

CHARLES R.
SWINDOLL

CLINGING
to
HOPE

*What Scripture Says about Weathering
Times of Trouble, Chaos, and Calamity*



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Clinging to Hope: What Scripture Says about Weathering Times of Trouble, Chaos, and Calamity

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*It is with much admiration and appreciation
that I dedicate this book to our two daughters:
Charissa Ann Gaither and Colleen Alissa Thompson.
Both of them have experienced numerous trials,
major disappointments, anguishing pain, and personal
heartaches. They have endured them all with great
grace and without losing their sense of humor.
Their mother and I love them deeply and
have a respect for them that knows no bounds.*

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Introduction

ONE THING I'VE NOTICED IN RECENT YEARS is that people have no margin. More and more, people from all walks of life seem to be living on the ragged edge of chaos.

- one financial crisis away from bankruptcy
- one blowup away from relational collapse
- one temptation away from moral failure
- one calamity away from emotional meltdown
- one illness away from physical breakdown
- one doubt away from apostasy

If chaos and calamity haven't found you yet, it's only a matter of time before they do. When—not if—that happens to you, where will you go for strength to endure—and for hope to carry on? None

of us is exempt from the sudden trials and lingering tribulations of life. None of us.

Throughout 2020 and in the early months of 2021, it seemed everybody around me was dealing with their own calamities. They rolled in like a storm, stopped people in their tracks, and left their victims feeling helpless and even hopeless.

This reality hit hard while I was working on this very book. For about eight months, I lost sight in one eye. It was like a dust storm had blown in from the Texas Panhandle and obscured my vision. With one eye out of commission, the complications began to domino. My depth perception evaporated, and my night vision weakened. That made driving “exciting.” Needless to say, my passengers suggested I give up driving for a while.

Others around me faced their own trials.

A very close friend of mine had to be rushed to the ER in an ambulance. It turned out he not only tested positive for COVID-19 but also had pneumonia, bronchitis, and strep! They got him to the hospital just in time, but that quartet of troubles could have easily done him in. I’m sure we could all close our eyes and picture people who didn’t fare as well as my friend did.

Another friend of mine had his daily life come to a screeching halt during the infamous Texas “Icepocalypse” in February 2021. Historic below-freezing temperatures combined with lost power caused a pipe in his home to freeze and burst, flooding his downstairs. In the months it took to repair the damaged house and replace ruined property, everything in his life was put on hold. When something like that T-bones your life, you never really catch up, do you?

I know people who have spent their last cent of borrowed

optimism struggling against cancer. They suffered through aggressive chemotherapy, gathered prayer warriors around them who pleaded their case before God, and gripped hope with numb fingers while their suffering tried to rip that hope from them like a thief. Then they went in for a checkup and heard crushing news. Instead of the tumor shrinking, it metastasized. Perhaps you know all too well what that ride home was like or what dinner around the table felt like that evening. How easy to just give up on hope in days of deep disappointment and despair!

We're living in some tough days, friends. Sudden calamities hit us like nuclear meltdowns. The disaster itself is bad enough. But the aftermath and desolation can linger for years—even decades.

All of us are in desperate need of strength and hope. Life is difficult and demanding. It's often filled with pain, heartache, setbacks, and detours. Our disappointment in others saddens us. Scandals among those we respect shock us. Disputes in our families, churches, or workplaces demoralize us. When such troubles strike, they can be downright devastating.

But they don't have to be!

We can endure unexpected calamities. How? By taking our stand on the strong foundation of God's Word. When trials and tribulations rumble in like a fleet of bulldozers to demolish our lives, we can emerge from the rubble with a strong resolve to recover and rebuild. We don't have to settle for merely surviving; we can set our sights on thriving.

Our good, powerful, awesome God is inviting each of us to run to Him as our only strong tower, which can never teeter or topple.

In Him alone, we can find the strength and hope to endure.

CHAPTER I

WHEN TROUBLES COME AND STAY

Wisdom When You Face Long-Term Suffering

SOME TROUBLES COME AND GO—like occasional spring storms that keep you huddled at home for a day or so but eventually blow over. When the sun peeks through the clouds again, life goes on. No harm done.

Other times, though, troubles come and stay—like fierce hurricanes that not only ravage our lives but leave long-term wreckage in their wake. I know people in my home state of Texas who've suffered total loss from merciless Gulf Coast hurricanes, resulting in years of hardship and heartache from which they have never seemed to recover. We've all known days, weeks—even months or years—when our particular troubles refused to go away. Instead of waning with time, they intensified—or even multiplied!

