

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study guide is to facilitate the study of Acts 13:6-12 as a supplement to the sermon. It is based on my (Michael's) study and meditation on the passage. This handout can be used for personal study or community group conversation. (I hope you join a group!)

ACTS 13:6-12 ESV

6 When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. 7 He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. 8 But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. 9 But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him 10 and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? 11 And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time." Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. 12 Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

STRUCTURE

- I. The Lord's servants encounter the devil's servant in the court of a Gentile ruler (13:6-8)
- II. The Lord's servants confront the devil's servant by the Spirit and a sign (13:9-11)
- III. The Gentile ruler sees the sign, hears the Word, and believes (13:12)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

After launching out from Antioch, the first Gentile church, the historic duo of Saul and Barnabas enters the demonic-infested land of the Gentiles. Beginning at Babel, God had handed the nations over to "the gods" (aka, demons), inheriting Israel for Himself and flooding her with gospel light (Deut. 32:8-9). After His resurrection and ascension, however, His purpose in inheriting Israel—to bless "all the families of the earth" (Gen. 12:3)—began realization. Jesus, our Greater Israel, "re-inherited" the nations (Matt. 28:18). Now He sends His church into the harvest to actualize what already belongs to Him in principle (Matt. 28:19-20). The nations belong to Christ, not demons. Saul and Barnabas, you and I, have been called into this "salvation showdown" between the true God and false ones, between Christ and demons. We all have an epic role to play. Christ won the nations in principle; He wins them practically through us—but never without a fight. Evangelism is spiritual warfare.

Luke emphasizes this reality by narrating a story involving a sorcerer first, even though it occurred toward the end of their time in Cyprus. In the story, Luke introduces us to the sorcerer who accompanied the proconsul before mentioning the proconsul himself. By highlighting the opposition first, Luke sets the stage for a salvation showdown. The Spirit may have sent them into the harvest (Acts 13:2, 4), but that didn't guarantee a cakewalk. God calls us to do hard things; He calls us into war. The nations won't come to Christ unless we learn how to fight.

The showdown involves the eternal future of a Gentile ruler who is a "man of intelligence" (13:7) and shares a name with Paul (see below for the relationship between "Paul" and "Sergius Paulus"). His mind and name foreshadow a positive outcome.

Though Paul is linked with Sergius Paulus by name, he is connected with Elymas, the sorcerer, in other ways for contrast. Elymas is a false prophet (13:6), but Paul is a true one (13:1). Elymas is interchangeably called Bar-Jesus, meaning son of Jesus—an irony (13:6, 8); Saul is interchangeably called Paul (13:9). Elymas is blinded by "mist and darkness" (13:11); Paul is blinded by the light of Christ (9:8). Together, these contrasts intensify the mood. This is a spiritual battle between Paul and Elymas for the soul of a Gentile ruler who represents his entire region.

The showdown between Paul and Elymas reminds us especially of two prior ones in Scripture. First, the narrative alludes to Israel's exodus from Egypt. Consider the parallels: both Moses and Paul oppose sorcerers in a royal court; both Moses and Paul display greater power than their enemies; both Moses and Paul inflict a plague of darkness; both Moses and Paul display "the hand of the Lord" against their opposition; both Moses and Paul deliver

God's elect from slavery. On the latter point, Luke highlights the new element in this spiritual showdown. It is deliverance from slavery to the power of Satan. Like Pharaoh, the devil cracks his whip on our backs, but Jesus delivers us from his furious lash. Evangelism empties hell of both its power to enslave and its future population. To preach the gospel before men is to simultaneously announce to the devil, "Let my people go!"

The second parallel showdown comes earlier in Acts when Peter opposes Simon the Sorcerer. Notably, when the gospel first extends into Samaritan lands through Philip, there is spiritual warfare. Likewise, when the gospel first extends into Gentile lands through Saul and Barnabas, there is spiritual warfare. In both cases, a sorcerer has held sway over a region through supernatural means, and in both cases, the gospel prevails. We should not expect to take new ground for the kingdom without a fight, but the good news is that we possess far greater power.

The story ends with Paul announcing (and inflicting) a plague of temporary blindness over Elymas and the proconsul coming to faith. The temporary nature of the blindness and allusion to Paul's former blindness and opposition suggests that the story of Elymas was still being written. Perhaps, like Paul, supernaturally induced blindness would lead to spiritually opened eyes. Luke doesn't tell us the outcome for Elymas, but the connections imply hope. Furthermore, they reveal the heart of God. God can win any battle by "putting people in their place," so to speak. However, His preference is always for mercy. In our spiritual battles, we must not lose the heart of God—which is winning hearts.

