

## INTRODUCTION

A seminary student tried to have a scriptural basis for everything he did. He wanted to have a book, chapter, and verse to back up all of his actions. He was doing okay until he fell in love with a beautiful girl. He was smitten, and he really wanted to kiss her, but he couldn't find a verse to allow him. So, true to his convictions, he would escort her to her front porch every night, look at her longingly, and then shake her hand and say, "goodnight." He suspected she really wanted to kiss him, too, but she was waiting for him to make the first move.

This went on for several frustrating weeks. He searched the scriptures and found a verse in Romans 16 that said, "Greet each other with a holy kiss." He was excited until his bible professor told him that was for a church setting, not a romantic setting. So, he was disappointed and frustrated that he couldn't find a Bible verse to justify kissing his girlfriend. Later that same evening, he walked her to her front porch, and started to shake her hand. In a flash his girlfriend grabbed his shoulders, pulled him toward her and laid a zinger of a kiss on his lips. At the end of the kiss, the breathless seminary student said, "Bible verse, Bible verse!" She grabbed him a second time and just before kissing him again said, "Luke 6:31. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you!"

Over the past two months, we have been looking at Bible verses that teach us about the Heroes of Faith in Hebrews 11. In the previous messages, we explored the faith of ten men and women who are mentioned by name. When we come to Hebrews 11:32, the writer goes into summary mode and lumps many faith heroes together.

Hebrews 11:32-35. "And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection."

As we walk through Hebrews 11, I feel a little like I did the first time I visited Westminster Abby in London. If you've been to this beautiful church building, you know that it is basically a church where famous people are buried. Although services are held there every Sunday, I didn't feel like I was in a church as much as I was in a cemetery with a roof on it. There are over 3,000 people who are buried or commemorated in Westminster Abbey.

But the main difference between Westminster Abbey and Hebrews 11 is that those named in Hebrews 11 are all alive. There are no dead people in Hebrews 11. These are all living saints—men and women who have conquered through faith. In this passage we are going to examine three principles about conquering faith.

### **1. THE HEROES OF FAITH: God uses imperfect people who trust him.**

The writer mentions six faith heroes in quick succession with no commentary. They are not even listed in chronological order. He mentions four judges, one king, and one prophet. The judges covered a period of time when everyone did what was right in their own eyes. The one thing they all have in common is they made plenty of mistakes. Gideon was a reluctant servant of God. He was so afraid of the Midianites that he was threshing wheat down in a basement where there was no wind to carry the husks of the wheat away. What a dirty, dusty, job that must have been. The angel of the Lord appeared and said, "Hello, there, mighty warrior!" Gideon said, "Who me? You've got the wrong guy. I'm from the lowest tribe, and my family is the weakest family in that tribe, and I'm the runt of the litter." But Gideon finally agreed to obey God by faith and he led the Israelites to a great victory. But in his last recorded act, he made an idol of gold that the people began worshipping.

And what about Barak? Yes, there is a Bible character who shared a name with our last President. Barak was a general for the Israelites, but two strong women overshadowed him. Deborah, who was a judge, giving him orders and Jael who was an assassin. Barak led the Israelites into battle against the Canaanite army led by Sisera. Every Canaanite soldier was killed except for General Sisera who escaped and found his way to Jael's tent looking to hide. Jael gave him some warm milk to drink and told him to lie down to sleep. When he was sound asleep, Jael took a tent peg and a hammer and nailed him through the head, killing the Canaanite general. Barak didn't even get the credit for winning the battle, but he had faith to follow the orders of God's judge, Deborah.

And we all know the story of Samson—a he-man with a she-problem. His strength came from his vow to God to live a holy life, but then he lived an unholy life. He lived a terrible life of violence and debauchery. And he ended up getting his hair cut in the devil's barbershop. But in his last act of faith, he brought destruction to the enemies of God.

Jephthah was the son of a prostitute who was driven away from his homeland. But he later became a mighty general who led the army of Israel to victory over the Ammorites. But he made a foolish vow. He said, "If the Lord gives me victory, I will offer the first person I see after battle as a human sacrifice." After he won the victory, his young daughter ran out to congratulate him. He was a man of faith, but a man with innocent blood on his hands.

David was a mighty man of faith, who killed Goliath with a slingshot, but then he was conquered by his own passions, and committed adultery and murder to cover up his sins.

Samuel was the last judge and the first prophet. He was a faithful leader. But when he retired, he made the mistake of appointing his two sons to be judges, and both were dishonest and corrupt.

The overriding message we learn from Hebrews 11 is that all these heroes were faithful failures. So here's the lesson: For all of us who are not perfect, God can still use us. In fact the Bible teaches us that God prefers to use those whom the world considers to be losers. Because when God chooses someone who has a lot of imperfections, He is the One who gets the glory, not that person.

