What does it mean to be called a "saint"?

By Michael McCleeary

When we meet an individual that is kind and generous, we may refer to them as a "saint" because of their selfless character. The New Orleans NFL football team is called the New Orleans Saints. During the winter holidays, we hear stories and songs about good old St. Nick (or St. Nicholas). During the month of February, we often observe in some way St. Valentine's Day. During the month of March, we wear green in observation of St. Patrick's Day. While we as Christians observe these days out of tradition and not out of veneration to the actual "Saints", we realize how popular the term "saint" is in our society. So, what does it mean to be called a "saint" where the Bible is concerned?

Is it someone who has died for Christ? The term "saint" and "martyr" at one time were synonymous in Old English. Through the years the two terms have become separate in definition and rightly so as they also have different definitions in the Bible. However, there are those who believe that one can only become a true saint by dying for the cause of Christ, such as Stephen in **Acts 7**. Is it true that those who die a martyr's death are considered saints? Yes, indeed they are. In **Rev. 16:6** and **17:6** we find references to Christians who have been persecuted and killed because of their faith in Christ. These same Christians are referred to in both passages as "saints". Therefore, our answer to this question is "yes". However, is this the only way one is made a saint?

Is it someone who has died as a faithful Christian? There are those who believe that one can only become a true saint by dying as a faithful servant of God. Obviously, the definitions and qualifications of a "faithful servant" change with each "religion". However, the question remains the same: Are those who have died as faithful servants of God considered saints? Yes, indeed they are. In **Matt. 27:52** and **Rev. 14:12** we find references to faithful servants who have died. In both instances, they are referred to as saints. Therefore, our answer to this question is also "yes". However, both circumstances we have considered involve the death of the individual. So, we ask, does it require a person's death to be made a saint?

Can someone be deemed worthy of being called a saint while they are still alive? There are very few religious organizations that believe that one can be made a saint while still alive. They admit that the term "saint" can be used generically to refer to servants of God, but most believe that God only recognizes individuals as "saints" after they have died. However, is this taught in the Bible? In **II Thess. 1:10** and **I Cor. 6:2** we find that all those who are obedient believers are saints. In **Rom. 1:7** and **I Cor. 1:2** we find that those who are Christians have been "called" to be saints. The term "saint" is the noun usage of "*hagios*" and means "*a most holy thing; set apart*". We learn from the Bible that when one becomes a Christian, they are made a "saint" by God's grace making them holy and pure. Therefore, our answer to this question is "yes".

In the end, a saint is anyone who, as a true Christian, is holy and faithful in service to God through Christ Jesus. Whether that individual is currently alive, or that servant has passed away having lived a faithful life, or that servant died a martyr, all are saints. But nowhere in the Bible do we find the term "Saint" (capital "S") used as a title. We should not venerate certain individuals above others, alive or dead, by using the term Saint in front of their name. God is the One who recognizes a saint. All we can do is observe the faithful lives of those who serve God…and emulate their faith so we can one day enter into the home of all saints – Heaven.