

Acts 13:13-52

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[0 : 00] Well, I should warn you, this morning I'm not just going to preach a sermon. As if that weren't bad enough, I'm actually going to preach a sermon on a sermon. So, it's going to be doubly worse this morning.

I'm kidding. I promise you this. I promise you that this sermon is far from boring. Not mine, but the sermon that we're going to look at in Acts 13, Paul's synagogue sermon that Luke records for us here.

I mean, just listen to an outline of this sermon. This is what Paul has to say to them and to us. That the long story has come to its climax, and that your greatest problem has been solved, and that the future is breaking in.

Those are huge claims. That the climax to the story has come, that your problem is solved, and that the future is breaking in. Aren't you at least a little curious about how that could be?

Well, let's look then at how Paul begins. This is Acts 13. Let's pick up in verse 13. Paul and Barnabas are on their first missionary journey, and Luke picks it up like this.

[1 : 19] He says, Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen.

The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with uplifted army led them out of it. And for about 40 years he put up with them in the wilderness, and after destroying seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance.

All this took about 450 years. And after that he gave them judges until Samuel the prophet. Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin for 40 years.

And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king, of whom he testified and said, I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart who will do all my will.

Of this man's offspring, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised.

[2 : 44] Before his coming, John had proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. And as John was finishing his course, he said, What do you suppose that I am? I'm not he. But behold, after me, one is coming, the sandals of whose feet I'm not worthy to untie.

The novelist Flannery O'Connor once said, In the long run, a people is known not by its statements or its statistics, but by the stories it tells.

Now you might think, well, she was a novelist. Of course she would say that. But think about it. You know, in the ancient Near East, in the third and second and first millennia B.C., there were kings and kingdoms who amassed great military strength and built massive buildings and conquered and ruled vast empires, statements and statistics that could fill volumes.

But of all those kingdoms that came and went, there was one little people whose political independence was actually pretty short-lived in comparison.

And whose military might wasn't actually much to speak about. And whose architectural achievements were pretty small. And yet, it's that people that we remember.

[4 : 16] Why? Because what they had was this powerful story. The true story of the one God who created all things and who made humanity in his image.

And who after the ravage of human idolatry and rebellion, who, when humans had gone their own way into misery, was going to make things right.

The story to the story of the one true God. The story to which the people of Israel held fast and held forth was that this one true God had put into motion a rescue plan.

A plan that through one family, salvation, total healing and restoration would come to the whole world.

That's the story Paul is retelling in these verses. And when you look at it, what a gripping and, quite frankly, really gritty story it is.

[5 : 26] Verses 17 through 22 take us from Abraham through the Exodus, from the wilderness to the promised land, from the judges to the kings, and through it all, God was taking the initiative in grace to call and preserve a people through whom his blessing would come to every nation on earth.

And as the history went forward, God's promises more and more began to converge and narrow on the hope of a king.

A king in the line of the great King David. Now, if you go back to the beginning of the story, these promises actually began in Genesis. That's where Paul begins.

God tells Abraham, in your offspring, the world's going to be blessed. That's Genesis 22, 18. And then isn't it interesting that a thousand years later, in 2 Samuel 7, when God makes his promise to David, that he will establish his house and his throne forever, again, he picks up the language of offspring.

I'll raise up your offspring after you, and I will establish his kingdom forever. Coincidence?

[6 : 43] Well, nearly all the Hebrew prophets saw the connection. That what God promised would happen through the offspring of Abraham would be fulfilled in God's renewed promise through David's offspring.

That this coming king would not only restore Israel, but unleash God's blessing, his healing and restoring reign into the whole world. And friends, we could go through the prophets and cite passage after passage after passage, where that connection is made between this worldwide blessing that God promised to Abraham, and what God would do through his coming Davidic king. Isaiah 55, that we read earlier, is just one of them. Come, Isaiah says. Come and drink. Come and eat.

Come and be made totally new. Why? Because the king at last has come. Now, you can imagine, as Paul's sort of recounting the story, the whole synagogue sort of nodding in approval.

Yes, that's right. That's our history. That's right. But imagine how surprised they must have been when he concluded this sort of well-worn narrative with what he says in verse 23 of this man's offspring, David's offspring.

[8 : 03] God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised. Can you imagine what that must have been like? How many jaws dropped?

How many eyes grew wide? How many people who were sort of drifting off to sleep suddenly jolted awake? What did he just say? Did a murmur start to ripple through that ancient synagogue?

Or was it so quiet that you could have heard a pin drop? What did he just say? Well, he just said that the story, the story of the one true God, the creator God of heaven and earth, and the covenant God of Abraham and David, that God has done it.

