



Saints Alive!

Week Four – Joining the Cloud

*Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses,
let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.
And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us...*
Hebrews 12.1 (NIV)

Open – Called to Be Weird

Part One – Back to the Bible

In our first three sessions of “Saints Alive!”, we have focused attention on our most common use of the word “saint”: to describe Christian heroes who live exemplary lives and form our “great cloud of witnesses”. (Hebrews 11) In this final episode, we turn to the jarring, frightening, and heartening truth that the Bible’s definition of saints includes you and me.

Definitions

It’s time to look closely at “saints” in scripture. Of the sixty-eight appearances of that English word, sixty-seven appear in the New Testament. The sole Old Testament outlier comes at a twenty-two-verse cry to God for help. But after directing his intense prayer to God, the psalmist turns to the “audience” who have been listening in and charges us:

“Love the Lord, all you his saints.
The Lord preserves the faithful,
but abundantly repays the one who acts haughtily.” (Ps 31.23)

We imagine the psalm being read or sung out in the synagogue or Temple, with all who attend listening on to the pray-er’s woes and hope for help. Then suddenly the voice has turned toward them: “Love the Lord!” The address to “all you his saints” seems to include everyone – the whole gathered lot. The saints, in other words, are us.

This one OT reference sets the tone for the way the New Testament talks of saints. In almost every one of the 67 uses of the Greek “*hagioi*”, saints are simply people whom God has set apart through baptism. This bit from the “HELPS” online word study gets right to the point:

The fundamental (core) meaning of *hágios* [in general Greek usage] is “different” – thus a temple in the 1st century was *hágios* (“holy”) because *different* from other

buildings (Wm. Barclay). In the NT, *hágios* ("holy") has the "technical" meaning "different from the world" because "like the Lord."

(*hágios*) implies something "set apart" and therefore "different (*distinguished/distinct*)" – i.e. "other," because *special* to the Lord.]

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A similar definition comes from my graduate school classmate, Dr. Felix Just, S.J., who writes the "Ecclesiology" (i.e., "theology as applied to the nature and structure of the Christian church") article for www.catholic-resource.org:

Saints – Gk ἅγιοι (*hagioi* = "holy ones; those set apart"). In the NT, all Christians are called "saints" (Acts 9:13, 32). Paul commonly addresses the Christian community as "saints" (Rom 1:7; 12:13; Phil 4:22; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1), especially the community in Jerusalem (Acts 15:25; 1 Cor 16:1). The Book of Revelation uses the term for Christian martyrs (17:6), while later Christian tradition restricts the term to denote outstanding Christians publicly recognized for their exemplary lives.

In Felix's definition, we see the evolution from saints as all Christians (Paul and Acts) to saints as martyrs (Revelation) to saints as the crème de la crème of Christian heroes (Christian history). Let's take a look at the passages:

Called to Be Saints: Hagioi in the Letters of Paul

The apostle Paul uses our word *hagioi* often. Take a few minutes to read your way through this list of occurrences below, so you get a general sense of what the word means for him.

*To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be **saints**: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 1.7)*

*the Spirit intercedes for the **saints** according to the will of God. (Romans 8.27)*

*Contribute to the needs of the **saints**; extend hospitality to strangers. (Romans 12.13)*

*At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the **saints**; for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the **saints** at Jerusalem. (Romans 15.25-26)*

*that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my ministry to Jerusalem may be acceptable to the **saints**, (Romans 15.31)*

*so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the **saints**, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well. (Romans 16.2)*

*Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the **saints** who are with them. (Romans 16.15)*

*To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are 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)*

*When any of you has a grievance against another, do you dare to take it to court before the unrighteous, instead of taking it before the **saints**? Do you not know that the **saints** will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? (1 Corinthians 6.1-2)*

*(As in all the churches of the **saints**, women should be silent in the church.) (1 Corinthians 14.33)*

*Now concerning the collection for the **saints**: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia. (1 Corinthians 16.1)*

*members of the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the **saints**; (1 Corinthians 16.15)*

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God that is in Corinth, including all the **saints** throughout Achaia: (2 Corinthians 1.1)*

*begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the **saints**— (2 Corinthians 8.4)*

*Now it is not necessary for me to write you about the ministry to the **saints**, (2 Corinthians 9.1)*

