



## *Final Days*

A narrative encouraging all who follow Jesus to remain faithful in difficult circumstances.

## **THE BIBLE**

Acts 20-23; 27-28, 2 Timothy 1-4,  
Prison Epistles (Ephesians, Colossians,  
Philippians, Philemon)

*Prepare for the Story*

## **ICEBREAKER**

- Share about a time in your spiritual journey when you felt God call you to a new level of commitment and growth in your faith. How did you respond to this call?

*Rewind the Story*

Can someone highlight what has happened in the story so far ...

- Persecution & Growth – Steven and the church scatters
- Saul to Paul - Road to Damascus conversion.
- Peter – Peter's vision and revelation
- Paul's Mission – Trouble with church planting

*Hear the Story*

### **Scene One: Heading to Jerusalem**

Paul was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, so he gathered the elders from the church at Ephesus. Then he said to them: *"You know how I lived the whole time I was with you. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews."*

*"You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus."*

*"And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task of sharing the good news of God's grace."* The elders all wept as they embraced him. What upset them most was knowing that they wouldn't see him again. So, they accompanied him to the ship to see him off.

The voyage toward Jerusalem began, making several stops on the way. When they had stopped in Caesarea, Paul's friends who lived there began to fear for his life and pleaded with him not to go to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, *"Why are you mourning? It's breaking my heart! I am ready not only to be bound but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."*

### **Scene Two: Paul Testifies in Jerusalem**

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Paul was received warmly by the believers there. But some Jews from the province of Asia saw him at the temple. They stirred up the crowds and seized him, shouting, *"Fellow Israelites, help us! This is the man who reaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place!"*

The whole city was in an uproar; seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple. While they were trying to kill him, the commander of the Roman troops came up and arrested him, ordering that Paul should be taken to the barracks.

As they were shouting and rioting, Paul asked the commander if he could speak to the people. Paul's request was granted, and when he began to speak, the crowd became very quiet.

He said, *"I am a Jew ... raised in this city. I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was zealous for God as many of you are here today. I persecuted the followers of "the Way" to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison. I even went so far as to obtain letters from the High Priest to go to Damascus and bring back these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished."*

*"As I came near to Damascus, a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' I asked. 'I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting,' He replied. I was directed to go into Damascus, and while there, God sent a man named Ananias to me. He was a devout observer of the law and was highly respected by the Jews living there."*

*"He said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very moment, I was able to see. He then said, 'What are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized, and wash your sins away, calling on the name of Jesus.' When I returned to Jerusalem, I was praying in the Temple, and the Lord spoke to me saying, 'Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me ... go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles."*

### **Scene Three: Trouble in Jerusalem**

The crowd listened to Paul until he mentioned the Gentiles. Then they raised their voices and shouted, *"Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!"* As they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks, the commander ordered Paul to be taken into the barracks. He ordered that Paul be flogged and interrogated in order to find out why the people were shouting at him like this. As they stretched him out, preparing to beat him, Paul said to the centurion, standing there, *"Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn't even been found guilty?"*

When he said this, the soldiers withdrew immediately, and the commander was alarmed when he realized that he had put a Roman citizen in chains. He wanted to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews. So, the next day, he released Paul and ordered the chief priests to gather together. Then he brought Paul before them. Paul looked to the Pharisees and Sadducees and said, *"My brothers, I am a Pharisee descended from Pharisees. I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead."*

When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees over this hotly debated issue of resurrection, and the assembly was divided. There was a great uproar, and some of the teachers of the law who were Pharisees stood up and argued vigorously, saying, *"We find nothing wrong with this man."* The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces. So, Paul was taken away from them.

The following night, the Lord came to Paul and said, *“Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.”*

#### **Scene Four: Paul on Trial**

The next morning, the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves to an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul.