That the story's reached its climax, and it's reached it in Jesus. Friend, I wonder what story you live by.

As humans, it's almost impossible not to do that. What narrative is running underneath the sort of assortment of your days? Maybe it's not something you've really thought about or articulated to yourself.

[9 : 19] Maybe you've just sort of absorbed it from the culture that we live in, a story of finding personal fulfillment, maybe in love or in achievement, or perhaps making a difference, leaving the world a better place.

But go a little deeper. What story do you really live by? Now, perhaps the big story that you say you believe doesn't have much room for God, or not much need for him.

And yet, doesn't your story still include those elements about the enduring value of love, and the importance of our actions, and the concept, the very concept of making a difference?

Friends, let me ask you, do those elements really make any sense in a story where all we are is just time and chance and matter?

Do they make any sense in a story without God? Could it be that the story that this passage is inviting us into actually makes more sense of reality as we know it, and as we experience it, than all the other stories that we so easily absorb?

[10 : 35] A story that actually makes sense of our longing for love, and our longing to see things put right, and our sort of intractable valuing of what we do.

To be sure, the story that's beckoning to us here is an invitation into something so much bigger. Something that takes us from our small desires up into something that's shot through with grandeur. It's calling us to step into the story of God for which we were made. At the end of the Chronicles of Narnia, forgive me for always using illustrations from the Chronicles of Narnia, I've been reading it to my son in the evenings, so it's fresh in my mind.

But at the end, the very end, Lewis describes a little stable, a small little shed, that from the outside looks shabby, and tight, and confining, and dark.

But when the characters actually go inside, they find just the opposite. That it opens up into a vast world that's actually more real, and more fulfilling than anything they've ever known.

[11 : 59] From the outside, it looked confining, but inside, it was what they were created for. For life, and freedom. So often, Christianity from the outside can seem like that.

A humble little stable, maybe even a little tight, and confining. But if you humble yourself, and step in, you actually find just the opposite.

It's not something that takes away your best, not something that diminishes you, or diminishes your view of reality, but something that finally brings it to life.

And opens it up in ways that you could have only dreamed. And at the center, bringing it all together, at the climax of it all, is the person of Jesus.

That he is the one who will fulfill and complete, not just the threads of Israel's story, but of yours and mine as well. That's what verse 23 means.

[13 : 11] And think of all the other implications of that verse. We could probably preach this whole sermon on that verse. Doesn't that verse tell us that first, God is very faithful, that he keeps his promises, that after 2,000 years, he didn't let one of them fall to the ground, that this is a God that you can trust, even if it takes a long time.

And second, that isn't Paul telling us here that all those promises of God find their yes, as Paul will say in 2 Corinthians a little later, in the person and work of Jesus.

That he's the center of the Old Testament as well as the New Testament, that all of it led to him.

Christian, do you read your Bible that way? Do you read your Bible not primarily as a long list of rules that we have to keep or a bunch of sort of old, dusty, irrelevant stories, but as the single great drama that's come to fulfillment for all of us in Jesus?

Another thing that this verse means for us is that, you know, if the climax of God's story has come through the events of Jesus' life, then what's at stake here is actually something that we can investigate.

We can look at the historical evidence for his life and for his death and for his resurrection that we can go to the sources and see for ourselves.

[14 : 37] And that's good news if you're exploring Christianity or if you're spiritually curious. No one is asking you to make a leap in the dark. Instead, consider the claims.

Look at the evidence. The very book that we're studying this morning, the book of Acts, is actually the second part of a two-volume work. The first part, the Gospel of Luke, is Luke's own orderly account of the life of Jesus based on eyewitness accounts and his own historical research written well before the end of the first century.

That is, in the lifetime of the followers of Jesus themselves. Luke's Gospel is a great place to begin your investigation of who Jesus is.

If you want some other suggestions on where to begin, there's a book stall downstairs. I'd be happy to make some recommendations to you after the service. But you know, there's another implication of Jesus being the climax of this story.

And Paul alludes to it in verse 24 with his reference to John the Baptist. That might have seemed like a bit of an odd thing to throw in there. But you know, we know that the news of John the Baptist's ministry had actually reached all the way to Asia Minor where Paul is now.

[15 : 49] In fact, a little later in chapter 19, we're actually going to meet some disciples of John the Baptist who made it all the way to Ephesus, which is like on the western coast of modern-day Turkey. That's a long way from Jerusalem and the Jordan where John was ministering.

So you see, Paul's audience in Pisidian Antioch here would have been familiar with John the Baptist's reputation and character. And Paul's reminding them here that John came preaching a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel to prepare the way for this coming one.

