

## “HOW TO ‘HANG IN THERE’”

Romans 12.12

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After the pastor concluded the graveside service with prayer, Ray’s friends stood around and watched the cemetery crew lower the casket into the hole cut through the moist, green carpet of grass on the side of the hill. Ray sat in the folding chair under the awning in stunned silence. He and Jo Ann had only been married for 6 months. Finally, after a few hour-long minutes, Ray’s lifelong buddies said what they’d said over and over again since the accident, “Hey, man. Hang in there.” Then they left Ray to his loneliness.

At the same time in another part of the metroplex another person’s life took an unexpected turn. Bill had worked in aerospace for so many years that his area of expertise, so vital to the military, wasn’t even dreamed of in the nationally known engineering school he graduated from. As a key man in the design department, he had every expectation of job security until he reached the minimum retirement age.

But when his boss walked up to his desk and handed him his pink slip, his whole world seemed to cave in. Plans for retirement, college for the kids, needed repairs on the old car, and the youngest son’s braces. As he fought back the feelings of despair, he kept hearing, over and over again, the only comfort his coworkers could give him as they filed past him on their way to the parking lot: “Hang in there.”

Difficult times befall everyone. Not a soul has ever lived who did not face discouragement, feelings of disappointment, a bleak future, fears of great loss, the reality of great loss, opposition, persecution, oppression, horrible emotional pain, unbearable physical pain, desperate loneliness. To one degree or another, these are the consequences of the human condition.

When such things overwhelm us, what does the world have to offer as advice? “Hang in there, man.” That’s it? Oh, the words may be different. Sometimes a person will say, “Stay cool, man.” Another guy will say “Don’t let it get you down.” But, essentially, the world always offers the same advice.

Notice, I’m not talking about the comfort that is given during the hard times. And this is because the comfort that the world offers during times of loss or distress is meaningless. Only the child of the God of all comfort can truly comfort with the comfort wherewith we ourselves have been comforted of God.<sup>1</sup> Amen?

It’s not comfort I’m referring to now. It’s advice. When life is hard, what do I do? I’ll tell you what the world advises you to do. In one way or another, the world advises you to get as passive as you can and hold on for dear life. Isn’t that, basically, what “Hang in there,” and “Stay cool,” and “Don’t let it get you down,” really means? Sure.

But do you know what’s wrong with that kind of pitiful advice? Two things: *First*, it’s advising people who want to do something that what they can do is essentially nothing. “Hey, man, want to know what you need to do? Nothing, man. That’s what you do. Do nothing.” And *second*, it’s advice that springs from the hopelessness of the unsaved, who have no recourse from fate, and who hope only to ride out the ill wind of adversity, while ignoring the inevitable end of every person. Every person’s inevitable end is exactly the same.

Let me tell you something, my Christian friends. Such pitiful advice is not given to the child of God in the Word of God. Oh, no. My Bible tells me that there is no such thing as a fateful ill wind of adversity that blows this way and that for no reason whatsoever.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians 1.3-4

My Bible tells me that there is a God in heaven who made this world. And that my God is in absolute control of everything that takes place on this planet. That He has a purpose which will be accomplished, and that

“all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to *his* purpose.”<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, when painful things assault me, when hard circumstances overtake me, when the refiner’s fire that I live in is turned up, God’s will is not for me to lay, through the difficulties, like a gelatinous blob of protoplasm. God’s will is not for me to try and ride out the ill wind. No, sir. God’s will is for me to actively respond, to actually do something. His plan is *not* for me to sit all day in my recliner.

Turn to Romans 12.12. When you find that verse, I invite you to stand for the reading of God’s Word, where we find three active responses to difficulties that every Christian should demonstrate in his life during the hard times:

“Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer.”

### **First, EVERY CHRISTIAN SHOULD ACTIVELY RESPOND BY REJOICING**

As we deal with each of these active responses indicated by Paul, I will ask two questions: *First*, what is it I am to do? *Second*, how am I to succeed in doing it?

