



ASK THE
CHRISTIAN
COUNSELOR



WHEN THE HURT WON'T HEAL

LIVING WITH
CHRONIC ILLNESS

CRAIG K. SVENSSON

“To the one experiencing unrelenting chronic pain or emotional distress, this book is a comforting first-line prescription for rehearsing biblical truth. Each chapter concludes with practical applications for the sufferer’s toolbox. All of us, whether sufferers or comforters living east of Eden, can benefit from these reminders of God’s providential care.”

Julia Breuninger, RN, Member Care, OC International

“‘We have this treasure in jars of clay’ (2 Corinthians 4:7). But what happens when our ‘jar of clay’ becomes irreparably broken . . . when the hurt won’t heal? With compassion and wisdom born from his personal struggle with chronic illness, Craig guides the reader to a place of spiritual flourishing in the midst of unrelenting pain. The treasure of our hope in Christ makes all the difference!”

Pamela Gannon, RN, ACBC Certified Biblical

Counselor; coauthor of *In the Aftermath: Past the Pain of Childhood Sexual Abuse*

“Sometimes when the darkness of persistent suffering threatens to disorient and overwhelm us, we need a sure guide—a hand in the dark. In *When the Hurt Won’t Heal*, Craig Svensson offers chronic sufferers a steadying hand to help guide them out of the gloom. His hand has been steadied by careful Christian reflection on his own chronic suffering. Highly recommended.”

Mark Talbot, Associate Professor of Philosophy

Emeritus, Wheaton College; author of the *Suffering and the Christian Life* series

“In *When the Hurt Won’t Heal*, Craig Svensson shares his journey of physical suffering and loss, describing how God is bringing him through it and how God will carry us through suffering as well. This book will be a great resource for my

patients and for counselees who are facing pain and problems that will not go away. I highly recommend it!"

Charles Hodges, MD, Family Physician; fellow, Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (ACBC); counselor and instructor, Faith Biblical Counseling Ministries; editor of *The Christian Counselor's Medical Desk Reference*

"Dr. Svensson is in a very unique position to provide comfort and counsel on this important subject. What I especially appreciated was the wonderful balance of rich theology with practical guidelines for everyday life. Readers will benefit greatly from this warm, wise presentation of important biblical truth."

Stephen Viars, Senior Pastor, Faith Church, Lafayette, IN; board member, Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (ACBC); author of *Do You Believe What God Says About You?*

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INTRODUCTION

Not long ago, an alarm on a piece of lab equipment across from my university office began blaring, and the staff was unavailable to stop it. Seconds turned into minutes and minutes into hours as the alarm droned on. As the beeping of the alarm continued in the background, I grew unsettled. The incessant *beep-beep-beep* became so irritating that I could no longer concentrate on my work. I had to exit the building to find relief.

But what if my circumstances had been different? What if I had no path for escape? The nonstop irritation made it challenging to accomplish my work, and yet it needed to be done. Could I find a way to work through the constantly blaring siren without losing my mind? Like a seemingly unrelenting alarm that grates on the nerves, there are many who live with an enduring trial, an affliction that won't go away.

Some people suffer from ongoing physical pain. Others are plagued with unending dizziness or fatigue, tingling in the ears or vision that is continually blurred, or a host of other symptoms that are like a slow grinder chipping away at their body. Their health is impaired and life is no longer normal. Dreams have been dashed and simple activities of daily life

are no longer so simple. They live with an ailment for which there is no cure.

There are also those who live with the haunting memories of past trauma, terrors that are frequently relived and renew the harm. Still others experience repeated periods of descending into a darkness of mind that won't lift, robbing them of joy and hope. There are also those who are frequently gripped with overwhelming anxiety about the future, leaving them feeling unable to cope with the vicissitudes of life.

Perhaps you find yourself in one of the above conditions. If so, I wrote this book for you. In particular, this book can help you navigate the hard challenge of living with a hurt that won't heal, a pain that persists, or a darkness that won't dispel. If you are trying to navigate life with an endless trial, the chapters ahead will help you find the path to flourish spiritually despite the ongoing pain, fear, or darkness.

Or perhaps you are seeking to come alongside and help those who are suffering from a chronic illness or a mental/emotional struggle. My hope is that the chapters ahead will help you do so with wisdom and compassion. Scripture reminds us that two are better than one while on this journey of life (Ecclesiastes 4:9–10). You can be a source of encouragement to others who are living with ongoing affliction. But if you are to avoid the errors of Job's three friends, you must tread carefully. Job's friends began well, as they sat with him and entered into his pain. They erred when they sought to uncover the *why* behind his suffering. If you are seeking to comfort a sufferer, my hope is that the pages ahead will equip you to do so with wisdom and grace. If you are willing to sit with sufferers, you can be a source of comfort and help.

