



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

HEROES FROM HEBREWS

Finish Line Faith – Hebrews 11:32-35
Steve Lombardo | August 19, 2018



Winning is good. I would say to you that winning is good. I realize that we live in a day and age when winning is downplayed, or it's not as important as it could be. I understand the type of thinking that would want to downplay some aspects of winning. As we're teaching our kids to play sports, I get it that winning isn't everything. It matters a little bit, but it's more about how you play the game. That's true and I think it's good to teach our kids that when we play sports, it's not just about winning—it's about developing character, playing hard and doing all those things.

But I'm here to tell you that winning does matter. Winning is a good thing. The first time I ever won a significant amount of money was when I first became a pastor. I shared with you that I had tried to plant a church, but it didn't work. Then the first church I went to called me to be their pastor.

As a young pastor there, I went to a local elementary basketball game. I walked in and paid the two bucks to watch the game. There was also an option to buy a 50-50 raffle ticket. I thought, "I'd like to support my local team and local community," so I bought that ticket as well. I went in to the gym, found some people from the church—in fact, the place seemed to be packed with mostly church people. We got to half-time and they brought out the 50-50 drawing. It was a big drawing. They drew the winner. "Steve Lombardo, would you please come down and receive your 50-50 winnings!"

I think the lights all went dim, a big spotlight came on me, and now, here's the gambling pastor walking down to get his winnings. I was so embarrassed. I thought, "This is terrible. I'm the new pastor in town and I'm endorsing the gambling thing." But even with that, it was still great to win. To get that money was so good. It pains me to say that I did give it all back to the program. It hurt, by the way, to do that.

Even with that tie to gambling and organized crime (not really), I enjoyed winning because winning is a good thing. I'm not going to go along with everybody else and say winning doesn't matter. Winning does matter. Do you want to win in your life? Yes. You want to excel at the things you do. You want to win at your job. You want to work hard. You want to get that promotion. You want to get that bonus. You want to work hard for that. You're going to show yourself to be approved by your boss.

I want to work hard in my relationships and I want to win in my relationships. I won with my wife. That's a big win for me and it's a good thing. I'm not going to downplay it. Now, I get some of the other stuff we want to be careful with regarding our kids. Winning isn't the only thing. But I am here to say that winning is good.

Today we're going to look at some winners in Scripture from Hebrews 11, and we'll see how they won big time in their faith. They won in some incredible ways. As we get ready to look at this Scripture, I want to show you an incredible victory that happened in the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. Here's the speed skating video.

Video: Now it's only one man across the line for gold. It will be over in 90 seconds. Mathieu Turcotte takes the lead. He will advance to the semi-finals. There's the young Korean skater sliding on the inside. Sometimes you don't even know where he is, he's so small. He slips in there, right now hanging back in fourth. Trying to pass on the inside. Some jostling. Turcotte has to be careful. He does not want to get disqualified. It's only six laps to go. He does not want to get caught in

the back when the pace really picks up. Now Ahn from Korea has taken the lead. Turcotte from Canada is second. Li Jiajun is third, and Ohno is fourth.

Li Jiajun moving on the inside track with Turcotte. Jiajun is slipping, and there goes Apolo on the inside. He got past two, but still trailing the Korean. The 16-year-old bespectacled skater is now the obstacle between Ohno and gold. Apolo is in a great position right now, with only two and half laps to go. Ohno moves to the outside. Li Jiajun coming up on the inside. It's going to be between these two. A lap and a half. And Ohno hears the bell. One lap to go. He's reaching back for one more tier. Trying to hold up the lead. [Lots of shouting.] They all fall down! Steven Bradbury of Australia is across the line. Four skaters go down. Just when you think you've seen everything in short track, we get stunned again. Ohno, just yards from gold, but there was too much jostling in that last turn, mostly between Ohno and Li Jiajun....

Steve: Steven Bradbury won that race at the very end. He had never won any gold or silver medal, nor anything in the Olympics. He won the gold medal in the 2002 speed skating. Steven Bradbury, Australian speed skater. You saw him behind, and he just all of a sudden found it wide open, so he went right through to the finish line. It was an incredible victory.

