

KINGDOM HEROES

TONY EVANS



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1

**WELCOME
TO THE
HALL OF HEROES**



The overriding feeling that life isn't working and it's not even worth trying anymore has begun to pervade society at large, causing many people to live with a profound sense of hopelessness and despair. Furthermore, this sense has led more and more of them to throw in the towel on life itself. When nearly 40 million people lost their jobs during the onset of the pandemic-based lockdown in America, suicide rates rose. In fact, during the early months of physical distancing, more people died from suicide in the state of Tennessee than died from COVID-19.* Add to that, the overwhelming social, economic, political, and racial unrest we experienced in our culture caused both confusion and insecurity to arise in the hearts of people nationwide.

My phone nearly rang off the hook during the initial stages of these multiple pandemics due to my congregants seeking counsel from me as their pastor. They just couldn't take it anymore. It seemed like each day brought a new worry, fear, or concern to all of us, and my emotions rode the same ever-changing roller coaster of uncertainty everyone else's did.

On top of that, I was at the beginning season of mourning the loss of my wife, ministry partner, and best friend of 49 years, Lois, and I was additionally mourning the loss of my dad, who had passed away just a

* "Lockdown-inspired suicides on course to DWARF coronavirus deaths in Australia & in time, even in US—studies," RT, May 7, 2020, <https://www.rt.com/news/488070-australia-us-coronavirus-suicide-spike/>.

month before she did. The previous months had also brought the loss of my sister, her husband, my brother, and two nieces. People were calling me to help them through their pain while I was treading my own painful waters.

So much had suddenly changed in my life. Social situations were different not only because of the loss of so many family members but because of the loss of friends and church members who had passed away. My career routine changed through the temporary closing of our church premises due to the mandatory Dallas County shelter-in-place rules—I stopped preaching to congregations and began preaching to two cameras. Interviews increased as network after network contacted our ministry asking for my perspective on the virus and its social impact, race relations in America, the 2020 election, and more. I stopped traveling to speak at churches, conferences, and events due to being in the high-risk category for COVID-19 based on my age and having had a bout with walking pneumonia at the onset of the pandemic.

Nothing resembled the normalcy I'd once known, lived, and experienced for so long. Nothing at all.

Except God.

In the midst of the chaos of constant change, pounding like waves crashing against breakers set to hold their wrath at bay, God's constancy was calming. And better yet, it remained calming. His power prompted my internal praise. His peace soothed my heart so I could speak comforting truths to the many who looked to me during this strange season we were all sharing as a nation and around the world.

Living by Faith

As each week and month progressed into what seemed like a continual cycle of uncertainty, one day I spoke with my good friend and fellow pastor Jim Cymbala. He'd been away from his church in New York City during the height of the pandemic there, and as was true for so many of those in ministry, his heart was heavy. When he told me a large percentage

of pastors in California and New York were considering leaving the ministry due to the difficulties they were facing (at one point, California had even made it against the law to sing in church), the gravity of the reality we were in hit me hard.

Knowing so many were contemplating quitting in the midst of this trial reminded me of those mentioned in Hebrews who had also considered throwing in the towel, hanging up the gloves, and moving on. I'm sure abandoning the faith and going back to the world's ways crossed their minds in hopes that it would lessen the difficulties they faced. Perhaps they even wondered if the Christian faith was worth the effort, because it just didn't seem to be working for them anymore.

In Hebrews 11—often called the Hall of Faith—we're introduced to these individuals and how they responded when life got hard. That chapter is also the basis of our study on kingdom heroes, which is why I'm calling the place we're about to enter the Hall of Heroes Museum. These verses give us both the backdrop and conclusions to the stories we'll explore as we examine the core DNA and features that show up in each hero.

But first, in chapter 10, the author of Hebrews has something important to say to those who want to be kingdom heroes:

Do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.
For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the
will of God, you may receive what was promised.

For yet in a very little while,

He who is coming will come, and will not delay.

But My righteous one shall live by faith;

And if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him.

But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of
those who have faith to the preserving of the soul (verses 35-39).

He's telling us what we most need to live as a kingdom hero—endurance. We need the will to keep going when life gets tough. But he also

throws in the caveat that we're to have this endurance *based on our faith*. In fact, the way "my righteous one shall live by faith" is worded is important because of what it implies. In other words, faith ought to be our *modus operandi*. It should be the way we flow. Faith isn't a concept to visit but rather a lifestyle to embrace. Thus, if we're not living by faith, the conclusion based on this passage is this: We're not living righteously. Scripture clearly states that the righteous live by faith.

Are You Living by Faith?

Before we approach the museum, ask yourself this foundational question:

Am I living by faith?

Start here. Start with you. Because if living by faith isn't how you roll, studying the lives of kingdom heroes is useless. You might as well put down this book before we go any further. Sure, you'll gain knowledge from these pages, but without the wisdom and courage to apply it, that knowledge will do you no good. Living by faith is to be a lifestyle for the believer (Romans 1:17).

