

Who Was Mark?
Selected Scriptures
ABC 1/9/22

Do you recognize the name, Leon Lett? Unless you're a NFL nut, probably not, so let me fill you in. Leon spent 11 years in the NFL, mostly with Dallas. He was a great defensive tackle, making all pro twice, & the anchor of an even greater defensive line that helped the Cowboys win 3 Super Bowls during his career (93, 94, 96). So far, so good. Unfortunately, for most fans, these aren't the things he's remembered for. Instead, 2 plays of his stand out. In fact, ESPN rated these 2 plays in the top 3 of their *25 Biggest Sports Blunders*.¹

The 1st occurred in 1993 during Super Bowl XXVII against the Buffalo Bills. Leon recovered a Bills' fumble late in the game. As he scooped up the ball & started to rumble to the end-zone, there were no Bills near him. He was on his way to a sure touchdown. Any touchdown for a defensive lineman is a career highlight, let alone one in a Super Bowl. He approached the end-zone with such ease that he slowed down & stretched out his arms. That's when everything went wrong. A Bills' player came racing from behind & slapped the ball out of Leon's hand just before Leon crossed the goal line. The ball bounced through the end-zone resulting in a touchback that cost Leon his touchdown & his moment of fame. Instead, he's remembered in NFL history with a moment of infamy & failure. Of course, the Cowboys had an overwhelming 52-17 lead & went on to win the game easily but that's not what Leon's remembered for.

10 months later, Leon had a 2nd blooper. This one cost the Cowboys a game. On Thanksgiving Day the Cowboys were leading the Miami Dolphins 14-13. The Dolphins attempted a 41-yard field-goal with 3 seconds on the clock. If they made it the game would be theirs. Miss it, Dallas would win. The center snapped the ball. The holder held it. The kicker took his steps & swung his leg. The contact was solid, however, a Cowboy player slipped through & blocked it. The ball should have fallen untouched & dead ending the play & the Dolphins' chances for victory. Leon's teammates jumped & shouted in celebration, but not Leon. Leon tried to recover the football as though it was a fumble. In his attempt, he knocked it away from himself &, since he'd touched it, put the ball back into play. The Dolphins recovered the ball on the 1-yard line. They kicked again. This time the ball sailed through the goal-posts. Miami 16, Dallas 14. Miami, winners. Dallas, losers. Again, this failure overshadowed his greatness. The rest of the season was fantastic. They didn't lose another game that year with Leon anchoring the defensive line. The Cowboys went on to win another Super Bowl. During this 2nd of Leon's 3 Super Bowl victories, Leon forced a fumble while the Cowboys trailed 13-6. James Washington, the Cowboys safety, recovered the ball & took it 46 yards for a touchdown. The touchdown brought the Cowboys even with the Bills & the momentum turned their way. The Cowboys went on to win 30-13.

Leon's not remembered for his great moments & Super Bowl wins, but for his failures on 2 occasions. I've been there & you probably have too. Like death & taxes, failure is one of those things we all have in common. We may not have our failures splashed on TV for all to see, but we know how Leon feels. Does failing mean we're failures? To answer that question, shift your

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leon_Lett

attention away from Leon to another man, one named Mark, who is a testimony to the fact that failing doesn't necessarily make us failures. Today we're beginning a study through the gospel of Mark. It's widely acknowledged that the writer of it is, you guessed it, Mark. Yet, we need to ask, who is Mark? There are various traditions about him. For example, tradition says Mark was nicknamed *stump finger*, but no one really knows why. Some say he brought Christianity to Egypt & was a bishop there. According to the Roman Catholics, they believe Mark suffered a martyr's death in Alexandria & his body was taken from there to Venice where it was buried. We can't be sure of any of those things & some are highly dubious. Let's look & see what the Bible has to say about Mark.

