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ANCHORS IN THE STORM

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 can be ours 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

TRUTHS THAT HOLD US STEADY

Pilots flying in a storm or in darkness quickly become disoriented and deceived by their senses.

Pilots say that when they are flying without visibility, they can be flying in a tight circle while their senses assure them that they are flying straight ahead. When a pilot becomes disoriented in this way, his body is telling him one thing and his instruments are telling him something completely different. To keep flying safely, he must rely on the instruments in his plane. Those instruments will tell him what is actually and absolutely true.

What we know to be true when we're in trouble is the instrument panel that provides certainty regardless of how we feel. People who are hurting have often told me, "I know what's true

from the neck up, but somehow it doesn't make sense in my heart." We assume that if it only makes sense in our heads, it's not helpful. But it is.

Part of the process of working through pain is learning to hang on to what we have from the neck up. When our hearts are broken and hurt, there won't seem to be a pipeline from the brain to the emotions. That's okay. Just don't let go of what you know. That's the key to making it in the midst of difficulty. That's exactly when God's Word says, "Consider it pure joy . . . because you know that . . ." (Jas. 1:2-3).

What can we know in the midst of trials? What are the reliable instruments that track us successfully in the midst of difficulty?

In James 1:3-4, the stabilizing truth is that we can *know* that "the testing of [our] faith produces

endurance” and that we should “let endurance have its perfect result, so that [we] may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (NASB). James is saying that we can know that pain is a process with a purpose. That specific piece of knowledge will enable us to implement the joy response.

There are at least six mental anchors in Scripture that give stability in the midst of trouble.

COMMONALITY

Three of those “knowable” truths are found in 1 Corinthians 10:13. The first portion of that verse reads, “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man.” Unfortunately, we tend to think of the word *temptation* only in regard to sin. Although that is a part of its meaning, limiting the term to sin greatly reduces

the scope of the verse. It’s interesting to note that the word *temptation* is from the same word group we find in James 1:2 (italics added): “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face *trials* of many kinds.” Actually 1 Corinthians 10:13 could read, “No *trouble* has seized you except what is common to man.”

This portion of verse 13 provides the first principle we need to rely on in the face of problems. It’s the principle of commonality. You can be absolutely sure that you are not the only one who has gone through this kind of problem. You haven’t been singled out by God to be the one individual in the history of the human race selected to experience a situation like this. There were others before you, and there will be others after you.

It’s been said that misery loves company. What is true is that misery

needs company to keep us from terrible aloneness, to enable us to find others who have struggled against the same dragons, and to prepare us to help others who are yet to be ambushed.

In the American church, we have privileges that few other believers around the world have. One of them is good Christian literature. Most Christian bookstores today have quality material available about people who have walked through dark times—biographies of suffering heroes, and specific titles on sudden tragedy, abuse, broken homes, disappointments, and a variety of other problems.

If you are suffering through a trial, you should be able to find someone who has been there before, who has struggled and come to know grace, growth, and glory. Networking with others as a point of support and

insight can be very helpful. Look for heroes who have made it through with their hands held high in victory. What you're suffering is common to others.

And as God, by His grace and in His time, begins to put the pieces of your growth and His glory together, you can fulfill the truth of commonality by becoming a support to someone else who is looking and listening for that "Can I help? I've been there too!"

A tremendous frustration for me as a pastor was to stand with people who were experiencing terrible pain. I learned early on that I should not say, "I understand." Because I *didn't* understand. I had never been there myself.

But then some special person who *had* been there before would walk up and put his arm around this suffering soldier and say, "I understand. Let's talk."

BEARABILITY

The second reality is the truth of bearability. First Corinthians 10:13 goes on to say, “And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.” That statement guarantees that God never gives us anything more than what we can bear. It’s like the country road that has a sign posted before a bridge, “Load Limit 5 Tons.” God, who knows our “load limit,” limits the load He permits us to carry.

