

Acts 13:4-12

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/acts/acts-13/acts-134-12/>

Barnabas, Saul (Paul), and their helper John Mark sail to the island of Cyprus. They preach the gospel in the synagogues from the eastern shore to the western shore. In the port city of Paphos, they share the good news of Jesus with a Roman proconsul. The proconsul's court magician, Elymas, tries to stop the proconsul from believing in Jesus. Saul (Paul) rebukes Elymas, and Elymas is struck temporarily blind by God. The Roman proconsul believes in Jesus.

Barnabas and Saul have embarked from Antioch in Syria ([See Map](#)) to preach the gospel to the western Roman territories, accompanied by John Mark as an aid to their mission (v. 5):

So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus (v. 4).

Luke, the author of Acts, makes clear who has commanded them to go on this mission: they were *sent out by the Holy Spirit*. The Holy Spirit is the great moving force in the book of Acts. Many of the actions of the apostles are attributed to the leading of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4, 4:8, 4:31, 8:29, 8:39, 9:31, 10:19, 11:28).

It seems likely that Luke repeatedly references the Holy Spirit's role in Acts because **1**) it is the truth, and Luke's goal in his written works is to record the exact truth of all that he has investigated (Luke 1:1-4), and **2**) to emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit in all believers' lives.

Luke was a traveling companion of Paul in many of his missions (Acts 16:10, Philemon 1:24, Colossians 4:14, 2 Timothy 4:11), and is writing the Book of Acts in large part to defend the ministry and authority of Paul. Throughout his ministry, Paul was plagued by a sect of the Jews who sought to turn believers into Jewish proselytes, to rely on circumcision and keeping the Jewish Law to gain right standing in God's sight.

Much of Paul's letters to various churches are exhortations to rely on Christ's sacrifice alone as their confidence for being justified in God's sight, and to live by following the Holy Spirit, who is present in each believer as a Helper and a Teacher (John 14:16-18, Acts 2:38, Romans 8:14). Paul was constantly trying to bring believers back to the truth that God was speaking and leading Christians through the Holy Spirit, not through religious rules and cultural rituals (Galatians 3:2-4, 5:25, Romans 3:27-28).

Thus, Luke is diligent in citing the Holy Spirit as the authority who directs the apostles' and evangelists' actions; the Holy Spirit is responsible for the spreading of the good news of Jesus Christ, and the attesting miracles performed to sway unbelieving hearts to the reality of God's message to them.

The first stop on their journey is to *Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus* (v. 4). ([See Map](#)) They probably traveled by boat from Antioch (which was 15 miles inland) up the Orontes River to the port city of *Seleucia* on the Mediterranean coast. *Seleucia* was named after Seleucus

Indicator, one of Alexander's four generals who divided Alexander's conquered lands through civil war.

Seleucus ruled over an empire which stretched from Thrace (modern Bulgaria) to the borders of India, between which was much of the Middle East, including Israel. The Jewish people were governed by Seleucus and his descendants for around 134 years until the Maccabean Revolt (167 BC).

Luke mentions that *they also had John as their helper* (v. 5). *John*, also known as Mark, had gone with Barnabas and Saul (Paul) from Jerusalem to Antioch at the end of Chapter 12:

“And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, taking along with them John, who was also called Mark.”
(Acts 12:25)

John Mark was Barnabas's cousin (Colossians 4:10). According to early church tradition, he is the author of the Gospel of Mark, which he wrote as a scribe recording the testimony and recollections of Peter.

Barnabas, *Saul* (Paul), and *John* Mark set sail from *Seleucia* to *Cyprus*, a voyage of 130 miles. *Cyprus* is a large island in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, where Barnabas was born and presumably grew up (Acts 4:36).