1. Mark's Background It appears there's only 1 Mark mentioned in Scripture, who is also called *John Mark*, a combination of Jewish & Roman names. *John* was his Jewish name & *Mark* his Roman name. We 1st meet him by name in Acts 12:12, where it tells us he was the son of Mary of Jerusalem. There are many *Marys* in the Bible. This Mary is distinguished as being the mother of **John who was also called Mark**. Apparently, she was a wealthy woman as she had a house in Jerusalem large enough for the early Christians to meet in & had at least one servant, Rhoda (12:13). It was in Mary's house where believers gathered together to pray for the release of Peter from prison & where Peter came when he was released. We also know from Col 4:10, Mark was a cousin of Barnabas, the encourager. We also find in Acts 12 that both Barnabas & Mark accompanied Paul on his 1st missionary journey (25). But later we read that Mark had a rocky beginning with Paul (Acts 13, 15). In Acts 13:13 we find that Mark abandoned Paul at Perga in Pamphylia. He decided he'd had enough & was returning home to Jerusalem. According to Acts 15:38 Paul looked upon Mark as a deserter, one whose heart faltered because of **the work** which confronted him. No reason is given for his deciding to leave & speculation abounds. One thing we know is that Paul was so unhappy with Mark that he refused to take him on his 2nd missionary journey, even though Barnabas wanted him to. Acts 15:40 seems to imply that if any sides were taken in this dispute, the church chose the side of Paul & it doesn't leave the impression that Mark was without fault

when he left.² This started a quarrel between Paul & Barnabas, two good friends & partners in the Lord's ministry. The squabble resulted with Paul & Silas going one way, & Barnabas & Mark going another. Mark then disappears from Acts & from Scripture for some years. Whatever Mark was up to, we don't know. Eventually, some years later, we know Paul & Mark reconciled although we don't know the details. When Paul was in prison in Rome, we read in Philemon 24 & Col 4:10, there was some kind of reconciliation. Mark came & served as Paul's helper & then became a representative of Paul in some kind of service. Later we find in 2 Tim 4:9-11, Paul asked Timothy to bring Mark back with him to Rome. Listen to what Paul says as he writes to Timothy, **Make every effort to come to me soon; for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me & gone to Thessalonica; Crescens *has gone* to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Pick up Mark & bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service.** Demas had deserted him & he wants Mark, the one-time deserter, to come to him because of his usefulness. Mark, once rejected by Paul, has become a comfort to him, a valuable, highly-esteemed & warmly loved co-worker.

Putting all this together, what do we know about Mark? 1st, he was probably raised in Jerusalem in a wealthy home. 2nd, he left Paul's 1st missionary journey, apparently for no good reason. Because of this, he was the cause of division between Paul & Barnabas, two spiritual leaders in the early church. Eventually, he reconciles with Paul. This is Mark, the same man who wrote an account, probably the 1st to be written, of **the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God** (Mk 1:1). Here we see God's amazing grace at work. You may have failed in some Christian service, you may have been a cause for dissension, you may have felt discouraged, but like Mark, if you submit to God's grace & power, He can turn you around & use you for great things. Even Paul recognized God's grace at work in Mark's life. Paul had been so hard & critical of him but came to accept Mark's restoration & found him useful in service to Christ. Isn't that an encouragement to us all? Most people, including Christians, can't take failure & the shame it brings. Failure to some is almost like the end of the world & so they give up. In the middle of the book of Acts, Mark's Christian service appears to be over. However, God turned him around. God renewed & refined &

² William Hendriksen & Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Mark*, vol. 10, NT Commentary, p 8

transformed & enabled him to write the gospel of Mark. How did it come to be that someone who wasn't an apostle wrote the 1st gospel concerning Jesus?

