

# Acts 13:13-52 - DiCicco

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[0:00] You are the captain of your own destiny. There's been a lot of talk about scowling in the last few sermons.

! I was just trying to start by getting a couple of scowls. I win, I think. This is the story that we're told in our culture, in movies and books, social media influencers, even advertisements make use of this story.

I walked past one this week on the Metra because it's baked into the American dream. You are the captain of your own destiny. And not just America, it's in New Zealand.

I spent years there. It's what they call the number eight wire mentality. Number eight wire was the ubiquitous fencing wire all over the country. And the idea is Kiwis, with their grit, their ingenuity, and just a little bit of number eight wire can make anything happen, get anything done, be whoever they want to be.

You are the captain of your own destiny, the author of your own story. The problem is, it's a lie.

[1:13] This is not just a Christian complaint against a culture that's getting less and less Christian. I think in a lot of ways, people without any faith in God are starting to question this story that, at least people in my generation, grew up hearing.

Even if you wouldn't call yourself a Christian this morning, you might know what it's like to feel helpless. The promise that you captain your own destiny means nothing if life is just one big storm that ignores your attempts to grab the wheel and steer it wherever you want.

Maybe the Odyssey is a good illustration of this. Being captain means nothing when you're at the mercy of the winds, right? What if there was a story that we could step into that could give you hope and meaning, purpose, a story that sees value in you as an individual?

What if there was a story that could actually give you almost everything our culture wants to promise but has no power to deliver? The author of this book we've been studying, the book of Acts, writes this account of Paul preaching to bring his audience into this story.

Not the story of the text itself, but the story God has been writing. Before we turn to look at the text itself and the invitation I think it has for us this morning, I want to pray one more time because we need the Lord's help for this.

[2:36] Would you pray with me? Father in heaven, would you give me the tongue of one who has been taught by you that I may know how to sustain with the word those who are weary.

Gracious God, would you open our ears to hear your voice that we may learn to do what is pleasing to you through Christ our Lord, we pray. Amen. Well, Luke, the author of this book, writes this account of Paul preaching in this small Roman colony to invite the people of God, his audience, into the story that God is writing.

Luke wants early Christians to be captured by this, that God's people witness to the eternal life found in Jesus because they are caught up in the mission of God's servant.

God's people witness to Jesus himself. What I want to convince us of today from this text is this, that the gospel invites us to step inside a story that's greater than any other.

And there's a ton of details and a lot of interesting things, and I'm very prone to distraction, but I want this to be something that helps me filter out all the things that I want to say so that I say the things I think I need to say.

[3:56] Three things in the passage I think will make the case for us. The first is the invitation, which is Paul's speech itself. Secondly, the implications of his sermon.

We see this in the negative response of the Jewish leaders to him, and finally, the inspiration for Paul's ministry. See, Paul's defense of his message at the end of our passage reveals the reason that he preaches Jesus.

I think these are the key, this is key, this last thing, for us as readers of Acts today to take hold of what God offers to us in his word. So the invitation, the implications, and the inspiration of the gospel, all these invite us to step into a story greater than any other.

Let's pick up at the beginning of our passage in Acts chapter 13 and verse 13. We pick up where we left off last week. Paul and Barnabas, this guy named John Mark, they had gone out from Antioch in Syria to preach the gospel.

And the first few verses are sort of like a travel diary. And this becomes a sort of like a pattern for Luke as he goes throughout the rest of Acts and we sort of follow Paul on his missionary journeys.

[5:10] Did you notice in our story where Barnabas and Paul end up? They end up in Antioch. They leave John Mark in Perga and they land in Antioch, but it's a different Antioch, different from the one they set out from, different from the one Dan told us about last week.

This Antioch is not in Syria, it's around the coast in Pisidia, a Roman colony in what today is Turkey. One question I always ask is, why does Luke give us so much detail?

Why city names? Why include the province that they were in? And these things seem, especially to us who are 2,000 years away with, I don't know, our maps don't even have these names anymore. Is it just so we can trace Paul's journey in the back of our Bibles?

