

Barnabas & Saul on Cyprus

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[0 : 0 0] Welcome here for this Sunday, March 30th, 2025. My name is Kent Dixon. It is my joy to be your pastor here. This morning we're continuing in our ongoing sermon series, Acts to All the World.

! And through this series, we're exploring the New Testament Book of Acts. Our focus passage this morning, and you can flip to it or listen as I read, Acts 13, verses 4 to 12.

So it's a little bit longer passage than the three verses we had last Sunday, but you can turn to it in your Bibles. Grab a Bible from the pew in front of you, or listen as I read.

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

John was with them as their helper. They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus.

[1 : 0 5] The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. But Elemas, the sorcerer, for that is what his name means, opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith.

Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elemas and said, Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand.

When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord. Our sermon this morning is titled, Barnabas and Saul on Cyprus.

So Leah made a really good comment to me this morning. She said, so if somebody walked in on a Sunday and hear, this is sermon 31 of 50, right?

Or, you know, it's not 50, but we'll see. So if someone came in and heard that, and then she said, it's amazing that they can go onto our website and listen, right?

[2 : 3 2] Go back to the beginning and listen. So that's helpful. That's encouraging. Thanks, Leah. So I want to give a bit of a recap from the events of last week.

So if you weren't here or you don't remember, let's do that. So we studied the call on Barnabas and Saul. So these are two men who were working with the church at Antioch with other prophets and teachers that we learned about.

Two men who were separated by, remember this? Set apart by the Holy Spirit for the work to which he had called him. That's what we learned about them. There were two men who were then sent out by the church, supported by fasting and prayer and the laying on of hands.

That was the process they followed in presenting these men to God and then blessing them on their way to which the task the Holy Spirit had called on them for.

So in Acts 13, verse 4, it says, sent out by the Holy Spirit. That's the words there. So Barnabas and Saul began their missionary journey.

- [3 : 40] That was their sending point. They first made their way to Seleucia. And it's a port city on the Mediterranean coast, almost 26 kilometers away.
- So then they sailed to Cyprus, an island a little more than 200 kilometers southwest of Seleucia. Imagine me doing all this geographical math.
- Not a math guy, remember. So it was when Barnabas and Saul arrived in Cyprus that they began their preaching ministry. And Cyprus is an island. And we're going to get there right away.
- So as we begin our exploration this morning, let's start with some details about the island of Cyprus. So now we've had a bit of a refresher from last week. So where's Cyprus?
- What's it all about? Well, Cyprus is located southeast of Greece, south of Turkey, west of Syria and Lebanon. You narrowing it down, triangulating.
- [4 : 37] It's northwest of Israel and Palestine, and it's north of Egypt. So you can also just Google it. So go ahead and Google it. That's fine, too.
- Google Maps will take you directly to Cyprus. The island of Cyprus is 240 kilometers long. It is 100 kilometers wide.
- I didn't have a chance to go, how big is it in relation to Alberta or, you know, to put some context. Because I always like that when somebody says, it's a quajillion liters or one Olympic swimming pool full, right?
- So that's helpful to kind of contextualize. Couldn't find that kind of context. But Cyprus is the third largest island in the Mediterranean, only after Sicily and Sardinia.
- So that gives you a bit of context. So what about the biblical facts of Cyprus? Well, we learn in Acts 4, verse 36, that's quite a ways back now, that Barnabas himself was from Cyprus.
- [5 : 39] This was his home base. So we learn also in Acts 11, verse 19 that the gospel had previously been preached here in Cyprus. Acts 11, verse 20 told us that the church in Antioch of Syria had been started by men from Cyprus.
- See all these neat little connections? And looking ahead just a little bit, little teaser, we'll learn in Acts 15, verse 39, that Barnabas and John Mark will return to Cyprus.
- So stay tuned for that. That will happen. So I believe when we think of missionary journeys, now stay with me here, we may think of people being sent to unfamiliar places, right?
- That's generally what we think, where the culture or even the language may not always be familiar to the people who are sent there. You know, sometimes people are sent to a country and they learn the language in advance as part of their missionary training.
- But lots of times they are sent to, they are strangers in a strange land, effectively, right? So it's interesting then that the Spirit sends Barnabas and Paul to Cyprus.
- [6 : 47] Because remember, Barnabas is from there. So this is a place that would have been very familiar to him. It's a big island, but not so big that he probably wouldn't have been quite familiar with it.
- So Barnabas and Saul begin to preach the word. And our passage tells us that they began this mission in a port city called Salamis. And it's an ancient Greek city-state along the east coast of Cyprus.
- So although the date and place and circumstances of his death are historically unverifiable, like it's a little bit, there's no clear answer, Christian tradition holds, I don't know if you knew this, that Barnabas was ultimately martyred at Salamis, at this city.
- So unfortunately, he comes from Cyprus and is martyred in a city in that island. Barnabas and Saul started with preaching to the Jews in synagogues.

