

December 10
Lesson 2 (NIV)

FAITH TO DISCERN

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 146

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Acts 13:1-2

ACTS 13:1-12

¹ Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. ² 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.” ³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

⁴ The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. ⁵ When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper.

⁶ They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, ⁷ who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. ⁸ But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. ⁹

Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, ¹⁰ “You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? ¹¹ Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun.”

Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. ¹² When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.



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KEY VERSE

When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.—
Acts 13:12

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Recall the events from the beginning of Paul’s first missionary journey.
2. Identify the work of the Holy Spirit as empowering Christ’s followers to accomplish his mission in a way that reflects Christ’s saving work.
3. Write a prayer asking for the Holy Spirit’s empowerment for bold witness in the week ahead.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Plot Twists
- B. Lesson Background

I. Accept the Assignment (Acts 13:1-5)

A. Direction from Leadership (vv. 1-3)

B. Following a Plan (vv. 4, 5)

Affinity Evangelism

II. Recognize Roadblocks (ACTS 13:6-8)

A. Spiritual Counterfeit (v. 6)

B. Powerful Detractor (vv. 7, 8)

III. Counter Conclusively (ACTS 13:9-12)

A. Defining Differences (vv. 9, 10)

B. Providing Evidence (vv. 11, 12)

False Spirituality

Conclusion

A. God's Surprises

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Plot Twists

A mark of a memorable movie is the unexpected plot twist. The story of the film seems to be heading in an expected direction until it takes an unanticipated turn that keeps moviegoers thinking about it long after. In *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), Luke Skywalker battles Darth Vader, whom Skywalker believes murdered his father. But in a surprising plot twist, he learns that Darth Vader *is* his father! Astronaut George Taylor believes he is on an alien world in *Planet of the Apes* (1968). He (and the audience) is shocked to discover that he is actually on a future Earth nearly destroyed by humans and overthrown by apes. And who can forget the film *Psycho* (1960) in which the murderous mother turns out to be none other than Norman Bates himself!

Real life has its share of the unexpected as well—plot twists. We can react to those moments with surprise, with despair, or in any number of other ways. The apostle Paul was successful because his reactions to the unexpected were based on knowing God, who stands above all plot twists.

B. Lesson Background

In Acts 8-12 Christians began to move out from Jerusalem as persecution and other circumstances scattered them. Acts 13-21 is a bit different as it identifies three distinctive missionary journeys of the apostle Paul and his companions. By the time of the episode in today's text, Paul (known as Saul at the time) was linked with Barnabas by the need to assure the Jerusalem Christians that their former persecutor had become a faithful believer in Jesus (Acts 9:26, 27). Barnabas was already notable in the Jerusalem church for his generosity (4:36, 37).

After the gospel spread to Antioch, Barnabas invited Paul to join him there as a teacher in the church (Acts 11:19-26). Antioch, where our text begins, was a major city in Syria; we take care not to confuse it with a different Antioch of Acts 13:14. Syrian Antioch featured a multiethnic population and was one of the largest cities of the Roman Empire.

As the gospel spread to the city, both Jews and Gentiles became believers. This multicultural group found itself living in fellowship. As a famine approached, they generously provided relief for their fellow believers in distant Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-30). Such a background prepared the church at Antioch well as the first to send missionaries to share the gospel with people in other places.

I. Accept the Assignment

(ACTS 13:1-5)

A. Direction from Leadership (vv. 1-3)

^{1a.} Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers:

We are introduced to a group of leaders *in the church at Antioch*. The term *prophets* indicates those inspired by God to speak for him. Modern readers of the Bible often associate prediction of the future with prophets. But the biblical prophet is less a "foreteller" than a "forthteller"—someone who proclaims God's truth, though sometimes that truth does deal with the future. *Teachers* are those who instruct others in the Christian message.

The text does not clearly identify some as prophets and others as teachers. The two terms may overlap, indicating prophets who teach or teachers who prophesy (compare Ephesians 4:11). In any case, the book of Acts understands their work to be empowered by the Holy Spirit, who enables the church to prophesy (Acts 2:17-21), to speak the message of God truly and boldly.

^{1b.} Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.

