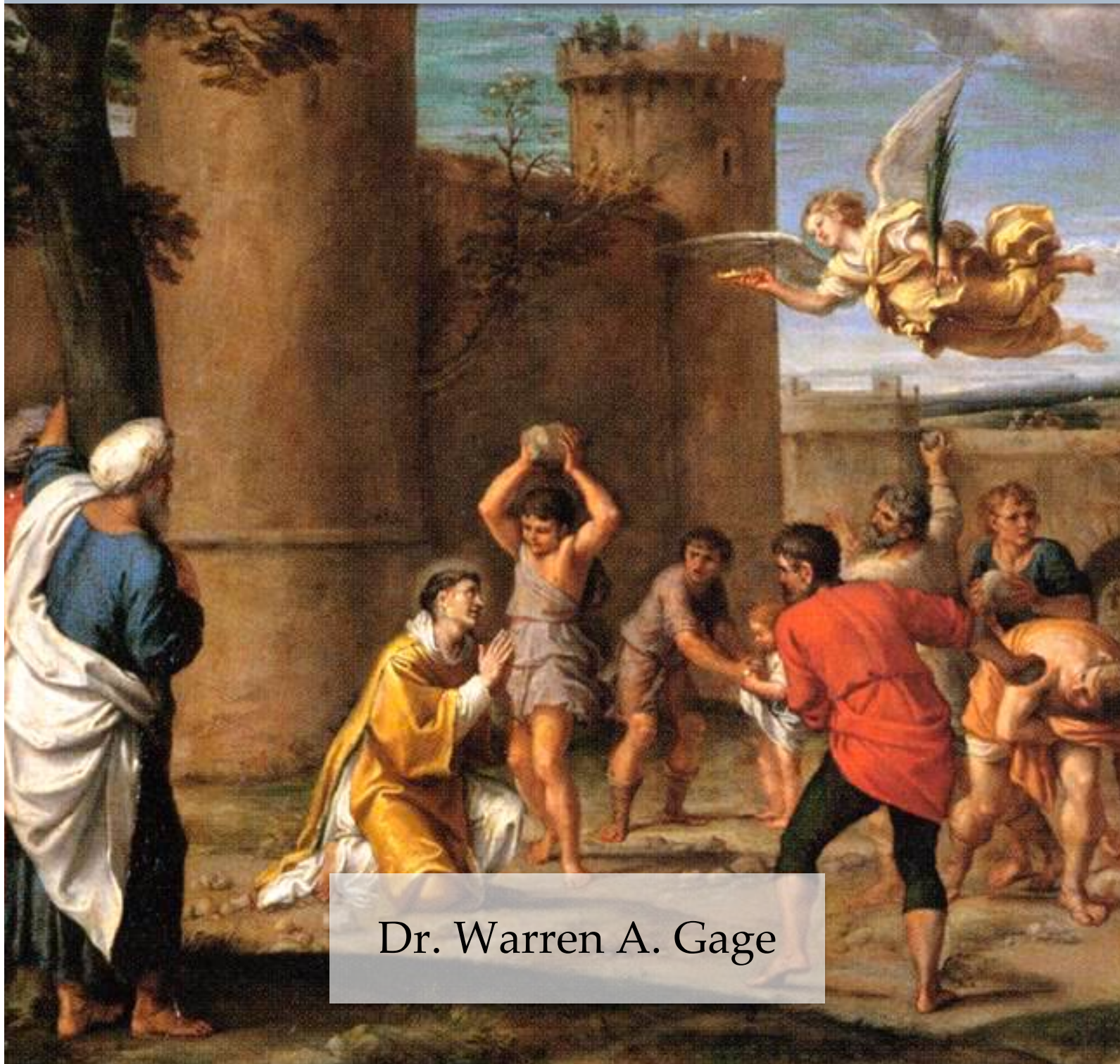




The Alexandrian Forum

THE MARTYRDOM OF STEPHEN

ACTS 7



Dr. Warren A. Gage

Christ in all of Scripture

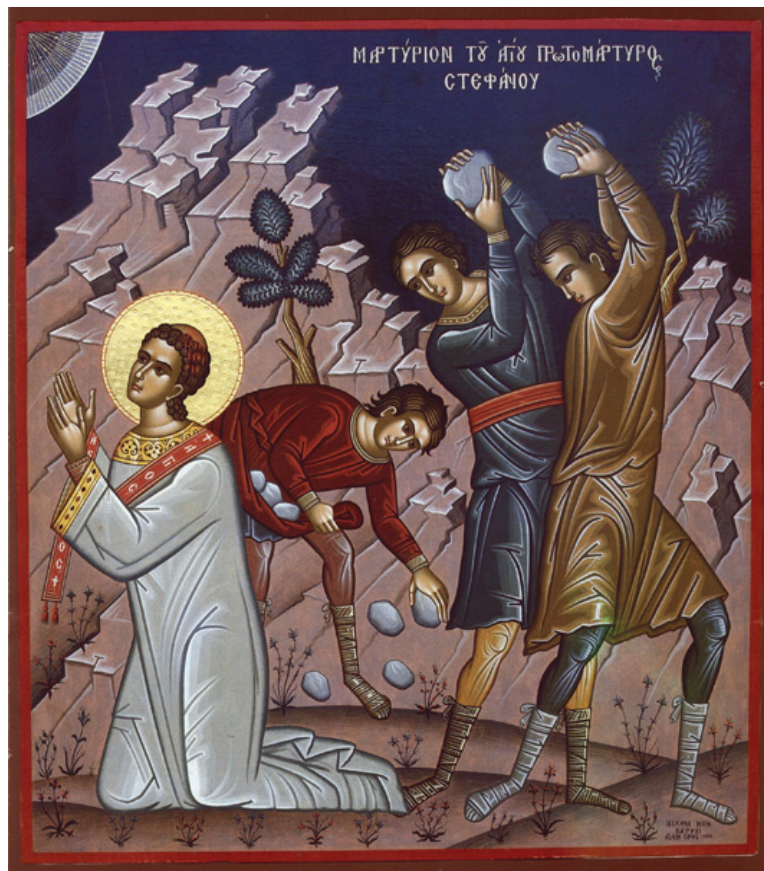
The Martyrdom of Stephen

Acts 7:54-60

Read the Passage

Acts 7:54-60

⁵⁴When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. ⁵⁵But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, ⁵⁶and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" ⁵⁷Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; ⁵⁸and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.



"The Martyrdom of Stephen"



Gospel Preview in the Text

The Gospel writers are aware that the Greek word "graphein" means both "to write" and "to draw." The evangelists recognize that words can be used to draw vivid (graphic) pictures that can tell a "story within a story." By recognizing a passage as iconic, we are alerted to a foreshowing as well as a foretelling of the gospel account of the suffering (cross) and glory (resurrection) of Jesus.

JESUS' DEATH & THE GOSPEL	STEPHEN'S DEATH & THE GOSPEL
1. Jesus does signs and wonders with power among the people (Acts 2:22).	1. Stephen does signs and wonders with power among the people (Acts 6:8).
2. Jesus is summoned to the Sanhedrin and charged with blasphemy. False witnesses called against him said that he despised the temple (Luke 22:66; cf. Mark 14:58).	2. Stephen is summoned to the Sanhedrin and charged with blasphemy. False witnesses called against him said that he despised the temple (Acts 6:13, 15).
3. Jesus charges the religious leaders of Jerusalem with guilt for the blood of the prophets (Luke 13:33-34).	3. Stephen charges the religious leaders of Jerusalem with guilt for the blood of the prophets (Acts 7:52).
4. Jesus testifies before his death that the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of God (Luke 22:69).	4. Stephen cries out before his death that he sees heaven opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:56).
