



THE WIND BLOWS IN CYPRUS

SERIES: ACTS LIFE UNLEASHED

Acts 13:4–12
26th Message
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In our text today we come to a historic moment in the history of the church, when Paul, Barnabas and John Mark set sail for Cyprus on the first missionary journey of the church. Up until now evangelism was the spontaneous less-systematic work of individuals. But now the task of missions will be intentional and strategic, following the lead of the Spirit coupled with wise strategy. Straight away we will discover the pattern of outreach that will be repeated in place after place. We will see the power of prayer to open doors, the approach Paul takes with politicians, the inevitability of fierce and sometimes violent attacks, and the relentless power and authority of the Holy Spirit to overcome all opposition. Though not every believer is called and sent to foreign lands to plant churches, every follower of Jesus is called and sent as a witness to the world and to take part in the process of making disciples of all nations. As Peter writes in his letter,

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9 ESV).

The good news is that God is calling a people for himself among the nations, and all we have to do is show up and be attentive to those around us.

I. Calling and Commission (Acts 12:25; 13:2-4)

A. A new assistant

And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark. (Acts 12:25)

Having completed their task of delivering the famine relief to the church in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch bringing John Mark with them. John was Barnabas’s cousin (Col 4:10) and Mary’s son, in whose home Barnabas and Saul most likely would have stayed in Jerusalem.

B. Commission and departure

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. (13:2–4)

Upon their return the Holy Spirit, speaking through one of their prophets, made known his will that Barnabas and Saul were to be set aside “for the work to which I have called them” (v. 2). After further fasting and prayer they were commissioned by the leadership at Antioch through the laying on of hands and sent on their way with John Mark accompanying them. His assistance

would be valuable not only on a practical level, but also as an eyewitness of the events that surrounded Jesus’ passion.

At PBCC we have a unique DNA in regard to missions. We have fourteen full-time missionaries, who have been sent out from our body. They are an incredibly gifted and diverse group, ranging from legacy missionaries, who have been on the field for 40-50 years, to those who are laying new foundations for their ministries. In addition to our full-time missionaries, almost every pastor has established a beachhead outside the local church to minister. This was not something the elders pre-planned or put into our job description. Rather, it was simply how the Spirit led each one of us, which the elders recognized and confirmed. Over the last four decades the Lord has opened doors for us to minister in Mexicali, the Yucatan, King City, Liberia, Israel, Turkey, Malaysia, Thailand, Romania, Albania, Croatia and, closer to home, Collins Elementary School with “Kids’ Club.” One of the benefits of this approach is that it created a stage for hundreds of you to get out of your comfort zones, expanding your horizons to see what God is doing in the world, and to use your gifts in ways you never thought possible.

Given the dramatic and expansive nature of Saul’s call, the beginning of this historic mission seems small and insignificant compared to our modern mindset of mass evangelism and global marketing schemes. All we have are two preachers and a young and inexperienced assistant setting out to share the good news with any and all who are willing to hear. But small beginnings should not surprise us, for this has been the characteristic “way” of the kingdom all through the gospel of Luke. Jesus sent his disciples two by two (10:1) and explained that the kingdom of God was “like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches” (Luke 13:19). Luke reminds us that what makes this little band mighty is not their numbers, wealth, or status, but the Holy Spirit who “called,” “sent” and “empowers” them along the way.

So how do they decide where to go and how will they manage to get a hearing in a Gentile world dominated by sensuality, power and idolatry? The Spirit doesn’t specify where to go; there is no itinerary or five-year plan. The strategy they employed was to go where they already had established relationships in strategic areas where there were significant populations of Jews. Paul was convinced that Jesus was the goal of Israel’s history and hope, “so the good news had to be proclaimed in the synagogues first — because it was ultimately Israel’s good news for the world. The good news was therefore ‘for the Jew first, then for the Gentile’ (Rom 1:16).”¹ Scholars estimate that there were more than four million Jews living in the Diaspora, and their synagogues provided

“the largest concentration of Gentiles open to the God of Israel and respectful of Israel’s salvation history.”²

Cyprus was the logical choice for their first destination. With its rich deposits in copper and strategic location Cyprus had become the central hub where sea routes from Egypt, Asia Minor and Syria converged. Coincidentally, Cyprus was also Barnabas’s home turf and he knew the island well. He would have known people who could host them and give them invitations to speak at their synagogues. There were also other Jewish believers who had fled there (11:19) and had begun to evangelize the island.

