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Last words to die for...
Acts 7:1-9

The last words that people speak on their deathbed can be very telling as to what they lived for during their life. While her housemaid was praying out loud for her, Joan Crawford's last words were, "Bleep it... Don't you dare ask God to help me." P.T. Barnum's last words "How were the receipts today at Madison Square Gardens?" Druggy of the 60's Timothy Leary's last words in 1996 "Why not? Yeah. Who do you think said these last words, "I have offended God and mankind because my work did not reach the quality it should have."...Leonardo Da Vinci. Lifelong agnostic WC. Fields was found reading a Bible on his deathbed when asked about it he replied, "I'm looking for a loophole" General John Sedgewick of the union army during the civil wars last words were during a battle as he said, "They couldn't hit an elephant from this dist..." Tolstoys last words "Even in the valley of the shadow of death two and two do not make six." Truth is truth and it is unbending and inflexible especially in the face of death...two and two is still four. The truth is still truth. Some have lived for a lie and die for that same lie. Others live for truth and in their death we see them living for that same truth. John Wesley died full of counsel and exhortations and praise for God. His final words were, "The best of all. God is with us. The best of all God is with us. The best of all God is with us. Farewell. Adoniam Judson, the great American missionary to Burma suffered immensely at his death said to those around him, "I go with the gladness of a boy bounding away out of school, I feel so strong in Christ." Jonathan Edwards last words, "Where is Jesus my never failing friend."

This morning we read the some of the very last words spoken by the very first martyr of the early church. Words by a name with a Greek

name Stephen. A man who had been recently commissioned by the Apostles in Acts chapter 6 to be one of the first deacons to serve food and care for the needs of the widows in the church. A man whose ministry went far beyond just serving food. A man who was full of faith, well respected by the community. A spiritual man who was noted to be full of grace and power and through whom God works many powerful signs and wonders among the people. A man who stood up for truth and was willing to debate the sharpest minds of his time that Jesus is the answer for the world today above him there is no other for Jesus is the way. For God has put his stamp of approval on Jesus being the reality from God that came to earth and laid down His life, laid down even on the shadow of the temple so that no longer is there any need for bloody animal sacrifices for Jesus the reality has arrived. No longer is there any need for going through a priest to talk with God for Jesus is the new access and announces to all reality has arrived. No longer is there any need to go visit the temple to experience the presence of God for Jesus the reality has arrived. We can go to Jesus and experience the glory of the Lord.

Stephen was accused of preaching that Jesus destroyed the temple. He was accused of speaking against the Law and Moses. And yet the truth is that Jesus came to destroy it by fulfilling it. Like the rising sun destroys the need for your headlights on the car. Like laying down on the grass destroys your shadow from the sun, so also Jesus in reality laid down on the shadow of the temple and the Law and brought a present reality to earth. Stephen so believed that truth that he was unwilling to water it down. He was unwilling to shade and soften the truth to save his own neck. He had lived by this truth and was willing to die for this truth and his spiritual confidence shined so clearly that even those who opposed him could see it. Look at the last verse in chapter 6 "And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the council saw his face like the face of an angel." The Greek name Stephen or Stephanos means crown. The crown was the remarkable radiance on his face. They

would give out a Stephanos or crown-garland to honor a civic leader or an athlete in an Olympic contest. What a perfect name for one who stands so tall on his final day. The council all saw the glow and it was as if God himself was saying “This man is not against me. He’s not blaspheming me or going against Abraham and Moses. He is my faithful servant. He has gotten the truth right. Listen to him.

Lets read what Stephen had to say on the last day of his life after having been accused of speaking against the temple and the Law and Moses. READ v.1-8

The high priest said v.1 “Is this true?” Are you against Moses? Are you intent on destroying the temple and altering the customs of Moses that have been handed down to us? Are you against the Law? Is this true? So Stephen replies by giving them a history lesson of the Jewish people and the various contributions made by the key historical leaders of the people. Giving this history lesson to these Jewish leaders at first sounds like trying to teach Bill Gates how to use Microsoft windows. They know this stuff. They teach this history better then anyone. But Stephen uses it to remind them of some things they have forgotten. It also reminds us of some things that are true about God that we may have forgotten. Reminds us of some truth that we need to act on. Truth to live by.

