Faith to Discern

Acts 13:1-12

SS Lesson for 12/10/2017

Devotional Scripture: Phil 1:9-11

OUTLINE

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Key Verse: Acts 13:12

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

Commentary from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

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Introduction

Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson
The lesson examines the hardships Paul and Barnabas encountered as they displayed their Faith to Discern. The study's aim is to recognize that there will always be opposition to the preaching of the gospel. The study's application is to learn from the example of Paul and Barnabas how to serve the Lord in missions.
(Adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary)

Key Verse: Acts 13:12
Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had been done, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

13:1. The church at Antioch now became the base of operation for Saul’s ministry. Jerusalem was still the mother church, but the missionary church was Antioch on the Orontes River. Furthermore, Peter was no longer the central figure; Saul became that. The diversity in the backgrounds of the leaders of the church at Antioch shows the cosmopolitan nature of the church. Barnabas was a Jew from Cyprus (4:36). Simeon was also a Jew, but his Latin nickname Niger not only indicates he was of dark complexion but also that he moved in Roman circles. He could be the Simon of Cyrene who carried Christ’s cross (Matt. 27:32; Mark 15:21), but this is highly debatable. Lucius was from Cyrene in North Africa (cf. Acts 11:20). Manaen had high contacts for he had been reared with Herod the tetrarch, actually Herod Antipas, who beheaded John the Baptist and who treated the Lord so shamefully at His trial (see the chart on the Herod family at Luke 1:5). One in that court (Manaen) became a disciple; the other (Herod) an antagonist! At the end of the list, for he was last on this scene, was Saul, a Jew trained in Rabbinical schools. Despite their variegated backgrounds, these men functioned as one. Perhaps the name of Barnabas appears first in the list because as the delegate from the mother church in Jerusalem he held the priority position.

13:2. Evidently God made His will known by means of the “prophets” in the church (cf. v. 1). Frequently in Acts the Holy Spirit gave directives to God’s leaders (e.g., 8:29; 10:19; 13:4). Here He directed the five, while they were worshiping... and fasting, to set apart for Him Barnabas and Saul. Once again the principle of two men working together is underscored. The verb “set apart” (aphorizō) is used of three separations in Saul’s life—at his birth he was separated to God (Gal. 1:15); at his conversion he was set apart for the gospel (Rom. 1:1); and in Antioch he was separated for a specific service (Acts 13:2).
13:3. The church leaders placed their hands on Barnabas and Saul and sent them off. The laying on of hands identified the church with their ministry and acknowledged God’s direction for them (cf. Ananias’ identifying himself with Saul by laying hands on him, 9:17). Two of the choicest were sent on this significant mission.

13:4. Directed by the Holy Spirit (cf. v. 2) they first went down to Seleucia, a seaport 16 miles from Antioch, and sailed from there to Cyprus. This island, known in the Old Testament as Kittim (Gen. 10:4), was the homeland of Barnabas (Acts 4:36). This implies Barnabas was the leader of the party (cf. the order of names in 13:2, 7).

13:5. Salamis was the largest city in the eastern half of Cyprus. Evidently a large number of Jews resided there, for Barnabas and Saul proclaimed God’s Word... in the... synagogues, not “a” synagogue. There was wisdom in going to these religious centers: (1) It gave priority in that generation to the Jews receiving the gospel first (cf. Rom. 1:16; Acts 13:46; 17:2; 18:4; 19:8). (2) Gentiles in the synagogues would be a fruitful field for sowing the gospel because they would already be acquainted with the Old Testament and its anticipation of the Messiah. John Mark, a cousin of Barnabas (Col. 4:10), was with them as their helper (cf. Acts 12:25). What is meant by the term “helper” (hýpēretoû) is debated. Probably he instructed new converts, assisted in baptisms (cf. 1 Cor. 1:14-17), and helped in any way he could.

