

# 2000 Advent Week 4 - John Mark

by John Piper

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*John Mark's great mistake was his fear of change and peer pressure, but he changed after hearing the truth and experiencing the love and freedom that came from God.*

**Duration:** 16:24

**Scripture:** Amos 9:12, Acts 12:12, Acts 15:36-41, Ephesians 6:4

**Topics:** "Overcoming Fear", "Trust God"

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## Description

In this sermon, John Mark shares a personal story about a mistake he made fifteen years ago. He recounts how the apostle Paul suggested they travel to Cyprus together, but John Mark's fear prevented him from going. He reflects on the various forms of fear he experienced, including fear of mobs, fear of change, and fear of losing his status as a chosen people. However, he eventually realized that his fear was a mistake and that God had set him free from it. The sermon emphasizes the importance of trust and overcoming fear in order to fulfill God's purpose.

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## Transcript

The Advent poem this morning is built again on an imaginary scene from the life of John Mark. John Mark wrote the Gospel of Mark. He also had a mother named Mary who owned a house in Jerusalem, we learn in the Book of Acts.

There was a servant in this house named Rhoda, a servant girl. The setting that this poem takes is the early sixties, first century. In Timothy's house in the city of Ephesus with Timothy's children sitting on the hearth in front of John Mark.

John Mark sat by the winter flames in Ephesus with little James and Mary on the floor in front of him and watched the children hunt for words to ask why tears ran down his smiling face. He held a brown and beaten parchment in his hand and fingered tenderly the band that Timothy had broken just an hour before. Oh, sweet, sweet trust, he thought.

Is there a taste among mere men more pleasant than the tongue of one dear friend who says to some self-doubting soul, I trust you. Come and be my toil and battle mate and let us venture something great. He closed his eyes and let his mind imagine ending well, refined but not defeated by the fear of man.

His faithful wife sat near him on the hearth and understood more deeply than an angel could or any man because it touched the woman in his life who clutched the hope of love long scorned more than it touched the feeling of a man. At last the little James found words. Sometimes my daddy says the birds don't sow or reap but God takes care of them and they have clothes to wear and food to eat so you don't need to be afraid.

When I learn how to read, he told me yesterday, you might be finished with your book. At night, he said, he'd read me lots of things that Jesus said. My daddy brings me up to bed at night and lays his hand here on my head and prays and blesses me.

He said that when he has your book, he'll bless me then with lots more words of Jesus. I sure hope you're not too sad to try to finish, Mr. Mark. That's what the children called John Mark and not with first names.

Timothy had taught them fearlessness was not the same as disrespect and that a name and title take more pluck and poise in youth than treating men like boys. What makes you think, young man, that I'm afraid? John Mark replied, one time my daddy was afraid to tell the silversmiths that if they sell their images and don't trust Jesus Christ, they'd miss eternal life. And later, I could hear him through the floorboard cry.

And when I saw your tears tonight, I thought that maybe it was fright and you remember being scared and then felt sorry. John Mark stared at James and Mary on the floor and marveled. Young man, you know more at five than most men know who live to be ten times your age.

So give thanks, son. Your father cares enough to show his heart and doesn't bluff his way around the truth. You've been well taught.

But even now, and in a family like this, there might be something you can learn tonight. Then Mary spoke. Our daddy said that we don't have to go to bed so long as you tell stories and we stay awake and I can stand up if I have to so I don't get sleepy.

Then James added, won't you tell us, Mr. Mark, why you were sorrowful but smiling through your tears? And why the parchment there is special? John Mark was aware of Rhoda's eyes. They seemed to say, John, tell these little ones the way God made a marriage in a man. So John Mark leaned down and began, well, children, let me tell you first a big mistake.

One of the worst I ever made some 15 years ago. God set me free from fears that I had felt through all my life and gave to me a godly wife. The great apostle Paul told me in Antioch, he thought that we should go together on the sea to Cyprus, Barnabas and he and I, because I knew the laws and customs there and Jesus was unknown.

I grew up there, a strict and kosher Jew and never kicked against the rules. I never shook an unclean hand. I never took a meal with Gentiles all my life.

At this point, John Mark saw his wife wince as she always did at this point in the story. But the kiss that flew between their faces fell like petals from a rose, pastel and sweet, and sailed like laden ships with fragrant smiles across her lips. And so we set out for the King of Kings and preached Christ through a string of synagogues and saw the Word awaken hundreds when they heard that Jesus the Messiah came, just like the prophet Micah's claim in Bethlehem, and that He died the way Isaiah prophesied for sins, and how on Him God laid all our iniquity, then made Him rise up from the dead, prolong His days forever, put a

song in all those who believe, and count them righteous from an endless fount of grace.

