

Lesson Text

Acts 13:1-12 (NIV)

¹ Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. ² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

⁴ The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. ⁵ When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper.

⁶ They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, ⁷ who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. ⁸ But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. ⁹ Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, ¹⁰ "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?" ¹¹ Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun."

Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. ¹² When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

Today's Lesson Aims

- **Learning Fact:** To recall the events from the beginning of Paul's first missionary journey.
- **Biblical Principle:** To trust the Holy Spirit's guidance to discern the will of God.
- **Daily Application:** To pray for the Holy Spirit's empowerment for bold witness in the week ahead.

Power Hour Lesson
Summary for
December 10, 2017

"Faith to Discern"

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Acts 13:1-12

Background Scripture:
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Devotional Reading:
Psalm 146

Introduction

Plot Twists

A mark of a memorable movie is the unexpected plot twist. The story of the film seems to be heading in an expected direction until it takes an unanticipated turn that keeps moviegoers thinking about it long after. In *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), Luke Skywalker battles Darth Vader, whom Skywalker believes murdered his father. But in a surprising plot twist, he learns that Darth Vader *is* his father! Astronaut George Taylor believes he is in an alien world in *Planet of the Apes* (1968). He (and the audience) is shocked to discover that he is actually on a future Earth nearly destroyed by humans and overthrown by apes. And who can forget the film *Psycho* (1960) in which the murderous mother turns out to be none other than Norman Bates himself!

Real life has its share of the unexpected as well—plot twists. We can react to those moments with surprise, with despair, or in any number of other ways. The apostle Paul was successful because his reactions to the unexpected were based on knowing God, who stands above all plot twists.

Lesson Background

Time: A.D. 47-48

Place: Syrian Antioch

In Acts 8-12 Christians began to move out from Jerusalem as persecution and other circumstances scattered them. Acts 13-21 is a bit different as it identifies three distinctive missionary journeys of the apostle Paul and his companions. By the time of the episode in the current lesson text, Paul (known as Saul at the time) was linked with Barnabas by the need to assure the Jerusalem Christians that their former persecutor had become a faithful believer in Jesus (Acts 9:26, 27). Barnabas was already notable in the Jerusalem church for his generosity (4:36, 37).

After the gospel spread to Antioch, Barnabas invited Paul to join him there as a teacher in the church (Acts 11:19-26). Antioch, where the text begins, was a major city in Syria; we take care not to confuse it with a different Antioch of Acts 13:14. Syrian Antioch featured a multiethnic population and was one of the largest cities of the Roman Empire.

As the gospel spread to the city, both Jews and Gentiles became believers. This multicultural group found itself living in fellowship. As a famine approached, they generously provided relief for their fellow believers in distant Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-30). Such a background prepared the church at Antioch well as the first to send missionaries to share the gospel with people in other places.

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1. What group of leaders were empowered by the Holy Spirit to lead the church at Antioch of Syria? (Acts 13:1)

We are introduced to a group of five leaders *in the church at Antioch*. The term *prophets* indicates those inspired by God to speak for Him. Modern readers of the Bible often associate prediction of the future with prophets. But the biblical prophet is more a “forthteller”—someone who proclaims God’s truth, though sometimes that truth does deal with the future. *Teachers* are those who instruct others in the Christian message.

The text identifies some as prophets and others as teachers, and the book of Acts understands their work to be empowered by the Holy Spirit, who enables the church to speak the message of God truly and boldly (Acts 2:17-21).

The first and last names on the five-person list are already familiar in the story; they are about to become the focus of the narrative. In between are three names that demonstrate the diversity of the multicultural Antioch church. *Simeon*, also called Niger, had a Jewish first name and a Latin (that is, Roman) nickname meaning “dark-skinned,” indicating he might have been from Africa. While the modern notion of race did not exist in the biblical world, peoples from Africa south of the Sahara commonly migrate to the Mediterranean region and are well known in the world of the Bible. Simeon may be such a person. Some have suggested that he may have been Simon of Cyrene (c.f. Mark 15:21) who carried Jesus’ cross.

Lucius is a Greek name, and he is said to come from *Cyrene* (compare Luke 23:26; Acts 2:10), a region of North Africa to the west of Egypt (approximately where modern Libya is). So two of the leaders of the church in Antioch are likely from Africa (compare Acts 11:20).

Manaen is described as having *been brought up with Herod the tetrarch*, also known as Herod Antipas. A tetrarch is someone who rules a fourth part of an area, and this particular Herod rules Galilee and Perea from 4 B.C. to A.D. 39 (Luke 3:1). He was the son of so-called Herod the Great (reigned 37-4 B.C.; see Matthew 2:1-19). Herod the tetrarch is known for beheading John the Baptist (Matthew 14:1-12). Having been a childhood companion of Herod Antipas, Manaen clearly comes from the upper echelon of wealth and power. His presence shows that the gospel is penetrating all segments of the population.