I'm here to tell you that God shows us incredible victories in this life. It's not guaranteed to us, as we're going to see. But it does happen. God does the miraculous. He is still a miracle-working God. Today we're going to look at some incredible stories—true stories—of God's people who experienced these powerful victories in extraordinary ways. I invite you to go to Hebrews 11 where we'll start reading in verse 32 (NIV):

³² *And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ 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.*

³⁵ *Women received back their dead, raised to life again.*

Let's start with our first point.

God uses all kinds of people.

If you've been through Hebrews 11 with us this summer, you've seen that God is using all different types of people. He used Rahab the prostitute. He used Abel way back in the beginning. It's an incredibly diverse group of people. Now when we get to the end of the chapter, we get a flash of names from the author of Hebrews. So if you're here today and you think you're not perfect, if you're wondering if God can use you and wondering if you have enough faith to be a member of the Hall of Faith—look at these people who are listed here.

First, a couple of these are men who had doubts. They were unsure of themselves. That would include Gideon and Barak. I want to briefly show you a little snapshot of both Gideon's and Barak's lives, to see how God used them despite what some people might consider to be disqualifying deficiencies in their faith.

In Judges 6, Gideon was called by God to drive out the Amalekites, Midianites and other groups who were opposing Israel. He was asked to be a powerful man of war who would rise up and deliver God's people from the threats of their enemies. As a matter of fact, an angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon in verse 12, saying, *"The Lord is with you, mighty warrior."* It's amazing that God called him a mighty warrior.

Verse 13: *"And Gideon said to him, 'Please, sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?' But now the Lord has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian.'"* The Lord actually showed up and spoke to him, yet his first response was one of doubt.

¹⁶ *And the Lord said to him, "But I will be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man." ¹⁷ And he said to him, "If now I have found favor in your eyes, then show me a sign that it is you who speaks with me. ¹⁸ Please do not depart from here until I come to you and bring out my present and set it before you."*

The Lord had made Himself known to Gideon, even calling him a mighty warrior. He told him, "You're going to be My guy. You're going to deliver My people, the nation Israel, from the hands of the Amalekites and the Midianites." Gideon replied, "Okay, but if it's really You, just stay here for a minute and let me get some food. I'll be back. If I'm not making this up or going crazy, then we'll proceed from there." So the angel of God stayed, and Gideon came back with a meal, which he cooked and they ate together.

²² *Then Gideon perceived that he was the angel of the Lord. And Gideon said, "Alas, O Lord God! For now I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face."*

²³ *But the Lord said to him, "Peace be to you. Do not fear; you shall not die."*

What this text calls the angel of the Lord is probably the pre-incarnate Christ appearing to Gideon. Verse 27: *"So Gideon took ten men of his servants and did as the Lord had told him. But because he was too afraid of his family and the men of the town to do it by day, he did it by night."* Gideon was told by God Himself to cut down the idols of Baal and destroy the worship places of the Asherah. He did just that, although he waited until after dark to obey God. He was still doubtful and unsure.

If you move ahead to the end of Judges 6—and if you went to Sunday School, you probably learned this story—it tells about Gideon and his fleece. He put the fleece outside and he said, "God, if this is really a message from You, make the fleece wet and everything else dry." The next morning, that was the case. But then Gideon said, "God, I hate to ask You again, but this time do the opposite. If it's really You, let the fleece be dry and everything else be wet." God answered that prayer as well.

When I read this, I see myself in Gideon. He's unsure. God has called him a mighty warrior and he makes it to this list in Hebrews 11. But still he doubted. He had questions.

Barak experienced similar doubts. In Judges 4 we see that he was also a man God called to deliver God's people. I should mention that the whole book of Judges is about people of Israel doing what was right in their own eyes. God then raised up judges to lead and guide the people, delivering the Israelites from their enemies.

Barak was one of these judges. God called Barak through the prophetess Deborah to lead the people into battle. In Judges 4:8 we read, *"Barak said to her, 'If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go.'" So here's another man in our list whom God called and who was still filled with doubt. Even though Deborah had made it plain to him that he was God's chosen man for this calling, he only agreed to do it if she would come with him.*

Deborah agreed to go, but she told Barak that the person who would win the battle would not be a man, but a woman. And one of the most incredibly gory stories of the Bible is found in the rest of Judges 4. If you'd like to read that tonight before you go to bed, it's about somebody getting a tent peg through their head, pinning them to the ground. That's an Excedrin headache.

