

Acts 13:4–12

Introduction

12:24 is a transitional text, returning us to Saul/Paul's adventures.

Last week five markers that the word of God was increasing and multiplying.

- Gospel Work is Being Done
- Diversity of Gifts Being Exercised
- Diversity of Workers
- Leadership is developed and sent
- Growth is Spiritually Driven

Having been set apart by the Holy Spirit and having been sent out to do the work to which the Holy Spirit called them, Barnabas and Paul head to Cyprus, the place of Barnabas' origin.¹ This marks the final stage of Jesus' promise:

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”²

- Note that these two men, searching for a new field in which to work, start with the place that is familiar to one of them.

Luke records very little about their visit to Salamis, except that they proclaim the word of God and John Mark was there to assist them. From this, we might gather that not all preaching of the word of God will bring about results: either good or bad!

Then the two brothers move across Cyprus to Paphos, from the east side to the west side across the island.

This week, we compare two men and—more importantly—the difference between the work of the enemy of our souls and the work of the Holy Spirit.

¹ Acts 4:36.

² Acts 1:8.

Two Men Compared

As we compare these two men let us notice how many **similarities** there are:

- * both unconverted at beginning of the account,
- * living in the same place,
- * both seemingly are interested in the same God,
- * both hear the same message, and,
- * from the same messenger.

Yet the outcomes are completely different.

Bar-Jesus, called Elymas

* Bar-Jesus means means “son of Joshua”, which could be understood to mean “son of salvation”.

* His title is Elymas, derived from a Semitic word meaning wise or powerful. That title goes with his profession “magician”, the same title given to the wise men who visited Jesus when he was about two years old.

* He is Jewish, which means that he supposedly holds to the faith of the Old Testament

* He styles himself a prophet, one authorized by God to tell forth (“forth-tell”) the word of God, and/or to foretell the future, the two biblically defined functions of a prophet.

* Actually, the title that Luke gives to him is not prophet, but pseudo-prophet, which means that he claims to be a prophet when he is not, and that he utters falsehoods as if they were divine prophecies.

* He was with the proconsul, meaning that he had some sort of relationship with this Roman leader, perhaps as a personal counselor, a “chaplain” of sorts.

* Elymas opposed Barnabas and Paul.

* He did not want the proconsul to accept this faith of Barnabas and Paul. Though we are not told explicitly, it is easy to speculate that Elymas did not want to lose influence over Sergius Paulus.

* Since Elymas was a false prophet, purity of religion would be of no interest to him. As a Jew, he would know that what he claimed concerning his abilities

and powers were worthy of death according to Old Testament law.³ In other words, he's not called a false prophet by Luke, because he is against Christ. He's called a false prophet, because he **knows** that what he is doing is false according to his own religion.

Sergius Paulus

* Proconsul: a civil governor with legal authority, a kind of Supreme Court judge and governor of a state wrapped into one. He is considered a direct representative of the emperor, Claudius, as history tells us.⁴

* Considered to be intelligent. The word means more than simply knowing much information. It is the sense of being "mentally well put together". We could also use words like wise, learned, prudent, or discerning.

* As an implication of his intelligence, he is philosophically well put together, that is, he is pious.⁵ That's why he sends for Barnabas and Saul, so that he can hear the word of God, which we should understand as the Old Testament.

* The proconsul's relationship with Elymas and Elymas' supposed position as a prophet of God tells us something about the proconsul's piety. The religion in which he is interested is the religion of the Jews, of the OT.

Essential Point of Comparison

The essential point of this comparison is that even though both do not know Christ, Sergius is described as a discerning man and humble seeker after truth. Elymas is an opportunistic liar.

Two Outcomes Compared

* Note that Saul is now called Paul. Paul is a Roman citizen, speaking to a Roman official. Paul is a Roman name; whereas Saul is a Hebrew name.

³ Exodus 22:18, Deuteronomy 18:10, Deuteronomy 13:1–5, 18:20–22.

⁴ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sergius_Paulus and Easton's Bible Dictionary, **Sergius Paulus**.