*for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the **saints** but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. (2 Corinthians 9.12)*

*Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the **saints** greet you. (2 Corinthians 13.12)*

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the **saints** who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus: (Ephesians 1.1)*

*I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the **saints**... (Ephesians 1.15)*

*so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the **saints**, (Ephesians 1.18)*

*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the **saints** and also members of the household of God, (Ephesians 2.19)*

*Although I am the very least of all the **saints**, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, (Ephesians 3.8)*

*I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the **saints**, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, (Ephesians 3.18)*

*to equip the **saints** for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, (Ephesians 4.12)*

*But fornication and impurity of any kind, or greed, must not even be mentioned among you, as is proper among **saints**. (Ephesians 5.3)*

*keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the **saints**. (Ephesians 6.18)*

*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the **saints** in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: (Philippians 1.1)*

*Greet every **saint** in Christ Jesus. The friends who are with me greet you. (Philippians 4.21)*

*All the **saints** greet you, especially those of the emperor's household. (Philippians 4.22)*

*To the **saints** and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. (Colossians 1.2)*

*for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the **saints**, (Colossians 1.4)*

*giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the **saints** in the light. (Colossians 1.12)*

*the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his **saints**. (Colossians 1.26)*

*And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his **saints**. (1 Thessalonians 3.13)*

when he comes to be glorified by his saints and to be marveled at on that day among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. (2 Thessalonians 1.10)

she must be well attested for her good works, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints' feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way. (1 Timothy 5.10)

because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus... I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother. (Philemon 1.5 and 7)

As we read this long list, patterns emerge that help us understand Paul's meaning.

1. Paul often greets or tells others to greet "the saints".
2. He differentiates "saints" from other groups – like "unbelievers" (Rom 15.31) or the "unrighteous" (1 Cor 6.1-2) and the immoral (Eph 5.3)
3. He refers often to his "ministry to/of the saints", by which he means a collection he has taken in the churches of Macedonia and Greece.
4. The word "saints" helps Paul remind the local churches that they aren't going it alone – that there are many other "saints" in many other cities. He especially uses this in Corinth, where they seem to have a, shall we say, independent spirit, in order to tell them there's a proper way of doing things.
5. Being a "saint" is a calling. Both in Romans and in 1 Corinthians he differentiates his own calling (to be an apostle) from theirs (to be saints).
6. Most importantly, some of the people Paul calls saints don't even nearly approximate the image that you and I conjure next to "saint in our memory." (See below under "Imperfect".
7. Paul never uses the term "Christian" or the term "disciple". He seems to use "*hagioi*" the way we would use those two terms – to identify a person whom Christ sanctifies/sets apart through baptism and who therefore call upon the name of the Lord. (1.2)
8. Paul can't even imagine a *Hagios* – a singular, separate, not-engaged-in-the-church saint.

Part Two – The Gap

I call them the the "I's" of sainthood. Our Christian heroes are **Inspiring**. We are drawn to **imitate** them. And, just as truly, our saints are **imperfect** like us. Most of the books that introduce us to saints feature their best moments, which can be as intimidating as following someone's Facebook page and seeing only the highlights – never the bad day. You and I know all too well the gap between who we are and who we would like to be in Christ. Our saintly heroes and sheroes have the gap, too. It's the thing we all have in common. Blessedly, the Bible gives us reason to hope that God will work with us to close that frustrating gap, and will ultimately eliminate it one fine day in glory.

The Good the Bad and the Ugly

Paul's greeting to the Corinthians sounds pretty normal:

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes;

*To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are 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.*

It is only when we read the rest of the letter that his willingness to call them saints becomes a bit shocking. This is the church that most frustrates the Apostle, because of the laundry list of things listed below.