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2. What results from the prophets' and teachers' focused worship with prayer and fasting? (Acts 13:2, 3)

The scene is that of church leaders joined in focused worship with fasting. Fasting is associated with seeking God's will in some texts (examples: 2 Chronicles 20:3; Luke 4:1, 2) and with mourning in others (examples: Esther 4:3; Matthew 9:15).

Either or both reasons for fasting may hold true here. A mournful fasting is appropriate given the church leaders' realization of the lost state of Jews and Gentiles who do not know of the salvation that is now available from God through fulfilled promises in Jesus. During this time of fasting *the Holy Spirit* designated Barnabas and Saul to become the first actual missionaries. The content of that communication is a summons for two of their number to be shared with the world at large. The others are to ratify and support God's summons. The purpose is clear: to push forward God's program of witness to Christ to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Exactly how God reveals His message to the teachers and prophets is not explained. But how the leaders respond is emphasized: they obey fully. Continuing their prayer and fasting, they place hands on Barnabas and Saul in a way that shows that they pray for God's blessing and power to be with them (compare Acts 6:6; 1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6; Hebrews 6:2). With that, the two missionaries depart, not knowing what lies ahead.

3. How did Barnabas and Saul (Paul) begin their missionary journey? What standard practice do they establish for their preaching? (Acts 13:4-5)

Underlining the Holy Spirit's calling, the text now describes the movements of Barnabas and Saul. *Seleucia* is the harbor city on the Mediterranean coastline that serves Antioch, which lies a dozen or so miles inland. From Seleucia the missionaries sail southwest about 130 miles to a harbor on *Cyprus*, a large, well-populated island. Barnabas is on his home territory here (Acts 4:36), a fact that may provide the reason for traveling there first.

Salamis is the easternmost harbor city on Cyprus, closest to the point from which the two have sailed (See Set 18, Map#119, "The First Missionary Journey of Paul." To begin their preaching ministry *in the synagogues of the Jews* will become Paul's standard practice in the years ahead. Synagogues are the perfect places for preaching the gospel. Faithful Jews gather there on the Sabbath for worship. Those gathered already believe in the God of Israel, and they are waiting for God's promises to be fulfilled.

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Acts 13:1-12

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The person named *John* who accompanies the two is John Mark (see Acts 12:12, 25; 15:37). Like many Jews of the day, the man has both a Jewish name and a Greco-Roman name. His Jewish name John (meaning “the Lord is gracious”) is from the Hebrew; the Roman name Mark (meaning “a large hammer”) is from Latin. He is a cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10), and would later write the Gospel of Mark.

Recognize Roadblocks: Acts 13:6-8

4. What roadblock did the ministry team encounter when they arrived in Paphos? (Acts 13:6)

Paphos is located on the western end of Cyprus (see Bible Map#119). The straight-line distance between Salamis and Paphos is about 88 miles. But curving, hilly roads make the travel distance more like 115 miles. After a preaching journey of unknown duration, the team encounters a figure common to the Greco-Roman world: *a sorcerer* (compare Acts 8:9).

Sorcerers present themselves as having the ability to manipulate unseen beings and forces of the spirit world. Reciting long incantations, using potions, performing strange tasks—such are their stock-in-trade. Sorcery is witchcraft, forbidden to the people of Israel (Leviticus 19:31; Malachi 3:5; etc.).

This sorcerer goes by two names. We see his Jewish name here: *Barjesus*. From Aramaic, it means “son of Jesus.” This does not refer to Jesus of Nazareth, of course, as the name Jesus (derived from the name Joshua) is common. The man’s Greek name is given in verse 8. Jesus’ warnings regarding false prophets apply (Matthew 7:15-20).

5. What was the role of the sorcerer, and why did he resist the gospel message? (Acts 13:7-8)

Barjesus is an attendant of the court of a Roman official. The provinces of the Roman Empire are governed by local rulers who have pledged loyalty to Rome or by those appointed by the emperor or Senate. As a senate-appointed governor, *Sergius Paulus* is politically the most powerful man on Cyprus. The missionaries apparently are having such an impact on Cyprus that they come to this official’s attention. So he seeks to *hear the word of God* from them firsthand.

The gospel represents a threat to the sorcerer, whose Greek name we now see as *Elymas*. If Sergius Paulus is to be persuaded by the message brought by the missionaries, Elymas will have to lose influence and position. The power behind the gospel leaves no need for any competitors.

So Elymas resists the message that Barnabas and Saul bring, perhaps by interrupting and challenging them as they speak with the governor. As is so often the

Power Hour Lesson
Summary for
December 10, 2017

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Psalm 146

case in the New Testament narratives, resistance to the gospel arises from attempts to hold on to power (examples: John 11:48; Acts 19:23-27).

