

Isaiah 65:17-25 *“See, I will create a new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. ¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. ¹⁹ I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more ²⁰ “Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; the one who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere child; the one who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. ²¹ They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. ²² No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands. ²³ They will not labor in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the Lord, they and their descendants with them. ²⁴ Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear. ²⁵ The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, and dust will be the serpent’s food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,” says the Lord.*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

Death doesn’t feel very triumphant. I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know. Standing next to a loved one who has just died or at the grave after the funeral is over doesn’t feel very triumphant. It feels defeating. Final. Hopeless. It doesn’t matter if the deceased has lived a long life and died peacefully in their sleep or is finally at rest after a long, drawn out illness that included a lot of suffering or is killed in a sudden, unexpected car accident, death doesn’t feel triumphant. No matter how they leave this earth, that love one is gone and his/her absence is constantly noticed. You’ve got your own stories of experiencing the loss of death. Whether close relatives, dearly loved friends or occasional acquaintances, we’ve all experienced in one way or another the deflating, final, overwhelming grief of death. And it doesn’t feel very triumphant.

Death would be overwhelming if it were not for the fact that Christ has completely transformed death. We’ve gathered today on this second to last Sunday of the church year to celebrate the Saints Triumphant. During this season of End Time as we direct our attention the end times of this world, God helps us to look past the sorrow and tragedy of this earth to the victory celebration the saints will enjoy for all eternity. We are reminded that for the members of God’s family, death is not the end. It may feel like the end. It may seem like the end. It may seem as if death has won, but because of Christ it hasn’t. For those who are part of God’s family through faith in Jesus as their Savior from sin, death is not the end but only the beginning of a new and better life where the deceased has triumphed over sin and all of its consequences for all eternity. This is the beautiful Gospel truth that gives us hope and peace, even as we face death. We have an everlasting family. When Christian loved ones die, they are not lost. Something is lost when you don’t know where it is and therefore will not see it again. As God’s people, we know exactly where our Christian loved ones are: they have triumphed over death and reside in heaven with our Savior Jesus eternally. This is our hope. This is our certainty. This is our joy. Today we celebrate the saints’ triumph over death with the certainty that we too will be united with them one day. We have an everlasting family.

When we think about the concept of Saints Triumphant, we have to admit that we don’t always feel like saints...and we don’t always feel that triumphant. Even the concept of family can have a tainted meaning to us because we don’t always have the glorious or ideal family life. We know too well how sin has marred and destroyed relationships within our family and without. Our sins of jealousy, selfishness, greed, and how we have handled our anger just to name a few have jilted our relationships not only with one another but with God. This is what makes death feel so hopeless and final. Whether we like to admit it or not, we are not the perfect saints God demands that we be. We know that death is the consequence we deserve for these sins that we commit. Each one of those sins we commit have separated us from God and condemned us to God’s wrath eternally. That leaves us feeling overwhelmed, hopeless and full of despair.

That’s where Isaiah and the Israelites were when God shared this vision with them. This prophecy in our text was shared with Isaiah in response to his plea in chapter 64 that God forgive his people. Much of the first part of the book of Isaiah was spent pronouncing judgment on Judah for their refusal to repent of their sins. The earthly judgment that would come for their sins is that they would be destroyed by the Babylonians and their people would either be killed or taken into exile. In chapter 40, God turned his attention through Isaiah to those who had remained faithful to him despite the wickedness and sin around them. It is this remnant who is speaking to God in chapter 64. They recognized their sins and that the judgment which was coming was just punishment from God for the things they had done. So they laid their sins before the Lord and asked him to be merciful. Isaiah records: *“You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved? ⁶ All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. ⁷ No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins. ⁸ Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. ⁹ Do not be angry beyond measure, O Lord; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look upon us, we pray, for we are all your people. (Isaiah 64:5-9)*

To this plea for mercy, God replied in our text, *““See, I will create a new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.”* What great news for God’s people to hear! God was going to create a new heavens and a new earth where the former things will be forgotten. Of course, this place is heaven. In heaven, everything will be new. What was here on earth will be forgotten. There will be no more sin or death or pain. There will be

no more effects from sin: sorrows, hurts, tears, tension, fights, arguments, selfishness—all of it will be gone and forgotten. Gone will be the frustration of sin-strained relationships. Gone will be the aches and pains of bodies that don't work right. Gone will be the fight against the devil and against sin. With the absence of sin will come unending joy. Life in heaven will be nothing but pure joy for the believer. Our text tells us age will no longer be an issue. Time will no longer have an effect on us. We won't have the frustrations of building homes that other people live in or gathering food others will eat. Everything we need will be provided for us. *We will be a people blessed by the Lord.*

