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WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH

by Joe Stowell

During his years of pastoring, radio broadcasting, and the presidency of Moody Bible Institute, Joe Stowell has helped many hurting people find strength for the journey of life.

With a reassuring realism that is rooted in the timeless counsel of the Word of God, Joe proclaims a message of hope and faith that we can have as we travel the wonderful yet difficult road of life.

This is the kind of encouragement you will find in the following pages excerpted from *The Upside Of Down* by Discovery House Publishers.

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This booklet is based on a portion of *The Upside Of Down* by Joseph M. Stowell, published by Discovery House Publishers, a member of the RBC Ministries family.

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Printed in USA

UNDERSTANDING THE TRIALS THAT TROUBLE US

Getting through a season of trouble is a lot like surviving a roller-coaster ride—except that we do not volunteer for trouble, and trouble was never intended to be fun.

Trouble is filled with stomach-wrenching drops, dips, and sudden curves. And just when we think we've caught our breath, we're dropping again.

If we didn't know better, we might think that this roller-coaster ride is a random experience, that somehow the forces that lift us up and push us down are whims of fate.

Thankfully, it's not a random ride at all. Those who understand the work of God in and through our troubles know that He does not abandon us to disaster. Rather, with all the

strength of His character, He provides a well-engineered superstructure that supports the process along a carefully planned set of tracks and guardrails. Even when the ride is too hectic, unsettling, and twisted for us to sense the presence of His support and guidance, it's still there. Our only hope in it all is to stay in the car and find something solid to hold on to through every turn of the experience.

When trouble invades our comfort zones, two needs rise to the top: the need for understanding (to find answers to the probing and disturbing questions that crowd our minds and souls) and the need for healing (to feel better and to finish the problem). Of the two, understanding is the key to managing the problem effectively to its ultimate outcome. Without the understanding that produces the right answers,

there is no sense of direction and no hope in which to feel secure.

How should we view trouble? The apostle James used a specific word for trouble that leads to a helpful understanding of what trouble is. The essence of this word led J. B. Phillips to paraphrase James 1:2 by saying that when troubles come, “Don’t resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends!”

When James wrote, “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials” (Jas. 1:2 NASB), his choice of words is strategic. The Greek word for *trial* is a word that means “to examine or test for the purpose of proving or revealing something about the thing tested.” It is a test that reveals something for a specific purpose.

Of all the things we could say about trials—that they are disappointing,

discouraging, humiliating, uncomfortable, painful, and disheartening—God sees them, among other reasons, as tests that reveal our true selves. It’s a sure thing that in trouble, the real me becomes apparent quickly. Trouble is revelatory.

Trouble is one of God’s ways of examining our lives. When we are on “Easy Street”—and thank the Lord that He lets us come up for air periodically—it is hard for us to know what we are really like. We can carry on a cosmetic existence and fool ourselves, and most people, about our true nature.

But when trouble hits our lives, what we are really like is quickly revealed. Trouble shows our friends, our spouses, our children, and our acquaintances what we are like. Even more unsettling, it forces us to start seeing ourselves for what we really are.

I am committed to the sanctification process in my life, to becoming increasingly pure as I grow in my walk with God. Yet sanctification is tough, even in situations that are not life threatening.

Several years ago, when my son was a student playing basketball, it was a trial to see him sitting on the bench when he should have been playing. A small trial, but a revealing one. Worse yet was what it was like when he got into the game and the referee started to harass him. As I rose out of my seat, I began to “express myself,” only to feel my wife tug at my coat: “Joe, you’re the president of Moody Bible Institute,” she would remind me. There is much in me that needs to be worked on. More important than the “obvious lack of judgment by the coach or the referee” was my lack of maturity in terms of self-control and

Christlikeness. The pressure of the “trial” during the game gave me a good look at myself and showed me areas in which I needed to grow.

Without that strategic perspective, we tend to focus on the external aspects of our problems. Yet if we keep in mind that trouble is in part intended to reveal the “real me” so that we may grow, our focus in pain will move from pity to the production of God’s glory in and through us.

What good is trouble? Among other things, trouble reveals where I am in the growth process in terms of my conformity to the image and character of Christ. It gets me beyond assumptions to reality. Am I a forgiving person? Am I kind? Understanding? Just? Loving? Helpful? Patient? Or am I angry, slanderous, self-centered, inflexible, manipulative, weak, and ill-

equipped to respond to trials correctly?

