

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Paul's Companions: Aristarchus and Mark - Colossians 4:10

Good morning and welcome to *Truth for Today*.

I wonder if you have ever read Mark Twain's story of Tom Sawyer? I read it when I was about twelve and from what I remember I found it quite interesting. Perhaps I need to remind you that Tom was a lad living in nineteenth century America. One of the episodes in Tom's life still remains in my memory. It concerns a rare visit he made to the local Sunday School. If I recall the details correctly, there was a young lady that Tom particularly admired and whom he wanted to impress. He was aware that she regularly attended a Sunday School which awarded prizes to anyone who managed to win a certain number of tokens. I have forgotten many of the details, but I do remember that to achieve the correct number of tokens was a mammoth task, spreading over a number of months, and including a lot of rote learning of passages of Scripture. This was beyond Tom, but, by dint of trading and swapping his treasures, he managed to obtain sufficient tokens to win a Bible. This, he hoped, would impress the girl of his dreams, but, unfortunately, the minister asked him to repeat the names of two of the Lord's disciples. Sadly, the only names he could recall from his scanty attendance at the Sunday School were David and Goliath. Such an answer spelt disaster for his embryonic friendship with the young lady.

What has that to do with today's talk you ask? Well, the title of this series of talks is 'Paul and his companions'. Some of us might have difficulty in naming more than half a dozen, though, if you are able to listen in during the next few weeks, you will know the names of eight of them. These all assisted the Apostle Paul to spread the Christian message across the Roman world. Some are quite well known. Others appear on the pages of Scripture but once. All, however, are known and appreciated by the Master.

The pair we shall be looking at this morning are Aristarchus and Marcus, or Mark, as he is usually called, and we can find them linked together in Colossians 4:10. I am reading this verse from the King James Version. "Aristarchus my fellowprisoner saluteth you, and Marcus, sister's son to Barnabas, (touching whom ye received commandments: if he come unto you, receive him.)" As Aristarchus is mentioned before Mark in the quoted passage we shall deal with him first.

We first read of him in relation to a riot in the city of Ephesus in Acts 19. To place this in context, we need to know that a silversmith, called Demetrius, had called his fellow craftsmen together in order to warn them that Paul's preaching would lead to a loss of trade. I now quote from verses 28 and 29: "And when they heard these sayings, they were full of wrath, and cried out, saying, Great is Diana of the Ephesians. And the whole city was filled with confusion: and having caught Gaius and Aristarchus, men of Macedonia, Paul's companions in travel, they rushed with one accord into the theatre."

From this it is obvious that they were visitors to Ephesus and not residents. It is also obvious that they were already Christians.

The question then arises regarding when Aristarchus became a believer. From Acts 27:2 we learn that he was from the city of Thessalonica, a city that Paul had previously evangelised. It is evident from the letters to the church in that city that the visit by Paul, Silas and Timothy had met with some success, as is stated in 1Thessalonians 1. I quote verses 5 and 6: "For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake. And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost." Another believer, Secundus, is mentioned as coming from Thessalonica in Acts 20. It is quite probable that they both became believers in Jesus during Paul's visit to Thessalonica during his second missionary journey.

One thing we do learn from both of the passages that have just been quoted is that Aristarchus was willing to suffer for his new beliefs. It would seem that, at Thessalonica, he was willing to suffer many afflictions. Certainly, at Ephesus, he had been seized by the mob and rushed into the theatre. The very fact that he was seized shows that he was at the forefront with Paul. It would have been easy when the trouble started for him to slip into a corner where he wouldn't be noticed. Instead he took a stand for his beliefs. When he was taken into the theatre, we know that he wasn't expecting to see the latest production of a Greek drama! It likely rather to be some form of physical punishment. How thankful

we ought to be that we, in this country, do not face the likelihood of physical persecution. For the Christians of the Roman world it was an everyday possibility. That being so, are we willing to openly confess our belief in Jesus by word and deed, regardless of the consequences? Not that we should deliberately court unpopularity or cause offence but quietly and with dignity bear a testimony to the risen Christ. These days the very term 'born again Christian' carries connotations of mockery in the popular press. Even to suggest that we read and believe the Bible can easily cause us to be an object of mockery. Are we willing, in our time, to be known as a Christian, as Aristarchus was in his time?

A further fact we learn about him from Acts 19 is that he was a travelling companion of Paul. He was with the apostle when he set sail for Rome, and he was with him again in prison, as we saw in Colossians 4. Whether the reference to 'fellow prisoner' in Colossians is asserting that Aristarchus was actually in prison is debatable, but he was certainly alongside Paul and identified with his sufferings. This again meant that he, Aristarchus, was willing to forego any wealth that he could have earned if he had stayed in Thessalonica. If he was sufficiently wealthy not to need to work, then one can say he was willing to live in comparative poverty as compared to luxury. This, again, is a challenge to us. How far do our beliefs affect our life style?

