



## VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

# HEROES FROM HEBREWS



The Greatest Generation

Hebrews 11:35–38

Tim Badal | August 26, 2018

Starting in Hebrews 11:35, we'll again be looking at more heroes of the faith. The book of Hebrews was written to a group of downtrodden and broken believers who were experiencing all kinds of rejection in their workplaces, communities and even in their families. This was not happening due to their political views or because they rooted for a particular sports team or even because of who they had as their friends—whether they hung out with the “in crowd” or the “out crowd.” Their suffering was specifically because they had become followers of Jesus Christ.

Whether they were old or young, whether they had been believers for a long time or not, many of them could have been tempted to give up on their faith. It might have simply become too difficult to follow Christ, as they considered how life was easier for their neighbors and friends and family members.

We too may have those thoughts when life throws us some difficult moments. We might pause and think, “Is it really worth being obedient? Is it really worth saying no to ourselves and the pleasures of this world to follow Jesus?” After all, when we follow Him, we get beat up by the devil or bombarded by the world. Life gets harder, not easier. Some of us may have walked into church this morning after a very, very difficult week, and we're not sure we're coming back again. We have suffered too much; we're struggling too much and we're asking, “Is it really worth it?”

This is the context of Hebrews 11. By looking at some of the greatest stories ever told of real men and women, the author seeks to remind his readers that suffering isn't the only outcome believers can expect. Some of these men and women experienced awesome victories: they were able to quench fires, they saw their children resurrected from the dead, and they watched foreign armies take flight.

But our passage today also reminds us that as followers of Christ—because we've said to Jesus, “I will...”—things won't always go well for us. There are many TV preachers who will tell us that by following Jesus we will be healthy and wealthy, but in order to make that doctrine work, they have to cut out large portions of Scriptures. In fact, this would be one passage they would never touch. Our text today is going to tell us that what these preachers are saying is heresy and a cancer to our souls.

We're going to learn that the life of the believer is not always victorious. Our lives are going to be difficult and painful. In fact, there will be times when we experience things no one around us seems to experience specifically because we follow Jesus Christ. Our passage this morning actually fights against our pursuit of comfort. But by the Holy Spirit's power, these words should compel us not to pursue our own comfort, but rather to pursue Christ-likeness. That's what God desires for us. He never promised us a life of comfort. In fact Jesus told His disciples—and it is true for us today as well—“*In this world you will have tribulation....*” He didn't say we'd find comfort. However, He went on to say, “*...but take heart; I have overcome the world*” (John 16:33).

Just because God has overcome the world, He doesn't take us out of our suffering. Rather, as He did with the Hebrew boys in Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—He enters into our suffering and makes His presence known, so we can shine brightly in a world of darkness.

This morning we're going to look at what I believe is one of the most heartbreaking passages in the entire New Testament. There is nothing pretty or glamorous or positive in these verses. But let's turn now to Hebrews 11, beginning in verse 35. This is what the writer of Hebrews says:

<sup>35</sup> Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. <sup>36</sup> Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. <sup>37</sup> They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— <sup>38</sup> of whom the world was not worthy— wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

Aren't you glad you came to church this morning? This is the Word of God, and this is our spiritual food for today.

As a competitive guy, there is a part of me that always wants to be known as "the greatest" or "the best." Maybe you're like that too. Whatever I get in to—even if it's the smallest of games or activities—I strive to be number one. I want to be on top. Now, it doesn't mean I'll cheat. It's just the competitive nature in me. But there are times when I know I'm not the best. That was proven last Sunday at Trivia Night. My team had great hopes that I would move them to wonderful trophies of trivia, only to find out I was not the best. In fact, we eked out second to last place. Not very good.

