

What happens to Christians who have faith?

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A casual reading of the bible is enough to teach the reader that all true believers in God and salvation must exercise faith. Faith in God, meaning believing and acting on his promises so that through them we become the heirs of eternal life. But what does scripture say will happen in this life to those of us who practise faith? We examine that question in light of the bible testimony regarding the life experiences of faithful people.

Colossians 1:21-23 “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. 22 But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— 23 if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.” *New International Version (NIV)*

Paul talks about our sinful condition and our alienation from God because of our evil minds and thoughts leading to evil behaviour. God himself sought to remedy this situation through Jesus Christ. The death of Christ for us enables us to stand before God as holy people free from all accusation of evil “*if*” we continue in faith. Notice the word “if”. This is a clear indication that salvation is conditional on our exercising faith.

James 1:21-22 “Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” *New International Version (NIV)*

The proper exercise of faith involves doing what the word of God tells us to do. Biblical faith is believing and doing what God tells us to do through his word – the bible. Those people who only hear the word but do not do what it says are deceiving themselves if they think that they are children of God.

Luke 11:27-28 “As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, “Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you. 28 He replied, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.”” *New International Version (NIV)*

Jesus was teaching the people and a woman in the crowd calls out about how his mother must have been blessed. Jesus virtually says don’t concern yourselves about my mother. But rather blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it. And in doing that we are counted by God as being just as blessed as she was. Obeying God is not a “works trip”. It is imperative that we obey God if we are to avoid deception and potentially the loss of our souls.

Unfortunately there are today many so called 'prosperity preachers' who teach that if you have faith in God then everything in this life will work out well. You will have that job you always wanted, you will have the perfect spouse, you will have good health, you will live in a good house and the list goes on. They teach that faith is a wish list of things that you want God to do for you. But the bible portrays a different picture of faith. Jesus himself and the apostles lived destitute and were murdered. There is a big contrast in the life experiences of bible characters who exercised faith by believing and doing what God told them. For example notice the experience of the parents of John the Baptist.

Luke 1:5-7 “In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. 6 Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly. 7 But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.” *New International Version (NIV)*

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The father of John the Baptist - Zechariah, and John's mother Elizabeth were righteous in God's estimation and they are recorded as 'observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly'. These people were true people of faith, and yet in spite of that they were suffering under one of the greatest social curses in the ancient world. They were unable to have children. In that society they would have been considered to be under the curse of God. Yet this was not the case as God considered them righteous. Later on God chose these people to be the parents of John the Baptist.

Luke 1:24 *"After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. 25 "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."* *New International Version (NIV)*

God in his mercy decided to give them a child, Elizabeth exclaims that God has taken away her disgrace. Outward appearance is deceptive when it is used to judge the estimation that God has of us.

One of the greatest characters of the New Testament is the Apostle Paul. God specifically chose this man to be a missionary to the world to proclaim the gospel. Paul was in the city of Damascus suffering from temporary blindness. While in this condition God calls Ananias to go to Paul with a message -

Acts 9:15-16 *"But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. 16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."* *New International Version (NIV)*

Paul who was a great man of faith is about to spend the rest of his life as a missionary for Christ. Jesus tells Ananias that he will show Paul how much he is to suffer for the name of Jesus. Years later Paul writes to the Corinthian church about his experiences in suffering for the faith.

2 Corinthians 11:23-28 *"I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches."* *New International Version (NIV)*

Because Paul believed in Jesus and did as he was commanded he suffered quite a lot due to his faith. Just before his execution by being beheaded on the Appian way in Rome, Paul writes to Timothy- the Ephesian elder and Paul's fellow missionary.

2 Timothy 4:6-8 *"For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and no to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing."* *New International Version (NIV)*

I have kept the faith Paul writes to Timothy. That is I have continued to believe and do what God requires of me. Because of this he is about to suffer martyrdom. Paul's hope lay in the resurrection of the dead when on that day he will receive the crown of righteousness and eternal life.

