

Opening Scripture: Acts 13:4-8 So being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. ⁵ Arriving in Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. They also had John as their assistant. ⁶ When they had traveled the whole island as far as Paphos, they came across a sorcerer, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. ⁷ He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man. This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and wanted to hear the word of God. ⁸ But Elymas the sorcerer (that is the meaning of his name) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul away from the faith.

Introduction: **Dominica—the hunger and thirst. One because it was a novelty.**

The first Missionary journey to the Gentiles: The island of Cyprus was strategically located in the Mediterranean. As a Roman province, Cyprus enjoyed seasonal weather; two massive mountain ranges; the Island had two primary rivers and a Roman Road connecting the coastal cities. It had a large **theater** and a **Roman style forum**, a Greek styled **gymnasium and a marble pool** surrounded by Greek deities. With an estimated population of about 150,000, it had several Jewish synagogues and was well known for its Jewish population.

A. They began by proclaiming the Word of God in the Jewish Synagogues (9:20; 13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:10, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8).

Rom 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek.

But the Jewish people had largely rejected the Gospel and so this opened an opportunity for it to be offered to the Gentiles.

Now, about three times between Romans 9—11 Paul has to ask the question “Has God rejected his people?” the answer Rom 11:1 “Absolutely not. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.” Later he will say “Israel’s rejection results in the offer of salvation to the Gentiles.” Here, he’s not talking about God’s rejection of Israel but their rejection of God and his Messiah.

Rom 11:11-12 “I ask, then, have they stumbled so as to fall? Absolutely not! On the contrary, by their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel jealous.¹² Now if their transgression brings riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fullness bring!”

Paul uses two examples of people who were hardened against the Lord—Esau and Pharaoh—who hardened his own heart (Ex. 8, 9—three times it says Pharaoh hardened himself against the lord).

This is why Ps 95 says “Do not harden your heart as you did at Meribah.”

Heb. 3, 4 he says “Today if you hear this message, do not harden your hearts.”

Why would Paul teach that a partial hardening has come upon Israel, if he says repeatedly that Israel has not been rejected?

How does God harden the heart? The same sun that melts butter hardens clay.

So in Rom 11 when he says that “Israel’s rejection has become your salvation.” He means this as a subjective genitive not an objective genitive.

What is the result of their rejection of their messiah? The riches of the Gospel inheritance in among the Gentiles.

In Romans 9 Paul quotes Hosea 1:10 “I will call Not My People, My People, and she who is Unloved, Beloved.²⁶ And it will be in the place where they were told, you are not my people, there they will be called sons of the living God.”

Peter will echo this same sentiment.

1 Pet 2:10 “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

In context, Peter is here referring to Christ, the cornerstone of the entire temple of God being built up—rejected by his own people but received by the Gentiles who were not a people. Now welcomed into God’s holy family.

Isa 49:6 “It is not enough for you to be my servant raising up the tribes of Jacob and restoring the protected ones of Israel. I will also make you a light for the nations, to be my salvation to the ends of the earth.”

God had always intended for his Gospel to be a light to all peoples of the earth—all Gentile nations. But he first offered salvation to the Jews his original covenant people.

Paul and Barnabas are doing this by first going to the Jewish synagogues where both Jew and converted Gentiles are present. To tell them the good news about Jesus the Messianic King who has come to reign and rule over rebel hearts—there is salvation is no other name.

The local diaspora synagogue in Greek and Roman cities would be the ideal place for Paul to reach his countrymen and sympathetic monotheist-Gentiles who have left paganism and joined a local synagogue. This strategy is maintained all the way through to the end of Acts and Paul's ministry. Synagogues provide a useful template for NT churches who adopted their basic structure of gathering, public reading and teaching of Scripture, and worshipful singing of hymns and psalms with prayers.

B. Paul and Barnabas are immediately opposed by a Jewish false prophet named Elymas bar-Jesus.

13:6 “they came across a sorcerer, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus...⁸ But Elymas the sorcerer (that is the meaning of his name) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul away from the faith.”

They take the Roman Road down the coast to Paphos. Paphos had an outstanding harbor and the city was filled with some of the most astonishing pagan temples in the Roman world. It had a mixture of pagan religions to the gods (the patron deity being Aphrodite) and many synagogues. Greeks typically held Judaism in high esteem because of its exotic nature and viewed them to be magicians. They were particularly intrigued by the miracle stories of the OT which were very different than the kind of otherworldly mythology you would see in pagan society.