13:6. The results of the ministry in Salamis are unstated. Paphos, 100 miles southwest of Salamis and the seat of the provincial government, was their next point of ministry. What took place here is of great significance in the progression of the gospel to Gentiles. At Paphos, Barnabas and Saul met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus. The word “sorcerer” (magos) could describe a counselor or honorable gentleman (e.g., the “Magi” in Matt. 2:1, 7, 16) or it could refer to a fraudulent wizard, as here. It is related to the verb “practice sorcery” (mageuô) used of Simon (Acts 8:9).

13:7. It so happened that Bar-Jesus was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. This sorcerer was greatly threatened by the intelligent proconsul’s interest in the gospel. Proconsuls were governors appointed by the Roman senate; procurators, on the other hand, were appointed by the emperor. Three Judea procurators are mentioned in the New Testament: Pontius Pilate (A.D. 26-36), Antonius Felix (A.D. 52-59?), and Porcius Festus (A.D. 59-62).

13:8. The sorcerer... tried to turn the proconsul from the faith.

The name Elymas is something of a problem. Probably it is a Semitic word meaning “sorcerer,” which was given or taken by him as a nickname.

13:9. At this juncture Saul, now for the first time called Paul, stepped to the fore and assumed leadership. He probably was more aggressive and also knew Gentile minds better than Barnabas. From this point on Paul was the leader and his name preceded Barnabas’ name except when they were in Jerusalem (15:12, 25) and in 14:14. Furthermore, the Roman name Paul was used from here on; the Jewish name Saul was used only when he in his personal testimonies referred to his former life (22:7; 26:14).

13:10. In Aramaic, Bar-Jesus means “Son of Jesus.” But Paul told him that instead of being a son of Jesus (“Jesus” means “Yahweh is salvation”), Elymas was a child (huie, lit., “son”) of the devil. Paul lashed at him with strong language: Bar-Jesus was an enemy of everything that is right (lit., “righteousness”), he was full of... deceit (dolou) and trickery (rhadiourgias, “unscrupulous mischief, work that easily deceives,” used only here in the NT) and perverting the right ways of the Lord. Sorcery, exercising power by the help and control of demons, had led him into all kinds of deception of others and distortion of the truth. The occult is indeed dangerous. This is the second of four incidents of conflict with and victory over demonic powers in the Book of Acts (cf. 8:9-23; 16:16-18; 19:13-17).

13:11-12. In judgment Paul inflicted a temporary blindness on Elymas. This is the first of Paul’s recorded miracles and it was performed in conflict with a Jew over giving the gospel to a Gentile. Seeing this miracle, Sergius Paulus’ interest in the Word of God (v. 7) blossomed into genuine faith in Christ. Interestingly the Greek names of this proconsul and of the apostle were the same: Paulus. This incident is significant for three reasons: (1) It marks the beginning of Paul’s leadership in this journey; verse 13 refers to “Paul and his companions.” (2) From this point on the ministry took on an even more decidedly Gentile slant. (3) It is filled with figurative nuances. A Gentile with the name Paul accepted the message while a Jew opposed it. The Jews’ blindness pictured the judicial blinding of Israel (cf. 28:26-27). Luke by this means emphasized the transitional nature of the Book of Acts. On one hand Gentiles became the primary object of the gospel, and on the other God temporarily turned from the Jews and thus judged them.
Commentary from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

