

**What Does It Mean to Live by Faith in the Service of the Fatherless? By John Piper**  
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<http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/what-does-it-mean-to-live-by-faith-in-the-service-of-the-fatherless>

When God opens your eyes to see the ugliness of your sin, and the beauty of his holiness, and the justice of your looming condemnation, and the wonderful all-sufficiency of Jesus to be punished for sins in your place, and to perform perfect righteousness in your place; and when you are broken with sorrow and overflowing joy by this love, and you put your faith in Jesus, that is, you embrace him as your Savior and Lord and Righteousness and Wisdom and Friend and Treasure—and all that God is for you in him—from that moment on your whole life is lived by faith. Everything you do after that moment, you do in the strength of that faith.

In that moment of trusting Jesus alone, you are justified, you are forgiven, you are totally accepted by God, you are adopted into his eternal family, you are loved, you are secure forever. And all of that by grace alone, through faith alone, on the basis of Christ alone, to the glory of God alone. So that, from that moment on, everything you do you do in this faith. Everything you do from that moment on, you do in the confidence that you are accepted, you are justified, and God is 100% on your side—not in order to be accepted or be justified or to get God to be 100% on your side. That is, from that moment on, you live by faith. Nothing you do from that moment on creates or earns God’s commitment to be 100% for you and never against you. That has been settled by faith alone in Christ alone.

### **Orphan Care by Faith**

Which means that all adoption and all orphan care by Christians—by those who are justified by grace alone through faith alone on the basis of Christ alone—is done by faith. We adopt by faith. We build an orphanage in China by faith. We give to the Micah Fund or the Lydia Fund by faith. We hold a summit by faith. We love by faith. As Paul says in [Galatians 5:6](#), “In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.” Or as he says in [Galatians 2:20](#), “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh *I live by faith* in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” So my question tonight is, What does this look like? What does living by faith look like—adopting by faith, caring for orphans by faith, leading a movement of Christians by faith? To answer this, I want us to look at [Hebrews 11:29–38](#). And the sobering thing about this text is the shift that happens at verse 35. I will point it out when we get there.

*By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned. 30 By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. 31 By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies. 32 And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. 35 Women received back their dead by resurrection. [Now notice the shift...] Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. 36 Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— 38 of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.*

This passage tells us what it is like to live by faith. To adopt by faith, to care for orphans by faith, to create ministries by faith, to lead movements by faith. That is, by trusting in the blood-bought privileges and promises of God that are absolutely guaranteed for all trust in him.

I will try to make five brief points on the basis of these verses.

### **1) Through our faith, God can and does work miracles and acts of providence to bring us practical earthly help and deliverance in our resolves to adopt and care for orphans.**

That is the point of verses 29–35a. What I mean by “miracles” is works of God that involve some extraordinary interruption in the natural cause-effect way that nature works. The writer refers, for example, to

- the dividing of the Red Sea (verse 29)
- the falling down of the walls of Jericho (verse 30)
- the shutting of the mouths of lions when Daniel was in the lions’ den (verse 33)
- the quenching of fire by Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego, when they walked through Nebuchadnezzar’s furnace (verse 34)
- the resurrection of the son of the widow of Zarephath (verse 35a)—a miracle for a fatherless child.

All these are what we usually call *miracles*. God breaks into the normal way things work and in an extraordinary way makes them work differently. And in every case here the people of God were helped or rescued from danger or death. That’s one way God works through our faith—namely, by miracles. But I also mentioned “acts of providence.” Through our faith God helps us by acts of providence. What I mean by “acts of providence” is works of God that control situations but in a less extraordinary way. Looking on, you would not necessarily say that a miracle happened, but by the eye of faith you see the “invisible hand of God.”

For example, the writer refers to

- Rahab not perishing because she had heard of the power of the God of Israel ([Joshua 2:9–11](#)) and cared for the Jewish spies (verse 31)
- David conquering kingdoms and establishing righteousness (verse 33)
- Elijah escaping the sword of Jezebel (verse 34)
- Gideon being strengthened in weakness (verse 34)
- others putting foreign armies to flight (verse 34)

In all these cases, God is the one who is working behind the scenes, but no miracles are obvious. This is what we may call the more ordinary working of God’s providence. And the point of the writer here in verses 29–35a is that all these wonderful acts of God—both extraordinary miracles and more ordinary acts of providence—come about “by faith.” You see that  
(verse 29) by faith they passed through the Red Sea . . .  
(verse 30) by faith the walls of Jericho feel down . . .  
(verse 31) by faith Rahab . . . did not perish . . .  
(verse 33) by faith [they] conquered kingdoms . . .

The point is that God works through faith to do miracles and acts of providence to bring practical, earthly help and deliverance to his people. And you can’t be a part of orphan care and adoption for long without hearing story after story of such wonderful things as people love the fatherless by faith.

