

# The Missionary Who Came Back

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

Written By: Pastor John T. Anderson

Delivered On: March 27, 2010

*This Sermon is available in audio format for listening or downloading on our [Audio Sermons web page](#)*

When Lucifer became Satan, through the indulgence of the desire for self-exaltation, he began the process of spreading "the lie." As we discussed last week, there really is only one "truth," and that is the existence, character and ways of God. That is the basic truth of the universe. "The lie" is the rejection of those principles. Therefore, "the lie" that he has been telling people on earth is the denial of the existence of, character of, and ways of God.

In heaven, with regard to the angels before his expulsion, it was impossible to even speak to the first part of "the lie"; that is, in a way contrary to the existence of God. They had seen and known Him. They had witnessed His creative power at work. The devil and his colleagues know most certainly of the existence of the Almighty. "The demons believe and tremble." James 2:19. The demons believe about God; they know He exists, but they don't believe in God. There's a big difference between "believe" and "believe in."

Therefore it was necessary for Lucifer to concentrate on the other, more attainable aspects of "the lie;" that is, to attempt to misrepresent the character and ways of God. He insinuated that He was not a God of love and that His ways were restrictive and binding. They would experience more freedom if they were not accountable to the Law which had governed the universe from the beginning. In the end, it would come to be that the devils would know that God is, but they would have no trust in His character of love and benevolence. They would not believe "in Him."

Knowing that God exists, having faith in and appreciation for His loving character and a commitment to obeying His principles through His grace is the foundation for salvation; it is the reception and practice of "the truth." Throughout the Bible, God's holy Book, there are sermons and stories which beam out information to help us in our growth into the truth, the truth that God is, that that He loves and forgives sinners.

One such story we'll study today. It concerns a man named John. There are several individuals who bore the name of John in the Bible. There was the one named John before his birth by the angel Gabriel, who became the forerunner of Jesus the Christ, immersing converts into the river Jordan as a symbol of their commitment. John the Baptist. There was the John who became one of the twelve, a fisherman who with his brother James was called from their nets to become fishers of men, who wrote a Gospel which bears his name, three letters and the Apocalypse. John the Beloved. Neither of these is the one whose life we'll look at today.

There was another John, but we usually don't know him by that name. Probably to avoid confusion, he is usually referred to by his other name. He was John Mark. What do we know about this John, called most often Mark? We're introduced to him in the Book of Acts with these words: "So, when he (Peter being released from prison by the angel) had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying." Acts 12:12.

John's mother Mary was a convert to Christianity. It was to her home that the early Christians resorted for safety and assembly. Before the days of separate structures owned by Christian churches, it was in the homes of hospitable members that the flock gathered for worship and fellowship. John Mark's mother was such a person. Many have concluded that it was within this home's "upper room" that the disciples had gathered for the "last supper" that Thursday night before Jesus' trial and suffering. Because the text mentions it being "the house of Mary," it appears that she was at that time a widow, John Mark's father having passed away.

With the Church meeting often at his home, John would have had opportunity to become acquainted with the leaders of the fledgling group. He would have personally rubbed shoulders with Peter, James, John and Paul. Could he be the subject of the passage recorded in the Gospel of Mark, which reports that at the time of the arrest of Jesus, "a certain young man followed Him, having a linen cloth thrown around his naked body.

And the young men laid hold of him, and he left the linen cloth and fled from them naked"? We can't say for sure. What does seem factual is that young John had personal acquaintanceship with eyewitnesses to the life and ministry of our Lord. He probably sat spellbound as the stories and lessons of Jesus were told and retold in his living room. The instruction of the Master anticipated the growth of the church. They were to be His witnesses "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." Acts 1:8. This was already beginning to happen as Philip had preached in Samaria and to the treasurer of Ethiopia (Acts 8). Paul, the future herald to the Gentiles had been converted to Christianity (Acts 9) and Peter had been commissioned to share with the Centurion Cornelius in Caesarea (Acts 10, 11). Other outreaches were beginning to form, with believers preaching in Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, though to Jews only at that time. Acts 11:19, 20.

Doubtless when they would return and report, it would be at homes such as the home of Mary the mother of John in Jerusalem. As the church began to contemplate spreading the Word to farther regions and commission apostles for this task, John expressed his interest in joining the work. So we read, "And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their ministry, and they also took with them John whose surname was Mark." Acts 12:25.

Barnabas, a native of Cyprus, was a relative of John Mark. He was John's uncle, and sympathetic to the young man's request to join them in their efforts. He saw in John Mark potential as a Christian worker and leader, and so it was that when the "Holy Spirit said, 'Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'" (Acts 13:2), that John Mark became part of the missionary team. "So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. And when they arrived in Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. They also had John as their assistant." Acts 13:4, 5.

John knew the story of Jesus. His heart had been warmed by the message of hope. He desired to have a part in sharing that message with the world. He had thrilled with the prospect of becoming a part of a team going out and spreading the Gospel. What he had not anticipated was the toil and hardship, the privation and persecution which this endeavor would bring.