We're all familiar with Peter & he was no stranger to failure himself. We find in 1 Pt 5:13 that Peter calls John Mark **my son**. It appears Peter had a great influence on Mark & could've been instrumental in helping Mark with his falling-out with Paul. Peter might have been his mentor & nurtured him to the strength & maturity he'd need to serve the Lord in the work He'd called him to. If anyone understood the process of restoration after failure, it was Peter, who was graciously restored by Christ after denying Him 3x (Jn 18:15–17, 25–27; 21:15–17). Peter's influence undoubtedly helped Mark overcome the weaknesses of his youth so he could faithfully accomplish what God called him to do.³ It was Mark's close relationship with Peter which motivated him to write a gospel account. Most scholars, based on early Christian historical documents, agree that Peter & Mark were together in Rome (the **Babylon** of 1 Pt 5:13). We also know that before his own death Peter seemingly wanted to make a permanent record of his memories of Christ. We read of that in 2 Pt 1:15 where Peter writes, **I will also be diligent that at any time after my departure you will be able to call these things to mind**. This seems to indicate that Peter wanted to record his memories of & experiences with Jesus. Put simply, Peter wants to write an account of Jesus. Peter doesn't but Mark does. With Mark's gospel, we stand at the transition point between the oral & the written. As the eyewitnesses begin to die it was imperative the record be written down. The death of the apostles & eyewitnesses created the need to conserve & record their times with Jesus. The Holy Spirit selects the men to do that, & the 1st is Mark. Keep in mind, most people were illiterate then & written words had to be read to them. It's been estimated that literacy in that time was probably *no more than 10%, although the figure may have risen to 15 or 20% in certain cities*.⁴ Unless Mark's work was designed only for the benefit of the small minority who could read, he must have known it would be experienced by most as an oral text, read aloud in meetings of the local church. The enjoyability of Mark's storytelling is enhanced by the more extensive use of

³ John MacArthur, *Mark 1–8*, MacArthur NT Commentary, p 2

⁴ M. B. Thompson in R. J. Bauckham, *Gospels*, p 66

descriptive detail than the other gospels. Typically, Mark's version of a miracle story may be twice as long as in Matthew, simply because Mark is more descriptive, while Matthew goes straight to the heart of the story. For example, all 4 gospels tell the story of the feeding of the 5,000. But it's only in Mark's account that the vivid detail of the **green** grass & people sitting in groups looking like *flower* beds is given (6:40). It must have been vivid to an eyewitness & only Mark conveys that impression.⁵

The earliest statement about the gospel of Mark was recorded Papias, possibly a disciple of the apostle John⁶ who was born between 50-60 AD.⁷ Papias claimed that, *Mark having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things said or done by Christ.*⁸ Justin Martyr, another early church father writing 10 years later, referred to the gospel of Mark as the memoirs of Peter.⁹ Irenaeus, writing c 185 AD, called Mark *the disciple & interpreter of Peter*, & recorded what Peter actually preached in his sermons about Christ.¹⁰ Clement is reported to have said the following concerning Mark:

*The Gospel according to Mark had this occasion. As Peter had preached the word publicly at Rome, & declared the Gospel by the Spirit, many who were present requested that Mark, who had followed him for a long time & remembered his sayings, should write them out. & having composed the Gospel he gave it to those who had requested it.*¹¹

Peter's sins & weaknesses are recorded faithfully by Mark, but the praise which he received elsewhere (ie Mt 16:17) is omitted from Mark. At times Mark mentions Peter by name (5:37; 11:21; 16:7) when Matthew doesn't. Although Mark is much shorter than Matthew or Luke, he mentions Peter nearly as often (Mk 25x, Mt 28x, Lk 27x); & Mark mentions Peter in 4 places where Matthew & Luke don't, & in all 4 passages we seem to have personal recollections (1:36, 11:21, 13:3, 16:7).¹²

Mark is also the only gospel that informs us that Simon of Cyrene was **the father of Alexander & Rufus** (15:21), who were evidently well-known in Rome (cf Rom 16:13). As we go through Mark,

⁵ Louis Barbieri, *Mark Commentary*, p 24

⁶ DA Carson & Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the NT*, p 173

⁷ William Hendriksen & Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Mark*, vol. 10, NT Commentary, p 12

⁸ David Turner & Darrell L. Bock, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Vol 11: Matthew & Mark*, p 394

⁹ Turner & Bock, p 394

¹⁰ Quoted by Eusebius

¹¹ Eusebius, *Hypotyposeis*, VI.xiv.7-6

¹² A. Plummer, ed., *The Gospel according to St Mark*, Cambridge Greek Testament for Schools & Colleges, p xix

we'll see that nothing happens in which Peter isn't present. The entire gospel of Mark is almost certainly the eyewitness testimony of Peter.¹³ If Peter's authority stands behind Mark's gospel, this would help explain the gospel's immediate acceptance by the church. For a guy who's not an apostle, not a prophet, not a pastor, not a teacher, not an evangelist, not a leader, just a helper, & a failed one at that, to be given the privilege of serving alongside Paul & Peter, & then writing the 1st gospel is powerful. But it shouldn't be surprising. Mark is no different from any of us. This is the only kind of Christians there are, repaired rebels, recovering sinners, restored deserters, renovated defectors.