There are times when each of us has to own up and say, "I'm not the greatest or the best." I remember feeling this way when I picked up a book entitled *The Greatest Generation*, by NBC newscaster Tom Brokaw. This book chronicles the stories of people who lived during the era that is now called "The Greatest Generation"—those born between 1910 and 1924. It implies that all generations before and after are lesser. These other generations are given ambiguous names like "Millennials" or "Generation X" or "Baby Boomers" or "Busters." None of them have a grander or more catchy title than that group of individuals born between 1910 and 1924. What made this group "The Greatest Generation"? Brokaw says the reason is that they had learned to persevere. Here's what he says:

The World War II generation's perseverance through difficult times is a testament to their extraordinary character. Their remarkable actions during times of war and peace ultimately made the United States a better place in which to live. They were born and raised in a tumultuous era marked by war and economic depression. These men and women developed values of personal responsibility, duty, honor and faith.

These characteristics helped them to defeat Hitler, to build an American economy, make advances in science, and implement visionary programs. At every stage of their lives, they were part of historic challenges and achievements of a magnitude that the world has never before witnessed.

That's an amazing statement. "At every stage of their lives, they were part of historic challenges and achievements of a magnitude the world had never witnessed."

If you have questions about this, look at the inventions that were developed during that time. We go on vacations to see what these people built. Have you thought about that? These men and women built things that take your breath away, because they had a vision for the future. Brokaw continues, "They have given the succeeding generations the opportunity to accumulate great economic wealth."

By the way, one economist says that you and I are still experiencing the net effect of the Greatest Generation's impact on our economy. We're in the houses we're in and the cars we drive because of them. Much of what experience in life was not around prior to them. Each of the succeeding generations have gained prosperity because of them. In Brokaw's words, "They have given the succeeding generations the opportunity to accumulate great economic wealth, political muscle and the freedom from foreign oppression to make whatever choices they like." What an amazing group of people!

But notice something else about them. "It is a generation that by and large made no demands on homage from those who followed and prospered economically, politically and culturally because of its sacrifices." You would have thought that this group would have gotten big heads. You would have thought they would have said, "We're the best of the best." But it is said that some of our generations are the ones who think we have done so well. We are the ones who have affected so much change—whereas in fact, it is through their sacrifices that these things have been accomplished. Still, their attitude was this: "We don't need to be known. We'll let what we've done speak for us."

Finally, at the end of the book, Tom Brokaw says, "It is, I believe, the greatest generation any society has ever produced." In fact, FDR said of his generation that they had "a rendezvous with destiny." Why in the world would I talk about a group of people with such affection? Well, they did the hard stuff and were faithful when it mattered most and when their backs were against the wall.

But today I want to look at another generation that America did not produce. God produced a generation known for their perseverance and their endurance. When their backs were against the wall, they shone like the noonday sun. This generation did

not pursue notoriety. In fact, our text today does not mention a single person's name. They are the unknown soldiers of the Christian faith.

It is our great joy to see that God produced this greatest generation. What can we learn about them? What can we learn from these people who gave up their lives for the cause of Christ and His Kingdom? I'm going to show you three things that I believe they teach us.

## **If we want to be heroic in our faith, we must respect these titans of biblical history.**

To be honest, when I start to study a text like this, I feel sheer panic in my heart. How do I create a sermon from this? We don't have a certain person to rally around. We're not given a key word or verse to camp on and understand. We're not given anything positive, so it won't be something that lifts our spirits. What in the world can we do?

For starters, we can remember what these people did. As followers of Christ in a land of freedom and opportunity, we should be aware that most generations did not have what we have. The people mentioned in this text definitely did not enjoy these things. They stood tall amid the worst of circumstances. As we remember the titans, let's remember that we have it easy compared to them.

I thought long and hard about this, and I realized that none of the things mentioned that happened to them have happened to any of the people at Village Bible Church in the almost 15 years I've been ministering here. Nor have I ever read or heard in any news media of anyone in America during my lifetime who has experienced these things.

In other words, there is a sense in which this passage speaks of things foreign to us. Now, are these things happening in other parts of our world today? You bet they are and we need to be praying for those people and seeking to do whatever we can to alleviate this type of persecution. But here in America, it is absent from our lives.

