

ACTS: THE STORY CONTINUES

Bible Study: Acts 13:1-12 - *The Gospel Enters the Roman World*

Theme

The Holy Spirit sends the Church to proclaim Christ in a world filled with political power, intellectual achievement, and spiritual darkness.

Read Acts 13:1–3

“Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While there 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.”

The Church at Antioch

After years of growth, teaching, and preparation, the church at Antioch becomes the first church in Acts to intentionally send missionaries.

- **This is a really big deal:**
 - There had been other movements of the Gospel being taken to other places,
 - But it was driven by persecution and scattering
 - This is something different.

Notice that this mission begins in worship, prayer, and fasting - not in human planning.

- The initiative belongs to God.

"Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

- The mission of the Church has always been Christ's mission.

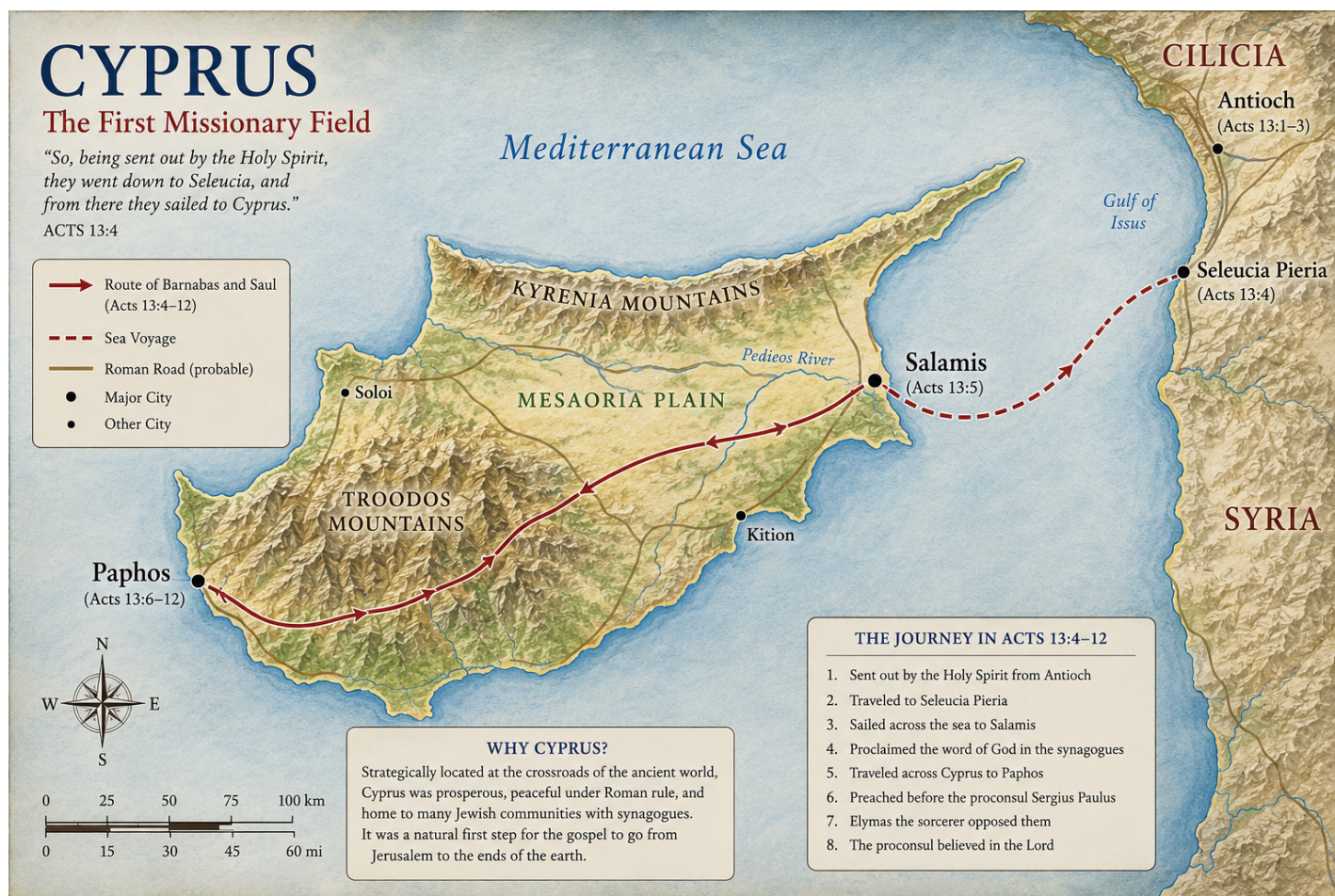
Consider

- What does this passage teach us about how God directs His Church?
- Why do you think Luke emphasizes worship and prayer before missionary activity?