- They are divided over who is their favorite pastor. (1.11-15)
- They have begun to criticize the low style of Paul's preaching, compared to that of the golden-tongued orator, Apollos (1.18-25 and 2.4-5 with Acts 19);
- They've not yet grown up in Christ, so are still "people of the flesh, infants in Christ", who need to be fed milk instead of solid food. (3.1-4).
- They're arrogant. (3.18-21; 4.8; 5.2, 6)
- There is a form of incest in the church. (5.1)
- They're suing one another in Roman courts, rather than settling things as Christian brothers and sisters (6.1-8)
- Some are frequenting prostitutes (6.15-20)
- Amid all this sexual immorality and confusion, some have proposed that they're strong enough to abstain from sex inside marriage. (7.1-2)
- Some have chosen to eat meat that has been sacrificed to Greco-Roman gods, at the peril of their "weaker" brothers and sisters. (8.1ff.)
- When they meet together, the rich gather early and gobble the food and wine so there's little to none left for the day workers (11.21-22)
- They're enthralled by ecstatic utterances, but they can't recognize truth when it's offered (chs 12 and 14)

This is not exactly the pedigree of what you and I call saints. But there is Paul throwing that *hagioi* word right out there, without qualification. They don't seem worthy of the name.

Paul's use of *hagioi* to identify less-than-saintly characters tells us that the title doesn't come with performance standards or clauses in the contract. God makes saints, by adopting them as God's children. Otherwise the motley crew in Corinth would never merit the name.

What does that mean for you and me?

How does the unconditional identity of saint impact your own relationship with God?

The Already and the Not Yet

Christians have always believed that an afterlife will feature the resolution of all things in Christ. In the beautiful language of Revelation 21, a time is coming when all will be new.

*See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.” (Rev 21.3-4)*

In that renewal of heaven and earth, our authors also picture a transformation of people. 1 John 3 takes a shot at picturing how that might go:

Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.³ And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Seeing the Son transforms us into his likeness.

So, what does that mean for our current lives – which often look a lot different than Jesus’, to understate?

Theologians often talk about “the already” and the “not yet”. When Jesus prays, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” he acknowledges the gap between what is, here and now, and what will be when God has full sway. The same kind of gap exists in the lives of the saints. So we live now as set-apart people, who are being transformed (Romans 12.1-2). That progress is frustratingly slow, but, in the words of Hebrews 12.1-2, we “fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.”

Where do you see signs of the “already” in your life, where the work and presence of God’s Spirit are evident?

What parts of you are “not yet” whole and holy?

How do you experience the gap?

Becoming Someone's Christian Hero

What would ever give us the confidence that we could reflect Jesus' light? Let's take a look at Hebrews 12 for a little bolstering. In that passage, the author features a "Faith Hall of Fame" in which he puts the great heroes and sheroes of faith on display for us. Let's survey that Hall and see what we find.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.² Indeed, by faith^[a] our ancestors received approval.³ By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.^[b]

*By faith **Abel** offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith^[c] he still speaks.⁵ By faith **Enoch** was taken so that he did not experience death; and "he was not found, because God had taken him." For it was attested before he was taken away that "he had pleased God."⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.⁷ By faith **Noah**, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith.*

*⁸ By faith **Abraham** obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.⁹ By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.¹⁰ For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.¹¹ By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised.^[d]¹² Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore."*

¹³ All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth,¹⁴ for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return.¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

*¹⁷ By faith **Abraham**, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son,¹⁸ of whom he had been told, "It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you."¹⁹ He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive*

him back. ²⁰ By faith Isaac invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau. ²¹ By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, “bowing in worship over the top of his staff.” ²² By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave instructions about his burial.

²³ By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth, because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king’s edict. ²⁴ By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh’s daughter, ²⁵ choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶ He considered abuse suffered for the Christ ²⁷ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward. ²⁷ By faith he left Egypt, unafraid of the king’s anger; for he persevered as though ²⁸ he saw him who is invisible. ²⁸ By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.

²⁹ By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. ³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹ By faith **Rahab** the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, ³² because she had received the spies in peace. ³² And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of **Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets**— ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵ **Women** received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, ³⁸ they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— ³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

³⁹ Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

Two things strikes me about the featured heroes on this list. The first is their fallibility. And the second is the brevity of their appearances on this stage.

These saints are imperfect. Noah got drunk and shamed his family. Abraham lied and called Sarah his sister, rather than his wife, so that an Egyptian bigwig would not kill him to take her away. Moses got angry and sometimes sulked. David committed adultery and murder. And the list goes on. Their heroism and their mighty deeds shine out across Israel’s history; their low moments do, too. The Old Testament, even more than the New, lets us in on the imperfection of its heroes.

