

Introduction

I'd like to begin by telling you something you've never been told before. How many of you have ever told someone or had someone tell you, "Don't be a martyr"? All of you have, I'm sure. But none of you, I'm just as sure, have ever been told, "Be a martyr." That's exactly what Hebrews 11:32-38 though calls us to do. Be a martyr and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

The Martyrs

In 11:1-31, the unknown author of Hebrews tells us about 10 men and women who lived and died faithfully for God. He then writes in verse 32, "**And what more shall I say? For time will fail me . . .**" He's saying that there are a lot of other faithful people he'd like to tell us about but doesn't have the time to, people like Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and Samuel, and the prophets.

But he does tell us, in verses 33-38, some of the things in general that they experienced and did. What I'm going to focus on in that regard are the martyrs in verses 35-38. Notice what those verses tell us. They were tortured, mocked, scourged, chained, and imprisoned. They were, stoned, sawn in two, tempted, and put to death with the sword. They went about destitute, afflicted, and ill-treated. They wandered in deserts, mountains, caves, and holes in the ground.

But the martyrs didn't end there in chapter 11. According to various sources, over 70 million Christians have been killed for their faith during the last 2000 years. Almost 65% of those, 45.5 million, were killed in the 20th century. Currently, over 100,000 Christians are being killed for their faith every year. Communism and Islamic fundamentalism are primarily what fuel those killings.

Now look at 12:1 and what it calls all of these Christian martyrs. They are "a cloud of witnesses." That means their lives and deaths teach us things, one of which is this.

Staying Alive on Earth

You and I shouldn't value staying alive on earth the most. We shouldn't regard staying alive on earth as more important than everything else.

The reason that needs mentioning is because most people do. I saw a picture of a student at a Princeton anti-draft rally back in 1978. He held up a placard that said "Nothing is worthy dying for." Over 30 years ago now, John Lenin wrote and sang an empty song called *Imagine*. In it, he asks us to imagine a praiseworthy world in which there's nothing to die for. Lenin and that student are typical. The truth is that most people value staying alive on earth the most.

But they, and we, shouldn't. That is in fact one of the underlying tenets of Memorial Day. Memorial Day began on May 5, 1866 to honor soldiers who were killed in the Civil War. After World War I, it was extended to honor the dead of all American wars. Memorial Day, in other words, is a day for honoring those who "gave their last full measure of devotion," to quote Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. It's obvious what the vast majority of soldiers we honor on Memorial Day believed. Some things are worth dying for. They valued certain things, including the freedom of others, more than they valued staying alive on earth.

And so did the men and women of faith in Hebrews 11. Look at verse 37, **"They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword."** The words "sawn in two" probably refer to Isaiah. Tradition tells us King Manasseh commanded him to worship idols but he refused. So he had Isaiah put in a hollowed out log and sawn in two. In her book *A Book of Saints*, Anne Gordon summarizes what we learn from people like Isaiah: **"If the martyr saints teach us anything, it is that some things really are more valuable than life itself."**

She's right. That's one of the most significant things that the Christian martyrs teach us. We shouldn't value staying alive on earth the most. That is a powerful principle, the implications of which are

profound. Let's identify and examine two of those today.

Live Faithfully

The first implication is this. We should live faithfully. To live faithfully means to live for the things that we're willing to die for.

We've seen in verses 35-37 that the men and women of faith died for God. But that isn't all they did. Look at the verses 37 and 38. They **"went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill treated . . . wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground."** They didn't just die for God, in other words. They lived for Him as well. They didn't just sacrifice their lives. They sacrificed their fortunes, comfort, and reputations as well.

And so should we. We should live for things we're willing to die for. That only makes sense doesn't it? If I'm willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for A, B, and C, my life, then I should make the lesser sacrifices for them as well. That's what it means to live for the things we're willing to die for. We think and act consistently with the value we've placed on them. We think and act sacrificially in other words.

But that isn't always an easy thing to do is it? I'm going to say something now in fact that might shock you. In some ways, it's easier to die for things than to live for them.

Take Abraham Lincoln, for instance. He died for the Union and became our most loved president as a result. But if he had lived, he would have faced one of the most perplexing problems in American history, reconstructing the South. His successor in fact, Andrew Johnson, was impeached for trying to implement Lincoln's lenient reconstruction policies. In ways, his dying for the Union was easier than living for it.

It's the same with us. In some ways, it's easier to die for things than to live for them. There are glory and finality in dying for things but routine and constancy in living for them. Dying for them requires ultimate momentary sacrifice but living for them requires continual sacrifice. Many find the former easier than the latter, which explains a

curious fact. They don't live for what they're willing to die for.

