✠ *In the Name of Jesus* ✠

Today many Christian churches are celebrating "All Saints Day" because today is November 1, and November 1 is All Saints Day. A number of you were privileged to grow up in denominations that make a big deal about All Saints Day. For you this may be review. But I did not grow up with All Saints Day. If my church ever celebrated it when I was young, the celebration did not stick in my memory. With Reformation Sunday falling on November 1, it seemed like a good idea to learn what I can about All Saints Day and to answer the question: HOW CAN ALL SAINTS DAY HELP US?

Before we can get at that bigger question, we need to know: What is a saint? A saint is someone who is holy. Ok, but do you know any holy people? I can cite Bible verses that teach: no human is holy. You've probably heard Romans 3:23: "*…all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*." I was not born holy. Neither were you. I can't make myself holy. Neither can you. After trying to be holy for nearly six decades, I'm just an older sinner.

Yet here we are at November 1, All Saints Day. Again, what is a saint? A saint is someone who is holy. But if we're all born sinful and can't make ourselves holy, how can we become holy? The Bible teaches that God gives holiness to people as a gift. The bad-news Bible verse, "*…all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*," is followed by good news. The same "*all*" who sinned "*are justified freely by God's grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus*." Justified. Declared not-guilty. Declared holy. Declared to be a saint. | Freely. As a gift. Do you know any holy people? Yes, you do! Everyone who believes in Jesus as

Savior is a saint, holy in God's eyes.

The word "saint" appears 69 times in the Bible. As you listen to a few passages with the word saint, ask yourself, "What is a saint according to the Bible?" Romans 1:7: "*To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God…*" This letter was written to the people of a Christian church. Hmm. | What is a "saint"? Here's Ephesians 1:1: "*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus.*" He's calling Christians on earth "saints." Hmm. | What is a "saint"? Psalm 85:8: "*I will listen to what God the LORD will say; he promises peace to his people, his saints—but let them **not return to folly***." So what is a "saint"? A saint is one of God's people. Almost every time the Bible uses the word 'saint,' it's referring to believers here on earth, people who are still sinners, and holy at the same time.

When we believers get to heaven, we will never sin again, nor will there be any more effects of sin (Revelation 21:4, 22:3, Philippians 3:21). We will **never return to folly**. We will be completely holy. So then 'believers in heaven' are also saints, saints in an even fuller sense of the word. That's probably why the early church started saying that believers who died had been "sainted," especially those who died for the "crime" of believing in Jesus. So All Saints Day became a day to remember believers who died in the Lord, especially the martyrs, a word that means "witnesses," Christians who died proclaiming Jesus as Savior, believers who were faithful even to the point of death.

All Saints Day can help us remember those who died believing in Jesus. Perhaps that's one reason so many denominations celebrate

"All Saints Day": Roman Catholics, Methodists, Anglicans, Wesleyans, Lutherans, and others, each denomination observing it a bit differently.

Celebrating All Saints Day can help us if we praise God for all the believers whose souls are already with our Lord in heaven. To us they are dead, but to God they are very much alive (Luke 20:38)! So on All Saints Day we thank Jesus for dying on the cross and removing all sin. We can also thank the Holy Spirit for bringing us and many others to faith in Jesus, especially those who are already home with him in heaven. We can ask God, "Help us be like them. Help us stay connected to Jesus through God's Word like they did. By your grace, Lord, we want to join the saints in heaven someday."

Of course, Jesus didn't command us to celebrate All Saints Day. So how did this celebration come about? Even after Christianity became the dominant religion in Europe and the middle east and northern Africa, there were still many people who wanted to hold on to other religions. Many of them believed that the spirits of their dead relatives hang around and haunt the living, that the souls of evil relatives make bad things happen. So how did they try to get rid of evil spirits? According to one source, the head of house would get up at midnight on May 13, walk around the house barefoot, throw black beans into the dark, and say: "I send these; with these beans I redeem me and mine." Nine times he would say: "I send these; with these beans I redeem me and mine." Then everyone else in the house would clash bronze pots and say, "Ghosts of my fathers and ancestors, be gone!"

As you can imagine, Christian leaders were not fond of all this. So in the year of our

Lord 609 (A.D.) a Christian leader in Rome tried to de-paganize May 13. He taught: "It's ok to think about the dead, but the souls of believers are in heaven. They don't need to do any haunting. They are happy."

After 120 years May 13 was less associated with evil spirits, especially in southern Europe. But the Celts in northern Europe celebrated a harvest festival. Guess when. Yup, on the night between October 31 and November 1. That evening was considered the boundary between the light half and the dark half of the year. So it was a natural time to think of the boundary between life and death. People at that time believed that this boundary between life and death became very thin on this night. So evil spirits would cross over to haunt people. How might people scare away the evil spirits? Of course, they would put on scary masks and costumes. They would even hollow out large turnips and then carve faces into the sides of the turnips to scare off evil spirits.

As you can imagine, Christian leaders were not fond of all this. So in the 730s All Saints Day was moved from May 13 to November 1 in an attempt to de-paganize the evening between October 31 and November 1. The Christian church has not completely succeeded in quelling thoughts about evil spirits.

