We’re all captivated by stories, especially fairy tales, love stories, epics, and superhero stories. The sustaining appeal of these types of stories at the publishing house and the box office is remarkable. Movies and books like the Lord of the Rings trilogy, the two Star Wars trilogies, the litany of Disney Princess movies, and the movies put out by the comic book companies ad nauseam, all show we are captivated by stories that resolve crisis with rescue, alleviate loneliness with love, dissolve despair with hope, and restore wreckage by renewal. But many of the most incredible stories we know are not true; that’s what makes them incredible; they’re amazing even though they’re not believable.

The most amazing story ever told is the gospel – the story of God’s salvation which culminates in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This too is a story of rescue, love, hope, and renewal, but it is different in many ways. For one, we are the people in need of rescue, love, hope, and renewal. That is why we celebrate this story on Easter! For many, however, the story of God’s salvation is not very believable. But unlike other incredible stories the gospel is only amazing if it is true – it is only amazing to those who believe it. I pray that we will be amazed by the gospel this morning and believe.

We will look at the story of God’s salvation in Acts 13. Please turn there in your Bibles. Acts 13 records the first part of Paul’s first missionary journey. In verses 1-3 Paul and Barnabas are sent out by the church at Antioch. In verses 4-13 they visit two cities on the island of Cyprus, Salamis and Paphos. While Paul and his companions are at Paphos they tell the gospel message to the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a high Roman official. But there is a problem. There is also a false prophet present named Bar-Jesus who tries to dissuade the proconsul from believing the gospel message. But Paul rebukes him in the power of the Holy Spirit and a miracle occurs; Bar-Jesus is struck blind. Then verse 12 tells us that the proconsul believed when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord. You would think the proconsul would have been astonished at the miracle, but the text tells us he was astonished at the gospel message Paul preached, and he believed it. What is this message and what is so amazing about this message?

Right after the incident at Paphos Paul travels to Pisdian Antioch and preaches the gospel message there too. The book of Acts records the content of that gospel message in verses 16-41. Let’s look at that message to see what is so amazing about it. This message is divided into three sections. Let’s read the first section in verses 16-25.

**Jesus is the promised Savior. (16-25)**

16 Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen. 17 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 arm he led them out of it. 18 And for about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness. 19 And after destroying seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance. 20 All this took about 450 years. And after that he gave them judges until Samuel the prophet. 21 Then

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1 The first two main points of this outline come from Mellinger, 2010.
they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. 22. 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.” 23. Of this man’s offspring God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised. 24. Before his coming, John had proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. 25. And as John was finishing his course, he said, “What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but behold, after me one is coming, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.”

These verses teach us that Jesus is the promised Savior.

The sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden resulted in a curse on humanity; Adam and Eve and all humanity with them were banished from God’s presence and sentenced to death. But God has been working throughout history to save his people, who rebel against his rule. We call this redemptive history or salvation history.

**God is the author of salvation history (16-22)**

According to Graeme Goldsworthy salvation history involves the restoration of God’s people to God’s place to live under God’s rule. We will use these three categories as we walk through verses 16-22.

First: God restores to himself a people who have been alienated from him. God called Abraham (verse 17a says, God chose our fathers) and made a promise to him that through his offspring he would become a great people/nation and a blessing to all peoples/nations. And God fulfilled that promise, though he did so in an unexpected way. Verse 17b: [God] made the people great during their stay in Egypt. God made them great while they were slaves in Egypt, but God also saved his people from slavery in Egypt. Verse 17c: with an uplifted arm [God] led them out of it.

Then in verse 18 we are told that [God] put up with them in the wilderness. God’s people were not a godly group of people. They were a rebellious people, a sinful people. He chose them because he loved them, not because they were righteous (Deut. 7:8; 9:4ff). They often failed to believe God’s promises of salvation. But God put up with them because they were his people.

Second: God restores his people who have been banished from his presence to a new place. God promised Abraham he would give his descends land. God fulfilled that promise as well. Verse 19: Then [God] destroyed the seven nations in the land of Canaan and [God] gave them their land as an inheritance.

Third: God places his people who have rebelled against his authority back under his rule. One way God places his people back under his rule is through giving the Law of Moses (cf. v. 39). Another way God places people back under his rule is through God-appointed leaders. Although God himself was the true ruler of Israel and his law was the primary means of government, he also provided human leaders.

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2 Gospel and Kingdom in The Goldsworthy Trilogy, 2000
3 They are not mentioned in this passage, but the tabernacle and Temple are also critical aspects of God restoring his people to his place and presence.
Verse 20: [God] gave them judges until Samuel the prophet. Verse 21: Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul… But the judges of Israel and Saul were not God’s ultimate plan. Verse 22: [God] removed [Saul] and [God] raised up David to be their king.

