

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
Paul Gunn, Pastor

THREE CHOICES; TWO SIDES

Acts 13: 4-12

May 30, 2021

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The points for today's sermon:

1. The devil distracted Sergius from the truth.
2. The Lord used Saul to demonstrate his power.
3. Sergius believed.

INTRODUCTION: Last week, we studied the beginning of Acts 13. We read how the leaders of the Antioch church prayed, worshipped, and fasted together. The leadership recognized when the Holy Spirit called Saul and Barnabas to head out on their own and sent them with their blessings. This week's message picks up with verse 4 when Saul and Barnabas begin their journey.

SCRIPTURE: Acts 13:4-5

The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. ⁵ When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper.

EXPLANATION: The missionary team set off, and their first stop was Seleucia, which was the nearest port city to Antioch. From there, they set sail to Cyprus, Barnabas's home country. Of course, like most of the known world at the time, it too was controlled by the Roman government. In verse 5, we are told two interesting pieces of information.

First, Luke made it a point to tell us that Saul and Barnabas went to the Jewish synagogues to preach. This is important because it shows that they were still trying to reach the Jews with the gospel message. They still recognized God's love for the Jewish people and their unique call in God's family. Unfortunately, as we will see,

the Jews as a whole continue to reject Christ. So, Paul's efforts became more and more centered on spreading the Good News to the Gentiles.

The second thing Luke points out is that John Mark was also a part of this team. John Mark, as I mentioned last week, was Barnabas's young cousin. He is the same person who wrote the book of Mark. I'm not going to discuss John Mark a lot this week, but you need to remember him because he becomes an important part of Saul and Barnabas's story later on.

SCRIPTURE: Acts 13:6-8

They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus,⁷ who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God.⁸ But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith.

1- THE DEVIL DISTRACTED SERGIUS

EXPLANATION: Saul, Barnabas, and John Mark traveled across the large island visiting one town after another until they came to Paphos. At that time, Paphos was probably considered the capital city of Cyprus. So, it makes sense that the proconsul or governor lived there.

Evidently, one of the first people the team met in Paphos was a Jewish sorcerer. Sorcery, then as it is now, was involvement in witchcraft. The very fact that this man was a Jew but also a sorcerer was a contradiction. The Jews were God's holy people, set apart by God. Sorcery was a crime against their faith, punishable by death under Old Testament law. Yet, here the man known as Bar-Jesus, or Elymas, practiced openly and probably profited from his attachment to the governor. He might have served as a fortune teller and may have been a regular member of the governor's counsel.

Many sorcerers then and today are nothing more than charlatans who take advantage of vulnerable people. But God’s word tells us that Sergius was an intelligent man. So why would he allow Elymas to have a voice in his life?

ILLUSTRATION: In 2011, a woman named Rose Marks was convicted of duping hundreds of clients of millions of dollars through a psychic scheme. One of those people was a best-selling novelist who said, “I kept coming back because she was listening to me.” In another case, a British internet entrepreneur continually visited a Times Square store where a supposed psychic gave him advice regarding his love life. He never got the woman of his dreams, but he lost \$550,000.

Sometimes even intelligent people do really dumb things. Maybe Sergius thought he was covering all the bases politically speaking—getting every available angle before he made a decision. Maybe he was insecure and thought he needed a “secret weapon” to boost his self-confidence. Or maybe, just maybe, the Holy Spirit was calling Sergius. Maybe he was feeling that hole inside himself that longs to be filled with God. Maybe Sergius reached out to Elymas because he was looking for something. He just wasn’t sure what that something was.

We don’t know why Sergius sought the counsel of a sorcerer or exactly what Elymas gained from his services. We do know, however, what was happening behind the scenes.

Word of the traveling evangelists reached Sergius. Curious, he wanted to hear what the evangelists had to say. If Sergius learned the truth, Elymas would lose his job. So, Elymas did everything he could to keep Sergius from hearing the Gospel.

