

## WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A SAINT

### Philippians 4:20-23

What does it mean to be a saint? Many Christians would struggle to give a formal definition of the term “saint.” More importantly, many would struggle to answer the simple question: “Are you a saint?” Many would say, “I am not a saint. I’m a Christian. Jesus is my Savior and Lord. But I wouldn’t call myself a saint.”

We think saints are highly virtuous Christians – like the Apostles of Jesus or the New Testament writers or historic Christian figures. We have Roman Catholicism to thank for this confusion. Roman Catholicism has a detailed process for conferring sainthood. First of all, you have to die before you become a saint in the Catholic Church. But sainthood makes the dead Christian a functioning member of the mystical body of Christ. When someone becomes a saint, the Catholic Church appoints a feast day, dedicates churches and altars and displays statues and pictures in his honor. They even venerate his relics and pray to him publicly. Sainthood requires you go through the processes of beatification and canonization. But if the pope includes you in the canon of saints, the judgments reached in this process are infallible. It is a novel way to honor virtuous and sacrificial Christian living. But there are no biblical grounds for this.

There is more truth about sainthood in these closing verses of Philippians than in the entire Roman Catholic doctrine of sainthood. Paul does not define sainthood here but he assumes it, mentioning it twice in these final remarks to the church at Philippi. But these remarks tell us what it means to be a saint. Verse 21 says, “Greet every saint **in Christ Jesus.**” You don’t have to be a paradigm of virtue to be a saint. You don’t have to be a historic Christian figure. And you don’t have to have supernatural or miraculous events associated with your life. You are a saint if you are in Christ Jesus. In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

Consider the church at Corinth. They were divided over church leadership. One member was in an adulterous relationship with his stepmother. Members were taking one another to court over financial disputes. Some were getting drunk during the Lord’s Supper. Prominent teachers were denying the resurrection from the dead. The church at Corinth was the most sinful and worldly church in the New Testament. Yet in 1 Corinthians 1:2, Paul greeted them by saying: “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, **called to be saints** together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Every sinner that is saved by the blood and righteousness of Christ is a saint. Saints are not good people. Saints are bad people who have been redeemed by a good God. That is what separates Christianity from other religions. Christians are not just people who follow the teachings of Jesus. We are in him. No one would say they are in Mohammed or Buddha or Confucius. But we are in Christ. And because we are in him, we are saints. Therefore, to be asked if you are a saint is to be asked, are you saved? And to understand what it means to be a saint is to understand what it means to be saved. Consider what Philippians 4:20-23 teaches about what it means to be a saint.

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## I. THE GOAL OF THE SAINTS

Philippians 4:20 is a doxology: “To our God and Father be glory forever and ever.” I suppose Paul paused before writing this verse, contemplating all he had written in this letter, culminating with the promise of verse 19: “And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” When Paul thought God’s faithfulness to meet every need of the saints, he burst forth into praise to the glory of God. This is the goal of the saints: THE GLORY OF GOD. Saints are not to be worshipped. They are worshipers. Saints are people who live to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

What is the glory of God? The Bible speaks of the glory of God in two ways. There is God’s INTRINSIC GLORY. The glory of God refers to the sum total of his divine attributes. It is all that God intrinsically is. It includes all the characteristics that are innately his and all the perfections that are inherently his. “Glory is essential to the Godhead, as light is to the sun,” said THOMAS WATSON. “Glory is the sparkling of the deity.” Likewise, there is God’s ASCRIBED GLORY. Intrinsic glory refers to the character of God. Ascribed glory is our response to his self-revelation. We cannot add to God’s intrinsic glory. But we can give him the glory he deserves through our worship, trust, and obedience. This is the goal of the saints.

Psalms 115:1 says, “Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness!” 1 Corinthians 10:31 says, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” Ephesians 3:21 says, “To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” 1 Timothy 1:17 says, “To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.” And Revelation 4:11 says, “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.”

**Louis XIV became King of France at age fourteen and ruled for seventy-two years. It was the longest reign in modern European history. Consumed with power, he called himself the “Great Monarch.” And declared, “I am the state!” But in 1715, Louis XIV abdicated his throne in death. The great cathedral was packed with mourners for his funeral. To dramatize his greatness, a single candle burned above his solid gold coffin. Thousands waited in hushed silence as they peered at the exquisite casket that held the mortal remains of their monarch. Bishop Massillon presided over this official act of state. When the service began, Massillon stunned the nation by bending down from the pulpit and snuffing out the candle that represented the king’s greatness. Then came four words from behind the open Bible: “Only God is great!”**

To be a saint is to live in light of the fact that only God is great. A.W. TOZER rightly said: “God is looking for men in whose hands his glory is safe.” God is searching for people who will lay down their glory before his throne and give him the glory he alone deserves. He is looking for those who are absorbed in his

surpassing glory and are jealous for his name, not theirs. Could that be why so little true ministry takes place in many churches? CHARLES SWINDOLL said, “We are often so caught up in our activities that we tend to worship our work, work at our play, and play at our worship.” Think about it. A rowboat in the sand is hard to move. But when the tide comes in, it’s easy. The church is like that. When genuine worship is absent from the church, it struggles to do its work. But transforming grace flows when the church is swept up in the glory of God.