This begs the question: why, in our lives filled with such ease and opportunity, are we not more outspoken about the cause of Christ? If we don't have to worry about being tortured or being sawn in half, then what keeps us from being bold and confident with the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Oh, I know. We'll be laughed at. We won't get invited to the "cool kid" parties or the neighborhood parties. Those are first-world problems, right? Not at all. This should kick us in the pants, reminding us that people who had it way more difficult than we do were still confident and faithful to pursue the cause of Christ in their lives.

So why can't we? What's holding us back? The devil has us so distracted and so fearful that we walk around with a loser's limp, even though we are victorious in Christ Jesus. This text should bring a complete guilt trip to every one of us, including the one preaching it to you. We're not doing enough, yet we have it so easy.

Second, I want you to remember we have been given no names in this passage. At the end of this "Hall of Faith" in which many names were mentioned, here there are no names given. We could take the different events shared—all of them ugly—and we can attach the names of different prophets or patriarchs to them. The life of faith in the Old Testament was a time filled with great suffering.

However, there are clues to these stories. One such clue is the phrase "sawn in two." Nowhere in the Old Testament do we read of anyone experiencing this. Other descriptions can be applied to Old Testament characters, including torture, imprisonment, mocking, floggings and chains. They were killed by the sword. Many of the prophets went about in skins of sheep and goats and were otherwise destitute and afflicted.

But the "sawn in two" description? That's a new one. Jewish writings however, in a piece called "The Martyrdom of the Prophet Isaiah," give us this story. The evil king Manasseh, because he was tired of hearing about God's Kingdom preached and the people of Israel being called to repentance by the prophet Isaiah, took Isaiah and cut him into pieces before a group of people. The writing recounts that Isaiah "neither cried aloud nor wept, but his lips spoke with the Holy Spirit until he was sawn in two." I don't know if that's what really happened, although the writing appears to be ancient and reputable. Nonetheless, we know from Hebrews that it happened somewhere, in some place, to someone, and that individual was found to be faithful.

Speaking of being tortured and not accepting release, we can go to an apocryphal book written by Jewish historians during the time between Malachi and Matthew. The apocryphal books are not in what we call our canon of Scripture. They're not bad books by any stretch of the mind—in fact, we can glean important history from them.

For example, in the books of 1 and 2 Maccabees, we learn how the Jewish people experienced a great victory against the Roman Empire and because of that, they now celebrate this with a tradition of certain nights when candles are lit—what is called Hanukkah.

And in 2 Maccabees 6 and 7, we are told of an older woman who was faithful to God. When the authorities told her that she must defile her God by eating food sacrificed to foreign idols and to otherwise denounce God through worshipping other gods, she refused. The story tells us that at this point they brought in seven of her sons, then as she was watching, they were tortured and killed in front of her. But through all of this, she remained faithful to God despite the huge cost.

Another story from this book tells of a man named Eleazar who was beaten and tortured by the evil ruler Antiochus Epiphanes. This was the king who brought the “abomination of desolation” in Jerusalem by sacrificing a pig on the altar in the temple’s Holy of Holies as an offering to his gods. The story tells us that when he was being put to death after being tortured, he uttered these words to the very men who were killing him: “I might, for the present, avoid man’s punishment. but alive or dead, I shall never escape the hand of the Almighty. You can do what you will with me, and if I’m not faithful, I may live another day. I may escape your hand, but I will never escape the hand of Almighty God. So, kill away. I’ve got a better home coming.”

Today, we are enamored by made-up people with made-up powers, but these are stories we should tell. The superheroes we should be paying attention to and commending are these nameless men and women who, in the middle of incredible troubles, stood tall for their faith.

Rather than listening to the millions of mindless people like ourselves who watch these made-up stories on our movie screens, we should realize that God has said, “The world is not worthy of these people. Even the world I created is not good enough for these people. They are great, and they are to be commended. They are the greatest generation.”

What did they do? I want to look at three things they did.

