

The Lasting Mark of Encouragement

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"Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry" 1 Timothy 4:11 (NIV).

These brief words from a letter have, as all words do, a context that explains and enriches them. Written by the Apostle Paul from prison to his young disciple Timothy, Paul contemplates his life and anticipates his seemingly imminent death.

Already speaking of his life in the past tense - "I have fought the good fight, I have run the race, I have kept the faith" - Paul seeks to have some basic needs met. He requests a cloak for warmth, some books to study and some companionship to fill his last hours.

Having been deserted by Demas, and sending off others to fulfill different ministries, Paul and Luke are alone. He appeals for Timothy to come to him. He also asks him to bring Mark with him, deeming Mark as beneficial to him and his ministry. "Get Mark, Timothy. Guide him to me. He is useful to me and my ministry."

These had to be encouraging words of respect from the mighty apostle for this younger, lesser-known servant of God. To be called on to help Paul was quite an honor. Paul too was human. He had real needs and limitations and saw Mark as someone who could meet them.

Yet, the history of Mark and Paul fills this verse with even more meaning. If newsman Paul Harvey were telling this tell, we would expect to hear: "and now, the rest of the story."

When a younger man, John Mark was honored to join Paul and his cousin Barnabas on what we now call the "Paul's First Missionary Journey". Finishing a blessed gospel sharing tour of the island of Cyprus, Paul and Barnabas planned a return to the mainland to share Christ in more unreached areas. For reasons not stated, young Mark opted out of that phase of the mission, returning to the known settings of his home, Jerusalem.

Some time later, Paul and Barnabas itched to visit the churches they had started. Like good parents, they longed to know how their spiritual children fared. When Barnabas suggested they take Mark along with them, Paul balked. Mark had bailed out last time, Paul was not going to risk that again. His resolve was firm. So was Barnabas' - just like when he took a chance on Paul when he was first saved and no one believed him a genuine disciple.

We read that this powerful ministry team had such a sharp disagreement about this, that they parted ways. Barnabas took his cousin Mark to encourage the churches in Cyprus; Paul took Silas and set out to nurture the other churches.

Back to Paul in prison, many years and mission trips later. We do not read in Scripture what had transpired, but things have changed between Paul and Mark. Paul's apparently simple request seems with life.

It reflects humility on Paul's part. To now ask for help from someone he saw as untrustworthy required some pride swallowing. Sure Mark had grown, but so had Paul. Sometimes we put people in neatly labeled boxes and never let them out. It serves us all too well to keep them pigeon holed. Paul let Mark be what he had become - no small thing.

This also speaks of some reconciliation that had gone on behind the scenes. We do not read of when Paul and Mark were reconciled, but it is assumed here. It is too easy to let past offenses define for all time our present relationships. Beyond unfortunate, it is so unfair. Paul knew Mark had forgiven him.

To ask Timothy to bring Mark with him speaks volumes. Timothy became Paul's helper shortly after Paul refused to take Mark along. Mark is not only not bitter towards Paul, he holds no ill will towards "his replacement".

Mark refused to hold Timothy responsible for something Timothy had no control over. How many homes, work environments, neighborhoods, friendships have been soured by secondhand bitterness? No immature snubbing or petty grudges here. Just mature adults serving God together. How refreshing!

Paul's request for him certainly bespeaks Paul's appreciation of Mark and who he had become. Oh what it means to have a mentor, a model, a hero appreciate a younger protégé. Our kids long for it - be they 5, 15, 25 or 45.

Yet, beyond mere appreciation, Paul in this pen-stroke, publicly shares his affirmation of Mark - in an eternal format. We are all too apt to keep appreciation of others to ourselves, admiring them from afar. Here, in an eternal, God-breathed letter, Paul lets Timothy and all who would read his letter know that he affirms Mark's ability to minister.

What must this have meant to Mark? Certainly people knew Paul had turned down his last application for service, choosing even to part ways with

Barnabas rather than take Mark along. Now Mark has Paul's blessing, his personal endorsement. How many people have dropped out of service to God and others after even lesser hurts than Mark received?

What kept Mark from being just one more of the multitude of bench / pew sitters? Prior to Paul's call for help, Mark had been buoyed, nurtured and mentored by Barnabas - the "Son of Encouragement." What must it have meant for Mark to see Barnabas choose him over Paul? Rejected by Paul, Barnabas enfolded Mark, giving him a second chance.

Paul defined Mark by his past - a quitter. Barnabas saw God's grace at work to mature Mark. He risked a relationship and reputation for the likes of lowly Mark. How many of us have longed for that or ever offered that to another castaway?

Is it too much to speculate that if Barnabas not fought for him, Mark's ministry might have ended or been seriously diminished as he avoided further risk of rejection? Would we have the gospel of Mark in holy writ? I think it is worth pondering.

Who needs you to nurse their wounds after a rejection? Who needs to hear that your opinion of them has changed? Who have you parted ways with that you need to be reconciled?

Have you ever turned back or been turned away like Mark? Thank God for the Barnabas in your life - that precious and rare encourager. May He grant us the grace to stand up for failures and give second chances to runaways. (For further study, read Acts 4, 9 & 11-15.)