Having been sent out by the Holy Spirit and commissioned by the church at Antioch, they made their way nine miles down the river Orontes to Antioch’s port on the Mediterranean, Seleucia. There they booked passage on a merchant ship making the seventy-mile voyage to Cyprus. For Barnabas the journey was nothing new; he was going home; and for Saul, this was just the first step to fulfill his greater calling. But for Mark, this would be a new adventure. In his book, *In the Footsteps of Saint Paul*, Peter Walker imagines what Mark might have been feeling as they set sail for Cyprus.

Nurtured in Jerusalem and only recently having tasted the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Antioch, this was indeed a voyage of fresh discoveries. Yes, he was travelling with a trusted family member...but he himself had little idea how synagogues functioned so far away from Jerusalem. And how would they respond to this message of a messiah? More worrying still, how would he cope with it all? Would he prove useful to his seniors, or somehow get in the way? Would he feel homesick?³

II. The Channel is Open (Acts 13:4-8)

A. Arrival and Proclamation

When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them. When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos... (13:5–6a)

Upon their arrival in Salamis they implement the strategy that would become the characteristic launching point — proclaiming “the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews.” Salamis was the main port city of Cyprus with a large population that some scholars estimate to be as many as 150,000 residents. It was a flourishing commercial center with a significant Jewish population that required more than one synagogue. The synagogues provided a ready-made stage for Barnabas and Saul to share the good news, as it was customary for synagogue leaders to invite visiting guests to give a fresh word of exhortation following the reading from the law and prophets. Luke doesn’t tell us the reception they received, for he wants to focus our attention on what occurs in the capital of the Roman province of Cyprus — Nea (New) Paphos. The reason will become clear at the end of the story.

After evangelizing Salamis the trio traveled west 115 miles along the Roman roads through the whole island as far as Paphos. The coastal road linked several cities anywhere from 11 to 24 miles apart, which made it convenient for a day’s travel. Along the way they would have come into contact with some of the main cult centers and sacred sites such as Aphrodite’s rock, the alleged birthplace of the goddess of love and fertility. According to tradition, it was here that she emerged from the sea and the soft sea breezes carried

her ashore on a shell, which gave rise to a wave of sensual worship that lasted for centuries. Seven miles southeast of Paphos was the magnificent temple of Aphrodite, to which Paphos’ citizens made annual processions and engaged in ritual prostitution.

Though it may be difficult with our modern mindset to imagine the pull of this kind of worship, we have idolatrous temples of a different sort. In his book *You Are What You Love*, James Smith unmasks the idolatrous design and pull of our modern day temples, we know as the “mall.”

The mall is a religious site, [a temple], not because it is theological but because it is liturgical...The mall doesn’t care what you think, but it is very interested in what you love...We arrive at one of the several grandiose entries to the building, channeling us through a colonnade of chromed arches to the towering glass face with doors lining its base... The design of the interior is inviting to an almost excessive degree, drawing both seekers and the faithful into the enclosed interior spaces, with windows on the ceiling open to the sky but none on the wall open to the surrounding moat of automobiles... The sense conveyed is one of vertical or transcendent openness that at the same time shuts off the clamor and distractions of the horizontal, mundane world. The architectural mode of enclosure and enfolding suggests sanctuary, retreat, and escape... With few windows and a curious baroque manipulation of light, it almost seems as if the sun stands still in this space as we lose consciousness of time’s passing and so lose ourselves in the rituals for which we’ve come... The layout of this temple has architectural echoes that harken back to medieval cathedrals—mammoth religious spaces designed to absorb all kinds of religious activities happening at one time. As we wander the labyrinth in contemplation, preparing to enter one of the chapels, we’ll be struck by the rich iconography that lines the walls of the interior spaces... These statues and icons embody for us concrete images of the good life.⁴

B. An open door

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. He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. (13:6–7)

Because Cyprus was a senatorial province, which meant that it did not require a standing army to pacify resistance to Rome, it was administered by a “proconsul,” rather than being under the direct control of the emperor.⁵ Keener writes, “Provincial governors typically had leisure time available and followed the Roman patronal custom of receiving early-morning guests who came to pay respects.”⁶ In AD 46 the proconsul was Sergius Paulus, a member of the well-known aristocratic family Sergii Pauli. Having heard favorable reports about the impact that Barnabas and Saul were making in his territory, he invited them to his residence eager “to hear the word of God.” How thrilled Saul and Barnabas must have been for God to open a door for the gospel with the most influential and powerful person on the island. Luke describes him as “a man of intelligence.”