Then in 2 Samuel 7 a promise was made to David. God promised David an everlasting throne – David’s offspring would rule God’s people forever. But for the next 1000 years of biblical history after David we see Davิดic king after Davیدic king fail to live up to God’s standards and eventually God sends his people into exile. As the Old Testament comes to a close, the promise made to David is not looking very promising.

When I leave the church for an offsite appointment I sometimes say, “I’ll be back in an hour.” But I’m not “so good” with time sometimes and I rarely make it back in an hour. I think there is a running joke in the office about what an hour means to me. This is a minor example, but it does illustrate that although our intentions are good, we’re not always good at keeping our promises. However, God’s promises are not a joke; he always keeps his promises. Although we may not understand God’s timing he keeps his promises.

God has been working out salvation for his people and keeping his promises throughout history. Notice the subject of every verb in these verses is God: God chose, God made, God led, God put up with, God destroyed, God gave (land, law, judges, Saul), God removed, and God raised up. God is the one at work. Also notice how much of biblical history Paul covers in his sermon: God chose fathers, that is in Genesis; God made his people great and he led his people out, that’s in Exodus; God put up with his people, that’s in Numbers and Deuteronomy; God destroyed nations and gave land, that’s in Joshua; God gave law, that’s Exodus through Deuteronomy; God gave judges, that’s in Judges; God gave Saul and he removed Saul, that’s in 1 Samuel; God raised up David, that’s in 2 Samuel. The failure of David’s offspring is not mentioned in Paul’s sermon, but it is implied. Their story is told in 1 and 2 Kings as well as most of the prophetic books. God is at work throughout salvation history, throughout the whole Old Testament. And God keeps his promises. Even though it took 1000 years to fulfill his promise to David, he kept it!

Verse 23: Of this man’s [David’s] offspring God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised. It is remarkable that Paul goes straight from David to Jesus. He skips 1000 years. It’s as if he’s saying, “Let me get to the point…”

**Jesus is the culmination of salvation history. (23)**

The promises made to Abraham find their fulfillment in Jesus; the promises to David find their fulfillment in Jesus. God’s greatest work is not the exodus from Egypt; it is the deliverance from sin and eternal death found in Jesus. God’s greatest work is not the inheritance of the Promised Land given to Israel; it is an eternal inheritance secured by our Savior Jesus. God has provided human leaders throughout history, but they have all failed. Jesus Christ is the only righteous king. God has provided law, but man has broken it. Jesus has fulfilled the law and lived in perfect obedience to it. Jesus is the culmination of salvation history. I have a picture in my mind of many streams flowing into one body of water. Although many of the themes in the Old

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4 The idea for this illustration came from Mellinger, 2010.
Testament seem disconnected they are all like these streams flowing into one vast ocean – the person of Jesus Christ. That’s one reason the story is so amazing. All of God’s work in history points to the promised Savior, Jesus. But why do we need a Savior?

We are sinners in need of salvation. (24-25)
Verse 24: Before Jesus came, John the Baptist came and proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. Even though the people of Israel considered themselves God’s people they all still needed to repent. For all have sinned… (Rom 3:23a). But how does Jesus save sinners from their sin? Let’s look at the second section of Paul’s sermon in verses 26-31.

Jesus is the crucified and risen Savior. (26-37)

26 Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation. 27 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. 28 And though they found in him no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have him executed. 29 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. 30 But God raised him from the dead, 31 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.

These verses show us that Jesus is able to save sinners because Jesus is the crucified and risen Savior. These verses give us the gospel message in an almost formulaic way. They show us that… The gospel is amazing because Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection serve as a substitute for us. (26-31)

First: Jesus was condemned to death (v. 27), but he had no guilt worthy of death (v. 28) – Jesus was an innocent man. Jesus lived a perfect life in place of our sinful lives. Jesus obeyed the law perfectly in place of our disobedience. Jesus’ life serves as our righteous substitute. This is amazing.

Second: Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate; executed on a tree (v. 28-29). Notice that verse 29 points out that this was also fulfillment of the Scriptures; they carried out all that was written of him. This is likely a reference to Isaiah 53. I’ll read verse 5: He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. In our sin we deserve death. We are under a curse. We are destined for eternal death. But Deuteronomy 21:23 says cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree (Gal 3:13). Jesus took the curse upon himself. Jesus’ death is our sacrificial substitute. He died in our place for our sin. This is amazing.

Third: Jesus was buried; they laid him in a tomb (v. 29). This is Paul’s proof that Jesus was truly dead. But death could not hold him.

Fourth: God raised him from the dead (v. 30). There are many things the resurrection accomplishes, but for now I will only draw out one aspect. While the cross provides forgiveness for sin, the resurrection overcomes the penalty of sin, death. The resurrection destroys the power

5 Cf. 1 Cor 15:1-11
of sin and death. Jesus’ resurrection paves the way for our resurrection. Although we experience the effects of sin and death now, when the risen Christ returns we will be raised with him. This is our foundation of hope, if we believe. This is amazing.