When they reached Salamis, a port city on the coast of *Cyprus*, the three believing Jewish missionaries immediately get to work: *they began to proclaim the word of God*. The first place they begin to *proclaim the word of God* is *in the synagogues of the Jews*. This is a regular starting point in each city for Saul (Paul) during his missionary journeys (Acts 17:10, 18:4, 19:8):

“...they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures.”
(Acts 17:1-2)

Later in this chapter, Barnabas and Saul (Paul) explain that

“It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to [the Jews] first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.”
(Acts 13:46)

They say this after certain Jews cause a stir to silence their preaching. The Jews are always given priority in receiving *the word of God*. They are God's chosen people, a nation set apart to minister to the rest of the world. Jesus first came to Israel as its Messiah, and by rejecting Him, room was made for Gentiles to be included in God's plan to save humanity from sin and separation from Him (Romans 11:25, Isaiah 49:6).

Barnabas and Saul (Paul) are giving the Jews of each town the opportunity to believe or reject the good news of Jesus. Though Paul and others recognized his specific ministry to the Gentiles

(Acts 15:12, Romans 11:13) he always desired that his fellow Jews would believe in Jesus (Romans 9:1-5).

There was a significant population of Jews living on the island of Cyprus. Barnabas was a native to Cyprus, but Jewish, and doubtless knew friends and family who were still in Cyprus for whom he was excited to share the good news of Jesus. Tragically, church tradition says Barnabas was killed in the city of *Salamis* in 61 AD, around sixteen years after this first missionary journey.

Apparently Barnabas, Saul, and John Mark were able to preach the gospel unopposed for some time, because the next incident Luke reports is that they travelled *through the whole island as far as Paphos* (v. 6), a port city and the Roman capital of *Cyprus* on the western coast. Having preached the gospel in each synagogue in many cities, starting in *Salamis* on the eastern shore of *Cyprus*, the missionaries now meet an enemy of the gospel on the opposite end of the island, in *Paphos*: [\(See Map\)](#)

When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they found a magician, a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus (v. 6).

Bar-Jesus means “Son of Jesus” or “Son of Joshua.” *Bar* means “son of,” signifying family heritage, somewhat like modern last names. This type of name is known as a patronymic, where a person’s second name is based on their father’s name. Patronymics occur across many cultures (Jackson, “son of Jack,” Mikhailovich, “son of Michael,” Larsson, “son of Lars”).

This magician’s father’s name was Joshua (or the Greek version which is “Jesus”). Luke gives us another name for this man—*Elymas the magician* (for so his name is translated) (v. 8). *Elymas* is believed to be derived from the Arabic word either for “wise” or “powerful.”

In ancient times, authority figures had counselors who not only provided wise advice, but also performed magic and healing (Exodus 7:11, Daniel 2:2). Culturally, to be wise and to wield supernatural abilities were bundled together (not unlike the word “wizard,” which means “wise one,” being traditionally a magic-user as well as someone who speaks wisdom).

This man *Elymas* was both *Jewish* and a *magician*. Practicing magic or sorcery is explicitly forbidden throughout the Jewish scripture (Deuteronomy 18:10-13). In no uncertain terms, God tells His people what He thinks of humans using magic:

“For whoever does these things is detestable to the Lord; and because of these detestable things the Lord your God will drive them out before you.”
(Deuteronomy 18:12)

This is why Luke brands this man a *false prophet* as well as a *magician*. He was with the *proconsul, Sergius Paulus* in the city of *Paphos* (v 7); he served as a counselor and *magician* to the *proconsul* who was named *Sergius Paulus*.

Whether or not he could perform actual supernatural feats (through the aid of supernatural persons—fallen angels, also known as demons), or he was merely a charlatan, *Elymas Bar-Jesus* was a *false prophet*, one who pretended to speak for God, to have knowledge as to what God (or the gods) wanted, what actions they would favor, and so on. This was how *Elymas* earned his

keep with *Sergius Paulus*, by telling him what he should do to find favor with the higher powers, influencing how he governed.