One of the states in which we lived had a bottle return policy. Each empty pop bottle was worth 10 cents. Neither Martie nor I especially liked to take the bottles back. This meant that they accumulated in our garage, leaving a veritable savings account in pop bottles. One evening when the stacks of bottles had gotten intolerably high, I decided to take them back. Our then preschooler son,

Matthew, followed me into the garage and nobly said, “Daddy, let me help!” (Why is it that when children are too young to help they want to help you, and when they finally get old enough to be constructive, they aren’t interested?) “Sure, Matt,” was my reply. This precious little boy took two cartons of bottles and struggled to get them into the car.

Off we went to the grocery store. I got a cart and piled the bottles in, put some under my arms, and started to the store. Matt had his two cartons. Halfway across the parking lot he set his down, looked at me, and exhaustedly said, “Daddy, I can’t do it. They’re too heavy.” I replied, “Listen, Matthew. You started the project. You wanted to help. Now buck up and do it right. Pick those bottles up. I’ll count to five.”

Do you think I said that?

Not a chance! As his father, I understood his limits. I picked up Matt's cartons and put them into the grocery cart. Now if I, as an earthly, fallen father would do that for my child, how much more will my Father in heaven, who intimately knows me, be willing to never permit anything more than what I can bear. You can know that. If He permits trouble to come into your life, it's bearable.

It's not that our trouble doesn't often seem unbearable. It often does. It's that we can know that if God has permitted it, in His intimate knowledge of who we are (and He knows us better than we know ourselves), we can be assured that it is indeed not beyond our capacity to bear.

In this guarantee is the promise that though we may become bent, we will never be broken. Our lives only

become brittle and fatally broken when, by poor responses, we permit bitterness to add extra weight to the load of our struggle.

There's a particularly strategic side to this principle that we dare not miss. All of us have had the feeling at times that God really hasn't done anything for us in a long, long time. We see Him at work for others, yet much of our life seems strangely lacking in terms of the supernatural. We tend to sour and think that though God may be at work somewhere, "He's not at work in *my* life!"

Actually, if God did nothing more than redeem me, He's already done far more than I deserve. That's reason enough to give Him praise and glory for the rest of my life. Yet beyond that, He's active every day in my life as He stands as the sentinel at the gate of

my existence, weighing, measuring, and excluding everything that exceeds my load limit. Those are the things I know nothing about. Periodically, as I fall asleep, I like to thank God for the things He did for me today that I am unaware of. When there is nothing on your thanksgiving list, thank Him that He has guaranteed that your struggles are bearable and that He has kept from you things that would have been crushing blows.

SUPERNATURAL OPTIONS

The third reality we can know for sure is that God has supernatural options available for delivering us from trouble. The closing portion of 1 Corinthians 10:13 says, “But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.” I love 2 Peter 2:9, which says, “The Lord knows how

to rescue godly men from trials.” It guarantees that when I get into trouble, though I may feel as though I am trapped in a room with four walls closing in on me and no windows or doors for escape, God already knows how He is going to deliver me. He is in the business of making ways of escape.

When David was being hunted by Saul, he found himself in a cold cave crying out to God, “How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart all the day? How long will my enemy be exalted over me?” (Ps. 13:1-2 NASB).

Like David, when we feel that God has forgotten us, we are prone to plan our own escape. We say, “I know what I’ll do. I’ll—no, that won’t work. Here’s what I’ll do—no, I don’t think that

will work either.” It’s the total despair of seeming to be locked in with no way out.

The children of Israel, finally delivered from Egypt through God’s performance of phenomenal miracles, stood with their backs to the Red Sea watching the dust of the approaching Egyptian host on the horizon. Their response? “God has options we never dreamed of in Egypt. Remember those 10 plagues? We never dreamed God would deliver us like that. Can you imagine what He’s going to do now? This is going to be spectacular.”

Unfortunately they said, “It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!” (Ex. 14:12).

