

Armagh Baptist Church  
Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> February 2010 - 11:00am

**Acts 15:36-16:10 – ‘Turning Obstacles into Opportunities’**

**Introduction**

I received the following story by e-mail during the week:

*In ancient times, a King had a boulder placed on a roadway. Then he hid himself and watched to see if anyone would remove the huge rock. Some of the King's wealthiest merchants and courtiers came by and simply walked around it. Many loudly blamed the King for not keeping the roads clear, but no-one did anything about getting the stone out of the way.*

*Then a peasant came along carrying a load of vegetables. Upon approaching the boulder, the peasant laid down his burden and tried to move the stone to the side of the road. After much pushing and straining, he finally succeeded.*

*After the peasant picked up his load of vegetables, he noticed a purse lying in the road where the boulder had been. The purse contained many gold coins and a note from the King indicating that the gold was for the person who removed the boulder from the roadway.*

*The peasant learned what many of us never understand:*

***Every obstacle presents an opportunity to improve our condition.***

I tell you that story this morning to get you thinking, because the title for my message this morning is **‘Turning Obstacles into Opportunities.’**

This morning we come to the end of Acts ch.15 and the beginning of ch.16. Acts 15 closes an important chapter in the early church, as it has settled once and for all the foundational truth of the Gospel – that it is by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, that anyone can be saved – whether they are Jew or Gentile. It is not the case that Gentiles have to become Jews, by being circumcised, in order to become Christians. No, each of us can come direct to Christ, no matter what background or culture we were born into. So having settled that issue, Paul is now full of fresh enthusiasm to get back out there, to see as many people as possible come to faith in Christ, from the Gentile world.

So Acts ch.16 starts a new era in the early church: Paul's Second Missionary Journey. It's on this journey that he brings the Gospel to our Continent – the Continent of Europe.

But the whole venture was nearly aborted because of obstacles.

Let's see how God was able to turn those obstacles into opportunities.

The first obstacle was:

**1. A Disagreement between God's Servants (15:36-41)**

Paul and Barnabas have been working together for quite some time now. Their partnership in the Gospel has known much blessing from the Lord.

We first came across Barnabas back in Acts 11:19-24, when Barnabas was serving the Lord as a man of God in his own right. He was an encourager, a spiritual man, a good man – a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. Indeed we could say that Barnabas was a man with a pastor's heart, who not only wanted to see people coming to faith in Christ, but he wanted to see them growing in grace and in their knowledge of God and His Word. He had a desire to see new believers built up in terms of their faith and discipleship.

A prime example of this was when Saul of Tarsus himself was converted on the Road to Damascus. Nobody in the Church wanted anything to do with him. They were still frightened and wary of him as their arch-persecutor. But it was Barnabas who took Saul under his wing and introduced him to the Church in Jerusalem. Later in Acts 11:25 it was Barnabas who found a niche for Saul to serve the Church in Antioch, as a Bible teacher. In those days Saul played 'second fiddle' to Barnabas. (Acts 11:26,30; Acts 13:1-2).

But in Acts 13:7-9 Paul comes to the fore during their visit to Cyprus, as part of their first missionary journey together. For the first time their names are reversed, for the first time they appear in Scripture as Paul & Barnabas, whereas before it had always been Barnabas and Saul. We discover the reason why in Acts 14:12 - Paul had come to the fore because he was the more gifted speaker – a preacher and teacher. He was the up-front man, whereas Barnabas was more a behind the scenes one-to-one encourager.

Now in Acts 15:36 we discover that Paul is very definitely taking the lead.

We read that *'some time later'* it was Paul who said to Barnabas,

*'Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.'*

So Paul takes the initiative to suggest a return visit to the new churches they had recently planted in Asia. His idea was probably to make the journey back by land this time, through Tarsus in Cilicia (Paul's home town), then up through the Taurus Mountain range and into Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Antioch up on the plateau – the last four churches they had planted together. This was a good idea, so Barnabas at first agrees to go.

But a disagreement then arises over who should go with them on the journey. Who should they take along as helpers, or as apprentice missionaries, for some on the job missionary training?

Barnabas wants to take John Mark with them. Remember him?

John Mark was the one who had deserted them on their first missionary journey, just after they had finished in Cyprus.

Barnabas seems prepared to give him a second chance – but Paul wasn't! We don't know why Paul was so obstinate about this, but he was. There was no way, as far as he was concerned, that John Mark was coming with them!