It is helpful to see ourselves as we really are. Trouble reveals that, and it turns the agenda toward the things in our lives that need to be changed so that we can grow to be more like Him—and that, of course, is the purpose of our redemption (Rom. 8:28-29) and one of God’s purposes in trials (Jas. 1:2-4).

William Coltman was pastor of Highland Park Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan, for more than 40 years. He served with dignity through many difficult times. At one point in his life he was falsely accused of moral indiscretion, and his wife refused to go to church with him. Each Sunday she left the house to attend another church down the street.

His secretary of many years told me that through it all she “never heard him say

a negative word about anyone!” In the test, his character was revealed and Christ was glorified.

What are trials anyway? Often they are tests to let us know where we are in the process of growing up in Him.

James 1:2 goes on to qualify the nature of these tests by saying that “many kinds” of trials will enter our lives. Knowing what kind of trouble to expect is a great help in being ready to meet that trouble.

The Scripture speaks of at least seven different kinds of trouble.

TRIALS OF PLACE AND RACE

First, and probably most common, are trials of *place* and *race*. Scripture affirms that we live in a fallen place. This planet is under the rule of our adversary, Satan. Earth is his domain. We are also part of a fallen race.

Apart from the help of God, all of us are prone to express our fallenness in many kinds of damaging ways.

We can count on it—living in a fallen place and being a part of a fallen race is going to produce difficult times. Originally, this place was a perfect environment where productive work, fellowship with God, and morally responsible actions provided fulfillment and unhindered joy. But in Genesis 3, sin entered the picture and raped the scene. The rest of Scripture speaks to the struggle of real people trying to live in a fallen place as part of a fallen race.

The wonderful thing about the scope of biblical history is that whereas it starts with a perfect creation and then records the Fall, it ends with the glorious consummation of all things. One of my all-time favorite passages in Scripture is in Revelation: “The former

things are passed away. . . . Behold, I make all things new” (Rev. 21:4-5 KJV).

What a great hope for us. In that new environment there will be no more death, no more tears, no more sorrow, no more pain, no more crying. But until then, we are a *fallen race* planted in a *fallen place*.

When we were children we played the game “So Big.” We couldn’t wait to grow up. Then we became teenagers. We looked in the mirror and said, “No way! That can’t be my body!” Our faces erupted like volcanoes, we started to become men and women, and we didn’t like what was happening to us. Then we reached our thirties, and our bodies began to slow down. We spent vast sums of money at health spas. Our bodies sagged and wrinkled, and we started looking for the plastic surgeon.

We look forward to

retirement, but our bodies will retire before we do. Our back goes out more often than we do. When we lean down to pick something up, we want to stay down to see how many other things we can get while we're there.

Our bodies get sick—and rarely on schedule. Some of us live in bodies that are diseased. Arthritis, diabetes, and Alzheimer's disease plague many. Death stands ready to rob us of those we love in untimely and unsettling ways. It's a fallen place, and we're a fallen race. Trouble comes with the territory.

Fallen people use, manipulate, and abuse us. Horrific accidents, killer tornadoes, and devastating earthquakes disrupt our lives. It's all part of being planted on a planet damaged by the rule of Satan and sin.

When a trial of place and race impacts our lives,

what ought to be revealed? In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul valiantly struggles with his thorn in the flesh. He prays three times that God will remove it from him. But it's clear that it's not God's will that the thorn should be removed. It has purpose. So Paul acknowledges the thorn's presence and recognizes that it has purpose. He submits to the trial without bitterness or blaming God, and claims that through his weakness God will make him strong.

TRIALS OF TEMPTATION

The second kind of trial we find in Scripture is the trial of *temptation*. In Matthew 4:1 we read, "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil." Interestingly enough, the same Greek word sometimes translated by the word *trial* is translated here by the word *tempted*. Satan

led Christ through the temptation of the pride of life and the lust of the flesh. He hit Christ at every vulnerable point we struggle with as humans. The Lord countered His trouble at every point by a response from Scripture that kept Him unflinchingly loyal to God.

Temptation is unavoidable. It intrudes into the life of the businessman on the road, the homemaker in her house, the citizen filling out income tax forms, and the person who has been hurt by others. We feel the temptation to strike out in revenge, to gossip, or to slander. These are significant temptations.

I have a friend in the ministry who, after checking into his hotel, got on the elevator with two attractive young women. As the door closed, one of them said, "Hey, how about a little fun with us tonight?" Who would know? He later told

me, "It was like God pulled a curtain down in front of me, and on the curtain was Galatians 6:8, 'The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction.'" He said no to the women and yes to God. His relationship to God was more important than the seductive pleasure of sin.

