

Acts 13:13-52 God at Work!

Introduction

At the beginning of June 2010 around 300 representatives of the broadest range of Christian Churches ever assembled in one conference met in Edinburgh to celebrate the successes and overcome the failures of our Christian predecessors who met in the same city one hundred years earlier. In the course of the five days of the event delegates sensed something of the changes in world Christianity over the last hundred years. Here we were as representatives of churches in which approximately two billion people find their spiritual homes, with the task of addressing some of the challenges before us that prevent us from completing the fulfilment of the Great Commission of Jesus in our generation. There was a powerful sense of the weakness of the Church in the West. The iconic photograph displayed on the screen of a Presbyterian Church in Scotland during Sunday morning worship, in which the many pews were largely empty and the three members of the congregation hard to spot, was contrasted (at another session) with the equally powerful image of a packed Yoido Full Gospel Church, Seoul, Korea, for one of its several Sunday services, in a venue larger than Scotland's biggest football stadium. The gasps from different delegates at both these (to them) incomprehensible scenes told a story of the state of the Church of Jesus Christ in different parts of the world. The high hopes of Edinburgh 1910 for Asia have been fulfilled to a significant degree. There was a clear, but mostly concealed sense of frustration by African delegates that the extraordinary growth of the Church on their continent was given less recognition than it deserved in 2010, and not seen as much of an improvement on 1910. One of the biggest failures of 1910 was to see how God would work in Africa through ordinary national believers who would be the most effective missionaries in reaching their fellow Africans for Christ. In our world God is at work! The question before us is simply this: God is on a mission to redeem a people to Himself and a world for His glory, Will you join Him in fulfilling this task? Will you participate in the calling entrusted to every Christian? What has happened in our generation or in recent generations is only possible because previous generations of Christians took seriously their responsibilities to take the gospel to the nations, proclaiming the lordship of Jesus Christ over all nations, cultures and creeds. At the very beginning of this mission was the ground-breaking and pioneering work of Saul and Barnabas as missionaries sent out from the Church in Antioch.

1. The Setting (Acts 13:13-15)

(a) **The hazardous journey** *From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). Paul and Barnabas had been preaching in Barnabas's home country of Cyprus. Now for the second leg of their first missionary journey they travel to Paul's own native land of Turkey. The comparatively long boat trip was followed by a twelve mile walk to the Pamphylian town of Perga. To get to the Turkish town of Antioch involved an arduous walk of around one hundred miles across the Taurus mountains through 'bandit country'. Listen to these words of Paul in his second letter to the Church at Corinth. *I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger**

from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. ²⁷I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked (II Corinthians 11:26-27).

Map of West and Central Turkey in New Testament times



While in Perga young John Mark decided that it was time to go back home to Jerusalem; In Luke's account here there is no hint of the reason for his departure or any indication how the older men viewed his decision. However, in Acts 15:37-38 some insights are given into John's possible motivation: ³⁷*Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, ³⁸but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had **deserted** them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work.* Paul's choice of wording to refer to Mark's departure is emotive and strong. We have no clear explanation, but it is not difficult to conjecture that he might have been homesick, missing his family and their comfortable home in Jerusalem with various servant to cater for their needs. Here Mark was fulfilling that role. Did he hesitate at the thought of the lengthy, lonely and dangerous trek over the Taurus Mountains, sleeping rough along the way? Coming from a conservative Jewish background did he fear the unknown that lay ahead of him in visiting Gentile communities where Jews might be few in number and influence? Or was it the unhealthy climate of the south Galatian coastal plain around Perga that was too much for him? We have no idea if Mark or Barnabas contracted some kind of illness like malaria, but Paul certainly did. Chronic malarial fever was rampant in that area and probably necessitated their decision to engage in the demanding climb to the cool area and climate of the Taurus plateau around 3,500 above sea level. Paul hints at this problem in his letter to the churches of south Galatia some years later: *As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you. ¹⁴Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself (Galatians 4:13-14).* (b) **The difficulties of missionary service** It is very likely that Paul and Barnabas carried out little or no evangelism in Perga due to the health problems experienced in that area. When we pray for our missionaries overseas try and put yourself in their position with respect to the health issues they might