### **These titans spoke up against sin.**

We know that some of the prophets are included in this group, perhaps some of whom are the minor prophets we don’t know as much about. But all of them stood up, probably with shaking knees, saying, “Thus saith the Lord.” They knew when they went before the kings and others in authority that their message would not be well received. They knew they could die. Nevertheless, they cleared their throats and spoke the words God had given them, words for which the world would condemn them to death. We might be thinking, “That doesn’t happen today.”

Well, the Cubs just brought on a new player, Daniel Murphy, from the Washington Nationals. Since the All-Star break, Daniel Murphy is the best hitter in the National League. You would think sports talk radio would have loved this guy. The Cubs got him for practically nothing. But do you know what that whole day of sports talk radio focused on? This devoutly Christian man had spoken against homosexuality. Any person like that should be barred from any profession, including baseball. So people were picketing, saying he should never have been acquired by the Cubs.

The first seven questions in his press conference had to do with how obstinate, bigoted and hateful he was. But if you look at what he said, he spoke words of love. Still, he stood his ground. “I don’t agree, and God’s Word does not agree, with this as a lifestyle.” He said this with respect, honesty, and clarity, and the world hates him for it. It’s as though those calling in want some of the things that happened to the people in our text to happen to Daniel Murphy. You know what? The radio host loved it.

We have to speak up against sin, doing so with grace and mercy and hope. We need to speak with love in our hearts, without being jerks. But we need to speak up against sin. Too often we back away when we should be declaring why we live the way we do and why we should be telling others that when they pursue sinful things, they are removing themselves from God’s favor and God’s blessing. These people mentioned in Hebrews spoke out against sin.

### **These titans stood for what was right.**

They recognized that certain times and situations were important, but instead of backing away and hiding in the masses, they took a step forward, standing tall and proud for the glory of God. They announced to the world, “What you are doing is wrong.” They lived out what Proverbs 31:8–9 tells us to do: “*Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.*”

God has called us to be advocates for those around us who have needs. Some of the most vicious responses Jesus would get from the religious establishment were when He went between someone who was needy and the powerful. They hated Him for that, and

they'll hate us for that. That's why we need to speak up for the unborn. No one else will do it and the world will hate us for it. They'll say we are unloving toward women.

### **These titans suffered unbelievable pain.**

We need to stand up for the marginalized, the alien, and the poor. As Christians, we're called to serve and protect them, even if it means we have to suffer unbelievable pain. Do we have to suffer? They did. They did what was right, and what did it get them? Pain and sorrow. As I mentioned, our text refutes the health and wealth heresy.

It also shows us the fierce opposition the devil brings. Listen, the devil wants you dead. If you think he's a guy in red pajamas with a pitchfork like some Halloween costume, you are wrong. The Bible says he is a roaring lion seeking those whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). He has his sights set on the church, including the elders and any man, woman, or child who will make the cause of Christ their focus. If that's you, you will experience Satan's hottest fire when you stand for what is right. When you do the will of God, the devil will do everything in his power to stop you. We need to understand this and be ready for it. Jesus told us we would experience rejection, injustice, ill treatment, torture, or even death, all for the sake of the gospel.

Fast forward for a moment to Hebrews 12:4. Notice what the writer says as part of his larger thought. After turning our attention to these people who have been tortured and are suffering horrific hardships, he then says, *"In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood."*

As bad as we may have it, Jesus had it worse. He shed His blood—not for His sins, but for the sins of all men and women. We need to take heart, knowing the One Who saved us, Who loves us, Who will take care of us, and Who will never leave or forsake us, is the One Who Himself endured such incredible hardship for our sake. Jesus calls us to this when He says we are to deny ourselves and take up our cross (Luke 9:23), a symbol of pain and torture and eventual death. He even says He wants us to do this daily. This is what Christianity is. It's what we're called to. So, we must remember the titans and what they did.

### **If we want to be heroic in our faith, we must resist the temptation to give up.**

When we read a passage like this and try to put ourselves in their situations, we say, "I don't think I could do it. I don't think I want to do it." Those are honest responses. As humans, we push suffering away and do what we can to avoid it. But when do our temptations become hottest?