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## II. THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE SAINTS

As you read Philippians, it is tempting to overlook these closing verses. But that would be a mistake. These verses affirm 2 Timothy 3:16: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, and correction, and for training in righteousness.” Verses 21-22a record simple words of greetings. In verse 21a, Paul sends personal greetings to the saints at Philippi. In verse 21b, the coworkers on Paul’s ministry team send their greetings. In verse 22a, all the saints in the church at Rome send their greetings. And in verse 22b, the saints in Caesar’s household send their greetings. But these simple greetings are a powerful statement about the fellowship of the saints.

Look at the text again. Verse 21a says, “Greet every saint.” Note that Paul uses the personal term “every,” rather than the collective term “all” to highlight the unity and equality of the church. Whether Jew or Gentile, male or female, bond or free, they were all saints in Christ Jesus. So Paul addressed each one of them personally. Then verse 21b says, “The brothers who are with me greet you.” We know from Philippians 1:1 and 2:19-30 that the “brothers” included Timothy and Epaphroditus. This group probably included many of the people Paul mentioned by name in Romans 16:3-16. These were men and women of great stature within the church. But Paul does not give them any special titles. He does not even call their names. He just lumps them together as “the brothers.” Then verse 22a says, “All the saints greet you,” a reference to the general membership of the church at Rome. They had never met the saints in Philippi. But when they found out Paul was writing the Philippians, they said, “Send our regards, as well.”

These words are more than personal greetings. These verses remind us that the gospel does not make sense without the church that makes it make sense. It is not accidental or incidental the New Testament does not teach us how to follow Christ on your own. Saving faith in Christ is lived out in the communion of the saints.

**The California Redwood Trees are some of the largest living organisms in the world. The redwoods are three hundred feet high. Some of them are forty feet around. Some of them have been there for 250 years. Because of the size and strength of the Redwoods, you would think they have deep roots. But they have rather shallow roots. But their roots are intertwined. So when the wind blows and the storm rages, Redwood Trees stand tall because they hold each other up.**

In John 13:34-35, Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” How will the world know we are true disciples of Jesus Christ? By our love for one another. Saints in Christ Jesus live in fellowship with the saints in Christ Jesus. In fact, the Greek word for “saints” is used 229 times in the New Testament – more than any other term used to refer to Christians. Yet the New Testament only uses the singular form of the term here in verse 21. But when Paul says, “Greet every saint,” he was not doing so with our “I-have-Jesus-and-I-don’t-need-nobody-else” attitude. He used it to express that every person in the church matters to God and should matter to us.

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### **III. THE JOY OF THE SAINTS**

In verse 22a, Paul sends greetings to the church at Philippi from the church at Rome. But he ends the verse by sending greetings from a particular group within the church at Rome: those in Caesar’s household. This reference to the saints in Caesar’s house highlights the joy of the saints. It is a twofold joy.

#### **A. THE JOY OF BECOMING**

Who were the saints in Caesar’s house? Were they soldiers assigned to Paul that had been saved through his ministry? Were they slaves or freedmen who worked in the palace? Were they officials in the Roman government? Or might this expression include members of the emperor’s family? We do not know. But the point is not who these saints were but where they were: CAESAR’S HOUSEHOLD! That is the last place one would have expected to find Christians. Do you know who Caesar was? **NERO**. Nero the unprincipled. Nero the jealous fiend who murdered his mother, wife, and son to protect his throne. Nero, the archenemy of the church and persecutor of Christians. After Nero died, a legend sprang up that he had fled beyond the Euphrates and would return as the Anti-Christ. Centuries later, people name the sons Paul but name their dogs Nero. Yet Paul tells the Philippians that the gospel had penetrated the walls of Nero’s palace. That’s the joy of the saints.

Saints in Christ have been called into fellowship with one another. But we cannot forget about those who are not a part of the communion of the saints. We are commissioned to make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In Luke 15, God is pictured as a shepherd who goes temporarily insane when one of his sheep is lost. God is pictured as a housewife who has a panic-attack when she loses her wedding ring. And God is pictured as a lovesick father who spends his days watching and waiting for his runaway son to come back home. Jesus paints these unorthodox pictures of God to make a graphic point: Lost people matter to God! You may be concerned about a lost relative or friend. Don’t give up on them. Never underestimate God’s power to change a person’s life.

