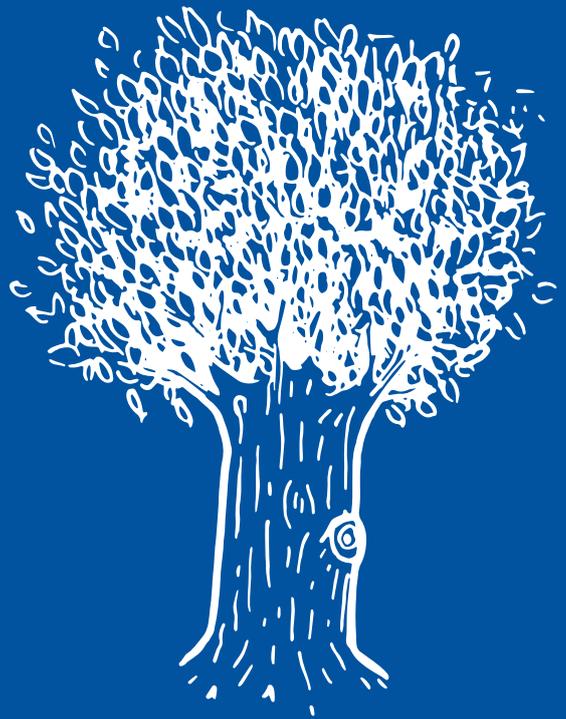


LONG STORY SHORT

EPISODE 12 UNFINISHED

A LENT JOURNEY
THROUGH THE SWEEPING
STORY OF SALVATION



#LONGSTORYSHORT

INTRODUCTION



An unstoppable force, an irrefutable new reality, the Way was moving forward. It's not long before opposition springs up. But every effort to thwart its progress seems counter-productive, only stirring up more opportunities.

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OPPOSITION

While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the leading priests, the captain of the Temple guard, and some of the Sadducees came over to them. They were very disturbed that Peter and John were claiming, on the authority of Jesus, that there is a resurrection of the dead. They arrested them and, since it was already evening, jailed them until morning.

The next day the council of all the rulers and elders and teachers of religious law met in Jerusalem ... They brought in the two disciples and demanded, "By what power, or in whose name, have you done this?"

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Leaders and elders of our nation, are we being questioned because we've done a good deed for a crippled man? Do you want to know how he was healed? Let me clearly state to you and to all the people of Israel that he was healed in the name and power of Jesus Christ from Nazareth, the man you crucified, but whom God raised from the dead.

"There is salvation in no one else! There is no other name in all of heaven for people to call on to save them."

The members of the council were amazed when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, for they could see that they were ordinary men who had had no special training. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus. But since the man who had been healed was standing right there among them, the council had nothing to say. So they sent Peter and John out of the council chamber and conferred among themselves.

"What should we do with these men?" they asked each other. "We can't deny they have done a miraculous sign, and everybody in Jerusalem knows about it. But perhaps we can stop them from spreading their propaganda. We'll warn them not to speak to anyone in Jesus' name again. So they called the apostles back in and told them never again to speak or teach about Jesus.

But Peter and John replied, "Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than him? We cannot stop telling about the wonderful things we have seen and heard."

The council then threatened them further, but they finally let them go because they didn't know how to punish them without starting a riot. For everyone was praising God for this miraculous sign – the healing of a man who had been lame for more than forty years.

4:1-3,5,7-10,12-22

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As soon as they were freed, Peter and John found the other believers and told them what the leading priests and elders had said. Then all the believers were united as they lifted their voices in prayer.

"O Lord, hear their threats, and give your servants great boldness in their preaching. Send your healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

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After this prayer, the building where they were meeting shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. And they preached God's message with boldness.

When they saw that the apostles were still teaching, the authorities arrested them again. But an angel of the Lord came at night, opened the gates of the jail, and brought them out. Then he told them, "Go to the temple and give the people this message of life!"

God's message was preached in ever-widening circles. The number of believers greatly increased in Jerusalem, and many of the Jewish priests were converted too.

4:23-24,29-31;5:19-20;6:7

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CARING FOR THE POOR

All the believers were of one heart and mind, and they felt that what they owned was not their own; they shared everything they had.

There was no poverty among them, because people who owned land or houses sold them and brought the money to the apostles to give to others in need.

More and more people believed and were brought to the Lord – crowds of both men and women. As a result of the apostles' work, sick people were brought out into the streets on beds and mats so that Peter's shadow might fall across some of them as he went by. Crowds came in from the villages around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those possessed by evil spirits, and they were all healed.

But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. Those who spoke Greek complained against those who spoke Hebrew, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food. So the twelve called a meeting of all the believers.



They said: "Select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. We will put them in charge of this business. Then we can spend our time in prayer and preaching and teaching the word."

These seven were presented to the apostles, who prayed for them as they laid their hands on them.

4:32,34-35;5:14-16;6:1-4,6

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VIOLENCE

Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed amazing miracles and signs among the people. But one day some men from the Synagogue of Freed Slaves, as it was called, started to debate with him.

