

Scripture Readings for October 31, 2021

Isaiah 25:6-9 (NIV)

⁶ On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines.

⁷ On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; ⁸ he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people’s disgrace from all the earth. The LORD has spoken.

⁹ In that day they will say, “Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the LORD, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.”

John 11:17-27 (NIV)

¹⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. ²¹ “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.” ²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴ Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” ²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷ “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

Revelation 21:1-7 (NIV)

¹ Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,”¹ for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death² or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” ⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶ He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. ⁷ Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.

¹ Isaiah 65:17.

² Isaiah 25:8.

Sermon: “A Cloud of Witnesses”

As I am sure you all know, “Halloween” is a contraction of “All Hallows Eve,” and “hallows” is an archaic term for saints or holy persons. Consequently, tomorrow is “All Hallows *Day*,” better known as All Saints’ Day, and the following day is All Soul’s Day. On these two days, Christians of various traditions and nationalities celebrate those who have died in the faith.³ I have to say this is not a big deal for me personally, but I respect those for whom it’s very important. Whether we are talking about the Christian martyrs or those known personally to us who have died, it is no bad thing to pause and honor their memory and give thanks to God for their lives. Underlying these special days is the belief that there is a powerful spiritual bond between those deemed to be in the presence of God⁴ and ourselves,⁵ whether they be famous or not. After all, in the “Great Prayer of Thanksgiving” that is part of the liturgy for Holy Communion, we proclaim: “Therefore with apostles and prophets, *and that great cloud of witnesses*⁶ *who live for you beyond all time and space*, we lift our hearts in joyful praise . . .” Now, to be fair, the New Testament is not consistent as to precisely what happens after we die.⁷ Nevertheless, many find it comforting to think that those who have died are somehow cheering us on our way.

You, know, it’s all too easy for preachers to paint *half* the big picture of the biblical story, the one that begins with creation and ends with the story of the spread of early church from Jerusalem to Rome, following on from the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.⁸ We often under-emphasize the great Christian hope is of Christ’s coming again on the Great Day of the Lord, when God’s justice will finally put the world to right. That powerful resurrection hope is something foreign to most Old Testament writers – although there are bold hints here and there.⁹ For example, in our reading from Isaiah 25, there is a magnificent and shocking vision of God having a banquet for *all the nations* – not just Jews – in Jerusalem, with the best of meats and the finest of wines. At that time, Isaiah says God will swallow up death forever and will wipe away the tears from all faces. In that day, Isaiah says the nations will proclaim, “Surely this is our God; we *trusted* in him, and he saved us. Let us rejoice and be glad in the LORD’s salvation.”¹⁰ We must not lose sight of the whole of the biblical big picture.

³ The Day of the Dead (*Día de los Muertos*) is also very big in Latin America, especially Mexico. Another time that one could do this is “Holy Saturday” (between Good Friday and Easter Sunday), a day that seems quite appropriate in my mind; see: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/%E2%80%99CHE-Descended-to-the-Dead%E2%80%9D.pdf> .

⁴ Traditionally known as the “Church triumphant.” This raises important theological questions as to what happens to those who have died. The Nicene Creed ends with “We *look* for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world *to come*.” Based on 1 Thess 4:13-18 and 1 Cor 15: 12-28, the dead remain dead (as it were) until the great Day of the Lord. However, in Phil 1:23 and 2 Cor 5:1–9 there is the suggestion that immediately after death, those “in Christ” are (somehow) in his presence.

See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Waiting-Trusting-and-Living-in-Hope.pdf> .

⁵ Traditionally known as the “Church militant.”

⁶ See Heb 12:1.

⁷ See [4], and read N. T Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 2008.

⁸ Not forgetting Pentecost (Acts 2; the book of Acts tells the story of how the church spread from Jerusalem to Rome.)

⁹ I believe Job 19:23-27 also gives a brief glimpse of that hope, though the writer does not develop the idea.

¹⁰ Isa 25:6-9.