That's what we learn in our passage this morning. So it seems like a pretty bold move for your first trip, right? So we're Jewish, we're here to visit you, and we're going to come into your synagogue and tell you about our Messiah.

[7 : 59] Yeah. But this makes sense though, right? As being Jews themselves, Barnabas and Saul would have had access to these places. This is a familiar place for them to begin.

And then looking ahead to Paul's ministry later in Acts, it's his standard mode of operations in ministry to go to synagogue services.

We learn that that's what Paul does. And then he begins to reason with people there about the scriptures. So while Paul's attention would have been focused on the Gentiles for sure, he never lost his focus on his own people in his ministry.

It's so interesting. We're going to have the opportunity to consider a sermon that Paul preached in a synagogue in the coming weeks. Being from Cyprus, we have to wonder if Barnabas would have been well known there, right?

I just mentioned, it would be a familiar place to him. Would he have been well known? Would people have known him and been familiar with him? Odds are probably good.

[9 : 04] But it's certainly possible. And then we can wonder if the local people would have reacted with surprise about Barnabas returning to his home and preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Interesting, right? Oh, is this the Barnabas? I mean, we hear that in scripture, right? Oh, is this that Jesus? I thought he was a carpenter's son, wasn't he? You know, and people have these kind of, wait a minute, who is this guy?

That's not the guy who was when he was here last. So you have to wonder if this happened with Barnabas too. It's probably possible. So Paul and Barnabas are, sorry, Saul and Barnabas, it's almost spoiler there.

They're accompanied on, we learn from scripture, by a man named John. And they say John Mark. And remember last week we talked about the principle of synergy, right?

Do you remember that? That things work together to produce a greater overall effect or result than the sum of individual efforts. So, and I reminded us of that expression, greater than the sum of their parts, right?

[10 : 08] So Barnabas and Saul, and they bring John Mark with them. So two or more people working together can accomplish more than if they work separately or in isolation.

And we see that play out not only with Barnabas and Saul going on this mission together, but also in bringing John, known as John Mark, with them as their assistant. So who was John Mark?

Well, if you've been reading the slide rather than listening to me talk, which I used to do in church all the time, I'm not judging. We know from Acts 12, verse 12, that Barnabas, his mother Mary, her name was Mary, had a home in Jerusalem.

We know that from scripture. In Acts 12, verse 25, we learned that John Mark had also accompanied Barnabas and Saul another time when they returned to Antioch from Jerusalem.

He was with them. This is a common trio that were together. Paul mentions in Colossians 4.10 that John Mark was Barnabas' cousin, right?

[11 : 10] I don't know how you feel about your cousins. I don't know if I would want to accompany some of my cousins on a long mission trip. Maybe. Maybe God has it planned. I shouldn't say that out loud. Paul, so perhaps most importantly, I don't know if you knew this.

It was a big reminder for me. I knew this, but it was a good reminder. This Mark, John Mark, is the Mark who is recognized in Christian tradition as being the author of the New Testament Gospel of Mark.

There you go. I see some raised eyebrows. Surprises. So as we continue with Barnabas and Saul's ministry on the island of Cyprus, we read about a dramatic and shocking encounter.

After landing in Salamis, we learn that the three men traveled across the whole island until they came to a place called Paphos. And it's another coastal city, and this time it's on the west side.

So it's on the far side of the island. And it's in Paphos where they meet a Jewish sorcerer and a false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus. And Bar-Jesus is also immediately identified as an attendant of the proconsul Sergius Paulus.