Do you remember the moment when you first had faith? For some, that was a long time ago. For others, it may have been just yesterday or even today. Stop and consider it. What was the moment like when you first realized who Jesus is? Many of us would say that it was a relief, like a weight taken off our shoulders. We might remember the overwhelming joy coursing through us, completely enveloping us. Maybe there was a sense of peace settling upon the heart and soul. Most of us, however, would agree that it left us in awe of our Saviour. What caused us to come to faith in Christ? The answer is discernment, which involves a recognition of something. It is that "aha" moment so many people talk about. This kind of spiritual discernment is unexpected. It is not something you can gain by practice; rather, it is something that happens by God's grace. In this week's lesson text, I am sure that this government official had no intention of making a life-changing decision when he met with Paul and Barnabas. He was probably feeling curious about these religious folk. He likely had heard reports about the believers and wanted to educate himself. But whatever his purpose, he was not expecting to be converted. Yet that is what occurred. When this man heard their testimony, he became a believer. Suddenly, he was moved to trust in Christ as Lord. How did this happen? Scripture tells us that God gives discernment to people. True discernment comes from God and the reading of His Word (Ps. 119:130). This discernment reaches far beyond the wisdom of mankind (cf. Ps. 139:6; Jer. 10:7-8). There is no one on earth who can rival His understanding. God chooses to grant us discernment so that we are able to know what He has for us (cf. Eph. 5:10). When we practice discernment, His will for our lives is revealed (Rom. 12:2). As we seek to follow Him, we will grow in wisdom (Ps. 111:10). We become able to separate what comes from God from what is not from Him (1 John 4:1). Discernment comes from having access to godly wisdom. There are times, though, when we may feel lacking in that. We feel inadequate and do not know what to do about something. When we experience this lack, we can ask God for wisdom. He will freely give it when we seek it (cf. I Kings 3:11-12). He will also choose to take it away when we are able to discern His ways and yet continually choose to go against them. He expects us to use what we are given. Are you feeling the need for wisdom in something? Ask God. When we sincerely ask Him for it through prayer, He will give it to us. If we are in an attitude of reverent prayer, He will reveal it to us. What we need to do is wait on Him to show us His plan. There are times when the waiting may seem to take forever, but it is always worth it when we follow His design for our lives. Remember that God is a loving Father who never fails His children. Whatever you are facing this day, you can come to Him and ask for discernment about it. When you make a decision, do not forget to include Him in it. You will be happy that you did.

Lesson Introduction and Background

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

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 on 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.

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 today's 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 our 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.
Major Theme Analysis
(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

The Preparation (Acts 13:1-3)

1 Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.
2 As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."
3 Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.

Preparation through leaders (1)

Leaders appointed by God to build up the Church (Eph 4:11-16)

11 It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, 12 to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. 14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Leaders that have been given the manifestation of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:7)

7 Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

Leaders who proclaim Jesus as well as admonish and teach everyone (Col 1:28)

28 We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.

Leaders who are accountable for their leadership (Heb 13:17)

17 Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Leaders who bring good news (Rom 10:14-15, 17)

14 How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? 15 And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" 17 Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

Leaders who are fellow workers with God (1 Cor 3:5-9)

5 What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe — as the Lord has assigned to each his task. 6 I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. 7 So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. 8 The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. 9 For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

Preparation through the Holy Spirit’s guidance (2)

Guidance into truth (John 16:13-15)

13 But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. 14 He will bring glory to me by
taking from what is mine and making it known to you. 15 All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.

**Guidance by the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:18)**

18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

**Guidance into insight (Ps 119:99-100)**

99 I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes. 100 I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts.

**Guidance as a light for our path (Ps 119:105)**

105 Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

**Guidance into understanding (Ps 119:130)**

130 The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.

**Guidance into wisdom (Prov 2:6)**

6 For the Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

**Preparation through prayer (3)**

*Prayer because the Holy Spirit helps us to pray (Rom 8:26-27)*

26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. 27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

*Prayer because it helps to keep one from falling into temptations (Matt 26:41)*

41 "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."

*Prayer because it supplies wisdom (James 1:5)*

5 If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.

*Prayer that "strives" with others (Rom 15:30)*

30 I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me.

*Prayer that is in the Holy Spirit (Eph 6:18)*

18 And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

**The Opposition (Acts 13:4-8)**

4 So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus.
5 And when they arrived in Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. They also had John as their assistant.
6 Now when they had gone through the island to Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew whose name was Bar-Jesus,
7 who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man. This man called for Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God.
8 But Elymas the sorcerer (for so his name is translated) withstood them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.
Opposition to preaching God’s Word (4-5)

**Opposed to preaching because of itching ears (2 Tim 4:3)**

3 For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.

**Opposed to preaching to persecute (2 Tim 3:12)**

12 In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,

**Opposed to preaching because of turning their backs and stopping their ears (Zech 7:11)**

11 “But they refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and stopped up their ears.

