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July 13, 2003

Lessons from Joseph Acts 7:9-17

One Sunday morning after the fourth of July, the pastor noticed little Alex was staring up at the large plaque that hung in the foyer of the church. It was covered with names, and small American flags were mounted on either side of it. The seven year old had been staring at the plaque for some time, so pastor walked up, stood beside him and said quietly, "Good morning, Alex." "Good morning, Pastor," replied the young man, still focused on the plaque "Pastor, what is this?" "Well, son, it's a memorial to all the young men and women who died in the service." Soberly, they stood together, staring at the large plaque. Little Alex's voice was barely audible, trembling with fear, when he asked, "Which service, the 8:30 or the 11:00?"

I hoping we don't lose too many in this mornings service. This week we celebrated and honored those who have died for our country and fought so that we could enjoy the freedoms we have now. Men and women who stood up for what they believed in. This morning we study some of the last words spoken by a man named Stephen. The first one who gave up his life because He believed that Almighty God had done something incredible in Jesus Christ. Believed that Jesus was the Messiah they had all been waiting for. That Jesus died and then three days later rose again. Stephen believed that Jesus had come down and in reality had laid himself down on the shadow of the temple and rendered its existence null and void. Believed that they no longer had any need of animal sacrifices, because Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice. That Jesus was now the High priest. That through Jesus now we have direct access to God. That Jesus, not the temple is where the glory of God now rests. That Jesus is the way the truth and the life.

Stephen so convinced of this he wanted everyone to know. He wanted them to see the same Jesus that He saw, for if they could only see the Jesus that He saw, if we could only see the Jesus that Stephen could see, we too would be fully committed to Him and want to follow Jesus. We too would be willing to die for the right things because we have lived for the right things.

This morning in our reading we find Stephen is in court. He has been brought before the chief priests and elders of Israel on the charge that he is speaking against the Law, blaspheme Moses and preaching that Jesus is going to destroy the temple. In Acts 7:1 the chief priest asks "Are these accusations true?" And Stephen begins his rebuttal reply by addressing them in 7:2 as fathers, that is Patri in Greek. This is a key label word in this section. As you study look for words that are repeated and this is one repeated many times. Also look for words that are inserted at key moments in the text and this word "fathers" is used. Typically, a term of honor and respect, but here Stephen uses it as an association of indictment as he gives these jurors what sounds like a history lesson, but really is a refutation of their own nations sins of prior rejection of God's attempts to reach them in the past. Stephen's history lesson is well chosen to expose them as ones guilty of sins far more terrible than the ones he is accused of.

Stephen recalls the story of four hall of famers from the Jewish history achieves to show how the current "fathers and elders" have treated Jesus is very similar to the way they treated these other well respected men in the past whom God clearly was doing a powerful work. In addition Stephen uses the stories of these four men to demonstrate the incredible faithfulness of God despite rejection and opposition from those who ought to know and accept. There are lesson for us today as well. Those of us who refuse to obey God simply because it is going to mean some change in our life. There are lessons for those of us who ought to know better. There are lessons for those of us who are currently

suffering and in difficult times. We learn some powerful lessons about who God is, how he works and what he is about. And that ought to affect our lives, because the truth we believe must make a difference in how we live. If it doesn't then we really don't believe it...we really haven't got it yet.

Stephen begins by telling the story of Abraham. Tells how Abraham responded to God's initiative while he was living in the pagan land of Ur in southern Iraq. Responded by faith and trusted that God would come through as promised and provide what at the time looked quite impossible. Without children in his 80's yet God provided him an heir and he became father to a mighty nation. Owned no land and yet God promised a land. And all of this God initiated apart from the Law of Moses and apart from any temple and before there was any land or nation. God promised. God is faithful. God is not tied down to buildings or confined to any land or geographic or ethnic boundaries. Point? God is God and He can well do what He pleases. Faithful is he who promised and He will do it.

So now we come to the next character in Stephens story, a man named Joseph. Read with me what Stephen reminds the chief priests, elders about Joseph on the day that He gave His life up for what He believed. (READ Acts 7:9-17)

Now when Stephen recalls the story Joseph he assumes correctly that these men know the story even better then he does. But some of you this morning may not have grown up learning the stories of the Old Testament, so let me quickly bring you up to speed. You can read about it in greater detail in Genesis chapters 37-50. It's a very good read.

