

# To Be a Saint

By Gregory T. Pouncey

Iconography at entrance of bell tower sanctuary at St. John's Monastery on Patmos.



The major religions of the world all recognize their special classes of holy men. The Hindus of India recognize a group called the *Sadhus*, who attain a level of holiness that liberates them from the world by causing them to renounce all their worldly concerns, live off the alms of others, and spend their lives roaming the country. They refrain from forming attachments to people or places.<sup>1</sup> Siddhartha Gautama was the original holy man of Buddhism. His enlightenment became a crucial part of the religion's foundation.<sup>2</sup>

Islam teaches that Mohammed was a holy man comparable to Moses or Jesus.<sup>3</sup> In early Christianity the idea of a special class of holy men seemed to originate with the martyrs who died for their faith. These persons were venerated as saints. Early Christians erected images to those they recognized as saints.<sup>4</sup> The perimeters for sainthood expanded, though, and Roman Catholicism came to list over 10,000 persons as saints. These individuals distinguished themselves from ordinary Christians by exemplary holiness.<sup>5</sup> But the pressing question for

Christians is this—Do the Scriptures support a separate and distinct class of Christians called saints who have progressed beyond the others in holiness? This article will explore the Jewish background and Christian terminology related to saints to help answer this question.

## LESSON REFERENCE

ETB: 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 2 Thessalonians 1:10



## Jewish Background

The Hebrew noun translated “holy ones” or “saints” (*qedoshim*) is closely related to the adjective *qadosh*, which occurs in the Old Testament primarily to describe God in His holiness. *Qadosh* identifies something or someone “which is intrinsically sacred or which has been admitted to the sphere of the sacred [because of some religious action]. It connotes that which is distinct from the common or profane.”<sup>6</sup> The word is used to describe God in His absolute purity, as being both sacred and wholly different from any other.

God declared, “Be holy (*qadosh*) because I, the LORD your God, am holy (*qadosh*)” (Lev. 19:2, HCSB). Likewise, Hosea the prophet called God the “Holy One” and used the same term to describe the “holy ones” who followed the Lord (Hos. 11:9,12). But how were God’s people to apply “holy” living?

In order to serve God, the Israelites had to abandon their idolatry (Josh. 24:19-23). They were to separate themselves from all that was not holy (Lev. 11:44-45; Deut. 14:21). God’s people were to be different from the world (Lev. 19:2; 20:7); they received a call to holiness from God that set them apart from the other nations. Because God was holy and He required holiness of His followers, the Old Testament identifies his followers as “holy ones” or “saints.”<sup>7</sup>

## New Testament Terms

The New Testament also uses the word “holy” in reference to the saints. It is the plural form of the adjective for holy (Greek, *hagios*). Though the Old Testament continually tied the term to religious practices, the New Testament emphasized holiness as a result of one’s relationship with God through Christ. Under the new covenant, “sainthood is not an attainment, it is a state into which God in grace calls [people].”<sup>8</sup> In



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other words, we do not aspire to be saints by keeping the laws and practices of our faith; rather, we become saints the moment we trust Christ as Lord and Savior.

The New Testament uses the word “saints” to describe all those who have trusted Christ. The use of “saints” in Acts refers to local assemblies of Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 9:13; 26:10) and Lydda (9:32). Instead of referring to a few devoted people who had achieved more than the others, the word refers to all the believers who continued to gather and devote themselves to the Lord in those cities.

In Romans, Paul wrote to the entire church and referred to them as those “called as saints” (Rom. 1:7, HCSB). He did not set up a separate class for those who were especially devoted; rather, he saw holiness as the calling of every believer. He also emphasized the Holy Spirit’s role in interceding for the saints (8:27), which would include all Christians.

In his letters to the Corinthians, Paul reiterated the fact that all Christians were called as saints (1 Cor. 1:2). He set up two

**Above: The supposed tomb of John the Baptist’s head in Damascus, Syria.**

**Right: A statue of Jerome outside the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Jerome, who lived A.D.**



**341–420, studied in Rome before deciding to live as a hermit in Israel. After a while, he returned to Rome, was ordained, entered the ministry, and eventually served as a secretary to the pope. Leaving Rome, he returned to Israel and lived in Bethlehem, where he devoted his life to translating the Bible. Considered the most learned biblical scholar of his day, the church venerated him as a Doctor of the Church.**

distinctions of people when he discussed lawsuits among believers. He asked whether they would rather take their dispute before the “unrighteous” or the “saints” (6:1). To live apart from Christ placed one in the category of the unrighteous, but to be made righteous by Christ made one a saint.

The Books of Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians echo the sentiment that all Christians are saints. Paul wanted everyone to know the “glorious riches of His inheritance among the saints” (Eph. 1:18, HCSB). In Philippians 1:1, Paul made distinctions between the church’s leaders and all the saints in Philippi. In Colossians he spoke of the mystery of the gospel of Christ given to all the saints (Col. 1:26).



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**Above: Martin Luther, leader of the Protestant reformation, emphasized the status of all believers as redeemed saints.**



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**Right: A Coptic bronze cross decorated with a figure of a saint. Apparently the cross was one part of a chain worn by a church official.**



people worshiping and offering prayers to the saints.<sup>10</sup> Afterward, people reported miracles associated with the saints' tombs and relics. Peasants sought relics at local fairs. Merchants carried what they believed to be small splinters from Christ's cross to protect them from robbers. Knights carried small relics such as a saint's hair, bone, or teeth in their armor, believing it brought a special blessing or favor from the Lord.<sup>11</sup>

With the Reformation in the sixteenth century, people began to recognize the priesthood of the believer rather than emphasizing the special attainment of a few.<sup>12</sup> The church was on its way to rediscovering the biblical meaning of "saints."

### The Use of "Saints" in 1 and 2 Thessalonians

The term "saints" occurs only two places in Paul's letters to the Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians 3:13, Paul wrote, "May He make your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints" (HCSB). Though Paul taught that one became a saint or holy one by the sanctifying work of God in Christ, he also highlighted the need for progress and development in personal holiness in one's own walk with Christ.<sup>13</sup> Paul stressed the need for the heart to be "blameless," or without public reproach, and for the heart to progress toward the holiness already granted through a relationship with Christ.

"Saints" also appears in 2 Thessalonians 1:9-10: "These will pay the penalty of everlasting destruction, away from the Lord's presence and from His glorious strength, in that day when He comes to be glorified by His saints and to be admired by all those who have believed, because our testimony among you was believed" (HCSB). Paul contrasted the saints

who believed in Christ with the lost who would face eternal destruction because they had rejected Christ. Paul clearly believed that becoming a saint was the result of believing in Jesus rather than personal merit.

### Implications

While most religions have some concept of sainthood, biblical Christianity differs greatly from the other faiths. Other religions see sainthood as an option or an achievement for one to attain. The Bible teaches, however, that when one becomes a Christian, he or she also becomes a saint. This means the believer is holy or set apart for God's service. While the saints still have a need to progress in practical holiness, they already have been made holy through the work of Christ on the cross and through their expression of faith in Him. The process of sanctification is becoming in practice what we really are in God's eyes—holy! **B**

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3. Niels C. Nielson et. al., *Religions of the World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 587.

4. *Ibid.*, 508.

5. "All About Saints," *Catholic Online* [online, accessed 23 April 2008]. Available on the Internet: [www.catholic.org/saints](http://www.catholic.org/saints).

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7. *Ibid.*

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11. *Ibid.*, 83, 296-97.

12. Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 2, *The Reformation to the Present Day* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1985), 33-34.

13. D. Michael Martin, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, vol. 33 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 113.

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