[12 : 22] So let's unpack this a little bit. Barnabas and Saul meet this man as they're heading to see the proconsul. And he, Sergius Paulus, has summoned Barnabas and Saul personally, as scripture says, because he wanted to hear the word of God, right?

He knew these men were preaching the word of God, and he wanted to hear it for himself. So the men are summoned by Sergius Paulus, who is a proconsul.

And scripture defines him as an intelligent man. What is a proconsul? Well, I'm glad you asked. In biblical times, a proconsul would have been the principal governor of a province that would be administered by the Roman Senate.

So important, important man. Proconsuls would have had both judicial and military power. And although their actions would have been subject to review by the Roman Senate, they would have wielded supreme authority in the provinces they oversaw.

So this man is no small deal. He would have been the most powerful man in that region. And he had personally summoned Barnabas and Saul.

[13 : 34] But sorcerer gets in the way. We learn that this man, Bar-Jesus, his name is Elemas. So according to Luke, what he says in his account there is that this name, Elemas, means magician or sorcerer.

So the name Elemas would have indicated that that's what he was. It would have identified him as that. And Bar-Jesus was his Jewish name. So it wouldn't have been uncommon for, as in the case of Paul, Saul, for a Jew to have more than one name.

Now in Paul's case, obviously in Saul's case, Saul was his Jewish name. Paul was the Roman equivalent. But Luke would have thought it would have been important, obviously, to include both these names in his account.

We're given the sense here that not only is Sergius Paulus interested in the gospel of Christ. Remember, he summoned these men. But there's also seems to be, there's a sense that a seed must have been planted in his heart at some point.

Because right out of the blue, a Roman official doesn't suddenly go, huh, I want to know all about Jesus, right? Unless the Holy Spirit had planted something there that made him say, no, I'm hungry, I want to learn more.

[14 : 55] So then, here it is. Big momentous moment in Scripture. Acts 13, verse 9, is the first time Saul is called Paul.

And I love how Luke kind of goes, Saul, also known as Paul, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, right? And we go, no, no, stop, stop. This is really important. It's almost as an aside that Luke does that.

And it probably seems strange to us, right? But, of course, Luke wouldn't have necessarily been recognizing the gravity of who this man was going to be.

But this is the name which we most commonly know him by, right? It's been, you've noticed, it's been a struggle for me to keep saying Saul. Because it's like, Paul is right there in my mind.

But then Luke, from now on, the transition happens, boom, right there. And then from now on, in his account, Luke refers to this man as Paul.

[15 : 54] That's it. That's the change. So the Holy Spirit fills Paul, we read, and gives him the confidence and insight to see this man, Elemas, for who he truly is.

He also sees what he's up to, right? He can see his motives. See his desire to derail the proconsul's desire to learn more about the faith.

Paul, never one to mince words, right? Never. Looks straight at Elemas, straight at this man, and says, You are a child of the devil, and an enemy of everything that's right.

That's a harsh greeting, isn't it? He says, You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. He pulls back the curtain on this man's character and his motives.

And this is a powerful and condemning declaration against him. But Paul is not done yet. He continues, Will you never stop perverting, he says, the right ways of the Lord.

[17 : 04] So his condemnation moves immediately from the more general, You're a bad guy, I don't trust you, to very specific, and then to the specific ways that Elemas is seeking, and Paul can see this, to interfere with God's plans.

Then in the power of the Spirit, the condemnation becomes swift and immediate judgment and punishment. Paul says, 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. And then Paul doesn't act on his own initiative, we read, but in the prompting and power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul is moved and inspired by the Spirit of God to act, and he immediately obeys. I think that's an inspiration. It can be an inspiration for all of us.

Through the power and insight of the Holy Spirit, Paul is able to see Elemas for what he truly was, a person who is full of deceit, a person who is a fraud.

[18 : 14] Paul calls him a son of the devil and an enemy of righteousness. He sees him as someone who is actively seeking to, as Paul says, pervert the ways of the Lord.

Pretty strong language, pretty strong words. And then through the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul blinds Elemas. So immediately, the magician is afflicted with a temporary blindness, that's what Paul is implying, and he begins groping around for someone to guide him by hand, right?