Abraham had a child by his wife Sarah named Isaac and Isaac had a child named Jacob and Jacob had several wives. Leah had given him 11 sons and Rachael his favorite wife finally gave him two boys Joseph and then Benjamin. Now Joseph was daddy's favorite and Jacob gave Joseph a multicolored coat that about the same as putting a sign around

your neck that says, "Dad likes me the best" Needless to say the other 11 boys didn't like it very much. They didn't like it when Joseph told them the dreams he began to have that told of 11 sheaves of grain bowing down to his sheaf of grain, inferring that one day he would rule over them. Even his mom and dad got bent out of shape when he told them the dream about 11 stars, plus the moon and the sun bowing down to Joseph. Meaning that all 11 brothers plus mom and dad would one day bow down to young Joseph, daddy's favorite. So as Stephen mentions here in Acts 7:9 the brothers who would later become the fathers, or patriarch of the 12 tribes of Israel became very jealous of Joseph and they wanted to kill him. But Rueben steps in and says no lets make this a win-win deal for us. Lets sell him to those slave traders. We get rid of Joseph and get a few shekels in our pocket. So Joseph was sold and taken to Egypt. A wealthy man named Potipher buys him at the slave auction and Joseph goes to work at this mans house. Everything that Joseph puts his hand on flourishes. He is recognized as very wise and trustworthy and is soon put in charge of the house as chief overseer.

Problem comes in now because Potiphers wife has a roving eye and sees this man Joseph, whom the Bible refers to as a very handsome man. She wants to be intimate with him and Joseph refuses. She constantly badgers him it says "day after day" and tries to entice him to go to bed with her. He refuses saying that his master has given him everything in the house at his control, I will not take what is not mine." One day she is aggressive in her pursuit with no body around and grabs him by the coat. He flees leaving his coat behind as well as a very angry and jilted woman. This is the second time a coat has gotten Joseph into trouble. Potiphers wife yells for the guards and falsely accuses Joseph of attempted rape. Potipher believes his wife's story and tosses Joseph into prison. Once again it appears that Joseph has gone from great blessing and favor to the pit of suffering and difficult circumstances. Even in the prison God extended his hand of favor to Joseph so that he came in

charge of all the prisoners in jail. The jailor so trusted him that he didn't even supervise anything under Joseph's charge. Years later the cupbearer and baker to the king had been tossed into prison. They had dreams that they couldn't interpret so they called on Joseph to help them out. The interpretations proved correct. The baker was executed and the cupbearer restored to his position. Remember me said Joseph as the cupbearer left to return to the palace. Put a good word in for me when you get there. But...the cupbearer forgot for several more years until God perfect timing and Pharaoh himself had a nagging dream that he couldn't interpret. This prompted the cupbearer to remember this man named Joseph the dream interpreter. Joseph came and interpreted the Pharaoh's dream stating the dream, telling the Pharaoh that there would be seven years of great abundance in the crops and then seven years of famine and then he offered a wise recommendation for the Pharaoh to build grain houses and store up as much as he can the first seven years and then be ready the next seven because people would come from lands all around to buy grain from the only one who had it and he would become very powerful and wealthy. Pharaoh recognized the wisdom and appointed Joseph to head up the project. He went from the prison to becoming the second most powerful man in Egypt. Stephen includes in his story how God was with him. V.9. Even in the midst of getting what looks like the short end of the stick time after time. Sold into slavery, unjustly accused at Potiphar's house and forgotten in a prison for years. In the midst of it all, God was with him it says in v.9 and v. 10 God rescued him from all his afflictions. That word afflictions is repeated in v.11 and it carries with it the idea of internal pressure, or distress that is brought about by outward circumstances. That is the worst which happens down inside us, the mental, emotional and spiritual oppression that sinks us into depression and despair. Suffering and tough times can often bring this upon us...but not for Joseph. His circumstances screamed out for him to get angry and shake his fist and God in rebellion

and ask “Why God? Is this some kind of cruel joke you are playing on me. Do you delight in lifting me up only to turn around and trip me up and shove my face in the mud?...I’d be tempted to do that if I were he and so have some of you. But Joseph had a strong sense that God was at work and even in the midst of difficult circumstance He knew that God was with him. Joseph experienced how God had rescued him out of his afflictions. Do you need a God that can do that for you this morning. He is the same God that was the God of Joseph. Some times we think that God is only with us when our circumstances are favorable, when things are going well and we are getting along with our wife and our budget is all balanced and our neighbors aren’t bothering us and the in-laws are peaceful and the dog hasn’t messed on the carpet. We think that if we are obedience to God and keep doing things right that we will somehow get a relief from suffering card or extra blessing card for us to play in the game of life. But the story of Joseph reminds us that suffering and setbacks and even difficult times are not necessarily an indication that you have somehow fallen out of God’s plan or that God is no longer with you or cares for you. On the contrary it seems in the midst of suffering we can discover some of the greatest moments of God’s presence when we experience comfort from our afflictions, our anguish. Josephs story reminds us that God has promised relief not from circumstances but from our anguish in them. I wonder if Stephen thought about Joseph suffering as he spoke these words on the last day of his life.