It’s important to see that Luke is not prejudiced toward Roman officials and gives credit where credit is due. N. T. Wright suggests that this should serve as a reminder to us in our “own world where political polarization easily leads people to simplistic analyses and

diagnoses of complex problems, and to a readiness to dismiss out of hand all authorities and anyone in power, whether locally or globally.”⁷ Paul consistently treated governmental authorities with dignity as human beings, and saw them as candidates for conversion no matter how corrupt or violent they might be. In his second letter to Timothy Paul urges believers to put aside their combative spirits and instead pray for the conversion of all men and women, especially those in power.

I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth...I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling. (1 Tim 2:1–4, 8)

It’s important to note that the means by which men and women are converted are listed in the four qualities Paul lists—a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified. These are qualities of the inner heart and have nothing to do with our circumstances. The world takes note when believers live lives of dignity, godliness and inner peace. It is then they recognize something different about us and seek out answers.

B. Opposition

But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. (13:8)

Though Sergius Paulus was open to the gospel, his court magician was not. It was not uncommon given the polytheistic culture of the Roman and Greek world for rulers to employ diviners for consulting on matters of state. Keener writes, “The empire’s forty provinces maintained as little Roman bureaucracy and staff as possible to keep the empire running,”⁸ which gave governors the freedom to draw on local expertise for consultation. Sensing that he was about to be exposed and his livelihood threatened, Elymas vigorously attacked their teaching. So now two spiritual forces are vying for the governor’s attention.

There is no advance of the gospel without opposition. The gospel is not about making people a little better by coming to church or turning over a new leaf. The gospel is about a radical transformation; so radical it will always be opposed by satanic forces. Paradoxically, it is when we find ourselves attacked and overwhelmed by unexplainable forces that drive us to pray as never before, that we can be confident that we’re on the right track. At these times we are to “take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one” (Eph 6:16).

III. Confronting a Storm of Deceit (13:9–12)

A. Exposing the darkness

But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, “O [you] full of all deceit and villainy, son of the devil, enemy of all righteousness,⁹ will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?” (13:9–10)

With the life of a sacred soul hanging in the balance, the Spirit within Saul is so provoked it will not allow him to be silent. Saul,

now called Paul, does what prophets are gifted to do—with a penetrating gaze that bores deep into Elymas’ soul, he uncovers the corruption that fills his heart, brings it out into the light of day and then utters an oracle of judgment. N. T. Wright brings the point home saying, “Sometimes, in the context of prayer, it is possible to see right into someone’s heart, even if we would rather not. When that happens, the only thing to do is to take the risk and say what you see.”¹⁰

1. Exposing his true identity

Paul’s spirit is so vexed his grammar is truncated, “O [you] full of deceit and villainy, you son of the devil.” Mincing no words he is saying, “You’re an absolute fraud! You were born a Jew, named the son of Yeshua, but turned your back on your godly heritage and changed your identity to Elymas, a self-proclaimed pagan magician for the purpose of defrauding others to make money.” “Villainy” means “wickedness, deceit, fraud unscrupulousness” and describes a person “who avoids responsibility and looks for an easy and questionable way of doing things to make money.”¹¹ What does that make him? Answer: the son of the devil. You don’t have to be demon-possessed to “a son of the devil.” Just do his works—lie and take advantage of innocent people to get rich—and the devil will adopt you.

2. Exposing the fruit of his deeds

For all of his labors, Paul awards Elymas the title, “THE ENEMY OF ALL RIGHTEOUSNESS.” “Righteousness” is basically serving the community at one’s own expense. “The enemy of all righteousness” means he is the unequivocal master of getting rich at the expense of the community. He is the Bernie Madoff of his generation, leaving a twisted wreckage of relationships in his wake.

B. Removing the light

“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. (13:11)

The judgment that falls upon Elymas fits the crime and publicly exposes his spiritual blindness to the world. Now that the Lord’s hand is upon him, he must seek someone to lead him by the hand, a shameful and humbling experience. But there is a silver lining of grace. The judgment is not permanent, but is only for a season in the hopes that it will lead him to repentance. In this first power encounter Paul sees a mirror of himself when God blinded him. It’s hard to become judgmental when you know how blind and depraved you once were. This is why Paul admonishes Timothy to be extremely careful how he reacts to those who oppose him.

