

'A Place with the Saints'

A Place with the Saints*Those who are 'made right' by Jesus will live with God forever.*.....**Revelation 21: 1 – 7**.....

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ²I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' ⁵He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.' ⁶He said to me, 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. ⁷He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son.'"

I don't know about you, but when this earth '***passes away***', I am really counting on living in the New Jerusalem. I often read this passage at funerals because I think it gives hope that the promises of God are real. Don't we all want to live in a world without suffering or death? God promises that if we belong to Him, we will.

John's vision in today's reading continues in the next verses of Revelation through the end of Chapter 21 and into Chapter 22. He described a brilliance that was breathtaking, saying '***It shone with the glory of God; like a precious jewel***'.

The splendor of the New Jerusalem that John was allowed to see was simply 'wow'. As Paul said in 1st Corinthians, '***No ear has heard, no eye has seen, no mind has conceived what God has planned for those who love Him.***' (1 Corinthians 2:9)

Since that fateful day long ago in the Garden of Eden, when Satan succeeded in tempting the first humans, God has been leading all of humanity to *The Day* when He will make all things new again. God has been at work through history; through Abraham, through Moses, through Mary and her son Jesus, through the apostles and through *us*, to bring us once again into His perfect Kingdom. God has promised us that if we hold on by faith and persevere by His truth, we *will* be a part of it.

John was privileged to get a glimpse behind the door of Heaven. And we are blessed that he has shared it with us. I imagine that some of you are a little skeptical of Revelation. Perhaps you think that it is too '***way out there***' to be of any serious help. Maybe you have tried to read it but found the details about the 'beasts' and the tribulations just too much to take in. Today I hope you use what John saw to build up your faith and find certainty of hope in difficult times.

John was allowed to see what will happen when God calls all who belong to Him into His presence. He saw all who had received Jesus' forgiveness of sin being gathered before the

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throne of God, singing praises and worshipping The Father and Son. He described a thrilling scene that gives me 'goosebumps':

"I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands...¹⁵Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst...¹⁷For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." (Revelation 7: 9 – 17)

Jesus promised his disciples before he ascended into Heaven that he was 'going to prepare a place' for them, where they could be together forever. (John 14:6) And Jesus is doing just that, waiting for that day –and God only knows when it will be- when he will return and take all who are his to be with him in God's forever Kingdom.

When all the saints assemble before God's throne, I for sure want to be 'in that number'! I imagine you do too. Perhaps you are asking, as I hope you will, 'How can I be sure that I will be included?'

That was the same question that plagued a monk named Martin Luther. He was 'holy' by all reasonable standards. He lived a life above reproach, and yet, he was haunted by the thought that some sin would keep him out of Heaven. In the monastery, he drove his superiors crazy, because he spent most of his waking hours in confession. He was paranoid about not being good enough for God.

As a professor of theology, he began to study the Bible from the original languages, Hebrew and Greek, comparing them to the Church's Latin Bible, the Vulgate. There, especially in the Greek version of the letters of Paul, he found hope.

The Apostle Paul described a '**righteousness apart from the Law,**' which was not based on what a person did, but in what God had already done for us through His Son, Jesus.

'Righteousness' means being 'right' in God's eyes. It means meeting a standard of holiness that is set by God and judged by God, according to God's own character. To be 'righteous,' is to be perfect as God is perfect, always showing His attitudes and thoughts.¹

Talk about pressure! Knowing that God expects us to be as holy as Him, makes us realize how helpless we are to try to be 'righteous' through our own power! And that's what Martin Luther's struggle was all about.

In his study of Romans, Luther read, ***"For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith 'The righteous will live by faith.'"*** (Romans 1: 17) And in 2nd Corinthians (5:21), Luther learned, ***"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."***

For the first time, Luther realized that the verses did not say, as he had always thought, that in order to **be** righteous in God's eyes, a person needed to **first make himself** righteous by

¹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/righteousness.html>
Burgettstown Presbyterian Church

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'right' behavior. The Good News that Luther began to realize was that **BY** faith in Jesus, a person was **MADE** righteous and holy before God. Martin Luther was finally able to grasp the fullness of what Jesus had accomplished for him on the cross.

So, out of concern that other people would also know the truth about how they, too, could be made 'holy' in God's eyes, Martin Luther posted his famous 'Ninety-five Theses' on the church door in Germany. His actions ignited a fire of revival for the Church, which we Protestants call 'The Reformation'.