Yet God had a plan to deliver them that they never would have dreamed of. God said to Moses, “Why are you crying out to Me? Tell the Israelites to move on. Raise your staff and

stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground” (vv.15-16). We know the rest of the story. The sea parted and the Israelites walked across. The Egyptian army followed, God closed the sea, and they sank like stones. God’s people were free. The trouble was past. God knows how to deliver the righteous from trouble.

I recall counseling a woman who had just come to know Christ. She was interested in becoming God’s kind of woman, so we were studying passages of Scripture that had to do with what a biblical wife is like and talking about the whole matter of gracious cooperation with her husband’s leadership. She came to me one day and said, “Pastor, I’ve got a major problem. I have been saving up my money for a

dining room set. I love the one my mother-in-law has and am looking for something just like it. After I've gone through the used furniture ads in the paper, my husband and I drive around and look at them. But he doesn't seem to be real interested. He's so insensitive. We've been to a couple of places where I really liked the furniture, but he just says, 'No, I don't like those.'

I encouraged her to be patient and wait for the Lord to work in His way. The next week she came back and said it was worse. She said, "The worst thing about it is that it's my money and he couldn't care less what kind of furniture we have in the house. He doesn't know if we have French Provincial or Early Salvation Army. He's basically interested in his newspaper, easy chair, and the TV."

A couple of weeks later

she came back and said, "You're not going to believe this, but my mother-in-law called me and said that she had bought a brand-new dining room set and wanted to know if I wanted hers."

God does not always work exactly like that. But it's clear that He has lots of different options of deliverance. When we are faithful and patient through trouble, God will, in His time, exercise options of deliverance that are far beyond what we ever dreamed.

GOD'S POWER

The fourth truth we know is that God's power is at work in our difficulty. I have a friend who has a wonderfully engineered car. When we come to a light and wait for it to change, I feel like telling him, "Start the car." It sits there with no vibration or noise from the engine. If I had that car, I'd

probably break 10 dozen starters thinking it had gone dead. If it weren't for the tachometer sitting at idling RPMs, you'd think the power was gone.

Much of the time, we don't notice that God's power is engineering our trouble toward resolution. Sometimes we see very little evidence of His work. Yet His power is busy at work in at least three dimensions.

God's Power To Bring Good Out Of Bad. Dimension number one is the claim of Romans 8:28, where we are assured of God's power to bring that which is bad to that which is good. It's His phenomenal ability to take the worst possible circumstances and transform them and ultimately bring good out of that which is terrible.

If you ever get really disappointed or discouraged, read the story of Joseph in Genesis 37-50. Betrayed by

the people closest to him, his own family, he was sold into Egypt as a slave. Rising to a place of influence in Potiphar's house, Joseph daily faced Potiphar's wife's efforts to seduce him.

The Egyptians prided themselves on having beautiful, sensual wives. Potiphar, being one of the leading bureaucrats in the land, no doubt had a wife who was rather spectacular. He was off on business much of the time, so she was probably lonely. Joseph, who was young and strong, was running the household every day. One day she grabs him, and he runs. God looks down on Joseph and says, "Joseph, nice going. You're My kind of man!" But he gets 3 years in the slammer. For 3 years nobody remembers him. (In those years God may have been extracting the arrogance from his life.) Then, in His time, God

delivers Joseph and elevates him to the second highest position in the empire.

There was a famine in the land and his treacherous brothers came to him for food. Now their lives were in his hands. In time, Joseph's father, who had moved to Egypt, dies, and the brothers were fearful that Joseph was going to kill them in revenge (Gen. 50:15). They came cowering before Joseph, only to hear him say, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (vv.19-20). God had used His power to turn the very worst moments of Joseph's life into that which was good.

This capacity of God to bring good out of evil was demonstrated in the cross. Was there ever a moment in the history of humanity that was so brutal, unfair, and

personally agonizing than the moment when the Son of God was hung as a criminal? All of hell rejoiced for 3 days. Satan had won the day. He had exterminated the conquering Son. Then God turned that which was incredibly bad into that which was wonderfully good. Redemption from sin. Hell canceled and heaven gained.