In other words, John's message was that everyone, even good religious Israelites, had a deep problem that only God could solve.

And that actually brings us to the next big point of Paul's sermon here. That Jesus is not only the climax of the story, but because of that, He's also the answer to our greatest problem.

Let's read verses 26 through 43. Paul continues, Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham and those among you who fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation.

[17:00] For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize Him nor understand the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning Him. And though they found in Him no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have Him executed.

And when they had carried out all that was written of Him, they took Him down from the tree and laid Him in a tomb. But God raised Him from the dead. And for many days He appeared to those who had come up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now His witnesses to the people. And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this He has fulfilled to us, their children, by raising Jesus. As also it is written in the second Psalm, You are my son, today I have begotten you.

And as for the fact that He raised Him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, He's spoken in this way, I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David. Therefore, He says also in another Psalm, you will not let your Holy One see corruption.

For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption. But he whom God raised up did not see corruption.

[18:13] Let it be known to you, therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. And by him, everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.

Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the prophets should come about, Look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish, for I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you.

As they went out, the people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath. And after the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who, as they spoke with them, urged them to continue in the grace of God. In verse 39, Paul points us to the greatest problem that we all have. Look again at that verse. Do you see the little superscript number after the word freed? That's telling you to look down in the bottom of the margin.

And there it tells you that that word literally means justified. To be justified means to be pronounced righteous. In other words, it means to have a verdict declared over you, pronouncing you not just innocent, but in the right, totally acceptable, totally approved.

[19:37] approved. In January, the New York Times ran an article called A Race to the Front Row. Did any of you read this? And the article was basically about how people in exercise classes, in spinning classes in particular, have become obsessed with getting a spot in the front row of the class.

I've never been to a spinning class myself, but apparently in some of the higher intensity classes, the instructor will actually pick who gets to ride in front. According to the article for these avid exercisers, a place up front is a status symbol akin to sitting front row at a concert or a fashion show.

It shows you're fit enough to keep up and confident in your ability to lead a class. So it's actually become a thing, I guess, to strive for the front row, to get the instructor to publicly affirm that you've got what it takes to ride in front of everybody else and set the pace.

Listen to how one person describes the feeling of having the instructor select her for the front row. I remember seeing the front desk staff confer with the instructor and he glanced over at me and then looked back at them and nodded.

I was so honored and excited that he recognized me as a strong rider. And then the article goes on to say, she's still starry-eyed about it.

[21:03] I kept looking at myself in the mirror during class thinking, I feel strong and beautiful. But apparently at some gyms there's a step even higher than the front row.

This is how that article ends. For those for whom the front row isn't VIP enough, one gym has a new badge of honor, riding the podium, a.k.a. the instructor's bike.

The gym equivalent of being Courtney Cox pulled on stage to dance with Bruce Springsteen. One rider who started out as a back row rider was recently invited up.

She said she's not the selfie-taking type, but after class she nonetheless took one and shared it on Facebook where it became her most liked picture of 2014. She said, you can see the joy and pride in that picture.

It's like I was chosen. Now of course this is a bit of a silly thing, isn't it? But I think it points us to something pretty deep.

[22 : 07] What is it about us as humans that makes us crave some kind of verdict over our lives? What will make us transform even a spinning class into a place where we crave and strive and long to get public affirmation, to get a verdict of our worth and worthiness?

It's probably not spinning for you. It's not for me. But it's probably something or someone. Your peers, your parents, your spouse, your children.

Each one of us looks to something as our judge that will pass an external verdict over our lives, a verdict that we hope will be positive. Why is that?

Is it because we're psychologically maladjusted? Did our parents not reinforce good self-esteem in us? No. Look, you can have the most awesome parents, but you're still going to live your life looking for something or someone to justify you.

You see, friends, according to the Bible, we, all of us, have a righteousness problem. And it's our biggest one.

[23 : 22] And the fact that we can turn anything, even a spinning class, into an opportunity for justification is a deep sign that something has gone wrong. And this is it.

You see, we've lost the most important verdict of all, the verdict of the God who created us. We were made to have His approval and His delight, to have His word of favor spoken over us.

But because of sin, we've lost it. And now, instead of standing under God's approval, we stand under His just condemnation.

And no amount of good works could ever get it back. At the end of verse 39, Paul says flatly, the law can't free you. That is, it can't justify you. Why? For the simple reason that we don't keep the law.

That we break it over and over and over. And somewhere, somehow, we got this strange idea that we could build up good works that will cancel out our bad works. As if any human judge would let you off the hook for robbing a bank because you let an old lady cross the street.