Read Acts 13:4-14

"So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. 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, 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. But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him 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? 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. Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord."

Following the Journey



Route

- Antioch (Syria)
- Seleucia Pieria
- Salamis (Cyprus)
- Across the island
- Paphos

Cyprus was a natural first destination.

- Barnabas was from Cyprus.
- Believers had already fled there after Stephen's persecution.
- Jewish synagogues were already established throughout the island.

- It was an important Roman province located on major Mediterranean trade routes.

Cyprus: Salamis

SALAMIS

CYPRUS

The First Stop on Cyprus

ACTS 13:5

From there they sailed to Salamis, and proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews."

ACTS 13:5



A PROSPEROUS PORT CITY

Salamis was the largest and wealthiest city on Cyprus in the first century. Strategically located where the fertile Mesaoria Plain meets the sea, it controlled the main trade routes across the eastern Mediterranean. Ships from Syria, Asia Minor, Egypt, and Greece filled its harbor daily with goods, people, and ideas.

Home to a large Jewish community, Salamis had several synagogues where Barnabas and Saul proclaimed the gospel soon after arriving on the island.

KEY FEATURES

- Major harbor and commercial port
- Roman forum and civic buildings
- Gymnasium for athletic and cultural life
- Theater for entertainment and gatherings
- Multiple synagogues for the Jewish community
- Fertile Mesaoria Plain for agriculture
- Pedieos River providing water and trade access inland



IN SALAMIS (ca. AD 45)

A bustling city of merchants, sailors, craftsmen, and officials. Roman authority was evident in its public buildings and orderly streets, yet Jewish life flourished alongside the wider population. It was here that the gospel first took root on Cyprus, as Barnabas (a native of the island) and Saul entered the synagogues and began to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.

THE JOURNEY SO FAR (ACTS 13:4–5)



Antioch



Selucia



Pireucia



Pieria



Sailed across the sea



Salamis

Next: Travel across Cyprus to Paphos

Cyprus: Paphos:



Narrative Description of Cyprus:

Cyprus — Gateway to the First Missionary Journey (Acts 13)

(View Salamis Map)

The ship has been at sea for most of the day.

Ahead, rising from the blue waters of the eastern Mediterranean, a long mountain ridge slowly appears on the horizon. As the vessel draws nearer, the island stretches farther than you expected—nearly one hundred and forty miles from end to end. This is Cyprus, the homeland of Barnabas, the third largest island in the Mediterranean after Sicily and Sardinia.

Unlike the rugged hills of Judea, Cyprus seems almost inviting. Behind the northern coastline rises the Kyrenia mountain range, while far to the southwest the higher Troodos Mountains gather the winter rains that feed the island's fertile valleys. Between them lies the broad Mesaoria Plain, a rich agricultural corridor where wheat, olives, vineyards, figs, and grazing flocks have sustained prosperous communities for centuries.

Cyprus sits at the crossroads of the eastern Mediterranean. Merchant vessels arrive daily from Syria, Cilicia, Asia Minor, Greece, Egypt, and Rome. Copper from the mountains, timber from the forests, olive oil, wine, grain, and finely crafted pottery move through its ports. Along the docks, sailors shout in Greek while traders bargain in Aramaic, Latin, Hebrew, and other languages from across the empire. Roman soldiers keep watch as caravans arrive from the interior, and pagan shrines remind every traveler that Cyprus lives under the shadow of Rome—and beneath the worship of many gods.

Soon your ship enters the harbor of Salamis.

The smell of salt and fresh timber fills the air as merchant ships crowd the quays. Warehouses line the waterfront, while broad streets lead toward one of the largest cities on the island. Luke records only a single sentence: “They proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews.” Yet those few words reveal much. Salamis was home to a substantial Jewish community, with multiple synagogues spread throughout the city. Before the gospel turns decisively toward the Gentile world, it is proclaimed first among the covenant people, just as God had promised.

(View Cyprus Map)

Leaving the harbor behind, Paul and Barnabas begin the long journey west across the island. Roman roads carry them through fertile plains, vineyards, orchards, and villages nestled beneath distant mountain ridges. Pack animals move steadily along the highways beside merchants, travelers, and government couriers. For Barnabas these roads are familiar. This is his homeland. Mile after mile they proclaim Christ until they finally arrive at the opposite end of Cyprus.

(View Paphos Map)

There stands Paphos.

Unlike bustling Salamis, Paphos is the political heart of Roman Cyprus. Here the proconsul Sergius Paulus governs the island on behalf of Rome. Government buildings, public forums, a theater, administrative offices, and a protected harbor all testify to Roman order and authority.