John the Seer’s vision of “a new heaven and a new earth”¹¹ echoes Isaiah’s themes. Revelation 21 is part of the pinnacle of John’s apocalyptic vision, and as long as we understand that John’s overall message is much broader than these seven verses, we can explore them briefly together—and thereby be inspired and reassured. Remember this is a *vision*, and just as human imagination is incapable of *perceiving*, so John knows that human language is incapable of *expressing* the reality of things in the world as they truly are – in other words, in the way that *God* sees them. Rather than being paralyzed in awe and stunned into silence, John endeavors to portray what he sees in a variety of *this-worldly* pictures. We should, therefore, not take his descriptions too literally. John is painting an *impressionistic* canvas and alludes to Old Testament images of which his audience would be very familiar.

What he sees is a “new heaven and a new earth,” one in which there is *no* sea.¹² Clearly, this is *not* a place of disembodied spirits in the presence of God. Rather, the Creator God who, in Genesis 1, made the sea, land, and the sky is going to make something *new*.¹³ But, oddly to our ears, this creation has no “sea,” which might sound remarkably dull and boring! In the Old Testament, the turbulent “sea” itself often symbolized chaos and evil,¹⁴ and not just the sea monster Leviathan that I mentioned recently in the story of Job.¹⁵ In this new creation, there is no *capability* for such things. The threat of chaos has been removed forever. When we think of natural disasters like earthquakes, storms, floods, and famines, and of disease, decay, and death – all these are features of the “Sea,” and they will *not* be present in the new creation. That is *wonderful* news; life will be fulfilled, joyful, and vibrant. That is why John goes on to say, “God will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”¹⁶

But there is *much* more. John says: “I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming *down out* of heaven from God . . . and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is *now among the people*, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.’”¹⁷ Note John’s language: we do not go *up*, as it were, God comes *down*! Put differently, God will come from his dimension into ours. What John glimpsed was a new Holy City, not made by human hands, but by God himself.¹⁸ Moreover, God will no longer be hidden; he will live *among* mortals. That is why in the new Jerusalem there is no Temple (or churches); there will be no need of

¹¹ Isaiah 65:17.

¹² Rev 21:1.

¹³ See Isa 65:17-25, 66:22.

¹⁴ See Prov 8:29; Sir 16:26–27; Ps 33:6–9; 89:8–10; Job 26:8–13; 38:8–11; Isa 27:1. (This is discussed in Reddish, *Science and Christianity* (Wipf & Stock, 2016), 155–61.) It is therefore significant that the Gospel writers have Jesus also walking on the water (Matt 14:22–36; Mark 6:45–52; John 6:16–21), revealing he is Lord even of the “Sea” (Matt 14:33).

¹⁵ See: <https://securerusercontent.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/God-Speaks-and-Job-is-Silent.pdf> .

¹⁶ Rev 21:4, echoing Isa 25:8.

¹⁷ Rev 21:2a, 3. (“God himself will be with them” means there is no more need of *intermediaries* between God and people.)

¹⁸ (This is what the “coming down” signifies.) There is an element of human pride in city architecture, from Babel to Dubai. See Heb 11:10; 13:14. Moreover, while we presently partner with the Spirit in establishing the kingdom of God, God is the one who realizes the new creation. Whatever is good in this world and in the kingdom will *endure* in the new creation.

such buildings because God will present everywhere and intimately accessible to all his people.¹⁹ In the vision, John then hears the powerful voice of God, the same God who *spoke* in Genesis 1 bringing creation itself into being. And God says, “I am making everything new!”²⁰ Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true. *It is done*. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.”²¹

With that vivid picture in mind, let us now briefly consider a pivotal aspect in the story the raising of Lazarus.²² You will remember that Lazarus had been dead for four days and naturally his sisters, Mary and Martha, were disappointed Jesus hadn’t come earlier. Nevertheless, Martha says to Jesus: “I know that *even now God will give you whatever you ask*.”²³ Jesus replies, “Your brother will rise again.”²⁴ To which Martha responds, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”²⁵ Martha, then, was one of those Jews who believed in the general resurrection of the dead at the culmination of history, on the great Day of the Lord. But she could not have really understood what that might mean—no more than any other disciple could have understood it before Jesus had risen from the dead. What Jesus says next is stunning: “*I am the resurrection and the life*. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.”²⁶ Profound and jaw-dropping as those words are—then and now—on their own they mean little.²⁷ The act of raising Lazarus from the dead is, then, a *sign* that supports this bold claim of Jesus. But what does it all mean?