In Cyprus they encountered the resistance of Elymas the sorcerer who withstood them in their effort to evangelize Sergius Paulus. The road would become steeper; the path more difficult. Paul speaks of these hardships with these words: "From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils of the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils of the sea, in perils among brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness." II Corinthians 11:24-27.

While Paul and Barnabas overlooked these problems, for the joy of spreading the news of Jesus to all, John became overwhelmed with the difficulties. He shrank from the prospect of future tribulations. Sadly, we read, "Now when Paul and his party set sail from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia; and *John, departing from them*, returned to Jerusalem." Acts 13:13. Though his intentions had been good and honorable, his endurance had run short. He found the path too difficult to travel, the cross too hard to bear. It was not as easy as he thought it would be. The comforts of home beckoned, and he chose to leave the work and return to Jerusalem. John Mark quit.

Some time later, following the church council that is recorded in Acts 15 (A.D. 49), Paul and Barnabas found themselves in Antioch, "teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also. Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing.' Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. But *Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed* from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work." Acts 15:35-38.

With the passage of time, John's faith and maturity grew stronger. He repented of his former misdeed and wished again to work for the Lord in active mission service. Barnabas, his uncle, was inclined to give him another chance to prove himself, but Paul was unable to see that this was a wise thing to do. John had left them once; what was there to suggest that it wouldn't be the same if they took him along again? It wasn't worth the attempt, at least in Paul's mind.

Because of this difference of opinion, there arose a disagreement between Barnabas and Paul concerning John Mark, which escalated to the point that they found themselves unable to work together. "Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God." Acts 15:39, 40. Though it was not God's will that there be disagreement among the brethren, especially

as it became so sharp, He used this to multiply the workers: now there were two teams sent by the church to evangelize.

Paul had given up on John Mark. He had failed. He had not completed his task. He had not finished his course. Paul had no place on his staff for one who had thus fallen. But Barnabas saw potential in John. Though he had made a mistake, there was still hope. It was worth giving him another try. Had not Mary Magdalene fallen many times, and yet Jesus had patiently prayed for her recovery? What about Peter? Had he not denied his Lord with curses and oaths, and yet was he not restored to apostleship? It seemed to Barnabas that John Mark's repentance was sincere and genuine, and that another opportunity to serve should be offered. Paul didn't see it that way, and the two who had been yoked together in ministry, Paul and Barnabas, separated.

Knowing the truth sets us free. Does God give us another chance? Or does He "write us off" after our failures? What does the Bible teach us about His character? From the same mount on which He had thundered His law, God declared His "glory" to be this: "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty." Exodus 34:6, 7.

Yes, it is true that through persistent rebellion one may succeed in beating back the waves of mercy, but that's not easy to do! It takes "work" to do that. It is the "wages" of sin that bring death. Romans 6:23. God's character of love and forgiveness is demonstrated by His giving His only, unique Son to die for our sins, that we might be reconciled, restored to a relationship with Him. Jesus came to save the lost. He came to heal those with spiritual sicknesses. The wise man wrote, "For a righteous man (or woman) may fall seven times and *rise again*." Proverbs 24:16. Does this give us excuse to continue in sin? What does the Bible say? "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?" Romans 6:1, 2.

One of the great chapters of the Bible is I Corinthians 13, sometimes called the "love chapter." In this chapter, God's love is revealed and explained. True "agape" selfless love is defined. Paul is holding high the ideal and challenging us to have the greatest of all gifts of the Spirit, love, controlling our minds and hearts. In his delineation, notice carefully the aspects of God's agape love which underscore His patience and forgiveness.

Because "God is love" (I John 4:8), when Paul in I Corinthians 13 defines what love is, we may put in place of the word "agape" the word "God." After all, He is the epitome, the essence, the embodiment of this agape love. It is true that the Bible says that "God loves." We read that "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." But it goes beyond this. Not only does "God love," more emphatically, "God is love." And because of this, the two terms are interchangeable. Thus in this chapter, in place of reading "love suffers long," we might read, "God suffers long and is kind; God does not envy; God does not parade Himself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek His own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth." See I Corinthians 13:4-6. Every one of these attributes we can see reflected in the character of Jesus, Who came here to tell us about God.

Now notice how God, embodying the essence of this principle of agape love, is revealed to be the eternal Optimist. God "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. God never fails." See I Corinthians 13:7, 8. God doesn't give up, at least not easily. Because He has endowed all with freedom to choose, there will come a time when He will recognize a person's choice to resist Him, but that does not come quickly nor easily. That requires a bitter and fierce battle of the soul to fight back against the sweet, encouraging influences of the Spirit. He is always trying to win us back to Him. Even if we fail miserably, God is still there to try to lift us up and restore us, as He did Peter after his inexcusable denial of Christ; as He did Mary Magdalene, following her frequent failures; as He did Adam and Eve, after their shameful sin. That is God's nature.

