

# Receive My Spirit

Acts 7:54–8:3

August 12, 2001

“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” This prayer of Stephen’s, uttered a moment before his death, articulates not only the good news of Easter but also the prior good news of creation and the ultimate good news of heaven. It is all here, in five words, prayed quietly in the midst of a screaming mob, offered up to heaven even while stones were being thrown down against him. “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

First of all, the prayer is addressed to Jesus Christ. We may have become so accustomed to this that the ramifications are not immediately obvious. But here is the good news of Easter. Jesus had been killed just a few weeks earlier. He was crucified, dead, and buried. The ones responsible for his death were the same ones Stephen accused of murdering Jesus, the same ones murdering Stephen during this prayer. But surely a dying man would not cry out to a dead man! That would make no sense at all. Stephen is speaking out of his faith and out of his vision of heaven. He is praying to the resurrected and living Jesus Christ. So, the very first thing being said here is that Jesus is alive again. The tomb could not hold him. The ones who presumed to kill him had lined up on the wrong side of the universe. They lost. Jesus won. And they could not stand it. It drove them berserk, into a mad fury. The powers of evil cannot stand the preaching of the gospel.

Moreover, to address this prayer to Jesus was to acknowledge him as God. Jesus himself had prayed a similar prayer on the cross: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). It is not unlike one found in the Psalms: “O LORD . . . into your hand I commit my spirit” (Psalm 31:1, 5). But those are addressed to God. This one is addressed to Jesus. In the face of the crowd responsible for killing Jesus, in the face of the crowd which regarded Jesus as an enemy of their faith, in the face of the crowd convinced that Jesus was as dead as dead could be, Stephen not only claimed again that Jesus was alive, but also proclaimed that Jesus was God. Christ not only had been raised from the dead but also had ascended into heaven, from which he rules the universe. Easter is not only about the victory of life, but also about power and authority. “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

Second, the prayer teaches the reality of the human spirit. We were created by God and for God. It is a part of the reality of our existence that we have a spirit. This may be as radical and startling in our day as is the proclamation of the resurrection. Surely in naming the reality of the human spirit Stephen was not pointing to a figment of his imagination. Surely in the waning moments before his death he was not offering a prayer for his life just using a figure of speech. He was convinced of, and his prayer teaches us the truth of, the reality of the human spirit.

This great truth is a part of the Christian faith which we especially need to proclaim today. We live in an age which is eager to reduce humanity to something less than it is. Yes, we share much with the rest of God’s creatures. Yes, we can be understood not only as organisms, and collections of organs, but also as colonies of cells. Beyond that, we can be understood as complex, integrative, self-sustaining, chemical reactions. These are good, true, and helpful understandings of human life, as far as they go. They are very fruitful in the production of medicines and various treatments of diseases. But the question is, Are we anything more than a

chemical reaction? Are we anything more than a colony of cells? Are we anything more than a set of organs? Are we anything more than a lump of flesh?

These questions take on fresh relevance in an age of increasing capital punishment, countless abortions, embryonic stem cell research, and the specter of human cloning. In the face of the rapidly burgeoning knowledge of the genetics underlying human life, some theologians and ethicists are too ready to say that there is no distinct soul, self, or spirit, and that the image of God in us simply consists of our highest capacities for self-consciousness, language, imagination, self-transcendence, and so forth. But, in regard to human nature, does the soul merely consist of our genetically and environmentally determined capacities for freedom, or is it an entity which has those capacities? Does not the reality of “personal choice” imply that there is a “person” behind, or beyond, the very capacities—such as choice—that the “person” exercises?”

The prayer of Stephen, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,” teaches us the reality of the human spirit. We are not just chemical reactions. We are not just lumps of flesh. We are not tissue to be manipulated at the will of scientists or of society. We are human beings, made by God in the image of God. We have spirits. This is what makes us human. We need to stand ready to resist all efforts to deny that, all efforts to undermine that, and all such efforts to destroy human life.