The first and last names on the five-person list are already familiar in the story; they are about to become the focus of the narrative. In between are three names that demonstrate the diversity of the multicultural Antioch church. *Simeon* is an Aramaic name, likely indicating birth and upbringing as a Jew in the Jewish homeland. He is called *Niger*, a Latin (that is, Roman) word meaning "black." While the modern notion of race did not exist in the biblical world, peoples from Africa south of the Sahara commonly migrate to the Mediterranean region and are well known in the world of the Bible. Simeon may be such a person.

Lucius is a Greek name, and he is said to come from *Cyrene* (compare Luke 23:26; Acts 2:10), a region of North Africa to the west of Egypt (approximately where modern Libya is). So two of the leaders of the church in Antioch are likely from Africa (compare Acts 11:20).

Manaen is described as having *been brought up with Herod the tetrarch*, also known in nonbiblical sources as Herod Antipas. A tetrarch is someone who rules a fourth part of an area, and this particular Herod rules Galilee and Perea from 4 BC to AD 39 (Luke 3:1). He was the son of so-called Herod the Great (reigned 37-4 BC; see Matthew 2:1-19). Herod the tetrarch is known for beheading John the Baptist (Matthew 14:1-12). Having been a childhood companion of Herod Antipas, Manaen clearly comes from the upper echelon of wealth and power. His presence shows that the gospel is penetrating all segments of the population.

What Do You Think?

What can we do to achieve more diversity in church leadership?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding racial diversity
- Regarding socioeconomic diversity
- Other

2. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

The scene is that of church leaders joined in focused worship with *fasting*. Fasting is associated with seeking God’s will in some texts (examples: [2 Chronicles 20:3](#); [Luke 4:1, 2](#)) and with mourning in others (examples: [Esther 4:3](#); [Matthew 9:15](#)).

Either or both reasons for fasting may hold true here. A mournful fasting is appropriate given the church leaders’ realization of the lost state of Jews and Gentiles who do not know of the salvation that is now available from God through fulfilled promises in Jesus. If this is a fasting to focus on discerning God’s will, those gathered may be startled in receiving direct communication from *the Holy Spirit*. The content of that communication is a summons for two of their number to be shared with the world at large. The others are to ratify and support God’s summons. The purpose is clear: to push forward God’s program of witness to Christ to the ends of the earth ([Acts 1:8](#)).

3. So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

Exactly how God reveals his message to the teachers and prophets is not explained. But how the leaders respond is emphasized: they obey fully. Continuing their prayer and fasting, they place hands on Barnabas and Saul in a way that shows that they pray for God’s blessing and power to be with them (compare [Acts 6:6](#); [1 Timothy 4:14](#); [2 Timothy 1:6](#); [Hebrews 6:2](#)). With that, the two missionaries depart, not knowing what lies ahead.

What Do You Think?

How can the church do better in the area of prayerful decision making?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- At the leadership level
- At the level of the midsize group
- At the small-group level
- At the level of the individual

B. Following a Plan (vv. 4, 5)

4. The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus.

Underlining the Holy Spirit’s calling, the text now describes the movements of Barnabas and Saul. *Seleucia* is the harbor city on the Mediterranean coastline that serves Antioch, which lies a dozen or so miles inland. From Seleucia the missionaries sail southwest about 130 miles to a harbor on *Cyprus*, a large, well-populated island. Barnabas is on his home territory here ([Acts 4:36](#)), a fact that may provide the reason for traveling there first.

AFFINITY EVANGELISM

Motorcyclists, quilters, volleyball players—all have been known to use their recreational interests to introduce Christ to others who enjoy the same activities. *Affinity evangelism* is the current term for this practice.

In affinity evangelism, Christians take the gospel with them to celebrations, events, and activities that unbelievers will attend as well. Such occasions may be designed by Christians, with evangelistic intent built in. Or such circumstances may merely be part of the fabric of the local culture. The gospel receives a better hearing when communicated to those known to have something in common with the messenger.

Since Barnabas was a native of Cyprus, he knew the people and their culture. He and Saul were Jews, so they took the gospel message to Jewish synagogues (see next verse below). Both cultural and spiritual affinity contributed to the success of their evangelistic efforts. The same approach, if done with integrity, still works.

—C. R. B.

5. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper.