***The Bible will
keep you from sin,
or sin will keep you
from the Bible.***

When I was a little boy, someone wrote in my Bible, "This book will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from this book." In the face of troubling temptation, the power of God's Word is an indispensable ally. As the psalmist said, "Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against Thee" (Ps. 119:11 KJV).

TRIALS OF IDENTIFICATION

A third kind of trial that we can expect is the test of *identification*. In chapters 15 and 17 of John's gospel, Jesus told His disciples that they could expect the world to be rough on them, as it had been on Him. They could expect to be thrown out of the synagogue, to be disowned by their families, and, in some cases, even to be murdered—all because they bore His name and were identified with His cause.

History records that because the early church broke bread at Communion and said, "This is the body of Christ," the culture of that day accused them of cannibalism. Christians claimed Communion as their love feast, and the culture of that day accused them of improprieties in those private observances. In the midst of this pressure,

Peter encouraged the believers to persevere. He wrote to a suffering church, "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us" (1 Pet. 2:12). He added:

How is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth." When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly. He

Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by His wounds you have been healed (vv.20-24).

Now that America is becoming more secularized, we can expect trouble in an environment increasingly hostile toward the values of righteousness we hold dear. Now more than ever, we as God's people must be prepared to pass the test of trials that come because of our identification with Christ.

Dennis was on the fast track upward with Cox newspapers, headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia. He had been the publisher of the *Springfield News* in Springfield, Ohio, and had served Cox as the publisher of the *Dayton Daily News* in Dayton, Ohio. In both settings, he had made the newspapers he managed profitable and was well

thought of within the newspaper community.

As a Christian, Dennis applied biblical standards of righteousness to the decisions he made in the marketplace. Some of those decisions related to advertisements. It's common for newspapers to reserve the right to advertise things they believe are constructive in the community and to withhold advertising for those things they believe are not helpful to their business or to the community at large. In light of that practice, Dennis eliminated advertisements for X-rated movies from the Dayton papers. He also refused to run notices and advertisements for gay and lesbian groups in the community.

Needless to say, that decision brought forth an outcry from the groups whose advertisements had been rejected. Yet Dennis

remained committed to that which was righteous and true. The issue went to those in authority over him in Atlanta. Though they had backed him in similar decisions in the past, to his surprise they said he had to run the ads from the gay and lesbian groups or lose his job.

For Dennis, this was a trial of identification. He chose rather to identify with Christ than to continue in his career.

Hebrews 11:24-27 says of Moses:

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was

looking ahead to his reward. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible.

To stand for Christ and His values in a hostile environment is bound to bring trials into our lives. As Christians, we must realize that throughout church history, the church has usually been planted in a hostile environment. In fact, rarely has the church thrived in a friendly context. More and more, there will be tests involving our identity with Jesus Christ.

In the midst of trials of identification, the pattern of success is to persist in righteousness, regardless of the cost. Peter wrote:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you

participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name (1 Pet. 4:12-16).

Christians need to remain strong and demonstrate faithful perseverance in a test of identification.

TRIALS OF DISCIPLINE

There are also trials of *discipline*. We need some clarification here. As noted earlier, not all difficulty in our lives is God's discipline. When difficulty impacts us,

we are prone to think that God is chastising us. That may not be true. We may be experiencing a trial of place and race or a trial of temptation or a test of identification. But if it is discipline, it will be difficult. In discipline God seeks to nudge our lives back to paths of righteousness.

Note the difference between punishment and discipline. Punishment is justice. Discipline is corrective. There is a vast difference between the two. There is not one trouble that God brings into our lives as believers that is punishment. Sin was punished on the cross. We are not in double jeopardy. Every sin that I have committed or will commit or am committing has been punished. Justice was meted out at the cross. But the corrective discipline of God comes along with sovereign nudges that inflict just enough pressure to alert

me to the problem and to get me back on the track of righteousness.

Proverbs 3:11-12 states, “My son, do not despise the Lord’s discipline and do not resent His rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those He loves, as a father the son he delights in.” Hebrews 12 says that if you feel God disciplining you, rejoice. It’s a sign of sonship. If He doesn’t discipline you, you are not His child. I understand that kind of talk.

I don’t know how many times I’ve been in situations where I have wanted to put a little corrective pressure on someone else’s child. But I had no right. The child was not my son or daughter. But with regard to my own children, not only do I have the right to “encourage” them into right paths when they get derailed, I have the responsibility, the stewardship as a parent, to do just that.

How are we to respond to trials of discipline? By not resisting them. They come from a loving Father, and we need to open our hearts to these trials so that the Lord might correct us through them and put us on the right path.

