

The Saints Await

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

Lord, open our hearts and minds
by the power of your Holy Spirit,
that as the Scriptures are read
and your Word is proclaimed,
we may hear with joy
what you say to us today. Amen.

Background

If the Psalms are our hymnbook and prayerbook from the Old Testament, Revelation is our hymnbook and prayerbook from the New Testament.

In our Scripture reading from Revelation on this All Saints' Sunday, John the Revelator poetically peels back this present age for us to see our ultimate destiny.

The first part of the chapter showed us the **earthly church**, also known as the **Church Militant**, sealed by God's protection. Now in the second half, we see **the heavenly church**, known as the **Church Triumphant**.

This encompasses every single believer from past, present, and even future. In other words, you and I are there, too. Time collapses. Present and future intermingle. In this vision, John's not just a fly on the wall, he's in the thick of heaven. And we're given a glimpse of the glory in store for us—the hope of heaven to help us carry on in even our darkest and loneliest of hours here below.

God will come off his throne and personally wipe the tears of sorrow from our eyes. In other words, heaven is a reality and a comfort for us **now**. "Earth has no sorrow heaven can't heal."

This is the real and final truth about history and our very lives. Life wins. Death loses. The victory has already been achieved by God and the Lamb.

There's a lot of symbolism and mystery in this passage:

- ♦ **The vast multitude** is the complete people of God through the ages.
- ♦ **The Lamb** is the crucified and risen Lord.
- ♦ **The white robes** symbolize that we're clothed in Christ's righteousness—when God sees us, he sees Jesus.
- ♦ **The palm branches** speak of the joy of victory we have over death.
- ♦ **The elders** symbolize the 12 Tribes of Israel and the 12 Apostles.
- ♦ **The four living creatures** symbolize all of God's creation—humans made in God's image, the eagle that rules the air, the ox which is supreme over domesticated animals, and the lion which is supreme in the wild.

Let's hear now God's word to us from:

Revelation 7: 9-17 (NRSVue)

⁹ After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!" ¹¹ And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,

¹² singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" ¹⁴ I said to him, "Sir, you are the one who knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great

ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵ For this reason they are before the throne of God and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. ¹⁶ They will hunger no more and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat, ¹⁷ for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

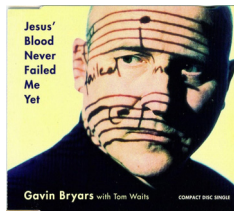
The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.

All: Thanks be to God.

SERMON – “The Saints Await”

[The song “[Jesus’ Blood Never Failed Me Yet](#)” plays in the background. Pastor waits as the song plays for a little bit... and fades out.]

This song, “*Jesus Blood Never Failed Me Yet*” is considered by many to be one of the most moving pieces of music composed in the 20th century. It’s been called the “**Anthem of the Homeless.**” And really, it’s about the homecoming that awaits every believer—on earth as it is in heaven, because of the **blood of Jesus** that washes us clean.

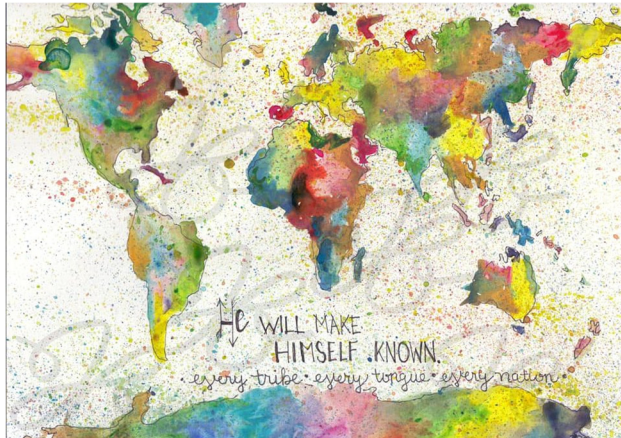


In the early 1970s Gavin Bryars, the composer of this piece, was working on a documentary about people living in a rough region of London. During the filming, some of the indigents would break into drunken songs. But there was one individual in particular that stood out. He sang, but it wasn’t a drunken revelry like the others. Instead, he gently sang the spiritual—“*Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet.*”

The recording of the gentleman didn’t make it into the film, but Gavin Bryars was given the outtakes. When he played it at home, he found the singing was in tune with his piano, and so he improvised an accompaniment to go along with the song. He then looped the song, where he added a gradually evolving orchestration. Later Tom Waits would add his voice for a duet.

While crafting this piece, Bryars stepped out of the recording room, which led into a large painting studio. He left the door open and the recording playing, while he went to have a cup of the nectar of the gods, coffee. When he came back, he found the normally lively room unusually subdued. People were moving about more slowly. In fact, several were sitting alone, weeping.

