

*But in those days, following that distress,*

*“ the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light;  
<sup>25</sup> the stars will fall from the sky,  
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’*

<sup>26</sup> *“At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. <sup>27</sup> And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens. (Mark 13:24-27)*

### **We Win!**

Which do you like better, winning or losing? That’s a silly question, isn’t it? Maybe a better question would be, what kind of a win do you prefer, a blow out or a come from behind victory? That’s a little harder. If we’re talking about sports, we might like to see our team totally dominate the opposition, but coming from behind is exciting and satisfying. But winning and losing apply to more than just sports. In the business world, there are winners and there are losers. Coming from behind might not be all that appealing. In politics, there are winners and losers, and we might like to see our team totally dominate the opposition. When two countries go to war, one usually wins. But if it’s a come from behind victory, that means that even the winner probably paid a terrible price. Yet, if we win, we usually consider the game, the business venture, the election or even the conflict in a positive light. We may even retell the story of how close we came to losing so people feel the drama of the win. Today is all about winning. Today is a festival of the church year called Saints Triumphant. And if we win in our battle against sin and death and the devil, then everything else is worth it. The message in our gospel lesson for today is: **we win!**

#### **I.**

Now, the gospel lesson we have before us may not seem to emphasize that as clearly as the other two lessons for today. It may seem like it fits better with the Sunday we celebrated last week, called Last Judgment. But these words show us why and how we win. We don’t win because we’re so good. We win because of Jesus. **We win because of God’s grace.**

You see that in what Jesus told his disciples will happen on Judgment Day. He said that the Son of Man – of course, that’s Jesus himself – will come with great power and glory, **“And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.”** Winning on Judgment Day doesn’t happen because we dig deep inside ourselves and triumph over the devil or over our own temptations. We win because Jesus comes back and ends the battle. We win because Jesus won already on the day he rose from the dead. All those centuries since he ascended have been about collecting the prize, the people Jesus died and rose to save.

Jesus calls those people “the elect.” What does that mean? It means the chosen ones. We just had an election a couple of weeks ago. What did we do? We chose who’s going to represent us in congress and on the state and local level. Well, God had an election, too, and he was the only voter. Before the world began, God looked forward into history and he chose who would be gathered to his side on Judgment Day. He chose who would win. He chose us. Then he sent the gospel to us and gave us faith so that if we die, we go to heaven. And if we live until he comes back, we will be gathered by those angels. Either way, we will live with Jesus for all eternity.

Why did he choose us? It wasn’t because he knew we would make such great Christians. It wasn’t because we’re smarter or more spiritual than anybody else. It wasn’t because we’re just nicer people or because we would never run over little old ladies in a crosswalk or sell drugs to kids. It wasn’t even because we’re better looking or more fun than anybody else. None of those things are true. Lots of people are better looking and more fun people than me, and probably even than you, too. Lots of people are more spiritual, and they would make better Christians than we do. Lots of people are smarter than we are. And truth be told, we were

born dead sinners – just as dead as anybody else. And who can say what sins we would commit without God working in our hearts? God didn't choose us for any of those reasons.

So why did he choose us? Just because he loves us. There's a special word for this kind of love: grace. In catechism class, I teach the kids that grace is God's undeserved love. It's a gift that God gives. Next week, on Black Friday the Christmas shopping frenzy will begin. Why do we parents give gifts to our children? Not because they've earned them. Even if they're good kids, they can't possibly earn the enormous amount of money we spend just feeding and housing and clothing them. What further obligation could a parent have? But every year we spend more money on gifts for them just because we love them. All the gifts God gives us are examples of grace. We didn't earn them. He simply gives them. But in a deeper sense, God's grace is the love inside him that turns to us sinners and saves us. Grace doesn't ask if we deserve it or not. It doesn't seek out those who are lovable or beautiful. It doesn't care how smart or spiritual we are. Grace simply loves us. And it keeps on loving us no matter how many times we show that we still don't deserve it. God chose us to win because he loves us, because of his grace.

## II.

Jesus talked about that grace to keep our heads and our hearts focused while we muddle through life in world where it often feels like there's not nearly enough love or compassion. Here on this earth, it often feels like we're losing. Sometimes, we can't see that we're really going to win. To use a sports metaphor, it often feels like it's late in the game and we're way behind and it would take a miracle for us to mount a comeback. But God gave us a miracle. All the points that the devil has scored are an illusion. My friends, **we win no matter what else happens.**

Jesus points to all that can happen in our gospel lesson. He talks about "distress" and the sun being darkened and the stars falling. What does all that mean? The specific incident that Jesus was talking about was the destruction of Jerusalem which happened about a generation after he spoke these words. The blood ran in the streets. The Romans leveled the city and built a Roman city over the top of it. So many Jewish people were enslaved that the price of slaves on the open market collapsed from oversupply. Jesus uses that terrible series of events as a picture of all the terrible things that happen in this world before he returns. Just go to your favorite news provider and count how many wars are going on right now. How many earthquakes and famines and plagues have happened this month? How much suffering and sorrow stalks this world? Does it feel like you're winning when you have to live through something like that? I don't think so.