The list in Hebrews goes on. Samson is next on the list and his story is found in Judges 13–16. You could pick him apart if you want to because he was a prideful man with a hot temper who was filled with lust. There were many sins that proved to be stumbling blocks to him. Even at his death, he said some things that aren't quite what you would want someone who was called of God to say. Look at Judges 16. Samson had had his hair cut, he had lost his strength and he was taken by the Philistines, who blinded him and put him in jail. Let's start reading at verse 23:

²³ *Now the lords of the Philistines gathered to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to rejoice, and they said, "Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hand."²⁴ And when the people saw him, they praised their god. For they said, "Our god has given our enemy into our hand, the ravager of our country, who has killed many of us."²⁵ And when their hearts were merry, they said, "Call Samson, that he may entertain us." So they called Samson out of the prison, and he entertained them.*

These were pagan people who hated God and worshipped a demonic deity named Dagon. They had conquered God's mighty man Samson and blinded him, reducing him to a weakling. Here was a man who had been a powerful warrior, who had killed hundreds of Philistines by his might, even a thousand men with the jawbone of a donkey. But now he was paraded in front of them as a poor blind soul.

Verse 28: *"Then Samson called to the Lord and said, 'O Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes.'" A better prayer at this point might have been something like, "O Lord, these people have done what is evil in Your sight and they continue to rebel against You. Let me be an instrument of Your judgment upon them, that they would be remembered no more but You would be remembered." Instead, all he said was, "Let me get revenge for my eyes." I can see myself in Samson.*

²⁹ *And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and he leaned his weight against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other.³⁰ And Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines." Then he bowed with all his strength, and the house fell upon the lords and upon all the people who were in it. So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he had killed during his life.*

That was Samson, who is in the Hebrews list even though he was a prideful, hot-tempered, lustful man who even in the end didn't really have his thinking straight.

Then we have the story of Jephthah in Judges 11. Briefly, this man had what I would call a challenging childhood. At the beginning of the chapter we learn that his mother was a prostitute. After other sons were born, his father and brothers put him out of the house. They ridiculed him because of his mother, which he had nothing to do with. Yet Jephthah was called and used by God.

Moving to David, we know he was a sinner. Through the lust of the flesh, he saw a woman and had to have her. She got pregnant, then in order to cover up the pregnancy, he had her husband killed in battle. This is David in our list—a sinner.

We even have someone who had an unbelieving and unsupportive family—Samuel. We read in 1 Samuel 8 that Samuel's sons did not follow in their father's ways. Samuel was a mighty prophet of God who followed God, but we can question how he raised his kids. Evidently, they rejected God, which led the nation of Israel to ask for a king to lead them instead of Samuel's sons. So, Samuel was a prophet with an unbelieving family.

The author of Hebrews starts this list by saying, "And what more shall I say? I don't have time." It's as if he's saying, "There's a really long list and I could say so much more about each of these." But from what we just looked at in their stories, I would say we have reasons to forget these guys. In my mind, they should be forgotten for what they had done. But that's not our God Who is rich in love, mercy and grace so He kept them on the list.

This God, Who loves us with an everlasting love, Who has died in our place on the cross of Calvary, keeps us on the list despite our sin and shortcomings. So, when we say God uses all kinds of people, it's true. These people were used mightily by God. But I would add to this that God saves all kinds of people.

This is a mission throughout our church. It's really the Great Commission that Jesus gave to all of us, that we would go out into the world and make disciples of all the nations. We're trying to do that in Plano—to bring people to salvation. The message to the people in Plano, and to the people here, is that God saves all kinds of people, no matter who you are, no matter what your background is. You can have an unbelieving and unsupportive family. You can have a challenging childhood. You can have doubts galore. But I'm here to tell you that God saves people and it doesn't matter what their background is. When I do new membership classes, some people tell me they can't come. They're afraid the classroom will fall down on them because of where they've been or what they've done or who they are. But I'm here to tell you, this list contains people with some real junk and still they're in the Hall of Faith. God saves all kinds of people and He wants to save you. This is our God. Romans 5:8 says, "*God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*" I wonder if that can sink into our heads, that Jesus died for us when we were at our lowest, when we were farthest from Him, when we were struggling in our sin. That's the point at which He loved us and died for us. God doesn't wait for you to change yourself to gain His love. He loved you at your worst.