The proconsul comes to faith not only because of the sign but also the "teaching of the Lord." Word and Spirit unite to win the proconsul's heart. Where Elymas was "full of all deceit and villainy" (13:10), Paul was "filled with the Spirit" (13:8) and performed a sign. The sign was not enough, however. They never are. Without the "teaching of the Lord," signs point people nowhere. Miracles are never just about miracles. God intends them to point beyond themselves—to Jesus. Pointing people to Him is how we win the salvation showdown.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

6 When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus.

—"When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos":

- Paphos rested on the far western shore of Cyprus, with their original port of entry, Salamis, on the eastern side. It was 112 miles between them.
- Paphos was the provincial capital of Cyprus.
- The text implies that Paul and Barnabas evangelized from Cyprus's east to west coast. The same verb appears in 8:4, 40, and 9:32 in evangelistic contexts.
- That Luke selects this story to tell (leaving out all the stories between the two coasts) suggests special significance for this one. It will introduce the first named Gentile convert who lacks any relationship to Judaism. It will also spotlight a battle royale between the kingdom of Satan and of God. Invading pagan territory with gospel light won't come without a fight. Light pierces darkness through direct confrontation.
- The drive of Paul and Barnabas to share the gospel with an entire island illustrates the zeal we should all feel to make disciples.

—"they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus":

- Luke introduces the magician before the convert. This approach highlights spiritual warfare. Preaching Jesus is war. The devil doesn't lie down without contest.
- "they came upon": Luke narrates as though their encounter was "by chance," but the overall story conveys the opposite. The devil designed this opposition.
- It feels random when we encounter spiritual warfare, like we stumbled into it. It is not random, however. The devil has "schemes" (Eph. 6:12). It is not just God, but the devil who has a plan for our lives. This story shows us how to let God's plan triumph.
- "magician... Jewish false prophet... Bar Jesus... Elymas (v. 8)... son of the devil (v. 9)... enemy of all righteousness (v. 9)":
 - Luke multiplies terms for the sorcerer, beginning in verse 6 and extending into verse 9. The variation underscores that his wickedness is not one-dimensional.
 - "magician":

- Reminds us of the exodus, where Moses opposes Egyptian magicians in a battle royale. Their magic is not sleight of hand; it is supernatural.
- Also reminds us of Acts 8, where Peter confronted Simon, the sorcerer. Outside of Jerusalem, pagan gods hold sway.
- "magician" as defined by Schnabel: "a person skilled in the use of incantations with the goal of influencing or controlling transcendent powers to overcome public or private problems."
- "Jewish false prophet":
 - Bar Jesus descended from Abraham, but he adopted the gods of paganism. As is typical throughout Scripture, a "false prophet" is not just one who misses a prophecy but rather one who employs supernatural power to lead God's people astray, often even speaking (falsely) for Yahweh.
 - See NT references to false prophets below.
- "Bar Jesus": means "son of Jesus"; Paul calls him "son of the devil." The followers of Jesus and Satan are made plain. Jewish blood alone does not place one on God's team; only the blood of our Jewish Messiah can do that.
- "Elymas":
 - This name is highly debated, but it seems to derive from a Semitic word for "wise." To be a "wise man" and a "magician" were related in the ancient world. Think of the "magi" who visited Jesus.
 - If "wisdom" is indeed part of the link to this magician's name, it would seem that Luke aims to contrast the demonic "wisdom" of Elymas with the "intelligence" (13:7) of the proconsul, who chooses Christ. "Wisdom" thus seems to be a theme of this chapter.
- "enemy of all righteousness": no matter how friendly we are, the gospel makes enemies. You can't be a friend of God and the world simultaneously (Jam. 4:4).

—To expand on the biblical depiction of "false prophet," the term appears 11 times in the NT. Notice how every instance pertains to people who practice heresy and/or immorality.

