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Tips for Tolerating Tribulation



HOW DO YOU RESPOND to tribulation in your personal life? Does Scripture inform your mind and emotions when you are faced with seeming setbacks? Are you able to control your emotions with your mind? Is your mind permeated with Scripture so as to be able to combat the fleshly responses of our inner person? This week I would like to explore one particular passage in the book of Ephesians that can greatly aid you when you are faced with trials and tribulation. Read on, my friend!

Ralph Drollinger
Ralph Drollinger

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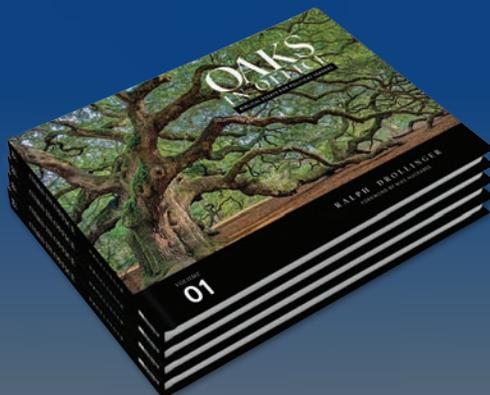


■ ENDORSEMENT



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Tips for Tolerating Tribulation

I. INTRODUCTION

Ephesians 3:13 *Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf; for they are your glory.*

The Apostle Paul is writing to the Ephesian Church in this inspired-by-God letter. This is a wonderful passage that delves into the inner thinking of the man, more specifically, how he himself dealt with his own struggles. Keep in mind, he had more struggles in his life after becoming a follower of Christ than any of us could personally experience or even imagine! Allow me to list those out for you from 2 Corinthians 11:23-28. In these particular passages, Paul summarized his life’s tribulations in sound bite fashion:

I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches.

Through it all, however, Paul maintained his calling. To quote his own admonition to others in this regard, he *fulfilled his ministry* (2 Timothy 4:5). How did he do that? How did he have the character to persevere?

There is something very interesting about trials and *tribulations*: they either make you bitter or better. The attitudinal difference equates to how you decide to think about them, and what you choose to do in response! Certainly, Paul viewed the plights and seeming setbacks in his life as something God allowed in His sovereignty — and was personally strengthened as a result. Trials and tribulation can be catalytic to mature you in your character, aid you in refining focus and distilling resolve. Or, they can prove woefully destructive. We will see these contrasting results in what follows as we outline this week’s home passage.

II. THE RISK OF TRIBULATIONS

Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations ...

The inferential particle, *Therefore*, signals a connection between what Paul has previously said in his parenthetical statement throughout the beginning of Ephesians, chapter 3 to the applicable conclusion under examination this week. And that is this: believers should *not lose heart* or become disheartened in light of another’s trials — or for that matter, their own. James 1:2-3 states in this regard:

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.

The risk of *tribulations* is that the believer is defeated by them and fails to see God’s purposes through them, therefore missing God’s intended lessons and blessing. Remember, you will keep facing the same trial until you learn what God wants to teach you! Learn how to see God’s purposes in your tribulations. Count it all joy, states James. He does not say “count it all disheartening!”

To think that coming to faith in Christ will lead to a successful, easy life is to be seriously misled from a biblical perspective. The life of the believer, if he is serving Christ wholeheartedly, will most certainly mean suffering of some kind and to some extent (cf. Matthew 5:10). Trials and *tribulations* come into the lives of all believers.

The Greek word for *lose heart* in our home passage (or translated in other English Bibles as *disheartened*) is *egkakaio*. It is used elsewhere in Paul’s epistles to signify a loss of heart, or growing weary. It means, “To be utterly spiritless, wearied out, exhausted.” The following passages provide insight into Paul’s serious admonitions to stay “out of the tank,” or blue moods, or “becoming burned out” as a follower of Christ. These are excellent passages to memorize and meditate upon. They should be at your fingertips, ready to call up whenever you are tempted to *lose heart*. Remember, *losing heart* is a conscientious decision that, once made, immediately informs the emotions.

- A. GALATIANS 6:9 *Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary.*
- B. 2 THESSALONIANS 3:13 *But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good.*
- C. 2 CORINTHIANS 4:1 *Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart.*
- D. 2 CORINTHIANS 4:16-18 *Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.*

WHEN THEOLOGY DOES NOT INFORM THE MIND, VOLITIONAL INSUFFICIENCY RESULTS — AND AN ACCOMPANYING INABILITY TO FEND OFF THE NEGATIVE PROCLIVITY OF THE FALLEN NATURE



These passages reveal the inner thinking process of the Apostle Paul and how he kept persevering in a life (as we have just seen) filled with constant tribulation. Bolster your mind with these passages of *Scripture* so that you, too, like the great Apostle, can fend off incorrect thinking regarding your present circumstances. Biblically *uninformed* thinking fosters weak willpower: it is the recipe and license to emotionally tank.

Further, notice an additional inferential thread existing in each of the four passages listed above: what is in common with Paul's usage of *lose heart*? It is that believers are victorious over their emotions when they look to the future. Victorious believers possess a cognizant mental anticipation as to when they will be glorified, living with their Savior in eternity, if not the rapture of the Church and the imminent return of Christ prior to their physical life's end. Implied is this: we have an eternal hope that far eclipses all present, temporal, difficult circumstances!