Earlier in John’s Gospel, after Jesus heals *on the Sabbath*, the religious are very critical of Jesus and he defending himself, saying: “My Father is still working, and I also am working. . . .”²⁸ What does this

¹⁹ We often struggle with the *hiddenness* of God today, especially in the context of suffering and death. I have found that knowing in the core of your being that God is with you, an even *suffers* along side you, in your trials is a profound comfort; but even so, we still have many unanswered questions. Much to our frustration, John and the other New Testament writers, do not answer all our questions! That, of course, is an *inevitable* feature of our journey of *faith*. John’s vision is not so much a relief that everything will turn out well in the end - that is an insult to all those who suffer - but his vision points to the reality that things, here and now, as being profoundly unwell and therefore repentance and transformation are required. What John says is that *God* will bring about that change, not just in sending his Son, Jesus but in God’s ongoing activity in putting to right all that is out of joint in our world. And he invites and empowers us to partner with him in that redemption.

²⁰ See also Isa 43:18–19, 2 Cor 5:17.

²¹ Rev 5b-6a. The words, “It is done” not only echoes God “resting” on the 7th day of creation, but the words of Jesus on the Cross, “It is finished” (John 19:30), meaning the task is completed.

²² See John 11:1-45; <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/In-Whom-Do-We-Put-Our-Trust.pdf>.

²³ John 11:22. *Lament* is a legitimate Jewish response in such circumstances, but even lament does not imply doubt.

²⁴ John 11:23. This seems intentionally open-ended and therefore susceptible to misunderstanding.

²⁵ John 11:24. Jews had not always believed in the resurrection at the “Day of the Lord.” Indeed, the Sadducees in Jesus day did *not* believe in the resurrection; see Acts 23:6-7; Mark 12:18. But since the time of Daniel (Dan 12:2), about 2-3 hundred years earlier, belief in the resurrection had become widespread among the Jews - not least through the influence of the Pharisees. Even so, until Judgement Day, when God finally puts the world to right, the Jews believed the dead reside in *Sheol*. *Sheol* was literally a God-forsaken place, but *not* a place of torture, rather it was the land of the shades or shadows. Regardless of your moral character, everyone went to *Sheol*, where they existed as a vague shadow; strengthless and joyless. Obviously, not a place over-flowing with hope – unlike the future hope expressed by the prophet Isaiah (Isa 65: 17-25)!

²⁶ John 11:25, 26a.

²⁷ If I were to proclaim them, you would pity my family and send me to the psych-ward!

²⁸ John 5:17. The (life-giving) healing can, therefore, be considered a *sign* of the *new* creation.

mean? After all, in Genesis we are told God *rested* on the Sabbath.²⁹ Now, Jesus isn't really contradicting the supposed words of Moses, since Jewish thinkers had come to understand that God *cannot* rest on the Sabbath because creation continues; children are born and so new life is being given, and people die and therefore need to be judged. The work of God never stops. And Jesus says that, like his Father, he too is working to bring about "new life"—or healing in this case—even on the Sabbath. Jesus then says, "*Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes. . . . Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.*"³⁰ Jesus is therefore claiming that he has been entrusted with the fullness of the Father's authority both to *give life*³¹ and to *judge*,³² two tasks that Jewish scholars agreed God does even on the Sabbath.³³ John therefore tells his readers *that's the kind of authority that God the Father has given the Son—particularly with reference to the final resurrection.*³⁴

Now let's return to the story of Lazarus and hear again those words of Jesus: "*I am the resurrection and the life.*"³⁵ The raising of Lazarus back to life is John's way of further demonstrating that God the Father has indeed given Jesus the authority to *give life*! But there is more to it than that because Lazarus will die again at some point. Yet Jesus also says, "Whoever lives by believing in me will *never die.*"³⁶ That is *not* just an authoritative statement about Jesus *giving life*, it is also one of concerning the final judgement.³⁷ John records Jesus as earlier saying, "Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will *not* be judged but has crossed over from death to life. . . Don't be amazed at this," says Jesus "For a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear my voice and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live."³⁸

As we reflect on the confident hope that is celebrated on All Soul's Day, we can also gain perspective of how we live in the present. Most importantly, the gospel is *not* merely an insurance policy that those Paul says are "in Christ"³⁹ will be resurrected on the last day to life in God's presence. The gospel is much more than being "saved," if I can use that evangelical language.⁴⁰ The gospel is the good news that Jesus *is the Messiah* and that Israel's story, and the biblical canvas as a whole, has been fulfilled in

²⁹ Gen 2:2–3; Exod 20:11.