In addition to unending joy will be unending peace. God will be there to answer our prayers before we even speak to him. What a vivid picture our text uses to picture this peace: the lamb and the wolf, who are direct enemies on this earth, will sit down together to eat. The ox and the lion will lie down on the straw together. There will be no disagreements, no conflict, no selfish pride to separate and divide people. There will be no stabbing in the back or tearing down of people. Such will be our eternal family! It will truly be the ideal family. In heaven, the saints will worship together. They will live and dwell in the presence of God with no fears or worries or terrors or trepidations whatsoever. What a beautiful picture God paints in our minds for what is waiting ahead for the people of God.

All of this was made possible through the work of Jesus our Savior. When we cry out to the Lord because of our sins for him to have mercy on us, he does. He points us back to Jesus, whom he sent to mend the broken relationship between us and God by condemning him in our place. We may not feel like saints...and by ourselves we are not. We may not feel triumphant...and by ourselves we are not. We have been made saints through the blood of Jesus our Savior. Because of Jesus' sacrifice on Calvary's cross, God has washed our sins away and remembers them no more. Covered in the blood of Jesus, God sees us as saints. Because of Jesus' victory over the grave he has promised that we too will be triumphant over the grave one day. Through faith in Jesus, God has brought us into his everlasting family and promised us the certainty of life with him forever in heaven. Death no longer holds trepidation for us because we know it can't win! We are saints covered in the blood of Jesus and we will live with him forever in heaven. We will take part in the triumph of the saints. God has made us part of his eternal family!

The wonderful news is that we are part of that eternal family right now. God brought us together into his family to support and encourage and guide and help each other long the path as we look forward to the eternity that awaits. Like our earthly family, it might not be perfect, but what a blessing our Christian family is. We need one another. We may not be blood relatives in a physical sense. But we are blood relatives spiritually. And God brought us together into one family to support each other. Let's face it, life on this earth is hard. I know that many of us may not expect life to be easy. But how often aren't we tempted to ask God, "But does it have to be this hard?" Unfortunately, at times the answer is, "Yes." But God has given us to each other as a Christian family to look out for one another and to bear each other's burdens. That means supporting our family members when there is a death in the family—providing food, asking how we can help, sometimes just being there to lend an ear to let someone share their sorrow. This means sharing with them the hope we have in the promises of Jesus to strengthen and support them in the difficult times. This means reaching out to brothers and sisters we haven't seen for awhile out of concern for their spiritual welfare. That means giving up some precious alone time to help a brother and sister who needs a hand. This means sacrificing some of our own resources to help provide assistance to someone who is in need. It means sharing life with one another. It means recognizing that God has brought us together to be a family of support for one another no matter what we might be facing.

We know the road ahead won't always be easy. While we talk about the Saints Triumphant today and look ahead to joining in the triumph of the saints when life here is over, we have not yet joined that realm. We are still part of the church militant—that is, the church of God still engaged in the battle against sin and the devil. Often in our world Christians are thought to be people of peace. And, from a worldly standpoint that might be true. But spiritually, we are engaged daily in a battle of life and death. We are battling an extremely tough, difficult opponent who has as his goal only to destroy us eternally. We daily go to war against the devil. We are daily fighting against the lures and temptations of our world. We engage daily in hand to hand combat with the desires of our flesh who knows what God wants of us yet still desires what we cannot have. We are tempted to give in to those temptations, be selfish in our desires and indulge our sinful lusts. When members of our family sin against us, we are tempted to lash out and belittle them and hold grudges. Our stubborn sinful pride tempts us to reject the attempts of our brothers and sisters to call us out of our sinful ways and return back to the God-pleasing ways of our Lord. We are daily engaged in a spiritual battle which is a fight to the death.

Yet, let's never lose sight of what is waiting for us. For those who persevere and stand firm, the glories of heaven await. The victory over death has already been won for you by Jesus. It has been given to you through faith. The reward is guaranteed for all who finish their lives in faith. God has given you to each other to fight alongside one another in this spiritual battle. Rejoice and be glad in the vision that God gives to you today as he reminds you that you are part of his eternal family. As part of that eternal family, you look forward to no sin, the former things forgotten, eternal joy, no tears, perfect peace. This is yours in Jesus. You are a saint because of him and you will be triumphant over death! Don't let death overwhelm you or cause you despair. The triumphant victory is already yours and you will celebrate it for all eternity. May God fill you with joy and hope as he encourages you: You have an Everlasting Family. Amen.