Salamis is the easternmost harbor city on Cyprus, closest to the point from which the two have sailed. To begin their preaching ministry *in the Jewish synagogues* will become Paul’s standard practice in the years ahead. Synagogues are the perfect places for preaching the gospel. Faithful Jews gather there on the Sabbath for worship. Those gathered already believe in the God of Israel, and they are waiting for God’s promises to be fulfilled.

What Do You Think?

What principles of and places for successful evangelism can we draw for today from the actions of Barnabas and Saul?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Considering also [Acts 13:42](#); [14:1](#); [17:1-4](#), [10-12](#); [19:8](#)
- Contrasting [Acts 14:8-18](#); [17:16-34](#); [19:9, 10](#)

The person named *John* who accompanies the two is John Mark (see [Acts 12:12, 25](#); [15:37](#)). Like many Jews of the day, the man has both a Jewish name and a Greco-Roman name. His Jewish name John (meaning “the Lord is gracious”) is from the Hebrew; the Roman name Mark (meaning “a large hammer”) is from Latin. He is a cousin of Barnabas ([Colossians 4:10](#)).

II. Recognize Roadblocks

(ACTS 13:6-8)

A. Spiritual Counterfeit (v. 6)

6. They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus,

Paphos is located on the western end of Cyprus. The straight-line distance between Salamis and Paphos is about 88 miles. But curving, hilly roads make the travel distance more like 115 miles. After a preaching journey of unknown duration, the team encounters a figure common to the Greco-Roman world: a *sorcerer* (compare [Acts 8:9](#)).

Sorcerers present themselves as having the ability to manipulate unseen beings and forces of the spirit world. Reciting long incantations, using potions, performing strange tasks—such are their stock-in-trade. Sorcery is witchcraft, forbidden to the people of Israel ([Leviticus 19:31](#); [Malachi 3:5](#); etc.).

Like John Mark just mentioned, this man goes by two names. We see his Jewish name here: *BarJesus*. From Aramaic, it means “son of Jesus.” This does not refer to Jesus of Nazareth, of course, as the name Jesus (derived from the name Joshua) is common. The man’s Greek name is given in [verse 8](#), below. Jesus’ warnings regarding false prophets apply ([Matthew 7:15-20](#)).

B. Powerful Detractor (vv. 7, 8)

7. who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God.

Bar-Jesus is an attendant of the court of a Roman official. The provinces of the Roman Empire are governed by local rulers who have pledged loyalty to Rome or by those appointed by the emperor or senate. As a senate-appointed governor, *Sergius Paulus* is politically the most powerful man on Cyprus. The missionaries apparently are having such an impact on Cyprus that they come to this official’s attention. So he seeks to *hear the word of God* from them firsthand.

8. But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith.

The gospel represents a threat to *the sorcerer*, whose Greek name we now see as *Elymas*. If Sergius Paulus is to be persuaded by the message brought by the missionaries, Elymas will have to lose influence and position. The power behind the gospel leaves no need for any competitors.

So Elymas resists the message that Barnabas and Saul bring, perhaps by interrupting and challenging them as they speak with the governor. As is so often the case in the New Testament narratives, resistance to the gospel arises from attempts to hold on to power (examples: [John 11:48](#); [Acts 19:23-27](#)).

III. Counter Conclusively

(ACTS 13:9-12)

A. Defining Differences (vv. 9, 10)

9. Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said,

This is the point in Acts where *Saul* begins to be known by his Greek name, which is *Paul*. Along with this change in designation comes a switch in the order of names: henceforth “Barnabas and Saul” ([Acts 11:30](#); [12:25](#); [13:1, 2, 7](#)) becomes “Paul and Barnabas” (in Greek, [Acts 13:43, 46, 50](#); [15:2](#) [twice], [22, 35, 36](#); exceptions: [14:12, 14](#); [15:12, 25](#)). This likely indicates a change in leadership as Paul becomes viewed as “the chief speaker” ([14:12](#)). And in the verse at hand, it is Paul who confronts the antagonist. *Filled with the Holy Spirit* is an expression the author uses to indicate that a bold act of speech is pending ([Luke 1:41, 67](#); [Acts 2:4](#); [4:8, 31](#)). With eyes focused on the sorcerer, Paul is set to deliver to Elymas a stark message from God.