There are many illustrations of this kind of trial in Scripture, but I can’t resist going to the Old Testament prophet Jonah. The word of God came to the prophet: “Jonah, I want you to go to Nineveh.” And he immediately said no.

What would God do? He needed somebody to go to Nineveh, but the prophet had just said he was not going—and was on his way somewhere else. In fact, Jonah was down in the hold of the ship, sound asleep. Discipline was God’s response, sovereignly nudging Jonah back toward obedience, back toward Nineveh.

Some of us say to ourselves, *If I sin, I won't feel any peace. And I feel peace, so it must be all right.* Yet many times we have so rationalized our way into sin that we feel quite peaceful about it. Jonah's nap demonstrates that emotional peace is not a barometer of righteousness.

Jonah was so much at peace that he slept all the way through a storm. God had sent that storm to wake him up and bring him to his senses. But he kept sleeping. So God sent the captain of the ship down to see him. Sovereign nudge number two. The pagan ship captain shook Jonah and said, "Wake up! And pray to your God!" So Jonah got up and went to the deck of the ship. There the sailors were trying to find out who was responsible for their trouble.

They cast lots and gave everybody a number, including Jonah. As that

ship tossed and turned under the delicate, sovereign hand of God, the lots were cast on the windswept deck—and wouldn't you know it, the lots pointed to Jonah. "Tell us," the sailors cried, "who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?" (Jon. 1:8).

He had to give a testimony. "He answered, 'I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land'" (v.9).

You'd think that by this time Jonah ought to be dropping to his knees—right? No. The trouble increased. "So they asked him, 'What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?'" (v.11).

Jonah could have said, "I'll pray and repent, and your problem will be over."

But Jonah replied, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea . . . and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you" (v.12). Jonah was saying, "I would rather die than obey God." Finally, in desperation, the sailors chucked him overboard. Now Jonah had won. God had nudged him and nudged him, and yet he had stubbornly maintained his sinful choice.

But when it comes to discipline, God has options we've never dreamed of. Just when Jonah thought he had won, God said to a great fish, "Do you see that boat? I want you to swim next to it, and when you see a splash, that's lunch." Jonah lived 3 days and 3 nights in that underwater hotel. He wrestled with God until finally, after 3 days of devastating discipline, he said, "God, You win."

We can expect that when

we sin, God will love us enough to keep working to bring us back to the course of righteousness. "The Lord disciplines those He loves" (Heb. 12:6). And although this discipline is sometimes tough and troublesome, He does it because He loves us enough to keep us on safe and successful paths.

Passing the test of discipline demands cooperation with God. When I was a boy, we used to like to wrestle to see whose young male ego could be affirmed. As little kids, we'd get a guy down, sit on top of him, and put him in a full nelson until he said one liberating word: "Uncle!"

And that's how we respond to God. A trial of discipline is intended to get our stubborn wills to say, "All right! Uncle! I'm yours. I repent and will gladly walk in righteousness."

TRIALS OF CONSEQUENCE FOR SIN

There are also trials that are the *consequence for sin*. Chuck Swindoll says it so well: “We teach our children 1 John 1:9, ‘If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness,’ which may tempt them to coast on grace.” He goes on to say that “if we teach them 1 John 1:9, we must also teach them Galatians 6:8, ‘The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction.’”

Some of our trouble is a direct consequence of willful sin in our lives. Sin always brings consequences. Nobody is exempt. No one is clever enough, no one is subtle enough, no one is intelligent enough to sin and not bear its consequences. “Be self-controlled and alert.

Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8). In the Old Testament we read, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death” (Prov. 14:12). Sin always brings despair and trouble. Even long after we are forgiven, the consequences may remain. Some will not be removed until that final glorious day of redemption.

Paul, having murdered Christians, couldn’t shake the memories. In the first chapter of 1 Timothy he calls himself the worst of sinners. Yet he used that consequence as a springboard to worship and praise.

Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord

was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display His unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on Him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen (1 Tim. 1:13-17).

The troubling and sometimes lifelong consequences of sin ought to motivate and remind us of its awfulness so that we say, “God, this daily consequence reminds me of Your amazing grace to love, forgive, forget, and receive

me.” It ought to be, as well, a protective shield to help us not to risk the path of sin again. And, significantly, it ought to make us take the focus of our hearts off this fleeting, fallen world and live for that grand and glorious day of redemption when all things will become new (Rev. 21:1-4).