In the New Testament book of Hebrews there is a chapter devoted to recording the life experiences of those Old Testament characters who lived a life of faith. This witness to the lives of the faithful people of God is a contrast of experiences showing that no matter what happens to us in this life we are to remain faithful until the end.

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Hebrews 11-12 Faith in Action

Hebrews 11:1-3 “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. 2 This is what the ancients were commended for. 3 By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.” *New International Version (NIV)*

The Ancients mentioned here are the Old Testament characters who were commended for their faith. We like them believe what God tells us, that he created the world with the power of his own voice from material that is invisible. This is the belief of creationists. The author of Hebrews then begins to describe the life experiences of the faithful and shows some amazing contrasts in their lives.

Hebrews 11:4 “By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.” *New International Version (NIV)*

Abel had faith therefore he presented his sacrificial offering as he was instructed. Cain his brother did not have faith so he offered a different offering. Yet in spite of this Abel gets murdered by Cain while Cain lives.

Hebrews 11:5-6 “By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: “He could not be found, because God had taken him away.” For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. 6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” *New International Version (NIV)*

Enoch has faith and is taken from this life, he does not experience death. Like Abel he pleased God because of his faith yet this is in contrast to faithful Abel who did experience death. The same faith but a totally different outcome.

Hebrews 11:7 “By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith.” *New International Version (NIV)*

Noah has faith and is told to build an ark to save himself and his family from the soon coming destruction. He is to remain in his home town for 120 years to build the ark and to preach of the coming destruction.

Hebrews 11:8 “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. 9 By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” *New International Version (NIV)*

Because Abraham believed and did what God told him he is called out of his home country and travels hundreds of miles to a new country. This is in contrast to Noah who had the same faith and yet is told to stay in his own town.

Hebrews 11:11 “And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. 12 And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.” *New International Version (NIV)*

Sarah the wife of Abraham was given a promise by God that she will be a mother when she was ninety years of age. Her husband Abraham was also incapable of producing children yet because they believed and did what God told them God fulfilled his promise to them.

Hebrews 11:13 “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and

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strangers on earth. 14 People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. 15 If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 Instead, they were longing for a better country - a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.” New International Version (NIV)

This city is a magnificent city that at present exists in heaven. It is named the “New Jerusalem” and is described in Revelation 21-22:5. It is spoken of as being a real city both in the book of Hebrews as well as Galatians.

Gal 4:26 *“But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.” New International Version (NIV)*

Hebrews 11:17 *“By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, 18 even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” 19 Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.” New International Version (NIV)*

As an act of faith Abraham is ordered by God to take his son Isaac and offer him as a sacrifice. A complete contrast to Sarah who has faith and is granted the wish of producing life and now Abraham who has the same faith is told to take that life by offering Isaac as a sacrifice.

Hebrews 11:23 *“By faith Moses’ parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king’s edict. 24 By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. 25 He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. 26 He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. 27 By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king’s anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible. 28 By faith he kept the Passover and the application of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.” New International Version (NIV)*

Jacob and his whole household are told to leave the land of Canaan to live in the land of Egypt with his son Joseph. This move of faith led them from poverty to wealth. Moses who was an Israelite in Egypt was next in line to be the Pharaoh of Egypt. He leaves Egypt and all the wealth he had to live in Canaan to become poor. The opposite of Jacob who left Canaan to go to Egypt to become rich.

Hebrews 11:29 *“By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.” New International Version (NIV)*

The Israelites were told to walk through the Red sea as on dry ground. They did as they were instructed and as a result they survived. The Egyptians were not instructed to walk through the sea but went anyway and were all drowned. This highlights that point that we are to do what God tells us to do but not to go beyond that. We are not to presume to do what God has not told us.