I love this statement: God doesn't love you for who you are; God loves you because of what He's done. You might have a rotten family. You might have had a rough childhood or lived on the wrong side of the tracks your whole life. You might have come here this morning with doubts, wondering if you would even be allowed to come to God. Maybe you're going through some serious stuff in your life and it's hard to believe God is even there. You want to believe, but it's a struggle. Even if the state you're in right now isn't the best, Jesus died for you at your worst. This is the amazing message of salvation that we have been given. God uses all kinds of people and saves all kinds of people.

God promises victory to all His people.

³² And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵ Women received back their dead by resurrection.

We'll look at this list a little more in depth in a minute, but the point here is that the people of faith won. Remember we began this message by saying that winning is a big deal. It's a good thing." How many people want to win in life? How many want to win in their careers? How many people want to win in their marriage? Winning is a good thing and the people of faith—the people who trusted in God—won. I love that. Winning is a good thing. There is victory in Jesus Christ. This is salvation. We must be saved.

As the Early Church Fathers and the Reformers would say, "We need to be saved from sin, death and the power of the devil." There is salvation in Jesus Christ in all those areas of our lives. If you're in Jesus Christ, that means you're trusting in Him. You believe in Him and you're a new creation. You have victory. Even though you might fail and even though you might falter, there is a victory guaranteed for you in the Lord Jesus Christ.

There's victory over temptation, as it says in 1 Corinthians 10:13. When you're tempted, know that God provides a way out. You might be tempted to go into sin, but if you look another way, you'll see there is a way out. God has promised you deliverance and victory.

There's also victory against the world. In John 16:33 Jesus said, *"In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."* The world might be beating you down. The circumstances that surround you might be terrible. But God gives you victory through Jesus Christ even in the world.

How about against the devil? In 1 John 4:4 we read, *"He who is in you" —Jesus— "is greater than he who is in the world."* The devil is real. Demons are real. The spiritual world is a frightening one, but the One Who lives in you is greater than all.

Even death is swallowed up in victory. *"O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ"* (1 Corinthians 15:55–57). Even though we're all going to face death, it doesn't gain the victory over God's people. God promises victory to all of His people.

As a pastor, one of the things I really cherish is being with people when they die. I've been with a lot of people around that time, or up to that time, or just after that time. But to actually be there at the time of death is more rare, but it does happen. I remember when I was at the bedside of one of the first people I ever saw die, something happened that has never happened since and I want to tell you about it.

About a year and a half before that fateful day, a man in the church I served was diagnosed with inoperable liver cancer. He had a couple different options, but none of them promised to do much. He was going to try chemo—a lot of you are probably familiar with this with friends or family. Even though it made his quality of life worse, he tried it for a little while just to see if it would do anything. He was 82 years old but was still strong enough to work and was otherwise in good shape. It actually was a shock to everyone when he got his diagnosis and was given less than two years to live.

Over the next year and a half, I would visit him at his house, asking how he was doing and praying with him. We prayed for two things. First, we prayed for healing, for God to supernaturally step in. God is the Great Physician, so it is always right to ask Him to heal. We are told to cast all our cares on the Lord (1 Peter 5:6–7), and we believed He could take those cares.

The second thing we always prayed for was that if God wasn't going to heal him in that way, that God would take him quickly. This man was sure of his place in heaven, not because of himself, but because of Christ. He just asked that God would come quickly, and perhaps in His mercy spare some of the suffering that often comes with this kind of cancer.

He didn't respond to any of the chemo, although he went through a second round for the sake of his family. He got worse and worse. Then I got the phone call that he was dying, so I went to the house. All the family was there. All the grandkids were there. Hospice and the nurses were there. He was up that morning but had been in bed the rest of that day. I went over to his bedside. He had just fallen into unconsciousness, which is why they called me. I was on one side of him and his wife was on the other. I held his hand and spoke briefly, then prayed for him like we always prayed.

In that moment, I prayed, *"God, You can heal him even now and we ask for that. But if that's not Your will, we also pray, Lord, that You would deliver him from this body of sin and death to the glorious future we trust that he has in Jesus Christ. Amen."* At that point, he stopped breathing. A couple minutes later the nurse came over to confirm he was gone. I remember the crying in the house. He was a much-loved man. But I could tell it was a different kind of crying. Yes, it was a crying of sorrow, but it was also a crying of joy. God had delivered Grandpa from his body of sin and death. Even in that moment, everyone who was around there saw it and knew that God had taken him.