And we're told that they had such a sharp disagreement / falling out, that they parted company! How sad it is, when believers fall out with each other and head off in different directions, with unresolved issues between them.

I remember when we were only 3 months into our series of Sunday afternoon fellowship meetings in a farmhouse near Killeshandra, Co Cavan. Everything had been going well. We had expected about 16 to turn up on the first day, but to our amazement 42 turned up and packed out that farmhouse on the very first occasion that we ever met back in March 1992 – almost 18 years ago! We continued to see 30-40 people attend throughout those first 3 months, but when we called our first meeting to discuss the way ahead and where we were going, 2 or 3 people in particular got up and started to criticize the way everything was being done. *'We weren't reading from the right Bible, and we were singing from the wrong hymn book, and we had a different philosophy of the Christian life than they had!'* So obviously they were right and we were wrong, as far as they were concerned! That meeting threatened to wreck the first attempt at a Baptist Church there had ever been in the heart of Ireland. There was nothing prior to that from Sligo on the West Coast to Dundalk on the East Coast or from Enniskillen to Athlone. And yet they wanted to wreck it because we weren't doing things their way! They had only come to live in the area a matter of months previously. The rest, who felt they had been living in a spiritual desert up until that time, couldn't have been happier about what we were trying to do.

Did we give up? No way! We pressed on with what we were doing, and how we were doing it, and before the year was out we had formed a Church with 14 foundation members and had started to meet in the Farnham Arms Hotel in Cavan town. Because from that moment onwards, we had refused to let an obstacle stand in our road, instead we used it as an opportunity to unite around what was really important and move on. Those people turned out to be blessed subtractions, and today there is a church in Cavan with 100 people meeting on a Sunday.

The lesson is that disagreement shouldn't destroy a work for God. In fact it can become an opportunity for even greater work. And that's what happened on this occasion back in Acts ch.16. The result of Paul & Barnabas falling out was that two mission teams headed out instead of one! (Look at vs.39-40). Paul's attitude in the light of all of this can be seen in Philippians 1:12 & 18.

What matters is that the Gospel continues to advance, and that Christ is preached – even by those who may disagree with us on minor issues! When we part, our attitude should be, 'the Lord bless them anyway!'

So the first obstacle was a disagreement between God's servants. But God used it as an opportunity for 2 mission teams to go out instead of one. This created a further opportunity:

## **2. An Opportunity to discover New Talent (15:39-16:5)**

As I said, two teams head off from Antioch instead of one. Barnabas took John Mark and headed to his home territory of Cyprus (v.39). Paul took another young man called Silas and heads north through his home territory (Tarsus in Cilicia) to Derbe & Lystra as planned (v.40-41). Again they were commended by the brothers in Antioch to the grace of God.

If there never had been a rift between Paul & Barnabas I wonder whether these younger men would ever have got their opportunity to serve the Lord in this way.

But it wasn't just John Mark and Silas, there were 3 young men altogether who got an opportunity to learn alongside these seasoned missionaries: John Mark went with Barnabas, Silas went with Paul, but very soon they were joined by another one in Lystra: Timothy (Acts 16:1-3a).

### **(i) John Mark (15:37-39)**

Back in Acts 12:12 we saw that the early church met in John Mark's mother's home in Jerusalem. She was called Mary. Acts 13:5 - John helped on the first missionary journey with Barnabas & Saul. Acts 13:13 – he had deserted the team as soon as they reached Pamphylia. We know from Colossians 4:10 that John Mark was the cousin or possibly nephew of Barnabas. So there was a family tie there that kept Barnabas very loyal to John Mark, even though he had deserted the first missionary team.

Although Paul didn't want him on his team second time around, because he was unreliable, later Paul's opinion of John Mark changed completely: In Colossians 4:10 he gave him a warm recommendation, and in 2 Timothy 4:11 at the end of his own life, Paul was able to say he was grateful for him.

You see, the Apostle Paul didn't always get it right. He wasn't '6 foot above contradiction'. He needed the grace of God as much as anybody else to cover his sins and his bad judgement. Barnabas had been right to give John Mark a second chance to prove himself. And in the end John Mark proved his worth. He became a writer – writing the Gospel in our Bibles that bears his name!