The content within these pages arises from my experience of living with several incurable ailments and the tragic loss of my youngest son. My journey with chronic illness began

during my first year of marriage, when frequent episodes of knee-buckling intestinal cramping and lengthy periods in the bathroom led me to seek the help of several specialists, who ultimately diagnosed a rare form of colitis. For the next fifteen years, our life was deeply impacted by flare-ups that caused me to miss important events in our children's lives and forced my wife to become adept at preparing meals for a husband with an increasingly limited diet. She lived with the weight of watching her husband repeatedly writhing on the floor in pain after dinner and fearful that something she served was the cause.

In the providence of God, a significant measure of relief finally came when I spent several days doing consulting work for the National Institutes of Health and was seated next to a specialist investigating the same rare form of colitis. He experimented with a drug used for a different purpose. Several patients responded positively, and he suggested I give it a trial. I did so and went from an average of four attacks a week to only four in the first four months.

Sadly, finding some relief from colitis coincided with a back injury that left me in excruciating pain. My world became increasingly small as numerous specialists were unable to find any intervention to relieve the agony. The first decade of living with chronic pain was, in many ways, life-altering. The unceasing siren of pain in my back made sitting nearly impossible and limited my physical activity in many ways. Vacation plans were discarded and chores on the homestead went undone. I gained a reputation as the guy who always stood during worship services, concerts, airplane travel, and meetings of every sort.

Nearing the end of my first decade with chronic pain, I lost part of my vision in one eye during a lengthy plane ride over the Pacific Ocean. This event, combined with additional

neurological symptoms, led me to join the more than one million Americans living with multiple sclerosis. Relapses over the years have left me with areas of my body that persistently tingle or burn.

I understand what it feels like when you live with a hurt that won't heal. The spiritual, emotional, and relational challenges that arise when living with an incurable ailment are very real. Persistent physical illness tests our spiritual well-being. Like Job, I came to see how hard it is to thrive spiritually when you are robbed of your physical health.

I trained as a pharmacist-scientist and have spent my professional life as a professor and university administrator. My clinical training included managing the care of patients with a variety of chronic illnesses. Through the years, I've been a part of preparing countless young people to be the pharmacists, physicians, nurses, and physician assistants of the future. I've taught about pain medicine and other interventions to relieve human suffering. But neither my training nor professional experience prepared me for the tough questions I face as a patient living with incurable illness.

Where is God when pain piles upon pain? Is there a purpose behind it all? How can we forestall the emotional roller coaster an enduring trial can produce? Can we grow spiritually while physical limitations shrink our world? How do we find help for such perplexing questions when easy answers will not suffice?

These experiences and the spiritual dilemma they exposed have driven me to Scripture and to seek the wisdom of those more seasoned in living with an enduring affliction. I have also had the privilege of sharing this content in formal settings with biblical counselors and people living with chronic illness. Their feedback has helped refine both

my thinking and this content. My prayer is that the Lord will use it to help you know the fullness of joy that Jesus offers.

A journey through life with chronic illness is like traveling on a road with dangerous ditches on both sides. Swerve to the left and you'll descend into the depths of despondency. Swerve to the right and your illness will become the focus of your life and the core of your identity. Neither ditch is a place we want to land. To avoid doing so, we must recognize the danger—understanding the spiritual challenges and the destructive direction our hearts are inclined to travel.

But here's the key message: the good news of Jesus Christ changes *everything*, including how we live in the face of chronic illness. The joy that Jesus promises is not only for those who live with good health. It's also for those facing various types of enduring trials, including chronic illness. I hope to help you find the path to that joy.

Chapter 1

FINDING HELP IN THE JOURNEY¹

After months of constant back pain that upended my life, a series of tests ordered by a spinal specialist provided me with hope that I might discover the cause of my pain and a path to alleviate it. But hope disappeared like smoke with the frank assessment of this learned physician: “There is no clear cause and there is really nothing more we can do for you. You will just have to learn to live with it.” Yet he gave me no insight for exactly how I was supposed to do that.