As a side-note, here are a couple other possible mentions of Mark, although we're not certain. In Mk 14:13 we read that Jesus **sent two of His disciples & said to them, "Go into the city, & a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him."** It's been speculated that Mark might have been that man. & then in Mk 14:51-52 with the account of Jesus' arrest, we read about **a young man was following Him, wearing *nothing but* a linen sheet over *his* naked *body*.** When he was seized by those who had come to arrest Jesus, **he pulled free of the linen sheet & escaped naked.** That's an interesting little bit of color commentary included in Mark's gospel & not the others. Most believe this was probably Mark. It's possible the Upper Room where the last supper was held was in Mark's mother's home. If that's the case, he was familiar with the disciples & with Jesus. It seems safe to assume that Mark was acquainted with some of the early witnesses of the events centering on Jesus. Mark, the young man who ran away naked at Jesus' arrest, the one who deserted Paul, was the one who recorded Peter's memoir of Jesus. As one pastor put it, Mark *was the man who copped out, dropped out, & came back.*¹⁴ Mark was chosen & used of God. As young man, he had a failure in his spiritual service & caused dissension among believers. But Jesus turns him around & prepares him for work that He wanted him to do. Mark stumbled but he went on & was used of God & is still being used of God as we still study what he wrote today.

¹³ Timothy Keller, *Jesus the King: Understanding the Life & Death of the Son of God*, p xviii

¹⁴ Dr Howard Edington, <https://thewordmadefresh.org/sermons/minor-men-with-a-major-message-john-mark-the-man-who-copped-out-and-came-back/>

2. Mark's Message What was Mark's message in writing his gospel? We find it in Mk 10:45. **the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, & to give His life a ransom for many.** In a nutshell, Mark's gospel is one that portrays the perfect Servant of God in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now think about this: Mark himself was a servant who had quit. But here he presents to us the perfect Servant. Mark had failed as a servant of Jesus but now he was the right man for the job in sharing with us the ideal Servant, Jesus Christ. That's Mark's message, that Jesus Christ, the suffering Servant, our Model for Christian service. There are many names, titles, & representations given to Jesus. But Mark describes Him as the Servant. Christ came to serve. This is a distinctive feature of Mark's gospel. Mark emphasizes the deeds & works of Jesus & doesn't focus as much on His words as Matthew & Luke do. The facts Mark gives us are included to demonstrate that Jesus is the promised Messiah & that He is the Son of God. Mark makes this affirmation at the beginning of his work, saying, **The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God** (Mk 1:1). That is the thematic statement for the entire gospel. This book drives us relentlessly to the Caesarea Philippi confession (8:27–30), when Jesus said to His disciples, **Who do people say that I am?** They replied, **John the Baptist; and others say Elijah; but others, one of the prophets.** Jesus then said, **But who do you say that I am?** At that point, Peter, the champion of Mark, gave the great confession: **You are the Christ.** Mark foreshadows this great confession when he affirms that this is the gospel of Jesus Christ, which means it is the good news of Jesus, the Messiah, who is also the Son of God.¹⁵ Mark omits certain things concerning Jesus that speak of His royalty, His Lordship, & His deity. Not because he doesn't believe in them, but because he wants to bring to us the message that Christ is the Servant of God. The 1st half of Mark's gospel concerns the identity of Jesus (1:1-8:30). The 2nd half concerns the mission of Jesus (Mk 8:31-16:8). Shockingly, the Messiah isn't here to conquer the Roman army but to suffer & die as an atoning sacrifice for sin. Mark writes to show that Jesus' crucifixion doesn't negate His claim to be the Messiah, but affirms it. His faithfulness to this mission becomes the model for all Christians. Following Jesus means denying yourself, taking up your cross, & following Him (Mk 8:34). Mark's gospel is a proclamation that Jesus is the Messiah & Son of God,

¹⁵ RC Sproul, *Mark*, St. Andrew's Expository Commentary, p 4

the Servant whose death & resurrection paid the penalty for our sins & achieved our victory over Satan, sin, & death.

