

MEET JOHN MARK: AN INTERVIEW

**Presented at the Gospel Fellowship Church, Steinbach, January 2, 2005, by Jack Heppner
(An Introduction to a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of Mark)**

John Mark: played by Jack Heppner

Reporter: played by Sue Unrau

As the scene opens Jack Heppner is seated on a stool on stage. He explains to the congregation that we will be studying the Gospel of Mark between now and Easter. He will tell them that the purpose of this morning's presentation is to meet the writer of the Gospel, John Mark. He will explain that he will play the role of John Mark and be interviewed by a reporter from the Jerusalem Daily post. As a matter of fact he is waiting for the reporter to arrive. At this time Sue enters. After a few impromptu greetings the interview begins.

Let's get one thing straight before we begin. What is your real name?

Some people call me **John**. Others call me **Mark**. Still others call me **John Mark**. I haven't quite figured out what I should call myself. Whoever came up with the idea of giving the same person two names? I haven't quite figured out who calls me by what name. I think when someone calls me John Mark, they feel especially close to me. Putting the two names together seems like a term of endearment. Instead of saying Johnny, they say John Mark. I don't know. But when I think of myself I think of myself as simply Mark. But you can call me what you want. I won't mind.

I understand that you are thinking about writing down the story of Jesus, is that true?

Yes, I admit that idea has crossed my mind many times recently. At first I tried to push it away, but it kept coming back. It almost seemed like God was speaking to me.

But why now, and for whom would you do this?

I think it is time for the Gentiles to get a condensed version of the Jesus story that will make sense to them. You see many Gentiles have already believed in Jesus, and more are showing a keen interest in who he is.

Most of the first believers in Jesus are of Jewish background. They know how God worked through our forefathers like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And they are convinced that Jesus is the Messiah our prophets talked about many years ago. So to them it is quite clear that Jesus is a Jewish Messiah. He came to save his own people.

But we have a problem. Many of the Gentiles are also beginning to believe in Jesus. And they don't know anything about that long story of how God worked in the past. Personally, I think it is important to know about it, but many Gentiles are wondering if they have to know all that history before they can believe in Jesus. I want to write the Jesus story so Gentiles have direct access to him, even if they don't know all about the ancient scriptures.

Did this become an issue for Jewish believers when Gentiles wanted to come directly to Christ?

Oh, yes, this became a big issue for some of the Jewish believers. As a matter of fact, some said that, “Yes, Gentiles could become followers of Jesus if they first became Jews. They should get circumcised, and follow the other commandments God had given to Moses. And then it would be a simple step to believe in and follow the Jewish Messiah.” The Apostle Peter seemed to favor this approach, even though he had had a vision from God which seemed to indicate that Gentiles were not unclean like Jews tend to think they are.

On the other hand, some of the Jewish believers who had seen first hand how eager the Gentiles were to believe in Jesus, wanted them to be able to come to Jesus directly – without going through the rig-a-marole of first becoming Jews. Paul and Barnabas were really high on this idea.

So how did the church leaders handle this division of opinion. It seems to me there were some strong feelings involved.

Yes there were. To get directly to the point, a short time ago we had a big convention in Jerusalem. The main item on the agenda was exactly this question – Can Gentiles become followers of Jesus without first becoming Jews?

Boy, I’ll tell you, the discussion at that meeting became quite heated. When Jews believe something they really believe it, you know. But after Paul and Barnabas told everybody how many Gentiles had gladly received Jesus, good old James came to the rescue. He reminded everybody that our own prophets had predicted that one day Gentiles would come to believe in our Messiah.

He quoted Amos, one of our famous prophets – that part where he says, *After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins and I will set it up, that the rest of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who has made these things known from of old.*

So was everyone fully convinced right away?

Are you kidding? Old ideas die hard for some people, especially traditional Jews. To some it was crystal clear that Gentiles should be allowed into the church without any impediment. They said, “Look, our own scriptures are being fulfilled before our very own eyes.” But others were not that easily convinced. After a lot of discussion we came to a compromise. We agreed to accept Gentiles into our fellowship without them first becoming Jews. But we would ask them to keep just a few laws which are very important to the Jews, like abstaining from pollutions of idols, from unchastity, from what is strangled and from blood. That was a small concession, I guess, in order to get the main verdict to win the day, namely; that Gentiles can come to Jesus directly.