HOW TO SAY IT

Antioch *An-tee-ock*.
 Aramaic *Air-uh-may-ik*.
 Barnabas *Bar-nuh-bus*.
 Cyprus *Sigh-prus*.
 Cyrene *Sigh-ree-nec*.
 Elymas *El-ih-mass*.
 Herod Antipas *Hair-ud An-tih-pus*.
 Lucius *Lew-shus*.
 Manaen *Man-uh-en*.
 Niger *Nye-jer*.
 Paphos *Pay-fus*.
 Salamis *Sal-uh-miss*.
 Seleucia *Sih-lew-shuh*.
 Sergius Paulus *Ser-jih-us Paul-us*.
 synagogue *sin-uh-gog*.
 tetrarch *teh-trark* or *tee-trark*.

10a. “You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right!”

Paul addresses the man with terms that accuse him of dishonesty and deception. The sorcerer’s claims are a shallow fraud. Any power that he exercises other than mere sleight of hand involves the power of *the devil*, the deceitful adversary of God and humanity. To be an *enemy of everything that is right* is to oppose God’s plan to make the world right, a plan coming to its fulfillment in Jesus. The sorcerer twists with his charades the straight, true paths that God has created.

10b. “You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?”

This expression is especially ironic. The word translated *ways* appears earlier in Acts to refer spiritually to the way of Christ (Acts 9:2; compare John 14:6). As a persecutor of Christians, Paul himself had been one who perverted *the right ways of the Lord*. Having seen the risen Lord Jesus and come to faith in him, Paul now accuses another of making the same terrible mistake.

What Do You Think?

What circumstances today call for strong confrontation rather than a gentler approach, if any? Why?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding tensions between church and culture

Regarding tensions within the church

B. Providing Evidence (vv. 11, 12)

11. “Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun.”

Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand.

After the Lord Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus, Paul was blind until a follower of Jesus came to lay hands on him in prayer and to baptize him (Acts 9:8-18). The physical blindness was an apt expression of Paul’s spiritual condition as a persecutor of Christians. Now Paul pronounces the same sign on Elymas.

The *mist and darkness* that surround the man may be either a way of describing the sorcerer’s own experience of blindness or an indication that the man’s blindness is accompanied by a miraculous sign that is visible to others. Having to be led *by the hand* also happened to Paul (Acts 9:8), an ironic repeat of the “time out” imposed on each for misleading others in opposing the gospel. Paul makes clear that this act is the Lord’s, whose hand is upon Elymas in judgment.

But this judgment is not final: the blindness is temporary (*for a time*). God’s purpose in this event is to demonstrate to Elymas and those around him how wrongheaded is his opposition to the gospel. As it was for Paul on the road to Damascus, the act of judgment has repentance and faith as its goal, even if the outcome is different in each case.

FALSE SPIRITUALITY

The Force is a familiar concept to anyone who has seen the *Star Wars* movies. The idea plays on a change in culture in which a vague spirituality is displacing Christianity. Various occult practices have increased their presence in recent years. The fascination many people have with Eastern religions plays a part as well.

Some Christians refer to horoscopes as if they are relevant. Others arrange their homes according to the ideas of Feng shui to protect themselves from “bad qi.” Good qi is supposedly encouraged if, among other things, the furniture arrangement does not block its movement. And what about incorporating “sacred” words, rituals, and objects borrowed from pagan religions into Christian practice?

Sorcery is still around, and it presents itself to us in various pleasing forms (compare 2 Corinthians 11:12-15). But before we can confront it, we have to recognize it. Can we do so, or are we blind to its dangers?

—C. R. B.

12. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

Whether Elymas changes in his opposition to the gospel, the book of Acts does not say. We simply know that each time in Acts where messengers of the gospel encounter those who engage in witchcraft, the gospel prevails.

