



## “The Big Question: What is Heaven?”

### All Saints Sunday

Saturday & Sunday,

October 31 and November 1, 2020

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Revelation 7:9-17; Matthew 5:1-12

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

Blessed All Saints Day to you! All Saints Day is when we celebrate the whole of the baptized people of God, living and dead, who **are** the body of Christ. Every year on the first Sunday in November, we lift up in prayer all those who have joined the Church Eternal since the previous All Saints, which we'll do that in a few minutes during the Prayers of the Church.

This All Saints, however, is unlike any other, at least as far as I can remember. In the past twelve months, 228,000 Americans have died due to the pandemic, and that number continues to rise. That is nearly the **entire** population of Cumberland County. As you leave today, driving home, try to imagine every house, every apartment building, every grocery store, bank restaurant empty, vacant. All because the people whose lives were centered around those places are now dead.

This is an All Saints Celebration unlike any other for me, personally, because as of August 31, both of my parents have now passed away. This was the first September in my life that I could not wish “Happy Birthday” to my mother. It will be the first Thanksgiving in four years that we won't be spending together.

I know I am not alone in things like this. Many of you are facing similar situations, not necessarily about your parents, but your partner, spouse, children, friends, or loved ones. As believers, as followers of Christ, we live in the *hope*, we hold onto the *promise*, that we *shall* all be joined together again. We believe in the words that we *shall* be gathered with the whole multitude of believers around the throne, rejoicing and praising God.

But if I were to be completely honest with you, I'm not really all that interested in all that. Especially when compared to how many lives have been cut short because of a virus; when so many suffered pandemic related pain, that they had to be placed into a coma, only to never wake up, even to say goodbye. I'm not interested in heaven, when all I want to do is pick up the phone and call my mom or hold her hand. We're not interested in figuring out what heaven is about when we simply want to reach over the side of the bed in the middle of the night just to feel the warmth of our loved ones' arm, the listen to the rise and fall of their chest as they breathe.

Yes, WHEN we **all** get there, things will be great! When we're **all** gathered together again, joined by the saints from throughout the ages, along with our loved ones, that's going to be fantabulous! But right Here, right Now, in the midst of this global pandemic, stuck in this quarantine without those loved ones active and alive with us every day, our life really kind of sucks. And talking about the "What Will be" doesn't always cut it. Still, we live in the promise of heaven.

Have you ever noticed, if you've ever looked for it in scripture, we never, really, accurately, get a decent description of heaven? We don't know what heaven looks like, or even what WE will look like. Yes, we have bits and pieces. Jesus said to the criminal on the cross that "today you will be with me in paradise." In his parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the poor, lowly-in-life beggar Lazarus was, in death, pictured seated next to the patriarch Abraham. We assume he had plenty to eat and drink, based on the conversation of the rich man and Abraham, but we don't know that for certain. (Luke 16:19-31)

We have the last two chapters of John's Revelation that describes the "new heaven and new earth" and goes on to give details about the "new Jerusalem," but those aren't descriptions of heaven; they're talking about just that: "New" places God creates, not heaven; they are a description of the Church as a whole. (Revelation 21:1-2)

In our reading from Revelation today, we get folks all gathered around the throne, but we're not explicitly told that is heaven. (Revelation 7:9-12)

Probably the place we get the most details straight from Jesus, is in John's gospel when Jesus is talking to the disciples and says "in my father's house are many dwelling places, and I go to prepare a place for you." (John 14:2-3) But, I mean, Really? A mansion? An Omni level hotel? That's what heaven's going to be like? Room service? I think I have to say, if it *is* what heaven is like, I think maybe then we've got the premise wrong.

Let me ask this: Why do you believe? Why are you here, worshiping, or listening or watching this? There must be at least some spark, some essence, something that is driving you seek meaning to your life, meaning in this world around us. Maybe, like many of those before us, and many even today, you feel that your current circumstances are so lousy, so awful, so desperate, that you're looking toward a "better tomorrow."

I think, if you're living *for* heaven, If your life goals and actions are based on "will I be good enough to get into heaven?" well, first, you've totally misunderstood the entire concept of "Grace," but *more* importantly, what good are you? And by that, I mean, let's look at the essence of Christianity. What is at the core of Christianity? What is faith all about?

Have you heard the street preachers, tele-evangelists, shouting their "good news":

*God Loves you, you're going to hell. You better believe in Christ, you better follow Jesus, Or Else! Hell is in your future.*

That's **not** what I would say Christianity is all about. When Jesus was asked, which was the most important of the commandments, what did Jesus answer? Jesus gave a two-prong response:

love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength AND . . .

love your neighbor as yourself. (Matthew 22:36-40)

Love of God and love of others - That's what Christianity is about.

How does Jesus define faith in our reading from Matthew today? This is how we hear it from the translation called **The Message**:

[3] *"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.*

[5] *"You're blessed when you're content with just who you are—no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.*

[6] *"You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.*

[8] *"You're blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.*

[9] *"You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.*

Who *are* blessed? Those who are seeking heaven? **Or**, are the ones who are blessed those who are living out their faith every day, in this life, helping others, even those they don't *like*, in the midst of all the stuff that's happening here, right now?

Heaven **is** going to be great, whatever it will be. Heaven is *beyond* our human comprehension. Heaven goes farther than this life, and is the beginning point of whatever comes after. What it is, exactly, or how it looks are not things to bother ourselves in this life.

What matters, what is most import, is how we live today, how we treat those around us, especially those who are different, or with whom we disagree, or those whom we simply do not like.

So maybe the Big question is not "What is Heaven?" Perhaps the Big Question is "What are you doing in your life?" As I heard preacher Chuck Swindoll once ask:

*Are you so heavenly minded that you're no earthly good?*

To that, I hope your answer is No.

Amen