I don't think so. I think Luke includes these details because they carry information with them. And two pieces of information in particular are worth considering.

The first is Pisidia. This is the Roman colony that Antioch is in. Roman colonies were places where people had at some point been conquered.

[6:18] Rome is far off in Italy. This is in modern day Turkey. The local people would have been conquered by an army at some point. If you know your history, probably multiple armies over multiple centuries.

The conquerors, most recently the Romans, would have settled the colony with people from its own cities. Maybe sometimes giving positions in that city to people who had earned them and they brought Roman influence to these colonies through their law and their language and their culture. And so that long after the army had left, Rome was able to control huge portions of territory because they strip away the culture of the people they had conquered and put their own on top. It's an easy way to do that is to erase the stories of the conquered people and replace them with your own. Which brings us to the second piece of information, not just the setting, but the synagogue.

Because all across the ancient world were Jews who had been scattered at this point for centuries. And at some point, Jews who would not join in the cultural forms of worship, they were allowed to maintain their culture.

[7:26] They were given the right to set up these centers where they could teach their children their language, they could read their ancient scripture, they could train one another in telling the story that God had written. They were allowed to preserve their culture in these centers called synagogues.

So these two pieces of information, the setting and the synagogue, set us up for Paul's speech. As we sort of walk into this Antioch and Pisidia, it's the Sabbath.

And the Sabbath in the synagogue unfolds the way it does every week. It feels familiar. The synagogue fills up with people, a few visitors find their seat in the back, and then the scripture is read, a reading from the Torah, then a reading from the prophets, some words of encouragement. This Jewish community from Antioch and Pisidia is reminding itself who they are. They are God's people, strangers in a strange land, waiting for God to redeem and to restore them back to his presence.

But then after the readings, the rulers of the synagogue send a message to Paul and to Barnabas, inviting them to say a word. For Paul, this is all the invitation he needs.

[8:35] He stands up, puts his hand in the air, and he begins to tell the story of the people of God. In three sentences, Paul covers the first six books of the Bible.

Do you notice that? From the calling of Abraham in Genesis to the deliverance of his descendants in Exodus. and then we have what took us, I don't know, 20 plus sermons, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

He captures when he says, for about 40 years, God put up with them in the wilderness. But did you notice how Paul summarizes the prophets? He kind of speeds through the Old Testament to focus

in on one thing.

Did you notice what he focuses on? He goes past centuries of history, judges, the calling of Samuel, the establishment of Saul, the king, and lands on David.

Specifically, a promise God makes to David in 2 Samuel chapter 7, where God promised David, I will raise up after you an offspring, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

[9 : 39] Did you catch how Paul calls this out? Paul's sprinting through Old Testament history, pulling on this thread of offspring. There was going to be an offspring of the woman in the garden who would crush the head of the serpent, an offspring of Abraham that they were waiting for all the way until David where he promises an offspring who would have an everlasting kingdom.

Paul tells the story of Israel to the people of Israel to remind them who they are and where their hope is, but then Paul stops telling the story that they would be used to and takes a sharp left turn. Did you notice it in verse 23? Paul mentions David and then jumps right out of the Old Testament and says, of this man's offspring, God has brought to Israel a savior. Where the story in the synagogue would normally end, maybe on a note of hope and of longing for God to make good on his promises like our psalm did today, Paul presses on and makes the claim that God has already done it.

God has fulfilled his promises. And yet, do you notice how Paul speaks to the people in here, how he addresses the people, brothers, sons of the family of Abraham.

Even after this massive claim where Paul sort of changes the story a little bit, Paul reminds them who they are. It confused me a little bit why he kept, you know, going out of his way to call them men of Israel, you who fear God, sons of the family of Abraham.

[11 : 04] Why does he call them this? I think it's for the simple reason that Paul has not stopped telling them their story. He's filling in the key to the whole thing.

