

ZION: ALL SAINTS DAY, November 1, 2020

We normally think of saints as people who have led holy and exemplary lives. Mother Teresa. St. Augustine. Francis of Assisi. Martin Luther. The apostles Peter and Paul. Yet, the Apostle Paul addressed many of his letters to the "saints." He wrote "to the saints at Ephesus." He wrote ... "to the saints at Philippi." Who were these "saints"? They were people like you and me.

Saints by virtue of their faith in Christ brought about by the Holy Spirit. We are not saints because we are without sin. Only one human being was without sin and that was Jesus. Martin Luther said that we are "**simul justus et peccator.**" We are at the same time saints and sinners.

We are pronounced "holy" by God because Jesus has taken away our sins by nailing them to His cross. That's what makes us saints. Saints are nothing more- nor nothing less- than forgiven sinners. Saints are ordinary people. People who have given their hearts to Jesus. The greatest saint is not the one who prays the most or fasts the most or gives the most. It is the one who is most thankful to God. Who has a heart always ready to praise Him. Saints are people through whom the light and life of Christ shines. Oswald Chambers wrote, "**Character in a saint means the disposition of Jesus Christ persistently manifested.**"

The celebration of All Saints Day is an opportunity for us to reflect upon the "grace in which we stand." It is a time for us to remember the saints in our lives who have given witness to the resurrection of Jesus in a fallen world. It is a time to remember those who have gone before us.

Hebrews 12:1-4 reads, "**Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.**"

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses."

Who makes up this "cloud of witnesses"? Hebrews chapter 11 tells us. It describes the cloud of witnesses as those who walked by faith to the glory of God.

It reminds us of the faith and faithfulness of heroes like Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Moses. The writer of Hebrews reminds us of the heroes of the past... named and un-named... to prepare us to be the heroes of faith in our day and age.

Hebrews was written to a group of Christians who were about to face great hostility and persecution. Verse 4 reads, "**In your struggle against sin, you have not resisted to the point of shedding your blood.**" Resisted to the point of shedding YOUR blood!

Many Christians at the time that Hebrews was written would testify to their faith in Jesus Christ by shedding their blood. By giving up their lives. Many more over the centuries and many around the world today are witnessing to their faith in the same way. By the shedding of their blood and the sacrifice of their lives. The cloud of witnesses that Hebrews speaks about is huge and its growing every day.

When the writer of Hebrews speaks of "so great a cloud of witnesses" think of a heavenly stadium. Filled with millions of people who have stood where you stand! Who have gone through what you are going through! Who are cheering for your victory!

"Let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely." Sin weighs us down. The wandering of the children of Israel in the desert is an example of how sin can weigh us down. It can cost us the race. It can keep us from reaching our goal. It was their sin, their unbelief, their lack of trust, their lack of faith in God's promises that caused them to wander and die in the wilderness.

"... and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." The Greek word that the writer of Hebrew uses for "perseverance" should sound familiar to us. It's **"agon."** It's where we get our English word "agony" from.

When you are running it takes perseverance to push through the agony. It takes endurance to keep going when your lungs are on fire. When your legs feel like spaghetti. When every cell in your body is screaming for you to quit.

"... looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

We know that we can persevere. We know that we can endure. We know that we can finish the race because Jesus has run the race before us. And when we look at the cloud of witnesses cheering us on, we know that we can persevere. We know that we can endure. We know that we can finish the race set before us because the ones cheering us on did. They persevered. They endured. They finished the race set before them. Perseverance reveals genuine faith.

With Christ living in us we can remain courageous and hopeful to the end. We are not saved by being steadfast and firm in our faith, but our courage and hope do reveal that our faith is real. Without this enduring faithfulness, we could easily be blown away by the winds of temptation, false teaching, or persecution.

"... to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before Him."

Did you hear it? ... **"for the sake of the 'joy' that was set before Him."** Yes... it takes perseverance. Yes it takes endurance to push through the 'agony.' But the joy that awaited Jesus on the other side of His agony is what motivated Him to press on. Motivated Him to not give up. And it's Jesus' promise of that same joy that motivated and inspired the saints of old to finish their race. It is the same reward that should motivate and inspire us to keep pressing on today.

" ...looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of God."

Consider all that Jesus endured for you in coming to this sinful world. The hatred shown by the religious elite. The cursing and mockery from Jew and Gentile. The abandonment by his disciples. The beating and floggings before the authorities. His humiliation in being stripped naked and sentenced to death upon a cross. His being forced to carry his own cross to Calvary upon his open wounded back. Then being nailed to it by his hands and his feet and raised up into the ground. Then driven down into the socket of the ground. Then to be forsaken by God as he bore our sins in his body as darkness filled the entire world. Yet our Lord endured it all for us!

Jesus has now taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of God. He finished the race and received His joy sitting at the right hand of His Father wearing the crown of victory. His joy and His victory can be ours like it has for countless others ... as we persevere as He persevered. As we endure shame and trial and suffering as He did. If we are willing to shed our blood as He did.

His victory is our victory as we endure and persevere and finish the race set before us. Then when we cross the finish line, we can join the cloud of witnesses. The multitude of saints who surround Jesus on His rightful throne.

"In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood."

"In your struggle..." The people he was writing to were beginning to experience struggle. Criticism and ostracism from Jews and Greeks alike. But these were nothing compared to what was coming in their near future. The writer of Hebrews was pointing to the storm clouds gathering on the horizon. They were about to be expelled- excommunicated- from the Jewish community.

The Christians would then be alone and exposed to severe persecution, arrest, the confiscation of their property, torture, the shedding of their blood, and death. If they couldn't handle their situation now, when all they were having to endure were glares, whispered slanders, and some public humiliation, how were they going to persevere, how were they going to endure if and when the time came for them to shed their blood or give up their lives?

What about us? Are we prepared to face the storm clouds that seem to be building on our horizon? It is becoming more and more difficult to be a Christian these days. Our freedom to practice our faith is fading.

Those who try to live the Christian life in any more than a superficial way face increasing ridicule. This should come as no surprise to us. The Scripture tells us that it will be that way for all who run this race. It will be that way for all who try to live righteous, Godly lives. It will be that way for all who live to witness to their faith in Christ.

Jesus was persecuted. Many of those who have gone before us have been persecuted. Why would think that the race laid out for us will be any different? There are many Christians in the world today who are enduring. Who are persevering in the face of true hardship! Literally to the point of being tortured. Locked away in prison. Shedding their blood, or losing their lives. We may never have to endure such agony, such hardship, but we are to faithfully run the race set before us. We are to be prepared to endure the road that leads to the cross if that's the course that God has chosen for us to follow.

**"I do not ask to walk smooth paths
nor bear an easy load.**

**I pray for strength and fortitude
to climb the rock-strewn road.**

**Give me such courage and I can scale the hardest peaks alone,
And transform every stumbling block into a stepping stone."**

This is a time of great uncertainty, turmoil, and unrest in our nation. Covid-19 seems to be running rampant. We find ourselves in the middle of a social and political upheaval never before known to us. There are some of you here this morning who are going through some mighty struggles. The tempter, Satan, may be whispering in your ear right now: "Hey! Give it up! Quit! You'll never make it. Wouldn't it be nice to give up this whole faith in God thing and just find a rock or a bench to sit on and rest?"

Don't listen. Listen to the cheering. Listen to the shouts of encouragement coming from those who have finished the race. Look to Jesus. He is saying, "You can do it," He's shouting. "Just keep putting one foot in front of the other. Keep pushing forward. Keep persevering. Keep enduring. Stay the course. Let your faith sustain you.

I promise you; it will be worth it." Satan wants us to die in the wilderness of our unbelief. Jesus came to show us the way. All of heaven is encouraging us to go the whole distance. To finish the race. To reach our goal. To hear Jesus say: "Well done, you good and faithful servant. You have run the good race. You have endured. You have persevered. Now the race is finished and you can find rest for your soul.

**And when the fight is fierce, the warfare long,
steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
and hearts are brave again, and arms are strong.
Alleluia! Alleluia!**

**The golden evening brightens in the west;
soon, soon to faithful warrior cometh rest;
sweet is the calm of paradise the blest.
Alleluia! Alleluia!**

**But lo! there breaks a yet more glorious day;
the saints triumphant rise in bright array;
the King of glory passes on his way.
Alleluia! Alleluia!**

**From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast,
through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,
singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
Alleluia! Alleluia!**