At first Bryers was puzzled as to what was going on, until he remembered the loop that continued to play. The people were overcome by the old man's singing, his nobility and simple faith. Gavin Bryers tried to find the man who sang like an angel, but it turns out he died before he could hear the composition. And yet, according to our passage, the man's song had only begun on earth. His voice continued singing, "Jesus Blood Never Failed Me Yet" as he joined the countless saintly choir who awaited his voice and presence. And our voices will join his voice and their voices too someday.



I have good news for us this morning, Immanuel, heaven is bursting at the seams. It's just as God promised Abraham in Genesis—a vast throng more numerous than the sands of the sea and the stars of the sky. Heaven is an innumerable and international multitude—the people of God from all times and places. Every tribe, tongue, and nation.

Think about this: We've got to learn to get along NOW with our fellow earthlings of all colors, stripes, and plaids, because heaven is

going to be filled with the same people. Revelation seems to say that we're going to keep in heaven many of our earthly social identities of race, culture, and language. But we'll also have this in common—we'll be redeemed. Washed white as snow in the blood of the Lamb, and freshly clothed in the pure and unstained righteousness of Christ, the Lamb of God. In Christ, God has given us a new start, a new character. The protective seal of God is over us. We're sheltered by God's very presence.

This is not just for the saints and the martyrs, but for ALL the people of God—standing before their Maker. And this is a party—festive and exuberant. Make no mistake, we certainly won't be bored in heaven.

Do you think about heaven much?

It seems like we think about heaven more in our times of need or weakness—when we're feeling knocked down by life. Or when we're missing loved ones. But you don't have to wait for heaven to enjoy the heaven-kind-of-life. Jesus has opened up the way for us to live a heavenly life here on earth. All Saint's Sunday reminds us we enjoy a little slice of heaven now, whenever we worship the living God—with reverence, gratitude, and joy. It's in this place that heaven and earth kiss. So let's join with heaven in the sevenfold praise of God, crying out:

**"Blessing and glory
Wisdom and thanksgiving
Honor and power and might
be to our God—forever and ever!
Amen."**

The hope of heaven helps our lips and hearts overflow with God's praise—in the good times and the bad. God is on the throne—reigning in power. Death is defeated! Life and love will have the last word. God's enduring good power and undying wise love will prevail.

Don't be scared by Revelation.

It helps us see the present with the eyes of eternity.



We've had a lot of memorial services lately. Today we remember loved ones gone from us. These services are sacred times. They are times to grieve—but they are also a celebration of life. The official name for memorial services in our tradition is a "Service of Witness to the Resurrection."

Through our tears, heaven helps us celebrate not only a life well-lived but gives us comfort that our loved ones' lives continue because of Christ's resurrection. This is what John the Revelator was talking about—that in Christ we can have the direction and the discipline to make it safely through The Great Ordeal.

What's *your* **Great Ordeal?** *Your* **Season of Anguish?**

- Maybe when you feel like our world is going crazy with terrorism and shootings and wars and rumors of wars and division and corruption and generally bad behavior?
- When you're suffering for your faith in Christ?
- When you're suffering with chronic pain that never gives you a moment of peace?
- When you're suffering from hunger or financial stress?
- When you're suffering under injustice or tragedy or the painful loss of a loved one in your life?

Take heart!

We have a cascade of promises awaiting us—God is faithful!! God brought his Son through death into life. He will do the same for us in the midst of our physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual aches and pains, bumps and bruises.



In Christ, we live the Psalm 23 life. The Lamb at the very heart of the throne shepherds his flock through our trials and tribulations. He's calling us by name, and we follow—all the way through the Jordan River to the Celestial City. The Lamb of God and Good Shepherd are alive and well, on the move, even now.

God is at work in us and through us. He's guiding us to life-giving waters. He's restoring our soul. The Good Shepherd is leading us along paths of righteousness. Goodness and mercy are following close behind us, too—dogging our every step. He's searching for the lost, caring for the wounded and downtrodden, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and giving a cup of water to the least of these. He's singing over us and giving us abundant life. He's sheltering us with his protective and powerful presence, even when we feel surrounded by evil. And there will be a time when all our tears will be wiped away forever.

Immanuel, this is our destiny, our hope. Christians—we're a resurrection people, a redeemed people. And so every time we gather in worship in this sanctuary and sing God's praises, like we're doing right now, we're warming up for what we'll be doing for eternity. When we baptize, we're reminded of the rivers of living water.

And in this very moment, even in the midst of the world's struggles, we're protected and sheltered by God's presence that will bring us safely home, where we'll join that great cloud of witnesses that will welcome us with a rousing cheer and open arms.

Amen.

"Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet," [link](#)

Sermon Art: Kelly Latimore Icons, All Saint's Day 2022 [link](#)

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