We continue the Joseph story from Acts 11. Meanwhile back in Egypt and all over Canaan there came a famine and with it great affliction and anguish. One can picture the anguish of a family of brothers and their families who knew that they were only a couple of months away from becoming totally out of food with no possible source in sight. People get desperate when their family has no food. They are willing to do just about anything...and so when they heard that Egypt

had vast stores of grain they decided to send the brothers down to the foreign enemy of Egypt and beg for food.

Notice in v.12 it says that Jacob heard about the food in Egypt and sent “our fathers” there is that key word again. They arrive in Egypt and gain an audience with the second most powerful man in Egypt. They don’t recognize their brother Joseph as they bow down before him begging for food. Joseph wanted to ensure that his younger brother Benjamin hadn’t met with the same fate. He wanted to know if they had matured and grown up yet so on their second trip back to Egypt Joseph revealed to them who he was. V.13 He invited the whole family down to Egypt where they were given plenty of food and land. It was a perfect opportunity to multiply and increase the families of Israel. And grow they did as they exponentially multiplied during the 400 years they spent down in Egypt until God decided it was time to move into the land that was promised to them...and once again God uses suffering to move them along. Interesting how God often chooses suffering and difficult circumstances to move people to the place where He knows they will grow the most.

Lets spend a few minutes thinking about why Stephen included Joseph story in his rebuttal explanation before the council defending his charges. Why did he start with in v.9 saying that patriarch or fatherarch became jealous of Joseph who was the favored one of the Father even though he was one the youngest at the time? I think Stephen wanted to subtly make the point that God will often use the younger, those from the out of the way places. Those whom the rest of the world has written off as irrelevant to do the greatest good. Nazareth was considered the armpit of Palestine and yet it was out of the least of these came Jesus, born in lowly Bethlehem.

Stephen reminded the fathers of the council that God will accomplish his purposes even when the jealous brothers he calls fatherarchs tried to snuff him out. It is pretty clear that Stephen is

connecting up the fathers or patriarchs who were the jealous brothers of Joseph with the same actions of the fathers sitting in judgment against him. No matter what they try to do God's plan, God's desires will not be snuffed out. I think Stephen sees himself in the Joseph character. Thinking that no matter what they may do to me, God is with me and will accomplish his purposes no matter how much suffering you may put me through. It is worth standing up for truth and living it out and keep doing what is right even when it is tough, because God is faithful and has promised to never leave me or forsake me and will always be with me and bring relief not necessarily from all my circumstances but will provide relief in the midst of them, and freedom from my internal anguish.

Stephen saw that God was in control even when the circumstances looked like they were totally out of control. Joseph lived this truth when he said in Genesis 50:19 as the brothers feared that Joseph would get back at them after their dad died. He responded to them "Do not be afraid for am I not in Gods' place? You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good in order to bring about these present results to preserve many people alive." So don't be afraid." Joseph believed that God had a plan no matter what the circumstances looked like and that God would carry it out. He didn't have to be God that moves in judgment against anyone else. He didn't need to exact revenge. He didn't have to go bitter and angry. He knew that vengeance belongs to God. If God wants to do something about that then that is up to Him.

Stephen knew that if they should kill him that it would only be because God allowed it and even in his death God would use it for a far greater purpose than his life. And Stephen was right, as God used Stephen's death as the seed of blood that fan the flames of truth to sweep across the known world and we are benefactors of that stand for truth even today.

I think Stephen included Joseph because he wanted those he referred to as Fathers in the council that day to consider that just as the ancient fathers, the patriarchs had initially rejected Joseph, but then bowed down in humility and accepted him in Egypt far away from any place they might have expected. Just like they received Joseph the second time and then received the rest, care and protection in order to thrive and grow into a strong nation, Stephen wanted the council fathers to take a second look and receive Jesus whom they had rejected and receive the rest, protection and blessing that can be anyone's who comes into the arms of the Saviour Jesus Christ.

For the ancient brothers, the ancient patriarchs, it took a deep hunger need, a famine to motivate them to go where they could get lasting help. God induced a hunger in them by a famine. Perhaps this morning God has induced into you a hunger, an emptiness, a void or hurt in your life that can be only healed and filled by God alone. The chief priest and elders refused to obey God because it meant they needed to admit they needed to make some changes in their life. They needed to humbly bow down before God almighty and admit they were wrong. Will you continue to stiff arm God? Isn't now the time to say yes to God. Isn't it about time to put aside your pride and bow down before God? Don't you want to come home to God? Come home to the rest He provides? Don't you want to ease the anguish in your heart? Your difficult circumstances that you face right now may not change all that much, but you will have an entirely different outlook on life. God will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is focused on Him because He trust in Him. If you want to do that this morning is a great time to start. Admit your hunger. Admit your need. In humility admit to God you are a sinner. Tell him that you want to accept His free gift of salvation offered through Jesus Christ who died on the cross to wipe our sin debt clean. Tell him you want to come home to him today. Tell him you want to live

for Him and say yet to him and accept him as the Savior that He is.
Come home to Jesus this morning.