So Stephen begins in v.2 of chapter 7 connecting with them as fellow citizens, calling them brothers and respecting their position by referring to them as fathers. He then begins by referring to God as the God of glory. He begins and ends his address in v. 55 with the glory of God and all the time people listening to him said his face even radiated some of that same glory. Why did Stephen start with referring to glory? Because we learned from last week that when Jesus died, he destroyed the shadow of the temple. The veil was ripped in two from top to bottom in the inner place of the temple. Israel had been privileged as a nation to enjoy the glory of God as its inheritance, Romans 9:4 but then the glory

of God departed, first from the tabernacle and then from the temple. God sent glory down in the form of His son but the whole nation rejected God's gift of glory. John 1 talks about it "we all beheld his glory, of the only begotten of the Father full of grace and truth. V.14 and he came unto his own and his own did not receive him. V.11.

Stephen starts by referring to the God of glory not only because it had left the temple when Jesus showed up. But Stephen wanted to make the point that the God of glory will appear where ever and to whomever He chooses. In fact, the Jewish people refer Abraham as their father, but Abraham wasn't anywhere close to the land of Israel when He appeared to Abraham in glory. He was (look there in v.2) in Mesopotamia. He was living south of modern day Baghdad , Iraq in a place called Ur, when God appeared in glory and said. "Depart from your country, your relatives and come to a land that I will show you."

What's the first lesson we can learn this morning? God is the one who takes the initiative. God seeks us by His own sovereign pleasure and will. He seeks us out and invites us to friendship. It is all a part of His divine plan which may or may not make a whole lot of sense to us. He invited Abraham to follow in obedience and promised blessing of land.

How far did Abraham get? He made it about halfway to a place called Haran. He was settling down there in this halfway place but after Abraham's father Terah died God decided to give him some extra motivation and get him to the land he needed to be in. So in v.4 it says God "removed" him and took him to the promised land, the land of Israel.

Even when we drag our heels. Even when we get absorbed in the stuff of life and family things. God will call us. He will invite us. God will take the initiative. The chief priests and elders had gotten some messed up notion in their head that God needed protection, that God needed guidance...and they were just the men for the job. They had decided that God could be confined to a particular temple. They had decided that God could be confined to a particular land and only appear to a certain kind

of people. And Stephen starts his rebuttal argument by reminding them. Folks this is not the way this started. God will not be confined to a building, or a particular group of people or a specific place and land. He is the one who has His plan and He will take the initiative to seek us out and invite us into relationship with Him.

What happened in Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve had eaten of the fruit in the garden? They tried to go into hiding as if they thought they could hide from Almighty God and the Creator of the Universe. They tried to hide but God went seeking. Where are you? He asked as if Almighty God of the Universe had misplaced his very first people. No he was seeking them to invite them back into relationship even when they had sinned and blown it badly.

Romans 5:8 “While we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.” While we were yet sinners Christ died for us. God pursue us even when we are at our worst and far away from where he wants us to be. We may only have gotten partway to where we know He wants us to be...but he doesn't stop, He doesn't give up on us. God keeps on seeking us to bring us to His place of blessing and rest.

Abraham was the founder of the Hebrew nation and yet his relationship with God was based on one of grace and faith. Abraham believed God and it was reckoned unto him as righteousness. And he was called the friend of God.” God called him out of a heathen nation who didn't know or love God and invited him into the light of salvation. Abraham responded out of faith, not because he kept the Law or worshipped in the temple or was in a certain piece of land or had certain genes in his blood. All those things, the Law, the land and the temple all came afterward. None of those things were in place yet. He simply believed in the promises of God and that faith saved him.