Apparently, the Proconsul had taken a Jewish prophet who called himself “bar-Jesus” meaning in Aramaic “the son of Jesus (Joshua)” —a very common name in Jesus's day—as an advisor.

Elymas is called by Luke a *magi*—these are sages and diviners who diligently studied the OT for its insights and as a book of magic usually involving the interpretation of Dreams. Elymas bar Jesus passes himself off as a true prophet of Israel and a sorcerer which could include everything from soothsaying, predicting the future, and allegedly performing ritual miracles.

Sergius Paulus had heard the message of the Gospel proclaimed in Synagogues and invited Paul and his companions to come and teach him this new way. Because it involved the miraculous life and resurrection of Jesus—he no doubt wanted to hear all the stories. But Elymas attempts to persuade him against the Gospel. Luke uses a term here that means “to resist”—he resists and opposes the news about Jesus.

C. False prophets are the primary way in which the gospel is opposed in the world.

Jer 23:31-32 I am against the prophets”—the LORD’s declaration—“who use their own tongues to make a declaration. ³² I am against those who prophesy false dreams”—the LORD’s declaration—“telling them and leading my people astray with their reckless lies. It was not I who sent or commanded them, and they are of no benefit at all to these people”—this is the LORD’s declaration.

Much to Sergius’ and Elymas’ surprise—Paul does not engage in the customary polemical discussion in an attempt to publicly humiliate Elymas through rhetoric. Paul is moved by the Spirit to confront him—he is no Son of Joshua, he is a son of the devil. A follower of wickedness and instead of a debate Elymas gets a power-encounter with an Apostle of the Gospel.

When Sergius sees that Paul performs no rituals and simply with a word curses Elymas and darkness falls on him—he knows that he is witnessing a far superior power. And he believes.

So, let's talk about Power encounters with the forces of darkness.

1. Our weapons are not of this world. We are engaged in a battle between light and darkness, between truth and untruth, between the powers of hell and the Power of God—the Holy Spirit. And the armaments of the Christian Faith are fundamentally different than the resources of our enemies.

- 2 Cor 10:3-4 “For although we live in the flesh, we do not wage war according to the flesh, ⁴since the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but are powerful through God for the demolition of strongholds.”

God has given us heavenly resources to wage this war for the souls and the hearts and minds of our fellow men. And these are supernatural ordinances.

- Eph 6:12 “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this darkness, against evil, spiritual forces in the heavens.”

He is here referring to the rulers and authorities who are under the influence of cosmic, supernatural powers in this dark age. These powers are evil, and they are spiritual forces working in the heavenly realm behind the scenes to move rulers and authorities to legislate against and limit through governmental authorities and entities—they want to limit our freedom to proclaim the gospel and legislate a morality that stands starkly in contrast to Gospel values.

Whether it's Russia, China, North Korea, or Muslim nations in the middle east—understand that there are cosmic powers behind their choices to persecute the church, to limit human freedom to proclaim the Gospel—these are spiritual forces working to oppose the Good News of Jesus taking hold.

2. We demolish arguments and the arrogance of this present age. Now notice in 1 Cor 2, Paul tells us what we do with these spiritual armaments.

2 Cor 10:4b-5 We demolish arguments⁵ and every proud thing that is raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ.

The story of Paul and Elymas bar-Jesus is kind of rare. There are other sorcerers, like Simon the sorcerer earlier in Acts whom Peter had to rebuke as well. The vast majority of time however, Paul can be found refuting ***the arguments and the arrogance of human philosophy and man-made religion*** that sets itself up against the Gospel.

- **We demolish arguments.** As believers we are to be prepared to devastate the false wisdom of this age and the pseudo-scientism that vaunts itself as superior to the Gospel. It's not. And we need to be prepared to annihilate those arguments. **Why the arrogance? No one sounds smarter/erudite than the village atheist. Until the village atheist meets an informed Christian who is prepared to demolish nonsense.**
- **We take captive every thought, the word "thought" here can also be translated "idea"**—in context these "thoughts" and "ideas" are those that come out of the culture and set themselves in opposition to the Word of God. We bring the arguments with their boastful pride and the thoughts that malign the gospel into the obedience of the Gospel.
- **When philosophy, or science, or financial theory, or governmental theory—when they are brought into the obedience of the Gospel—these are amazing tools. All of these ideas, thoughts, human avenues of research and inquiry—they all have a ministerial function to the Gospel—not a magisterial role.** As a minister in service to the gospel not as a supreme authority standing sovereignly *over the Gospel*. Left to themselves, these disciplines can be weaponized against the truth of God's Word by men who hold an anti-Christian worldview.
- **We punish every act of disobedience to the Gospel**—"and we are prepared to punish every act of disobedience to the Gospel." (v 6)—notice the first thing Paul does to bar-Jesus—he rebukes him before he pronounces judgment.