I encourage you to make the pursuit of increasing the level of faith you put into action your highest priority, not just settling for learning about other people who lived their faith well. God has a destiny for you that can be reached only if you choose to follow Him in like manner. And so, if you've answered yes to the question *Am I living by faith?* I invite you to go through the Hall of Heroes Museum with me. This magnificent place will help you get to know each hero in Hebrews 11 all the more.



Before we go inside the museum, we see an enormous fountain with statues of various kingdom heroes in the midst of it. Let's take a moment to walk around the entire structure and read the statement engraved on it, ensuring we know what a kingdom hero is:

A kingdom hero is a committed Christian who perseveres by faith in order to experience spiritual victory and divine approval.

Now let's step inside, where we see the well-known Hebrews 11:1 displayed in an atrium just outside the hall's entrance. The words are inscribed in large metal lettering, each letter nearly three feet in height, and it spans the width of the area.

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for,
the conviction of things not seen.*

You may have memorized this verse at some point, but I don't want you to skip over it just because you feel like you already know it. It teaches us how to live a righteous and victorious life. It instructs us how to go about becoming kingdom heroes ourselves. It lets us know that in order for faith to be faith as God defines it, it must have substance.

Faith isn't an amorphous concept or feeling you find in a faraway land. Nor is it merely an inclination. Kingdom faith means being absolutely sure of the things for which you hope. It involves living with the conviction of things you've not yet seen, a conviction that assures you they will come to pass. This conviction gives you the motivation and strength to endure when life becomes difficult. It gives you the hope to hang on to when sacrifices come into play with the pressures of a pagan or worldly culture.

Faith in Substance

Faith deals with things that are real but haven't yet penetrated our five senses. Faith means actively functioning in the spiritual realm while simultaneously living in the physical realm.

Now, keep in mind that faith is only as meaningful as the substance to which it is attached. Faith has to do with both an expectation and a hope because hope is an expectation about the future. If you have faith in a bad or unreliable substance, that faith won't produce anything. It's like a kid placing faith in the nonexistent tooth fairy. On her own, the tooth fairy

won't do anything for that child because she isn't real. But because parents realize their children are placing faith in an unreal entity, they oftentimes leave a surprise under their children's pillows in place of a baby tooth that fell out.

You can apply the same principle to Santa Claus. Santa, on his own, won't bring a single present to anyone, simply because he doesn't exist. But parents see the faith of their children and respond in a way that reinforces that faith—they make surprise gifts appear under the Christmas tree.

Adults place faith in unreal concepts as well. It's just that, by and large, no one follows through on their misplaced faith, and many of them discover that life can come with significant disappointments. After choosing to place their faith in unreal concepts, they eventually learn that the way things turn out doesn't always resemble expectations.

A significant amount of faith placed in an insufficient substance will inevitably produce no results. That's because what makes faith demonstrable is the substance to which it is attached. Thus, if you want to grow your faith, you don't need to go faith-hunting. Rather, you need to focus on a better substance in which to place your faith. Make sure the substance is solid and real. Make sure your faith is in God and in Him alone.

I'll never forget a trip I was scheduled to take to Iowa. My wife, Lois, often traveled with me on my speaking trips, but she didn't want to go on this one because we'd be flying in a small, twin-engine plane.

"You don't have much faith," I said, joking with her.

"That's because you don't have much plane," she responded.

Not until the schedule changed and our new flight would be on a jumbo jet did she change her mind and come along.

"Your faith grew," I told her, laughing as we boarded the much-larger plane.

"That's because your plane grew," she said, smiling in response.

It's a humorous illustration, but the point applies to us all. The size of my wife's faith was directly tied to the size of the plane. That's because, as I've said, faith is related to the substance to which it is attached. True faith

in God is tied to a substance that is not yet seen or experienced with our five senses, which is why we must be convinced it's real based on the integrity of God Himself, the One who's calling us to have faith.

Let me put this principle in everyday language: To not live by faith is to call God a liar. Every time you make a decision out of fear rather than by faith in what God has declared, you let it be known that you don't trust that He's telling the truth. I realize none of us would outright call God a liar, but a majority of us do it through our actions or inactions resulting from a lack of faith.

Faith in Action

Now, before we look closely at the lives who modeled faith as told in Hebrews 11, I want to give you a simple definition of faith:

*Faith is acting like God is telling the truth.
It's basing your actions on the belief that what He says is true.*

Faith isn't merely *feeling* like God is telling the truth. Nor is it *saying* God is telling the truth. For faith to truly be faith, it involves *acting* like God is telling the truth. That's why the Bible calls it walking by faith, not talking by faith or even feeling by faith. This faith walk is to be done without the requirement of prior visible, empirical evidence to validate it (2 Corinthians 5:7). It is rather to be based on the integrity of God.

Faith always includes movement and actions aligned with what you believe to be true. Unless your faith makes it all the way down to your feet, it's not faith. Rather, it's an intellectual concept that hasn't been mixed with action, and nothing concrete will show up in your life. If you want a concrete manifestation of God, then what you believe about Him must be married to what you do in light of that belief. Exercising faith takes God's involvement in your life from a theory in your mind to a reality in your life.

A number of years ago, the church where I serve looked for ways to curb its electricity bills. As a result, we installed motion-detector lighting in certain rooms. That means the lights come on only when motion is detected.