³⁰ John 5:21, 25.

³¹ See John 5:20–21, 25–26. It is in this context that we are to understand John's later account of the raising of Lazarus, see John 11:1–44. It is there that John reports Jesus as saying, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). Note that the synoptic gospels also give accounts of Jesus raising individuals from the dead; see Mark 5:21–24, 35–43; Luke 7:11–17, 8:49–56; Matt 9:18–26. (Such mighty acts are linked to special, holy people; see also: 1 Kgs 17:17–24; 2 Kgs 4:18–37; Acts 9:36–42, 20:7–12.)

³² See John 5:27–30. The notion of Jesus as the divinely-appointed (eschatological) judge is not unique to John; see, for example, Matt 7:21–23; 16:27; 25; Acts 10:42; 17:31; 2 Cor 5:10; 2 Tim 4:1, 8.

³³ That's why Jesus concludes: "Anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him" (John 5:23).

³⁴ For the overall context see John 3:31–36; 5:19–29; 6:36–40; 8:51; 14:19.

³⁵ John 11:25.

³⁶ John 11:26a.

³⁷ See John 5:24–30.

³⁸ John 5:28–29a. This then implies that the dead remain dead (or in *Sheol*) until the great Day of the Lord.

³⁹ See: Gal 3:26–28; Rom 8:1; Phil 1:1; 1 Cor 12:13; Col 3:3

⁴⁰ See: Scot McKnight's *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Zondervan, 2016).

him. “Messiah” means, amongst other things, *King*, and in Jesus Christ, God established the kingdom – or reign—of God. To claim Jesus as Messiah is to state that God is acting distinctively and decisively in Jesus.⁴¹ And as we have just heard, King Jesus has the right to *give life* and *to judge*. If you go back to the story of Adam and Eve, God wanted them to rule the world as his image bearers. But they failed, and so in the fulness of time, God sent his son, Jesus the Messiah, to rule the world as the second Adam.⁴² God’s action in raising Jesus from the dead reveals that he is now the world’s rightful Lord⁴³ and he commissions the church to bear witness to the world of the Jesus story—the gospel—and to embody his kingdom as people of God. That is our role until that day when God fully establishes his reign on earth. We need this bigger perspective—from the creation story until the final culmination of history at Christ’s second advent—so that we can appreciate the gospel in its context. If we ignore that bigger biblical story, then the gospel itself will get distorted. And that is what happens when we reduce the good news to simply hope of life after we die because we have been baptized as a child or said the “Believers’ Prayer” at some point in our life.

The story of Jesus is, then, about the Messiah’s kingdom vision, and this vision emerges out of the creation story, out of Israel’s story of trying to live out God’s desire for the chosen people, and out of John’s vision of the city in the Book of Revelation. The entire story of Jesus is the narrative of his birth, life, and teachings, his miracles and actions, his death, his burial, his resurrection, and his ascension and exaltation. Inherent to the gospel story of Jesus are labels that define him,⁴⁴ identify him, and his role in completing Israel’s story, titles such as Messiah, Lord, Son of God, Savior, and Son of Man. The story of Jesus as Messiah and Lord results in what is yearning for completion in the story of Israel that we read about in the Old Testament. It is this story the apostles preached, and it is this story that we proclaim today amongst this great “cloud of witnesses.”⁴⁵ Let us celebrate this heritage of the faithful in Christ. Let us remind ourselves that we are a part of this great story and so regain perspective in daily life. Let us look forward to that great banquet while still being busy in the present doing kingdom work. For Christ’s sake. Amen. Let us pray.

⁴¹ Put another way, Jesus is the agent through whom God is working in an unprecedented and unrepeatable way.

⁴² See 1 Cor 15: 20-29; 45-49.

⁴³ Concerning titles of Jesus, see Reddish, *The Jesus I Didn’t Know I Didn’t Know* (Wipf & Stock, 2021), chapter 4.

⁴⁴ See [42].

⁴⁵ *All* life begins and ends in God (see Rom 11:36; Eph 4:6), your life, my life. In the end, *God* will live with his people and be all in all. Those words are trustworthy and true!