The *proconsul* of any Roman-occupied province served as a magistrate for its designated region. *Sergius Paulus* served in this capacity. In a sense, he “ruled” over *Paphos* as representative for Rome. Luke says that he was *a man of intelligence*. Perhaps the reason Luke attributes *intelligence* to *Sergius Paulus* is because he was intrigued to learn the message which *Barnabas and Saul* taught. When the missionaries come to *Paphos*, *Sergius Paulus* invites them to his headquarters to listen to them:

This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God (v. 7).

While *Barnabas and Saul* (Paul) stood audience to *Sergius Paulus*, teaching him *the word of God* concerning Jesus Christ, *Elymas the magician was opposing them*. The way Luke phrases this encounter, it sounds as though the missionaries were able to speak for some time about who Jesus was, what He had done, and that faith in Him would bring the believer eternal life. Having spoken at length enough for *Sergius Paulus* to possibly believe in Jesus, *Elymas* interjects, *seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith* (v. 8).

Apparently *Elymas* sees that the *proconsul* is warming to this message, so he interrupts the conversation between the missionary and the *proconsul* *Sergius Paulus*. Luke does not tell us what he says, only that he *was opposing* Barnabas and Saul. The *magician* begins arguing with them, undercutting their message, contradicting them, lying, so that his source of income—*Sergius Paulus*—won’t believe their message.

Elymas probably discerns, rightly, that if *Sergius Paulus* believes in Jesus, he will not have need of a court magician and counselor. It is worth pointing out how radical and strange the message of the gospel was to people in the first century, especially pagans. Pagan cultures believed in a multitude of gods, and that through sacrifices, oaths, and money, the gods could be made obligated to serve men. Magicians, priests, and wisemen acted as intercessors, as middle men who could speak to the gods on behalf of other men.

But the gospel disintegrates this kind of transactional, manipulative worldview. It connects humanity with its Creator and restores a right relationship with Him. It empowers humans to recover God’s original design for the world to exist in love and harmony.

The gospel teaches that God the Father loves the world and wants to heal it of sin; He wants to be in a right relationship with His creation again, and He has accomplished that through the sacrifice and resurrection of His perfect Son, Jesus.

Faith in Jesus does away with any need for transactional intermediaries, for men to speak to the higher powers to negotiate good fortune or selfish gain. Faith in Jesus makes men into new creations who are then in right standing before the One True God, and can thus live according to His good design and experience eternal life (2 Corinthians 5:17).

We have no need of specialists to talk to God for us. We have Christ Himself, we have the Holy Spirit, and we too can speak to God directly, as one speaks to a loving Father:

“In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”
(Romans 8:26-27)

“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession... Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”
(Hebrews 4:14-16)

“but Jesus, on the other hand, because He continues forever, holds His priesthood permanently. Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. For the Law appoints men as high priests who are weak, but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, appoints a Son, made perfect forever.”
(Hebrews 7:24-28)

We can suppose that *Elymas* foresaw the end of his job security with this new message of eternal favor (“grace”) from the one true God by simple faith (John 3:14-15).

After *Elymas* spoke out against *Barnabas and Saul* (Paul), Paul responds:

But Saul, who was also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze on him [Elymas] (v. 9).

Up front, Luke reports that *Paul*’s reply is of righteous intent, that he was *filled with the Holy Spirit*; the *Spirit* was guiding *Paul* in his response.

Luke makes note that *Saul was also known as Paul*, “Paulos,” the same name as the *proconsul Sergius Paulus* (“Paulos” in the original Greek). From this point on in the book of Acts, Luke exclusively refers to *Saul* as *Paul*, which is the Greek rendering of his name.