experience in another climate; the cultural challenges of another society; the relational problems of life in another part of the world, all in addition to the usual issues relating to sharing our faith in Jesus with people yet to come to Christ. We can so easily imagine that Paul and Barnabas wandered steadily without any pressures from town to town and city to city planting churches experiencing a pretty good welcome from the vast majority of people, even if they did not wish to become believers! This could not be further from the truth. Missionaries to Africa, for example, prior to the Twentieth century were reputed in many cases to have taken their coffins with them knowing that their life expectancy was around eighteen months to two years in places like the Gold Coast (Ghana). The extraordinary phenomenon that took place, though, was that when news of the death of one group of missionaries came back to the United Kingdom that other families volunteered to take their place. That self-sacrificial spirit, more than anything that was spoken, was the most powerful witness that resulted in due course with many people in the tribes of that region becoming followers of Jesus Christ. Too often we can think if I cannot utter the gospel in wonderful theological language or have an answer to some of life's most challenging issues then my witness will be defective! This is so untrue. The vast majority of people in our land may never have known let alone thought much about the intellectual issues you may have struggled over. They are often much more interested in how the gospel we profess relates to the problems of everyday life. In our contemporary society many people with a post-modern mindset will major on their experience of Christians and their relationships with them much more than theological doctrine and church practices that may be very important to practising Christians. The Christian Church in the twentieth century grew most rapidly in Africa. One revealing finding that has emerged from research into the reasons for this growth is that the most effective evangelists were not the missionaries from overseas, though they played an important role; it was not the theologically trained pastors and other church leaders, though they too made a major contribution; most of all it was the unknown members of congregations witnessing to their families and friends and work colleagues who came to faith through them. The missionaries and church leaders were needed of course, but leaving evangelism and witnessing to them as 'professional Christians' / 'experts' results in a church that will have little impact on the wider community. It is a team effort with every member a missionary at home or overseas and every worshipper a witness to the reality of the transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. (c) **The place where God's power would be evident** (Acts 13:14-15) Pisidian Antioch was located in the province of Galatia, although its language and sense of identity appeared closely bound up with Pamphylia its southern neighbour. As in Cyprus Paul and Barnabas began in the synagogue and accepted an opportunity give to them to proclaim the good news to the people present. *From Perga they went on to Pisidian Antioch. On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down. ¹⁵After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue rulers sent word to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak."* (Acts 13:14-15). We too must pray for opportunities to share our faith, but be warned God may want to use you in unexpected places and with people you least expected to be interested in Jesus.

2. The Sermon (Acts 13:16-41)

The guests were warmly received at the synagogue in Antioch. It is understood that their usual pattern of worship on the Sabbath was to begin with public prayer then a lengthy reading from the Torah (Genesis to Deuteronomy) then one from the Prophets (second section of the Hebrew Bible); following on from this a sermon would be preached. Local lay elders would normally fulfil this responsibility, but a suitable guest might be invited to preach in their place as happened on this occasion. It is most probable that the invitation was addressed to Barnabas as the elder guest, but although I believe that he did the majority of the preaching in Cyprus from this point onwards he allowed Paul to take the lead. The younger man having learned from Barnabas how to approach the different ministry opportunities. The invitation in verse 15 is for *a message of encouragement for the people*. They were not expecting their guests to cover whatever Biblical topic they might have addressed as local elders, instead giving Paul, in this case, the freedom to choose his own selection of Scripture verses for comment. Notice how Paul is very conscious of two groups of hearers present in the synagogue, *Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God* (Acts 13:16). The first category are the Jewish men who were expected to be present each Sabbath; Jewish women who took the lead in family devotions and festivities in the home were not necessarily required to attend. The second group seated at the back or more likely in a balcony were the 'God-fearers'. These people were non-Jews who were attracted to the high moral lifestyles of the Jews and their family values and their faith in the one true God. However, they were unwilling to adopt all the ritual practices and ceremonies of the Jews. These people would be the most responsive recipients of the preaching of the Early Church. They were the gateways into the wider Gentile communities. After the first generation of Jewish converts from around 30-70AD the number who received Jesus as their Messiah was negligible until the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A legacy of anti-semitism in so-called Christian nations undoubtedly played a large part in this decision to reject the Lord of these so-called Christians. However, by the 50s AD Paul was acutely aware of the decline in receptivity in Jewish communities. His explanation in his letter to the Romans (chapters 9-11) was enormously helpful to the Christian Church that struggled to grasp why this problem had arisen, given that Jesus and all His early followers were Jews.