We ought to say a few words about Acts 27 and verse 2, where it tells us about Paul setting off for Rome. Some commentators have suggested that Aristarchus actually signed on as Paul's servant or slave in order to be with him on the journey. He certainly got more than he bargained for, for the rest of the chapter describes the voyage that ended in the ship being wrecked. Luke would be able to describe the chaos and danger, as he was present. I am sure, however, that it would be a talking point whenever he reminisced with Aristarchus. I also suggest that he, Aristarchus, would be a source of Luke's vivid description of the riot at Ephesus, recorded for us in Acts 19. I intend to return to this man before I finish, but now, we shall turn to consider another of Paul's companions in the work of evangelism, namely Mark, the writer of the second of the Gospels.

I suppose I ought to clarify, or even modify, what I have just said, for Mark was a companion or fellow-worker with Paul for only a limited period. We shall learn why as we proceed through the details of his life as recorded in the New Testament.

The first mention of Mark, by name, is in the Acts 12. The context is the escape from prison of Peter, one of the leaders of the church at Jerusalem. I shall read verses 11 and 12. "And when Peter was come to himself, he said, Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews. And when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark: where many were gathered together praying."

Can there be a better introduction of any person than that they should be found at a prayer meeting in company with fellow believers? The object of the disciples' prayer was for the safe release of Peter. As we have just read, the prayers were answered, and Peter made his way to Mary's house, where he knew there would be a Christian welcome. This would suggest that it was a regular meeting place for the believers of the infant church. John Mark, therefore, would be aware of all the men and women that regularly met in his mother's home. This must have been a dwelling place of some considerable size, as it states in the same passage that many people were gathered there. It more than hints that Mary was reasonably wealthy. Consequently, we need to remember that Mark could have had a comfortable life, if he had remained at home, instead of becoming an itinerant evangelist in the company of Barnabas and Paul. There was at least one other place in Jerusalem, where another group of Christians met, because Peter, when he was leaving Mary's house, asked for a message to be sent unto James and to the brethren.

We shall, in a short while, see how this developed, but, firstly, I want to mention a detail in the Gospel that bears Mark's name, but is not in the other Gospel accounts. This is in Mark 14:51-52. "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."

As we have said, this strange incident is not contained in any of the other accounts of the betrayal and arrest of Jesus, and the consensus of a lot of commentators is that the young man was none other than Mark himself. We can never be definite about it but, if it is true, it places Mark as a witness of the most profound events in human history.

We must turn now to the second mention of Mark in the Acts. This is in Acts 12:25: "And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem, when they had fulfilled their ministry, and took with them John, whose surname was Mark." Notice from this extract, if you will, that Mark had a Jewish name, John, and a Gentile name, Mark. While we are considering this verse, we can also notice that Paul was still known by his Jewish name of Saul. From the context, Saul and Barnabas were in Jerusalem to deliver a gift, for the poor of the Jerusalem church, from the church at Antioch. I think, that we can be sure, that Mark would accept, with alacrity, when offered the chance to visit Antioch, the third largest city of the Roman world.

A short time later he was offered the chance to see yet more of the world, when Barnabas and Saul were commissioned by the Christians of Antioch to take the message of salvation to other cities. What a dramatic change had occurred in Mark's circumstances, in so short a time, when, from the comfort and protection of his mother's home, he faced the dangers and deprivations of a missionary tour. This is, perhaps, why we get the rather sad statement in Acts 13:13 that Mark left Barnabas and Paul to return to Jerusalem.

Though we do not know the reason for Mark's turning away from the work, we do know that it remained as a barrier when Paul and Barnabas decided to revisit the scene of their missionary labours, a year or so later. Barnabas wanted to have Mark with them, as a travelling companion, but Paul would not consider it as Acts 15:39-40 makes clear. "And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus; and Paul chose Silas, and departed, being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God."

How thankful we ought to be for those who act like Barnabas did. We know, from elsewhere in Scripture, that Mark did not leave the company of Christians. That he did not do so was, in a large part, due to Barnabas. He was there when encouragement and help was needed. Perhaps he could see qualities that escaped Paul. Let us take a lesson from the actions of Barnabas, and never give up on any young life in our Christian gatherings.

Many years passed before we hear of John Mark again. We do not know where he went, or what he was doing, during the years before Paul mentions him again. This is in the verse I read from the Letter to the Colossians at the beginning of this talk. Now he is at Rome, and completely in harmony with Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, for the Letter goes on to say that Mark, along with two other Christians, had been a comfort to him. Again, we do not know how this comfort had been administered, yet how precious that the travel-worn, imprisoned, apostle could now be encouraged by the man who had disappointed him all those years before.

It is also suggested in Colossians 4 that Mark would be making a journey to Colossae. I think we can assume that this was connected with the young churches, because Paul, writing about the same time to Philemon, includes Mark in the appellation 'my fellow workers.' What a transformation has been effected! The failed missionary was now a fellow worker! One of the wonders and joys of Christianity is that the Lord can take any of us and make us into disciples, if only we will submit to His sovereign will. We can all be fellow workers, striving to make known the glory and excellence of Christ, in the world that still rejects Him.