John Mark had made a disgrace of his calling to the ministry. Right when the apostles needed his assistance, he had said, "No; I'm out of here. This is not what I had planned. Sorry, this isn't for me. I'm going back." But then, John, reflecting on his error, repented and wished to be reinstated as a missionary. He wanted another opportunity to share Jesus with others. Paul said, "No way." Barnabas said, "Let's give him another try."

We love and admire Paul; what would the New Testament be without his contributions? But in this particular case, whose way better reflected the character and ways of God? Was it the decision of Paul, who had written John off as a total loss, or was it Barnabas who said, "He needs another opportunity"?

What does the name "Barnabas" mean, by the way? Actually it seems that it was more of a nickname than a given name. In an earlier part of Acts we're introduced to him with these words. "And Joses (or Joseph, his given name), who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet." Acts 4:36.

So it appears that this Joseph exhibited in a particularly clear way the aspect of godly encouragement in his character, so much so that the apostles, his peers and colleagues, gave to him the name Barnabas, which is given the definition as "son of consolation" (KJV) or "son of encouragement." In Greek, the name is given as "son of parakleseos," the very word that is used so often of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, the One Who encourages us on our walk. Barnabas became known as "Mr. Encouragement" by his friends because that was what he was always doing. His life was about lifting people up. He demonstrated that part of God's character, the agape love, which doesn't give up easily, the part that "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

Barnabas said to John, "I believe in you. Yes, there might have been mistakes made in the past, but today is a new day. Your future begins now. We'll let the past be the past and start a new journey today. Come with me; we'll win souls for Jesus together." Have you met a Mr. Encouragement in your life? Someone who believed in you and hoped all things for you, though the past was splattered with the ink of failure? God bless those who encourage as did Barnabas! Maybe you can be a "Mr. Encouragement" or a "Mrs. Encouragement" to someone else who has made mistakes.

The story has a happy ending. John did not let them down again. He was faithful in his calling. We discover that Peter established a strong relationship with Mark. When completing his first letter, Peter said, "She who is in Babylon (that is, the church at Rome), elect together with you, greets you; and so does Mark my son." I Peter 5:13. Not in a literal sense, of course. But in the sense of friendship and mentoring. Maybe Mark felt a special kinship to Peter, because Peter had been the one who had denied his Lord but was reinstated.

Tradition states that Mark spent a lot of time with Peter. Papias, Bishop of the city of Hierapolis in the first half of the second century, just a few decades after the Apostle John's death, said this: "And the Presbyter (or "Elder," probably referring to John the Beloved, the last of the apostles to die) used to say this, 'Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered, ... of the things said or done by the Lord. For he had not heard the Lord, nor had he followed Him, but later on, as I said, followed Peter, who used to give teaching as necessity demanded.'"

It is curious that the story of Jesus was told in the Gospels by the disciple Matthew and the disciple John, but not by the outspoken one, Peter. Or was it? Could it be that the Gospel written by John Mark was the "Gospel according to Peter," related to his friend and "son" in the faith, young John Mark? In any case, the one who failed, the one who gave up and left his post, the one some were ready to toss aside, ended up writing the story of Jesus, perhaps the first of the Gospels to be written. Praise God that John returned to serve God! Thank God for the missionary who came back!

The story gets better. Even Paul, the one who had rejected John's offer of service, came to appreciate and believe in him. We read in his final greetings to the church at Colossae, "Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, with Mark the cousin (nephew) of Barnabas, about whom you received instructions: if he comes to you, (what: throw him out? Turn him aside? No!) welcome him." Colossians 4:10. If he comes, welcome him! Paul has had a change in his way of thinking! He now recognizes the value of John's ministry.

As he was nearing the end of his apostleship, Paul requested of Timothy, "Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry." II Timothy 4:11. The New English Bible reads, "Pick up Mark and bring him with you, for I find him a useful assistant." Quite a change from Paul's insistence that John Mark, the drop-out, the quitter, not be a part of the evangelistic team!

Is there a part of your life that reflects the mistakes of John Mark in his earlier life? A turning back from God's calling? I know there is in mine! Thank God that there are "sons of encouragement" still around! Thank God that He "believes all, hopes all, endures all." Thank God that it is still "today," when we may leave the past at Jesus' feet and allow Him to raise us up to new life.

I'm convinced that we are on the very edge of eternity right now. Jesus wants to wrap things up and come and take us home. One of the signs that Jesus gave that His coming was near was the "great earthquake," identified as the great Lisbon earthquake of 1755.

How many people died in the Lisbon earthquake? About 90,000. How many died in the recent Haiti earthquake? The latest figures I've seen are in the 230,000 range, which is about as many as the Asian tsunami of 2004. Tragic, but interesting! If ever there was a time to come back to the Lord and rejoin His service it is now. I have a secret to tell you: His kingdom will be filled with those "who came back." John Mark will be among them. Will you?