Whatever the case with Elymas, the Roman governor Sergius Paulus does indeed come to faith. As the text describes it, his faith follows his witnessing the power of Christ over the sorcerer. But it is not simply the miracle that impresses him: Paul’s teaching about Jesus fills him with astonishment that drives him to faith. The greatest work of God is not vanquishing the magician opponent, but raising Jesus from the dead.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways to present the gospel that will cause unbelievers to take notice?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding unbelieving acquaintances

Regarding unbelieving family members

Regarding unbelieving strangers

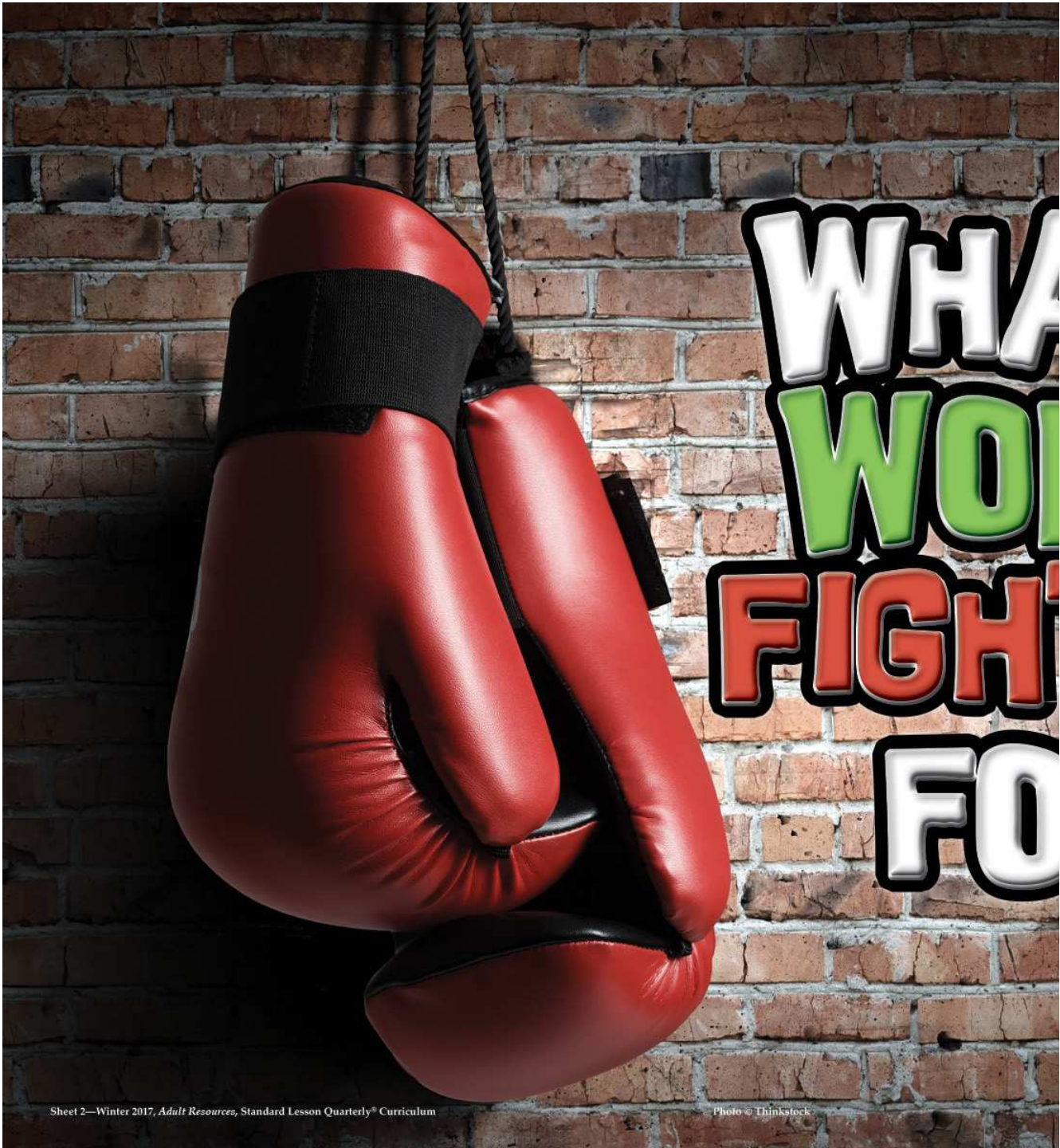
Conclusion

A. God’s Surprises

How has your life been different from what you expected a year ago? 10 years ago? How has your life been different from what you expected when you came to faith in Jesus?