Sometimes we feel like these immortal words of Shakespeare have

been permanently inscribed on our lives: “a wretched soul, bruised with adversity.”¹ Those “bruises” don’t always show up on our skin. They may mar our relationships, crush our spirit, dim our hope, or drag us into the mire of emotional misery. Troubles that affect us this deeply don’t just come and go. They get even more complicated.

The nineteenth-century Congregational preacher Joseph Parker used to tell young ministers that if they preached to suffering people, they would never lack for a congregation—because there’s a broken heart in every crowd. This prevalence of sorrow didn’t exist only in the Victorian era. It’s commonplace in our own generation as well. Through decades of preaching, as I scanned row after row in my own congregations, I looked into smiling faces that masked deep sadness, unresolved conflict, or the latest crisis waiting to assail them again the instant they stepped out of the sanctuary.

The truth is, much of life is played in a minor key. And long refrains of prolonged troubles can feel like a two-year-old pounding on piano keys—no melody, no rhythm, no tempo. Just irritating, incessant noise.

Hurts and heartache, pain and disappointment, sickness and disability, criticism and failure can eclipse our happiness and cloud our hope for relief. It’s hard enough to keep going when trials hit us from all sides—but when they come and refuse to go away, they can be devastating.

Entertainment may temporarily dull the edge of our suffering, but it offers no permanent answers. Travel may provide a nice break, but the nagging problems await us when the vacation is over. Busyness and distractions can push our troubles to the back of our

minds, but when it's "quittin' time," they're ready to spring to the forefront again.

THE BIBLE'S REALISTIC PORTRAYAL

The Bible doesn't varnish over the rough realities of life with a thick coat of empty clichés. God's Word meets the truth of unbudging troubles head-on. I think of Job's description of life's hardships: "How frail is humanity! How short is life, how full of trouble! We blossom like a flower and then wither. Like a passing shadow, we quickly disappear" (Job 14:1-2). These aren't the words of some jaded cynic who just can't see the bright side of life. These words express the deep reality of suffering in a fallen world by a man who experienced more hardship and loss than you and I ever will.

Scripture speaks often of the bruises of adversity. In the Psalms, King David reminds all the faithful through the ages that "the afflictions of the righteous are many" (Psalm 34:19, NASB). In fact, if you browse just the Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, you'll notice a heavy emphasis on suffering, turmoil, trouble, and affliction.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul, ever the realist, reminds us that "we are afflicted in every way" and "perplexed"—at a loss, confused (2 Corinthians 4:8, NASB). In the twisted maze of our prolonged troubles, we don't know which way to turn. How easy it is to feel lost!

As we're buffeted by tests and trials, the book of James offers help with profoundly realistic insight. When we open this letter, written to "Jewish believers scattered abroad" (James 1:1), most of us don't realize how deeply those first-century Jewish Christians were "bruised

with adversity.” Jews who had accepted Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah survived in a sort of no-man’s-land. On the one hand, their own people wanted nothing to do with them because they appeared to have forsaken the law of Moses—*apostasy!*

On the other hand, the Gentiles despised them because they refused to sacrifice to the Gentile gods, observe their festivals, or worship at their temples—*blasphemy!* As a result, persecution broke out against those early Jewish Christians. Their businesses were boycotted. Their families were shunned. Their rights were revoked and their property confiscated. Not only were they deprived of their liberty and livelihoods, but many of them also lost their lives for choosing to follow Jesus.

James wrote his brief letter to these first-century wretched souls bruised by adversity, but his immortal words continue to speak to all of us who are bruised by various troubles that come and stay. Offering encouragement and comfort, James answers four questions about troubles, which are as relevant today as they were in the first century:

- First, who will face troubles?
- Second, what is the purpose of troubles?
- Third, how do we handle troubles?
- Fourth, when we’ve handled troubles correctly, what then?

WHO WILL FACE TROUBLES?

As James begins his discussion of troubles, notice his word choice: “*when* troubles . . . come your way” (James 1:2, emphasis added). His use of “when” here tells us *troubles are inevitable* for all of us. James

doesn't say "*if* troubles come" or "when troubles come to somebody else" or "in the unlikely event that a trouble or two crosses your path."

It's when, not if.

James has both feet in reality, and he wants his brothers and sisters in Christ, including you and me, to know that troubles are inescapable.

Because of our human nature, though, we don't want to believe it. Whole heresies have been founded on the falsehood that troubles are only for weak or disobedient Christians, people who don't have enough faith to thwart suffering, sickness, trials, and troubles. Then, when those inevitable troubles do come (and they always do), guess whose fault it is? Yours, they say, because you didn't have enough faith. Or you had too much sin in your life. Or you failed to confess your troubles away with a powerful "word of faith."