**Opposed to preaching because rejecting the faith (1 Tim 1:18-19)**

18 Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, 19 holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith.

Opposition from false prophets (6-7)

**False prophets oppose because of trying to lead others to sin (Mark 13:22)**

22 For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect — if that were possible.

**False prophets oppose because of denying truth (2 Peter 2:1-3)**

But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them — bringing swift destruction on themselves. 2 Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. 3 In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping.

**False prophets oppose because of denying Jesus (Jude 1:4)**

4 For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.

**False prophets oppose because of trying to start divisions and obstacles (Rom 16:17)**

17 I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.

Opposition to reaching those who seek God’s Word (8)

**Opposing those seeking God’s word because of being hypocrites (Matt 23:13)**

13 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

**Opposition to reaching those who seek God’s Word because of keeping knowledge for self (Luke 11:52)**

52 "Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering.”

**Opposition to reaching those who seek God’s Word because of fear of losing leadership (Acts 4:17)**

17 But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name.”
Opposition to reaching those who seek God’s Word because of racial concerns (1 Thess 2:16)

16 in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.

The Discernment (Acts 13:9-11)

9 Then Saul, who also is called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him
10 and said, "O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord?
11 And now, indeed, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind, not seeing the sun for a time." And immediately a dark mist fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand.

Discernment from the Holy Spirit (9)

Discernment from the Holy Spirit to understand what God has given us (1 Cor 2:12)

12 We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us.

Discernment from the Holy Spirit to understand the things of God (1 Cor 2:14)

14 The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

Discernment from the Holy Spirit to know the truth (1 John 2:20)

20 But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth.

Discernment from the Holy Spirit to discern insights into the mystery of God (Eph 3:4-5)

4 In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.

Discernment from the Holy Spirit to discern what God's will is (Eph 5:17-18)

17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. 18 Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.

Discernment to recognize satanic schemes (10)

Discernment to be aware of Satan's schemes (2 Cor 2:11)

11 in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

Discernment to put on the full armor of God to fight Satan's schemes (Eph 6:10-13)

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. 11 Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. 12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. 13 Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

Discernment to be alert because Satan is prowling (1 Peter 5:8)

8 Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

Discernment because Satan performs signs and wonders as part of his schemes (2 Thess 2:9)

9 The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders,
Discernment because Satan blinds the minds as part of his schemes (2 Cor 4:4)

4 The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Discernment of God’s punishment (11)

Punishment filled with God’s wrath (Rev 14:10-11)

10 he, too, will drink of the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. 11 And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name.”

Punishment of being thrown into the lake of fire (Rev 20:15)

15 If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Punishment named the second death (Rev 21:8)

8 But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars — their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.”

Punishment because of rejection of the truth (Rom 2:8)

8 But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.

The Conversion (Acts 13:12)

12 Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had been done, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

Converted because he believed the teaching (12)

Believed the teaching because of what happened (Matt 27:54)

54 When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"

Believed the teaching because of the authority of the teaching (Matt 7:28-29)

28 When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, 29 because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

Believed the teaching because of the wisdom of the teaching (Acts 6:10)

10 but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.

Believed the teaching because of the knowledge of the teaching (2 Cor 10:5)

5 We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Concluding Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

Salamas was an influential city on the eastern side of Cyprus. When they arrived there, Barnabas and Saul went to the Jewish synagogues where they began to proclaim the Word. There was good reason for doing this. In the first place, Paul (and Barnabas) were committed to the principle of preaching “to the Jew first, and then to the Gentiles” (see Romans 1:16). Another practical reason is that this is where both Jews and Gentile God-fearers
congregated. It is apparent that visitors like Barnabas and Saul were invited to share a message with those gathered (see Acts 13:15), something Paul would never pass up.