Hebrews 11:32-35 *“ 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...” New International Version (NIV)*

These faithful people mentioned all have recorded positive life experiences. David has faith, he kills the Philistine giant Goliath and later becomes Israel's King. Gideon who through faith destroyed the Mideonites. The prophet Daniel in Babylon is thrown into the lions den because of his faith and comes out alive. Daniels three hebrew friends are thrown into the fiery furnace in Babylon and are not burned but come out alive. Others escape the edge of the sword. They are about to be killed by an enemy whose raised sword has no power over them. Samson whose weakness while in the Philistine goal was turned to strength enabling him to kill thousands of God's enemies. The prophet Elijah is translated to heaven without dying. These histories show positive life experiences of God's people. However not all of God's people had such experiences.

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Hebrews 11:35-38 “...There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. 36 Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— 38 the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.” *New International Version (NIV)*

In complete contrast now we have people who are suffering for their faith. This record talks about people who are tortured to death, flogged and put in prison. The prophet Jeremiah was chained and put in prison. Prophets were stoned to death. The first christian martyr Stephen was stoned to death for his faith. Tradition tells us that the prophet Isaiah was put into a log and sawed in two for his faith. Elijah and Elisha lived in caves and were often destitute. In contrast to Elijah who did not die but was translated to heaven without seeing death his disciple Elisha who had the same faith dies of a lingering illness and was buried. Daniel is saved from the lions because of his faith yet many christians who have the same faith were eaten by lions in the Roman amphitheatre. The three hebrews were saved from being burned while in the fiery furnace in Babylon yet thousands of Christians who had the same faith were burned to death during the dark ages in Europe.

Hebrews 11:39 “These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised,” *New International Version (NIV)*

In spite of what happened to them in life both good or bad experiences they all had the same faith and were commended for it. None of them received the promised inheritance, that is the city built by God himself. That promise is still to come.

Hebrews 11:40 “since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.” *New International Version (NIV)*

We will all receive the promised inheritance at the same time. God has planned something better for us than just living in Palestine in a man made city. God himself will make a city for us as well as them. We will be made perfect. Perfect bodies in a perfect world.

Hebrews 12:1 “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us,” *New International Version (NIV)*

“The imagery here suggests an athletic contest in a great amphitheatre. The witnesses are the heroes of the past who have been mentioned in Hebrews 11. They are not spectators but inspiring examples. The Greek word translated 'witnesses' is the origin of the English word 'martyr' and means 'testifiers.' They bear testimony to the power of faith and to God's faithfulness.” Zondervan. NIV Study bible notes.

Let us take courage from the bible testimony regarding the lives of these Old Testament heroes of faith. What ever happened to them can just as easily happen to us. The purpose of this contrast in the lives of these people is to encourage us who have the same faith.

Hebrews 12:2-3 “fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” *New International Version (NIV)*

If we think that our lives can become a real trial and almost unbearable because we choose to practise our faith then we need to consider the life experiences of Jesus and copy his example of loyalty to God. He went through the most dreadful experiences and opposition a person can endure. Yet he endured by focusing on the reward and ultimately sat down on the right hand of the throne of God.

The purpose and discipline of trial

Hebrews 12:4-11 “In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. 5 And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, “My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, 6 because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.” 7 Endure.

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***hardship as discipline;** God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? 8 If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. 9 Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! 10 They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. 11 No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” *New International Version (NIV)**

***1Peter 1:3-9** “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, 5 **who through faith are shielded by God’s power** until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while **you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.** 7 These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. 8 Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, 9 for you are **receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.**”*New International Version (NIV)**

***2 Peter 1:3-11** “His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. 4 Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. 5 For this very reason, make every effort to **add to your faith** goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; 6 and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; 7 and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. 8 For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins. 10 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. **For if you do these things, you will never stumble, 11 and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.**”*New International Version (NIV)**

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

Psalm 23 New American Standard Bible (NASB)
The Lord, the Psalmist’s Shepherd. A Psalm of David.

- 1 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters.
- 3 He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness For His name’s sake.
- 4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.
- 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows.
- 6 Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.