Notice, also, in Colossians 4:10 that the church at Colossae was given instructions to receive Mark, whenever he arrived. How good it is to see the unity that marked the infant church. One could travel many miles, but be sure of a welcome from fellow believers, so deep was the fellowship that existed in those days.

The last time Paul refers to Mark, is in 2 Timothy. There in 2 Timothy 4:11 we have a very poignant statement. "Only Luke is with me. Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry". Please note, again, the change in Mark and Paul. Paul now avidly desires the company of Mark. At the same time, Mark has now matured into a profitable servant. We do not know what particular gift Mark had that made his service so needed, but Paul knew that he would be useful, even if their paths had only infrequently crossed.

The only other reference to Mark in the New Testament, not counting the Gospel that bears his name of course, is in 1 Peter. As usual, there is a list of names at the conclusion and I am going to read 1 Peter 5:13: "The church that is at Babylon, elected together with you, saluteth you; and so doth Marcus my son." Perhaps, it ought to be said, that the phrase that includes the words 'the church' is not as definite as the King James Version renders it, but, neither that, or the word 'Babylon', need concern us here. I only want to point out that now Mark's name is linked with Peter, the great Apostle to the Circumcision. There is very strong tradition, dating back at least to within sixty years, or so, of Peter's death, that closely connects the two. The late Professor Bruce, in his interesting book 'The Pauline Circle', quotes from the source, and this is part of what he wrote: "Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote down accurately, although not in order, all that he [Peter] mentioned of the sayings or doings of the Lord ... he accompanied Peter, who composed his teaching as the needs of the occasion required, not as though he were making a systematic arrangement of the Lord's oracles. Mark, then, made no mistake in thus writing points down one by one as he [Peter] remembered them, for he paid attention to this one thing, to leave out nothing of what he heard and include no false statement among them." I have quoted this at length to highlight the possible source of Mark's Gospel. He was, as we have read, so close to the apostle that Peter could call him his son in the faith. Such a title would place Mark at Peter's side for long periods of time. There he would learn much of the life and mission of the Lord Jesus.

How much we, in our age, owe to Mark is impossible to gauge. It would seem that he was the earliest of the Gospel writers who enabled Matthew and Luke to utilise the memories of Peter. From his questions and enquiries to the apostle Paul, his cousin Barnabas and other early believers, he pieced together his little book that became, in the words of CH Dodd, 'a call to Christian loyalty and a challenge to a hostile world.' What an inheritance has come down the centuries, in so much as we, in the year 2004, can read of the Saviour in first century Galilee. Mark has written of

the events that comprise the life and mission of the Lord in such a concise and straight forward manner that even the young in years, not only the young in faith, can understand. Yet, as one commentator states, 'the Gospel of Mark is like a pool of water that is far deeper than it looks'. He, Mark, also wrote in such a way that the Gentile believers of his own era could understand the context. He explained Jewish practices and customs in order that Christians, across the Roman world, could more readily grasp the importance of the Lord's words and actions. I repeat, again, that we owe a large debt to this man, whom Paul called his fellow worker.

This brings us back to the reference from Colossians 4:10 with which we commenced our talk this morning. This time I shall be including verse 11 and I shall be reading from the New International Version. "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.) Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me." From these remarks we notice that both Aristarchus, and Mark, were Jewish believers. That would have eventually caused trouble from the non-Christian members of their families. When a Jew converted to Christianity, it often meant separation from every aspect of their former life. Even so Paul brings before us, in this verse, the names of three men who were willing to pay the price, though for Mark, as we have learned, his mother was part of the fellowship, so, perhaps, the estrangement from his relatives was not so immediate.

Notice also, as we approach the end of today's talk, that Paul counts the presence of these men as a comfort. He was in prison, so the chance of Christian fellowship was extremely limited. How much he must have valued the links that men such as Aristarchus maintained with the young churches. This must pose a challenge to each one of us who regularly meet with other Christians. How much are we able to comfort our fellow believers? Is our presence and attitude rather a cause of distress and strife? In the present state of Christianity, we all need to bring comfort and encouragement to our fellow believers.

In summary, then, what have we learned from our study of Aristarchus and Mark? From the former, we have seen a man who did not disappear when trouble was near. He was a good friend to Paul in dangerous situations. This would suggest that his faith in Christ was real and steadfast. He was willing to travel at expense to himself and, though it is said that travel broadens the mind, for Aristarchus it brought privation.

The results of Mark's life are more easily recognisable for us, for, as we have emphasised, we have the results of his researches in the second book of the New Testament. We have also seen how he was a connecting link between Paul, Barnabas and Peter, who, without doubt, were three of the most important and illustrious members of the early church. The lives and ministry, of both Aristarchus and Mark, should be a beacon on that pathway of discipleship to which the Lord has called us. May the Lord help each one of us, who believe in Him, to show faith and grace, and to meet regularly with His people, until He comes!

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