First John 3:2 proclaims: “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.” I love this verse. Take heart. The consequence soon will pass. When He comes and we meet Him face to face, it will all be new. Consequences, even in our tears and brokenness, can result in praise and glory and a deepening love for God and His appearing instead of a heart soured and angry with Him.

TRIALS OF DISPLAY

The sixth kind of trouble we might face is the trial of *display*. God permits this kind of trial to come into our lives to enable us to display something for Him through our trauma.

God came to Abraham and said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about" (Gen. 22:2).

Quite frankly, when I hear that God asked for a child sacrifice, it troubles my spirit. I don't like to think that my God is like that. But we have to look at the context. In this particular instance, Abraham is living in the land of the Canaanites, where the highest form of commitment to their gods of wood and stone was taking their children and sacrificing

them to their pagan god. Offering the blood of their children was the pinnacle statement of obedience to their god.

I believe that God was saying to Abraham, "Are you willing to display your love for Me, the true and the living God, as much as these pagans are to their gods?" I think there was something even more significant in this trial, this test in Abraham's life. Isaac was the gift God had given to Abraham. He was the miracle baby. Isaac was the whole reason Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees to become a pilgrim in the land of the Canaanites. Genesis 12:1-2, the passage that gives God's command to Abraham to leave Ur, is an early prophetic statement of the coming of Christ: "The Lord had said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will

show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.’”

Years went by, and Abraham and Sarah were past childbearing age. Then, suddenly, miraculously, God gave them the gift of this boy. Abraham loved Isaac. I believe God was asking Abraham, “Do you love the gift more than the Giver?”

God often marches into our lives and threatens something precious to us—something He has given us. A child, a house, a spouse, a career. How do we respond? Do we display through our response that we love the Giver more than the gift?

I root for the Detroit Tigers and remain a loyal fan in good times, and mostly bad. During baseball season, every morning I open up the newspaper to see where the Tigers stand in the American League

Central. God opens the newspaper of our lives to see whether He is still first or if something has displaced Him. Only you know. You may be asked to give that answer through a trial of display.

Abraham wakes up his boy on that morning, and they walk for 3 days. Abraham has a long time to change his mind, to flunk the test. He has 3 whole days of walking to say, “God, you’re not first. Isaac is first in my life.” And he walks 3 days, builds the altar, lays down his son—and now the marvelous statement of what kind of God our God is. God says, “Wait! That’s all! That’s all!” Genesis 22:12 puts it this way: “Do not lay a hand on the boy . . . Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from Me your son, your only son.”

Trials of display are intended to be a platform where God's power can be clearly seen. Such is the case with the man born blind (Jn. 9:1-3).

As He went along, [Jesus] saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life."

The blind man's trouble had nothing to do with the consequence of sin. His blindness was, instead, a platform upon which the glory and power of God could be seen. I often wonder what works of God are displayed in the midst of my trouble? Forgiveness, kindness, patience, grace? Or is my trouble a platform for Satan's agenda?

TRIALS OF BROKEN EXPECTATIONS

The last kind of trial is the trial of *broken expectations*. You and I need to remember that one of the greatest difficulties we have in life is dealing with expectations that never come to pass. In fact, most counselors will tell you that much depression comes from the disappointment over broken expectations.

When we get married, we have expectations. Newly married husbands expect a lot of things from their wives. And she has a whole list of expectations for him. He is expecting her to pick up after him, prepare wonderful meals, care for the brood, exhibit social graces, work like a "strong bull at home," have the kids corralled, set a beautiful table with sterling candlesticks, have his favorite meal ready for him when he comes home, and

after the meal—while he reads the paper—finish the work in the kitchen, put the kids to bed, and then be a tiger in the bedroom.

She has her list as well. He will be sensitive, understanding, and hang on every word uttered from her lips. He will keep her secure financially and spiritually, and she will always look at him as the rock of her life. He will help around the house and expect nothing of her when she is exhausted.

One of the great problems in marriage occurs after the first few weeks, when we realize that there is something wrong with those lists of expectations. That's when the trouble begins. None of us likes to have our dreams dashed.

On one occasion when our children were very small, they asked, "Dad, will you take us to the circus Tuesday night?" Not

wanting to appear cruel and insensitive, I said, "Maybe." Which to their minds was yes. If you are a parent, or if you ever become one, know that anything short of an absolute, nonnegotiable, white-knuckled, teeth-clenched "NO!" is still a possibility. I said maybe and forgot about it.

I still remember coming home that Tuesday night. The kids were all excited. "Dad's home! Tonight's the night!"

"What's tonight?" I said.

"The circus! Remember?"

"Oh," I said, "we're not going to the circus."