More than forty religious leaders were involved in a plot to ambush and kill Paul. But Paul's nephew caught wind of this plan and went to the Roman barracks to tell him. So, Paul spoke with one of the Roman centurions and said, *“Take this young man to the commander; he has something to tell him.”*

The commander met with Paul's nephew and was informed about those who were waiting to ambush him the following day. The commander called in two of his centurions and gave them these orders, *“Get ready a detachment of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea tonight so that Paul may be taken safely to Governor Felix.”*

So, the soldiers, carrying out their orders, took Paul with them during the night and presented him to the Governor. Learning that Paul was a Roman citizen, Felix agreed to hear Paul's case when his accusers arrived. Then, he ordered that Paul be kept under guard in the local palace.

Paul presented his case before the Governor, but under pressure from the Jewish leadership, Felix kept Paul under house arrest. During this time, Felix would visit Paul, and he would teach the Governor about Jesus and what it meant to be his disciple. Over time, a new Governor took office, and again, under pressure from the Jewish leadership, he put Paul on trial. At this point, Paul asked as a Roman citizen to have his case brought before Cesear, and his request was granted. So, Paul, as a prisoner, embarked on a ship that was finally headed toward Rome.

#### **Scene Five: Shipwrecked**

After stopping in several ports along the way, the conditions became dangerous. At one point, when a storm had been raging for days, the whole crew of the ship had given up hope of finding any relief.

So, Paul stood up before them and said, *“I urge you to keep your courage because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. Do not be discouraged, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island.”*

Just as Paul said, the ship ran ashore on an island known as Malta, where the chief official of the island welcomed Paul and his companions with generous hospitality. The official's father was extremely sick, so Paul went to see him, and after praying and laying hands on him, the man was healed. When this happened, the rest of those who were sick on the island came to Paul and were miraculously cured.

When the crew was ready to set sail toward Rome, the people honored Paul in many ways. They furnished all the supplies that Paul and the soldiers needed. After three months there, they put out to sea again and finally came to Rome, where Paul was greeted by other followers of “the Way.”

### **Scene Six: Letters from Prison**

In Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself while under house arrest, with a soldier to guard him. For two years, he welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the Kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without any hindrance.

In his final days, Paul wrote letters to the churches at Colossae, Ephesus, and Philippi. He also wrote personal letters, including one last letter to Timothy, his co-worker and “son in the faith,” ... in which he poured out his heart and bid farewell to his dear friend.

Paul wrote, *“Never be ashamed to tell others about our Lord. And don’t be ashamed of me, either, even though I’m in prison. But with the strength God gives you, join me in suffering for the Gospel ... remembering that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. Because God’s Word can never be chained ...”*

*“Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, but evil people and imitators will flourish. They will deceive others and will themselves be deceived. But you must remain faithful to the things you have been taught for you know they are true ...”*

*"Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season. Patiently correct, rebuke, and encourage your people with good teaching. You must keep a clear mind in every situation. Don't be afraid to endure hardship. Work at telling others the Good News and carry out all the ministry that God has given you."*

*"As for me, my life has already been poured out as an offering to God. The time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith ... and the Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to His heavenly Kingdom. To Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen."*

The exact details of Paul's death are unknown, but tradition holds that he was ultimately executed in Rome by Emperor Nero. Just as Paul shared with his friends, he died as a martyr for his faith.

#### *Retell the Story*

- Where was Paul headed, and how did those in Ephesus feel about him leaving?
- What happened to Paul while he was in Jerusalem?
- How did the Roman officials protect Paul?
- What happened on the way to Rome?
- What happened on the island of Malta?
- What happened to Paul once he was in Rome?
- What instructions did Paul leave Timothy with?

#### *Discuss the Story*

- What is your first reaction to this story? How did this story make you feel?
- What stood out to you from this story? What did you notice for the first time?
- What from this story made you wonder?

- How do you think Paul was able to endure the pain and trials he suffered for his beliefs?
- Why do you think Paul was willing to choose a dangerous path?
- What can you learn from Paul's life about how to face difficult circumstances?
- Why do you think Paul chose to spend time writing letters to churches and other individuals while he was under house arrest?
- How would you have reacted if you were Timothy and you received Paul's final letter?
- Did you hear anything that reminded you of *other* stories?
- From this story, what did you notice about humans?
- From this story, what do you notice about God's character or His qualities?