It is right at this point that Luke chooses to inform his reader that John Mark accompanied Barnabas and Saul on this missionary journey (Acts 13:5). We should recall that Mark was the cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10). This reference to Mark’s involvement in this missionary journey will pave the way for Luke’s comment in verse 13 that John Mark forsook them at Perga in Paphlagonia and returned to Jerusalem. Mark’s desertion here will be the occasion for a strong disagreement between Barnabas and Paul, and as a result, they will divide into two missionary teams (Acts 15:36-41).

When Barnabas and Saul passed through the island of Cyprus and came to the city of Paphos, they encountered two very interesting men; one a Jew, the other a Gentile. The Jew was a false prophet named Elymas, or Bar-Jesus, the latter of which means “the son of Jesus.” Jesus was a common name at the time so we dare not read too much into this name. On the other hand, his familiar name seems like a most interesting coincidence.

Elymas is also identified as a magician or sorcerer (verse 6). I had to ask myself, “Just how could a Jew become a magician (or sorcerer)?” Then I remembered the story of the seven sons of Sceva in Acts 19:

13 But some itinerant Jewish exorcists tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were possessed by evil spirits, saying, “I sternly warn you by Jesus whom Paul preaches.” 14 (Now seven sons of a man named Sceva, a Jewish high priest, were doing this.) 15 But the evil spirit replied to them, “I know about Jesus and I am acquainted with Paul, but who are you?” 16 Then the man who was possessed by the evil spirit jumped on them and beat them all into submission. He prevailed against them so that they fled from that house naked and wounded. 17 This became known to all who lived in Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks; fear came over them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was praised. 18 Many of those who had believed came forward, confessing and making their deeds known. 19 Large numbers of those who had practiced magic collected their books and burned them up in the presence of everyone. When the value of the books was added up, it was found to total fifty thousand silver coins (Acts 19:13-19).

These seven sons of Sceva were Jewish. Their father was a high priest! They attempted to exorcise demons from people by naming the “Jesus whom Paul preaches” (Acts 19:13). The demons knew Jesus all too well, and Paul also, but they did not know these Jewish exorcists. And thus these seven sons were overpowered and badly beaten by the demons.

There are three things about this incident that interest me most. First, these seven men were Jews. They seem to be only an example of what a larger group of Jewish exorcists are doing. Second, it would appear that they were seeking to earn a living (or more) by casting out demons in the name and power of someone they did not know. Third, the saints in Ephesus who heard of this were deeply impressed. A very large group responded by forsaking the practice of magic and burning their books on the subject (Acts 19:18-19). They understood that what these sons of Sceva were doing was practicing magic.

I think I can understand why some Jews were attracted (addicted?) to magic. Their religion had become a legalistic system of works: “If I do this, this, and this, God will do that.” That, my friend, is magic. Magic is man’s attempt to manipulate God to produce a desired outcome. Unfortunately, Christians are subject to the same malady: “If I pray this prayer (for example, ‘the prayer of Jabez’), then I can be assured of success or prosperity.” Or, “If I will send a gift of $10 to this ministry, God will reward me ten fold.”

Elymas had some kind of relationship with Sergius Paulus, the Gentile proconsul in Salamis. Sergius Paulus seems to have been influenced by Elymas, and he seemed to stick close to this political official. I am inclined to think that this Gentile official believed that true religion must be Jewish. Think of being able to worship a man’s attempt to manipulate God to produce a desired outcome. Unfortunately, Christians are subject to the same malady: “If I pray this prayer (for example, ‘the prayer of Jabez’), then I can be assured of success or prosperity.” Or, “If I will send a gift of $10 to this ministry, God will reward me ten fold.”

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Suddenly and unexpectedly, Paul arises to the occasion. Notice the change of name that takes place in Acts 13:9. Also note Luke’s indication that Paul was “filled with the Holy Spirit” (verse 9). Paul is not acting on his own initiative; he is being prompted by the Holy Spirit. Paul seems to be able to look into the very soul of this man and to size him up spiritually – and it isn’t a pretty picture. Paul has some very strong words of indictment against Elymas. Notice the accusations. Elymas is …

… a man who is “full of deceit and wrongdoing”

… a “son of the devil”
… the “enemy of all righteousness”

… “making crooked the straight paths of the Lord”

How strange it felt for Paul to cast a temporary spell of blindness upon Elymas. We cannot help but think of Saul’s three-day blindness. Paul’s blindness seemed to be a merciful thing, giving him time to reflect on his opposition to the gospel, and to consider repentance. Perhaps God was being merciful to Elymas as well.

