

The Discipleship Project-Winter 2018–2019

Series 1: The Big Story

A series by Lee Ann Alexander

Series Big Idea: The big story of Scripture shows us the importance of experiencing God’s divine plan and purpose.

Lesson 1.4: Forever Set Free

Lesson Big Idea: The big story of Scripture shows us the hope we have of being forever set free.

FOUNDATION

Scripture Focus: Revelation 7:13–17 (PPT)

The sun’s first rays lit the waves as they lapped against the shores of Patmos. He rolled to his knees instinctively as his eyes opened. It was the Lord’s day.

His body shivered at the chill from the damp stone floor, but as he whispered words of worship, John’s spirit was transported elsewhere. A voice like a trumpet, visions of seals and angels—it was all beyond the scope of human reasoning. Like a passenger being carried along on a tour, John witnessed the final act of the big story.

Amid the litany of sights so specific they could be categorized, counted, and inventoried, an unusual expanse broke open before him. Instantly he knew the sight was a crowd of people, but his mind reeled at the magnitude of it. All previous attempts at cataloging failed here; this great crowd would be impossible to number. As he scanned the enormous crowd, he realized with awe that the people were from every tribe, people groups he couldn’t even place. The untold millions of faces of every color were yet unified. White robes flowed about them and they held palm branches. In unison they began to shout, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Revelation 7:10, NKJV).

At once, all of Heaven responded. Angels, elders, and four beasts surrounding the throne fell to their faces and proclaimed, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom, thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen” (Revelation 7:12, NKJV).

As John peered into that land where time is no more, an elder pushed near and turned to him with a question, “Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?” (Revelation 7:13, NKJV).

John took in the scene and shook his head, pondering the question. Sensing the sovereignty of the moment, he offered, “Sir, you know.”

The elder nodded and proclaimed, “These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:14, NKJV).

John surveyed the innumerable crowd as the elder swept his hand across the stage and

continued, “Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple. And He who sits on the throne will dwell among them. They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Revelation 7:15–17, NKJV).

With that, the seventh seal was opened and silence fell across the celestial stage. In time the vision unfolded further with wonders almost too fantastic to comprehend. When the vision reached its conclusion, John fell on his face at the appearance of Jesus Himself. His mind raced; his spirit yearned. He wept as the realization dawned that he must come back from the ecstasy of such rich communion with Jesus Christ. Yet as he began to pen the words that would give masses upon masses a glimpse of the future, hope leapt in his heart. He had a promise. Jesus was coming. Soon He would lead John to those living waters and wipe away every tear.

FRAME

Our story concludes this week on a stage so grand it sweeps all the way around the globe. For as news of the resurrected Jesus began to spread, ramifications rocked the very essence of what made the world go around—so much so that spectators of the big story would say of the cast that they turned the world upside down.

The grand story carried a surprise twist. The audience had thought when the hero was executed the story was over like so many other Greek tragedies. But this was no ordinary story. The writer upset the formula, broke all the unwritten rules of storytelling, and unveiled the surprising plot twist of the hero emerging victorious from the grave, more powerful than death itself.

Surely now the curtain would fall and the narrator would announce “the end.” No such thing happened. The drama shifted to Jesus’ inner circle as they traveled across the world’s stage to proclaim this very story, that everyone was invited to be part of this story with Jesus.

The story took them to an upper room on the Day of Pentecost. As they prayed there, the drama peaked yet again with images of fire appearing over each of them as the Spirit of the living God fell upon them and filled their hearts. The audience watches as extras crowd the stage—visitors from around the world who heard their native languages being spoken as a sign the Holy Ghost was covenanting with people from every walk of life. **God’s Spirit was poured out in the New Testament for all people. (PPT)**

- **Have you received the Holy Spirit? If so, what was that experience like? If not, would you seek God today?**

