

# HOW TO LIVE AND DIE

## ACTS 7:55-60

The astronauts' observations of the earth from outer space are always awe inspiring. They wax eloquent about the astounding beauty of our planet. The pictures they draw are breathtaking. Those of us who are frequent flyers can attest to the earth's beauty from an even less elevated height, but what I have discovered is that almost anything is beautiful if you can just get far enough away from it. From ten thousand feet, even the city dump doesn't look bad.

The stoning to death of the first Christian martyr, Stephen, was a barbaric and shocking event, full of blood, pain, and slow death. Only as we view it today from such a great distance would we dare to romanticize it. Compared to stoning, the electric chair is kind.

And yet, we can learn spiritual lessons on how to live and how to die from Stephen.

### I. While They Were Stoning

Luke informs us that "while they were stoning Stephen, he prayed" (v. 59). Even as they killed him, he prayed. In one of his darkest moments on earth, he turned to God. As naturally as he prayed in pleasant times, he turned to God in an impossibly difficult time and communed. Wherever he was and in whatever circumstance he found himself, Stephen found it natural to pray to God. Every disciple knew that could be the outcome, for Luke heard Jesus say, "They will put some of you to death" (21:16). That was being fulfilled.

### II. A Prayer of Trust

Stephen's prayer was, "Lord, Jesus, receive my spirit" (v. 59). It was not a prayer of panic or fear. It was not a prayer of desperation or bargain. It was a prayer of trust and affirmation. He was saying, "I have always trusted you in life, and now I trust you in death."

Following the model of the way his Lord had died, he quoted a familiar Jewish children's prayer found in Psalm 31:5: "Into your hand I commit my spirit." These are almost the exact words of Jesus from the cross: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke

23:46). He had learned that whether he lived or died, he was the Lord's.

### III. A Prayer of Forgiveness

Again, following the model of his Master on the cross who said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34), Stephen prayed, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (v. 60). Jesus influenced Stephen, who influenced the apostle Paul (Acts 7:58; 22:20), who in turn influenced millions of others.

The popular 1957 film *The Bridge on the River Kwai* documented many of the atrocities that the Japanese perpetrated on the Allies during the Second World War. On February 19, 1994, some survivors from both sides got together. Some of the Allies refused to acknowledge their former captors' presence. "What the Japanese did was unforgivable," said British leader Arthur Lane. Takashi Nagase responded by saying, "The former prisoners' feelings were only natural." That is true. It took a supernatural power to bring about forgiveness in Stephen's life, and so it does in ours. (C. Thomas Hilton)

## WHAT AM I?

### 1 PETER 2:2-10

Children like to play guessing games, especially ones where they pretend to be something that others have to guess. Adults do that sometimes, too, only the game can become a habit with no real answers.

Today's text uses a succession of images that tell us who we are as followers of Christ.

What am I? Paul suggests three images that demonstrate the nature of the Christian life.

#### I. We Are Hungry Babies

This is a humorous image. Can't you just picture yourself right now in a diaper fumbling with a big bottle? Or think about your spouse. Or your grown children.

Peter used the term in a serious way, though. The way a baby hungrily slurps a bottle is the way hungry Christians are to ingest