When we ask ourselves such questions, we may feel disappointment that we did not follow through in pursuing goals and dreams. Some of us may feel

disappointment with God, that he did not deliver in the way we had hoped.



Sheet 2—Winter 2017, *Adult Resources*, Standard Lesson Quarterly® Curriculum

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Visual for Lessons 2 & 13. Use this visual as a backdrop during class consideration of the question that is associated with [Acts 13:10b](#).

But if we ask the question differently, perhaps our feelings will change. How has God worked in your life to accomplish his purpose in the last year, or 10 years, or since you came to faith in Jesus? While he may not have done with us what he did with Paul, through the Holy Spirit God is shaping us and using us to reclaim rebellious humanity. As he does so, he usually surprises us.

How can we respond to such surprises? Like the leaders in the Antioch church, we need to share God's perspective on our broken world, ready to be his instruments by the Spirit's power in the next surprising situation. We need to accept each situation that lies before us as filled with potential for service in Christ's name. We need to trust the power of God's Holy Spirit to work in us when we know we are inadequate for the task. We need to act by a faith that sees God at work in even the most surprising circumstances.

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, may we trust in the Spirit's guidance rather than our own planning as we serve as your instruments in the various moments of life. Teach us to

follow your Son as we live in uncertainty. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Success depends not on knowing what comes
next, but rather in knowing
the author of our story.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Give each person a sheet of paper and a pen. At your signal, each person should begin writing a fictional story beginning with the sentence, “It was a dark and stormy night.” After 2-3 minutes say, “Plot twist!” and have everyone pass his or her paper to the left. Writers should pick up the new story where it left off, adding an unexpected turn of events. In another 2-3 minutes, repeat the “Plot twist!” and pass papers again.

Repeat as time allows, letting everyone know when the final plot twist is taking place, so writers can wrap up the action. Invite volunteers to read the finished stories, but don't let this drag out.

After the activity say, “Life is filled with unexpected circumstances—plot twists. We can react to those moments with anger, with despair, or in any number of other ways. The apostle Paul succeeded in ministry because of how he responded when things did not go according to plan. Let's look at some examples.”

Into the Word

Invite someone to read aloud [Acts 13:1-5](#). Then say, “Paul had come a long way since the days when he persecuted Christians. Now he was not only one of them, but chosen among them for special ministry. How do you think Paul and Barnabas felt about the assignment they had been given? How did they prepare? What do you think they expected?” Note: don't ask all three questions at once; allow time between them for discussion.

After a time of discussion say, “Things seemed to be going well for a time. Paul and Barnabas were preaching in the synagogues, spreading the gospel—it was all going according to plan. Then . . . plot twist!”

Choose someone to read aloud [Acts 13:6-8](#). Ask, “Why do you think Elymas was determined to keep the deputy of the country (the proconsul) from hearing Paul and Barnabas? What did Elymas likely fear?” After discussion say, “Elymas probably thought he had things under control. He was keeping a very powerful man right where he wanted him. Then . . . plot twist!”

Ask someone to read aloud [Acts 13:9-11](#). After reminding students how and why God blinded Saul in [Acts 9](#), ask, “How were Saul and Elymas similar? How were they different? What had Paul learned about God from his own experience that enabled him to speak with such conviction?” Again, allow time for responses to a question before posing the next one. Make a transition by saying “Paul and Barnabas didn't back down when confronted by Elymas. The sorcerer became blind as Paul declared he would. And then . . . plot twist!” Read aloud [verse 12](#) together.

Alternative: Distribute copies of the “Proconsul's Perspective” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have students work individually or in small groups.

Close either activity by saying, “Things didn't turn out as Paul and Barnabas expected. But their faith in Jesus empowered them to keep preaching despite a false prophet's efforts to deter them. We don't know whether Elymas chose to believe in Christ, but we know the official did. Paul and Barnabas succeeded through plot twists.”

Into Life

Say, “We all know someone who is facing a plot twist. It can be hard to see God's plan or his hand during those times.” Invite the class to share examples, but caution about using real names. Challenge students to encourage those people by showing faith, speaking truth, and petitioning God. Challenge them to pray daily for others this week, asking God to hold and strengthen those people as they strive to walk in faith.

Alternative. Distribute copies of “The Power of Prayer” from the reproducible page. Have students complete the activity individually.