When and how will all that stop? Only when the world ends. The stars falling and the sun going dark are images of the world as we know it, coming to a screeching halt. All we know has to end. And it's a good thing, too, because the world as we know it is broken. God cursed it when Adam and Eve sinned. Ever since then, pain and suffering and death have been a part of the fabric of our lives. But Jesus will come back and lift the curse and put an end to it all the suffering. So we will win.

The angels will fan out and gather all those who believe in Jesus – all those elect, those chosen ones we talked about before. Now, Jesus doesn't say anything in these verses about unbelievers. In other places, the Bible does tell us what will happen to the unbelievers: they will be sent to hell forever. But here, Jesus focuses on what he will do for us. He says he will send those angels to the four winds – in the ancient world they sometimes spoke of compass points that way. The angels will go to the north and the south, to the east and the west and collect the people of God. Jesus says they will go from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. In other words, they will cover the entire creation. Living and dead, Americans and foreigners. All believers will be gathered to Jesus' throne to live with him forever. No one will be missed.

So it doesn't matter how alone you feel in your faith. Even if everyone you know and love turns their back on Jesus, you won't be overlooked or lost. The angels will find you and bring you to Jesus, because he will be working through them. Even if you are in the middle of a desert or on a submarine, even if you are rotting in the darkest prison ever made, the angels will find you and you will come home.

Home to what? Jesus doesn't talk about it much here, but we need to know what he promises us: eternal life with him. Jesus is going to remake this world. God's curse will be over so we will live in a world without earthquakes or tidal waves or germs that cause diseases. Jesus will undo all that sin did to this world. So every scar from every war will be erased and all pollution and human damage will be undone. All war and hatred and violence will cease. We will live in a world in which every person knows Jesus and follows Jesus and treats every other person with perfect love.

Finally, we will be set free from our own sin. For me, one of the things I look forward to most about eternal life is being free from sin. Now, I want to be free from pain as much as anybody else. The older I get, the more true that is. I want the people I love to be set free from all that hurts them and all that they struggle with. So I will rejoice when all pain and suffering ends. But for myself, I look forward even more to being set free from all my own failures and sins. Does that surprise you? The way God designed the ministry, his people respect the minister God calls to preach the gospel to them. But do you ever feel like pastors don't really sin like everybody else does? If you think that, you're wrong. Our hearts are just as corrupt when we're born. The Old Man inside us is just as hard to kill. The devil loves to push our buttons and throw temptation in front of us, just as much as he does with you. Because God calls us pastors to teach his word and to model Christian love, I often feel that I'm a big disappointment to Jesus who called me not just to be a pastor, but also a husband and a father. Do you ever feel that way? Well, when Jesus comes back, we will be free. All the sin in our hearts will be gone and we will joyfully and perfectly live in love toward God and toward each other. We will win against our own sinful natures at last!

But even that won't be the best part about winning. The best part will be living with Jesus, who loved us, who saved us, who always wants to be near us. We will finally see him with our own eyes and experience his love for us without all the confusion the sin puts in the way. In fact, that helps us understand the nature of hell. The Bible often describes hell in terms of fire and darkness and other gruesome things like that. There is some question about whether the fire is literal or just a figure of speech. But you know what? It doesn't matter because if the fire is just a figure of speech, it represents something even worse. Hell will mean pain and sorrow on a scale that we can't even imagine. And there will be no hope of ever getting out. In hell, we would be separated from God and his love forever. We would know that God hates us and he is never, ever going to show us any grace again. In hell, we could only despair and suffer and wish that it would stop. But it won't.

Hell is losing. But we win because Jesus lived a perfect life in our place. We win because Jesus took every one of our sins to the cross and he suffered all our hell in the three hours he was there. We win because Jesus died and rose. We win because God chose us and he gave us faith in Jesus and he will preserve that faith no matter how much this life hurts. We win and we will live forever in joy with Jesus. And it wasn't even close. It might seem to us that reaching eternal life is a long shot and we're way behind. But the truth is, Jesus has blown the devil out. Today is Saints Triumphant. Regardless of how your football team does today, regardless of whether your candidate won in the last election, regardless of whether you're winning at business or you feel like a loser, you have won the ultimate lottery – even more than the \$1.6 billion ticket that was sold a few weeks ago. You won because Jesus won. One day soon, he will come and bring you your winnings. Amen.