[24 : 36] No, there's no hope of solving our righteousness problem through our own law keeping. We can't get God's good verdict that way.

It's got to come from outside of us. And that, Paul says, is exactly what God in Christ has done for us.

He lived a life that always pleased God. And though no guilt could be found in him at all, he was condemned, verse 27 says. And he was executed, verse 28.

And he was buried, verse 29. But though Jesus didn't deserve death, you see, this death wasn't an accident or a mere tragedy.

No, even this was actually part of God's plan foretold in the prophets, Paul says. Written of him in the scriptures hundreds of years before. Why did Christ undergo such a death?

[25 : 37] The answer is actually found in verse 29, but it's easy to miss. When Jesus was executed, it was by Roman crucifixion on a cross. So why in the world does Paul call the cross a tree?

Well, remember that Paul is speaking here to a Jewish audience steeped in Old Testament scripture. And when Paul says that Jesus died on a tree, he's actually making an allusion to a verse in Deuteronomy 21, 23 that they would have all known, where it says that a man hung on a tree is cursed by God.

Jesus on the cross was bearing God's curse, God's condemnation, not for his own sins, but for ours. On the cross, Jesus stepped right into the middle of our righteousness problem, and took the verdict our sins deserve in our place.

And then three days later, God raised him from the dead to demonstrate that the full condemnation for sin had been exhausted and satisfied and put away.

To declare publicly that Jesus was indeed God's son, to confirm the promises to David and make them sure, to ensure that Jesus, this holy one, would never see corruption but reign as king on David's throne forever.

[27 : 05] God foretold all this in the verses Paul cites in 33 through 35. You see, because Jesus conquered sin through the cross, he then could conquer death in the resurrection.

Because Jesus took all the condemnation of sin on the cross, he could then break forth into God's justification in his resurrection. God declaring imperfect, innocent, and righteous.

And that's why Paul can say in verse 38, through this man, Jesus, through him as your substitute, as your representative, forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.

Everyone who believes, Paul says in verse 39, is justified, declared righteous, by God. Because believing unites us to Christ, wherein his death becomes a death for our sin, and his resurrection becomes a verdict over our lives, the verdict of justification.

So friend, how are you trying to answer your righteousness problem? Paul lays out three options here. They're pretty comprehensive. First, in verse 38 through 39, you can answer it once and for all through Christ.

[28 : 26] You can finally stop trying to justify yourself through your own efforts, and you can trust wholly in Christ. And that invitation is for everyone. No matter what your background, no matter how successful or unsuccessful you are at playing whatever game of life that you're in, in Christ, God will forgive your sins and free you, justify you instantly, utterly, and completely.

Second, in verses 40 through 41, Paul gives a warning against rejecting the message of Christ. You see, you can try to answer your righteousness problem by going back to the same old things that you've done all your life.

You can jump back on the hamster wheel of your own performance and try to find a verdict that will bring your soul peace. Whether it's at spinning class or whether it's from your spouse or whether it's from your peers or whether it's from your colleagues.

Or worst of all, you can live in denial and try to pretend that you don't actually do any of that. That you don't need anyone's verdict. And then you'll live tragically unaware of what's really going on at the most fundamental level in your life.

And you'll have no idea why you can't stop working late. You'll have no idea why you're crushed with jealousy when your co-worker is promoted above you. You'll have no idea why your friendships always seem to disappoint you and make you miserable.

[29 : 58] You'll live in total denial. Having no idea that under all of these you're searching for a verdict over your life that only God and Christ can give.

Third, in verse 42 through 43, Paul gives advice to open-hearted seekers. Maybe like these people who follow Paul out of the synagogue, you're not believing in Jesus yet, but your interest is sparked and you want to hear more.

You're honestly seeking and Paul says, continue in the grace of God. Thankfully, God works through means. He says, put yourself in the path of God's grace. How do you do that? You keep coming on Sundays to hear the message of Jesus taught from the Bible.

You start reading the Bible yourself. You grab a friend and ask them to tell you more. You pray and you ask God to tell you the truth and to make the truth about Jesus clear to you and to give you humility before Him.

And above all, you remember that it's all about God's grace. One of the biggest barriers to belief that we all have is our own pride.

[31 : 06] Our own pride and our own desire to want to be acceptable to God based on our own performance. You know, at the end of the day, you don't actually need God to prove Himself to you.

You need to admit your need for grace. So how are you trying to answer your righteousness problem? Scoffing? Living in denial? Are you seeking? Or are you believing?

Paul wants to see that the one who brought God's story to its climax is the only one who can answer that problem once and for all. Well, friends, I hear the drums.