### **2) God does not always work miracles and acts of providence for our deliverance from suffering; sometimes by faith God sustains his people through the horrors and heartaches of adoption and orphan care.**

That's the point of verses 35b–38. Or another way to put it would be to say that having true faith in God is no guarantee of comfort and security in this life. No guarantee that the adoption will be pain free. Now it is absolutely crucial for you to see that the miseries God's people sustained in verses 35–38 come *by faith*, not because of unbelief. See this in two ways. First, in verse 33, notice that the list begins with “. . . who by faith conquered kingdoms . . .” and without a break continues into all the miseries of verses 35–38. It is by faith that “others were tortured . . . and others experienced mockings and scourgings.” All this misery is received and endured by faith.

The other way to see this is in verse 39 which looks back on all the sufferings of verses 35–38 and says, “And all these [that is, all suffering people], having gained approval through their faith, did not receive [yet in this life] what was promised.” In other words, the suffering and misery and destitution and torture of God's people in verses 35–38 are not owing to God's disapproval. Rather, God's approval is resting on them because of their faith. The miseries and sufferings were endured, not diminished, by faith.

Let's be specific, so we get the full impact of what this is saying. Verse 35b: “Others were tortured.” God does not always turn the hearts of torturers away from their torture of his people, though he could. And when he doesn't, it does not mean that the suffering Christian does not have faith or that he is not loved. The contrast between what God does by faith to deliver and what he does by faith in not delivering is seen most clearly in the verses 34 and 37. In verse 34, the second clause says that by faith they “escaped the edge of the sword.” So some by faith “escaped the edge of the sword.” Then in verse 37, the fourth clause says, “They were put to death with the sword.” So in one instance by faith they escaped the edge of the sword, and in another instance by faith they died by the sword.

[Acts 12:1–2](#) says, “About that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church, in order to mistreat them. And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword.” But the next verses tell the story of how he arrested Peter for the same purpose, but God intervened and miraculously delivered Peter. One died by faith. The other escaped by faith. So the second point is: God does not always work miracles and acts of providence to deliver adoptive parents and orphan advocates from sufferings. Sometimes he ordains that we walk through the fire of sorrow, and sustains us in it.

### **3) Having faith is not the ultimate determining factor in whether you will suffer in your care for the fatherless or not, God is—God's sovereign will and wisdom and love.**

To me this is immensely comforting. It is a great relief to know that there is a higher explanation for my pain or my pleasure than whether I have enough faith. Would it not be horrible to have to believe that on top of all your suffering you had to add this: It must be because I lack faith.

We will not relate to each other that way in our church. We will not look into the face of the suffering adoptive parent, and say, “If you had faith, you would not be going through this.” Rather, we will say, “Keep trusting God. Keep living by faith. You are forgiven. You are loved. You are accepted. God is 100% for you and not against you, because of Christ alone. Trust him. He will get you through.” God has his purposes. They are hidden from us. And faith means that we believe they are good.

### **4) The common feature of the faith that escapes suffering and the faith that endures suffering is this: Both of them involve believing that God himself is better than what life can give to you now, and better than what death can take from you later.**

When you have it all, and everything in adoption goes well, faith says that *God is better*; and when you lose it all, faith says *God is better*. The clearest illustration of this is verse 35: “[by faith] women received back their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, in order that they might obtain a better resurrection.”

What does faith believe in the moment of torture? Or the moment of family agony? That if God loved me, he would get me out of this? No. Faith believes that *God is better*—now, and in the resurrection. *God is better* than the miracle of resurrection that brought the widow’s son to life, only to die again later. In other words, faith is utterly in love with all that God is for us now, and will be for us beyond the grave. Faith loves God more than life. Faith loves God more than family. Faith loves God more than job or retirement plans or ministry or writing books or building the dream house or making the first million. Or avoiding the painful disruption of this adoptive family.

Faith says, “Whether God handles me tenderly or gives me over to misery, I love him. He is my reward (11:6), the builder of the city I long for (11:10), the treasure beyond the riches of Egypt (11:26), and the possession that surpasses all others and abides for ever (10:34).”

The great challenge of adoption and orphan care ministry is to cultivate a death-defying passion for God above all things. A faith that rests in him whether living or dying, whether comfortable or miserable, whether successful in our orphan care or not. Our aim is to cultivate and spread the unshakable confidence that *God is better* than what life can give us and what death can take from us.

**5) Those who love God more than life, more than successful adoptions and orphan ministries, and suffer willingly in the service of the fatherless, are God’s great gifts to the world.**

Look with me at verse 37b and 38: “. . . they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men [people] of whom the world was not worthy).” What does it mean that the world was not worthy of these obscure, destitute, unsightly, seemingly cursed people? What does that mean, that the world was not worthy of them?

It means they were a gift to the world and the world does not deserve it. Many things in this life are utterly opposite from the way they seem. And here is one of them. When the children of God—the followers of Jesus—are permitted to suffer in the path of love, the path of orphan care, God is giving a gift to the world. So here is one way for you to be a gift to the world. Love God more than life, walk by faith in his Son Jesus Christ, and pour your life out for the fatherless.