A man had come into town selling 'indulgences,' claiming that people could 'buy' forgiveness of sin for themselves or a loved one. His name was John Tetzel, and his sales pitch inspired a little song: 'Every time a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from Purgatory springs.'²

The Church had not authorized Tetzel to sell indulgences in this way; but his actions prompted Martin Luther's posting of his Theses on the Church door and his call for reformation of the Church.³ Luther's statements ignited kindred hearts as his 'Theses' spread like wildfire throughout Europe. As you can imagine, Luther was in a heap of trouble with the Church. His writings were banned and burned.

The issue at the heart of the controversy was how one became 'right' with God. Convinced by Scripture that he was made 'righteous' solely by faith in Christ's sacrifice on the cross, which was given *solely* by the grace of God, with no human effort added, Luther refused to back down.

In 1521, he was called to appear before the Emperor of the Roman Empire, Charles the Fifth, in a huge assembly of Churchmen, and was asked to recant. Luther replied, '**Unless I can be instructed and convinced with evidence from the Holy Scriptures or with open, clear, and distinct grounds of reasoning ... then I cannot and will not recant, because it is neither safe nor wise to act against conscience.**' Then he added, '**Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen.**'⁴

Since that day, the rallying cry of the Reformers of the Church became, 'Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, and Sola Fides.' 'Scripture Alone,' 'Grace Alone,' and 'Faith Alone.' You can see these 'Solos' written around the edge of Luther's Seal.

² <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/luther-gallery-of-friends-and-enemies/>

³ http://www.ligonier.org/learn/series/making_of_the_protestant_reformation/making-of-the-protestant-reformation-part-2/

⁴ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/theologians/martin-luther.html>



Later, these were expanded to include 'Five Solas,' adding, 'Solo Christo,' 'Through Christ Alone,' and 'Soli Deo Gloria,' 'All for the Glory of God Alone.'⁵

After Luther's *Theses* were published, pockets of 'Reformers' sprang up across Europe. These included Ulrich Zwingli in Switzerland, John Calvin in France, and John Knox from Scotland.

Seeking refuge from persecution in France, John Calvin went to Switzerland through the city of Geneva and was persuaded to stay and help establish the Reformed Church there. He set up a form of church government that had twelve (12) lay members, or 'elders,' together with pastors, deciding church matters.

When John Knox had to flee Scotland because of his Reformed beliefs, he went to Geneva and experienced how the Reformed Church functioned there. Later, Knox took his experiences back to Scotland and when the political time was right, he established the Church of Scotland.

This congregation, Burgettstown Presbyterian Church, was founded on the principles of the Reformed Church, with elders and with ministers governing together. This system of 'Presbyters,' was later called 'Presbyterianism,' and brought to the New Colonies in America.⁶

Before there was a 'Lutheran' Church or a 'Presbyterian' Church, Martin Luther used to sign his papers with this beautiful symbol. He published many flyers and little books to explain

⁵ <https://www.gotquestions.org/five-solas.html>

⁶ *The Story of Christianity, Vol. 2*, Justo L. Gonzales, (HarperSanFrancisco, 1985), 80, 149-159.

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the truth about the gospel that had set his heart free.⁷ It became his '*seal*' because it stood for his gratitude for God's gift of *righteousness*.⁸

This symbol summarizes the message of the gospel for all of us. The black cross in the middle of the heart stands for the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for us. Because of his sacrifice, our hearts are forgiven of sin and made '*right*' before God.

The heart and cross are in the middle of what he called a '*joyful*' white rose. The rose symbolizes '*faith (which) gives joy, comfort, and peace*.'⁹ The '*sky-blue field*,' represents the promise of '*future heavenly joy*.' The golden circle signifies, in Luther's own words, that '*bliss in heaven is endless, and more precious than all joys and goods*.'¹⁰

You and I are now living in the 'in between' times. We have seen God in the testimony of the past, and we have seen how God is at work in our present and we can be confident of God's provisions for our future.

While we wait for that Day when Jesus will return from Heaven where he is preparing a place for us, we can experience Kingdom living right here and now. We wait, sometimes in joy, and sometimes in sadness, but we have been given a great gift to always live in hope through faith.

While we wait in this world for our bodies to be remade in the New Jerusalem, we are being re-created on the inside. Our counselor, the Holy Spirit, is at work within our hearts to transform us into Kingdom people who show God's grace to the world.

Because we're human, we fall short, we stumble, we go one step forward and three steps back at times. But always, God promises to be there. He says to us: '***I am with you always, to the end of the age.***' (Matthew 28:20)

Until that Day comes, we must remain faithful to the One who has made us worthy to enter, with all the saints, into the eternal blessedness of God. Amen.

⁷ <https://lutheranreformation.org/history/the-luther-seal-summary-of-the-gospel/>

⁸ http://www.lutheran-resources.org/Luther_rose.htm

⁹ Luther's Works - American Edition - Volume 49, pp. 356-359

¹⁰ Ibid.