So now everyone was happy?

Well not exactly happy. There were still some uneasy feelings around. Some were afraid that by not first teaching the Gentiles the ten commandments and other laws of God that are still important, they might accept Jesus but keep on living in sin. Of course this never was the idea.

And I hear that James – the guy who helped broker the deal at the convention - is planning to write a general letter to all the churches to remind believers that the decision made in Jerusalem did not mean that you can believe in Jesus and then do what you want – that if you believe in Jesus it must be the kind of belief that is evident in one's actions. That's fair enough. I suppose some people might be inclined to believe in Jesus but not follow his teachings. Good old James - always keeping a balanced perspective!

So your decision to write the Jesus story especially for the Gentiles kind of came out of the convention decision you had at Jerusalem?

Yes, you might say that. I am concerned that the Gentiles don't have a written account of the life of Jesus. Many of Jesus disciples are still living among the Jewish believers, so if they have a question about what Jesus said or did they can go ask them. But the Gentiles don't have access to these eyewitnesses, you see. I think they need a clear, concise story about Jesus in written form. If they don't get that, they will hear so many versions of the story that they will get confused.

So how will you write your story so that it is especially suited for the Gentiles?

For one, it can't be too long. You know how people don't bother to pick up scrolls that are too big. It's got to be short and to the point. Of course that means that I will have to limit myself to how many stories about Jesus I tell and how many miracles and parables I record. You know there were so many I could never use them all. I am sure God will help me pick the ones that will speak most forcefully to the Gentiles.

And I will have to remember not to go on and on about the prophecies which the Gentiles have never heard about. I won't hide the fact that Jesus is the Messiah promised of old, but I won't belabor it either. And I will have to be careful not to use our own butchered version of Greek. You know how us Jews throw in Hebrew words and phrases when we speak Greek? (Just like German speakers do when they speak English.) I will be careful to use proper Greek so the Gentiles don't have to stumble over our often poorly spoken Greek.

How do you plan to keep the reader's attention – so they will keep on reading right to the end?

That's an important point. I will write the story of Jesus like a mystery story. You know, I will throw out some clues about who this Jesus is, and then let the readers guess for a while. It will be kind of a suspense thriller. Everybody in the story will be asking, just like the Gentile readers, "Who is this man?" I will let Jesus words and actions tease them on for a while. Finally as the story begins to wind down it will become more clear that Jesus is the Christ, the one come from God to be our Savior.

And then the ending. Ah yes, how do you end a suspense story. Do you give them all the answers or do you leave some questions unanswered? I know what I will do. I will end the story just after Jesus rose from the dead. I will tell about the women who came to the tomb to anoint his body. How they were surprised to find Jesus alive. How he told them to tell the disciples to go to Galilee to meet him there. And then I will end the story with the women fleeing the tomb in astonishment and fear, not saying anything to anybody. Period.

But why would you end it like that?

I can just see the Gentile readers coming to the end of the story, looking up, and saying, "And then what?" They will want to know more. So they will come running to those who already believe and know more about what happened. And we will tell them more and answer their questions. In that sense this story will be like a gospel tract. Once the reader has met Jesus through the miracles, parables, and selected stories about Jesus - especially the one about how he was crucified and rose again – they will want to know more! And then we can tell them much, much more!

Okay, back to the beginning. How will you start the story. Will you include the story of Jesus' birth?

No, I don't think so. I will skip that part. Readers can learn about that later. I have to get Jesus into action as soon as possible. I will make a few introductory comments about John the Baptist and then I will have Jesus coming from Nazareth to be baptized by John – and the story will be in motion.

Well before you begin writing, tell us a little more about yourself. How did you become so interested and involved in this Jesus movement?