Thankfully, most of us haven't been hoodwinked into that name-it/claim-it, health-and-wealth heresy. But a common characteristic among believers is the desire to find a more pleasant detour around trials or even to run away from them. We may seek to fill our lives with enough busyness to muffle the noise. Or we may try to drink or smoke difficulties away or turn to pills or other man-made means of numbing the pain.

But we can't get away from troubles.

We may not have the same struggles as someone else, but we will have struggles of some sort. That's why James says, "Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles *of any kind* come your way" (emphasis added). The word translated "of any kind" is the Greek term *poikilos*. It means "diverse, variegated, many-colored." The NASB translates the term as "various."

The word *poikilos* always makes me think of polka dots, and that's a good illustration of what troubles are like. Troubles come in all sizes and colors. Some are irksome and irritating, others deep and dangerous. Some come and go without warning, like pestering flies; others burrow deep into our lives, like invasive parasites. Some mar our bodies with pain and paralysis; others weigh on our minds, causing relentless anxiety.

Odds are, you don't have to think long to come up with a list of troubles. You may have experienced anything from car trouble or broken bones to job loss or financial difficulties, from rebellious children or marriage failure to chronic illness or betrayed trust. And the feelings that accompany these troubles—feelings of rejection, insecurity, guilt, shame, depression, worry, rage, and envy—can cast long, lingering shadows over our lives. Regardless of the severity or duration of our troubles, we will all experience them.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF TROUBLES?

When the inevitable troubles of various kinds come, remember the second truth about them—*they have a purpose*. We're not just tossed into the crowd and left to fend for ourselves as God runs the world from a distance. The various troubles that occur are all part of His plan. When we accept this, we can view them as opportunities for growth.

Notice what James says: "When troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy" (1:2). A trial is a faith test that exercises your endurance, not to break you but to strengthen you (see verse 3). So James says to let that endurance grow (verse 4). Don't look for an escape hatch. Instead, lean into God's plan and

learn from the trial. Let it water your roots so you can grow deeper in your relationship with Him.

As I've looked back over the decades of my life, I've learned the value of yesterday's pain. Our trials are where the most important lessons are learned. Sometimes we learn from our own failures or through difficult situations we ourselves have caused. Often we grow from falling prey to others' poor choices or circumstances beyond our control. When we value the lessons learned through our trials, they will help us to become mature. They all have a purpose. They are all part of our loving heavenly Father's plan to conform us to the image of His Son.

Recognizing that troubles have a purpose is much better than always asking, "Why did this happen? Why me? Why now?" Instead, we can ask much more fruitful questions: "What can I learn from this about God's grace? About the love of His Son? About the comfort of the Holy Spirit? What important truth is God teaching me at this point in my journey?"

When we shift our focus from "why" to "what," we can begin to face the inevitable troubles of life as opportunities for growth and great joy.

HOW DO WE HANDLE TROUBLES?

The third question about troubles flows from James's answer to the first two. We can't avoid the various troubles in life, but we can accept that God has purposed them for our good. We're to view them as opportunities for rejoicing in the work He's doing in our lives—challenging us so He can change us.

All that's true, but how do we endure the process of trial and

change? How do we keep from being overwhelmed and swept away by troubles? How do we keep the trials designed for our good from crushing us? When we look more closely at James's words, we see four important terms woven into the fabric of this tough passage: *consider*, *know*, *ask*, and *endure*. These words will help us answer the question of how to handle troubles.

Consider

In the original Greek text, verse 2 begins not with “troubles” and not even with “brothers and sisters.” It begins, literally, “all joy *consider*.” In Bible times, Greek word order didn't matter as much as in modern English, so writers often moved certain terms or phrases to the beginning of a sentence for emphasis. So, circle the word *consider* in your Bible. Underline it. Highlight it. That's James's emphasis: “Consider it an opportunity for great joy.”

The term *joy* doesn't refer to laugh-out-loud hilarity. That would clearly not be an appropriate response to trials and calamities. *Joy* refers to a deep-seated, positive spirit, a calm, conscious resolve of hope in the midst of circumstances that would normally push people toward despair. This can come only when you *consider* that God has a reason for allowing these troubles in your life.

Note that *consider* in James 1:2 is a command. It's not something that comes naturally. You have to consciously choose to do it. And it doesn't come easily. It takes an act of the will.

Don't just acknowledge the truth about God's purpose in our trials; ponder it. Don't just nod your head in agreement; lean into it with your whole heart. Remind yourself, “There's a reason for this difficulty. Through this, I'll get to know God better. I'll get to

know myself better. Maybe I won't know exactly how God is working things out for my good and His glory, but I'm going to regard it as true." Then remind yourself again. Consider.