None of them was able to stand against the wisdom and Spirit by which Stephen spoke. So they persuaded some men to lie about Stephen, saying, "We heard him blaspheme Moses, and even God." Naturally, this roused the crowds, the elders, and the teachers of religious law. So they arrested Stephen and brought him before the high council.

In reply to the false accusations, Stephen told the council how their ancestors had repeatedly rejected God's prophets. When they killed Jesus, they had done the very same thing.

The Jewish leaders were infuriated by Stephen's accusation, and they shook their fists in rage.

But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily upward into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honour at God's right hand. And he told them, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honour at God's right hand!"

Then they put their hands over their ears, and drowning out his voice with their shouts, they rushed at him. They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.

And as they stoned him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And he fell to his knees, shouting, "Lord, don't charge them with this sin!" And with that, he died.

6:8-12;7:54-60

Persecution has begun. Systems and powers are closing in, pressing back. Here we are. Hated, oppressed, but still speaking.

Here we are. Impossible to silence.

SCATTERING

A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem, and all the believers except the apostles fled into Judea and Samaria.

Saul was one of the official witnesses at the killing of Stephen... He was going everywhere to devastate the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into jail.

But the believers who had fled Jerusalem went everywhere preaching the Good News about Jesus. Philip, for example, went to the city of Samaria and told the people there about the Messiah. Crowds listened intently to what he had to say because of the miracles he did... So there was great joy in that city.

The believers who had fled from Jerusalem during the persecution after Stephen's death travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch of Syria. They preached the Good News, but only to Jews. However, some of the believers who went to Antioch from Cyprus and Cyrene began preaching to Gentiles about the Lord Jesus. The power of the Lord was upon them, and large numbers of these Gentiles believed and turned to the Lord.

Acts 8:1;7:60;8:3-6,8;11:19-20

SAUL

Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath. He was eager to destroy the Lord's followers, so he went to the high priest. He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them – both men and women – back to Jerusalem in chains.

On the road to Damascus, Saul saw a vision of Jesus that left him blind. He was led into the city, and God sent a man named Ananias to heal him.

Saul stayed with the believers in Damascus for a few days. And immediately he began preaching about Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is indeed the Son of God!"



All who heard him were amazed. “Isn’t this the same man who persecuted Jesus’ followers with such devastation in Jerusalem?” they asked.

Saul’s preaching became more and more powerful, and the Jews in Damascus couldn’t refute his proofs that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. After a while the Jewish leaders decided to kill him. But Saul was told about their plot, and that they were watching for him day and night at the city gate so that they could murder him. So during the night, some of the believers let him down in a large basket through an opening in the city wall.

Acts 9: 1-2,19-25

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This was not the last time Saul was in danger. Changing his name to Paul, he was to become the leading ambassador of the faith. The church sent him out, and he travelled to Cyprus, Syria, Greece, planting churches across the ancient world. He and his companions often met opposition. Rioting sometimes broke out where their message clashed with local cultures. They were frequently arrested.

God preserved them and rescued them time and time again. Years later, Paul returned to Jerusalem and visited the Temple. He was recognised and a mob formed, shouting that he had undermined the Jewish religion.

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The whole city was rocked by these accusations, and a great riot followed. Paul was grabbed and dragged out of the Temple, and immediately the gates were closed behind him. As they were trying to kill him, word reached the commander of the Roman regiment that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. He immediately called out his soldiers and officers and ran down among the crowd. When the mob saw the commander and the troops coming, they stopped beating Paul. Then the commander arrested him and ordered him bound with two chains.

Acts 21:30-33



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The feeling against Paul was so strong that he was escorted from the city under armed guard. He remained in prison in Caesarea for two years. When no one could bring a charge against him, he used his right as a Roman citizen to have his case heard by the emperor. Then he was invited to defend himself before the Roman governor and King Agrippa.

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Festus, the governor said: “I have decided to send Paul to Rome. But what shall I write the emperor? ... It makes no sense to send a prisoner to the emperor without specifying the charges against him!”

Then Agrippa said to Paul, “You may speak in your defence.”

Paul replied: “I used to believe that I ought to do everything I could to oppose the very name of Jesus the Nazarene. Indeed, I did just that in Jerusalem ... I caused many believers there to be sent to prison ... I was so violently opposed to them that I even chased them down in foreign cities.

“One day I was on such a mission to Damascus, armed with the authority and commission of the leading priests. About noon, Your Majesty, as I was on the road, a light from heaven brighter than the sun shone down on me and my companions. We all fell down, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is useless for you to fight against my will.’



“Who are you, lord?’ I asked.

“And the Lord replied, ‘I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. Now get to your feet! For I have appeared to you to appoint you as my servant and witness. You are to tell the world what you have seen and what I will show you in the future. And I will rescue you from both your own people and the Gentiles. Yes, I am sending you to the Gentiles to open their eyes, so they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God. Then they will receive forgiveness for their sins and be given a place among God’s people, who are set apart by faith in me.’