First, what am I to do when I am being assaulted, overwhelmed, brutalized, confused, and traumatized? I am directed to rejoice. Yes, that’s what I said. Rejoice. Though there are places in the New Testament where the Greek word found here refers to being “glad” that something good has happened, the overwhelming majority of times the word is used in the Greek New Testament, the idea of verbal, vocal exhibitions of joy is in mind. That is, you rejoice because you have joy. Joy in your heart works its way to your tongue and lips in the form of rejoicing. The reason so many Christians don’t rejoice is that they have no joy. Continual and prolonged rejoicing can only occur when there is joy unspeakable and full of glory.<sup>3</sup> That is, there is so much joy in your heart that you can never fully express that joy in words. And how do you come to have the kind of joy that produces this type of rejoicing? It’s part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit in your life.<sup>4</sup> It’s one of the ways in which the indwelling Holy Spirit affects and influences the personality of the Christian who is consciously and constantly submissive to Him. So, what you are to do, as a first response to difficulties, tragedies, and traumas, is rejoice. And rejoicing is the result of having the great joy of the Holy Spirit. And having great joy of the Holy Spirit is the result of His unencumbered presence in your life. Are you supposed to rejoice only when you get into trouble? Actually, you are to rejoice at all times. Philippians 4.4 says, “Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice.” If you always rejoice, you will, of course, find yourself rejoicing when troublesome times arise.

Now for the second question: how are you to succeed in rejoicing, even during the really tough times, even in the discouraging times, even in the times of great brokenness and heartache? Notice that Paul wrote, “rejoicing in hope.” If rejoicing is the expression of joy and delight in your heart, how does the Holy Spirit go about guaranteeing that your heart will be delighted even during the darkest hours of your life? Ah, by focusing

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 8.28

<sup>3</sup> 1 Peter 1.18

<sup>4</sup> Galatians 5.22-23

your attention on your hope. The great failing of so many of us is to slip into the foolish pattern that is described in Proverbs 18.2:

“A fool hath no delight in understanding, but that his heart may discover itself.”

When hard times come and you find yourself tempted to become discouraged and disconsolate, the worst thing you can do is look to yourself for relief. The Holy Spirit has a better way. The Holy Spirit maintains your constant supply of joy by focusing your attention on the future. Notice what Paul wrote in Romans 5.1-5,

- 1 Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ:
- 2 By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.
- 3 And not only *so*, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience;
- 4 And patience, experience; and experience, hope:
- 5 And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.

And what about First Peter 1.3-8?

- 3 Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,
- 4 To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you,
- 5 Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.
- 6 Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations:
- 7 That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ:
- 8 Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see *him* not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.

In both passages, we see that our joy comes from realizing that our present afflictions or distresses are only temporary. And that they are part of the process God is taking you through to prepare us for glory. And that we will someday stand before the Lord Jesus Christ in glory. Let me ask you, how in the world can we contemplate glory without our hearts welling up with joy, no matter what's happening to us right now? And since our hope is not wishful thinking, but a certain hope, a sure hope, the Holy Spirit's strategy for keeping us joyful is guaranteed. So, we ought to have joy in our hearts at all times. Right? That's what the Holy Spirit wants. But when things get especially tough, we need to consciously focus our attention, not on our own lives, our own troubles, the here and now. We need to focus our attention on what God ultimately has in store for us. That way, we will rejoice in hope during the hard times.