Know

Next, James says, "For you *know* that when your faith is tested . . ." (1:3, emphasis added). What do you know? You know that this lingering trouble is deepening your faith, increasing your endurance, enhancing your character, sharpening your discernment, and building your maturity (see verse 4). When you know this, you're better able to consider your difficulties with a positive spirit.

But let's be honest. We always want the fruits, but we seldom want the fertilizer. We want to reap the wares, but we don't want to pluck the weeds. We want a bountiful harvest of spiritual growth, but we don't love the toil of tilling the rock-hard soil. This is why James wants us to keep at the forefront of our minds the outcome of this trouble. It's a testing ground for our faith.

This reminds me of the words of twentieth-century British journalist, soldier, and spy Malcolm Muggeridge. In the middle of his life, he converted from agnosticism to Christianity. Reflecting on a long life of hardship, heartache, and pain, he wrote:

Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy-five years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through

affliction and not through happiness. If it ever were to be possible to eliminate affliction from our earthly existence by means of some drug or other medical mumbo jumbo . . . the result would not be to make life delectable, but to make it too banal and trivial to be endurable.²

It is in our trials that we reap the greatest spiritual harvest. Knowing this truth will help us to endure the challenges we face.

Ask

The third word: *ask*. James continues by saying, “If you need wisdom, *ask* our generous God” (1:5, emphasis added). This verse isn’t starting a new topic. James is still talking about how we can handle the various inevitable troubles we experience. In order to consider the truth about God’s purposes in our trials and to know with confident hope that these trials are happening for our good, we need wisdom from above.

You may have noticed that worldly wisdom will tell you that it’s all your fault. Or that it’s somebody else’s fault. Or that God is out to get you. Maybe you’ve even heard the world say that He doesn’t care about you—or worse, that He doesn’t even exist!

But divine wisdom helps us see through those smoke screens. We need His wisdom to see the truth. We’re not born with that kind of insight. We don’t inherit it. We can’t take a course in it at school, in college, or even at seminary.

True wisdom comes from the mind of God, through a relationship with His Son—who is wisdom incarnate—by the power of the Spirit of wisdom and truth. And our triune God is not a stingy guide

rationing out wisdom one precious drop at a time. He wants to lavish it upon us at those times we need it most.

All we have to do is ask.

I would define the wisdom of James 1:5 as “looking at life from God’s point of view.” Not the point of view of the evening news. Not the twisted perspective of your Facebook or Twitter feeds. Not the noisy outrage of the public square or political boxing ring. And certainly not the popular opinions of the latest Hollywood darlings.

We find true wisdom in God, who “will not rebuke you for asking” (James 1:5). Instead, He gives His insight to those who ask with unwavering faith (verses 6-8). He opens our eyes to the wisdom of His inspired Word, impressed upon our hearts and minds by His Holy Spirit.

When troubles come and stay, we need to drop to our knees and ask God for the wisdom to handle them. We can pray something like this: “Lord, I’m in a mess, part of which I caused and part of which I didn’t. It has brought loss, heartache, feelings of failure, and disappointment to me and to others. I need You to help me see through Your eyes what I can’t see through my own. Help me, Lord, to grow through this experience, to look at these troubles from Your perspective. By Your grace, let me ponder it rightly and gain a proper understanding of it. I desperately need Your wisdom, because I don’t have it in myself.”

When you ask for wisdom with an honest and sincere heart, you can trust God to answer.

Endure

James uses one more word to help us rise above our troubles: *endure*. The Greek noun *hypomonē*, or “endurance,” appears twice in the

passage: “You know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing” (James 1:3-4).

The term comes from two Greek words, *hypo*, meaning “under,” and *menō*, meaning “to abide” or “to remain.” It implies persevering under extreme difficulty, as a mule or donkey laden with a heavy burden holds up under the weight. We’re called to “remain under” the burden of our trials for as long as God has us on that leg of the journey.

But don’t fret! God doesn’t toss a ton of trouble on us, coax us with a prod, and shove us on our way through life. He provides all the strength we need for the trek. Just as God is the source of wisdom to understand hardships (James 1:5), He’s also the source of our strength to endure them (see Romans 15:5). In Colossians 1:11, Paul petitions God on behalf of his readers, “We also pray that you will be strengthened with all his glorious power so you will have all the endurance and patience you need.”

We’re not on our own. We endure because He gives us grace to endure.

Consider . . . Know . . . Ask . . . Endure

These four words have the power to change everything.

We consider that God has a purpose in our troubles.