5. Jesus is taken outside the gate to be executed as unclean (Luke 23:32-33; cf. Heb 13:12, Luke 4:29).	5. Stephen is taken outside the gate to be executed as unclean (Acts 7:58; cf. Numb 15:35).
6. Jesus prays from the cross asking the Father to forgive those putting him to death (Luke 23:34), and then he commits his spirit to his Father (Luke 23:46).	6. Stephen prays two prayers of the cross. He commits his spirit to the Lord Jesus and he asks the Lord not to charge the sin of his murder against those doing it (Acts 7:59-60).
7. Jesus is lovingly buried by the faithful after his death (Luke 23:50-53), followed by the spread of the gospel (Luke 24:46-47; Acts 1:8).	7. Stephen is lovingly buried by the faithful after his death (Acts 8:2), followed by the spread of the gospel (Acts 8:1, 4-5).



Prophetic Narrative of the Gospel in the Text

Jesus admonished his disciples, saying that, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever will lose his life for my sake will save it" (Luke 9:23-24). The Lord spoke not just about the suffering that discipleship implied, but also about its glory. He said further, "Truly, truly I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, for I am going to the Father" (John 14:12). The Acts of the Apostles demonstrates how these dominical words of Jesus became a reality as the lives of the saints and martyrs conformed to a cruciform pattern that served the furtherance of the gospel. Stephen's martyrdom beautifully illustrates this pattern as Stephen's dying prayer for mercy for those unjustly condemning him leads directly to the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. His witness to the Sanhedrin is thus magnified through Paul, who is a witness to the entire Roman world.

1. Signs and wonders done in the power of the Spirit attest to the divine approval of the witness of both Jesus (John 3:2) and Stephen (Acts 6:8-10).

There is a noteworthy theme of "angels" in the account of the martyrdom of Stephen. Indeed, Luke remarked that in his apology before the Sanhedrin, everyone noticed that Stephen's face was "like the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15). This aspect of Stephen's testimony heightens his significance in view of his summation, namely, that Israel had received the law as mediated by angels, yet had not kept it (Acts 7:53). Thus the "angelic" Stephen was rejected by Israel just as they had likewise refused to keep the angelically mediated law of Moses (Acts 6:53, cf. Gal 3:19). "Angel" thus becomes the "bookends" of Luke's rehearsal of Stephen's testimony. Likewise, "angel" occurs strategically in the center of Stephen's lengthy apology, as he describes the Lord himself appearing to Moses in the thorn bush (an emblem of suffering that could not be consumed) through an angelic appearance (Acts 7:30, 38). But Israel constantly refused and rejected Moses, though he had seen the angelic glory on the mount (Acts 7:35). Luke suggests that Israel, in rejecting the word of Stephen, rejected the message of Moses once again.

2. Stephen's gospel witness was so aligned with that of Jesus that it prompted the same response of opposition from the religious leaders in Jerusalem (Acts 6:9, 12). Just as the chief priests had rejected and opposed Jesus, now they rejected and opposed his followers like Stephen. But the more they persecuted them to death, the more the same witness was resurrected through different voices to counter them. The theme is highly comedic and speaks to the ultimate triumph of the church as the Sanhedrin is overwhelmed by "little Christs."
3. One of the major themes of Jesus' preaching was the continual opposition of Israel to the witness of the prophets, culminating in the deaths of John and Jesus himself.
4. Speaking of his messianic claim to the throne of David, Jesus prophesied before the chief priests that the Son of Man would be elevated to the right hand of God (Psalm 110:1; Acts 2:33-36). Peter emphasizes that Jesus is now seated upon David's heavenly throne. But Stephen sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God. The difference is that Peter is emphasizing the finished work of



Christ, as he sits upon the heavenly throne (cf. Heb 10: 11-14). In contrast, Stephen sees Jesus enthroned in heaven—standing. The image of Jesus standing, with the heavens opened up before Stephen, recalls the vision promised to Nathanael (John 1:51), which itself is based on Jacob's vision at Bethel (Gen 28:13), where the Lord promises to bring Jacob safely home (Gen 32:15). The image involved here is that Jesus will do for Stephen exactly what he promised to Jacob, namely receive him into heaven while accomplishing his promise to spread the gospel to the four corners of the earth (Gen 28:14).

5. The mob that lynched Stephen rushed him outside the gate in order to prevent bloodguilt according to the law (Acts 7:57). Ironically, Luke sees the mob differently. He deploys a verb for "rushed" that he only uses one other time in his two treatises to Theophilus. He uses the same verb in the narrative of the healing of the man called Legion to describe the herd of demonized swine that rushes off a cliff to their deaths (Luke 8:33)!
6. The two prayers of the dying Stephen consciously follow after the noble sentiments of the Savior expressed in his words from the cross. Stephen's prayer clearly convicted Saul of Tarsus, who had consented to the saint's death (Acts 8:1).
7. Just as the disciples showed great respect to the martyred remains of John the Baptist (Mark 6:29) and Jesus (Luke 23:50-53), so they demonstrated the same respect to Stephen's body (Acts 8:2). Luke shows his own respect to Stephen's nobility in his death by his tender expression that the faithful martyr "fell asleep" (Acts 7:60).

Gospel Takeaways from the Text

1. Jesus tells the disciples that they will be his witnesses (Acts 1:8). He had already forewarned us that we have a cross that is appointed for each of us—all of us who would follow him (Luke 9:23). The Greek word "witness" (Gk *martyr*) came to signify the death by which we may glorify God (cf. John 21:19). Paul, the faithful martyr himself said, "whether we live or die, we are the Lord's" (Rom 14:8).
2. Jesus himself rises up to receive his faithful witness in the hour of his death! And Stephen is given a vision of heaven that surely sweetened the hour of his trial. The Lord loves us no less, and will welcome us with rejoicing into the Gates of Splendor in the hour of our death.
3. God took the beloved Stephen from the comfort of the Jerusalem church. But he was preparing to give them the Apostle Paul, who would teach them of the God of all comfort (2 Cor 1:3-7)!





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Dr. Warren A. Gage
President of the Alexandrian Forum



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