A few days later we went to the funeral, celebrated his life and celebrated life in Jesus Christ. We talked about how Jesus said in John 11:25, *"I am the resurrection and the life..."* Jesus raised dead Lazarus and He can raise us to life. God gives victory to His people.

God's victories are glorious victories.

This list in Hebrews 11 is incredible. It's an amazing thing to read what these people did. After listing all these names, he says in verse 32, *"...and the prophets."* The men and women he listed and the prophets who aren't listed, each did these amazing things. They *"conquered kingdoms and enforced justice."*

Let's do some audience participation. Call out who you think the text is talking about next? Who *"stopped the mouths of lions"*? Daniel. Who *"quenched the power of fire"*? Maybe Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Who *"escaped the edge of the sword"*? There

were many of those who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. And women *“received back their dead.”* What prophets raised someone to life? Elijah and Elisha.

These are amazing things that happened. God is capable, and He still does the miraculous. Even in our scientific day and age, I'm here to tell you that God still works miracles. We're more part of the reformed evangelical church movement, and sometimes we shy away from the charismatic things that seem kind of crazy and wacky. But we should not forget that God does miraculous things and while you still have breath, you still have hope. I love that.

God does the miraculous here in this list. God's victories are glorious victories. This text goes on and we see there is another set of people who gained the victory, but not in the way the world would define as being glorious. These are hard victories. They're victories that only God knows and that people who are behind the scene see. These people were getting torn apart. They were not making foreign enemies run away. They were getting trampled by foreign enemies. We'll cover that next week.

But today let's sit in the glorious victories of this week. There are dead people being raised to life. Armies are running away. These are powerful victories; God's glorious victories. God is still a miracle-working God. So, when you pray and when you cast your cares on the Lord, know this: God does the miraculous.

Now, the normal way of things is that God works according to the way of the created order. The normal part of life is that, unless God steps in in a supernatural and miraculous way—which He can—things operate the way He's created them to operate. But here's the thing I want you to remember. Foxhole prayers are still prayers. They might not be the best, but I'm still going to pray them.

You know what *“foxhole prayers”* are, right? They're when you're in a terrible situation. Foxholes are where you hide in battle. People who never would otherwise pray to God and who previously had always disparaged Him, will call out to God when they're in a foxhole and facing the real possibility of death. At that point they'll say the Lord's Prayer or anything else they can remember.

You're going to go to lunch today at McDonald's and when you sit down to eat, you'll pray, *“Lord, bless this food to our bodies we pray. Amen.”* Well, God has to do a lot of miraculous things to get that blessing in your body. Or, *“God, please keep me safe. I'm going skydiving.”* God has to step in. Those are a kind of foxhole prayers. God normally operates according to the way He's created things. Let's get that in our minds first. God has created a way to live that He's told us about in His Word. If we follow it, we'll have the best possible life we can. But even then we might run into bumps in the road, because there is sin in the world. In fact, more than just bumps, we might run into things that will derail our lives because we live in a sinful world.

But take heart—Jesus has overcome the world (John 16:33). There are glorious victories in the Lord Jesus Christ. Remember, these victories are awesome, and we want to rejoice in them. Our God can blow away anything and anyone. That's my God and that's Who I'm associating with. He's the God Who raises the dead.

My Grandpa was the first family member close to me to die. When I stood by the fresh grave, I mourned and cried. But I knew it wasn't the end, because God has victory even over death. That's the God we serve. Victories we have in God are glorious.

In conclusion, as I thought about these things—and I believe they're right in the text—I believe God uses all kinds of people. He promises victory and they are glorious victories. But then I thought, *“What would stop me from participating in this life this way? What would stop you, as a church and as an individual, from experiencing these great victories? What are the things that threaten our faith—our finish line faith?”*

The big one is this: unconfessed sin. We've been reminded in this series that unconfessed sin can bring down even the greatest of people. We see a local church in our area whose leadership faltered and failed. There was unconfessed sin that went unchecked and therefore brought that church low and brought shame to the name of Christ. May we be a people who are confessing our sins one to another; may we be repenting of those sins. May we be a people who are rejoicing in God's victories on the one hand, and may we be broken and confessing on the other. That's what we're praying for God to do in Plano. That's what we're praying for God to do here in Sugar Grove. That's what we're praying for God to do at Village Bible Church and around the world, wherever Jesus' name is proclaimed and believed.