Well, you see, I was a young man living in Jerusalem with my mother Mary during those terrible days when Jesus was tried and killed. Jesus had been to our home a number of times. Our home was quite large so a lot of people could gather there at one time. I had become quite fascinated with him. I also got to know some of his disciples quite well. I got on well, especially with Peter. He seemed to take an interest in me and often answered my questions about Jesus.

Well the night when Jesus was crucified it was dark and the city was tense. I was at home in bed trying to sleep when someone came to our house with the news that a group of soldiers were headed out to the Garden of Gethsemane to arrest Jesus where he had gone to pray with his disciples. I didn't want to miss out on the action. I jumped up, grabbed a linen cloth to wrap around myself and took off to the garden. I guess I should have taken a few minutes to get dressed properly. But I didn't want to waste any time.

I came to the garden just in time for the action. Judas, one of the disciples was kissing Jesus. You could tell it wasn't sincere. It was a sign of betrayal. Peter tried to defend Jesus by waving his sword wildly at the attackers. He managed to cut off the ear of one of the High Priest's servants.

Just as Jesus was healing the ear, I felt someone grab me. They must have thought I was one of the disciples. Well I twisted and turned and got away. But Lo and Behold – I was stark naked. The attacker had my linen cloth. Good thing it was dark so I could find my way home without being seen. Now that would be an interesting tid-bit to include in the story I am writing, wouldn't it? But I won't say it was me. I will just say it was a young man. That will heighten the drama for sure!

We have all heard about how Jesus was crucified. How he was raised from the dead, met with his disciples and then returned to heaven. And everybody around here knows about what happened on the Day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit came upon a group of believers and they spoke in various languages so that everyone who had come to town could hear them telling about Jesus in their own language. We also know that thousands of people believed in Jesus and joined the new movement. With that many people, I bet you had some problems. Am I right?

Of course you are right. Whenever you get so many people together there are bound to be problems. You see, there are two kinds of Jews – the ones who stay in Palestine and speak Hebrew, and the ones who live throughout the Roman empire and speak mostly Greek. These are known as Hellenistic Jews. Over time some cultural differences had developed between these two groups. And that spilled over into a quite a spat when it seemed to some that the widows in the Hellenistic group didn't get fair treatment. That's when they started the tradition of appointing deacons to make sure everyone got treated fairly.

But as I said earlier, there was a bigger problem brewing on the horizon – namely, whether Gentiles could become followers of Jesus without first becoming Jews. I've already told you about the convention in Jerusalem that addressed that issue. But I should tell you a little more about how I got caught in the middle of this dispute.

I can't tell you the whole story here, but I will tell you enough so that you get the picture. After persecution arose in Jerusalem, many followers of Jesus fled in various directions. Wherever they went they talked about Jesus.

Is that when they started telling the story to Gentiles?

Well, yes. Take Antioch for example, north of Jerusalem. Quite a few Gentiles began to believe in this Jesus there. Barnabas was one of the leaders of the group there. Everyone called people belonging to that group Christians, because they saw that they were followers of Christ.

Wasn't there another leader up there named Saul, or Paul, or something like that? What about him?

What about him? He was one of those people persecuting the Christians most zealously at first. However he made a big turn around after God met him on the road to Damascus. This all took some time, but eventually Saul, who later was called Paul, ended up as one of the leaders of this largely Gentile church in Antioch. One time, after visiting Jerusalem, Barnabas and Paul took me back with them to Antioch. I don't know what they saw in me. I was a Hebraic Jew, as was my mentor, Peter. I think they wanted me to get a first-hand view of how Gentiles were coming to Christ. They must have seen how enthusiastic I was and thought that they could use me in the ministry there. Or maybe they thought once I was convinced, I would convince the Jerusalem church that the Gentile Christian movement was okay. I'm not sure.

But the big convention hadn't happened yet at this point, right?

That's right. There was still a lot of uneasiness around the question of Gentiles becoming Christians without first becoming Jews. I knew that my mentor, Peter, really struggled with this one. His mind said "Yes," because of a vision he had had, but his heart continued to say, "No, that is too radical a move!"

Did you find yourself torn on this question yourself?