Here is the irony – the man who sought to keep the proconsul from the faith actually becomes an instrument by which God brings the proconsul to faith:

Then when the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, because he was greatly astounded at the teaching about the Lord (Acts 13:12).

I am not surprised to read that some actually question the genuineness of the proconsul’s faith. I am both surprised and disappointed that any conservative evangelical scholar would give such a suggestion a moment’s thought. Think about it for a minute. Luke has given Elymas more attention than the proconsul. He has indicated to the reader that Elymas sought to keep the proconsul from the faith. Paul strongly rebukes Elymas and then casts a spell of blindness on him. The proconsul is amazed and is said to come to faith. Are we, for even a moment, to suppose that Elymas succeeded, but the gospel did not? Surely the proconsul came to faith, in spite of Elymas’ best efforts to prevent it, and through the opposition of Elymas.

Conclusion

The sending out of Barnabas and Saul is the beginning of a new era in the carrying out of the Great Commission. Now the gospel is headed for the “farthest parts of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Missionaries are not providentially thrust out by a wave of persecution (Acts 8:1); two missionaries are sent out by the Holy Spirit through the church at Antioch. Here is “missions” as we have yet to see it in the gospels or Acts. From this point on, we see very little of Peter or the other apostles in Jerusalem. Paul is the dominant personality throughout the remainder of the Book of Acts. The gospel is now on its way to Rome.

The sending forth of Paul and Barnabas (as we now have it) is instructive to the church today regarding the sending out of missionaries. I have suggested some possible areas of application above. This text also instructs us regarding how we may know the will of God. It is not exhaustive, but it is suggestive.

Of all the events that took place on the island of Cyprus, why does Luke choose this one incident in Salamas (concerning Elymas and Sergius) to report to his readers? I believe there are at least two reasons why Luke included this story. First, I believe that Paul’s confrontation of Elymas was a dramatic turning point in Paul’s ministry. It was at Paphos that Paul was filled with the Holy Spirit and took the lead in rebuking Elymas. And that is why the very next verse (13) begins, “Then Paul and his companions ….” From here on out, it will be Paul who will be named first.15 We can therefore see that God has sovereignly elevated Paul from that of being an assistant to Barnabas to becoming the dominant leader.

Secondly, I believe Luke uses Elymas as a prototype of the Jewish opposition that is to come. Luke makes a point of telling us that Elymas is a Jew. He is a Jew who strongly opposes Sergius Paulus hearing and embracing the gospel. In this case, the reasons for the behavior of Elymas may be self-serving. He seems to have had significant influence with the Gentile proconsul, and this would have been lost if Sergius Paulus embraced the gospel. But whatever the reason, Elymas, a Jew, resisted the conversion of Sergius Paulus, a Gentile. But his resistance was not effective. Because of the judicial blinding of Elymas, Sergius Paulus comes to faith. So, too, the resistance of the Jews to Paul’s preaching of the gospel does not succeed. Indeed, Jewish resistance opens the door to the preaching of the gospel (see Romans 11:25-32).

Let’s come back to the matter of the “letdown” I experienced when I left the dramatic events of chapter 12 behind and moved to our text. Chapter 12 did have some rather spectacular events – the dramatic deliverance of Peter from prison and from the jaws of death; and, the death of Herod. It reminds us of the story of Mordecai and Haman in the Book of Esther. Haman plots to execute Mordecai, but Mordecai is exalted, and Haman is hung on his own gallows.

