

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)*

The father of John the Baptist - Zechariah, and John’s mother Elizabeth were descendants of Aaron the brother of Moses. They were also 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

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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 [Paul] 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.

Hebrews 11-12 Faith in Action

Hebrews 11:1-3 “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for, being convinced of what we do not see. 2 For by it the people of old received God’s commendation. 3 By faith we understand that the worlds were set in order at God’s command, so that the visible has its origin in the invisible.” NET

The “people of old” mentioned here are the Old Testament characters who were commended for their faith. We as they did are to 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 offered God a greater sacrifice than Cain, and through his faith he was commended as righteous because God commended him for his offerings. And through his faith he still speaks, though he is dead.” NET

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 up so that he did not see death, and he was not to be found because God took him up. For before his removal he had been commended as having pleased God. 6 Now without faith it is impossible to please him, for the one who approaches God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” NET

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 he was warned about things not yet seen, with reverent regard constructed an ark for the deliverance of his family. Through faith he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.” NET

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 11:8-10 “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place he would later receive as an inheritance, and he went out without understanding where he was going. 9 By faith he lived as a foreigner in the promised land as though it were a foreign country, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, who were fellow heirs of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city with firm foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” NET

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 11:11-12 “By faith, even though Sarah herself was barren and he was too old, he received the ability to procreate because he regarded the one who had given the promise to be trustworthy. 12 So in fact children were fathered by one man—and this one as good as dead—like the number of stars in the sky and like the innumerable grains of sand on the seashore.” NET

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.

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Hebrews 11:13-16 “These all died in faith without receiving the things promised, but they saw them in the distance and welcomed them and acknowledged that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth. 14 For those who speak in such a way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 In fact, if they had been thinking of the land that they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they aspire to a better land, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them”. NET

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 above is free, and she is our mother.” NET

Hebrews 11:17-19 “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac. He had received the promises, yet he was ready to offer up his only son. 18 God had told him, **“Through Isaac descendants will carry on your name,”** 19 and he reasoned that God could even raise him from the dead, and in a sense he received him back from there.” NET

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 11:23-28 “By faith, when Moses was born, his parents hid him for three months because they saw the child was beautiful and they were not afraid of the king’s edict. 24 By faith, when he grew up, Moses refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, 25 choosing rather to be ill-treated with the people of God than to enjoy sin’s fleeting pleasure. 26 He regarded abuse suffered for Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for his eyes were fixed on the reward. 27 By faith he left Egypt without fearing the king’s anger, for he persevered as though he could see the one who is invisible. 28 By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that the one who destroyed the firstborn would not touch them.” NET

Jacob/Israel 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 likely the 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 they crossed the Red Sea as if on dry ground, but when the Egyptians tried it, they were swallowed up.” NET

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? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets. 33 Through faith they conquered kingdoms, administered justice, gained what was promised, shut the mouths of lions, 34 quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, gained strength in weakness, became mighty in battle, put foreign armies to flight, 35 and women received back their dead raised to life....” NET

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. Daniel's 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 "...But others were tortured, not accepting release, to obtain resurrection to a better life. 36 And others experienced mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned, sawed apart, murdered with the sword; they went about in sheepskins and goatskins; they were destitute, afflicted, ill-treated 38 (the world was not worthy of them); they wandered in deserts and mountains and caves and openings in the earth." NET

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 King Manassah put the prophet Isaiah into a log and sawed in two because of 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, yet his disciple Elisha, who had the same faith dies of a lingering illness and was buried. The Prophet Daniel was saved from being eaten by lions because of his faith yet many christians who have the same faith were eaten by lions in the Roman amphitheatre. Daniel's three hebrew companions were saved from being burned to death while in the fiery furnace in Babylon yet thousands of Christians who had the same faith were burned to death by the papal church during the dark ages in Europe.

Hebrews 11:39 "And these all were commended for their faith, yet they did not receive what was promised." NET

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 "For God had provided something better for us, so that they would be made perfect together with us." NET

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, we must get rid of every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and run with endurance the race set out for us" NET

"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. 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 "keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy set out for him he endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Think of him who endured such opposition against himself by sinners, so that you may not grow weary in your souls and give up" NET

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 "You have not yet resisted to the point of bloodshed in your struggle against sin. 5 And have you forgotten the exhortation addressed to you as sons?" ***My son, do not scorn the Lord's discipline or give up when he corrects you.*** 6 ***For the Lord disciplines the one he loves and chastises every son he accepts.***"

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7 **Endure your suffering as discipline: God is treating you as sons.** For what son is there that a father does not discipline? 8 But if you do not experience discipline, something all sons have shared in, then you are illegitimate and are not sons. 9 Besides, we have experienced discipline from our earthly fathers and we respected them; shall we not submit ourselves all the more to the Father of spirits and receive life? 10 For they disciplined us for a little while as seemed good to them, but he does so for our benefit, that we may share his holiness. 11 Now all discipline seems painful at the time, not joyful. But later it produces the fruit of peace and righteousness for those trained by it." NET

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: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.

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