## **THE SECOND WAY EVERY CHRISTIAN SHOULD ACTIVELY RESPOND IS BY REMAINING**

“Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation”

Again, you ask the question, What am I to do? Take note how the first thing you are to do, rejoice, wonderfully prepares you for the second thing you are to do. And the second thing you are to do is “remain.” I say “remain” because the word translated as “patient” does not refer to the passive sitting and taking it that we usually think of when we use the word “patient.” Instead, think of a waiter holding up a large tray of food with

one hand. After a minute or two, that tray becomes very hard to keep holding up. And the waiter could get out from under the burdensome weight, but if he did that, the food would crash to the floor. So, what does the waiter do? Is he passive? Not at all. He must actually exert himself to hold that tray up and keep it from crashing to the floor. That is what's in mind here. When "tribulation" comes your way, which means you are being squeezed on the right hand and on the left, by financial pressure, by family difficulties, by spiritual oppression, by physical pain, by diminished abilities, or by whatever else it may be, you do not drop your load of dishes so that you can try to push back the jaws of the vice you are in. Oh, no. You continue to carry that which you ought to carry, which you know is right to carry, which God wants you to carry. Some guys are carrying the responsibilities of supporting a family. Would to God all guys carried that load. But should a guy cut and run? Should a man leave his family just because the financial pressures begin to squeeze him? Should Mom run off with another man just because she feels a squeeze from running a household and raising her kids? Of course not. She needs to endure. He needs to endure. Aggressively strive to stay in place, to bear up your load, to continue doing right. Sometimes your ability to function begins to evaporate, but that is no reason to give up.

How, then, am I to succeed in remaining during tribulation, instead of quitting in cowardly fashion? Your capacity to remain now is greatly dependent upon whether or not you remained in the past. Did you endure before? You will probably endure this time. Let me show you.

Colossians 1.11: "Strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness."

This verse tells us that God strengthens you with limitless resources to make you, among other things, patient with joyfulness. See how rejoicing in hope and patience in tribulation go together? The question is, Does God just do this to you, *voilà*? Or does He use means to accomplish this strengthening process to make you durable?

Second Corinthians 1.6: "And whether we be afflicted, *it is* for your consolation and salvation, which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: or whether we be comforted, *it is* for your consolation and salvation."

Here, we see that the example of others helps you become more resilient and better able to endure. After all, how can you quit when you've experienced a little, and others have suffered from so much more?

James 1.2-4: <sup>2</sup> My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations;  
<sup>3</sup> Knowing *this*, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.  
<sup>4</sup> But let patience have *her* perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.

This lets us know that the experiences of life that God brings upon everyone work to make us more durable, more capable of remaining if we appropriately respond to those experiences. Therefore, we are directed to "count it all joy" when these things come upon us.

Second Peter 1.3-7: <sup>3</sup> According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that *pertain* unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue:  
<sup>4</sup> Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.  
<sup>5</sup> And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge;

- 6 And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness;
- 7 And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity.

Here we see that “patience,” or the capacity to remain, comes with greater spiritual maturity. But this passage also shows us that spiritual maturity is a byproduct of “diligence,” hard work. Sitting around doing nothing is not God’s plan for any Christian.

Hebrews 12.1-3 shows us that a willingness to lay aside, not only sins, but the weights of the cares of this world, also contributes to being able to serve God patiently:

- 1 Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset *us*, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,
- 2 Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of *our* faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.
- 3 For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.

To effectively deal with life’s hard places, keep so close to the Lord that you are a continually rejoicing Christian. And when things get tough (and they will), make sure that you can continue rejoicing by fixing your gaze on the future, the coming of the Lord, the certainty of heaven, and the reunion with loved ones who have gone ahead. That’s *first*.

*Second*, don’t drop anything you are holding up except that which hinders and interferes with your service. Don’t drop your God-given responsibilities and ministries. How can you avoid dropping things on the floor and creating a mess in your own life and the lives of others? *First*, look at the example of others. *Next*, learn from life’s experiences. *Third*, diligently apply yourself to growing in the Lord. And, *finally*, constantly look for that in your life which is burdensome and sinful to cast off, and then cast it off. These four things, many of which are things you should have started when you first came to know Christ, but which must undoubtedly be started now, will be used by God to strengthen you so that when the squeeze comes (and it will come), you will be able to remain without losing your joy.