So we should end quickly. Jesus isn't just the climax of the story and the answer to the problem, but because of that, He's brought God's future into the present.

The inbreaking of the future. Let's look at 44 through 52. The next Sabbath, almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him.

[32 : 10] And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we're turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, I've made you a light for the Gentiles that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region.

And the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas and drove them out of their district. But they shook off the dust from their feet against them and went to Iconium.

And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. You see, friends, the Old Testament prophets all foresaw a time when the Gentiles would come streaming into the people of God and hear Luke saying, look, it's actually starting to happen.

Almost the whole city shows up. Is Paul being a bit, or is Luke, excuse me, being a bit hyperbolic? Is he exaggerating a little? Maybe. Maybe not.

[33 : 15] The point is, is that God's great future is breaking in now. And Paul's had this in view the whole time. Did you catch how he addressed not just the men of Israel, not just the women of Israel, but also you who fear God?

These Gentile God fearers who hadn't quite converted to Judaism but were there at the synagogue. Paul says, it's for you too. And here he's talking about eternal life.

That is life of the age to come that has no end. The future's breaking in now and almost the whole city shows up to hear this message of salvation.

You imagine how thrilling that must have been. And friend, do you believe that the same God who worked powerfully then to bring almost the whole city to hear the message is the same God who can work powerfully now when and where he chooses.

And what's more, this passage tells us that in this, that in this in-breaking future as God's ripping open the present and pouring in, we've got a part to play.

[34 : 18] Look at verse 47. In 47, Paul quotes Isaiah 49.6. Now what's thrilling about that verse is that in the context of Isaiah, that verse is describing the servant of the Lord. It's primarily talking about what Jesus would come and do.

But what does Paul do here? He applies it to himself and to Barnabas. Isn't that incredible? Paul is saying that we now have the great privilege of taking part in the very mission of Jesus to bring light to those in darkness and salvation to those in despair.

And friends, if our mission is really an extension of the mission of the risen Christ, how much boldness ought that to give us? If we come not in our own name, our own strength, but as ambassadors of one who conquered sin and death and brought life and immortality to light, what genuinely do we have to fear?

But Luke also shows us here that this in-breaking future in which we have a role to play is also a contested future. In verses 45 and 50, we see that tragically some will still persist in clinging to their old stories and refusing to see that the climax has come.

You know, when people are sick and their bodies are failing, sometimes a sick body will reject an organ transplant meant to bring it life. In the same way, those who persist in living according to the patterns of the present age often reject the life-giving future that God begins, that He's bringing into being through the Gospel.

[35 : 51] That we'd rather have our own self-centered stories where our own righteousness is praised and our own tribe is exalted rather than give way to the righteousness of Christ that's freely offered to everyone who believes.

Of course, we know that Paul's reaction to his fellow Jews here is actually to weep and to pray for their conversion. We see that in Romans 9 and we should too.

But friends, also, we shouldn't expect that everyone will gladly accept Christ and accept us as His ambassadors. Following Jesus will be costly at times. We might lose friends and we might lose reputation.

But, there's one thing Luke says that you won't lose. Because even though this future is contested, he shows us at the very end that this is a future of indestructible joy.

even in trial and hardship, they're filled with the Holy Spirit and experience His joy. These new disciples in Christ had something that their circumstances couldn't shake and that their emotions couldn't shake.

[37 : 01] They had come to know the truth about God and Jesus Christ. They'd come to know His sovereign grace. Luke highlights it in verse 48. Did you catch that?

As many as were appointed to eternal life believed. Now, up to this point, Luke has stressed the very real, genuine human response of the gospel demands of each one of us.

We're all called to turn and trust in the Son. But now Luke sort of fills in the picture. And here we see that the fountainhead of our desire for God is His previous desire for us.

that those who believe don't have their own belief to thank for their salvation because even believing is a gift of His grace. And in that joy, they spread the gospel to the whole region.

And in that joy, they endure trials and persecutions. And in that joy, they glorify the word of the Lord. And that sort of joy is for all who believe.

[38 : 11] In the long run, a people is known not by its statements or its statistics, but by the stories it tells. Friend, how do you want your life to be known?

How do you want our church to be known? By statements or statistics? Things that won't last. Or the story of Jesus Christ.

His death and resurrection. His spirit. His future. And the joy that He brings. May that be the case. Let's pray.

Amen. Father, we pray indeed that by Your Spirit You would again open our eyes to see the beauty of Christ.

And Lord, now as we sing and as we give praise to Him, Lord, make this song that we sing a prayer of response, confession, and commitment to You, we pray.

[39 : 14] Amen. Let's stand and let's sing together. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. AMP
S tasted Him Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.