Sometimes All Saints Day was called All Hallows Day. That makes sense. We pray, "Hallowed be Thy name," meaning "Father, may your name be kept holy." And just as the night before Christmas Day is Christmas Eve, so the night before All Hallows Day is All Hallows Evening. But "All Hallows Evening" was too long, so they shortening it to Hallowe'en.

Today in America Halloween is mostly secular. But it still has that "evil spirit" overtone. Horror movies are made more available at this time of year. Apparently it would make for a terribly boring movie to portray believers reading Bible stories together and laughing for joy about all God's blessings, and in this way resisting the devil until he flees (see James 4:7). Apparently boring movies sell few tickets.

Can we Christians celebrate Halloween? It can be fun to put on a costume, especially if the costume helps you play a character. But should we believers observe any limits when it comes to dressing up? If your answer comes from your faith in Jesus and your knowledge of God's Word, you will notice yourself observing a number of limits with a happy heart. Listen to a particularly useful passage. Ephesians 5:8-11: "*You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth), and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.*"

What limits might you observe when choosing a Halloween costume? As a believer I would find it difficult to dress up as a demon because the demons keep trying to separate us from God's Word by way of any temptation that will work on us. As a believer I would find it hard to dress up as a witch when witches derive their power from "a god other than God," as I recently heard a witch explain. As a believer I would also find it difficult to toy with divination like a Ouija board since such games invite evil

spirits to answer questions. I hope you keep reading God's Word so the Holy Spirit can help you see some limits to observe when you participate in any celebration of Halloween. For instance, I hope we can all see that dressing up as a slutty anything encourages fornication. Some people celebrate Halloween by getting drunk, but Ephesians 5:18 lets us know that for all 365 days of the year, God's will is: "*Do not get drunk.*" One or two drinks might be ok, but because we love Jesus we limit ourselves with a happy heart. If you don't want to observe any such limits, check to see if your sinful flesh has gotten hold of your heart instead of Jesus, that is, if your sinful flesh will even allow you to look into your heart for it. The sinful flesh hates to give up control, but almighty Jesus loves to help people who ask him to rule in their hearts by his grace.

I hope that you have also asked: What does All Saints Day and Halloween have to do with the Reformation? Well, think about the way things were in Martin Luther's day. November 1 was All Saints Day for him. November 2 was known as All Souls Day. All Souls Day was about believers who had died but hadn't gotten out of purgatory yet. Luther had been taught, and had taught others, that the "saints" in heaven could help the "souls" in purgatory to get out of purgatory and into heaven. Can you see how the definition of "saint" had changed from Bible times and early church times? In Luther's day "saints" meant believers who had done so many good works that, they not only got to skip all that suffering in purgatory and go straight to heaven, they had done more good deeds than what they needed to get into heaven. (Yes, for a long

while Luther believed and taught that people got into heaven by their good works rather than as a free gift from God.) Luther and his fellow teachers believed that the excess good works of the saints had been collected into a treasury. There were enough good works in the treasury that the saints could help the souls in purgatory. And guess who had control of the treasury? Yup, the guy at the head of the church. Luther still believed this when he wrote his 95 Theses. He also believed that the church could help the people in purgatory by setting up good works for people on earth to do. If people on earth would do an act of repentance in front of a relic (an object associated with a saint) the head of the church could release some of those excess good works to help a soul out of purgatory.

But Luther noticed some new practices being added to this system, which he saw as abuses of the system. His 95 Theses were an attempt at starting a discussion about how to get back to doing all this correctly so people could work their way into heaven properly, the way All Saints Day and All Souls Day had been celebrated for centuries. This is why we never read Luther's 95 Theses in church. They teach salvation by works, not by grace alone.

Luther's 95 Theses got him into trouble by asserting a new approach. In one of his Theses Luther asks a question like this: "If the head of our church has the authority to free people from purgatory in exchange for money, why not free people from purgatory for no money, out of the goodness of his heart?" Luther thought this was such a good idea that he sent a copy of his Theses to the head of the church. He had no idea

that the head of the church was behind the new abuses.

As you can imagine, the church leaders were not fond of Luther's new idea. They commanded him: "Take it back! Say you were wrong!" But by that time Luther had done even more Bible study. He learned from God's Word that we don't need to pay for those extra good works of the saints, nor do our good works get God to let us into heaven. Not only that, there's no purgatory. Not only that, God wants to let us into heaven for no money, out of the goodness of his heart! Because of Jesus God can look at all of us as if we are saints, holy, no sins on our record, all necessary good deeds fully accomplish by Jesus and credited to us as if we did them. Here's the rest of that wonderful Bible verse we looked at earlier. Romans 3:22-24: "*This righteousness from God* [this holiness that God counts as ours] *comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and* [the same all] *are justified* [declared not-guilty or holy] *freely* [not for money or for good works] *by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*"

All Saints Day can help us by leading us to trust in Jesus as our Savior from sin and to live as if this is the most important truth ever, to acknowledge that we are saints in God's eyes because of Jesus, to thank God for delivering so many of his people into heaven already, and to ask him to keep us connected to Jesus through God's Word.