As I left his office, a darkness I had never before experienced engulfed me. The thought of living with incessant pain for the foreseeable future seemed unbearable. All hope was dashed, and there was nothing but darkness on the horizon. As I sat alone in my car in the parking lot, with debilitating pain in my back and even worse hurt in my heart, I felt emotionally paralyzed. I realized I was descending into a dangerous darkness of soul, from which I needed help to escape. How could I live for Jesus in the face of inescapable pain?

In what might be the most memorized of the Psalms, David declares, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4).

Often, we and others are powerless to remove the darkness. We cannot ascend out of the “valley of the shadow of death.” The pain will not cease, health will not be restored, depression will not lift, and traumatic terrors of the night will not disappear. But there is help *within* the valley. We need to see that God is there with us in the valley. He is not just randomly out there somewhere, but he is with us in the place of darkness. Thus, we need practical tools to help us see truth when all has gone dark.

Figure 1 illustrates the helps we can use when darkness overtakes: the Word, music, community, and biblical counsel. They provide the means by which we can see God through the fog. They represent God-ordained paths where we can find help when we’re in a world of hurt.

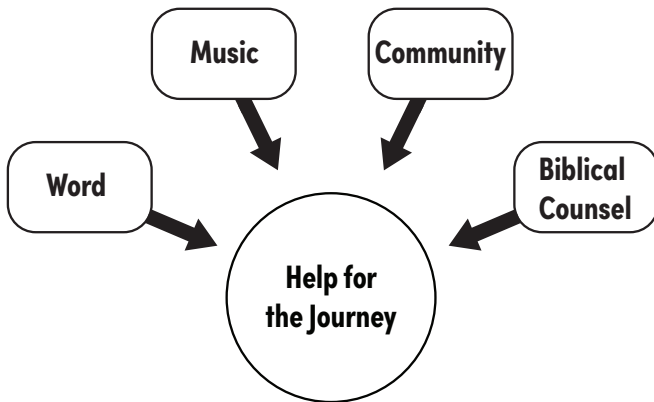


Figure 1. Means of Help for Living With an Enduring Affliction

But here’s a key point: it is best to have these in place *before* our vision of God is obscured by trouble. Stumbling around in darkness looking for them is much harder. Those who live with an enduring trial are going to experience difficult days

and need a plan to see them through such periods. Those living with chronic pain will face days when the physical challenge of ordinary life seems unbearable. For others, a mental darkness descends with an unexplainable regularity—taking their mind into places they should not dwell. It is essential to develop a recovery plan for the dark moments in life, especially when living with a lifelong affliction.

Nevertheless, if darkness descends when you are unprepared, these helps are accessible to you. They might be harder to put in place in the midst of trouble, but like a first-aid kit, you can grab them if you know where to find them.

THE WORD: PROMISES TO ANCHOR OUR SOULS

The psalmist declares, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105). What better place to turn when darkness descends than the Bible? But the Bible is a big book. A random opening of its pages when in need might not be the best strategy. Far better to be prepared by knowing where to turn when you need light to navigate through troubled territory. Memorizing passages of the promise of his presence will allow us to speak truth to ourselves when we feel abandoned by God (e.g., Psalm 55:22; Psalm 121; 1 Corinthians 10:13). In addition, marking key psalms to turn to gives us truth to draw upon when trouble comes.

For example, saints in sore affliction often find it hard to pray. This is a time to let Psalms be a template for our prayers, especially psalms of lament. Lament has two simple parts: (1) talk to God about your feelings, and then (2) talk to your feelings about God. In other words, express your agony to God. Voice the deepest feelings of your heart in prayer. Then speak truth to your heart. Settle your soul with solid truth. Psalm 13

illustrates this well when the psalmist gives voice to his pain (vv. 1–4), then steadies himself with sure truths (vv. 5–6):

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I take counsel in my soul
and have sorrow in my heart all the day?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
Consider and answer me, O LORD my God;
light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,
lest my enemy say, “I have prevailed over him,”
lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.
But I have trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the LORD,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

This is a pattern for us to emulate. Our emotions are God-given, but feelings can also lead us astray, for they are tainted by a sin-stained heart. This is why rehearsing truth is so important. It might *feel* like God has abandoned us, but we know he has promised that he never will. In the words of David above, he expresses his resolve to act on the truth he knows, not the feelings he experiences in the moment.