⁵ See Thayer (4908, 4920), Mounce (G5305, G5317), and Strongs Dictionary (4908, 4920) for συνετός and συνήμι.

* Note also that Paul seems to take authority ahead of Barnabas in this event, although it has been Barnabas who has been taking the lead until now.

We observe the outcomes for the two men in this story.

Elymas, Bar-Jesus

* Paul looks intently at Elymas. He fixes his gaze on him as if to look into his heart and mind.

* The true spirit of God—the Holy Spirit—speaks directly to the false spirit, the devil.

* Perhaps in a play on words, Paul declares to Elymas that he is not a son of salvation, but that he is a son of the devil, a son of hell.

* Paul openly says what everyone in the room already knew, except maybe Sergius Paulus. That is, instead of being a prophet representing the most high God, he is openly breaking God's law: thus he is an "enemy of all righteousness".

* He is "full of all deceit", since he falsely represents himself as a prophet, and thus speaks falsehoods.

* He is also "full of all ... villainy", with no scruples. His intelligence differs from Sergius in that his intelligence is wicked; he is cunning like his father the devil. He does mischief, rather than good with what he knows.

* Elymas is the exact opposite of a true prophet. "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain."⁶ But in the case of Elymas, he is making the plain places rough, the level ground uneven, and the smooth fields he is turning into mountains and valleys.

* The result is that one of the greatest curses of God that has been repeatedly pronounced throughout history on his people is that even though he has eyes, he will not be able to see. Note that this is exactly the same judgment that was pronounced on Paul for a time.

* Now the ostensible leader must find someone to lead him. The magician cannot undo the "magic" of God. The false prophet is prophesied against.

We don't know what happened to Elymas in the long run. But we do know in

⁶ Isaiah 40:4,

the short run he is shut down and shut up.

Sergius Paulus

* Seeing what happened, the proconsul believed.

* What caused him to come to faith was “the teaching of the Lord”, not the outcome of the contest between Paul and this supposed prophet. It shows his good judgment and discernment that it was not miracles that were his primary interest. It was right teaching, true knowledge about God.

* Having been introduced to the Old Testament by Elymas, it would have been relatively easy for someone so well-versed in the Old Testament—like Paul or Barnabas—to correct misunderstandings and the results of false teaching and extend the message into the atonement by Jesus.

* Again, as a kind of interesting wordplay, it is interesting that God’s grace turned Sergius from the false son of salvation—Elymas—to the true son of salvation.

Conclusions

Beware of False Power

We should not underestimate the power of Satan to lie, deceive, and destroy. Elymas **knew what he was doing was false**, and did it anyway.

There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.⁷

We’ve recently been made aware of the destructive power of lies in the increased rate of suicides.

* 50% increase for women between 2000 and 2016; 21% for men. The ratio is roughly 4:1, men:women.

* In PA, 34% increase.

* Since 2008, 10th leading cause of death for all ages.⁸

Another area in which the power of evil can be seen is in the use of words:

⁷ Proverbs 14:12, 16:25.

⁸ abcnews.go.com/Health/female-suicide-rate-jumps-50-percent-2000/story?id=55906336.

being a false prophet was essentially a matter of words.

We can be too easily seduced by a culture that tells us what words we can use and how we can use them. This text demonstrates the raw power of naming sin for what it is. It's something like being willing and having the courage to say that the Emperor is walking around naked. "Calling out" Elymas seems to be exactly what was needed for both Sergius **and** Elymas.

Be Aware of Good Powers / God's Powers

It is also the power of God attending the word of God that does the work in Sergius' heart. This is always the case, not necessarily in the same way it happened with Elymas, of course.

While we aren't told exactly what it was that Barnabas and Paul said, we are given hints by the other sermons preached by Paul, even in this same chapter! And the sermons we will see in the book of Acts aren't always accompanied by a miracle or some supernatural event. However, we can be assured that every conversion is the result of the power of God's Holy Spirit, applying what was heard to the hearers, confirming what was said by the preachers.

It's not our job to convert, just to speak.