Fifth, he appeared to many people (v. 31). If his burial is proof of his death, the appearances were proof of his resurrection. Paul is establishing the believability of this amazing salvation story by pointing out historical proofs of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Next he draws our attention to scriptural proofs.

In verses 32-37 he turns to the Old Testament to show again that…The gospel, and especially the resurrection, is amazing because it is the fulfillment of God’s promises (32-37).

32 And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, 33 this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus,

The first Old Testament reference is Psalm 2:7 (v. 33b): You are my Son, today I have begotten you. In its original context this Psalm referred to David. I pointed your attention earlier to 2 Samuel 7 where God made a covenant with David and promised him that his offspring would always be on the throne, ruling God’s people. In 2 Samuel 7 God calls Davidic kings shepherds of Israel, but he also calls them sons of God; not sons in a biological sense, but in a functional sense.

In the ancient world biological sons were true sons only if they did what their father did. David and his offspring were called to rule; they were called to do what God himself did – so they were sons of God in a functional sense. When David became king he became a son of God. After Jesus was raised from the dead he ascended to the Father and now sits at the right hand of God as our eternal Davidic king; at his resurrection he fulfilled the promise made to David.6 The son of God by nature became the son of God like David at his resurrection.

The next references are from Isaiah 55:3 and Psalm 16:10 (vv. 34-37).

34 And as for the fact that he raised him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he has spoken in this way, “I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David.” 35 Therefore he says also in another psalm, “You will not let your Holy One see corruption.” 36 For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption, 37 but he whom God raised up did not see corruption.

The promise to David pointed far beyond David. David served as a ruler over God’s people, but he died as did all of the Davidic kings after him – none of them reigned forever. But God raised Jesus from the dead. The grave could not hold him. He is now able to fully fulfill the promise made to David and fulfill God’s plan of salvation. Through the resurrection God is able to save a people who will live under the eternal rule of King Jesus in an uncorrupted place – the new heavens and the new earth. Jesus’ resurrection is the inauguration of his kingdom and the first fruits of the new creation. This is good news. This is amazing.

6 NB. The use of the verb “raised” in v. 22 and now in v. 33. The resurrection is the coronation of King Jesus.
How should we respond to this amazing story of salvation? Look at the third section of Paul’s sermon in verses 38-41.

**Belief is the appropriate response to the message of salvation. (38-41)**

> 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.”

These verses teach us that belief is the appropriate response to the message of salvation.

As we have been saying all along, this story is only amazing if it is believed. Forgiveness of sins and freedom are the amazing result of God’s work of salvation. This is the part of the story where we are rescued; where love is introduced into our lives; where our despair is dashed and hope is instituted; where our wreckage is renewed. But before we can receive forgiveness of sins we must believe that Jesus died for our sins and before we can be freed from the penalty of eternal death we must believe that Jesus’ resurrection brings eternal life. However, belief is counter-intuitive.

The gospel goes against all of the ways we been conditioned to live. The American dream is built on the notion that we must pull ourselves up by the boot straps. Many in America believe that God helps those who help themselves. Actually every religion but Christianity is, in one way or another, a system that is designed to work one’s way to God. Many believe that their good works will get them to heaven or earn them favor with God; they believe that God has a cosmic moral scale and if your good deeds outweigh your bad deeds you’ll go to heaven. Even the Jews believed obeying the Law of Moses would be their ticket. But Paul says the Law of Moses cannot free us, because…

**We are not saved by our good works; we are saved by the work of God.**

On August 5, 2010, 33 Chilean gold miners were trapped 2000 feet below the earth’s surface, following a major rock fall. Many of you followed this amazing story on the news. The miners were buried, helpless and hopeless under the earth. There was absolutely nothing they could do to save themselves. But outside help came: engineers, contractors, drilling companies, the Chilean government, paramedics, and the Navy. An estimated 5 million dollars was spent in rescue efforts. On October 13, just after midnight, the first of the 33 men was lifted out of the mine in a special capsule. *The Economist’s* headline the next day was titled “Plucked from the bowels of the earth.”

In our sin we are destined to an eternal burial – an eternal death away from the presence of God and under God’s wrath. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves. There are not enough good works to do and there are not enough rules to follow. All of us have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory. But there is a powerful rescue team. The Father sent his one and only Son Jesus to save us from the power of sin and death. The rescue effort cost the Father greatly, the death of

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7 The idea for this illustration came from Mellinger, 2010.
his own Son. But God raised Jesus from the grave, he plucked him from the bowels of the earth, and he is capable to raise us from the eternal death we deserve.