The saints whose dirty laundry we don’t see only stay clean because we don’t know enough about them. Abel and Enoch make the grade, but we have no idea how they lived. We get their shining moment only. (More Facebook Syndrome!)

Close – The Time Is Now

All of this means that you and I can apply for the job. When we overestimate the holiness of saints, we set ourselves up for a fall – everyone’s human. We also see ourselves as vastly inferior, and therefore no candidate to be someone’s faith hero or shero. Enough of that! Paul says we’re called to be saints. Somewhere in God’s future lies a time when we will become like Jesus. But for now, as St. Teresa of Avila reminds us, we Christians are about the only Jesus people see.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours.
No hands but yours;
No feet but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which Christ looks out compassion on the world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

So jump in. Begin to believe that God has great things to do through you in the world. Paul’s words to Timothy fly across the ages directly to us.

“Let no one look down on your youthfulness (we might add age, gender, profession, and a whole lot of other things we might think disqualify us from repping for Jesus). But rather in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe.” (1 Timothy 4.12)

It’s time for all of us who are called to be saints to open ourselves to the transforming power of God and become saints – to trust God to mold us and bolster us and show himself to the world through us.

The Rest of the Bible

The Book of Acts

In Acts, the trends in Paul's usage continue.

- Ananias remembers that Paul has menaced “your saints in Jerusalem”, by which he means everyone (at least 5,000 people) in that first gathering of Jesus' followers. (Acts 9.13)
- The very same usage repeats itself when Paul later recounts his menacing in Acts 26.10: “I...locked up many of the saints in prison, and I cast my vote against them when they were being condemned to death.”
- As Peter does his rounds among all the “believers”, he also checks in on the “saints” living in Lydda. (Acts 9.32) The author makes the two synonyms, so that they almost have an “=” sign equating them.
- Strangely, in one occurrence of “*hagioi*”, “saints” are differentiated from “widows”, which surely does not mean that the widows are not Christians. This may reflect a special status for widows in the community.

The Book of Revelation

Persecution challenges saints to keep the faith, instead of renouncing God or going quiet. That tilts the references to “saints” in the Book of Revelation toward martyrdom and courage under fire. Since a lot of the book's action is staged in the heavenly throne room of God, or above history in some way, it's often hard to tell whether the “prayers of the saints” (a common phrase in the book) refers to those who have gone on to that heavenly realm, or the prayers of living, breathing occupants of earth. In any case, courage and endurance are the virtues that most feature in the lives (or afterlives) of these saints.

Revelation 5:8

When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

Revelation 5:9

They sing a new song: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation;

Revelation 8:3

Another angel with a golden censer came and stood at the altar; he was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne.

Revelation 8:4

And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.

Revelation 11:18

*The nations raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for judging the dead, for rewarding your servants, the prophets and **saints** and all who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying those who destroy the earth.”*

Revelation 13:7

*Also it was allowed to make war on the **saints** and to conquer them. It was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation,*

Revelation 13:10

*If you are to be taken captive, into captivity you go; if you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the **saints**.*

Revelation 14:12

*Here is a call for the endurance of the **saints**, those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus.*

Revelation 16:6

*because they shed the blood of **saints** and prophets, you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!”*

Revelation 17:6

*And I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the **saints** and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus. When I saw her, I was greatly amazed.*

Revelation 18:20

*Rejoice over her, O heaven, you **saints** and apostles and prophets! For God has given judgment for you against her.*

Revelation 18:24

*And in you was found the blood of prophets and of **saints**, and of all who have been slaughtered on earth.”*

Revelation 19:8

*to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure”—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the **saints**.*

Revelation 20:9

*They marched up over the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the **saints** and the beloved city. And fire came down from heaven and consumed them.*

Revelation 22:21

*The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the **saints**. Amen.*

The Rest of the NT Books

Matthew uses the word in a strange setting, to describe the “saints” whose graves have opened with a sort of apocalyptic force at the moment of Jesus’ death, and whose lives are restored from death – two days before Jesus’ resurrection. (Matthew 27.52) The two references to saints in the Letter to the Hebrews look a lot like Paul’s (6.10), including the differentiation between leaders and saints. (13.24) The one reference in Jude pictures the faith that “once for all entrusted to the saints.” (1.3)

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