And he says, to us, it's him and Barnabas, people who are giving this message, to us has been sent the message of salvation, he says in verse 27. And then he tells them this news, how the rulers in Jerusalem had failed to recognize this man, even after all the prophets had said about him, how they had tried to condemn him, but when that failed, they ended up fulfilling for Jesus even more of what had been written about him in the prophets when they had him killed.

And after this, God raised him up from the dead and then Jesus shown himself to his followers who now are witnesses to his identity and his activity as the Messiah, as the Christ, as the redeemer of Israel that they had been waiting for.

And as Paul does this, he tethers himself to his roots. You see this in verse 32. This good news that Paul brings is not something out of left field.

You can look at verse 32 with me. He says, we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us, their children, by raising Jesus.

[12 : 24] Paul is just opening the next chapter on the story that God is writing. Paul says, this is old news in a way. It's part of the same story.

And God has chosen to use his witnesses to offer the invitation even to his own people who have not yet heard of this Jesus of Nazareth.

Here's Paul's invitation. Let it be known, he says in verse 38, 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.

Jesus. The point is, God is writing this story and this story culminates in this man, Jesus. This is the invitation.

Paul gets the invitation to speak and he wastes no time in offering his own invitation to hear the name of the Messiah that they've been waiting for and to honor him by coming to him in faith.

[13 : 31] So God makes the invitation through his servant Paul. But the invitation has implications. Paul makes it clear that the redemption God has promised from the beginning has come and has come in Jesus.

And at first, this invitation is received well. Right? You see in verse 42, as they went out, the people begged that these things might be told to them the next Sabbath. That's a pretty good response to a sermon of people begging you to come back and preach the same sermon you just preached.

I've yet to have that. It's only been five years. I've got time. But when the Sabbath, the next Sabbath, rolls around, the response has mixed.

On the one hand, there's almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord, but the Jewish leaders were filled with jealousy. They begin to oppose his message, contradicting what is spoken by Paul.

It's verse 45. I wonder what comes to your mind when you think of jealousy here. So the first thing that popped into my mind was a sort of selfish pride that sees the crowds and starts feeling a little bit petty and self-interested.

[14 : 42] They've come to hear Paul and they just want to stop it out of jealousy. It's a petty jealousy, but I think there's another better way to understand this word. This word is the same word Paul uses in Philippians when he's describing how he used to be.

He says that before Christ, Paul zealously persecuted the church. It's the same word for zeal. Paul himself contradicted the message of the witnesses to Christ's resurrection.

And I think this is how we read it here, not as some sort of petty prideful thing, but as a passionate, almost a pastoral thing from these Jewish leaders in Antioch of Pisidia.

So the question is, why would the Jewish leaders oppose Paul's message? Don't they hope that God will redeem his people?

Are they fine with the status quo needing to meet in tolerated meeting spaces to pass on their language and culture? Why don't they hear Paul's invitation as the best possible end to the greatest story ever told, the one that they've been telling themselves week after week for decades, centuries?

[15 : 55] I think the answer is in the implications of Paul's invitation. Because if the story God is writing finds its fulfillment in this man, Jesus of Nazareth, it has implications.

And remember, this story is the story the synagogue was entrusted to keep. That there is a hope for Israel, that the creator had chosen a people, promised a child, and would one day set him on the throne of David forever.

And this central story is the identity of this entire nation, even if they live way out in Antioch of Pisidia. And the murdered Messiah that Paul proclaims doesn't really fit the way that they have written the end of the story for themselves.

I wonder if you've noticed this pattern in your own life. Whether you're a Christian or not, your life is like a story. We make stories for ourselves. I think we're unable not to.

We have a habit of narrative. In many ways, we expect, like we are told, to be the author of our own stories. We, like the people of Israel, form our identities around the central stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.

[17 : 09] And so I can understand what happens when the people pick up on the implications of Paul's invitation. Is it the Jewish leaders contradict Paul not on the pattern of the story itself but in its particulars?

It's not the hope they have a problem with. It's him. It's Jesus. And so they are jealous. They are zealous that the people they have been training in the story of God's people might not be captured by this contrasting, opposing story.