Our text in Acts 13 does have a bit of drama – Paul casts a spell of blindness on Elymas, the Jewish magician who opposes the gospel. But it is not as spectacular as the events of chapter 12. Rather than comparing these two chapters in terms of their spectacularly, let us consider them in the light of their long-term results. Peter was dramatically spared, but he and his ministry definitely fade from this point on in the Book of Acts. Herod died, and he was not successful in dealing with Christianity as an illegal sect. This did have long-term effects, but they don’t appear to be dramatic at this point.
Now let us consider the sending forth of Barnabas and Saul in chapter 13. The Holy Spirit was instrumental in this new venture, but Luke is deliberate in his avoidance of the spectacular aspects of His role in thrusting forth a new missionary movement. And yet the results are spectacular. The gospel now goes deliberately and purposefully to the Gentiles. Many Gentiles come to faith and numerous churches are planted. The gospel goes from Antioch to Rome. This is spectacular, or if we wish to avoid that word, the events of our text are significant. Beyond this, a man who once traveled to various foreign countries to oppose the gospel is now traveling from country to country preaching that same gospel he once opposed.

Here is a lesson to be learned: We dare not gauge the significance of a life or of a ministry by its spectacularity. I am reminded of the story of Elijah in 1 Kings 17-19. Elijah has a dramatic confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel in chapter 18. They seek to gain the attention of their “god” but nothing happens. Elijah prays, and fire dramatically descends from heaven, consuming not only the sacrifice and the wood, but the rocks and water in the surrounding trench. Elijah then prays, and rain will soon follow – after 3 ½ years of drought (see also James 5:17-18). And yet when Jezebel threatens Elijah, he flees. He leaves his servant behind and goes into the wilderness to die. God then meets with Elijah on Mount Horeb. He does not speak through the strong wind, the earthquake, or the fire; instead He speaks through a still, small, voice.

The lesson is quite obvious: Don’t always look for God in the spectacular. God was going to accomplish His work, but it would be through others than Elijah. It would be through Elisha, Hazael, and Jehu. Hazael and Jehu were hardly pious men. We should not gauge the significance of what God is doing by the “spectacularity” of the events.

By the way, this principle also applies to spiritual gifts. Some people in Corinth tended to equate spirituality and significance in terms of the practice of certain spectacular gifts. The apostle Paul made it clear that the more important gifts may not be the spectacular ones:

18 But as a matter of fact, God has placed each of the members in the body just as he decided. 19 If they were all the same member, where would the body be? 20 So now there are many members, but one body. 21 The eye cannot say to the hand, “I do not need you,” nor in turn can the head say to the foot, “I do not need you.” 22 On the contrary, those members that seem to be weaker are essential, 23 and those members we consider less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our unpresentable members are clothed with dignity, 24 but our presentable members do not need this. Instead, God has blended together the body, giving greater honor to the lesser member, 25 so that there may be no division in the body, but the members may have mutual concern for one another (1 Corinthians 12:18-25).

If I understand Paul correctly, he is saying that the least important gifts have the compensation of having more pizzazz than the more important gifts. Think about this in terms of the body. The most important organs in my body are those which are not visible – organs like my heart, liver, and kidneys. I can live with my arms or legs cut off. I can live with my eyes put out. I can live without my hearing. But I cannot live without my heart, liver, or kidneys. Let us beware of pursuing the spectacular on the false premise that significance and success are measured in terms of the dramatic.

(Adapted from URL:https://bible.org/seriespage/18-first-missionaries-acts-131-13)

**Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary**

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? When we ask ourselves such questions, we may feel disappointment 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.
Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

1. There is a place and a job for every believer to serve in God's kingdom (Acts 13:1)
2. Worship and prayer open our minds and hearts to receive guidance from God (vss. 2-3)
3. God works mightily through the Holy Spirit (vss. 4-5)
4. Be careful and discerning about the people you allow to advise you on spiritual matters (vss. 6-7)
5. As you witness for Christ, expect confrontation from people who possess competing motives (vs. 8)
6. The Holy Spirit gives believers boldness and the ability to confront enemies (vss. 9-12)