

Barnabas and Saul are set apart for the work that God has called them to do and as a result they set out on their first missionary journey from their home base of Antioch. They arrive on the Mediterranean island of Cyprus and encounter Satanic opposition to the gospel through a false prophet who attempts to prevent a Roman official from believing in Jesus Christ.

1 Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

“Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers” – Some of these men had come from Jerusalem to minister and teach (Acts 11:27).

“as Barnabas” – Barnabas originally came from Jerusalem on a ministry trip to encourage the new believers in Phenice, Cypress, Cyrene and Antioch (Acts 11:19-24). After ministering in these places, Barnabas traveled to Tarsus to find Saul and brought him back to Antioch, and there they have remained as teachers of the word of God (Acts 11:25-26, 12:25).

“and Simeon that was called Niger” – “Niger” means “black” so Simeon may have been a black-skinned man. Some believe him to be Simon of Cyrene, the man who carried Jesus’ cross in Luke 23:26, this theory cannot be proven or disproven.

“and Lucius of Cyrene” – We know nothing of this man.

“and Manaen, which had been brought up with [foster-brother; childhood friend] Herod the tetrarch” – Manaen apparently grew up with Herod, either as a foster-brother or as a childhood friend. At some point he became a believer and now God was using him as a prophet and/or teacher.

“and Saul” – Saul of Tarsus, who later becomes known as the apostle Paul. Barnabas had brought him from Tarsus (Acts 11:25-26).

2 As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. 3 And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid *their* hands on them, they sent *them* away.

“As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted” – The Greek word for “ministered” is often used in the NT to describe priestly service. The ministry of the men listed in v. 1 to the church was considered ministry to the Lord through their preaching and teaching. Fasting is associated with prayer, indicating that they were dedicating themselves in prayer to God for guidance in their ministry.

“the Holy Ghost said, Separate [set apart for a specific purpose] me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them” – Christ had already revealed to Saul that his ministry would be to the Gentiles. Paul mentions this later when giving his testimony to King Agrippa: “*And I said, Who art thou, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.*” (Acts 26:15-18). Saul has grown enough spiritually that he is ready to embark on this ministry, accompanied by Barnabas. Later in this chapter, Paul declares that this is the work God had called them to do (vs. 46-47).

“And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid *their* hands on them, they sent *them* away” – It’s unclear if the “they” mentioned here is the group of five men listed as prophets and teachers in v. 1, or the church in general. The fasting and prayer being done at this stage is likely asking for God’s blessing on Barnabas and Saul, as is the laying on of hands. The laying on of hands also signified the church’s blessing on the pair as well as identifying the church with the work that they were about to commence.

4 So they, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, departed unto Seleucia; and from thence they sailed to Cyprus. 5 And when they were at Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews: and they had also John to *their* minister.

“So they, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, departed unto Seleucia; and from thence they sailed to Cyprus” – Antioch was near the NE corner of the Mediterranean Sea and about 16 miles from the coast. Barnabas and Saul travel the 16 miles to Seleucia, a seaport city west of Antioch. They board a ship and sail to Cypress, which is an island in the Mediterranean some 60 miles west of Seleucia. The phrase “sent forth by the Holy Ghost” implies that their destination was chosen by the Holy Spirit and not Barnabas and Saul.

“And when they were at Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews” – Salamis was a city on the east end of the island of Cyprus and was likely the seaport where Barnabas and Saul’s ship had docked upon arrival at Cyprus. Paul’s habit was to preach to the Jews first when entering a new city and the synagogues were the best place to do this. Also, there were Gentiles present at these synagogues who had a heart to worship God.

“and they had also John to *their* minister” – This is John Mark, who later becomes the author of the Gospel of Mark. He is described as the nephew of Barnabas in Col. 4:10 and accompanies Barnabas and Saul on this missionary journey, although he leaves them and returns to Jerusalem when they get to Perga (v. 13). Paul later refuses to take John Mark with them on the next missionary journey because of this (Acts 15:36-41).

6 And when they had gone through the isle unto Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew, whose name was Bar-jesus:

“And when they had gone through the isle unto Paphos” – Barnabas and Saul traveled the length of the island, likely preaching as they went, and arrive at Paphos, the principal city on the west end of Cyprus.

“they found a certain sorcerer [magician; wise man], a false prophet, a Jew, whose name was Bar-jesus” – Luke uses several words to describe this “Bar-Jesus” (Elymas – v. 8). The Greek word translated “sorcerer” is the same word used for the “wise men” who followed the star to find the king of the Jews at Jesus’ birth (Matt. 2:1, 7, 16). Such wise men (magicians) were trained in various arts such as astrology, dream interpretation, etc. and served as advisors to kings. Bar-jesus (“Son of Jesus”) was a Jew who used his position and training as a magician/wise man to perpetuate his false religious beliefs, possibly mixing Jewish and pagan religious ideas. Luke also describes the man as a “false prophet,” so Bar-jesus apparently claimed to speak for God.

7 Which was with the deputy of the country, Sergius Paulus, a prudent man; who called for Barnabas and Saul, and desired to hear the word of God. 8 But Elymas the sorcerer (for so is his name by interpretation) withstood them, seeking to turn away the deputy from the faith.