This practice of preaching to yourself, speaking biblical truth to our troubled hearts, is an essential step to steadying our souls in the midst of affliction. And it is a truth exemplified in many places in Scripture besides the Psalms. For example, the writer of Lamentations poetically expressed his anguish at the destruction of Jerusalem. Amid the rubble of the city and his life, he declares, “My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the LORD” (3:18). But the troubled prophet doesn’t stay there. He goes on to speak truth to his heart:

But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
“The LORD is my portion,” says my soul,
“therefore I will hope in him.”
(Lamentations 3:21–24)

What gave the writer of Lamentations hope was calling to mind sure truths, especially the enduring reality of the Lord's steadfast love.

Other psalms take our eyes off our trouble and focus them on our gracious Creator (e.g., Psalms 8 and 19). We should each have a small set of psalms to which we turn in difficult times. Praying through these can bring much help when we are in a world of hurt.

In the providence of God, we also can find truth we are not particularly looking for in our time of need. If we have made a habit of systematic daily Bible reading, the scheduled reading will sometimes contain a nugget of truth that is helpful for our need in the moment. The benefit of working our way through a daily Bible reading plan extends beyond giving us a comprehensive view of the story of the Bible; it also provides a way for us to find help for the day. I can't count the number of times my daily devotional time led me to the truth I needed for the struggle of that particular day.

MUSIC: SONGS OF SACRED TRUTHS

Gospel-saturated music is a marvelous gift that is a balm to the soul and a beacon in darkness. When darkness gripped King Saul, he was refreshed by the music of David

(1 Samuel 16:14–23). When the sons of Korah, the worship leaders of Israel, were led away into the Babylonian captivity, they penned one of the most reassuring of all the psalms (Psalm 42). What was the last thing Jesus and his disciples did before they went to the Mount of Olives—the place of his deep anguish—on that fateful night? They sang a hymn (Matthew 26:30).

Songs of biblical truth can steady our souls; they anchor us to truth in life's storms. We should all have a few go-to songs that help us see God in times of darkness. Joni Eareckson Tada's book, *Songs of Suffering: 25 Hymns and Devotions for Weary Souls*, has been a helpful resource to many sufferers.

Music has a way of penetrating the heart with a depth unmatched by the spoken or written word. Those who have raised children have surely experienced times when a song stilled a crying child. Many of us have watched the calmness that songs of hope brought to a loved one in precious moments before death's grip seized them. And music can wonderfully still our troubled souls in unsettled times when pain, fear, or darkness have gripped us.

Often when grief over the death of my beloved son, Eric, tightened its grip on my heart, songs such as “He Will Hold Me Fast” and “In the Valley” brought peace and hope. Their words stimulated the resolve to go forth and do what needed to be done, to trudge through the darkness in the assurance of my Lord's presence and care. The grief did not disappear, but neither did it paralyze. Not knowing when a wave of grief would threaten to overwhelm, it was helpful to have such songs in my pocket. While smartphones can make us dumb, they also allow us to have songs of gospel truth readily available to lift our souls in troubled times. Akin to stocking a first aid kit with bandages, modern electronic devices allow us to curate a few key hymns or spiritual songs.

COMMUNITY: OTHERS TO WALK WITH US

It is dangerous to walk through trials alone. As the Preacher of Ecclesiastes points out, “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!” (4:9–10).

We have been created to flourish in community, especially the community of the saints. When we place our faith in Jesus, we become a part of his body—the church. The book of Acts and the Epistles portray the local church as a visible, interdependent collection of followers of Jesus who give themselves to one another. My wife and I have the privilege of being part of a local church whose members display such sacrificial care for one another. We have received, shared in, and watched the support of believers toward those in all types of trials. I cannot imagine walking through our trials alone, nor does our Lord want us to try.

But you cannot experience this help if you are not a part of a local church or if you only live on the periphery of a congregation. People can also be very involved in a local church, yet close to no one. You must not confuse busyness with true relationship. You must be willing to link yourself arm-in-arm with other believers, which requires getting close. A willingness to be open and vulnerable with others is essential to developing the type of relationships that can help you in difficult trials. And yes, it will be messy at times, because we who live in frail flesh will fail one another. It is sadly inevitable. Yet if we allow this to prevent us from drawing close to other believers, none will be there to lift us up when we fall. So find believers to link arms with. Weave your life with the lives of others. Then, when trouble comes, others will be there to help you.

Experiencing the benefit of community also requires humility to serve and be served. Our pride often makes us resistant to seek or receive help. I was convicted of this years ago while teaching through the “one anothers” of Scripture (e.g., comfort one another, serve one another, exhort one another). My brethren in the local congregation cannot be all the body of Christ is meant to be if I am unwilling to make my need known. Similarly, they cannot fulfill their duty to me as a fellow believer if I am too proud to accept their help.