Unfortunately, unwilling to wait patiently, we often get in the way by attempting to take the project into our own hands. And while God is trying to do His good work, we're down here messing up His project with vengeance, bitterness, and other counterproductive responses. We need to walk in Christ's footsteps, who " '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” (1 Pet. 2:22-23).

God’s Power To Deal With Our Enemies. The second kind of power at work in the midst of trouble is God’s power to deal with our enemies. Joseph said to his brothers, “Am I in the place of God?” (Gen. 50:19). That’s a very important question. Romans 12:17 instructs, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.” The wonderful truth of this was demonstrated when Joseph admitted he had no business getting back at his brothers, because God is the one who carries out justice. We experience emotional liberation from our enemies when we say, “God, they are Your business. You deal with them.” We are then released to be like God and love our enemies in return.

Romans 12:19-21 reads:

Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is Mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

It’s liberating to know that God will deal with those who cause trouble in my life. That releases me to love them. Jesus said:

You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the

good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Mt. 5:43-48).

Again, our problem is that we get in the way. God has not equipped us or given us the capacity to deal justice and vengeance to our enemies. That's why it always gets messed up when we try. He is the only one who has that right and the power and wisdom to do it well.

I'll never forget an older woman who came to my office and heatedly dumped on me a long list of objections about her husband. I asked how

long she had been married. It had been more than 40 years. I have never in my life, nor would I ever, counsel anyone to break up a home. But as she went on and on about how miserable he was, I finally said, "Why have you lived with him so long if he's so bad? Did you ever think about just checking out? I'm not advising it, but I'd like to know what you think." She said, "Oh, no! I'd never walk out of this marriage."

I thought that was an honorable attitude until she continued. It was evident that she hated him so much that walking out of the marriage would have meant that she couldn't torment him anymore. For her, that was a reason for staying. Why would she want to give up the opportunity to shred her enemy at every turn?

God has called us to a better way. In the midst of trouble, we can count on the

power of God to deal with those who are against us. And we are then free to be like our Father in heaven—free to bless those who curse us, to pray for those who spitefully use us, and to love our enemies, because the power of God will ultimately deal justly with them.

God's Power To Hold On To Us.

The third kind of power we can count on is found in 2 Corinthians 4:7-9: "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed."

I love knowing that God values the preciousness of my being. Though I may go to the edge, in His wonderful, sovereign power He will always keep me

sane and safe as I respond properly to Him and to the trial.

The psalmist often says that God holds us with His right hand. The "right hand of God" is an Old Testament metaphor for strength. Think about holding a child's hand while you are walking. I don't know what it is, but somehow a child can be walking along beside you, and all of a sudden her legs just fly out from under her—for no reason at all. But even though she's off balance and in danger of falling, your power keeps her from "destruction."

What a wonderful picture! God holds me with His powerful right hand as I walk the sidewalk of life. If I trip and both feet go out from under me, it's okay because He's holding me. We can count on His power to ultimately and finally protect us and keep us from complete destruction.

GOD'S DIVINE SUPPORT

The fifth truth we can affirm in difficult times is the reality of God's divine support. In 2 Corinthians 12:7-9, Paul tells of his struggles with a thorn in the flesh. He prayed three times to be relieved from it, but to no avail. So he submitted to the lifelong affliction and, with a positive spirit, resolved to let God's strength be made strong in his weakness, discovering that God's grace was sufficient to support him through the trial.

In my many years in the pastorate, I have stood by people who have endured phenomenal suffering and trouble. And I have to tell you, a lot of times I walk away and say, "I can't believe how well they're doing." I think if that were me, I would be a basket case. Then I hear Paul's confidence ringing in my

heart, "God's grace is sufficient." Like the everlasting arms, God's grace comes under us and wraps around us. It overtakes us, and we are supported.