Paul, having *fixed his gaze* on the *false prophet* and *magician*, staring down this liar and enemy of the gospel *Elymas Bar-Jesus*, rebukes him with strong, truthful words:

“You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord? (v. 10)

From this we can gather that *Elymas* was a conjurer, that none of the “magic” he practiced came from supernatural power, certainly not from God. He was *full of deceit and fraud*, a liar through and through. Paul calls *Elymas you son of the devil*, making the inference that because *Elymas* is *full of all deceit and fraud*, it is as though *Elymas*’s father is Satan, because he is doing the work

of the *devil*, the father of all lies. Paul echoes Jesus here, who rebuked the Pharisees with similar language:

“You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”
(John 8:44)

Paul also calls Elymas an *enemy of all righteousness*, an enemy of God’s ways. *Righteousness* is God’s standard, His good and perfect design for how we were created to live to our benefit. A *false prophet* who practices magic and opposes the good news about Jesus the Messiah certainly fits the bill of an *enemy of all righteousness*.

Rather than live according to God’s (good) design, someone who practices magic and pretends to have received messages from God only wants to be god themselves. They have no interest in the true God or what He says.

Paul asks Elymas, *will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord?* Will you never stop perverting the truth? God’s *ways* are *straight*, they are true, and liars like Elymas make their bread by making God’s *straight ways crooked*, by keeping others from the truth (like preventing Sergius Paulus from coming to *faith* in Jesus, v. 8). Paul’s rebuke can possibly be read as a plea for Elymas to repent. A call for him to *cease* this career of making *crooked the straight ways of the Lord*.

Paul, *filled with the Holy Spirit* (v. 9), now tells Elymas what God is about to do to silence him and punish him for trying to prevent someone from believing in Jesus. Paul says,

“Now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time.”

And immediately a mist and a darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand (v. 11).

Elymas is struck blind. Not permanently, for Paul says that he will *not see the sun for a time*, not that he will never see the sun again. It is a temporary punishment. It is exactly what happened to Paul on the road to Damascus when he himself was an enemy of the gospel, persecuting believers in Jesus. Jesus struck Paul blind with the glorious light of His presence (Acts 22:11), while *Elymas* is blinded by *a mist and a darkness*.

In both cases, Jesus was silencing and humbling men who were bent on stopping the gospel from being preached. Wholly blind, *Elymas* must now rely on *those who would lead him by the hand*. He needs guides to take him from one room to the next. Now blind and troubled, *Elymas* leaves the debate, no longer standing in the way of the gospel being preached to *Sergius Paulus*.

With the false prophet and magician out of the way, *the proconsul* puts his faith in Jesus Christ:

Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord (v. 12).

Sergius Paulus the proconsul of Paphos believed when he saw Elymas struck blind. Elymas had possibly been his counselor for some time, and to see someone whom he used to think powerful and prophetic struck blind was very persuasive in regards to the question of where true power came from.

Paul did not blind Elymas, but after rebuking him, he warned the magician about exactly what was going to happen to him, and so it did. Paul said, *behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind*, and immediately Elymas became blind.

Witnessing this, *Sergius Paulus* concluded that the Lord whom Paul preached about was the real thing, and so he eagerly listened to what Paul and Barnabas had to say. He did not believe simply because of the blinding of his magician, though this functioned as an “attesting miracle,” similar to how Jesus and the apostles performed supernatural miracles from time to time to show that they were true representatives of the Living God, not charlatans or liars like Elymas (John 2:11, Acts 3:6-7).

The blinding of Elymas caused *Sergius Paulus*, who was no fool himself, *a man of intelligence* (v. 7), to pay serious attention to Paul and Barnabas. He believed they were speaking the truth after seeing the blinding of *Elymas*, which backed up what they were saying. *Sergius Paulus* thought the message of the gospel was wonderful and true; he was *amazed at the teaching of the Lord*. Thus he, a Roman authority, believed in Jesus Christ.

Biblical Text

⁴So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. ⁵When they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper. ⁶When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they found a magician, a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus, ⁷who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence. This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. ⁸But Elymas the magician (for so his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. ⁹But Saul, who was also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze on him, ¹⁰and said, “You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord? ¹¹Now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time.” And immediately a mist and a darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand. ¹²Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord.