

We Are Not Alone

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

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Matthew 22:23-40 NIV

That same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. “Teacher,” they said, “Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and have children for him. Now there were seven brothers among us. The first one married and died, and since he had no children, he left his wife to his brother. The same thing happened to the second and third brother, right on down to the seventh. Finally, the woman died. Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?”

Jesus replied, “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. But about the resurrection of the dead — have you not read what God said to you, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.”

When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching.

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

Jesus replied: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Hebrews 11:8-10 20-26 32-40; 12:1-2 RSV

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his burial.

By faith Moses, when he was born, was hid for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king’s edict. By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered abuse suffered for the Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he looked to the reward.

And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets — who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and scourging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated — of whom the world was not worthy — wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

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 perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

In the traditional Christian calendar, November 1 is known as All Saints’ Day. In most Protestant churches, this day has fallen out of use. And — I’m sorry to say — some Bible-believing churches are more likely to celebrate the day *before* All Saints. That day, of course, is All Hallows, or All Saints’ Eve — otherwise known as Hallowe’en. And although most Christians are put off by the spooky and dark side

of Hallowe'en, some churches do have costume parties and games for the children. Perhaps they wear Bible character costumes instead of scary or gross ones, and perhaps the celebration is harmless fun.

It's too bad, though, that All Saints' Day itself gets lost in the shuffle. It's true that the observance of special saints' days got carried to a ridiculous extreme by the church of the Middle Ages. This was one of the abuses against which Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, Thomas Cranmer and the other Reformers protested. But All Saints' Day isn't a remembrance of any one real or supposed saint. It's a remembrance of a doctrine that's well founded in Scripture, the doctrine of *the communion of saints*. Whenever we say the Apostles' Creed we remind ourselves of this doctrine: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Church universal, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting."

So All Saints' Day can be a celebration of the lives of all the faithful who have loved and served the Lord, and in many cases laid down their lives for the truth of God. The Letter to the Hebrews calls these departed faithful "a great cloud of witnesses." It says we're surrounded by that cloud of witnesses, and praises them as examples of faithfulness to God — examples we may follow as we look to Jesus himself, the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2).

Whenever we have to take a stand for truth and right, we can feel so lonely! At such times we might even feel like Elijah in the wilderness, who cried out, "The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too" (1 Kings 19:10). God had to remind him that he wasn't alone; there were still 7,000 in Israel who hadn't bowed the knee to Ba'al. No, we're not alone when we witness to the righteous rule of the Lord God over all things — even over a world as troubled and warped as ours. And it's not just the living who stand with us, but that heavenly host of faithful ones who have gone before. God's plan for this earth doesn't depend on what's happening right now. His plan is long-term, and involves the witness of the saints through all ages. We are not alone.

Perhaps that's why Martin Luther took his stand for Gospel truth on October 31, 1517. He knew, as did other Reformers who sought renewal in the church, that his efforts would be rewarded with bitter opposition, harassment, persecution or even death. Perhaps he felt like the three friends, Shadrach, Meshech and Abednego, about to be cast into the fiery furnace because of their testimony. It was fitting, then, that Luther nailed his 95 Propositions for Debate to the door of the church in Wittenberg, in Germany, on the Eve of All Saints. "Here I stand," Luther declared later at the Diet of Worms. What he did on that Eve of All Saints was a declaration, even then, that he did not stand alone.

We tend to think of ourselves as "the terminal generation." We think of all history as culminating in our time and place, as though what has gone before really doesn't matter, and the world is going to end with us. We forget about God's long-range plan that involves not only us, but those who've come before and those to follow. We forget that God says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega . . . who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Revelation 1:8). God has a plan for history: "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Habakkuk 2:14). That plan didn't begin with us, and it won't end with us. It's a plan that involves the communion of saints through all time.

We began our service with a great hymn, "For All the Saints," that celebrates this blessed communion of witnesses to the glory of God. We continued with an ancient Christian hymn, the *Te Deum Laudamus*, as a responsive reading. Let me go back to that for a moment.