3. Mark's Purpose The 1st purpose, I believe, Mark had was to make the good news of Jesus accessible to Gentiles. His gospel is a missionary or evangelistic book. He explains Jewish customs that would be unfamiliar to Gentile readers (7:2–4; 15:42) & he translates Aramaic words (3:17; 5:41; 7:11, 34; 15:22) they wouldn't understand. Mark makes few references to the OT than Matthew or Luke because Gentiles wouldn't have been familiar with them. Mark's gospel is an evangelistic book written for those unfamiliar with Judaism.

2nd, his purpose was to be the defender of the faith, especially regarding the cross of Jesus. He wants to explain the significance of Jesus' death. He wants to make clear that the death of Jesus wasn't a tragic accident, but was part of God's plan from the very beginning. Jesus knew He was going to die. He told His disciples that He was going to die, even though they didn't understand Him. Mark shows his readers that God chose to bring His kingdom by going through the shameful death of His chosen Servant. Of course, that was a stumbling block, not only to the Jews but also to the Gentiles. They find it difficult to accept the Messiah should come as a Servant & die on a cross as a criminal. Greek & Roman minds couldn't conceive of how a Savior could die for others in such shameful & disgraceful manner & then rise again. The preaching of the cross was a stumbling block, & so Mark wants to give an explanation of why Jesus was to die. Today the cross is still a stumbling block to those who don't believe. Many will accept Jesus as a great man, a profound prophet, or good teacher, but that's all they see. They can't accept or even understand that God would've allowed a great man like Jesus to die in such a terrible way. However, Mark points out clearly that Jesus wasn't merely a good man, He wasn't even just a great prophet, He was the Son of God who came as a Servant & that He must die. He must be delivered into the hands of wicked sinners & be slain if we're to be saved.

Mark's 3rd purpose was to encourage Christians who were facing persecution. His gospel was written while he was in Rome with Peter. At the time of the Roman Empire, Rome was a city of

with population of 1-2 million.¹⁶ At the same time, Rome was also the city where that great persecution of Christians occurred during the reign of Emperor Nero, beginning in 64 AD. Many Christians, probably including Paul & Peter, died for their faith during Nero's reign. In this backdrop of Rome, Mark wrote his gospel aimed at Christians who weren't just facing persecution, but who were going to face even worse persecution in the days to come. Mark is preparing them for it. He's telling them of the Christ who suffered, how He suffered, & how it was predicted that He would suffer. He comes as a suffering Servant of God & through this suffering our redemption would come. Not only that Jesus suffered, but His followers would also suffer. So Mark writes to encourage a minority church in a hostile environment to keep the faith. The One whom we worship suffered, He was ordained to suffer, He came to suffer, but through His suffering our redemption has been secured. As Christians, whether we like it or not, we will suffer in this world because of who we are. But our suffering is in line with the suffering of our Savior. Don't you find this relevant today? Are we not a minority church today? Don't we live in a hostile & unfriendly environment? We often hear or read, whether here or abroad, about certain individuals or groups of believers being harassed, oppressed or suppressed, facing some hardships or persecutions, because of their faith. Should we not look to the Lord Jesus Christ & see the suffering Servant Savior & follow His example?

