

All Saints

The first time I went to a gym as an adult a trainer taught me how to do a workout with free weights. On the wall was a photo of a body-builder flexing. I guffawed, and said, “Yeah, like that’s gonna be me.” The trainer did not laugh back. He said in all seriousness, “Well, if that’s your goal, I can get you there.” It would have meant changes in diet, exercise and the way I spent many hours of my day. He pointed to the picture and said, “Those abs? You have the same muscles that guy does. It’s just a question of how you develop them.” As you can tell, I was not ready to make all those changes in my life, but I did make a commitment to regular exercise that I maintain to this day, just to keep in shape.

The saints in heaven are all extraordinary individuals. But every one of them was human, and every one of us has the same spiritual “muscles” they did. It’s just a question of how we develop them.

Today’s reading from the Book of Revelation presents a vision of 144,000 saints gathered around the throne of God and the Lamb. The huge number tells us that being a saint—like being in shape—is not as out of reach as many people think. The elder at the end of this passage describes them as “the ones who have survived the time of great distress.” The saints in the Book of Revelation were extraordinary because the circumstances of their lives were extraordinary. They faced persecution for their faith—ordinary men and women just wanting to follow Christ, but finding themselves in the crosshairs of those who disapproved. All they did was remain faithful to what they loved—something that ordinary people do in times of extraordinary distress.

God helped them by placing his seal on them. In the Book of Exodus the Israelites sprinkled the blood of a lamb on their lintels. That sealed their homes, and the destroying angel passed over them and brought death only to the enemy Egyptians. But in Revelation, the seal of God does not preserve the followers of Christ from suffering and death. Instead, it fortified them through their tribulation. They did not win escape from dying; they won victory through dying.

They wear white garments, which the elder describes in a paradoxical way: “They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” Apparently at their martyrdom, their own blood soaked their garments, their own blood mixing with the blood of Christ, who died that we might live. Blood turned their robes white, the color of the clothing the bible ascribes to angels and others who dwell in the heavens.

We all experience persecution when others ridicule the values we hold dear, when friends tempt us to abandon our beliefs and join them in sin. When we hold fast to what we love, we will suffer for it. But we will enjoy the seal of God, which fortifies us through our tribulation.

One repeated chant in heaven is the word “Amen, Amen.” One repeated chant in the gym is the phrase, “No pain, no gain.” Many humans before us have excelled in physical and spiritual achievement. We all have the same muscles. If we exercise them every day, we will be prepared for any time when God asks us to wash our robes in the blood of the Lamb.