*To You all angels, all the powers of heaven,
Cherubim and seraphim, sing in endless praise:
Holy, holy, holy Lord,
God of power and might,
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.
The glorious company of the apostles praise you.
The noble fellowship of the prophets praise you.*

*The white-robed army of martyrs praise you.
Throughout the world the holy church acclaim you:
Father, of majesty unbounded,
Your glorious, true and only Son,
And the Holy Spirit, Advocate and Guide.*

You see, when we gather for worship *we are not alone*. To worship is to enter the presence of the Lord, and where he is present so is the host of all who've served him through time, and who now rejoice before him. When we praise God, we're in good company, for so does *the glorious company of the apostles*. When we praise God, so does *the noble fellowship of the prophets*. When we praise God, so does *the white-robed army of martyrs*. Our worship isn't supposed to proceed on the earthly plane alone. It's intended to be an intersection of heaven and earth — just as that cross above our Communion table stands for the place where Jesus Christ, the Son of God, stretched out his hands between heaven and earth to open the kingdom of heaven to all who come to the Lord in faith. In worship, and especially at the Lord's Table, we enter into that realm where we're "seated with Christ in the heavenly places" (see Ephesians 2:6), joining our voices with the host of heaven who cry, "Holy, Holy, Holy Lord!"

God's purposes are ongoing through time, and the doctrine of the communion of saints bears witness to this. It's a striking fact that in the Bible the Lord is sometimes called "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." Doesn't it seem strange that the awesome, infinite God should be known as the God of certain people — in fact, a succession of people, the Hebrew patriarchs? It's the Bible's way of saying that *who God is*, and what his purposes are, are revealed to us through time, as history unfolds and men and women respond to him in faith. God doesn't reveal himself into a vacuum, but into the lives of that "great cloud of witnesses" who have served him through the ages. And God identifies himself with these people. In short, *God is known by the company he keeps*. The saints are those who've kept company with God.

In our Gospel reading from Matthew, the Sadducees come to Jesus with a question. Now, the Sadducees were the priestly class of ancient Judaism, while the Pharisees were laymen. The Sadducees were more "cosmopolitan," if you will, than the Pharisees, who tried to keep away from non-Jewish contacts. They controlled the priesthood and the temple, but they cooperated with the Romans who were the occupying power. What's more, unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection — and so they were sad, you see.

The Sadducees told Jesus this phony story about a woman who was married to seven brothers in succession, each of whom died. Now this would have been in accord with Jewish law, because if a man died childless his brother was supposed to marry the widow and provide children for his dead brother. But the Sadducees wanted to force Jesus into some claim that would make the idea of resurrection look ridiculous. "In the resurrection," they asked, "whose wife would this woman be — since each of the seven brothers was married to her?"

Have you ever noticed how often Jesus doesn't answer the questions people ask him, but turns the question around and answers a more basic question? He does it again here. He doesn't answer their silly question about the woman and the seven brothers. Instead, he gives an answer that takes us back to the idea of the communion of saints:

You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. But about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? He is not the God of the dead but of the living (Matthew 22:29-32).

Our God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. He's known by the company he keeps, and that company is "the glorious company of the apostles, the noble fellowship of the prophets, the white-robed army of martyrs" — all those who, together with all the hosts of heaven, cry "Holy, holy, holy" before the throne of God.

We may not think of ourselves as saints, but that's what the New Testament calls every believer. Think of how Paul begins his letters: "To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints" (Romans 1:7)

. . . “To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours” (1 Corinthians 1:2) . . . “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 1:1) . . . “To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ at Colossae” (Colossians 1:2). I’m sorry, brothers and sisters, but you can’t escape it — as members of the body of Christ we’re St. Fred, St. Marge, St. Elva, St. Jacob, St. Bill, even St. Richard! No, we may not be apostles like Peter and Paul, or prophets like Isaiah or Amos, or martyrs like Stephen or Justin. But we belong to the same company, the same communion of saints, the same “cloud of witnesses” — and so do all those beloved of our congregation who have died in the Lord, and whom we remember today in this observance we call Totenfest.

The name *Totenfest* is German for “Festival of the Dead.” Our observance of Totenfest was established by Pastor John Riggs when he began to serve this church in 1972. This year we’ve moved the remembrance to the first Sunday in November, the Sunday after All Saints’ Day. I believe this is fitting, for as we think of those from our church family who’ve passed into the glorious presence of the Lord during the past year we’re reminded that we’re united with them in the communion of saints. Together with them, we serve Him who is, and who was, and who is to be. Our God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. And in seeking and serving him, and in witnessing to his eternal purposes, *we are not alone.*

O blest communion, fellowship divine!

We feebly struggle, they in glory shine.

Yet all are one in thee, for all are thine — Alleluia, Alleluia!!

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