In fact the Bible says, "God has chosen what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God has chosen what is insignificant and despised in the world—what is viewed as nothing—to bring to nothing what is viewed as something, so that no one may boast in his presence." (1 Corinthians 1:27-29)

Have you ever been named to any hall of fame? Were any of you ever listed in Who's Who? Elected class president or voted most likely to succeed? How many of you were ever named all-conference, all state, or most valuable player in sports? How many of you were in Phi Beta Kappa, or graduated with honors? How many of you have advanced degrees like a Ph.D., M.D. or Juris Doctorate? Now if you could have raised your hand I have a message for you. God can use you, but He'll just have to work a little harder. God does use the mighty and the noble, but He prefers to use ordinary people to do extraordinary things. So for those of who couldn't raise your hands, you are exactly the kind of people that God delights to use. Because with God, it's not about scholarship, it's about a relationship. It's not about fame; it's about faith. It's not about ability; it's about availability. That way, when God uses someone like Samson or David, or you or me, they can't boast, God gets all the credit. That's our first faith lesson.

## **2. THE VICTORY OF FAITH: God often performs miracles in response to faith.**

After mentioning six faith heroes by names the writer says "by faith" they conquered kingdoms. Then he goes on to mention several miracles that God performed in response to faith. The God of the Bible is a God of might and miracles. The Bible says, "Your ways, O God, are holy. What god is so great as our God? You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples." (Psalm 77:13-14)

We aren't given the particular names of those who received these miracles, but we can use the clues to suggest the names of these heroes of faith. David and Solomon conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and claimed what was promised. During the reign of these two kings, which occurred about 1,000 B.C., they lead Israel to become a great world power. Solomon's wisdom was so great that other world leaders came asking his advice. The borders of Israel were extended to include all the land that God had promised Abraham. David and Solomon weren't victorious, because they were skilled soldiers or wise judges, but because of their great faith in a God who performs miracles.

These verses speak of faith heroes who "shut the mouths of lions." Certainly we think of brave Daniel. Daniel had been evacuated from his homeland of Israel when the Babylonians conquered Judah. He had been taught in the king's inner circle, and had risen to a place of great responsibility in the government. But three times a day he would open the windows of his upstairs room and pray toward Jerusalem, giving thanks to his God.

Some of the government officials were jealous of Daniel's status, so they devised a scheme to trick the king into signing a law that for thirty days, all the people of Babylon could pray only to the king. The punishment for breaking this law would be to throw into a pit filled with hungry, ferocious lions.

Daniel heard about the law, but he didn't change his custom. He chose to obey the law of God rather than the law of man. He kept on praying to the one true Living God. Of course, his enemies had staked out his house and they immediately told the king that Daniel had broken the law. The king was distressed because he realized he had been used a pawn to punish his right hand man, Daniel. But the law of the Medes and the Persians couldn't be broken.

That night Daniel was tossed into a pride of hungry lions. The king sealed the opening to the lion's den and went and spent a sleepless night in the palace. But meanwhile in the lion's den, God sent an angel who gave those lions lockjaw. It was a cool night, so the lions lay down. Daniel pulled one up for a pillow and another lion for a blanket. Then he pulled out his Gideon Old Testament and started reading between the lions!

The next miracle describes those who quenched the fury of the flames. I think that's referring to the three Hebrew amigos, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They refused to bow down to a huge statue that looked like King Nebuchadnezzar. The King said, "I like you guys, so I'll give you a second chance. If you don't bow down, it's into the furnace with you." I love the profession of faith they made. They said, "Oh, King, our God is able to deliver us from the fire. But if not, we will still not bow down to your idol." Did you catch that? They said, "Our God is able. But even if He doesn't deliver us, we will not forsake Him. Some people have a weak "if God delivers me" faith. If God delivers me in this battle, I'll serve him. If God heals my child I will serve him. But true faith is the kind that says, "God is able. But even if He doesn't, I will still trust Him."

They were thrown into the fire and the King looked into the furnace and said, "Wait, we threw in three men, and yet I see four men walking around, and one of them looks like the Son of God." The three Hebrew amigos came out and the only thing burned were the ropes that had bound them. They didn't even smell like smoke. That's the victory of faith.

There were many who escaped the edge of the sword by faith, and one we know of was the prophet Elijah. Wicked Queen Jezebel vowed that she would cut off the head of that meddling prophet. But Elijah was taken to heaven with his head firmly attached to his neck and shoulders.

We read of weakness turned to strength. In Isaiah 38, King Hezekiah was sick to the point of death and God miraculously extended his life and he led the army of Israel to defeat the Assyrians.

We know of two at least two women whose sons were restored to life. The widow of Zarephath and the Shunammite woman both had sons who were resuscitated by Elijah and Elisha respectively.

So what do all these people in the list have in common? They all faced death and they were delivered. Whether it was lions, fires, sickness, or the sword, the mighty hand of God delivered them. They escaped death but they all eventually died in God's timing.