(a)The Promise –pointers towards Jesus (Acts 13:17-25) ¹⁶*Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: "Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me! ¹⁷The God of the people of Israel chose our fathers; He made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt, with mighty power He led them out of that country, ¹⁸He endured their conduct for about forty years in the desert, ¹⁹He overthrew seven nations in Canaan and gave their land to his people as their inheritance. ²⁰All this took about 450 years."After this, God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet. ²¹Then the people asked for a king, and He gave them Saul son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, who ruled forty years. ²²After removing Saul, He made David their king. He testified concerning him: 'I have found David son of Jesse a man after My own heart; he will do everything I want him to do. ²³"From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Saviour Jesus, as He promised. ²⁴Before the coming of Jesus, John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel. ²⁵As John was completing his work, he said: 'Who do you think I am? I am not that one. No, but he is*

coming after me, whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.' Paul was declaring in essence that Old Testament history leads to Jesus. In a short survey from the time of Abraham to the present day Paul stated that these key individuals prepared the way for the coming of Jesus in accordance with the predetermined will of God. 'He chose' 'He made' 'He brought' the sovereignty of God in this process is indisputable. The prophecy in II Samuel 7 of King David having a descendant who would reign *for ever* (II Samuel 7:13) pointed forward to the first coming of Christ and then to His future eternal reign; even a prophet as recently as John the Baptist who had followers all over the known world, including in Ephesus, in western Turkey (Acts 19:1-6). If all these people prepared the way for Jesus –ought we to follow Him also?

(b) **The Proclamation –fulfilment in Jesus** (Acts 13:26-37) ²⁶"Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. ²⁷The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning Him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. ²⁸Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have Him executed. ²⁹When they had carried out all that was written about Him, they took Him down from the tree and laid Him in a tomb. ³⁰But God raised Him from the dead, ³¹and for many days He was seen by those who had travelled with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now His witnesses to our people ³²"We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers ³³He has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: "'You are my Son, today I have become your Father.'" ³⁴The fact that God raised Him from the dead, never to decay, is stated in these words: "'I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.'" ³⁵So it is stated elsewhere: "'You will not let your Holy One see decay.'" ³⁶"For when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed. ³⁷But the One whom God raised from the dead did not see decay. After the teaching of Paul had been explained he made a personal challenge to his hearers in Acts 13:26: *Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent.* Now that we know the truth we have no excuse for not believing it. Have you trusted Jesus? Hearing about Him is not enough, you must take the next step and entrust your life to Him. The religious leaders and their followers in Jerusalem rejected Jesus and conspired with Roman Governor Pilate to murder the Lord of heaven and earth, but God raised Him up on the third day, hallelujah! The first followers of Jesus had a duty to pass on the good news *They are now His witnesses to our people* (Acts 13:31); that responsibility to share the gospel with others passes on to each follower of Jesus. Paul then moves (Acts 13:32) to include himself: *We tell you the good news.* In the 19th century Scottish evangelist Brownlow North (1810-1875) was used by God to lead many people to faith following his conversion in 1854. This wealthy young man, educated at Eton, considered becoming an Episcopal clergyman, but could not identify any sense of call and was turned down by his local bishop-and rightly so as he was unconverted at the time! After his conversion he became a passionate open air preacher and evangelised wherever he had opportunities, being recognised as an evangelist by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1859. In that same year, 1859, in Northern Ireland and Scotland, he preached to crowds of many thousands and God used him as part of the means that brought the extraordinary revival first experienced on the eastern seaboard of the United States to the United Kingdom. On one particular occasion North preached a particularly solemn sermon against an unconverted minister for leading his congregation astray and risking their eternal damnation for failing to preach Christ as the only hope of salvation for sinners. Jesus is still the hope of the world. We as Christians have this wonderful gospel to proclaim –may the Holy Spirit give us the

boldness to proclaim it in a clear, wise, gracious and appropriate manner to the people around us.