They said, "Okay. No problem," and danced off merrily to do something else. Not a chance! They were crushed.

Broken expectations are a leading source of discouragement and despondency. The most instructive passage I know about expectations is in

Philippians 1. It's the report that Paul files with the church in Philippi about his time in Rome. In this report he notes that he is imprisoned (v.13), that some of the Roman believers are envious and spiteful toward him (v.15), and that Nero may decree that his life be taken (vv.19-24).

This has the makings for a lot of discouragement. What fascinates me is that in the midst of this trial of expectations, he is victorious and ecstatic. How? The answer is given in verse 20:

[It is] my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death (NASB).

Paul had one expectation in life. It wasn't to be the premier apostle. Nor was it to be well liked by brothers

and sisters in Christ. It wasn't even to be given a longer life in which to serve Christ. Those were not his expectations. His one expectation was that Christ be magnified through him. He sought to demonstrate the quality, character, and agenda of Christ—*regardless of his situation in life.*

Rejecting comfort, pleasure, health, wealth, and peace as our primary expectations in life and placing as our number one priority reflecting Christ will not only direct us toward His glory but also help us bypass much trouble.

So, what can we expect from trouble? We can expect trouble to reveal ourselves as we really are and to come in at least seven different forms. And we can also expect trouble to elicit a response. The pivotal issue is what kind of response it will be.

RESPONDING TO TRIALS

If trouble is inevitable—and it is—then the other inevitability is that we will indeed respond to it.

But *how* will we respond? We can respond passively, fearfully, inwardly, assertively, philosophically, manipulatively. When trouble interrupts us, there are a host of options.

Out of all the possible responses, one rises to the top. That strategic response is vital if we're to make it through. It is, in fact, nonnegotiable if we're to grow in character and competency and to bring glory to God's reputation.

It is the commitment to respond to trouble by "consider[ing] it pure joy" (Jas. 1:2). Through our brokenness and tears, our hearts insist that it's *impossible!* Yet considering it pure joy is both possible

and, when applied, productive. In fact, resisting this choice will derail progress and deepen despair.

THE NECESSITY OF CONTROLLING OUR RESPONSE

When James writes, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds" (Jas. 1:2), he is referring to an arena we can control. The timing, depth, complexity, and duration of trouble are for the most part beyond our control. What is in our control is the way we respond.

An important goal in trouble is to respond in a way that minimizes long-term regrets. I recall standing by the casket with the parents of a son who had died in his twenties. I heard them say something that made a marked impression on my heart.

They said, “We’ve not always been perfect parents, but we have no regrets. We enjoyed our life with him, and he enjoyed his relationship with us.” What a wonderful commentary to come to the end of a relationship and to realize that while it wasn’t perfect, there are no regrets.

THE RESULT OF A RIGHT RESPONSE

Right responses in the midst of trouble always minimize regrets. One of the primary goals in moving through trouble successfully is to go through it in such a way that you can look back and realize that you did your best to respond properly and are not ashamed of how you managed the aspects that were in your control.

The story of Judas in Scripture is a fascinating and instructive tale of a life of wrong responses that ended up in the depths of regret.

Because Judas was given the responsibility of being the treasurer for the disciples, it’s obvious that he was trusted by them. So when Jesus said that one of the disciples seated at the table during the Last Supper would betray Him, it never occurred to anyone that He was referring to Judas. Even after Jesus clearly indicated the identity of His betrayer and told him to get on with his plan, none of the disciples understood whom Christ meant. They thought that when Judas left the room he was going to buy something for the Passover feast or give money to the poor (Jn. 13:21-30).

Yet, in retrospect and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, John tells us that underneath it all, Judas was addicted to greed and personal gain and that indeed he was a thief and would often steal from the treasury that he controlled

(Jn. 12:6). No doubt his dreams were that when Christ established His kingdom, he would be the treasurer and ultimately become a wealthy man.

Interestingly enough, it was right after Jesus announced that He was going to the cross and would not be establishing an earthly kingdom that Judas left the disciples and traded the head of Christ for money—30 pieces of silver. It's as though he said to himself, "Now that my prospect of greater riches is gone, at least I can get 30 pieces of silver out of this deal."

What's significant is that Judas was more committed to his own comfort and ease than he was to going through difficulty in his identification with Christ, a trial that Christ predicted all the disciples would experience.

Judas' option for

what seemed to be the comfortable way out was a response that filled the remainder of his life with regret, regret so deep that he couldn't live with himself. Matthew reports that after Judas betrayed Jesus and "saw that Jesus was condemned," his heart was filled with sorrow (27:3).