Because they actually catch what Paul has said. Paul's claim is that God has written the next chapter of the story of his people. And the most important chapter.

And it all hinges on this man, Jesus. And the implication is this, that if the story Paul tells is true, then any other story is doomed. The ones who reject Paul's message got almost everything right. They have the right reasons for contradicting Paul. They hear the right message in his speech. They're rejecting the idea of Paul's invitation.

[18 : 21] They're looking for the hope of Israel. They're only rejecting its implications. They have no problem with God's redemption, just the way he has chosen to do it. They cannot fit what God has done, what God has written, into the story that they have written for themselves.

I think their response is a good chance for us as Christians to hear a warning.

Like we mentioned, a Sabbath synagogue meeting is a lot like a Christian church. It's actually a lot like our church. The center of both is the word of God. And the purpose of both is the same, to tell the story of God again.

This is a good thing. I mean, this is what we heard on Thursday at the Epic Read, where the writer of Hebrews says, do not neglect the meeting together as is the habit of some. He tells them to come together so that they might stir one another up to love and to good works, to encourage one another as long as it is called today.

We gather each week to remind ourselves of the story of God. And I love that every week at Holy Covenant Church we hear the gospel.

[19:34] Even without the sermon, every week we approach God, we confess our sin, we hear the promise of forgiveness, and then we come to the table to eat and drink and to be satisfied in the promises of God.

So there's a warning here to us who hear the word every week. We can come to expect God to work in the way we expect God to work. We hear the call to love and we paint a certain picture in our minds of what that looks like.

We pick up the promises of peace and grace and hope and we imagine how God is going to work these out in our lives. But if the response of the people in Antioch is any warning, it's that it's not enough for us to be open to the idea of God working in our lives if we're not open to how God wants to work in our lives.

And in Antioch, the stakes for rejecting the story God has written in Jesus are high. After all, Paul is inviting them to step into a story that's greater than any other story. It's not just freedom and forgiveness that's at stake.

That's how he invites them. But when they reject Paul, did you notice what he says? He says, it was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first. Dan mentioned this last week.

[20:55] This is in verse 46. Paul goes to the synagogues of the Jews first in every place because this great story of redemption is their story.

But when they reject it, he says, since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, we are turning to the Gentiles. The stakes in this story are nothing short of eternal life.

And this makes sense because God's story is greater than any other story. It's better than the cultural stories that we inherit. It's better than the personal stories that we inhabit day in and day out.

And the gospel invites us to step into this story. And this happens not just once when people first hear the gospel like in Antioch, but it happens every week as we come and gather and hear the word of God afresh each week.

And every time we hear the story, the story carries its own implications. God's redemption is in Christ and nowhere else. Every other story is doomed. And so we remind ourselves each week of this great story and we encourage one another to keep walking in it, to live the story.

[22:11] But one question was buzzing around my mind, how do we make sure we're in that story? I mean, how do we know that we are telling the right story each week?

Because it's not enough just to gather and tell ourselves the same story. I can get very culty very fast. How do we know that we have become a part of the right story? And then, if we've got the right one, how do we actually step into it?

I think Paul's response gives us a hint at answering all of these things together. See, when the Jewish leaders reject the story of God's redemption in Jesus, Paul tells them, we are turning to the Gentiles.

And at first, for his opponents in Antioch, this would simply be proof that Paul's story is wrong. Right? God's redemption is for his people. His promises are for his people. And once again, they would be right once again, the story they are telling has fallen short of God's.

And Paul grounds his move to the Gentiles in the book of Isaiah. Do you notice how Paul makes this move? One of the things that Dave encouraged us with, warned us about maybe at the beginning of our series is that the book of Acts is a heavy hermeneutical lift, which is just one way of saying that the apostles used the Old Testament in ways that are surprising and a little bit confusing.