(c) **The Provision –saving faith in Jesus** (Acts 13:38-41) *"Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. ³⁹Through Him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses. ⁴⁰Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you:⁴¹" 'Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you.'* The sermon concluded with a personal appeal for each of his hearers to respond to Jesus. Knowing about Jesus is not enough we must crown Him king of our lives; placing Him on the throne of our lives. Only through Jesus can our sins be forgiven. He makes plain and so must we that Jesus alone reconciles humanity with the Father. Peter, in Acts 4, in the context of explaining to the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem how a lame man had been totally healed, said these words: *Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! ⁹If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, ¹⁰then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. ¹¹He is" 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone' ¹²Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."* These words are not popular today in our secular society. However, as Christians the challenge is this: are you willing to risk the unpopularity of the world and retain the favour of Jesus or do we want to risk losing His favour to please other people? We must express the truth in a gracious manner, but as Paul explained to the Corinthian Church: *we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (I Corinthians 1:23-24).* Have you trusted Jesus? If you have are you praying for other people to trust Him too? Are you praying that God will provide natural opportunities for you to witness to your faith in Christ?

3. **The Sequel** (Acts 13:42-52)

(a) **God's grace accepted** (Acts 13:42-44) ⁴²*As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. ⁴³When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God. ⁴⁴On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.* The initial response in this synagogue was extraordinary. Paul was invited back to preach the sermon the following week. It appears that many of those present had been converted to follow Jesus. Many others were deeply moved and challenged to take this step of faith. Why did almost the whole city turn up a week later? Because enough people present told their families, their work colleagues and their neighbours and had pointed them to Jesus also. When the extraordinary power of God in revival visits a town or neighbourhood or district it is not only people in churches who are impacted by the Holy Spirit; every citizen becomes conscious of the extraordinary events taking place in their midst, so they are without excuse. May He give us a sense of expectancy to believe that we too will see many people coming to faith in Him, even in this community; that God can use even you and me to be the means through whom some of these people come to faith in Jesus.

(b) **God's grace rejected** (Acts 13:45-46) ⁴⁵*When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying. ⁴⁶Then Paul and Barnabas answered*

them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. If all the people who didn't know Jesus in our community showed up one Sunday morning how would we react to the logistical challenge? The tragedy here was that it led to jealousy amongst many of the Jews who did not want large numbers of outsiders (Gentiles) coming into their place of worship and getting converted because it would change forever the nature of their congregation. Sadly too many of them would rather have had no conversions of Gentiles, so that their ways of worshipping and community life could have continued unchanged for years to come! These people made God and His human representatives angry as God passionately wanted more people to come to faith in Him. In II Peter 3:8-9, in a context where Peter is explaining why Jesus had not already returned to earth, declared: *But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.* What a sad situation for these particular Jews in Pisidian Antioch. God was working in their community in an extraordinary way yet they couldn't see what He was doing? May He deliver us from ever opposing His work, because it is inconvenient or uncomfortable for us? May He also deliver us from apathy and thinking that revival cannot happen again in our land! Yet may we never be presumptuous about our own responses. The people most opposed to what God was doing in Pisidian Antioch were included amongst those who were most faithful in attending the synagogue; what a tragedy to be so religious yet missing what God wants to do with your life because you have failed to place your trust in Him as your Lord and Saviour. Praise God, though, that this was not the end of the story.

(c) **God's grace acknowledged** (Acts 13:47-52) ⁴⁷*For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."* ⁴⁸*When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honoured the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.* ⁴⁹*The word of the Lord spread through the whole region.* ⁵⁰*But the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region.* ⁵¹*So they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium.* ⁵²*And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.* Luke's concluding summary records many Gentiles being converted; much persecution of those faithful to Christ and a determination to continue proclaiming Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Their key verse in this final section is Acts 13:49: *The word of the Lord spread through the whole region.* The world was hostile to Jesus and it led to His crucifixion. The world hasn't changed much since then, but Jesus' circumstances have! From a place of humble service washing the disciples' feet (John 13:1-17), Paul noted that: *God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father* (Philippians 2:9-11). It may never be your calling to serve as a long-term overseas missionary, but all of us are called to be His witnesses at home here in this community in Scotland. May we, like Paul and Barnabas, be found faithful in the tasks to which we have been appointed, for Jesus' sake Amen.