2-THE LORD USED SAUL TO DEMONSTRATE HIS POWER

SCRIPTURE: Acts 13:9-11

Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, ¹⁰ “You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? ¹¹ 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.” 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.

ILLUSTRATION: In 2014, the NBA fined Knicks basketball player, J.R. Smith \$50,000 for untying his opponents' shoelaces during games. It was a dirty trick designed to draw the challengers' attention away from putting the ball through the hoop. While his technique may be unorthodox, the basketball player was not the first athlete to practice the art of distraction.

Baseball players chant from the dugout to make an opposing player swing. Tennis players grunt loudly as they serve in hopes of catching their rival off-guard. Goalies dance around. Spectators stomp their feet and yell to distract the opponent from the job at hand.

EXPLANATION: Distraction can be an effective tool, but Saul wasn't going to have any part in it. Like the official who calls a foul or a technical, Paul quickly lost patience with Elymas and called him out for the trickster that he was. He announced the Lord's judgment against Elymas, and immediately, Elymas lost his sight. Notice, though, that the blindness was not permanent. Saul told Elymas that it was "for a time."

Does this experience remind you of any other? It's fascinating how similar it is to Saul's own conversion on the Road to Damascus where, after a confrontation with Jesus, Saul was blinded for three days. The Bible does not tell us the rest of Elymas's story, but it leaves us to wonder. Maybe during his time in the darkness, Elymas also came to know the Lord.

- **The devil distracted Sergius from the truth.**
- **The Lord used Saul to demonstrate his power.**

3- SERGIUS BELIEVED

SCRIPTURE: Acts 13:12

When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

EXPLANATION: The scripture does not say that Sergius was fascinated by the miracle Saul performed. It does not say that he was scared of the power that was demonstrated. It says that Sergius was “amazed at the teaching about the Lord.” Without the sorcerer’s distractions, Sergius was able to fully hear and understand the message that Saul was preaching, and he believed.

Saul and Barnabas were instruments in the Lord’s hands. Their aim was to do God’s will and bring the hope of salvation to Sergius and other Jews and Gentiles.

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APPLICATION: Saul, Sergius, and Elymas were part of a cosmic battle. There were forces at work that they could not see, and those forces are still at work today waging an invisible but very real war. Like Saul and Barnabas, those of us who are Christians have chosen our side. We are Christ-followers, children of the King, filled with the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, there are also people like Elymas, people who seem to have chosen the opposite side, people who are being used as tools of distraction for other seekers.

Then, there are a lot of people like Sergius, who are still sitting on the fence, people who have yet to make a decision for Christ, people who think they have all the time in the world. You may be one of those people. You may believe that you are in the middle, that you haven’t chosen a side. The truth is this: there is no middle ground. The Bible tells us that those who are not with Christ are, in fact, opposed to him.

Satan knows the end of his story. He knows that he does not have a chance. He has already lost the war. Because he cannot win, his primary aim is to take as many people with him as he can. He does not have to change your mind. Until you give

your heart and life to the Lord, you are already his. As long as he can keep you distracted from hearing and receiving the truth, he has you.

Which one of these people do you identify with more? Are you like Saul, a follower of Christ, seeking to share his love, mercy, and grace with others? If so, how are you doing with that task? Can you do better?

Maybe you are like Elymas. Through sinful lifestyles and habits, have you placed yourself squarely in Satan's camp? Are you aiding the devil's efforts to kill, steal, and destroy in your own life and in the lives of others? If you relate to Elymas, remember, it's not too late to turn to Christ. Today is the day to come to Jesus. He's giving you another chance.

Or maybe you are like Sergius. Maybe you feel the call of the Holy Spirit, you know that something is missing in your life. Maybe you have allowed the distractions of work, family, politics, COVID, lunch, whatever it may be, to pull you away from your heart's cry. I am here today to tell you - it does not have to be that way. Jesus loves you. He died for you. He wants you to know him, to serve him.

You have three choices, but only two sides. Will you give your life to the Lord or allow the devil to continue to keep you from the truth? It's time to decide. Who are you going to follow?

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Sincerely, Paul Gunn
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