## 1) A LIFE LIKE PAUL'S

Paul willingly put himself in danger for the sake of the Gospel. What provided him with the courage to do this? What do you think stops us from living a life like Paul's? How can we change this as a church? How can we change this as individuals?

## 2) SPIRITUAL HERITAGE

Paul celebrated the fact that Timothy had known the Scriptures from his youngest days because of a rich spiritual heritage of faith. Who has been a "spiritual parent" in your life? How did God use them to help you walk with Jesus? Who in your life is God calling you to nurture and walk alongside? How can you do this? What are some practical first steps if you are not already doing this?

## 3) INVESTING YOUR LIFE

As the apostle Paul drew near the end of his life, he expressed some thoughts about how he had lived: how he had 'served God with humility, faithfully proclaimed the truth, called Jews and Gentiles to repentance, and bravely faced prison and other hardships. As you think about how you will invest the rest of your life, name one thing that you really want to do for Jesus and one step you can take to move closer to this goal.

\* Bonus: When you "finish the race," what do you want people to remember about you? What do you hope your legacy will be?

Most scholars believe that Paul was released from house arrest in Rome in the year 62 A.D. and that he may have made a 4<sup>th</sup> missionary journey, which may have gone as far as Spain. Church tradition says that the Roman Emperor Nero executed Paul in Rome in the year 67 A.D.

As Paul told Timothy, those who follow Jesus would suffer. Church tradition tells us about the fate of the rest of the Apostles:

- **Matthew** was martyred in Ethiopia - killed by the sword.
- **Mark** died in Egypt after being dragged by horses through the streets.
- **Luke** was hanged in Greece because of his efforts to preach to the lost.
- **Peter** was crucified upside down on an X-shaped cross because he told his murderers that he felt unworthy to die in the same way Jesus did.
- **James the Just**, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, and brother of Jesus, was thrown over a hundred feet down from the highest point of the Temple when he refused to deny Christ. When they discovered that he survived the fall, his enemies beat him to death with a club.
- **James the Great**, a son of Zebedee, was beheaded in Jerusalem. The Roman officer who guarded James watched, amazed as James defended his faith at his trial. Later, the officer walked beside James to the place of his execution; overcome by conviction, he declared his new faith to the judge and knelt beside James to accept the beheading as a Christian.
- **Bartholomew**, also known as **Nathanael**, was martyred for his preaching in Armenia when he was believed to have been flayed to death by a whip.
- **Andrew** was crucified in Greece after being hung on the cross. He said these words, *"I have long desired and expected this happier hour. The cross has been consecrated by the body of Christ."* He continued to preach to his torturers for two days until he finally died.

- **Thomas** was stabbed with a spear in India during one of his missionary trips while he tried to establish a church in the area.
- **Jude**, the brother of Jesus, was killed with arrows when he refused to deny his faith in Christ.
- **Matthias**, was chosen to replace Judas; one tradition maintains that he was stoned to death in Jerusalem by the Jews and then beheaded.
- And lastly, the **Apostle John** faced martyrdom, when he was boiled in a huge basin of oil during a wave of persecution in Rome. However, he was miraculously delivered from death and was sentenced to the mines on the prison island of Patmos. It was there that he wrote his prophetic book of Revelation, giving hope to all Christians.

In our final gathering, we will take a look at what was revealed to John about the End of Time.

Pray

God,

*We thank you for stories like Paul's, which inspire us to press on in the face of adversity. We ask that, as we go from here, You would continue to show us ways in which we can be more courageous and be the kind of people You created us to be. Help us hold on to the things that truly matter and to let go of the things that only hinder us from living and loving the way You want us to. We thank You for Jesus and the power He offered through a new life lived with You. Amen.*