Maybe you feel like a John Mark here this morning? Maybe you feel that you have failed, or let the Lord or someone else down in the past? Don't give up. Don't wallow in the past. Pick yourself up and remember that God deals with you in his grace. He doesn't treat you as maybe some others think you should be treated. He will pick you up and brush you down, and give you another opportunity to work for him in the future. Failure is never final with a God of grace! Maybe you need a Barnabas to come alongside you and let you spread your wings again? Maybe then God can give you useful ministry in the future?

### **(ii) Silas (15:40)**

We first came across Silas in v.22 of Acts 15. There he was appointed as one of the trusted representatives of the Jerusalem Church to accompany the letter they were sending out to all the other churches about the truth of the Gospel. So Silas himself must have been widely respected and trusted within the church, not only in Jerusalem, but more recently in Antioch also (v.32-33).

In Acts ch.16:19-25 we will see him being tortured in Philippi alongside Paul. He'll have his back ripped open as he is flogged for being a Christian, and he will join with Paul in singing hymns to God at mid-night in a prison cell. What an experience! And then he'll survive an earthquake to go on to preach the Gospel and see more people converted to Christ. He wouldn't be afraid to risk his life for the Gospel. He will eventually preach the Gospel in Corinth (2 Corinthians 1:19), but one thing about Silas was, he was absolutely faithful and steadfast throughout, no matter what came his way (See 1 Peter 5:12).

### **(iii) Timothy (16:1-3)**

We know that Timothy was a young man, but he has been a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ at least since Paul & Barnabas first visited his town of Lystra on their first missionary journey. He was the son of a Jewish mother who was now a believer in Christ, but his father was from a Greek or Gentile background, and we're not told that he was a believer. So Timothy probably knew what it was like to come from a divided home – were his mother and indeed his grandmother taught him the Word of God, but his father doesn't seem to have been interested in the Gospel.

We're told in v.2 that Timothy was very highly spoken of by the brothers in his home churches of Lystra & Iconium. Maybe he had preached for them sometimes? But it was probably this recommendation that gave Paul the desire to bring Timothy along with him on his mission trip? (v.3a)

But in the light of what we looked at last Sunday morning in Acts ch.15, what Paul does next doesn't seem to make sense! For some reason Paul decided to have Timothy circumcised, before he came with them on their trip. Why? Well, because his father had been a Gentile, Timothy would not have been

circumcised as a child. So in effect, even though he had a Jewish mother, he would not have been brought up as a Jew in terms of rules and regulations.

Although Acts ch.15 settled the question that circumcision was not necessary or essential for salvation, Paul felt it was necessary from a pragmatic point of view to have Timothy circumcised so as not to be a stumbling block to the Gospel in that particular area. Timothy's father seems to have been well-known in the area, so everybody would have known that he was a Gentile, and that Timothy therefore would not have been circumcised.

Paul didn't want this to cause offence or to be a further barrier to any Jew in the area from coming to faith in Christ, so he had Timothy circumcised before he joined the mission team. This would enable him to be an effective witness to both Jews and Gentiles equally about the Grace of God that was now available through simply hearing and believing the Gospel. This ties in with Paul's adage in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 *'I have become all things to all men, so that by all possible means I might save some...'*

By Philippians 2:22 we discover that Timothy has already proved himself in God's work in many churches: Corinth, Philippi, Thessalonica and Ephesus. So the fact that he hadn't been circumcised, which might have been an obstacle to the Gospel for some, had been taken out of the way, and Timothy had become a real power for good in many new churches along the way.

So the major obstacle of Paul & Barnabas falling out in Acts 15, has become a tremendous opportunity for younger men to cut their teeth in Gospel work, and as a result, as well as two mission teams going out instead of one, 3 young men got their opportunity to use their God-given gifts and talents in the advance of the Gospel across the Mediterranean world. God makes no mistakes! Likewise today, we shouldn't be afraid to give younger people opportunities to prove themselves in the Lord's Work. Here in the local church is where we should be training young people, so that eventually as God calls we can send them out to serve him in other places. So let's give young people as many opportunities as we can here in this fellowship to grow in grace, and to exercise their gifts and abilities for God's service. And maybe that means that from time to time older people who have been holding the reins for a long time, need to lay them down, and allow younger people to take their places. In that way they don't become an obstacle to progress, instead they make way for opportunities for younger people to serve, and the church to move forward.