His grace is His unmerited help to us. In trouble, it will be there. How much? Is there a problem that is bigger than the reservoir of God's grace? The answer is no. That's why Paul said, "[God's] grace is sufficient" (12:9).

A PROCESS WITH A PURPOSE

The sixth principle we can count on during times of difficulty is that God uses trouble as a process with a purpose in our lives. God never wastes our sorrows. Any pain He permits is to be used by Him as a process with a purpose.

There are two biblical purposes: *our growth*, which is what James 1:2-4 speaks

of, and *God's glory* (Jn. 9:3).

Trouble attracts the attention of people around us. Hebrews 10:33 says, "Partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated" (NASB). One Christmas somebody gave one of our children a plastic fireman's hat. It was one of those gifts you wish they hadn't given. It had a red plastic flashing light on top of it and a battery-operated siren. Our kids ran all over the house with this siren and light going. You couldn't help but notice their presence.

It's like that with trouble. As soon as trouble hits our lives, the lights start flashing and everybody starts watching us. That's why it's such a wonderful opportunity to process the trial in the biblical manner so that as a "public spectacle" in trouble, with

the world watching, we can demonstrate the presence and power of God in our lives. Trouble becomes a platform for God's opportunity to glorify Himself and show Himself strong.

I had the opportunity to listen and watch as Joni Eareckson Tada told of her deep love for God and her joy in Christ. She was paralyzed from the shoulders down, but her face beamed as she sat in her wheelchair. It was clear that God was real, satisfying, fulfilling, and enabling in the midst of her lifelong trial. It was a credible statement to the reality and power of God and His grace. Whereas remorse, self-pity, and bitterness are the products of nonbiblical responses to suffering, the evidence in her life of God's power and presence revealed through her pain was an

unimpeachable statement of the grace and glory of God.

Suffering is a platform for the display of God's power. Sometimes that power is displayed by His miraculous deliverance, and sometimes it is displayed by the grace He gives to us to positively endure as we reflect forgiveness and peace during an ongoing, sometimes lifelong, problem.

When trials put us on public display, it's our privilege, through biblical responses, to turn the tables on Satan's attempt to deface God's glory. Our troubles allow us to demonstrate clearly God's worthiness to be worshiped, regardless; to give Him our willing allegiance, regardless; and to demonstrate the reality of His presence, power, and peace in the midst of pain.

Not only is pain a process with the purpose of demonstrating God's glory, but it's also a process that

focuses on the purpose of enabling our growth in character and in competency for living. James 1:2-4 states that we should count it all joy, knowing that the process will contribute to a life that is becoming "mature and complete, not lacking anything."

How does that happen? The text goes on to speak of the four-step process that leads to our growth: the testing of our faith, the testing of our endurance, the testing of our yieldedness, and our reliance on prayer.

The Testing Of Our Faith. This comes when trouble challenges our faith and calls it to the witness stand. What is faith? Faith is our unflinching reliance on God. I'm glad that God is not a slippery commodity that slides out of our hands or a moving target we cannot trust. God doesn't play hide and seek with us. He has revealed His promises, His

ways, and His character to us. They are reliable, solid, and clearly true. They do not change. These are the handles that we cling to in trouble.

When trouble comes, by faith I cling to His promises:

Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you (Heb. 13:5).

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28).

Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything (Jas. 1:4).

Even when there's no light at the end of the tunnel, when you are in a deepening darkness and your heart is broken, these promises are true and will provide your source of stability.

When trouble comes, by faith I cling to His ways. At such times we pray, "Heavenly Father, I know what You've done in the past and how You have responded in real lives in Scripture. Since that's the kind of God You are, I'll hang on to You through this. I will not become bitter or manipulative. I will simply permit You to do Your work in Your time," and by faith we hang on to that.

