

# Paul: From Persecutor to Preacher

## Lesson 4: Set Apart and Sent: The Mission to the Gentiles Begins -- Acts 13:1–12

The church in Antioch was a remarkable place, the first congregation where believers were called Christians, a mix of Jews and Gentiles, of prophets and teachers with names from across the known world. On a particular day they were doing what they often did: worshiping the Lord and fasting, hearts open and attentive before God. They were not strategizing or planning a campaign. They were worshiping. And it was in the middle of that worship that everything changed, not just for them, but for the world.

“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.’” There it is, the launch of the first great missionary journey, and notice how quietly it begins. No fanfare, no committee, just the voice of the Spirit calling two men out from among their friends. The church fasted and prayed some more, laid their hands on Barnabas and Saul, and sent them off. The gospel that had been gathering in Antioch was about to spill out across the sea.

They sailed to Cyprus and worked their way across the island, preaching in the synagogues, until they reached Paphos and the household of the Roman proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a thoughtful man who wanted to hear the word of God. But standing in the way was a man named Bar-Jesus, also called Elymas, a magician and false prophet who had the proconsul’s ear and who tried to turn him away from the faith. Here, at the very threshold of the Gentile mission, the gospel ran straight into a counterfeit, a peddler of spiritual lies determined to keep a searching man in the dark.

What happened next put the matter beyond doubt. Saul, now called Paul, looked the magician in the eye and called him what he was: “You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?” And the man who had been blinding others to the truth was himself struck blind for a time. The proconsul, seeing what happened and hearing the teaching of the Lord, believed. The mission to the Gentiles had begun, and it began with worship, with sending, with conflict, and with the unstoppable power of the word of God. This lesson asks what it means to be set apart and sent, and how the gospel advances against everything that opposes it.

**Group Discussion:** The first missionary journey was born not in a strategy meeting but in a worshiping, fasting church that heard the Holy Spirit say, “Set apart . . . Barnabas and Saul” (Acts 13:2). Why do you think God launched His mission to the nations out of worship and prayer rather than human planning? What does that say about where real ministry begins?

**Personal Reflection:** The church laid hands on Barnabas and Saul and “sent them off” into the unknown (Acts 13:3). Every Christian is part of God’s sending church, whether going or supporting those who go. Where do you sense God might be setting you apart and sending you, and what would it cost you to actually go or give?

*Read Acts 13:1–12*

## Study Questions

1. In the middle of the church’s worship, “the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’” (Acts 13:2). What does this reveal about the source and the goal of the church’s mission, and about how God advances the gospel through His people?
2. God’s mission is not a spectator sport; the whole church at Antioch was involved in sending. Are you actively part of God’s mission, by going, giving, praying, or serving, or mostly watching from the sidelines? Name one specific way you could step further into the work this year.
3. The sending happened “while they were worshiping the Lord and fasting,” and they fasted and prayed again before laying on hands (Acts 13:2–3). Why does Luke tie the birth of this mission so closely to worship, fasting, and prayer, and what does that teach about the foundation of all genuine service to God?
4. Real ministry flows out of a life of worship and dependence on God, not mere activity. Honestly assess your own worship and prayer life. Is your serving fed by a steady walk with God, or are you running on empty? What one habit would most strengthen the roots beneath your service?
5. When the gospel reached Sergius Paulus, it was met by Elymas the magician, whom Paul called “son of the devil . . . enemy of all righteousness,” bent on “making crooked the straight paths of the Lord” (Acts 13:10). What does this confrontation teach about the spiritual opposition the gospel faces and the tactics used to keep people from the truth?
6. Elymas worked to keep a searching man from hearing the word. Where do you see counterfeit beliefs, distractions, or influences today trying to turn people away from the straight paths of the Lord? In what ways might you, even unintentionally, be making it harder rather than easier for someone near you to come to faith?
7. Despite the opposition, “the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord” (Acts 13:12). What does the conversion of this thoughtful Roman official reveal about the reach and power of the gospel, and about who can be saved through it?
8. Sergius Paulus was powerful, educated, and surrounded by false counsel, yet the gospel reached him. Is there someone you have quietly written off as too important, too skeptical, or too far gone to believe? How does this account challenge the way you pray for and witness to such people?

9. At this decisive moment, Paul, “filled with the Holy Spirit,” pronounced temporary blindness on Elymas, and the proconsul believed when he saw it and heard the teaching of the Lord (Acts 13:9–12). What was the purpose of such a miraculous sign in confirming the gospel as the mission to the Gentiles began, why is the saving power located in “the teaching of the Lord” and not in the marvel itself, and why does this confirmatory role of miracles not mean Christians should expect to perform such signs today?
10. Look back over the launch of this mission, the worshiping church, the Spirit’s call, the sending, the clash with the counterfeit, and the believing proconsul. Name one specific way you sense Jesus using this account to form you, whether to deepen the worship beneath your service, to step into His mission, or to trust the gospel’s power with someone you had given up on.

### **Now or Later**

**Reflect on these passages:** Matthew 28:18–20, the risen Lord’s commission to make disciples of all nations; Acts 1:8, witnesses to the ends of the earth in the Spirit’s power; Romans 1:14–16, Paul’s debt to preach the gospel that is the power of God for salvation; 2 Corinthians 4:3–6, the god of this world blinding minds against the light of the gospel; Acts 4:12, salvation in no other name than Jesus