- [Matthew 7:15 ESV] 15 "Beware of **false prophets**, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.
- [Matthew 24:11, 24 ESV] 11 And many **false prophets** will arise and lead many astray. ... 24 For false christs and **false prophets** will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.
- [Mark 13:22 ESV] 22 For false christs and **false prophets** will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect.
- [Luke 6:26 ESV] 26 "Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the **false prophets**.
- [Acts 13:6 ESV] 6 When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish **false prophet** named Bar-Jesus.
- [2 Peter 2:1 ESV] 1 But **false prophets** also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.
- [1 John 4:1 ESV] 1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many **false prophets** have gone out into the world.
- [Revelation 16:13 ESV] 13 And I saw, coming out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the **false prophet**, three unclean spirits like frogs.
- [Revelation 19:20 ESV] 20 And the beast was captured, and with it the **false prophet** who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur.
- [Revelation 20:10 ESV] 10 and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the **false prophet** were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

—Schreiner: "When they come to the capital Paphos on Cyprus, they discover what Jesus found in Gentile territories: demonic domination."

—Schreiner: "Saul and Barnabas entered contested territory and conquered."

7 He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God.

—"with the proconsul":

- "proconsul" was "the head of the government in a senatorial province" (Schnabel, quoting BDAG).
- The sorcerer operated as a "court astrologer," much like Pharaoh's magicians. Kings would seek the counsel of those in touch with "the gods."

—"Sergius Paulus":

- The proconsul's name "Paulus" is translated from the same Greek word as "Paul"—that is, "Paulos." On a related note, this is the story where Luke begins calling Saul by his Roman name, "Paul." Paul's Roman name reflects his mission to the Roman empire. Perhaps I'm making too much of this, but I don't believe in coincidences. The first named Gentile convert on Paul's mission to the Gentiles shares Paul's Roman name. It seems to me like God is winking at Paul and us, as if to say, "The mission will succeed."
- Keener: "The graphic coincidence of the apostle's and governor's names reinforces for readers the Romanness of Paul's name."

—"summoned Barnabas and Saul": Luke does not relay how the proconsul learned of their presence, but presumably, they had been preaching the "word of God" openly enough to be discovered, even by the city government. The proconsul's "intelligence" leads him to summon them. He who had curiously welcomed the Jewish false prophet now curiously summons two Jewish apostles. Curious seeking is wise. Wisdom does more than just seek, though; it submits. By the end of this story, Sergius Paulus will submit to the King who is higher than Caesar.

8 But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.

—If we don't talk about Jesus, then the devil has little concern about us. Quiet piety presents no threat to the kingdom of darkness. Of course, we need quiet piety. We need holiness and the habits that accompany it. However, Satan's greatest concern is with the spread of the gospel. Here, he aims through Elymas to prevent that spread.

—I am reminded of my friend Todd who, at the age of 18, died of a cocaine overdose. He had an out-of-body experience. He realized it when he looked down and saw his body. He thought, "Oh my gosh! I'm dead!" He says he tried reentering his body, to no avail. He says that two dark hands then grasped his ankles and pulled him down into an infernal chamber. It was total darkness. He says the devil began pacing in circles around him, mocking and claiming him as his own. Terror overwhelmed him, and then he saw a light overhead. He heard a voice call out to him—Jesus—and he called back in desperation. He began ascending in the light, which acted like a force field against Satan. Suddenly, his spirit reentered his body, and he came to. He immediately repented and turned his life around. He told everyone he knew about Jesus. He says demons would appear in his room every night and harass him. He prayed vigilantly. He preached the gospel more. They wouldn't go away. Then one night, overwhelmed, he cried aloud, "Satan, if you would just leave me alone, I'd stop preaching the gospel so much!" He said everything stopped at that point. It's been decades since, and he's been a lukewarm believer throughout. I appealed that he resume his bold evangelism. He never did.

—You might not believe that story, which is fine. Maybe you have a scientific explanation for it. Either way, it illustrates that Satan most attacks those who proclaim good news. The solution is not to become lukewarm but to maintain our fire until the day we meet Jesus and the war is finally over.

—"the faith":

- The article "the" reminds us that we do not just place personal faith in Jesus; we also join a historic faith, submitted to by countless others who placed personal faith in Jesus. In other words, Christianity is a religion. It is not just a relationship. (It is both.)
- Jude, the brother of Jesus, uses "the faith" in similar fashion, revealing once again that Christianity is a religion: "Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints."

9 But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him 10 and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? 11 And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time." Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand.

—"But": verses 8 and 9 both begin with the adversative, "but". In verse 8, the proconsul summoned Barnabas and Saul, "but" the magician opposed them. In verse 9, the magician opposed them "but" Saul confronted him. The back-and-forth flow heightens the suspense and the sense that a spiritual battle is occurring.