Don't miss Stephen's point here this morning. God is the one taking the initiative. It was God who appeared v.2 God who spoke v.3. God who commanded v.3 God who removed Abraham v.4 God who gave

in v.5 And God who promised v.5 God spoke in v.6 God who gave a covenant in v.8 God is the one who is taking the initiative and he can do whatever He wants with whoever He wants wherever He wants and in whatever way He wants. Stephen is making his point crystal clear you can't put God into a box. He simply will not fit. You cannot confine God into a building or temple or certain plot of land. He is the One who takes the initiative.

Second lesson this morning. We discover that God is a come through God. God is far greater than any of us and when He makes a promise, he comes through. God promised Abraham a land and yet we read in v.5 "and He gave him not even a foot of ground. God promised Abraham a nation of descendants, and even though he had a child through the handmaid Hagar, his wife Sarah was way past child bearing years and had not yet had a child. Yet God promised a nation of offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky, and a land for them to live in. A heritage and legacy and blessing. God even predicted that these descendants of his would suffer under the hand of Egypt and be enslaved for 400 years even before there was a nation of people to be enslaved. It all took place just exactly as God said it would. Because when God makes a promise you can take it to the bank, it's done. God promised and God came through. "Faithful is he who promised and He will do it."

The Jews prided themselves on being Abrahams children, but they confused physical blood ties with a spiritual heart experience. They were depending on their national pedigree instead of a heart of faith to save them. Every prophet that came along warned the Jewish people of their sin and need to turn back to God but they rejected all their words until long after they were gone. Jesus had warned them about their sin. But they were blind to it and instead cluttered up their life with man-made traditions and made up a salvation that demanded a list of do's and don'ts not a heart of faith. Stephen wanted to remind them that

salvation comes by faith and just like Abraham that saving faith wasn't dependant on a temple or law or land or bloodlines.

Look at v. 8 "And God gave them a covenant, an agreement of circumcision. The Jews prided themselves on their mark of distinction that set them apart symbolically as God's chosen people. But they failed to understand that this rite of circumcision was only symbolic of an inner spiritual relationship with God. They had missed the point and sentimentalized the ritual. God has no grandchildren. We are not born into the family of God just because we happen to come out of a Christian woman's womb. We may be an American because we were born on US soil, but you would be amazed at the number of people who think that just because they are an American that of course they are a Christian. Some people think because they go to a certain church or are a part of a certain denomination that makes them a Christian. Some feel like if they are better then most folks and follow a certain moral list of do's and don't that makes them redeemed and acceptable in the sight of God...especially if they look around and think they are behaving better then most of the other people around, better then most of those who claim to be Christians. But people. That is not the case. Each one of us must be born spiritually into the family of God through personal faith in Jesus Christ.

This morning do you believe that God did something incredibly powerful and profound in Jesus Christ? Do you believe that God is seeking you? Do you believe that God is far greater then we are and that is God is so worthy of our trust that it is time to come home to Him? If you believe that God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten son into the world that whoso ever believes in him should not perish but have life forever."

If you believe that truth like Stephen did then that belief ought to affect your life and their ought to be a life change. Stephens' last words were powerful words of truth to people who desperately needed to hear

them...most of whom choose not to listen. But Stephen died well because he lived well. As I read some of the last words of those who have died well. Ask yourself, "Am I living in such a way that I will die well?" "Do people look at my life and see that it is a reflection of the truth I know to be"

The great scientist Michael Faraday knew that truth. He had taken ill and when it became very evident that his sickness would soon result in death, a group of fellow scientists came to see him. Not so much to talk about science as to talk about death. One of them said to him " Mr. Faraday, what are your speculations as to your future?" With surprise he replied; "Speculations. I have none. I am resting on certainties. Then he quoted II Timothy 1:12 "For I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day."