Some saints with the spiritual gift of mercy serve their suffering brothers or sisters in Christ best in practical ways. We have a dear friend who spends much of her time driving others to their medical appointments, some of which are more than an hour away. This simple help is of great benefit to the recipients, and it’s how she serves the Lord. But she could not serve in this way if others were unwilling to receive her help. Other folks delight in providing meals or performing physical work to lighten the load of their brothers and sisters in Christ.

While it is true that some abuse the generosity of others and none of us want to become an undue burden to others, we should realize that sharing our needs gives opportunity to others to fulfill the call of Jesus to love one another. In so doing, we are giving visible witness to a watching world that we are his disciples. A community of believers who sacrifices time, treasure, and talent for one another is a powerful witness to a world in desperate need of the light of the gospel.

Another source of help from the community of believers is the collective power of prayer. Asking other saints to struggle for us in prayer while we wrestle with our hearts should be part of our response to trials. If we believe that the prayers of the righteous accomplish much (James 5:16), we should be

quick to seek prayers when gripped in darkness. We all need a list of faithful prayer warriors to whom we can turn in a time of need. Doing so should be second nature for us.

Perhaps as you read the words above, you realize you are not part of a community of believers devoted to one another. If this is your situation, realize that the transforming power of community can begin with you. Find a need and fill it. Involve yourself in serving others. As you do so, you will find a bond developing between you and those you serve or serve with. Moreover, as you give yourself to meeting the needs of others, you will take your mind off yourself and your troubles. There is no better way to guard against self-pity and self-centeredness (which we all struggle with) than sacrificially giving ourselves to others.

BIBLICAL COUNSEL: WISDOM FROM EXPERIENCED SAINTS

Sometimes flashlights and candles do not provide enough light when electricity is lost. We need more intense help, such as a friend with a mobile generator. In the same way, we also need to know where to turn when our usual spiritual aids prove insufficient for the darkness we face. There is no shame in seeking more specialized help when in sore affliction, any more than there is in seeking help for a physical problem that strikes our body.

How do you know when you need more specialized help? First, realize we all need spiritual help all the time. We all need believers who can speak truth into our lives on a regular basis. Truth be told, we are sometimes slow to see our own spiritual needs, and others who do life with us can often see troubled areas to which we are blind. This is yet another blessing of living in a community of believers and

doing life together. This means a willingness to take seriously the words of others when they lovingly express their concern about our spiritual well-being. As we have watched others struggle in small groups we have led over the years, my wife and I have experienced a variety of reactions when we recommend that they need more structured help, such as biblical counseling. Some have reacted with offense and continued to wallow. Others have accepted the advice and sought counsel, finding the structured help they needed to settle them in their journey.

Second, when you are feeling overwhelmed and unable to fulfill your varied responsibilities in life, it is time to seek help. If you find yourself losing joy in things you normally enjoy or withdrawing from activities with others for weeks on end, this is a sign that you would benefit from another believer coming alongside and helping you in the midst of a rough patch.

But to whom do you turn in your time of need? A good starting point might be a seasoned saint in your small group. Someone with whom you have an established relationship can often speak into your life more readily than others. Also, does your church or one nearby have trained biblical counselors who can combine experience and knowledge of the Word to bring light into the darkness? In addition, pastors/elders can often provide counsel or direct you to those who can. Sometimes people are hesitant to involve leaders in their time of need, fearing they will be a burden to their pastors/elders. But making them aware of your struggle enables them to fulfill their calling to care for the flock over which God has given them care.

We all know to call 911 in the event of a physical emergency. It is foolish not to call when an emergency arises. In the

same way, we should not hesitate to seek help in the face of a spiritual emergency.

It is inevitable that those living with an enduring affliction will face times of darkness, doubt, and even despair. But we can prepare for such times. Most importantly, we need to remember our gracious Lord will be our help in such times of need. As the psalmist reminds us, “For he delivers the needy when he calls, the poor and him who has no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy” (Psalm 72:12–13).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND APPLICATION

1. When was the last time you read through the book of Psalms? If doing so is not already on your reading plan, consider regularly reading through Psalms to gain insight into how the psalmists addressed suffering in their own lives. Keep a journal to write down key truths you learn and psalms you want to return to in the future.
2. Create a playlist on your smartphone with songs you can listen to when facing dark times. If you are part of a small group, ask others what songs they have found especially helpful in dark times.