My days on Cyprus passed in joy and harmony. At last we sailed from Paphos on the western coast, and then at dawn the next day, Paul and Barnabas and I and those who went with us from Cyprus landed on the coast of southern Asia where the boast of raw Pamphilian sin was bold, and Perga's pagan priests extolled the goddess Leto, Mother of the World, they said, and here is where I made my great mistake. I watched the trade of leadership from Barnabas to Paul, the younger man, and thus from that day on Paul preached, and I was stunned at how he reached out to the Gentile pagans there and ate with them, and didn't care if he had washed his hands.

He talked to merchants on the Sabbath, walked among the prostitutes, ignored the dietary laws, explored the pagan temples and their shrines, and with the gospel quoted lines from godless heathen poetry, and preached that we are free from Jewish ways and even loosed from circumcision, he reduced the whole demand of how someone is justified with God, and none of all these laws the least avails but this alone, our faith. It fails to honor Moses and the law, I thought. That was my dreadful flaw and my big mistake.

What happened then, James said? I left the team, and when I got home to Jerusalem, I told the elders, all of them, what I had seen, and they began to plan a team to go and teach in Antioch that no one preach in Jesus' name that Jewish laws are cancelled now. A lengthy pause revealed that Mary there was sound asleep, but little James was wound up like a spring and said, Were you afraid you might be wrong? It's true what Paul was saying, isn't it? It is. And ever since I quit, I knew the bottom of my great mistake was not the worth and weight of truth, but fear, just like you said.

The many forms of fear and dread. The fear of mobs in Perga. Fear of elders and apostles near my home that I have known for years.

Fear of change and fear of peers, and deep, deep down the fear that Jews might have to eat with Greeks and lose our vaunted eminence among the nations and the glory sung for centuries that we alone of all the peoples could be known by God's electing grace. So then, said James, how did you change? And when did you feel free from fear? Two ways, my little sage. The first displays the power of truth well voiced.

And second, how the Lord rejoiced to free me from the reflex of disgust and put a kind of love here in its place that I doubt not will last forever. First, Paul got a chance to make his case before the elders on the council floor there in Jerusalem. And I heard truth so mighty and so high, it filled the room with light.

And then James, Jesus' brother, spoke. And when he did, I broke. He quoted from the prophet Amos.

There will come a day, he said, when God will take from all the foreign tribes and make a dwelling for His king and call them by His name and they will fall in worship as the Israel of God in Christ and He will dwell with them and they with Him and there will be one flock and they will wear one righteousness. My arguments collapsed and fell just like the tents of Midian. And I told Paul that I was wrong.

He said, for all you've done, I do forgive you, Mark. But you must show that this new ark of truth can float. And so we went our separate ways.

And Jesus sent to me a liberty I would not thought was possible. And could not have in any other way. James interrupted him to say, Is this the other thing God did for you, the way you said, to rid you from the reflex of disgust? It is, my little James.

And trust me here, this was the sweetest pain and surgery I'll ever gain. I fell in love with Rhoda, James. The boy looked up and saw the flames of love in Rhoda's burning eyes.

She was, John said, a precious prize I never wanted, little James. Why not, the boy inquired. It shames me just to speak the truth, John said.

Because she was a Greek. And bred with Gentile blood. And servant girl who cleaned our house.

A hidden pearl behind polluted hands. And I avoided her. Until the sky of my deceit and arrogance came crashing down at once.

And suddenly, I loved what I once called a swine. And found to my astonishment that she had long loved me in spite of all my wrong. So James, that was the fatal thrust against the reflex of disgust.

And there she sits, my liberty. The servant girl that set me free. Now all one heard was crackling fire.

And then James spoke. May I inquire once more tonight? The parchment, sir? What's that? This, James, is like the myrrh the wise men brought to Jesus. Or like honey, sweet to taste and more to be desired than precious gold.

It is a priceless letter rolled and sent from the Apostle Paul. He tells your dad, give Mark this call. I want you here in Rome, he wrote.

Because I've seen the ark does float. And now on Christmas Eve, we light the candle here and pray. Oh, might the holy flame of truth burn bright.

And here consume the works of night. And may the doctrines that we trace advance the purposes of grace. And all the wisdom from above promote the great designs of love.

And so may everyone be meek. In Christ there is no Jew or Greek. And may we too be freed from fear.

And every race be welcome here.

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