Oftentimes, our present struggles relate to the consequences of our own sin. But regardless of the ultimate cause, the emotion of *losing heart* is based on what one chooses to believe regarding his present situation. Always ask, "What does God want to teach me through this?" Claim God's sovereignty in and through every tribulation or trial; it will buoy you *to not lose heart*. The believer, because he knows his ultimate destiny in Christ, should be the most heartened of all people! Remember too, the truth of Romans 8:28:

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

III. THE REASON FOR TRIBULATIONS

... tribulations on your behalf...

Paul's extended years of imprisonment and enduring of almost continual suffering caused many believers around him to deeply grieve for him. This passage once again reveals his "others-centered" mental discipline. He did not want fellow believers to lose heart over his *tribulations*. His mindset was one of selflessness. We see this vividly in Philippians, chapter one, wherein writing from prison he talks about the Philippians (by the use of his word choice "you") no less than 11 times. He could have quite easily begun his letter rambling about how hard he had it. Such self-occupation was far from the level of spiritual maturity Paul had arrived at. "Don't lose heart because of my situation!" he is saying.

What additional perspectives can we glean from Scripture; what additional insights can we gain from Paul regarding inner strength and attitude in order to survive personal tribulations? The following passages will serve to shed additional light in this regard. Allow me to comment on each.

A. KEEP A CONTRASTING PERSPECTIVE AT ALL TIMES

Romans 8:18 *For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.*

Paul had a clear way of contrasting the present plights of this fallen world to the eternal destination that awaited him in the future. Again, he kept the spiritual dimension sharply focused in his frontal lobes. Such mental discipline curtails tanking under the weight of present problems.

B. KEEP A CONSTRUCTION PERSPECTIVE AT ALL TIMES

Philippians 1:13-14 *... so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear.*

Paul was keenly aware that as an Apostle, as a leader, his inner strength and attitude about circumstances would be picked up by others around him: Others experienced his courage to face the trials and *tribulations* of the day. Such strength in and by leaders encourages (better: "incourages!") others to possess the same strength in themselves: It is constructive! As a leader in Government, your courage or lack thereof as you tackle the giant problems in America will be picked up by others. Does what you model construct courage in others?

C. KEEP A CELESTIAL PERSPECTIVE AT ALL TIMES

Philippians 3:20 *For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory...*¹

Paul had the assurance of his salvation — salvation based on the finished work of Christ. This assurance gave him the confidence that his celestial destination was secure. Such a heavenly perspective buoyed him in times of difficulty in the here and now.

IN TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS, THE BELIEVER IS BUOYED BY CONTRAST, CONSTRUCTION, AND CELESTIAL PERSPECTIVES

Hold on to these theologically founded perspectives when you encounter various trials, persecution, and tribulation.

I firmly believe that one of the reasons Paul suffered so much was to provide for us — *on our behalf* — a clear, living illustration of someone who could endure great *tribulation* and come through it! How did he do it? He clearly diminished by way of contrast his

VERSE OF THE WEEK

Romans 8:18

... the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.



A heavenly perspective buoys us in times of difficulty.





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present situations. He kept in focus his responsibility to be constructive in others' lives (discipleship). And he vividly lived in anticipation of his ultimate *celestial* transformation!

IV. THE RESULT OF TRIBULATIONS

... *for they are your glory.*

At first read, this ending phrase in our home passage is somewhat confusing to understand. How can Paul's tribulations be of *glory* to Ephesian believers and believers today? States one of my favorite scholars on the book of Ephesians, "The clause does not mean that the readers are to give glory to Paul . . ." ² Keep in mind, Paul is writing to the church at Ephesus, a gentile congregation that he founded years prior. It is in this sense that Paul's *tribulations* are more specific to context, to the gentiles' glory; Paul's tribulations have led to the dissemination of the Gospel to the gentile world! Paul, the converted Jewish Pharisee, was called to take the Gospel to the gentile world (cf. Acts 9:15), which includes Ephesus! States my favorite commentator:

We might then have expected Paul to write here "which are for your strengthening," instead he refers to glory. This is a variant of the theme, for the "life" in question is not physical or psychic life but eternal life, the life which is associated with glory.³

The synonymous meaning given to the word *glory* can be found in several passages:

- A. Colossians 1:27 *to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*
- B. 2 Timothy 2:10, *For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory.*

Paul's point at the conclusion of this passage is simple: His tribulations, i.e., even though his ministry was very difficult, Paul persevered, and this resulted in the establishment of the Ephesian church, which in turn, resulted in the salvation of the gentiles he is writing to!

V. CONCLUSION

We, too, should deem it worthy to go through *tribulation* victoriously because it often means, to the degree of the *tribulation*, the degree of the deliverance of the Gospel message to others! My last tip for *tolerating tribulation* is this: You won't leave home without it — if you want to be a faithful witness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Like Paul, get used to it! And keep your future destiny in the forefront of your thinking.

¹ "Heaven is the place where God dwells and here where Christ is present. It is the believers' home (John 14:2,3), where their names are registered (Luke 10:20) and their inheritance awaits (1 Peter 1:4). Other believers are there (Hebrews 12:23). We belong to the kingdom under the rule of our heavenly King, and obey heaven's laws. Cf. 1 Peter 2:11." (Excerpted from: *The MacArthur Study Bible*, footnotes, p. 1827, column 2).

² Earnest Best, *The International Critical Commentary: Ephesians* (T&T Clark Ltd., Edinburgh, Scotland), p. 333.

³ *Ibid*, p. 332.

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