- **God is able to break any habit.**
- **God is able to demolish any stronghold.**
- **God is able to overthrow any enemy.**
- **God is able to penetrate any barrier.**
- **God is able to repair any breach.**

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said, “On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” That includes Caesar’s household!

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## **B. THE JOY OF OVERCOMING**

Throughout this letter, Paul addresses the threats to the Philippians’ devotion to Christ. Some of those threats were internal, some were external. Yet Paul exhorts the church to live in a manner worthy of the gospel no matter what. As he closes, Paul says, “The members in the church at Rome want me to let you know they are thinking about you and praying for you, especially those members who are a part of Caesar’s household.” I do not know if Paul intended the strategic nature of that reference. But God did. God is saying to us that we can overcome anything that stands against our faith in Christ. Here’s why: There were saints in Caesar’s household. Let me ask you something.

- **Do you need a favorable atmosphere in order to be loyal to Christ?**
- **Are you a moral chameleon, taking your color from the last environment you crawled across?**
- **Are you changing your surroundings or are your surroundings changing you?**
- **Do you create a moral fashion statement or do you merely adopt whatever happens to be in vogue at the moment?**

Saints should live for Christ no matter what. When things get rough, remember the saints in Caesar’s house. **ISAAC WATTS** asked:

**MUST I BE CARRIED TO THE SKIES  
ON FLOWERY BEDS OF EASE  
WHILE OTHERS FOUGHT TO WIN THE PRIZE  
AND SAILED ON BLOODY SEAS**

You cannot get to heaven on flowery beds of ease. God has only one child that lived without sin. Jesus. But God has no children who have lived without suffering, including Jesus. You cannot live for Jesus without facing trouble. But you can live for Jesus even when you are facing trouble. You don’t need to be in ideal circumstances to live out your faith. You can bloom right where you are planted. You can be a saint in Caesar’s house.

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## **IV. THE RESOURCE OF THE SAINTS**

Paul's letter to the church at Philippi ends in verse 23 with a benediction: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit." In this final statement, Paul entrusts the saints to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. That was his pattern. The Apostle Paul wrote thirteen of the twenty-seven books in the New Testament. In the closing remarks of each letter, Paul gives a benediction that affirms the presence and power of God's grace. Paul closes his letters with a benediction for the same reason we end our services with a benediction: When the message is finished, the faith must be lived. James 1:22 says, "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." What you learn on Sunday is useless if you do not live it out on Monday. Truth is not just to be learned. It is to be lived. So Paul closes this letter by commending the saints to the grace of the Lord, Jesus Christ.

This is the resource of the saints. We live for God by the grace of Christ. We are saved by grace. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." But grace does not stop at salvation. Grace both saves and sanctifies. Grace both pardons sin and produces holiness. Grace both covers our past and covers our future. The same grace that will one day get you into heaven will also keep you day-by-day until you get there. This is what Paul means when he says, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit."

You need the grace of the Lord Jesus to be with you every step of the way. In 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 Paul says, "In order to keep me from becoming lifted up in pride, I was given a thorn in the flesh. It was like one of Satan's henchmen beating up on me. I went to God in prayer about it three times. I asked the Lord to take the pain away. Deliver me. Heal me. Restore me. Perform a miracle. Take the pain away." But the Lord said, "I will not take the thorn away. But my grace is sufficient for you. My power works best in weak people." The Lord Jesus says the same thing to you today: "My grace is sufficient for you."

**Louisa visited Long Island Sound in New York, with her husband and four-year-old daughter. While enjoying a day at the beach, Louisa's life took a tragic turn when they heard cries for help coming from the water. When they spotted a little boy drowning in the sea, her husband rushed to rescue him. The struggling and terrified child pulled his rescuer under the water with him. And both drowned as Louisa and her daughter watched helplessly. Louisa could not understand why God would take her husband, a committed Christian not yet in his prime, and leave her without a husband and her daughter without a father. Yet she chose to trust him anyway. God helped her to get pass the pain. He allowed her to continue her missionary work. He even blessed her to marry again. Looking back on how God had blessed her life in spite of the tragedy, hardship and pain, she wrote:**

**"TIS SO SWEET TO TRUST IN JESUS  
JUST TO TAKE HIM AT HIS WORD  
JUST TO REST UPON HIS PROMISE  
JUST TO KNOW, "THUS SAITH THE LORD!"**

**I'M SO GLAD I LEARNED TO TRUST THEE  
PRECIOUS JESUS, SAVIOR, FRIEND**

**AND I KNOW THAT THOU ARE WITH ME  
WILL BE WITH ME TO THE END**

**JESUS, JESUS, HOW I TRUST HIM!  
HOW I'VE PROVED HIM O'ER AND O'ER!  
JESUS, JESUS, PRECIOUS JESUS!  
O FOR GRACE TO TRUST HIM MORE!**