“And so, King Agrippa, I obeyed that vision from heaven. I preached first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that all must repent of their sins and turn to God—and prove they have changed by the good things they do. Some Jews arrested me in the Temple for preaching this, and they tried to kill me. But God has protected me right up to this present time so I can testify to everyone, from the least to the greatest. I teach nothing except what the prophets and Moses said would happen— that the Messiah would suffer and be the first to rise from the dead, and in this way announce God’s light to Jews and Gentiles alike.”

Suddenly, Festus shouted, “Paul, you are insane. Too much study has made you crazy!”

But Paul replied, “I am not insane, Most Excellent Festus. What I am saying is the sober truth. And King Agrippa knows about these things ... King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do—”

Agrippa interrupted him. “Do you think you can persuade me to become a Christian so quickly?”

Paul replied, “Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that both you and everyone here in this audience might become the same as I am, except for these chains.”

Acts 25:25-27;26:1,9-29

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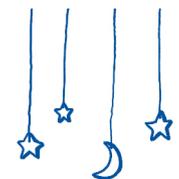
TO ROME

Paul had always wanted to preach in Rome, but he arrived in the city as a prisoner. He remained there under house arrest, and from there he wrote letters to the churches all across the region.

A large number of people came to Paul’s house. He told them about the Kingdom of God and taught them about Jesus from the Scriptures – from the five books of Moses and the books of the prophets. He began lecturing in the morning and went one into the evening. Some believed and some didn’t.

For the next two years, Paul lived in Rome at his own expense. He welcomed all who visited him, boldly proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ. And no one tried to stop him.

Acts 28:23-24,30-31



As Jesus had instructed, the good news had burst out from Jerusalem, to Judea, to the ends of the earth. It had pressed south into Africa, north into Europe, and here was Paul, planting a church at the heart of the empire.

And we are here, a global church, an underground empire. Jesus is followed on every continent, and praised in a thousand languages.

We are here; the kingdom is growing still.

The years passed, and the Bible does not record the final years of Jesus' apostles. James was executed in Jerusalem. Church tradition suggests that Paul and Peter died in Rome. It falls to the Apostle John to finish the Story.

I am John, your brother. In Jesus we are partners in suffering and in the Kingdom and in patient endurance. I was exiled to the island of Patmos for preaching the word of God and for speaking about Jesus. It was the Lord's Day, and I was worshiping in the Spirit. Suddenly, I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet blast. It said, "Write in a book everything you see."

When I turned to see who was speaking to me, I saw seven gold lampstands. And standing in the middle of the lampstands was the Son of Man. He was wearing a long robe with a gold sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white like wool, as white as snow. And his eyes were like flames of fire. His feet were like polished bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice thundered like mighty ocean waves.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as if I were dead. But he laid his right hand on me and said, "Don't be afraid! I am the First and the Last. I am the living one. I died, but look—I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and the grave."

Revelation 1:9-15,17-19

John saw a vision of God on a throne. He saw Jesus, the Lamb of God, surrounded by twenty-four elders, and he heard the elders singing:

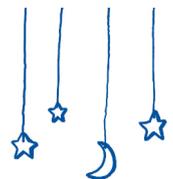
"You are worthy... For you were killed, and your blood has ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. And you have caused them to become God's Kingdom and his priests. And they will reign on the earth."

And then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea.

They also sang:

"Blessing and honour and glory and power belong to the one sitting on the throne and to the Lamb forever and ever."

Revelation 5:9-10



After this I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white and held palm branches in their hands. And they were shouting with a mighty shout, "Salvation comes from our God on the throne and from the Lamb!"

Revelation 7:9-10

A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a beautiful bride prepared for her husband.

I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, “Look, the home of God is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will remove all of their sorrows, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. For the old world and its evils are gone forever.”

And the one sitting on the throne said, “Look, I am making all things new!”

Revelation 21:1-5



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An angel spoke to John: “Come with me! I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” So he took me in spirit to a great, high mountain, and he showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God. It was filled with the glory of God and sparkled like a precious gem, crystal clear like jasper.

No temple could be seen in the city, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. And the city has no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God illuminates the city, and the Lamb is its light. The nations of the earth will walk in its light, and the rulers of the world will come and bring their glory to it. Its gates never close at the end of day because there is no night.

And the angel showed me a pure river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, coursing down the center of the main street. On each side of the river grew a tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, with a fresh crop each month. The leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations.

No longer will anything be cursed. For the throne of God and of the Lamb will be there, and his servants will worship him. And they will see his face, and his name will be written on their foreheads. And there will be no night there – no need for lamps or sun – for the Lord God will shine on them. And they will reign forever and ever.

Revelation 21:9-11,22-25;22:1-5

Jesus said: “See, I am coming soon, and my reward is with me, to repay all according to their deeds. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.”

Rev 22:12-13

And so the end turns out to be a beginning, and all things come together in the risen Jesus.

And we are here, a vision of the future burning in our minds.

We are here, the gates thrown open, invited into the love of God.

We are here, co-authors with God, invited into the unfinished story.



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