**WHEN IT’S TOUGH, CHRISTIAN, YOU *MUST* BECOME AGGRESSIVE. AGGRESSIVELY REJOICE, AND DON’T LET ANYTHING STOP YOU. AGGRESSIVELY REMAIN, AND DON’T LET ANYTHING MOVE YOU. FINALLY, AGGRESSIVELY REQUEST.**

Paul wrote, “Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer.”

For the final time, we ask the question, What am I to do? John R. Rice settled, once and for all, in his book “Prayer: Asking and Receiving,” that prayer is nothing more nor less than asking. Prayer is approaching the throne of grace to ask God what you will of Him. Prayer need not consist of lofty and high-sounding words. I’m not at all convinced that God cares to describe all the various details of the circumstances before asking for what we want. “God, you know that things are tough. And you know how so-and-so has been persecuting me. And, God, you know ....” Friend, if you are so convinced that God knows, why do you keep telling Him what He already knows? Why don’t you get on your knees and say, “God, I need money,” “Father, I need the courage to deal with my persecutors at work,” “Dear Lord, help me to be a strong and loving father, instead of a quiet and passive wimp”? “Dear Lord, this pain is unbearable.” So, what do you do when it’s tough? Rejoice, remain, and request of God what you want and what you need to do what you know He wants you to do.

But how am I to do this final thing? “I know how I am, pastor, and when I get in trouble, I forget to pray until the crisis seems almost over. How can I become a believer who prays, even when it gets very hot in the kitchen?” By doing what you ought to be doing anyway. First Thessalonians 5.17 tells us to “Pray without ceasing.” Amen? Well, when you take that command to heart and commit yourself to becoming a prayer warrior, you are “continuing instant in prayer.” Just make sure that when things get really hard you don’t abandon your prayer life because God doesn’t provide instantaneous relief at the time of your choosing. And don’t just ask God to take it away. Ask Him what He wants to accomplish in your life. Ask Him for grace to deal with things properly. Ask Him to help you stay fixed on your course.

“Hey, guy, hang in there.” I appreciate what people are trying to do when they say that to me in the midst of trials and tribulations and tragedies, but the content of what is said is meaningless. God, on the other hand, provides practical guidance to follow in the midst of it all, when I need to know what I am supposed to do.

Christian, picture yourself walking down a dark alley. And, with the joy of the Lord being your strength, you are carrying your spiritual responsibilities, you are rejoicing, and you are muttering prayers to the Lord about this or that or the other thing.

As you travel down the road the Lord wants you to travel, you notice that the alley gets narrower and narrower. As a matter of fact, the walls of the alley are actually coming together, threatening to squeeze you.

No. The walls of limited finances on one hand and sick children on the other hand aren’t threatening to squeeze you. They *are* squeezing you. Perhaps with you, the walls are a lack of education and limited job opportunities, or a marriage that simply is not working, or family pressures to compromise your Christianity.

Suddenly, the joys you once shared with your family are gone. The joys you found in work are gone. How can you continue rejoicing? By finding your joy in sources beyond what is happening now. Instead, your joy comes from the Spirit of God and what the Bible says will happen in the future.

And because you didn’t cut and run in the past when you were squeezed, and because of the godly examples of patience observable at Church, and because you have diligently strived to please God and grow, you resist the temptation to drop your spiritual responsibilities to the ground but do something quite different.

You drop those weights and sins that you were carrying in one hand, so that you can more effectively carry the load God wants you to have. You get rid of the hobby that occupies your Sunday mornings or evenings. You take steps to curb the occasional outbreak of temper. But above all, you do not abandon your God-given spiritual responsibilities and run away from the tight spot. You deal with it!

And through it all, you maintain your conversation with the Lord. What you needed from Him before, you need even more now, so you keep praying and praying and praying. What to pray for? You learn what to pray for from your Bible reading.

What are you supposed to do during the tough times? Very simply, you are to rejoice, remain, and request. And what happens when you do such things? You’ll see. And what happens if you don’t do those things? You’ll see that, too.