Finally this morning, I want you to notice how:

### **3. Obstacles make way for an Opportunity to discern God's Will (16:6-10)**

The focus is on Paul's team, not Barnabas, as the book of Acts continues.

Paul's team now consists of himself and Silas, together with Timothy, and if you look closely you'll discover that another person is present as well – Dr Luke, the writer of this book, seems to join them in Troas in vs.10-11. Up until this point in vs.6-9 the story is being told in the third person: Paul and his companions did this, and 'they' did that. But from v.10 onwards it changes to 'we' – so Luke, the author, has joined them for the remainder of the journey. He doesn't make a big deal about it, but it does mean that he is now an eye-witness of a lot of the stories that will now follow.

The original aim of Paul's mission was stated in Acts 15:36

*'Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.'*

Well this is now fulfilled in Acts 16:6 when Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia. These were the regions in which they had planted the churches on their previous missionary journey.

But the question is - Where did God want them to go next?

There were plenty of possibilities – after all there was a whole world needing to hear and believe the Gospel! Technically they could have gone anywhere, but would that have been God's Will for them? Well, first of all, they faced...

#### **(i) Plenty of Obstacles – Closed Doors (vs.6-8)**

Where did they try to go to?

Well, they tried **Asia**: to the West – 'prevented by the Holy Spirit.' No (v.6)

They tried **Bithynia**: to the North – 'spirit of Jesus did not allow them.' No (v.7)

They then passed by **Mysia** – to the South – another No (v.8)

And so they arrived in **Troas** – to a dead end – it was a sea-port - right on the edge of Asia! (v.8)

It was all closed doors, one after another, no matter which way they turned!

*'The Spirit may have led in any of a number of ways: vision, circumstances, good sense or use of the prophetic gift'* (NIV Study Bible).

I think they could have been asking lots of questions in their team-times now:

- Was God still with them?
- Was He still going to use them?
- Had that dispute back there with Barnabas, robbed Paul of God's blessing? – No – it hadn't!

Because just then God gave them one wide open door of opportunity:

#### **(ii) One Opportunity – an Open Door (v.9)**

It was to Macedonia and Europe that God wanted to them to go next – to open up a whole new Continent to the Gospel, for the first time! What a privilege!

God gave Paul a vision or a dream at night, and in that vision or dream, Paul could clearly see a man from Macedonia standing calling to him,

#### ***'Come over to Macedonia and help us!' (v.9)***

When Paul woke up, he took it as a clear message from God, and he and his team simply *'concluded'* that if this door opened as they pushed it, that this was where God wanted them to go to minister for him next.

***'Concluding that God had called us to preach the Gospel to them.'* (v.10)**

We had that kind of experience this week. Some of you will know that we had been trying to sell our house over the last couple of months. As you know it's not a good time to be selling houses, in the middle of a slump in the housing market. But by God's grace we have managed to do it, and buy another one!

We put our house in Craigavon on the market just a couple of weeks before Christmas. We never got any interest at all until Saturday two weeks ago. A Chinese family came to view it, and they were very impressed. They made an offer of our asking price on the Monday after that and we accepted it.

Then we had to find another house to buy in this area. Some of you will know we had been looking at a new house just across the way here, but it got too dear. So more recently we were looking at 2 houses – one in Richhill and the other in Markethill. So we started to bid on the Richhill bungalow first and got to our final offer and left it there last Friday. First thing on Monday morning, a first time buyer came in and offered them their asking price, and we weren't prepared to go above that. So on Monday we put the same offer on the second house in Markethill and by Tuesday morning, our offer had been accepted. So it was a case of two doors closing, and one opening wide for us. So for some reason God wants us to live in Markethill, but maybe that ties in with our 3 target areas in '20:20 Vision': No.1 here in Armagh City, No.2 in South Armagh, and No.3 to the rest of the world. Maybe this is confirmation this is where God wants us to focus our attention in the coming days.

#### **Conclusion:**

From Revelation 3:7-8 we discover that an open door is a God-given opportunity for us as a church to step through in faith.

From 1 Corinthians 16:8-9 we see that open doors bring their difficulties too!

Our God is in control of obstacles AND opportunities.

Our God closes doors he doesn't want us to go through, and he opens the door that He does want us to go through with the Gospel.

Are you facing obstacles? Then wait for God to open his door for you.

But let's not allow obstacles to defeat us in God's Work either!

Let's see them as opportunities for God to reveal His Will to us instead!