Yes, I admit that I was torn on this question too. I saw what God was doing among the Gentiles in Antioch, but I also knew that Peter was not fully in tune with this new direction. And I respected Peter very much. One day the church in Antioch felt the Holy Spirit directing them to set aside Barnabas and Paul to go on a missions trip to the Island of Cyprus and then north to the mainland and the regions of Pisidia and Pamphilia. And, they took me along as a side-kick. With the uncertainty I was feeling I didn't know how things would go, but I agreed to go along, nevertheless.

I had a good time with these missionaries, but when I saw how the Gentiles on the Island of Cyprus were turning to Christ, I really started to get uneasy. What would Peter and the others in the Jerusalem church say about this. I loved Barnabas and Paul, but I also loved Peter who had taught me so much about Christ. I wondered whether there would be a split in our church – one denomination made up of Jews and the other Gentiles. I saw this shaping up. When we left Cyprus to sail north to the mainland, I had quite a discussion with Barnabas and Paul on board the ship. I thought we should talk to the Jerusalem believers before charging ahead into more Gentile territory. Barnabas seemed to understand my concern, but Paul was actually quite put off by them.

It seems that you felt quite strongly about this issue, right? So what did you do?

Yes I felt strongly that the Jerusalem Church should be in on this. So when we landed at Perga, I immediately took a ship headed for Jerusalem. I needed to talk this over with Peter.

When I got to Jerusalem and told Peter what God was doing up north, he decided to go to Antioch to see what was going on among the Gentiles for himself. At first he was quite pleased and seemed to be open to this new movement. He even ate with the Gentiles. But when some of Peter's Jewish friends came up north too, probably to check up on him, Peter kind of withdrew from the Gentiles fearing what these friends would think.

Well, wouldn't you know it? Just while this was happening Barnabas and Paul returned from their mission trip. And Paul saw right away how inconsistent Peter was and took him to task in front of the whole church. This really hurt Peter. I could see that this thing was going to explode! And so did some of the other leaders in Antioch. So it was decided that Barnabas and Paul would go down to Jerusalem to discuss this divisive issue with the church there.

So your were kind of caught in the middle, you might say?

Yes, I guess you could say that. I really didn't want a split in the church. I could see the arguments on both sides. And I could feel them in my guts too. Anyway, that is how it happened that we had this big convention in Jerusalem, which I told you about earlier, where it was decided that the Gentiles could become Christians without first becoming Jews. I think if I hadn't said anything, and kind of forced both sides into a dialogue about the issue, the church might have split in two. Nobody wanted that – neither Peter nor Paul.

So now both you and James are starting to write about the Jesus movement.

Yes, I am getting ready to write down the Jesus story so that Gentiles can understand it. And James is writing his cautionary letter to make sure that no one takes the decision at the Jerusalem conference as an excuse to continue living in sin if they claim to be believers. We both have our task to do, and I think they are both important.

So is Paul okay with you now?

At this point it seems that Paul doesn't quite trust me yet. Barnabas is different. I am sure he would be ready to take me with him on a second missions trip, but I doubt that Paul would. He's still smarting a bit about my tattling on him when I deserted Barnabas and him on the first missions trip. Actually Paul has already written to the churches in Galatia – you know the ones he started on that first missions trip - not to believe those Jewish brothers coming around who still are trying to get them to become Jews before becoming Christians. He tells them in the letter not to pay attention to them because they are free to come to Christ directly.

Do you think that things will change between you and Paul down the road?

Yes, I am sure that with time Paul and I will become close friends again. I have a hunch that one day, down the road, I will get a message from Paul to come and join him in the ministry, or maybe to minister to him. I hope this hunch is true. I really do love him, as I do Peter. Yes they have different tendencies because they have had different experiences and personalities. But I am sure that by God's grace we can all stay together as the one true church of Jesus Christ. I feel like I am standing in the middle, in a way. "Mark in the Middle!" That sounds like a nickname I could live with.

Now will you please stop asking me questions so that I can get to my writing project writing down the Jesus story for the Gentiles. "In those day Jesus came from Nazareth into Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan..."

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