All the house lights burst on to signal a new day as these believers begin to go around the world with the message of salvation and eternal life through Jesus. But again tragedy and drama strike as the villain once again fights back. Opponents to the message of the story spring up wielding political power and a reign of physical terror as they attempt to

decimate the cast and shut the mouths of storytellers. In ghastly scenes that drive audience members to shield their eyes against the violence, cast members are indiscriminately martyred. In addition to the horror of the violence, the audience collectively shudders as a message of the story becomes clear: **the path of the believer is not without conflict**. (PDG, PPT)

Strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, “We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:22, NKJV) (PPT)

- **What hardships have you faced since following God? How has God helped you in these times?**

Yet in ways visually indiscernible, a sweeping peace comforts the audience as the narrator begins to explain that though invisible, the hero is still at work. He equips His people to tell the story to others so they too can join the story.

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” Amen. (Matthew 28:18–20, NKJV) (PPT)

We join the story with the martyrs of the New Testament. While we may not suffer the same physical fates, **we are likewise on a journey to share the story with others and be who King Jesus calls us to be**. (PDG, PPT) While centuries separate us, we will one day join them. All of us have a destination, a greater hope.

At this point the actors freeze in their places on the stage. As the audience takes in the scope of Jesus’ story spreading around the world, the narrator begins to explain the behind-the-scene directions from the author. All of the scenes combine to form the overarching story from Creation to God’s present covenant. As we step back and look at the whole of Scripture, **we can learn truths about God from the big story**. (PPT)

The big story shows us that God is the sovereign Creator and ruler. (PDG, PPT) Above the stage, an excerpt of His creation of stars, planets, and humans replays in dramatic fashion. The narrator reads from the story to remind us that it all begins with the sovereign plan of God.

For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. (Colossians 1:16, NKJV) (PPT)

- **How are you trusting in the sovereignty of God’s will for your life?**

The big story shows us that God loves humanity and reveals Himself to us, inviting us into relationship. (PPT) A montage of scenes run across the stage from God

making a way of escape for the first humans to His covenant with Abraham to a manger where He humbled Himself and became like us to bring the hope of eternal relationship with Him.

In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (I John 4:9–10, NKJV) (PPT)

- **Have you accepted God’s invitation to a relationship with Him? Explain.**
- **What are you doing to nurture that relationship?**

Next the big story reveals God as the Redeemer, intent on restoring relationship with fallen humanity. (PDG, PPT) God made us and loves us, but He loves us too much to watch from afar without saving us from our own mistakes. Throughout every scene of every act, the hero has been working to draw us to Him and provide a way for us to be redeemed and brought into right standing with Him (Titus 2:13–14).

- **Do you invite God to actively work in your life, seeking Him daily to purify you? Explain.**

Finally, the big story shows that God uses redeemed humanity in His mission to reach others and rule and reign with Him for eternity. (PPT) In this revelation, all of the many characters from the stage at once shift into formation and link together. The audience suddenly realizes that God has been orchestrating His people throughout each scene as part of His plan to invite people from every nation and culture into the big story (II Corinthians 5:18–20).

In this story there are no little characters, no extras. Every person matters and is part of the big story to bring all of the world into reconciliation with Jesus Christ. Not only did the hero sacrifice Himself to rescue humanity, but He then empowers humans to minister to each other.

- **How are you joined in the mission with the body of Christ to participate in the ministry of reconciliation?**

All these truths play out, not in a simple start-to-finish children’s story, but in the grand scheme of humanity. For not only is God without beginning or ending, but He desires to commune with us eternally, and this grand story of His is the master plan for all of humanity beyond the bounds of time (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

Our natural eyes gravitate to the cares around us, and we may fail to recognize God’s big story. However, He has put eternity in our hearts. **God desires eternal life for us—eternal life with Him. (PPT)**

God gave John a vision of the eternal hope to come. In Revelation John painted a picture of our eternal rest in Heaven. John saw an innumerable host of people from every

nationality who bowed before the throne (Revelation 7:13–14).

Those believers John saw entering their reward had come through tribulation. However, they stood spotless before the throne because they were washed in the blood of the Lamb. Their reward John described is a promise that gives Christians of all ages hope.

Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple. And He who sits on the throne will dwell among them. They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (Revelation 7:15–17, NKJV) (PPT)

In Heaven the hardships of surviving life in a fallen world will be gone. God will dry all our tears and we will never have reason to cry again. The daily struggles of this world, such as hunger and work and coping with things as inherent to our survival as the weather, will be no more. The Lamb will take care of us for eternity.

Most important, we will enjoy an intimacy of communion with Him forever: “He who sits on the throne will dwell among them” (Revelation 7:15, NKJV). What hope! As John penned that line, perhaps he thought back to the first act of the big story and how Adam and Eve walked in the Garden with Almighty God. Perhaps with awe and longing, John joyfully conveyed the vision of returning to a place of total, eternal access to God, forever free.

- **How are you actively looking for the return of Jesus Christ?**
- **How can we comfort ourselves with this hope?**

FINISH

On March 17, 1973, clouds rolled over the tarmac at Travis Air Force Base. Lt. Col. Robert L. Stirm dutifully followed orders and worked his way through the paperwork process. As he gathered his thoughts to give a speech to the assembled media, his mind played back over the last five-and-a-half years—years of captivity. He thought of the grisly day—October 27, 1967, to be exact—when all his fears landed in one haunting episode as his plane took enemy fire and went down over Hanoi. Scenes from the last five years blinked past as he shuddered away the images from the prison camps.

Now it was here. The moment that had kept him through it all, the hope when the hunger pains were almost overwhelming and the torture was unbearable. Home. He was home.

He pushed through the speech and followed along with the instructions from his officers. “Operation Homecoming” they kept calling it. He just wanted to be home, and home was the family waiting for Him.

And then it was there. The moment his car door opened and he stepped onto the tarmac, his daughter Lorrie glimpsed him first. Arms flailing, she began sprinting toward him. His wife, Loretta, and the three younger kids were mere strides behind. In one

jubilant moment, Stirm folded the entire family into a giant embrace. It was over. He was home. No more fear, pain, sickness, and despair.

A curious photographer in the crowded bull pen noticed the unfolding scene and quickly snapped a picture he titled Burst of Joy. It went on to earn a Pulitzer Prize in 1974 because it so aptly encapsulated the hope of the American people for the thousands of missing in action and POWs who had yet to make it home.

Sadly the story for the Stirm family did not end with the jubilant embrace. Bitterly Lt. Col. Stirm recounted to reporters the rest of the story. Just three days prior to the award-winning picture, an air force chaplain handed Stirm a Dear John letter in which his wife requested a divorce. During the next few months of settling in at what was once his home, Stirm learned of multiple counts of his wife's infidelity during his time in captivity, and he spent his homecoming fighting an inevitable divorce within the year. He found a town house in the area to share with his mother as he battled through custody and settlement issues.

One year after his "Operation Homecoming" speech, a journalist interviewed Stirm for a follow-up story. As he shared the bleak details of his saga, he lamented, "All those dreams I had in prison were nothing but dust." (Source: Nancy Faber, "A POW's Marriage Ends Bitterly," *People*, April 1, 1974, <https://people.com/archive/a-pows-marriage-ends-bitterly-vol-1-no-5/>)

Stirm's disturbing story reminds us that even our seemingly most jubilant moments down here are one-sided and our hope in temporal things is fragile. Paul wrote of the misery that comes from limiting our hope to only this world (I Corinthians 15:19). Lt. Col. Stirm survived unspeakable horrors by clinging to the hope he would one day make it home—safe from torment and united forever with his family. In our broken world, that dream failed him. Yet we serve a God who will not fail us. He offers us a sure and steadfast hope, an "anchor of the soul" (Hebrews 6:19, KJV) and a promise of an eternal home that we can count on.

God will help us survive our trials down here, but the story doesn't end there. Our ultimate hope is that He will take us to an eternal rest where He wipes away all our tears and communes with us forever. That hope is available to you today in whatever situation you find yourself; simply reach to Him and He will reach back to you with the hope of eternal rest in Him.