If there's no motion, there's no light. This also means the lights go off on their own when people leave without turning them off. Then the lights come back on when motion is again detected.

Similarly, God will give you the power and light you need when you need it, but He'll wait until He detects motion on your part. If there's no movement in faith, there's no power in your life. The two are tied together. You must trigger the use of His power in your life, and you do that through actions carried out in faith.

God is real. He has great power. But He will not manifest that power in the ways you need Him to until He sees the motion of your life in faith. If there is no movement, His power lies dormant even though it's there to be accessed at any time. It's in living a life of faith that we gain God's approval (Hebrews 11:2).

Here's another way I define faith:

*Faith is acting like it's so even when it's not so,
in order that it might be so simply because God said so.*

It is in living a life of faith, just like the kingdom heroes the author examines throughout this chapter, that we gain God's approval (Hebrews 11:2).

Why We Need Kingdom Heroes

The Pro Football Hall of Fame is in Canton, Ohio. This is where the football greats—those who exceeded and excelled at the game—are remembered. As you walk the halls of this great museum, you're reminded of what each player did to secure that position. To be enshrined there is no small feat. Only a handful of players, coaches, and owners will ever make it in. Induction requires a rigorous examination of each person as the judges look not only at what they did *in* the game but *for* the game.

God set up His own Hall of Fame in Hebrews 11, where heroes of the faith are recognized for how they modeled what it means to be men and women of heroic faith. And just as the Pro Football Hall of Fame serves as a motivator and inspiration for aspiring football players throughout our

land, this Hall of Heroes ought to provide each of us with greater motivation and inspiration for excelling in the area of faith.

When the world of boxing has its championship fights, they bring in the champions of old and introduce them to the crowd before the battle even begins. The throng explodes with enthusiasm as each champion is announced, but the reason they bring them back is to remind those about to battle what's truly at stake—the championship itself.

They also remind the two about to fight it out that others have been in that ring before them. Others have been punched. Others have been knocked down and bruised and bloodied. Yet even though all of that happened to them, they made it through to testify about their victory. Their presence inspires the current fighters to endure the hits, push through the exhaustion, and summon the strength they need to win.

Those we're about to witness in the Hall of Heroes are there to inspire us to keep going. Their lives should motivate us to hang in there, never give up, and stand strong for what we believe in.

Some of you may already feel beaten and bruised. The circumstances of life might have knocked you down, or sin itself may have entangled you. But the Hall of Heroes invites you in to discover that, no matter what you may be facing right now, you can overcome it. If you will simply rise up and place your faith in God through actions aligned under His overarching kingdom rule, you'll experience the freedom and victory you long for.

It's Never Too Late

Now, before we step through the door to the hall, I want to warn you about what you'll see. Some strange people are in there. You and I probably wouldn't have included them all if we were the curators of this place. A liar, a prostitute, a passive man... It's even got people who laughed in the face of God. Some very messed-up individuals are in the Hall of Heroes, I'll admit.

But that should make you smile, because it's good news for all of us. Any of you walking into this hall with me should know that, even if you've made mistakes or fallen far from grace, you can choose to live differently,

and you can choose to do it right now. God doesn't set a time limit on faith. You can obey Him now. It's never too late to honor God through a lifestyle of faith. It's never too late to live as a kingdom hero yourself (and I'll remind you of that again at the end of this book).

To live as a kingdom hero and be qualified for enshrinement in this hall is acting in alignment in faith under God. It means making choices in the physical realm based on what we cannot see but know to be true in the spiritual realm. The author of Hebrews reminds us of this in Hebrews 11:3: "By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible." Even the word *faith* itself came about through the activity of faith. God spoke into the invisible, and as a result, He created the visible. What we see now was made out of what we cannot see. The entire universe was created by One we cannot see while using things we cannot see in order to bring about what we can see.

Read the verse in the atrium one more time before we go into the hall itself.

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for,
the conviction of things not seen.*

Faith is all about what we cannot see. It's the conviction of things we cannot see. It involves placing our belief in the spiritual realm to a larger degree than in what we see and experience in the physical realm, trusting that what God says about it is true.

To live by faith is to live with spiritual sight, in tune with a God who can create a universe out of nothing at all. It's a change of perspective from what is right in front of our faces to the truth resident in our spirits through the power of God's Word and the testimony of His Spirit in us. We demonstrate our faith in the meteorologist's prediction for rain by picking up our umbrellas as we leave home, even though meteorologists are sometimes wrong. But we demonstrate our faith in God, who is never wrong,

when we do what He says even when circumstances seem to contradict what He's said.

Rise Up!

As we look around and see a country and world in continual decline, it really is more and more apparent that what we need most is kingdom heroes of the faith. We need men and women who choose to place Christ over culture and conviction over comfort.

And so as we journey through this Hall of Heroes, I pray we will all be inspired by the lives we study to such a degree that we'll become kingdom heroes too. There's no more time for complacent Christianity or ritualistic religion. If we're to impact others for good and advance God's kingdom agenda on earth, we must rise up as the heroes of the faith our world so desperately needs.