From the beginning of Paul’s sermon he has been emphasizing that God has been working throughout history to bring salvation to his people. It is God’s work that makes the plotline of salvation history so amazing. But if salvation is all about God’s work then what is our part?

**We are forgiven and freed from our sin by belief in the gospel.**
It is not by our works, it is by belief in the work of God. I’ve already said this, but I wanted to say it again. Now I want to draw your attention to why I’ve said it so much.

Look at the warning in verses 40-41. **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.”**

Many have heard the amazing story. The Jews who put Jesus to death had heard and the Jews who heard Paul’s sermon at Pisidian Antioch knew the story, but they didn’t believe. However, we are told in verse 48 that 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. All of you here this morning have heard the gospel – the story of God’s salvation – maybe for the first time, maybe for the thousandth time. But the same response is appropriate for each of us. Believe the gospel and be saved!

If you have been amazed by the story of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ I invite you to repent of your sins and believe the gospel this morning. If you believe you will be saved, and the amazing story of God’s salvation can be the most amazing part of your story.

Now let’s listen to an amazing story of what happened in the life of someone who believed the amazing story of God’s salvation through Jesus Christ.

*Paul Ackerman’s Testimony:*

*While preparing for a recent talk on Christ’s Resurrection I began to think about Romans 10:9 which reads, “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”*

*I became a Christian in 1972 and from that time the “confession of my mouth” has been, “Jesus is Lord.” But I ask myself, “Do I believe in my heart that God raised him from the dead?” The confession of my mouth is something I control by will and choice, but can I choose to believe something in my heart? Suppose I were to offer you $100 to believe for the next 20 minutes that the moon is made of cheese. Would you be able to do it? If you took the $100 could you be certain that you believed the moon was made of cheese? Is heart belief a matter of choice and under our personal control? Do I truly believe in my heart that God raised Jesus from the dead? I say I do, and I think I do, but do I? Is there hard evidence that I believe in my heart?*
There is hard evidence that I believe and in a word the evidence is my own transformed life. As I pondered my question, proofs of my “heart-belief” started coming to mind:

First, consider fear of death: Before I became a believer I had a fearsome dread of death. I took comfort in being relatively young and likely to have more than half my life remaining. But I also was aware of the many dangers life holds such as the railroad tracks I had to cross every morning on the way to work, and health related terrors such as cancer and heart disease—my father died of a sudden heart attack at 48.

But after coming to believe in the gospel, my morbid fear of death fell away. I remember my early days of faith when the sense of relief that I had eternal life would flood over me. My death would not be the end. Because of Jesus I now had eternal life. Oh what a relief! My thinking about this earthly life was transformed. Before I thought of life as fine wine drawing ever lower in the bottle but after, life became more like marking off days on a calendar while waiting for vacation.

Consider mood swings: Through my life I have suffered with bouts of depression—mood swings. At times I soar on the wings of a manic updraft and feel wonderful. At others times I am caught in the grip of depression obsessing about this or that and finding it hard to get moving on needful tasks. One proof of my belief in the reality of Christ’s resurrection is evident in the contrasting character of my mood swings before and after conversion. I still have mood swings but here is the difference: Before conversion, when I was in high spirits and optimistic, a voice in my mind said, “You have no excuse for feeling good. Given the nature of reality your feeling good and optimistic is a kind of lie.” However, when I was down in the dumps, the voice within said, “You’re right, this is truth ... this is reality. You should feel depressed.” After my conversion, the matter was reversed! Sometimes I am depressed and down in my spirit. But the inner voice says, “You have no excuse for feeling bad.” “Your feelings of despair have no foundation.” Ah, but when I feel like I’m on top of the world the voice within says, “Amen! You have every good reason to feel happy and optimistic.” In the risen Christ, feelings of joy have a solid base in what is true and real.

Well, there is more I could say. Of greatest importance, because of Christ ... his Cross ... his resurrection I was given an answer to the question, “Why be moral?” In Christ I have a foundation for moral character. My conversion resulted in remarkable changes in the moral character of my life.

Many proofs of my “heart-belief” in the Resurrection exist. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 15:17 we read, “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless...” (1 Corinthians 15:17- NASB) Reading this verse doesn’t bother me. Why? Obviously, it doesn’t bother me because I believe in my heart that Christ has been raised.
In my Christian life the promises of God have been, are being, and forever will be fulfilled. In Ezekiel God stated it most beautifully, “A new heart … will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes … and do them”. (Ezekiel 36:26-27 - KJV)

God has faithfully performed all these promises in my life and the new heart he has given me most certainly believes that God raised Jesus from the dead.

What a powerful testimony to this amazing story of salvation, and the difference it makes when it is believed.

Hebrews 13:20–21 (ESV)

20 Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, 21 equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.
Bibliography