—"Saul, who was also called Paul": commented on above. Saul's double name (Saul/Paul) was common in their multilingual world.

—"filled with the Holy Spirit":

- Paul was filled with the Spirit in 9:17 also. Likewise, Peter was filled with the Spirit in 2:4, 4:8, and 4:31. The filling of the Spirit is distinct from the one-time event called the baptism of the Spirit. The baptism of the Spirit incorporates us into Christ's body, the church (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13). The filling of the Spirit is a repeatable empowerment of the Spirit to proclaim Christ boldly, often in the face of a hostile audience.
- Paul's first filling of the Spirit came in the context of being blinded by the light of Jesus; his second filling of the Spirit came in the context of blinding a sorcerer with "mist and darkness."
- The contrast between Paul and Elymas highlights themes of the Spirit, light, and darkness. Later, Paul will quote Jesus sending him to Gentiles "to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God" (26:18).
- Themes of light and darkness parallel the power of God and Satan. God empowers Paul by the Spirit to win that battle. We can't win the spiritual battle without the Holy Spirit.
- The opening of one's eyes symbolizes spiritual illumination, which Paul received after the prayer of Ananias. The closing of one's eyes represents spiritual ignorance. Paul's filling by the Spirit empowers bold confrontation and a miracle, which results in opening the spiritual eyes of the proconsul and closing the physical eyes of the sorcerer. The Spirit wins the battle.
- If we want to experience the filling of the Spirit, we need to place ourselves on the front lines. If we sit back in our comfortable churches, begging God for an outpouring but never sharing the gospel, we are missing something. Paul needed the filling of the Spirit to bear witness to Christ and dismantle Satan's stronghold. The filling of the Spirit is not just for grins. It's for bearing witness and destroying Satan.

—"looked intently at him": this was an intense moment. Spiritual warfare is no laughing matter. There is a time for levity and laughter, but there is a time for gravity and sobriety. I'm reminded of a time I was casting demons out of someone (he had a lot of them), and just as I began to see a breakthrough, he interrupted with a series of graphic and lewd jokes. A spirit was trying to lighten the atmosphere because the authority of Christ was bearing down on him.

—"son of the devil... enemy of all righteousness":

- See comments under v. 6.
- Pharisees were sons of the devil despite being sons of Abraham biologically. John 8:44: *"You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies."*

—"full of deceit and villainy":

- "full of deceit and all fraud" (NKJV); "full of all kinds of deceit and trickery" (NIV); "full of deceit and fraud" (NASB); "full of all deceit and all wrongdoing" (NET).
- The second word appears to hold a broader meaning. Together, the terms communicate that the sorcerer is on the wrong path, and he employs deceit to bring others with him.
- The Apostle Paul is "filled" with the Spirit; Elymas the sorcerer is "full of deceit and villainy." Both men are full. What spills out of us depends on what we are full of.

—"will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?"

- This reminds us of Isaiah's prophecy (Isa. 40:3ff), fulfilled in Luke 3:4-6, where John the Baptist would *"Prepare the way of the Lord [and] make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and*

*every mountain and hill shall be made low, and **the crooked shall become straight**, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."*

- The language of "crooked" and "straight" had become part of Jewish vocabulary for contrasting righteous paths ("straight") from wicked ones ("crooked").
- Sometimes, "being righteous" precludes us from "being nice." I'm reminded of the time before I got saved when I participated in a YoungLife ski trip. The leader was trying to teach our cabin of teenagers the Scripture, and I kept acting like a class clown, interrupting the moment with levity. Finally, he pulled me aside and kindly rebuked me. Even as an unsaved person, I received his rebuke. Righteousness does not require us to be a pushover, and sometimes, it demands the opposite: bold action.
- "making crooked" (Gk. *diastrepho*) is used not only here in 13:10 but also in 13:8 to depict how Elymas sought "to turn" (Gk. *diastrepho*) the proconsul from the faith. The double-usage of a rare NT word in the same passage emphasizes the role of this false prophet. It is to make "crooked", to "turn", and (to use other translations of the same word) "twist" and "distort."