4. Mark's Method Mark arranges his gospel in a specific way. One preacher puts it, *he wants to show us Christ as the One who speaks, the One who acts & delivers in the midst of crises.*¹⁷ That is Mark's method of presenting the gospel. Whether we live under Nero's persecution, whether we live during times when Christians were burned at the stake, whether we live in this 21st-century of affluence, in every age, in every circumstance, Christians need to have a fresh focus on Jesus. If we lose focus on Him, we won't be able to stand firm & overcome our trials & troubles. If everything we do in the church isn't Christ-centered, it will be fruitless & vain because Jesus says, **apart from Me you can do nothing** (Jn 15:5). Christ is not only the Christ of the crisis, but He's all action in the crisis. In the same way, today in our crisis, in our persecution, in our difficulties, in our burdens, in

¹⁶ Gregory Aldrete, *Daily Life in the Roman City: Rome, Pompeii & Ostia*, p 22

¹⁷ David Legge, www.preachtheword.com/sermon/mark01.shtml

our struggle to live a godly life, our foundational truth is that Jesus is still our Servant-Savior. That's why in every scene, Mark's gospel is brilliant & vivid & fast-moving. As you read through Mark notice the word **immediately**. This word in the Greek is mentioned 42x in Mark's gospel & only 12x in the rest of the NT. It's all fast-paced & action packed. Jesus' life is portrayed as super-busy & always on the move. As Mk 3:20 & 6:31 say, He even has trouble finding time to eat. What's Mark showing us? He's showing us this is the Servant of the Lord & He's come to serve men at great cost, at great price, at great suffering. He's still serving those in crisis. Christ came to serve & not to be served. As you read, meditate, study, listen, & reflect on Mark's gospel you'll see this Servant Jesus. Why? So that we'll become servants like Him. It will make us servants who don't just run on theory but in action. I believe that if we respond rightly, the freshness & the vigor of Mark will grip us & make us long to serve according to the example of our Lord & Savior, Jesus Christ.

Mark's gospel gives the briefest account of Jesus' death & resurrection & ends abruptly (don't worry, we'll talk about the ending when we get there). Mark's account could be summarized as Jesus rose from the dead like He promised & would meet everyone in Galilee later. The End. There's no after resurrection stories here. To put it in today's terms, Jesus is the Savior of the World. His words & works proved it. So did His resurrection. What more do you need?

My hope & prayer is that, as we study Mark's gospel week after week as a community of Christians, we'll again get taken up by seeing Jesus. As we fix our eyes on Him, through His Word & Spirit, He will touch our hearts, & transform our lives. That's why in Mark's gospel, he uses what Greek experts call the *historical present tense*, that is to say, Jesus comes, not *came*; Jesus says, not *said*; Jesus heals, not *healed*, all in the present tense. This tells us that in the crisis of His life & the life of His disciples, He was active, He was busy, He was moving, & He was doing. In all circumstances of life He is present, active, & doing. That's the message of Mark.

The problem with many of us is this: We want to serve Christ but we just don't want to be treated as a servant, as a slave. We want to be treated like a manager or royalty or treated with dignity & respect. One thing is certain, Mark learned about perfect service through the perfect Servant, the Lord Jesus Christ, the One who stooped to serve in spite of inconvenience & hardship. As Paul says

of Jesus in Philippians: **although He existed in the form of God, He did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant (2:6-7).** That is Christ's humiliation, His condescension. But what about our humiliation? Are we willing to empty ourselves, to die to self, & become servants to serve others? Are we willing to become poor so others might be made rich? Are we willing to endure inconveniences & hardships in our service? & when we fail, are we willing to learn from our failures & get up & move on in the power of Jesus & the Spirit He gives us?

In 1878 when William Booth's Salvation Army had just been named, a man came to England from the US to enlist. He once dreamed of himself as a bishop in the church & he crossed the Atlantic from America to England to become a member of the Salvation Army. His name was Samuel Logan Brengle, & he ended up being the 1st Commissioner in America. But when he 1st came & introduced himself to Booth, Booth accepted his services reluctantly. Booth said to Brengle: *You've been your own boss too long.* In order to instill some humility into Brengle, he set him to work cleaning the boots of the other trainees. Brengle said to himself: *Have I followed my own fancy across the Atlantic in order to black boots?* Then, as if in a vision, he saw Jesus bending over the feet of rough unlettered fishermen, & he said: *Lord, You washed their feet, I will black their boots.*¹⁸

Jesus came not to be served, but to serve. The question for us is this: As we encounter God's Servant King, will we serve Him & serve others as He has called us to do? & when we fail, not if but when, will we get back up & continue to serve Him in His power?

¹⁸ www.kingsleypress.com/samuel-logan-brengle-en.html