Years ago, I counseled a husband, who was utterly consumed with his profession and golf, and his neglected wife, who was on the verge of leaving him. I remember an enlightening exchange between the two. The husband desperately pleaded his case by saying, **"I love you. I'm willing to die for you."** To which his wife replied, **"Yeah, you're willing to die for me. The problem is you aren't willing to give up your golf game for me."** And she was right. He wasn't. He was willing to sacrifice his life for her but not his golf game.

But he isn't the only one. I'm willing to die for Jesus but not to sacrifice the time, effort, and thought it takes to know and love Him. I'm willing to die for my country but not to sacrifice the time, effort, and thought it takes to cast an intelligent vote. You get my point. There are certain things we'll die for. But we won't live for those very same things.

But we should. If things are worth dying for, they're certainly worth living for. If we're willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for them, then we should be willing to make the lesser sacrifices for them as well.

Here's an exercise you can do in that regard. #1 – list all the things you'd honestly be willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for, your life. #2 – write down under each one the valid sacrifices it wants or requires of you. And #3 – circle the valid sacrifices you aren't making.

If there are circles under a listed thing, then you aren't living for what you're willing to die for. If there are no circles under it, then you are. And that's what it means to live faithfully. We live for the things we're willing to die for. We act sacrificially with regard to them.

Die Faithfully

That we shouldn't value staying alive on earth the most has a second implication and it's this. We should die faithfully.

The martyrs help us understand what that means.

Look at verse 35, **"and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection."** That line

may very well refer to the incident recorded in an apocryphal book, 2 Maccabees 7. That chapter records Antiochus Epiphanes torturing and killing a Jewish mother and her seven sons for violating God's law. Read it and you'll see how they died – courageously. As she told her seventh son just before he was tortured and killed: **“Do not be afraid of this butcher; accept death and prove yourself worthy of your brothers.”**

In the second half of the second century, the Romans systematically persecuted Christians. Listen to what Chuck Colson writes about that: **“Many Christians went to their death praising their King (Jesus), and such martyrdom became the church's most potent witness. Pagan Romans were convinced that Christ had taken away their pains. As has often been said, the church was built on the martyr's blood.”** You can see how those martyrs died - joyfully.

Putting that together, we learn how God wants you and I to die. It's courageously and joyfully.

The issue this speaks to of course is our final illness. Probably none of us will die like the martyr's did. We won't be killed for our faith. But most of us will die as a result of a final illness. And it's in that final illness that we should display the courage and joy that the martyr's did.

Francis of Assisi is my own personal model for this. Francis died in 1226 AD at the age of 44, after being ill for two years. His friends said that “only skin clung to his bones.” He suffered greatly from leprosy, blindness, Malaria, severe gastrointestinal attacks, and possibly cancer. But consider this. First, he wrote one of the most celebrated of all canticles of joy, *Praise the Lord*, during his final illness. Second, he told a visitor several days before he died: **“I am not a coward who fears death. I am so united with my Lord that I will not be sad over dying nor rejoice over living longer.”** Francis died courageously and joyfully and so should we.

Dying courageously and joyfully requires two things of us.

First, we must be disciples of Jesus. Francis and the martyrs had this in common. They had surrendered their persons and lives to Jesus.

They had arranged all of their affairs around being with Him and learning and doing what He says. And so must we.

Second, we must value eternal life. We see that in verse 35. It says, "**Women received back their dead by resurrection.**" That most likely refers to Elijah raising the widow's son from the dead in 1 Kings 17 and Elisha doing the same in 2 Kings 4. Both sons were raised from the dead to earthly life. But verse 35 also speaks of the "**better resurrection**" that the martyrs pursued. That refers to being raised from the dead to eternal life. The martyrs valued eternal life and so must we.

Notice I said "must." I've ministered to scores of people during their final illnesses over the years. I've learned a lot of things from that, one of which is this. Disciples of Jesus who value staying alive on earth more than they value being alive in heaven do not die courageously and joyfully. But those who value being alive in heaven more than they value staying alive on earth do.

So, value eternal life. Valuing eternal life is part of a three-step process. First, we *know about* eternal life. Second, we *believe in* it. And third, we *value* it. Those steps are sequential. We must know about eternal life to believe in it. And we must know about and believe in it to value it. That explains one of the two reasons that I wrote a study titled *Life after Life*. Learn the material in that study and you will know about eternal life, which, with the Holy Spirit's help, will cause you to believe in it, which will cause you to value it, which will enable you to die like Francis and the martyrs did, courageously and joyfully.

Conclusion

I leave you in closing with this tribute to the men and women of Hebrews 11, one that sums up well what the author says about them. That tribute is this, "**Faithful living – faithful dying.**" They lived for the things they were willing to die for. And they died courageously and joyfully. May you and I do the same. We're martyrs if we do.