

Who was John Mark in the Bible?

John Mark, often just called Mark, is the author of the gospel of Mark. He was a believer in the early church mentioned directly only in the book of Acts. John Mark is first mentioned as the son of a woman named Mary (Acts 12:12), whose house was being used as a place for believers to gather and pray. Later, Mark is mentioned as a companion of Barnabas and Paul during their travels together (Acts 12:25). John Mark was also Barnabas' cousin (Colossians 4:10).

John Mark was a helper on Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey (Acts 13:5). However, he did not stay through the whole trip. John Mark deserted Paul and Barnabas in Pamphylia and left the work (Acts 15:38). The Bible does not say why Mark deserted, but his departure came right after a mostly fruitless time in Cyprus (Acts 13:4-12). Only one conversion is recorded in Cyprus, but there had been strong demonic opposition. It could be that the young John Mark was discouraged at the hardness of the way and decided to return to the comforts of home.

Some time later, after Paul and Barnabas had returned from their first journey, Paul expressed a desire to go back to the brothers in the cities they had previously visited to see how everyone was doing (Acts 15:36). Barnabas agreed, apparently upon the provision that they take John Mark with them. Paul refused to have Mark on the trip, however, citing Mark's previous desertion. Paul and Barnabas had a "sharp disagreement" about John Mark (verse 39) and wound up separating from each other and going on separate journeys. Barnabas took John Mark with him to Cyprus, and Paul took Silas with him through Syria and Cilicia to encourage the believers in the churches in those areas (Acts 15:39-41).

Barnabas, the “son of encouragement” (Acts 4:36), desired to forgive John Mark’s failure and to give him another chance. Paul took the more rational view: pioneering missionary work requires dedication, resolve, and endurance. Paul saw John Mark as a risk to their mission. Luke, the writer of Acts, does not take sides or present either Paul or Barnabas as being in the right. He simply records the facts. It’s worth noting that, in the end, two groups of missionaries were sent out—twice as many missionaries were spreading the gospel.

John Mark sails off to Cyprus with his cousin Barnabas, but that is not the end of his story. Years later, he is with Paul, who calls him a “fellow worker” (Philemon 1:24). And near the end of Paul’s life, Paul sends a request to Timothy from a Roman prison: “Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry” (2 Timothy 4:11). Obviously, John Mark had matured through the years and had become a faithful servant of the Lord. Paul recognized his progress and considered him a valuable companion.

John Mark wrote the gospel that bears his name sometime between AD 55 and 59. There could be a veiled reference to John Mark in Mark 14:51-52. In that passage a young man, roused from sleep on the night that Jesus was arrested, attempts to follow the Lord, and the mob who had Jesus in custody attempts to seize him. The young man escapes and flees into the night. The fact that this incident is only recorded in Mark’s gospel—and the fact that the young man is anonymous—has led some scholars to surmise that the fleeing young man is actually John Mark.