So understand that the weapons of our war are not carnal—fleshly—they're mighty through God for the pulling down of these supernatural strongholds—and the main way we (and Paul) do that is by demolishing false arguments and pretensions that set themselves against the good news.

3. We guard our hearts and minds against error.

Col 2:8-10 Be careful (**vigilant and alert**) that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit based on human tradition, based on the elements (**elemental spirits**: transcendent powers that are in control over events in this world, *elements, elemental spirits*.¹) of the world, rather than Christ. ⁹ For the entire fullness of God's nature dwells bodily in Christ, ¹⁰ and you have been filled by him, who is the head over every ruler and authority."

- **We are cautious and vigilant against being duped**—taken captive through superficial philosophy and empty deceit. Human traditions, philosophies et. al. are all essentially superficial. Apart from Christ. They may pretend to give you deep answers to profound questions. **But ultimately, they can only give you a vaccine—it will keep you from dying from a deadly virus. Yeah, then what?** Capitalism can give you the opportunity to make money, put away a nice nest egg for retirement—have some fun. Ok. Then what? Republican democracies can maximize your personal freedom—let you vote a representative government that acts on your behalf. Sure. But then what? Social justice can make us sensitive to injustices inherent to every system.
- **It does not matter what the human solution, or answer, or ingenuity is to anything**—ultimately it only offers superficial answers, reasons, or ingenuous solutions. **Because they never deal with root causes. They never deal with ultimate outcomes—why is the human race so sinful and evil, and fractured?** Why is such injustice in the world? **3 falls: Gen 3; Gen 6; Deut 32 (Ps 82).** like Elymas bar Jesus, we twist the truth about God and about ourselves. They offer thin answers to thick problems. But the Christian faith is a thick worldview dealing with ultimates.

¹ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 946.

Why should we guard our hearts and minds, making sure that every human idea is into the obedience and service of Christ?

Hosea 4:6 “My people are destroyed from a lack of knowledge.” This confrontation with false teaching and a man who is under the power of Satan is striking—bar-Jesus intended to steal Sergius Paulus’ budding faith with false knowledge.

4. We confront spiritual forces in the power of the Spirit. Now notice—again, Paul does not so much enter into a rhetorical struggle with Elymas here. Other places he surely does. With the Philosophers at the Aereopagus forum. With Jews in the synagogue. With public officials and in the many trials he endures—Paul’s go to form of spiritual warfare is pulling down these weak, absurd, and pathetic arguments of the world. **That is in fact what ancient rhetors, including *magi*—sages and diviners would expect.** They would customarily expect a contest of wits.

But that is not what Paul does.

Acts 13:9-11 But Saul—also called Paul—filled with the Holy Spirit, stared straight at Elymas¹⁰ and said, “You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery, you son of the devil and enemy of all that is right. Won’t you ever stop perverting the straight paths of the Lord?¹¹ Now, look, the Lord’s hand is against you. You are going to be blind, and will not see the sun for a time.” Immediately a mist and darkness fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand.

When Paul says “the hand of the Lord is against you” this is textbook going OT on someone.

- **We vanquish the power of the devil when we affirm the truth of the Gospel over a lie.** The moment we embrace a lie—no matter how loud, or how strident the voices in our culture are—we allow Satan to gain a stronghold, a foothold in our lives and our churches.
- **We vanquish the power of the devil when we confront his hold on people through the word and prayer.**

Col 2:15 He disarmed the rulers and authorities and disgraced them publicly; he triumphed over them in him.”

What's your hang-up?

We are fighting a defeated foe.

What's your struggle?

We are fighting a battle that has already been won.

What do you lack for this fight? For your mind?

We are fighting against a disarmed ruler and authority—the god of this world.