Those 30 pieces of silver burned a hole in Judas' heart as they rattled in his bag. They became a symbol of his sorrow and a reminder of his regret. So deep was his regret that he went back to the Jewish leaders and threw the money at their feet. Then he went out and hanged himself. The response that had seemed the easiest, the most natural, and the most comfortable, that seemed to be exactly right and appropriate, ended up being the response that led Judas to the depths of despair.

As a pastor, I've been

through several building programs. Of the things I've learned through that experience, number one is that you let the decorating committee do what it wants to do. It's much easier that way. In one of the churches I pastored, my secretary was bolder than I was. The committee thought we ought to have blue carpeting throughout the office complex. She did not like or want blue carpeting. She went head to head with the decorating committee over the issue and finally won. Her office would have beige, earth tones on the floor.

Just before the project was to be implemented, however, she walked into my office and said, "Pastor, I've decided to have blue carpeting in my office." I was shocked. She went on to say, "I realized last night that if I have my way on this carpeting, every time I walk into the office the carpet

will be a reminder of my stubbornness."

Our response to a crisis will lead us either to reap a harvest of regrets that etch themselves on our minds as lifelong reminders of poor choices, or to reap the joy of knowing that we chose the biblically correct response. Though the crisis may have been painful, we have the privilege of knowing that through it all we did our best, that our conscience is clear. Regardless of the outcome, we didn't do things that deepened our distress by accumulating symbols of sorrow through our sinful choices.

Productive responses are the responses that are outlined in God's Word. In times of crisis, we need to fight through the baggage of our feelings, instinctive responses, advice from well-meaning friends, and past response patterns to check in with God to see what

He believes would be appropriate. Imagine being faced with a crisis and pausing—eyes glazed over a bit—only to hear someone ask, “What are you doing?” You respond, “Checking my biblical data bank to find out how to respond.”

That’s how the process begins.

THE JOY OF OUR RESPONSE

How then should we respond? Although there are specific patterns of response relating to issues of forgiveness, compassion, mercy, understanding, justice, and patience, one general command fits every case. It is God’s command to consider every trial to be a thing of joy.

Initially, that seems unreasonable because trouble does not feel joyous. In fact, trouble and emotional joy are incompatible.

If we are to respond constructively, we must understand that James 1:2 does not tell us to *feel* joy. For that we can be thankful. It’s impossible for us to manipulate our emotions. Emotions are a result of circumstances, body chemistry, how we have slept, what we have dreamed, or even what we may have eaten the night before. When I’m not feeling right about things, I don’t have a joy button that I can press and suddenly feel wonderful. For the most part, emotions come and go and are often dictated by circumstances of life. And although we are usually able to keep our emotions in check, it’s impossible to change them dramatically.

Emotions are the baggage that comes with our trouble. They were never intended to direct our response. They come along for the ride. The emotions we feel are

legitimate and normal. Feeling guilty about feeling down is unnecessary and wrong. Even Jesus wept.

What's right, however, is that we can't permit our feelings to dictate how we respond. If you have traveled through the mountains, you may have seen ramps for runaway trucks. They are for drivers who have lost their brakes and are dangerously careening down the road out of control. At that point, their trucks are driven by the weight of their baggage. It's a disaster waiting to happen. Letting our emotions dictate our actions is like letting the baggage do the driving.

It's in our choices that our lives should be directed to a productive end. When we understand what the word *consider* means, it becomes clear that James is speaking of a nonemotional choice in this text. Among other things, the word

consider is an accounting term for reckoning items one to another. In fact, some Scripture versions use the word *reckon* in the place of *consider*. At any rate, it's clearly a word that deals with cognitive, mental, volitional activity as opposed to emotional feelings. The text requires that when pain penetrates my existence I need to immediately, *mentally*, reckon that pain to be a thing of ultimate joy.

Since in the original language the word *consider* is used in accounting contexts, we can think of our minds as a ledger book with different columns we can use to record our response when difficulty crosses our path. Our response to difficulty might be to pick up the pencil of our mental notebook and put a check in the self-pity column, wondering why this is happening again and

why we're always having difficulty. So we throw a pity party for ourselves and wallow in the despair of "woe is me." That's one type of mental response.

There's another column that is often checked—the column of blame. We might try to figure out who is to blame for our problem (of course we never are) and put a check in the blame column, as we seek to put off any feelings of personal responsibility for the mess we're in.