Counter Settled: Acts 13:9-12

6. How did Paul respond to Elymas the sorcerer? (Acts 13:9)

This is the point in Acts where *Saul* begins to be known as *Paul*. Along with this change in designation comes a switch in the order of names: henceforth “Barnabas and Saul” (Acts 11:30; 12:25; 13:1, 2, 7) becomes “Paul and Barnabas” (in Greek, Acts 13:43, 46, 50; 15:2 [twice], 22, 35, 36; exceptions: 14:12, 14; 15:12, 25). This likely indicates a change in leadership as Paul becomes viewed as “the chief speaker” (14:12). And in the verse at hand, it is Paul who confronts the antagonist. *Filled with the Holy Spirit* is an expression the author uses to indicate that a bold act of speech is pending (Luke 1:41, 67; Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31). With eyes focused on the sorcerer, Paul is set to deliver to Elymas a stark message from God.

7. What accusation does Paul make of the sorcerer? What was ironic about Paul’s accusations? (vs. 10)

Paul addresses the man with terms that accuse him of dishonesty and deception. The sorcerer’s claims are a shallow fraud. Any power that he exercises other than mere sleight of hand involves the power of *the devil*, the deceitful adversary of God and humanity. To be an *enemy of everything that is right* is to oppose God’s plan to make the world right, a plan coming to its fulfillment in Jesus

The sorcerer twists with his charades the straight, true paths that God has created.

8. What judgment did Paul pronounce as a sign on Elymas? (Acts 13:11)

Now Paul pronounces the that *the hand of the Lord is against* Elymas. Paul rebukes his perversion of the truth and strikes him with temporary blindness (for a season), and the sorcerer *groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand*.

God’s purpose in this event is to demonstrate to Elymas and those around him how wrongheaded is his opposition to the gospel.

9. How did the Roman governor respond to the act of God placed on Elymas the sorcerer? (Acts 13:12)

Whether Elymas changes in his opposition to the gospel, the book of Acts does not say. We simply know that each time in Acts where messengers of the gospel encounter those who engage in witchcraft, the gospel prevails.

Power Hour Lesson
Summary for
December 10, 2017

“Faith to Discern”

Lesson Text:
Acts 13:1-12

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Whatever the case with Elymas, the Roman governor Sergius Paulus does indeed come to faith. As the text describes it, his faith follows his witnessing the power of Christ over the sorcerer. But it is not simply the miracle that impresses him: Paul's teaching about Jesus fills him with astonishment that drives him to faith. The greatest work of God is not vanquishing the magician opponent, but raising Jesus from the dead.

Paul recognized that Elymas was a child of the devil (John 8:44), and he inflicted blindness on the false prophet as a judgment from God. This miracle was also evidence to Sergius Paulus that Paul and Barnabas were servants of the true God and preached the true message of salvation (Acts 13:12; Hebrews 2:4). The Roman official believed and was saved.

What Do You Think?

- What can we do to achieve more diversity in church leadership?
- How can the church do better in the area of prayerful decision making?
- What principles of and places for successful evangelism can we draw for today from the actions of Barnabas and Saul?
- What circumstances today call for strong confrontation rather than a gentler approach, if any? Why?
- What are some ways to present the gospel that will cause unbelievers to take notice?

Points to Ponder

- Prayer and fasting focus us on discerning God's will, and can allow the Holy Spirit to empower us to speak the Word of God boldly! (Acts 13:1-3).
- Being obedient to the Holy Spirit allows others to be blessed as well (vs. 4, 5).
- Resistance to the gospel often arises from attempts to hold on to power (vs. 6-8).
- The enemy doesn't stand a chance against the power of God! (vs. 9-11).
- There is no distance too far for God to save even one soul! (v. 12).

Conclusion

God's Surprises

- How has your life been different from what you expected a year ago? 10 years ago? How has your life been different from what you expected when you came to faith in Jesus?

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- When we ask ourselves such questions, we may feel disappointed that we did not follow through in pursuing goals and dreams. Some of us may feel disappointment with God, that He did not deliver in the way we had hoped.
- But if we ask the question differently, perhaps our feelings will change. How has God worked in your life to accomplish His purpose in the last year, or 10 years, or since you came to faith in Jesus? While He may not have done with us what He did with Paul, through the Holy Spirit God is shaping us and using us to reclaim rebellious humanity. As He does so, He usually surprises us.
- How can we respond to such surprises? Like the leaders in the Antioch church, we need to share God's perspective on our broken world, ready to be His instruments by the Spirit's power in the next surprising situation. We need to accept each situation that lies before us as filled with potential for service in Christ's name. We need to trust the power of God's Holy Spirit to work in us when we know we are inadequate for the task. We need to act by a faith that sees God at work in even the most surprising circumstances.

Prayer

- Dear Heavenly Father, may we trust in the Holy Spirit's guidance rather than our own planning as we serve as Your instruments in the various moments of life. Teach us to follow Your Son as we live in uncertainty at times. We pray this in His name, Jesus. Amen.

Thought to Remember

- Success depends not on knowing what comes next in each chapter of our lives, but rather in knowing the Author of our story.

Anticipating the Next Lesson

- Next week's lesson is "**Faith to Persevere**" and describes the experiences of Paul and Barnabas and their faithful persistence in challenging circumstances. Study Acts 14 and Colossians 2:6-7.

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Psalm 146