

³²And what more should I say? There would not be enough time for me to continue to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets. ³³By faith they conquered kingdoms, carried out justice, obtained things that were promised, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched the power of fire, escaped the edges of the sword, were made powerful after being weak, became mighty in battle, and caused foreign armies to flee. ³⁵Women received back their dead by resurrection. And others who were tortured did not accept their release, so that they may take part in a better resurrection. ³⁶Still others experienced mocking and lashes, in addition to chains and imprisonment. ³⁷They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were tempted; they were killed with the sword; they went around in sheepskins and goatskins, needy, afflicted, and mistreated. ³⁸The world was not worthy of them as they wandered in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.

³⁹All of these were commended in Scripture by faith, yet they did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰because God had planned something better for us, namely, that they would not reach the goal apart from us.

Where will your name be written for everyone to see? A few years ago, when we first moved up here, we were down in Green Bay to go on a tour of Lambeau Field with some family that came in from out-of-state. We were waiting for the tour to start, so I wandered the atrium and looked at all the stuff you don't normally pay any attention to when you're not trying to kill time. And in the corner of the atrium was a wall with the names of all the high school football coaches in the Wisconsin state hall of fame. I scanned the list, and low and behold, I found two names I knew well, two of my old high school teachers. And I thought how cool it must be to have your name even listed in some dimly lit corner of America's most storied football stadium.

Today we take a tour of a different hall of fame. The writer to the Hebrews shows us the hall of heroes of faith. Name after name is listed, believers who boldly lived the faith in their ages. But the section of scripture in front of us this morning is from the end of the tour. After taking time to talk about each saint listed before this, the writer gives us the hundred-firework grand finale. Name after name is listed, and then he gets to the unnamed, those who endured torture, persecution, and death.

On All Saint's Day, we remember those who went before us. These people were not perfect. They were not voted on as saints by councils or popes. They were people who clung to Christ when every pressure of the world pressed down on them. They were those who endured the fires of trial when their every muscle told them to cry "uncle." We remember them, because their story is so tied to our story. They were not alone, and neither are we. And so, here's the

question for us today: Will we hold on like they did? Will we caravan together in faith even when the road gets rough?

That certainly seems like a tough ask, especially when we look at how influenced we are by the world around us. We prefer comfort over conviction. We hear that some of the saints of old triumphed and conquered in earthly matters. But then we hear about others who “experienced mocking and lashes, in addition to chains and imprisonment.” And if you think about it, these are not two different groups. Sure, Samson was powerful and fierce, but don’t forget that his eyes were poked out, and he died tied up like an animal. And yes, David was the great king of Israel, but don’t you remember how much the guy had to run and hide. Jephtha was the son of prostitute who was treated as an outcast. The prophets were rejected and even killed. Living as God’s people has never been easy. But you know what is? Following the Lord when it is convenient and following the world when God’s way is not.

How do you compromise your faith? Do you keep quiet instead of confessing the truth, because you know the truth won’t get you killed, but it will lose you friends? Do you choose the easy path over the path of faithfulness, even making excuses that God understands you serving yourself instead of him? Do you bend to fit the world instead of standing firm for God’s purpose? Or maybe even worse, do you mix the “wisdoms” of the world with the wisdom of God? A splash of God’s eternal truth with a dash of moral relativism, that says nothing is wrong if you can do backflips and somersaults to explain it away. It’s where you get all this biblical-sounding advice that isn’t actually in the Bible, like “God helps those who help themselves” or “If you just believe, you can do anything.” Can you not see that we use these things to allow us to snake our way out of standing firm for our God? The world says, “Do what feels best. And don’t let anyone stand in your way.” But those are the directions that everyone walking the path that leads to hell takes: Ignore God. Ignore my neighbor. Serve me.

Do you want to belong to the world instead of to God? Nobody’s stopping you. No one can force you to adore Christ and disavow all the sinful world has to offer. But you cannot have your foot in both camps. God will not share custody over you, taking you on Sundays while the world gets you every day. You are either all in or all out. It’s the road of comfort or the road of the cross.

The saints in heaven that we hear about in Hebrews today endured because they trusted in the God of promise, the God who has now fulfilled his greatest promise in his Son. As we hear, they “were commended in Scripture by faith, yet they did not receive what was promised.” They looked forward to what would come, their salvation from sin. These men and women were willing to suffer and give their lives for something they did not see, a promissory note they could not cash in in this life.

But we have something they didn't have. We are not waiting to see how God's plan to save sinners pans out. We know it. His name is Jesus. His sacrifice on the altar of the cross is what God pointed to all the way back in the Garden of Eden. And think about this. Jesus endured every hardship, mockery, and whip. The world did not deserve him, but here he came, for us. You and I can look at all the times we've avoided suffering for Christ to live the easy and selfish life. But then we look at our Savior, who suffered perfectly for us.

In Christ, the reward of heaven is already ours. Christ's victory means that our salvation is secure, even though our lives are filled with spiritual laziness and arrogance. Because our hardships don't earn heaven. Jesus already has. These hardships simply mark us as his own, joining us with him in his suffering and leading us to know our Savior even better than before.

But our relationship of faith is not just between us and Jesus. And anyone who tells you faith is a private matter and can be lived all alone without others contradicts God's continuous calls for his people to endure the struggles of life together. Because God did not design us to take this journey of faith alone. If you look at the very next verses, the start of chapter 12, the writer to the Hebrews tells us what this hall of heroes of faith means for us: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us get rid of every burden and the sin that so easily ensnares us, and let us run with patient endurance the race that is laid out for us." The saints in heaven who came before us surround us still, as examples of faith, but also as a family in Christ that awaits the day when we join them in glory. Though the Bible does not tell us that they look down on us from heaven and see all our sin and foolishness, scripture does tell us that they cheer on the day when we will be home with them. We are united with them and with the saints on earth by the same faith, the same Spirit, and the same Savior. Faith is a caravan, not a solo road trip. We travel together toward heaven with those we share this life with, but also Christians of the past and Christians that will still come.

And God gives us what we need to make the journey. It's not just a gathering of people that makes our path to heaven valuable. This afternoon you'll probably turn on your TV's and see stadiums of people gathered together, cheering on the home team with one voice. But a community is not enough in and of itself. That community must be guided by God's word. His truth is what fans the flame of faith as others speak it to us. When we stumble, we want people around us who will lift us up with the word of the Lord. When we suffer, we don't want empty promises. We want the guarantees of God Almighty.

One people, united in Christ. That is what we are. That is what the saints in heaven are with us, grandmas and grandpas, moms and dads, spouses, brothers and sisters, friends. Because those who wandered in deserts and wildernesses are not just names in a book or plaques in the hall of heroes of faith. They are members of our family of faith. Their endurance reminds us

that hardship is not defeat, and their victory assures us that glory is coming. So, we press on together, fixing our eyes on Jesus and encouraging each other to look to him too.

My name will never be written in Lambeau Field for excellence in football coaching. I expect yours probably won't either. People may never remember us in any sort of hall of fame. Our picture will probably never hang in some public building. But don't for a second think that the way you live out your life doesn't have a profound and eternal effect on the people you share this life with. You walk the same road as these heroes of faith, a road filled with trials and testing and pain, a road paved by the blood of Jesus. So, brother, sister, let's continue to caravan toward heaven, because we need each other to remind us of Christ. Amen.