

Sergius Paulus

Acts 13:4-13

13:4 So they, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, departed unto Seleucia; and from thence they sailed to Cyprus. **13:5** And when they were at Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews: and they had also John to their minister.

13:6 And when they had gone through the isle unto Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew, whose name was Bar-Jesus: **13:7** Which was with **the deputy** [*the proconsul*] of the country, **Sergius Paulus**, a prudent man; who called for Barnabas and Saul, and desired to hear the word of God. **13:8** But Elymas the sorcerer (for so is his name by interpretation) withstood them, seeking to turn away **the deputy** [*the proconsul*] from the faith. **13:9** Then Saul, (who also is called Paul,) filled with the Holy Ghost, set his eyes on him, **13:10** And said, O full of all subtilty and all mischief, thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord? **13:11** And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon thee, and thou shalt be blind, not seeing the sun for a season. And immediately there fell on him a mist and a darkness; and he went about seeking some to lead him by the hand. **13:12** Then **the deputy** [*the proconsul*], when he saw what was done, believed, being astonished at the doctrine of the Lord.

13:13 Now when Paul and his company loosed from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia: and John departing from them returned to Jerusalem.

a neglected Roman VIP

It is shocking that Sergius Paulus is hardly mentioned in the New Testament. He is only found in this one short passage despite being the highest ranking Roman official to believe in Jesus in the Book of Acts. One would expect to hear far more about him and from him.

In secular records of the time, there are references to a Roman ruler named Lucius Sergius Paulus, who probably is the same man. He later became the proconsul of other provinces. Thus, Sergius Paulus would have been well known in Cyprus, Rome, and other places.

If the Bible were like other books, and Christianity were just a man-made religion, high ranking converts like Sergius Paulus would be featured prominently. So Acts 13:12 might be followed by a verse like this:

"Thereafter, having believed in Jesus, the proconsul of Cyprus, the honorable Sergius Paulus, gave generously to help establish churches in the province before being reassigned to Italy by Claudius."

But no such verse is found, and nothing more is said about Sergius Paulus after verse twelve. Instead, in 13:13, we are told that the apostles moved on from Cyprus to evangelize other lands.

negatives

Sceptics enjoy questioning everything. And since many things in life and in the Bible are not knowable with one hundred percent certainty, there are always plenty of things to ask questions about. The main question in this study is if the faith of Sergius Paulus was genuine saving faith or not. Most of the lines in sections B and D are about this.

We know that the proconsul of Cyprus became a believer of some sort, for this is clearly stated in 13:12. But sometimes those who believe only do so superficially.

True believers continue in the faith, while those whose professions are false do not (B-6). The parable of the sower makes this point. (See Luke 8:12.) However, there is nothing in the New Testament that directly shows if Sergius Paulus continued on as a true believer or not. Verse 13 shows that Paul and Barnabas did so, but what about Sergius Paulus?

A secondary focus is on the relative importance of Sergius Paulus compared to others in the passage and Acts as a whole. This is covered in sections A and C of the worksheets.

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

A	() Sergius Paulus' importance is questionable.
A-1	() Nothing that he said is recorded.
A-2	() The passage is more about Paul than Sergius.
A-3	() Far more is said about Bar-Jesus than about Sergius.
A-4	() Cornelius is more important in Acts than Sergius Paulus (10:1-48).
B	() Sergius Paulus' faith is questionable.
B-1	() He believed quickly (13:12).
B-2	() He is never mentioned after 13:12.
B-3	() He probably never joined a local church.
B-4	() We do not know what Sergius did after he believed.
B-5	() Sergius seems to have been interested in magic (13:6-7).
B-6	() According to Luke 8:12, some who "believe" later fall away.
B-7	() Being astonished is not the same as truly believing (13:12).

positives

The relative importance of individuals can be measured by the amount of attention that is given to them in the relevant literature. Thus, since there is far more about Cornelius in Acts chapter 10 than about Sergius Paulus in chapter 13, the salvation of the Roman centurion at Caesarea must have made a bigger impression upon the early church than that of the proconsul of Cyprus. Nevertheless, Sergius Paulus, as a governor over an entire Roman province, would probably have been known by far more people than a centurion who was more like a local police chief.

Though it may be helpful to debate **who** is more important in Acts 13:4-12—Paul, Sergius Paulus, or Bar-Jesus—it is better to discuss **what** is important in the passage. And that involves God guiding and using Paul, the Scriptures, and a miracle to bring the proconsul to saving faith, despite opposition from Bar-Jesus.

There are several valid negatives on the previous page, but the majority of the evidence shows that Sergius Paulus became a true believer. So most (but not all) of the E lines below are correct or partly correct.

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

C	() Sergius Paulus' importance was real.
C-1	() He was the highest ranking official on Cyprus.
C-2	() He is in the closing verse (13:12); Bar-Jesus is not.
C-3	() As a proconsul, Sergius outranked Cornelius, a centurion.
C-4	() Many people at the time would have known Sergius Paulus.
D	() Sergius Paulus' faith was real.
D-1	() The Holy Spirit was guiding (13:4, 9).
D-2	() Sergius was interested in God's Word (13:7).
D-3	() Authority was important to Sergius (13:11-12).
D-4	() In 13:48, those who believed had genuine faith.
D-5	() God protected Sergius from Bar-Jesus (13:6-12).
D-6	() There was a spiritual battle around Sergius (13:8-12).
D-7	() He probably knew from the start that Bar-Jesus was a false prophet.

worksheet answers

Sergius Paulus was a Roman VIP (C-1, C-3) who became a believer. Later in chapter 13, the prominent men of another city opposed Paul (13:50). Why was the proconsul open to the gospel while these other leaders obviously were not?

Only God knows the full answer to the question above since the Lord is the one who knew Sergius from the beginning. That said, there are three facts to consider. First, we must not overlook the work of the Holy Spirit (D-1). Second, Sergius Paulus may have been interested in the word of God even before Paul and Barnabas came. Having a Jewish false prophet as an advisor may indicate this interest (D-2). And third, as an appointed Roman official, Sergius was more sensitive to authority from above than to group pressure (D-3). The centurion in Luke 7:8-9 and another proconsul, Gallio, in Acts 18:12-16 were as well.

Finally, there are two incorrect lines. Since the proconsul truly believed, he probably joined a church, even though it does not directly say that he did (B-3). Also he probably did not realize at first that Bar-Jesus was a false prophet (D-7).

So what?

The main negative in the passage is the deceptive, devil-like work of the Jewish false prophet, Bar-Jesus. He is mentioned before Sergius Paulus (13:6-7), and more is said about him than about the proconsul (A-3). Obviously, we should not be like this false prophet. But more importantly, we must learn to deal with deception from modern-day false teachers, starting by not being surprised that they exist. (See 2 Peter 2:1.) In this, we need the Spirit's guidance, biblical wisdom, and boldness. This is especially so, since God does not usually miraculously blind his enemies today in the manner that was done to Bar-Jesus at that time.

The biggest positive in the passage appears to be the salvation of Sergius Paulus. Wonderful though this is, however, Acts chapter 13 as a whole stresses the blessing of God upon the ministry of his Word rather than the salvation of a single VIP. Perhaps that is why nothing more is said about the Roman proconsul after verse 12. God's work was not dependent upon Sergius Paulus. Rather he—and each of us who have believed in Jesus since that time—are dependent upon God's work. (See 1 Cor. 1:26-31.)

applications

Apply the points which you believe are most important or seem most needful.