We know He’s cultivating character and motivating maturity.

We ask for wisdom to see beneath the surface of the trials.

We endure through the strength that comes from Him.

Rather than grouching and complaining about our troubles and making other people miserable in our pursuit of pity, we persevere because we find contentment in the fact that a good Father is at work. He's on our side. And when we endure those trials that come and stay, we learn significant lessons we could never have learned any other way.

Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Charles Krauthammer's last book, released after his death in 2018, is titled *The Point of It All*. While he was attending Harvard Medical School, a diving accident left him paralyzed from the neck down. Despite the challenges of his condition, Krauthammer finished his degree in psychiatry and lived a long, fruitful life of public service—as a psychiatrist, speech writer, journalist, author, and nightly news commentator. He was also a husband and father.

At the end of the book, his son, Daniel, wrote a touching eulogy—lessons learned from his father that illustrate the truth of James well: “Don't be defined by what life throws at you and you cannot control. Accept the hand you are dealt with grace, and then go on to play that hand as joyously and industriously and vigorously as you can.”³

That's how we handle troubles.

WHEN WE'VE HANDLED TROUBLES CORRECTLY

James 1:12 offers two specific promises for those who have handled troubles as they should—one for now, the other for when we stand before our Lord to receive our eternal rewards.

First, right *now*, “God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation.” There's our word again—endure. Not only does God grant us the strength to endure, but He also rewards us for that

endurance. What grace! Today, right now, we can be blessed with a sense of inner peace even in the midst of troubles that don't seem to quit. When hardships multiply, grace abounds. When our attempts to fix our problems fail, grace keeps us standing. When we handle trials God's way rather than through our own efforts, we receive a sense of contentment, satisfaction, patience, and even deep joy. We realize God is nurturing our character with the long view in mind.

Then, *afterward*, we “will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him” (James 1:12). What a promise! James calls us to lift our eyes from our present troubles and to look beyond the horizon, beyond the return of Christ, when we will stand before our Lord and Savior—not to receive condemnation and castigation, but commendation and compensation. As the Scripture affirms, “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive compensation for his deeds done through the body, in accordance with what he has done” (2 Corinthians 5:10, NASB).

Of course, “there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). Yet, the work we perform for Christ in this earthly life does determine the rewards we receive when we stand before Him. Elsewhere Paul notes that our contributions to building up the body of Christ will be tested, like the quality of earthly building materials are tested by a fire: “The fire will show if a person's work has any value. If the work survives, that builder will receive a reward. But if the work is burned up, the builder will suffer great loss,” though “the builder will be saved” (1 Corinthians 3:13-15).

Scripture uses the image of *crowns* to describe the future rewards of commendation for those who have labored for Christ. It mentions five specifically:

- A crown that will last forever (1 Corinthians 9:25, NIV)
- The crown of exultation (1 Thessalonians 2:19, NASB)
- The crown of righteousness (2 Timothy 4:8)
- The crown of life (James 1:12)
- The crown of glory (1 Peter 5:4)

Together these paint a powerful picture of a magnificent eternal destiny—physical tokens of those longed-for words, “Well done, my good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21). Handling troubles correctly is so significant that James mentions a specific crown of reward for it.

What a great word of hope for us all! If we learn to handle life’s trials correctly, we’ll experience God’s blessings now—and receive God’s rewards in eternity.

BEYOND THE BRUISES

We began by talking about “wretched soul[s], bruised with adversity”—a Shakespearean phrase apt for all of us at some point in our rough-and-tumble journey through life. I’d like to revisit that description in light of everything we’ve seen in James’s honest and encouraging look at the various troubles we’ll encounter.

If we embrace James’s insightful principles regarding trials, if we ask God for wisdom to think about them properly, and if we rely on His power to endure them, we can go from wretched souls bruised by adversity to wise souls matured through adversity. By God’s grace, I’ve experienced this kind of transformation in my own life. It’s what I would hope for you, as well.

God knows your circumstances right now. He knows the various

troubles you're experiencing—those that come and go and those that come and stay. In fact, when God the Son walked this earth, He endured the same kinds of trials, temptations, and sufferings we endure. Because God calls us His children (see John 1:12; Romans 8:14), I can assure you that He will faithfully lead you by the hand through your darkest valley (see Psalm 23:4).

James 1:12 promises a “crown of life” to “those who love him.” You know what else God promises to those who love Him? Romans 8:28 says, “We know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.”

Let me urge you, on the basis of God's Word, to trust that He is working in your troubles for your good. Let the lingering trial run its course. Seek His mind as you ask for the wisdom only He can give. Know that He is at work to bring you a depth of character you would otherwise miss.