[23:40] And there's a lot of Old Testament quotations in here. This is the one I've decided to pick up on. Did you notice how Paul makes this move? Did you notice what he does with it? I was scratching my head over this this week, and then once I think I got what Paul was doing, the whole chapter clicked and ties together.

Paul says, we are turning to the Gentiles for so the Lord has commanded us, saying, I have made you a light for the Gentiles that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.

Dan hinted at this last week, and I know you meticulous note takers know exactly what I'm talking about because if you remember, this is Dan's sermon. It was in his first point, his third, fourth sub point, I'm sorry, sub, sub point number three.

So for your references, that's what I'm talking about when I said Dan mentioned this last week. That point was that the disciples at Antioch, the one back in Syria, had sent Paul and Barnabas because they recognized the scope of God's mission.

Dan pointed out that the disciples of Antioch had a mature theology of going and sending, built in part on the suffering servant from Isaiah chapter 49. And this is what Paul quotes here.

[24 : 51] So if you want to tag this for your notes and your cross references, this is my third point, my first sub point, Paul's identification with the suffering servant. And this is the move Paul makes.

What Isaiah prophesied was a word from God to this servant, one who would suffer for his people, one who according to Isaiah 49, which is what Paul quotes, he would bring Jacob and gather Israel back to God from their exile, from this dispersion, back to spiritual life and vitality and communion with God.

This servant, at the same time as he worked redemption for Israel, would be deeply despised by them. And Paul makes the move from the call to this servant to go to the ends of the earth and says, yep, God has commanded us.

Somehow, he understands this as a personal command. So let me suggest, Paul does this for two reasons. First, he reads Isaiah well. And secondly, he has been caught up in a story that is greater than any other story.

Okay, Paul reads Isaiah well. There's a lot of disagreement in the scholarly communities and commentaries and journals and all sorts of stuff over who the servant of Isaiah is, specifically in chapters 40 through 55 of Isaiah, where we find God's promises of redemption for his people orbiting around four servant songs.

[26 : 19] And the disagreement is in part because sometimes the servant is spoken of as a single person and other times the servant seems to be all of God's people. Speaks to my servant Israel, my servant Jacob, the nation of Israel.

So which is it? The short answer is yes. Here's what I mean. The servant of Isaiah is in many ways, in Isaiah itself, a representation for the people of God.

The identity of this servant is so closely tied with God's people that Isaiah can go back and forth between speaking of the nation and speaking of the individual. So Paul is reading Isaiah well.

He identifies himself as one of God's people and so in some ways he identifies his mission with the mission of the servant of God. Paul reads Isaiah well.

There's a lot that goes into that paragraph so if you're interested we can talk for a long time. after.

But secondly, Paul has been caught up in a story that's greater than any other. The servant of Isaiah represents God's people and where the nation fails the servant succeeds in Isaiah.

[27 : 28] He is obedient, he is upright. Importantly, what we know from Isaiah 53 where the servant is oppressed and afflicted and crushed by the Lord, the people are free.

It's because the servant represents the people of God that he can bear their griefs, carry their sorrows and be pierced for their transgressions. Paul hints at this back in his speech in verse 39 when he says, everyone who believes in him is freed from everything which you could not be freed from in the law.

Your Bible might point out that that word freed in verse 39 is a use of the word to justify. As Paul identifies the servant of Isaiah with Jesus, he's identifying the means by which God's people are made free.

Apart from Jesus, the law of the Old Testament could never make its people perfect. That wasn't its point. The sacrifices of the law allowed God to live among his people.

But the sacrifices only pointed out the reality of sin. They didn't take away sin. Again, we read from Hebrews that the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin.

[28 : 45] God can put up with his people this way, like as Paul said, but the consequences of sin remain. And the most obvious consequence of sin is death.

Sin brought separation from God who is the source of life. And so sin brings death. The law did not free God's people from death itself. But, in the suffering of Isaiah's servant, God's son Jesus, he frees us from the consequence of sin by taking our death on himself.

Pierced for our transgressions. Crushed for our iniquities. That's why Paul says that everyone who believes, who trusts in, who relies on him is freed from what the law could not free us from.