—"the hand of the Lord is upon you":

- Throughout the exodus story, we read of the hand of the Lord:
 - [Exodus 7:5 ESV] 5 The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my **hand** against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them."
 - [Exodus 9:3 ESV] 3 behold, the **hand** of the LORD will fall with a very severe plague upon your livestock that are in the field, the horses, the donkeys, the camels, the herds, and the flocks.
 - [Exodus 13:3, 9, 14 ESV] 3 Then Moses said to the people, "Remember this day in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of slavery, for by a strong **hand** the LORD brought you out from this place. No leavened bread shall be eaten. ... 9 And it shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the law of the LORD may be in your mouth. For with a strong **hand** the LORD has brought you out of Egypt. ... 14 And when in time to come your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him, 'By a strong **hand** the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery.
 - [Exodus 15:6 ESV] 6 Your right **hand**, O LORD, glorious in power, your right **hand**, O LORD, shatters the enemy.
- Later, Moses would preach about God's "mighty hand and outstretched arm" in the "signs and wonders and great deeds of terror" associated with the exodus (Deut. 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 26:8). Psalmists would sing of the same (Ps. 89:13; 98:1; 136:12).
- The apostles prayed that God would "stretch out" His hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders by the name of Jesus (Acts 4:30).
- Luke portrays Jesus as the Lord of the exodus who once again delivers His people with a mighty hand and outstretched arm, displayed in "signs and wonders and great deeds of terror" (Deut. 26:8). Jesus delivers the proconsul from spiritual slavery by stretching His hand out against the sorcerer, blinding him with darkness as He did with the Egyptians.

—"you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time":

- Saul had likewise been blinded, but he came to faith as a result.
- "for a time" implies that the sorcerer would have the chance to repent. God inflicted temporary blindness to make a point: that he must stop twisting the way of the Lord and that he is operating from a place of spiritual blindness. But I don't think that's the only point. Jesus also wants to save the sorcerer, just as He once saved Saul through blindness. The temporary blindness served as an immediate restraint and ultimate testimony to Elymas about the world's true light. It also served as a testimony to Sergius Paulus, who received Christ as a result.
- Practically, do these sorts of miracles still happen? I'm still seeing a fair amount of "positive" miracles. I saw 80% deafness completely healed last week. I've never seen one of these, though—a "judgment" miracle.
- I still believe they happen. I have read about them in other parts of the world, especially when spiritual warfare is ramped up and in-your-face, as here with Paul.

- Like Moses, Paul inflicts blindness on an enemy: *"Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness to be felt.' So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was pitch darkness in all the land of Egypt three days. They did not see one another, nor did anyone rise from his place for three days, but all the people of Israel had light where they lived"* (Ex. 10:21-23). Jesus delivers His people through the leadership of God's man.

—Craig Keener makes a chart, highlighting ironies in the story:

Elymas	Saul
A "false prophet" (13:6)	A true prophet (13:1)
Has two names (13:6, 8), one that provides a wordplay ("Bar [son of] Jesus" is a "son of the devil"; 13:10)	Has two names (13:9), one of which provides a connection with Sergius Paulus (13:7)
Elymas twists the Lord's straight 'ways' (13:10)	Saul once opposed the 'way' (9:2); now he preaches it (16:17)
Blinded and sought someone to lead him by the hand (13:11)	Earlier blinded and led by the hand (9:8)
Full of deception (13:10)	Filled with the Holy Spirit (13:9)

—What does Luke convey through the above ironies?

- It heightens the combative mood of the passage. This is God versus the devil and Paul versus Elymas.
- It offers hope that Elymas can be saved since Paul was once in his shoes, opposing the way of Jesus before being blinded—and then seeing.
- Even in this combative scene, the heart of our Lord bleeds through. He has the power to crush His foes but prefers to win battles differently. He likes to win their hearts. By comparing Saul and Elymas and noting the temporary nature of the blindness, this desire for conversion—even of a bitter enemy—shines through.

—"mist and darkness": these were ancient medical terms for blindness (Stott).

—"people to lead him by the hand": like Saul, back to Damascus (9:8).

12 Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

—"Then the proconsul believed": as a result of the miracle-working power. Signs and wonders aid the gospel's advancement, just as Jesus prescribed (1:8).

—"for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord":

- "astonished" = "shaken to the core" (JBP translation).
- he was not just astonished at the miracle like the folks who ate the bread Jesus provided and disregarded His teaching (John 6). This man was astonished at the *teaching* of the Lord. To see a miracle can evoke awe, but the inspiration fades if we don't see beyond the miracle to the One who performed it—Jesus.