“Which was with the deputy of the country [proconsul], Sergius Paulus” – A proconsul was essentially a governor, so this Sergius Paulus served as the Roman governor of the island. Bar-jesus was “with” the proconsul, likely serving as an advisor and using his astrological and occultic knowledge to advise the decisions of the proconsul.

“a prudent [intelligent; wise] man” – Sergius Paulus was a thinking man – not assuming that he knew everything. Men who are wise are always wanting to learn more and accumulate more knowledge. The fact that he kept Bar-Jesus around may imply that he also had an interest in the God of the Jews, although Bar-jesus was a poor source of information in that regard.

“who called for Barnabas and Saul, and desired to hear the word of God” – Word had apparently gotten around about two preachers in town and the proconsul had become curious about the doctrine that they were preaching. Perhaps he was seeing inconsistencies in the beliefs that Bar-Jesus held and wanted to hear something more authoritative. It seems obvious, however, that God was moving on this man’s heart, prompting him to send for Barnabas and Saul so that he could hear the word of God in person.

“But Elymas [wise man; magician] the sorcerer (for so is his name by interpretation)” – “Elymas” is the Greek transliteration of the Arabic word for “magician.” He apparently was known by a name reflecting his occupation.

“withstood [resisted; opposed; to be set against] them, seeking to turn away [distort; pervert] the deputy from the faith” – Luke states Elymas’ goal: he did not want the proconsul to believe the gospel. He did his best to ridicule, twist and contradict Barnabas and Saul’s message to prevent the proconsul from coming to faith in Christ. Satan was obviously at work in the magician’s heart, but perhaps Elymas knew that if the proconsul believed the gospel then he would no longer need the services of a magician. Thus Elymas may have been motivated by his job-security to interfere with Barnabas and Saul’s gospel presentation.

9 Then Saul, (who also is called Paul,) filled with the Holy Ghost, set his eyes on him, 10 And said, O full of all subtilty and all mischief, thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord?

“Then Saul, (who also is called Paul,)” – Saul was not only a Jew, but also a Roman citizen (Acts 22:27-28). Thus he had both a Jewish name (Saul) and a Roman name (Paul). Luke uses this opportunity to start using Saul’s Roman name and then uses it exclusively for the remainder of the book of Acts. Paul apparently goes by his Roman name when in Gentile territory in order that he may be more easily accepted (1 Cor. 9:20-22 “And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some”).

“filled with the Holy Ghost, set his eyes [to fix one’s eyes upon] on him” – The righteous indignation of the Lord has filled Paul as he has had enough of Bar-Jesus’ interference in the salvation of the proconsul. He looks Bar-Jesus straight in the eyes and speaks.

“And said, O full of all subtilty [deceit; guile] and all mischief [cunning], thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness” – Paul uses some strong terms to describe Bar-Jesus, listing several characteristics that Satan demonstrated in the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:1). The serpent was described as being subtil (deceitful) and his behavior was cunning in the way he turned Eve away from the truth that God had spoken. Bar-Jesus was acting in the same way, as a true child of the devil, and was being an enemy of righteousness.

“wilt thou not cease to pervert [oppose; distort] the right ways of the Lord?” – The Greek word for “pervert” is the same word translated “turn away” in v. 8. Paul may be speaking to Satan in the same sense as when Jesus said “Get thee behind me, Satan” to Peter (Matt. 16:23; Mark 8:33; Luke 4:8). Bar-Jesus is doing the work of Satan and Paul is asking rhetorically if he (Bar-Jesus and/or Satan) will ever stop trying to oppose/distort the righteous works of God.

11 And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon thee, and thou shalt be blind, not seeing the sun for a season. And immediately there fell on him a mist and a darkness; and he went about seeking some to lead him by the hand.

“And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon thee” – The Lord is intervening to put a stop to Bar-Jesus’ opposition to the gospel and interference in the salvation of the deputy, Sergius Paulus.

“and thou shalt be blind, not seeing the sun for a season” – The Lord leads Paul to name the punishment: temporary blindness. This punishment served three purposes: 1) a punishment of Bar-Jesus; 2) it brings to a halt Bar-Jesus’ attempt to pervert the gospel and prevent the salvation of the deputy; 3) provides visible evidence for the deputy that the gospel being preached by Barnabas and Paul was of God.

“And immediately there fell on him a mist and a darkness” – The blindness was not gradual in such a way as to be attributable to a natural illness. Bar-Jesus became blind as soon as the words came out of Paul’s mouth, demonstrating that Paul was speaking through the power of God.

“and he went about seeking some to lead him by the hand” – Bar-Jesus was rendered helpless by this blindness, despite his knowledge and abilities as a magician (wise man).

12 Then the deputy, when he saw what was done, believed, being astonished at the doctrine of the Lord.

Whatever influence that Bar-Jesus had with the deputy was immediately gone. The deputy realized that the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ was superior to anything that Bar-Jesus had been advocating. He also realized that everything that Paul and Barnabas had been preaching was true and believed in Christ.

Verses 12-52: Paul and Barnabas leave Paphos and sail north to Perga in Pamphylia (on the southern side of Asia Minor) and then travel to Antioch in Pisidia (in central Asia Minor). There they preach Christ in the synagogue and are rejected by the Jews but many Gentiles believe. Paul and Barnabas are eventually run out of town and they travel to Iconium, a nearby town.