And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will. (2 Tim 2:24–26)

C. New Life Secured

“Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.” (13:12)

We don't know what impact the miracle had upon Elymas, but it fully convinced the Roman governor to become a follower of Jesus. Within 15 years of Jesus himself being crucified at the hands of a Roman governor in Jerusalem, here is another Roman governor who responds to the gospel and becomes a follower of Jesus. Keener astutely observes, "Sergius Paulus is amazed at the 'teaching' of the Lord because signs are inseparable from the teaching they confirm."¹² As Paul would later write to the Thessalonians, "our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thess 1:5). The sign would be a fearful reminder to a powerful politician of the consequences of using his office for personal gain and becoming a fraud like Elymas the magician. Perhaps to reinforce his solidarity with the governor and the wider world into which he was going, it is at this juncture that Saul takes his regular Greek name, Paul, which means "little."

IV. What Makes a True Apostle? No Compromise

Why then does Luke make this power encounter the focus of Paul and Barnabas' ministry in Cyprus? The answer is that, just as in the case of Peter, Paul's ministry is following the same pattern as Jesus'. Immediately after Jesus is commissioned by God at his baptism and receives the Holy Spirit, he is sent to the wilderness to do battle with the devil. Facing three temptations, he resolutely refuses to use his office for his personal gain (turning stones into bread to feed himself), or his own glory, or to seek the crown without the cross.

After Paul is commissioned by the Holy Spirit in Antioch, he confronts Elymas, the son of the devil, who forsook his godly heritage to seek fortune and fame by taking advantage of others. Paul subdues him in utter darkness, while the proconsul sees the light and comes to faith. The direct confrontation of evil puts everything into black and white with no possibility of compromise.

Paul's rebuke includes several wordplays that are appropriate for prophetic language. Paul is "filled with the Spirit," Elymas is "full of deception." Elymas is not truly bar Jesus, "son of Jesus," but "son of the devil." As Elymas tried to "twist" the proconsul from the faith, here he "twists" the Lord's ways...The true prophet prepared the Lord's way, which included straightening the crooked; the false prophet Elymas, by contrast, was making the straight way crooked.¹³

The pattern will continue to unfold as Paul's first missionary journey becomes a microcosm of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. What other religion has leaders like Jesus' apostles? None of them got rich or received any earthly gain. Instead Paul writes:

To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things. (1 Cor 4:11–13).

Why would we allow anyone or anything else vie for our attention?

In 1988 I made my first mission trip into Communist Romania. Though a seasoned veteran was leading our trip, I was like John Mark, apprehensive and fearful, wondering if I would be useful to believers who were suffering under the brutal regime of Nicolae Ceausescu. Landing in Bucharest was like entering a time warp, as if the clock had turned back to the 1940's. The air was thick with oppression, which made it difficult to breathe. There were no colors to be seen, nor laughter to be heard. Food was rationed and almost non-existent. Being foreigners, we were warned to speak to no one and to trust no one. In the middle of the first week I met Traian Dorz, a poet who was imprisoned for seventeen years because his poetry was so powerful it was causing revival. During that time, he never compromised his faith, but resolutely chose to love his enemies. After I was introduced to him, he looked deep into my eyes and said, "You teach about the cross...we live under the cross." For me, it was like meeting the apostle Paul.

Who would have thought that one of our team members, a car mechanic by trade, would be so drawn to those "living under the cross," he would return and take up permanent residence in Romania? There he would marry, raise a family and become the first American to become a Romanian citizen. If there is one standout quality that characterizes Jim Foster, it has been his resolute refusal to compromise in a land beset by compromise and corruption. This is what gives his teaching across the nation credibility. It is no wonder that the elders recognized Jim as worthy to be set aside as our missionary to serve the Lord's Army in Romania.

1. Peter Walker, *In the Steps of Saint Paul: An Illustrated Guide to Paul's Journeys* (Oxford: Lion House, 2001), 57.
2. Craig S. Keener, *Acts, An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 2:2002.
3. Walker, *In the Steps of Saint Paul*, 54-55.
4. James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), 42-43.
5. Timothy B. Cargal, "Proconsul," *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1085.
6. Keener, *Acts*, 2:2008.
7. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part One, Chapters 1-12* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 5.
8. Keener, *Acts*, 2:2012.
9. I have changed the word order in the ESV to reflect the Greek text.
10. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, 6.
11. "ῥαδιουργία" BDAG, 741.
12. Keener, *Acts*, 2:2026.
13. Keener, *Acts*, 2:2023.