### **Temptations come when life is hard and when it hurts.**

Maybe you're in a hard season in life, in a hurting season in life. The great temptation that you and I have in these times is to throw up our hands and say, "Enough is enough. I'm tapping out. I'm done."

Recently I was with some friends. We had never done this before, but we came across some MMA fighting—mixed martial arts. Two guys, who seem to be smarter than this, get into a ring, then grapple, kick, punch and wrestle with each other. One guy ended up a bloody mess. But in the middle of the fight, one of them said, "I'm done," and he tapped out. It happened so quickly—and the fight was over.

Some of you are beat up, bloodied and bruised, yet the enemy keeps pounding on you. Instead of continuing to fight, instead of keeping on by the power of God, it's so much easier to tap out. Some of you are tempted to quit.

### **In those moments, we choose survival or the Savior.**

In those moments we have two choices. When life is hard, when it hurts, we can pursue one of two things. First, we can choose our own survival. In the face of trouble, we get a bunker mentality—it's all about us and how we can somehow protect our comfort. We'll do whatever it takes to keep the bad suffering out.

When Amanda was diagnosed with cancer, that was my initial response. I had to circle the wagons. I needed to protect my life from this evil thing that was threatening it. As a good husband and dad, I had to protect my family—as if I could somehow stop cancer from afflicting my wife.

Some of us do this. We make our lives a survival game, trying to figure out how to keep things safe. It's the ultimate "Oregon Trail" game. At every step, we make sure there are no enemies nearby, that disease or other troubles are kept away. We try to protect ourselves from the rest of the world, so we can keep maintain a life of comfort.

But that's not what God has called us to. God did not give you custodial rights over your survival. In fact, God says, "Your life is in the palm of My hand." We need to relinquish our survival mechanisms; instead we need to pursue the Savior. He is the One Who suffered, Who endured ridicule and mocking and torture. He is the One Who promised that we would experience these things as well.

Until we experience these things, American Christian, we should be all the more confident and bold to take every opportunity to share the good news of Jesus Christ—because we don't have to worry about that stuff. We don't have to worry about being tortured or flogged or sawn in two. All we have to worry about is maybe some ridicule and mockery, or maybe the loss of a job. It's time for us to stop trying to survive and do what our Jesus did: seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). We have to stick our necks out and be willing to take a risk.

## **If we want to be heroic in our faith, we must remember that trusting God's Word is key.**

How were the men and women in our text able to endure all these difficulties and horror? How could they stand amid great opposition even in the most difficult of trials? They did so by doing two things. I won't go into detail here, because I don't want to steal next week's thunder, so let's simply close out this sermon.

### **This means leaving this world behind.**

First, they left the world behind. You can endure a lot when you know this is not what God intended for you. This isn't the ball game. This is all pre-season, pre-game preparation. What is 70 years of comfort, or 70 years of trials, in light of eternity? We've got a whole eternity ahead of us, folks—an eternity where we will rule and reign with Christ. That's why Paul can speak of "*this slight momentary affliction*" that can't be compared to the "*eternal weight of glory*" (2 Corinthians 4:17).

### **This means looking for what's to come.**

Whatever is going on here, whatever we endure now, these things are temporal, but the eternal is coming. That's what we need to look toward. The Bible says, "*No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him*" (1 Corinthians 2:9). These people endured, knowing that being absent from the body meant to be present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8). They knew—as did Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—that whether they lived or died, it was okay because they were with God.

As Christians who are going to go out into a new day, a new week—without having to worry about a lot of these things—we need to let go of this world a little bit. We need to loosen our grasp and start living in light of the eternity that is to come. This Greatest Generation got it right. They recognized that Jesus was right, that this world would cause us trouble.

So they lived by faith and with eternity on their hearts. They lived with full confidence, as we too are called to live, that our Savior and Lord has overcome the world and destroyed the powers of hell and death and Satan. Because of that, you and I have been made more than conquerors in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:31–39). Let's go live that way. Let's be bold and confident, knowing that whether we live or die, we have Christ on our side (Romans 14:8–9)—and that is more than enough.