When trouble comes, by faith I cling to His character. First Corinthians 10:13 says, "God is faithful." By faith we hang on to the fact that God will be faithful. He's not going to show up at the end of your trouble and say, "I'm really sorry, but I've had a busy 3 weeks. I just couldn't quite get around to your situation." His character is firm and reliable, fully worthy of our confidence. God is loving, just (which helps in terms

of our enemies), righteous, gracious, and merciful.

When troubles come, our faith is tested. It's called to the witness stand to demonstrate whether or not we will believe and non-negotiably apply His promises, ways, and character to every situation of life. When we give in to lesser responses, it reflects the weakness of our faith.

The Testing Of Our Endurance. This comes about when we apply the "faith response" to our situation. If we cling tenaciously to God, we won't give up or give in. Interestingly, the English word *endurance* is made up of two Greek words: *hupo* and *meno*. *Hupo* means "under"; *meno* means "to remain." Endurance is the capacity to remain under the stress until God's work is done.

Our family loves to eat watermelon. Our children

realized early on that if you put your thumb on a wet watermelon seed and apply a little pressure, it will spurt out and go flying across the table. It's especially fun if you can score a bull's-eye on your sister.

A lot of us respond to trouble in the same way. Life begins pressing on us, and what is our response? "Get me out of here! Lord, solve this problem. Immediately." But when God says no, instead of trying to wiggle out, by faith we claim God and hang in there as faith produces endurance. Staying under the pressure with a good spirit is an important part of the divine process as He works toward His productive end in our lives.

In times of trouble, it helps to list specific relevant truths about God and match them with the supporting passages. Memorizing and praying through those sections of Scripture will

anchor them in your heart and mind. A pledge to wait for God to fulfill those truths in your life while you unflinchingly obey and trust Him is the essence of endurance.

Look with anticipation for grace, growth, and glory, and rejoice in any signal that the process is working in your life. Regularly check your commitment. Have you started trusting in yourself and your own ways? Have you become manipulative, resentful, bitter, cutting, unforgiving? Or are you by faith clinging to God and responding in a biblical way?

The Testing Of Our Yieldedness. After exercising unflinching and persisting faith in Him, the third dynamic is to yield to the process. “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your

faith produces endurance. And *let* endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (Jas. 1:2-4 NASB).

“And *let* endurance have its perfect result” is the command in the text. It's like surgery. When the surgeon comes in and tells us we need an operation, we say, “Okay, I'll endure the process and take the pain.” We have confidence in the doctor and believe that it's ultimately for our good. Imagine the following situation: We are wheeled into the operating room and the staff begins to prepare us for the surgery. When the surgeon walks in, we watch as he walks past the trays of razor-sharp scalpels. The nurse puts his gloves on him and then rolls the tray with the scalpels on it toward the operating table. At that point we mutter under our breath, “No way,” and leap off the

table. The doctor grabs a scalpel and tries to operate as he chases us around the operating room.

Obviously that would never happen. Yet many of us give God that kind of trouble when He seeks to produce growth in us through a trial in our lives. That's why James 1:4 requires that we yield to the process. We must resist the initial impulse to jump off the table. We need, instead, to place unwavering faith in the divine surgeon and endure, knowing that ultimately it will culminate in a way that we can claim joy and praise for the process.

Our Reliance On Prayer. Last, James tells us to pray. Verse 5 says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God." There will be plenty of times when we don't know what to do or how to respond. We need to go to the Father and seek

wisdom from Him. But if we're so distressed that we can't pray or don't know how to pray, Romans 8:26 assures us that the Holy Spirit takes the groanings we can't even utter and brings them before the Father, untangles all their confusion, and lays them before Him on our behalf in accord with His will.

Prayer in the midst of trouble helps us see God again. It gets our eyes off our problems and focuses us afresh on God, who is all-powerful, merciful, and just.

Prayer reveals things about myself. When I pray in the midst of trouble, I may say, "Lord, you know this mess with Bob and Sally. Well, they . . ." Often the Lord interrupts and says, "Yes, I know about them. But can we talk about you?" Prayer has a way of revealing things in my own life that need to be faced if I am to become

“mature and complete, not lacking anything” (Jas. 1:4). I find that God regularly responds, “I’ll take care of them. Let’s talk about you.”