It is here, within the governor’s own court, that the gospel confronts both political power and spiritual darkness.

A Jewish magician named Bar-Jesus—also called Elymas—attempts to turn the proconsul away from the faith. Yet before the authority of the risen Christ, neither deception nor earthly power can prevail. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Paul rebukes Elymas, and the magician is struck temporarily blind. The proconsul, astonished not merely by the miracle but by “the teaching of the Lord,” believes.

Long before Barnabas and Saul stepped onto the ship at Seleucia, Christ was already accomplishing His purpose on Cyprus. The missionaries have crossed the sea, but they have not come to claim the island for Him—as though it did not already belong to Him. The risen King

has gone before them. He is gathering His people, opening hearts, overcoming opposition, and extending His kingdom exactly as He promised.

A World Ready for the Gospel

The Roman Empire was not an uncivilized world.

It was a world of:

- Impressive engineering
- International trade
- Educated leaders
 - Philosophers, Geographers, Scientists, Poets, Musicians, Architects, Theologians, Military Strategists, Orators, Business people, Doctors, Lawyers
- ... and Politicians

It was also a world deeply shaped by superstition, astrology, ‘magic’, and idol worship.

Into this world came the simple proclamation of Jesus Christ.

Sergius Paulus

Luke describes the governor as: "*A man of intelligence.*" (verse 7)

Skeptics: For centuries, critics argued that Luke had used the wrong political title for Cyprus’ ruler and invented a story.

- Archeology and secular history have completely refuted the skeptics
- **Secular History: Pliny the Elder:** In his series of 37 books entitled, “Natural History”
 - **Sergius Paulus is specifically credited** in books 2 and book 18 as a primary source Pliny relied upon to complete his work for those books.

- **Archaeology: Archaeological findings** confirm that Sergius Paulus was a real Roman proconsul.
 - **Marble Boundary Stone: Discovered in Rome**
 - Mentions a board of five high-level commissioners appointed as the Commissioners of the banks and beds of the Tiber River”
 - **Lists Lucius Sergius Paullus** as serving under the authority of Emperor Claudius
 - **Cyprus Inscription: Found on the northern coast of Cyprus**
 - Lists Paulus was appointed the 13th year of Claudius’ reign (54ad)
- **Luke's brief description of Sergius Paulus fits remarkably well with what we know from history.**

Consider

- What does it tell us about Christianity that the gospel was proclaimed before educated governors, philosophers, and political leaders?

Two Advisors Before One Governor

Luke introduces a very different man who stood as Paulus’ advisor

Elymas

- **Luke calls him a "magician" (*magos*).**
 - In the first century, this did not describe a stage performer or a “Wizard”.
 - A ***magos*** was often an educated advisor who claimed special knowledge through **astrology**, **omens**, **dreams**, and **the spiritual realm**.
 - ***They were playing with dark spiritual beings...***
 - Such men frequently served wealthy and influential Roman officials.
- **Bar-Jesus = “Son of Jesus” (Yeshua/Joshua)**