He has been incapacitated. The magician's name is Bar-Jesus, and that actually means son of the Savior, believe it or not. But Paul called him child of the devil.

What an amazing, intense contrast there, right? This is a wordplay that I don't think would have been lost on Sergius Paulus, this man who was intelligent, as Scripture tells us, and who was seeking after the Lord.

He would have seen this, he would have heard Paul's words, and it would have impacted him. God's hand of judgment falls immediately on this man. But then again, remember, we learn that it's only for a time.

[19 : 31] I tend to think that this is God's mercy at work here, to some extent. He makes, he's making a point, there's no question, by blinding Elemas, but only temporarily.

As God often does, he shows his power here to someone who does not believe. And then as Elemas is punished, as I mentioned, Sergius Paulus notices.

He recognizes what has happened. And we read that he believed, Scripture says, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord. It strikes me as quite ironic, actually.

Elemas dedicates himself to thwarting God's plans and preventing the proconsul from receiving and believing the truth. But it seems like Elemas' punishment actually serves in providing a way for the proconsul to more clearly see God, more clearly recognize the power of God.

Irony, right? Should we seek to follow Paul's approach? Do you ever just confront and condemn? That's always the way to open people to the gospel.

[20 : 44] Not usually. So unless God prompts us by, you know, by the Holy Spirit in the same way we've seen here, grace and kindness is always the way.

So I believe 2 Timothy 2, verse 24 to 26, gives us this, a great model of character and humility for us to follow. It says, And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome, but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful.

Opponents must be gently instructed in the hope that God will grant them repentance, leading them to a knowledge of the truth. And they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil who has taken them captive to do his will.

That's a gracious, very helpful model, I think. Some of my favorite stories in Scripture are when God acts powerfully, whether directly himself or through a willing servant.

But he changes the minds and hearts of powerful leaders whose hearts are either open to him or completely shut.

[21 : 56] That's the kind of story that we've explored here together this morning. A proconsul, the highest-ranking official in a Roman senatorial province.

Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man, wanted to hear the word of God. Sergius Paulus saw what was done to Elemas, and he was astonished by the teaching of the Lord.

Then Acts 13, verse 12, tells us that Sergius Paulus believed. We've seen how teaching was confirmed by miracles that demonstrated God's power.

Mark 16, verses 19 and 20 says, After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven, and he sat at the right hand of God.

Then the disciples came out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it. Hebrews 2, verses 3 and 4 says, How shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?

[23 : 01] This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders, and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

It's often the way God operates, for teaching and truth to often be accompanied or confirmed by miracles. This morning we've taken a closer look at what turned out to be a very favorable first missionary journey that was launched and directed by the Holy Spirit.

The first missionary journey of our faith. Folks, this is it. Quite an event to be remembered. It saw the word of God proclaimed in the synagogues of Salamis, and the teaching of the Lord confirmed in the city of Paphos.

While it almost sneaks past us in the text if we're not paying attention, the record of these events also includes Luke using the name Paul instead of Saul for the first time.

Up to this point, Saul was referred to by his Hebrew name. But from this point, as we've discussed, Paul will be called by his Roman name. It's at this point that Paul begins to have a precedence over Barnabas.

[24 : 25] Formally, the two men, and you can look in Scripture, were identified most commonly as Barnabas and Saul. But take note in the coming weeks, now these two men will be referred to as Paul and Barnabas.

A very interesting shift. We're also going to begin to notice the precedence of Paul is seen further as Luke describes their departure from Paphos.

Paul and Barnabas will continue on this journey as they leave the island of Cyprus. And we'll be looking at that next week. This morning, we've seen how the Holy Spirit will both empower and inspire God's people when they seek his will and follow his prompting.

We've also seen how we are called to be bold in proclaiming truth, even in the face of strong resistance and opposition. Friends, God will make a way for his truth to penetrate in even the most challenging situations and circumstances.

Let's seek to be people who faithfully follow where God leads and who declare truth no matter the challenges or the cost. My friends, our God is faithful.

[25 : 47] Amen? We are partners with him in this amazing plan for everyone to come to him. Amen.