Or we may put a check in the column of revenge. I'm amazed at how creative we can be when it comes to carrying out revenge against others who have hurt us. There's a column for withdrawal. There is a life-is-unfair column. There are columns for bitterness and guilt. But there's also a column for joy. Scripture demands that we move all the way across the ledger

page until we come to the column labeled joy and mentally make a checkmark indicating our belief that, in the hand of God, what has happened will ultimately be a cause for joy.

THE CONTENT OF OUR RESPONSE

James 1:2-5 points to the fact that this is not simple mental gymnastics or the power of positive thinking to get us through. This "joy" response has real content.

The end of the passage makes it clear that if we process pain correctly, it will, in the end, bring us to completion in terms of character and equip us to be completed in good works in the ongoing days of our lives. God will use our trouble to produce character and competency in our lives. That is the joy factor.

What Hebrews says of Jesus and His suffering should not go unnoticed:

“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, . . . who for the joy set before Him endured the cross” (Heb. 12:2).

Counting trouble a thing of joy does not require that we feel happy about our difficulties but that we understand that ultimately and finally God’s good hand will make the experience worthy of joyful praise and thanksgiving. This mental outlook keeps our focus not on the moment of pain but on the culmination of the process.

What enables us to respond positively? The joy response is fortified by what we *know* to be true in the midst of trouble.

James 1:3 speaks to the process of the joy response by saying, “because you know.” That statement directly ties our ability to count our difficulty an ultimate thing of joy to what we know to be absolutely true. There is a tremendous

advantage that believers have when they face trouble because of the truths that are logged in their mind before the trouble comes.

There are times when trouble puts us in such deep despair that our capacity to learn through it is almost nonexistent. Logging the right kind of knowledge in advance is greatly beneficial in light of the inevitability of tough times in our lives.

The success of the Persian Gulf War is likely attributable to the fact that our pilots were well trained before they actually faced battle. As one military commander observed, the generation raised on video games was able to take control of sophisticated equipment that required good eye-hand coordination and accurate timing. When the conflict came, they were well prepared in the skills it required.

Knowledge, whether

learned in the midst of trouble or logged in advance, is that commodity that remains certain in the midst of changing emotions and circumstances. It's like an anchor firmly secured in bedrock that keeps the storm-tossed ship from being blown onto rocks.

One of my all-time favorite sports memories is of the final hockey game played in the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, New York. The American team, made up for the most part of amateur players from colleges and universities, were facing Scandinavian and Eastern Bloc teams composed of seasoned veterans who had given their lives to the state to prepare for and to compete in the Olympic matches. The Americans seemed to be outmatched. And because the Olympics came at a time when the spirit of Americans was at an all-time low, there

was little to cheer about.

Yet the American team persisted and won game after game. I came home from church on the Sunday that our boys were playing the Russians and turned the television on and noted, much to my surprise, that though the match was more than half over, we were playing head to head with the Russians. I sat down and could hardly move. I watched with anxiety as our men skated and flinched every time the Russians cocked their stocks to make a shot. I relaxed in relief when I saw that they hadn't scored. It was an agonizing, white-knuckle, tight-stomach spectator event for me and for many others who watched across the country.

Then, in the final moments, it became obvious that we would beat the Russians. It seemed impossible. It seemed so wonderful. We at last had

something to cheer about. We had done it.

That night after church, the network decided to replay the hockey game. We invited some friends over to enjoy the game with us. I sat back in my easy chair, a glass of Pepsi in my hand and a bowl of popcorn on my lap. I was relaxed, calm, and enjoying every moment of the very same game—no whitened knuckles, no tight stomach. What made the difference? What I knew. What I knew to be true! The outcome was secure.

What we know to be true, regardless of the specific trouble we are going through, is the foundation upon which we can accurately, reasonably, intelligently, and confidently go to the joy column on our ledger page and put a check in the appropriate place.

What is it that we can know to enable us to respond positively in

trouble? In James 1:3-4, we are told that we can know “that the testing of [our] faith develops perseverance” and that “perseverance must finish its work so that [we] may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” In other words, we can know that pain is a process with a purpose. And that specific piece of knowledge will enable us to respond to our various trials with joy.



This booklet is excerpted from *The Upside Of Down* by Joe Stowell, which is published by Discovery House Publishers, a member of the RBC Ministries family. Joe served for 18 years as the president of Moody Bible Institute. Currently he is Teaching Pastor at Harvest Bible Chapel in Chicago. He is also partnering with RBC Ministries in radio, writing, and television productions.

If this booklet has been helpful to you, check out Joe's ministry online at www.getmorestrength.org for his weekly thought-provoking messages or his “Daily Strength” devotionals.

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