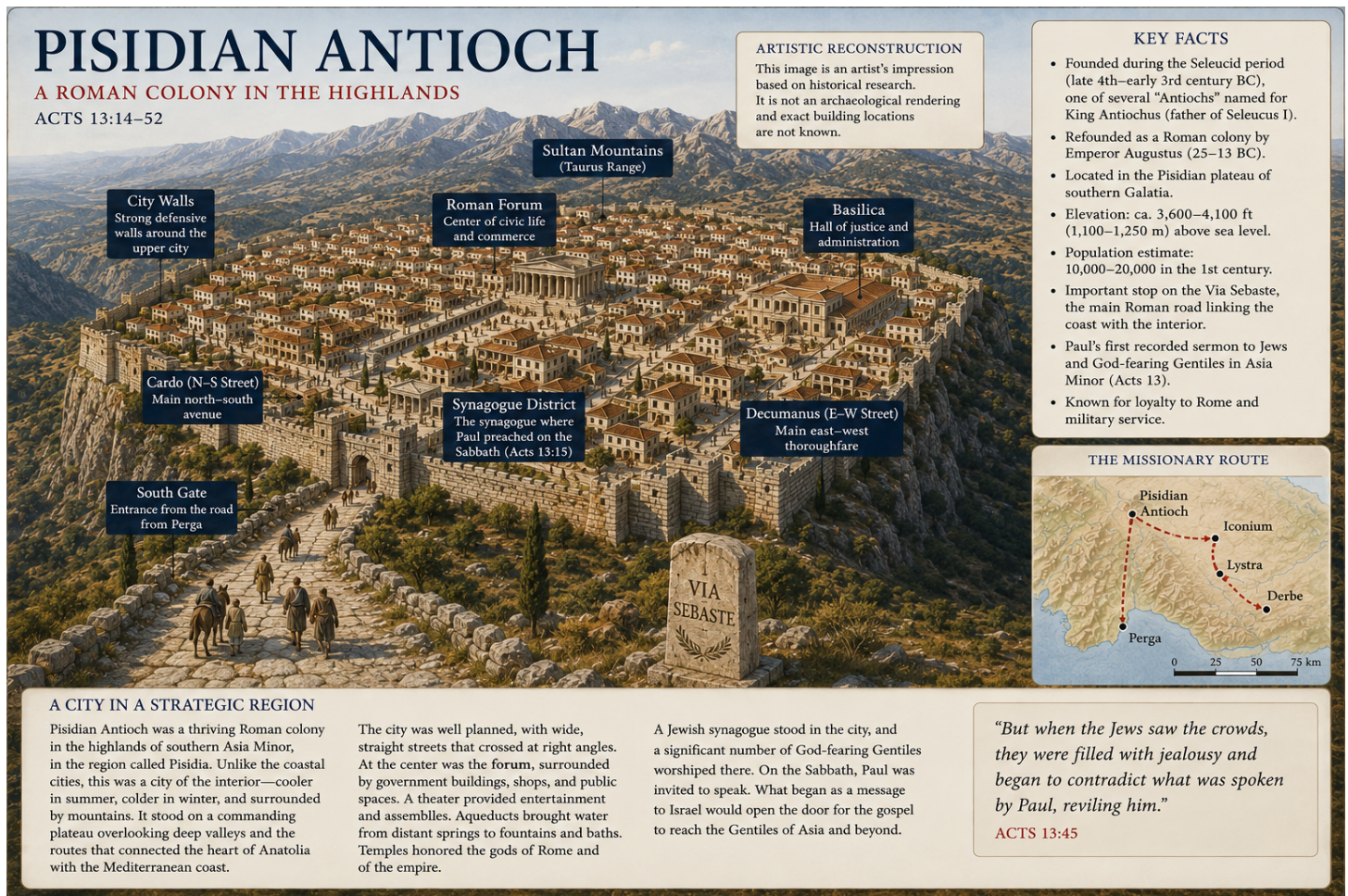
- **“Jewish false prophet”**
 - Jewish – Meaning, he should have known better.
 - **He would understand the Torah**
 - Prohibitions about sorcery, astrology, omens, etc.
 - The penalty for a Jewish person who practiced those things was death.
 - **The Gentiles had misconceptions about Jewish people**
 - They thought that Jews could use the secret name of their God to perform miracles, healings, and curses
 - (Think Baalam)
 - **Bar-Jesus was profiting through his role as Paulus’ advisor**
- **Why would an intelligent Governor hire a “Sorcerer”?**
 - In ancient Rome science, politics, military, economics were all intertwined
 - **Roman leaders would not make a move without consulting**
 - Stars, Omens, or Signs
- **Elymas stood to lose a very lucrative position if Paulus became a Christian**
 - That’s why he opposed them

Paul's First Missionary Miracle

Sergius Paulus is basically standing between two educated Jewish advisors

- When Elymas attempts to keep Sergius Paulus from believing, Paul confronts him in the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Luke is showing that the gospel is stronger than political influence and stronger than spiritual deception.
- The governor witnesses both the authority of God's Word and the power of God's Spirit.
- He believes.

From Cyprus to Pisidian Antioch



Immediately after leaving Cyprus, Paul and Barnabas travel north to Pisidian Antioch.

- Ancient inscriptions discovered in that region connect the family of Sergius Paulus with Pisidian Antioch.
- Some historians have suggested that the newly converted governor may have opened doors for Paul through family relationships or letters of introduction.
 - (While Scripture does not tell us this, it reminds us that God often uses ordinary relationships and providential circumstances to advance the gospel.)

Discussion:

- 1.** Why do you think the Holy Spirit might have chosen to begin the missionary movement from Antioch rather than Jerusalem?
- 2.** What does the encounter between Paul and Elymas teach us about the difference between worldly wisdom and God's truth?
- 3.** How does the accuracy of Luke's description of even small details (such as describing Sergius Paulus as "an intelligent man") help your confidence in his written account in Acts?
- 4.** How does seeing the real geography, politics, and culture of the Roman world deepen your appreciation for the spread of the gospel?
- 5.** As Acts continues, what encourages you most about the way Christ is building His Church?