Death. And this is why Paul links stepping into this story with eternal life. That when the rulers of the synagogue reject Jesus, they reject eternal life.

This life is offered to all God's people. It's the end of the story that they had been telling themselves for generations. And Paul grounds it in this servant from Isaiah.

[29 : 59] And he grounds himself in the mission of that servant. We tell ourselves the right story when we orbit the right person.

The end of Israel's story is pulled into the gravity of the person and the work of Jesus Christ. God's redemption is in him and nowhere else. And so we tell ourselves the right story.

We know we tell ourselves the right story when Christ becomes the center of gravity for our decisions, for our emotions and our affections. We know we're stepping into the right story when we are pulled closer to Christ.

Because the implications of the invitation is that any other story is doomed. Any other story will make Christ bitter or make him seem less trustworthy than he is.

But we know we step into the right story when we are pulled toward the eternal life found in Christ, the servant of God. But the question remains, how?

[31 : 01] How do we step into this story? Paul has hinted at this a few times and Luke, our author, makes it clear in verse 48. 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.

Stepping into this story is an act of faith. Those who were appointed to eternal life believed. God had written the story for them.

They had been appointed to eternal life and yet it took the invitation of the servant of God joined to Christ's mission to go to the ends of the earth to issue this invitation and they believed.

believing is like trust, it's reliance, it's knowing that only in Christ can the consequences of sin be taken away.

Only in his resurrection can life be redeemed and restored. In Jesus, we have the presence of God not just putting up with our time in the wilderness but the spirit of God dwelling in us personally.

[32 : 11] It's the spirit who's given at regeneration who joins us to Christ, who makes what is a literary identification between the servant of God and his people and Isaiah a lived reality between the son of God and all who trust in him.

We are in Christ when the spirit of God is in us through faith and this faith is what Paul found when he met Jesus and the whole world was put in a new light.

Stepping into this story means that we, like Paul, match the mission of the servant of God and we'll close with this point. The gospel invites us to step inside a story greater than any other.

It's a story of eternal life, of rescue and redemption and it is a great story because it is a story for anyone. Everyone who hears the invitation of the gospel can step into the story God is writing and in this story is purpose and hope and value.

The hope is in the eternal life that waits for us at the close of our own chapter in this story. But the purpose comes in every sentence that God is writing for us.

[33 : 25] As we step into the story we are joined to the mission of the servant of God and to bring light to the ends of the earth. For Paul that meant being sent, preaching in synagogues, offering the invitation of God to crowds of people.

For us, for those who have the spirit of God, this purpose soaks into everything we do. During our last year in New Zealand on Fridays, Jasmine and I with the kids would go and get our groceries from the same store every week and every week we checked out with a woman named Donna. We did not know at first but we had an interesting interaction the first time we checked out with her and we decided to keep going back and we made this relationship intentionally and we talked with her, we joked with her, she came to love us and our kids and she cried when we left and checked out our last round of groceries but we made this relationship intentionally because even in a weekly shopping list this story that we're a part of gives us purpose and it's more than just finding special ways of fitting our life into the story or fitting the story into our life the reality is if we have stepped into this story every moment is part of the mission which means that whatever you're doing is already a part of what God is doing in Christ or it can be if you are in Christ Luke is not just giving us an example in history he's teaching theology in story when Paul says later that whatever you do in word or deed do everything in the name of the Lord this is what he means he means step into the story every week be reminded of the story

God is telling and go out to your homes and your families your jobs and live the story there is no greater story than this God in Christ is reconciling the world to himself we in Christ are a part of this

work and this is Paul's inspiration because the implication of God's story of redemption is that any other story is doomed the gospel invites us to step into a story greater than any other so this week let me extend the invitation again let's live the story would you pray with me God in heaven creator of all things we thank you for your son for the story that you have shown through him thank you that by your spirit we can be your servants help us we pray to step into your story and to live a life that is worthy of your name through  
Christ our Lord amen