the deck was the galley where you had the rowers. It was an exhausting job but very important. John-Mark was an under rower. It was not a glamorous job, but a necessary and vital one.

As a helper of Paul and Barnabas, John-Mark saw miracles, heard great gospel preaching, witnessed the conversion of sinners, and traveled to places such as Selucia, Cryrus, Pathos, and Pamphylia.

John-Mark must have felt unfulfilled and full of regret after returning to Jerusalem, when he had time to think about what he had done. There was so much that he was missing out on and it was because he turned back. I believe John-Mark lost the joy of his salvation. He felt dried up in his soul. Perhaps, he thought, “any future ministry for me is closed.”

In addition to John-Mark suffering from his failure, Mary his mother must have been upset and disappointed with her son. Remember, Mary was a prominent Christian woman and active in the church in Jerusalem. She opened her house to the church for prayer and fellowship. She undoubtedly prayed for John-Mark on the Mission Field.

And now to see him back in Jerusalem under these unfavorable circumstances must have been a big blow to Mary. We see how the failure of a single man can have negative effects in the family and even in the church.

Paul and Barnabas had a falling out over John-Mark. The dispute involved the fact that John Mark returned home during the first missionary journey and therefore Paul believed John-Mark was unreliable.

Barnabas did not think the issue was so extreme as Paul thought, and Barnabas was willing to give Mark another opportunity. It is also important to note that John Mark is Barnabas' cousin (Colossians 4:10), and that relation may have allowed Barnabas the understanding that Paul did not seem to have.

Later on, when a second campaign was planned, Barnabas proposed taking Mark as a helper, but Paul resisted the idea. The New Testament record indicates that a "sharp contention" developed between them in Acts 15:36-41. They could not reach an agreement, and so they split up. As far as the Bible indicates, these two remarkable men never saw one another again.

Many of us may be a bit drawn to Barnabas when we reflect upon the fact that we too occasionally have needed a second chance. Over the long haul, the decision of Barnabas may have proved best – at least for John Mark. Years later, Paul finds the formerly useless Mark "useful," as revealed in the apostle's concluding epistle in II Timothy 4:11, "Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry."

In Colossians 4:10, we observe that the once-rejected young worker was commended, and the Colossian saints were asked to be receptive to him.

We see that John-Mark's failure had serious ramifications to him, his family, and the church. Although John-Mark failed, the Lord graciously restored him to the gospel ministry. Later in his life we see John-Mark learned from his failure and went on to accomplish great things in the church and glorify Christ.

We learn in failure that, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Pardon, in the Scriptures, always supposes that there is confession, and there is no promise that it will be imparted unless a full acknowledgment has been made. We must admit to our failures, and take them to the Cross where the blood of Christ is applied to cleanse us from all sin.

We fail as God's people but Christ's blood never fails in washing us from our sin. John-Mark learned from his failures. He did not repeat them over and over again.

So we must learn from our failures and move on in our service for Christ.

3. Learning from success

John-Mark failed. But he also succeeded. What are some of the things we can learn from our success?

A theologian writes, "Success is not the result of chance or of destiny; it is the outworking of God's own providence, the reward of faith and discretion, of virtue and persevering effort. The Lord desires us to use every gift we have; and if we do this, we shall have greater gifts to use.

While we use that which we have, He will work with us to increase and strengthen every faculty. By every wholehearted, earnest sacrifice for the Master's service our powers will increase.

While we yield ourselves as instruments for the Holy Spirit's working, the grace of God works in us to deny old inclinations, to overcome powerful temptations, and to form new habits.

As we cherish and obey the promptings of the Spirit, our hearts are enlarged to receive more and more of His power, and to do more and better work. Dormant energies are aroused, and palsied faculties receive new life.”

John-Mark was successful, not in his own strength but by the Holy Spirit. He used the gifts Christ gave him to help the church in ministry and bring glory to the Lord. John-Mark was not puffed up with pride in his success but John-Mark learned from his failures to be humble before the Lord.

We read in Colossians 4:10 instructions from the Apostle Paul to the church, “Aristarchus my fellow prisoner saluteth you, and Marcus, sister's son to Barnabas, (touching whom ye received commandments: if he come unto you, *receive him*;)”.

Philemon 1:24, “Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my *fellow labourers*.”

2 Timothy 4:11, Only Luke is with me. Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is *profitable to me* for the ministry.

The humble worker who obediently responds to the call of God may be sure of receiving divine assistance. To accept so great and holy a responsibility is itself elevating to the character. It calls into action the highest mental and spiritual powers, and strengthens and purifies the mind and heart.

Through faith in the power of God, it is wonderful how strong a weak man may become, how decided his efforts, how prolific of great results. He who begins with a little knowledge, in a humble way, and tells what he knows, while seeking diligently for further knowledge, will find the whole heavenly treasure awaiting his demand.

The more he seeks to impart light, the more light he will receive. The more one tries to explain the word of God to others, with a love for souls, the plainer it becomes to himself. The more we use our knowledge and exercise our powers, the more knowledge and power we shall have.

What is the measurement of true success in the Christian church?

Proverbs 16:3, “Commit thy works unto the LORD, and thy thoughts shall be established.” Or it can be translated, “**Commit your work to the Lord**, and then your plans will succeed.”

Joshua 1:8, “**This book of the law** shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success.”

John MacArthur writes, “Paul measured his own success as a leader, as an apostle, and as a Christian by a single criterion: He had “kept the faith”—meaning both that he had remained faithful to Christ and that he had kept the message of Christ’s gospel intact, just as he had received it. He had proclaimed the Word of God faithfully and fearlessly. And now he was passing the baton to Timothy and to others, who would be “able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2).

Therefore, Paul faced his own death with a triumphant spirit and with a deep sense of joy. He had seen the grace of God accomplish all that God designed in him and through him, and now he was ready to meet Christ face-to-face.”

If we judge success by worldly standards, how big a bank account is, how big a house is, how famous we are, then Christians would be considered failures. But true success is not found in the world.

True success in life is knowing and trusting a person, Jesus Christ, and resting in his atoning work on the Cross for sin.

Are you an success or a failure in the eyes of God? Does he see you still dead in your sins or does he see you in Christ, clothed in His righteousness?

In closing, John-Mark represented a life of both failure and success, a life not much different from our own. Although he failed miserably at Pamphylia, John-Mark learned from his failure and went on to become a Gospel writer, an evangelist, and a mighty man of God. John-Mark knew success in his ministry because he learned to entrust his life into the loving care of Christ. Let us pray.