When I’m in prayer, I’m often reminded of biblical principles that are relevant and true. His Word starts coming back to me and I’m reminded of passages and principles I need to apply. This is wisdom from God. Wisdom about Him, wisdom about me, wisdom about His Word. “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God” (Jas. 1:5).

There’s never an easy way to go through trouble, but there’s always a right way—by counting it joy because of what we know to be true about the process, by exercising faith, by yielding to the process, and by praying for wisdom.

Being committed to the fact that difficulties are a process with a purpose

requires that our purposes for life be like His purposes for us. If our purpose in life is to be comfortable, well liked, happy, and to accumulate enough money to buy the things we want, then we will never find hope in trouble. These are not God’s driving agendas for our existence. Character is more important to God than cash, convenience, or comfort. Our competency is of greater value to Him than simply going through life blissful yet unprepared and functionally unable to make a contribution to people’s lives and to the cause of eternity.

The measure of how productive trials have been in our lives is how much more we are like Jesus Christ now than we were when the trouble began. Pain is a process with a divine purpose, and God never wastes our sorrows.

Among all the question marks that invade our hearts and heads in times of trouble, the certainties revolve around the answers to who and what.

Who? It is God and me. The reliable, trustworthy God working in me and through me with an outpouring of His grace until my growth and His glory are realized.

What? My knowledge of what is clearly true and reliable. Choosing to bypass alternate, unproductive, and destructive responses, we choose to reckon our trial ultimately to be a thing of joy in His powerful and creative hand. Choosing not to permit the baggage of our feelings to drive our responses, we direct our reactions by what we know to be true, counting it all to be a thing of joy as we cling by faith to what is true about Him: His promises,

His character, and His ways; yielding to the process; praying for wisdom and enduring under the pressure until there is measurable growth in both character and competency and a reflection of His glory.

The principles of growth and glory are often demonstrated in Scripture. The penetrating theme of the New Testament is that God will do what is necessary to bring us to the likeness of His Son. His purpose may be to “grow” us to be capable and productive by using problems to reduce the risks that we bring to the kingdom. Growth may be fostered by the difficulty that finally forces us to be God-sufficient rather than self-sufficient. And His glory through us will only become evident as we seek to turn every attack of the adversary into a clear testimony of God’s worth and work in us and through us.

THE PURPOSE OF BRINGING ABOUT WHAT IS GOOD

Surgery. Many of us have experienced it. It is inconvenient, painful, unpleasant, frightening, and disruptive. Yet we choose to submit to it. Why? Because the pain is worth the gain. It promises to produce a good result.

God's Word assures the believer that all pain is a process with a purpose. In fact, God guarantees that the purpose will have a good outcome.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose. For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son, that He might be the firstborn

among many brothers (Rom. 8:28-29).

The guarantee of Romans 8:28-29 contains three truths that fortify us in difficulty.

GO WITH WHAT YOU KNOW

Trouble brings with it a bucketful of emotions: despair, hurt, revenge, self-pity, anger, sorrow, and a dozen other feelings. If we're not careful, those feelings can dominate us and disorient us from what we know. Emotions derail our thoughts and detour our commitments. How we feel tends to distort what we know.

Our resource in pain is not what we feel but what we know. When Romans 8:28 begins with the words "And we know," it literally means that we have an absolute knowledge. Our knowledge in pain is not a "hope so" or "maybe" or "might be"—but a

“know so” reality. While our emotions are like quicksand, knowledge is bedrock.

Notice that each major section on difficulty in Scripture begins with an appeal to what we know. “We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we *know* that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Rom. 5:3-4). As we have seen, James 1:2-4 directs us to “consider it pure joy . . . whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you *know* that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” When our emotions jade our perspectives, God’s truth doesn’t change. Truth is truth regardless of how we feel.