In particular, the Commonwealth of Virginia and the United States of America are in the midst of a discussion about the propriety, or the lack thereof, of embryonic stem cell research, as distinct from umbilical cord stem cell research, or adult stem cell research, which do not involve the taking of a life. The possibilities are fascinating. The opportunity to grow new organs sounds fantastic. But the problems are immense. And the presuppositions are dehumanizing.

The first and worst problem is that embryonic stem cell research involves taking a life. A second and also severe problem with embryonic stem cell research is that we are working with the same unknown factors as with an unborn child. We might take the human life of an embryo in order to use its stem cells to grow replacement organs only to find out years later that the organs might not be suitable for transplant. Then the life is not only taken but wasted.

But even if it worked beautifully every time, and perhaps especially if it did so, there are even more profound underlying problems. The presupposition of the willingness to turn viable human embryos into spare part factories for other humans is that we are nothing more than a lump of flesh, a complex chemical reaction, a speck of dust. If that were all we are, it would not matter how many embryos are destroyed, how many fetuses aborted, how many babies killed, or how many adults executed. It would not matter at all, and there would be no way to say that it did matter.

But since we have a spirit, since we were created by God, for God, in the image of God, human life is not ours to take. Human life is to be cherished and valued because it is cherished and valued by God. All other bases of value are subject to perversion and debasement. Then we would be reduced to saying that it is okay to take one life to save another. But with the Christian faith we have good reason not to take human life. We should not take the lives of our offspring in order to save ourselves. Instead, we should give our own lives so that our offspring may live. “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

Third, it is the ultimate aim and purpose of human life that we be received into heaven, into the presence of God Almighty and our Lord, Jesus Christ. As good as this life is, and we are profoundly grateful for it, it is not all that there is. There is another life, beyond this one, beyond our imagination, a life forever beyond pain and sickness, beyond disease and suffering, even

beyond death. We have been created and saved for a life of eternal communion with God, with his Christ, and with each other. That starts now, in small and fragmentary ways, but it is completed in the life to come. The goal of our life, and the great hope of our life, is that God will, in the end, receive our spirits into his presence.

Stephen had begun his sermon by saying, “The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham.” Now, at the end of his life, the glory of God appears to him. As, by the power of the Holy Spirit, he looks into heaven, there he sees Jesus Christ at the right hand of God. That is the basis of his prayer. But that was also the one piece of good news that was most unbearable to the crowd listening to him. They tried to overwhelm this proclamation and to shut it out, and they rushed forward and killed Stephen rather than hear anymore of it. It is no accident that this follower of Jesus Christ died very much like Jesus Christ, unjustly, but with prayers and forgiveness on his lips.

It still happens today that Christians are martyred for the faith:

Upon entering the cafeteria at Princeton Theological Seminary, one sees three bronze plaques inscribed with the names of Princeton graduates who, like Stephen, paid for their vision in blood:

Walter Macon Lawrie—Thrown overboard by pirates in the China Sea,  
1847.

John Rogers Peal—Killed with his wife by a mob at Lien Chou, China,  
1905.

James Joseph Reed—Fatally beaten at Selma, Alabama, March 11, 1965.

These names remind us of some later-day witnesses who went before us, some of whom paid dearly for their witness to the truth (Willimon, *Acts*, pp. 65–66).

“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” This prayer of Stephen’s, uttered a moment before his death, articulates not only the good news of Easter—that Christ has been raised from the dead, is ruling over the universe, and is the promise of our own resurrection—but also the prior good news of creation—that we were created by God, for God, and in the image of God, so that we have a spirit—and also the ultimate good news of heaven—that our lives are in the hands of God. It is all here, in five words, prayed quietly in the midst of a screaming mob, offered up to heaven even while stones were being thrown down against him. May God grant us the grace to learn and receive this gospel so that when our day comes we may pray with Stephen, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

*To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.*

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