There are many of us here today who have faced life or death situations, and God delivered us. We're still here today! There have been times for many of us when we should have died, but we're still here. Sometimes people say, "I cheated death." No you didn't. God delivered you because it wasn't your time to die according to God's timing. Each of us is alive today through the power of God because the Bible says, "In Him we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17:28)

But notice our lesson again. God OFTEN performs miracles in response to our faith. But He doesn't always deliver us from danger. That leads to our final lesson.

### **3. THE REWARD OF FAITH: God promises a better resurrection for those who die in the Lord.**

This passage also speaks of: "Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection." Many escaped the edge of the sword, but not John the Baptist. Herod Antipas beheaded John at the request of his stepdaughter. A few years later, Herod Agrippa beheaded James, one of the twelve disciples.

This sentence serves as a dividing point in the Faith Hall of Fame. Everyone before it received a miracle of deliverance. But all the rest through the end of the chapter died. We're going to read about those who were stoned and sawn in half for their faith. The next message is entitled, "Faith to Endure Tough Times."

So why did God deliver some and not others? According to this passage He had something BETTER planned for them—a better resurrection.

In John 5 Jesus spoke about this resurrection. He said, "Do not be amazed at this, because a time is coming when all who are in the graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good things, to the resurrection of life, but those who have done wicked things, to the resurrection of condemnation." (John 5:28-29) There is a first resurrection that will take place when Jesus returns to raise the bodies of the people of faith and rapture the church. The second resurrection will happen when the dead are raised to be condemned at the Great White Throne Judgment. The Bible says, "Anyone whose name was not found written in the Lamb's book of life was cast into the lake of fire, which is the second death."

But if you have placed your faith in Christ, you don't have to fear condemnation. We find this promise in Revelation 20:6, "Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! The second death has no power over them."

It's only natural to wonder, "If the first resurrection hasn't happened yet, what's it like for those in heaven now?" They are in paradise with the Lord, and they are enjoying all the blessings of heaven. For much more information, I suggest you get a copy of my new book coming out in three weeks, *Pastor David's Travel Guide to Heaven*. I will be addressing all the questions you may have about heaven and the afterlife.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout the centuries, millions of Christians have suffered for their faith. Many of them were killed for their faith. Do you know the period of history when more Christians were killed for their faith than at any other time? You're living in it. It's now. Last May, a representative from the Vatican reported to the UN that 100,000 Christians are being killed for their faith each year. The Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Cromwell Seminary agrees with this number. That means that since our service began today, 11 Christians have been put to death. That's every hour, every, week, every month for a year.

For many of them the choice is to renounce Christ and live, or to confess Christ and die. As our scripture says, "Some who refused to be released were tortured."

There are 44 Muslim Majority countries where it is basically illegal for a Muslim to convert to Christ. But thousands are converting to Christ, and with that comes the threat of death. Why do they do it? Not only so that they can have an abundant life here, but to attain a better resurrection.

I think we've become too desensitized to the Muslim violence against Christians. It was on February 15, 2015 that ISIS lined up 21 Christians on a beach near Tripoli, Libya. They had all been given the chance to renounce Christ and be freed, but they refused, because they were looking forward to a better resurrection.

These Egyptian Christians were in Libya as part of a construction crew. They were kidnapped and tortured by ISIS. In the blood-chilling video the Christians were dressed in orange jumpsuits to copy what the Muslim detainees wear at Gitmo in Cuba.

But there's a story behind this beheading many people don't know. When the Coptic Church in Egypt started identifying the Egyptian Christians they only knew 20 of the 21. You can see the leader in the middle wearing camo. He is holding the only African man. He wasn't an Egyptian Christian. It was later reported by his family that his name is Matthew Ayariga from Chad. He was a Muslim man working on the construction detail. But when ISIS demanded that he confess Mohammed and live, he refused. He said that after he saw the strength and devotion of the Christians that he chose to worship the God that they worship. So instead of twenty Christians being killed, there were 21, including a recent convert to Christ who died looking for a better resurrection.

So what's the point for us? Faith loves God for He is now, but also for who He is after death. Faith loves God more than family. Faith loves God more than a job or a hobby, or making your first million. Faith loves God even to death. Faith says, "I love God even if he delivers me and heals me. But if not, I love God even if I am delivered to torture and death. Because I know that in the end there will be a better resurrection."

Paul calculated it this way. To live is Christ and to die is gain. Heads I win. Tails I win. That's the kind of conquering faith that overcomes the world.

## OUTLINE

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Jesus said, "Do not be amazed at this, because a time is coming when all who are in the graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good things, to the resurrection of life, but those who have done wicked things, to the resurrection of condemnation." *John 5:28-29*

"Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! The second death has no power over them." *Revelation 20:6*

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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes



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