God’s truth gives us a unique edge to which

we can cling in trouble.

What do we know? We know that trouble develops character (Rom. 5:3-5) and that trials equip us to be more useful (Jas. 1:2-5). Because of Romans 8:28, we know that good is the ultimate purpose of the process of pain. Knowing and clinging to what we know make the difference. Truth is our stability factor in trouble.

A friend told me about the devastating months of depression that she had gone through. Nothing had seemed to help. She said that the only thing that kept her from breaking was “the truth that heaven is real.” That basic bit of knowledge kept her head above the swirling flood of her emotional despair.

Another friend, whose child had died 2 months before, told me, “It hurts more now than it did then. All we have is the fact that

God is sovereign and omniscient,” he said as his voice broke. That’s pretty basic, but it was enough to get him through.

As God’s people, we have the advantage of truth in pain. It’s a definite edge in trouble. It’s our resource. Cling to it.

PAIN IS A PROCESS

Romans 8:28 goes on to remind us that pain is a process toward an ultimate good. Foundational to the acceptance of pain is the awareness that God has us in process. None of us is what God wants us to be. Though God loves and accepts us the way we are, He sees all that we can become. Pleasure has a way of making us satisfied with ourselves. Pain catches our attention so that God can develop us into His dream for our lives.

That process is defined in several dimensions:

It’s An All-Encompassing Process. Since God works “in all things,” we are guaranteed that whatever He permits—whether pain or pleasure, bane or blessing—He is able to use it all to transform us.

Beautiful automobiles are especially alluring. They become beautiful and useful through a process. The process involves a design concept that is reached through bending, banging, shaping, heating, riveting, fusing, and tightening. It’s a slow process as the assembly line moves at an almost imperceptible speed, but it’s a specific process with a desirable goal. Hundreds of component parts make up the whole. Some are unsightly and added under great pressure, whereas others beautify; yet each is essential to the process.

The truth that pain is

a part of God's process is seen in the context (Rom. 8:18,23,26). To wish to be transformed by God without pain in the process is to expect a hunk of shapeless steel to become a beautiful and useful commodity without the trauma of the assembly line.

It's A Continuous Process. In Romans 8:28, the phrase "*God works*" indicates a present, continuous process. God will never abandon His purpose for us, nor the process to accomplish it.

I have many unfinished projects in my basement—things I tore apart to restore and antiques that I have begun to refinish. With God, I am never an abandoned project.

It's A Divinely Supervised Process. Note that Romans 8:28 says, "*God works.*" Behind the scenes of my life story is the hand of God—moving,

changing, limiting, applying pressure, providing strength, rearranging. God is the one working all things together for good.

Auguste Bartholdi went from France to Egypt in 1856. He was awestruck by the grandeur of the pyramids, the magnitude of the mighty Nile, and the beauty of the stately Sphinx of the desert. His artistic mind was stimulated. While on this trip he met another visitor to Egypt, Ferdinand de Lesseps. Ferdinand was there to sell an idea to cut a canal from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea that would save merchant ships the long journey around the tip of the African continent. Auguste was taken by the concept. He decided to design a lighthouse to stand at the entrance to this canal.

It wouldn't be an ordinary lighthouse. It would symbolize the light of Western civilization flowing

to the East. It took 10 years to build the Suez Canal. And for 10 years Auguste worked on his idea. He drew plans, made clay models, and scrapped plan after plan. Then he had the right one. It was the perfect design.

There was only one problem. Who would pay for it? He looked everywhere, but no one was interested. The Suez Canal was opened—without a lighthouse. Auguste went back to France defeated. Ten years of toil and effort were wasted.

You would have liked his idea. It was a colossal robed lady that stood taller than the Sphinx in the desert. She held the books of justice in one hand and a torch lifted high in the other to light the entrance to the canal.

After Auguste returned to France, the French government sought his artistic services to design

a gift to America. The Statue of Liberty lighting the New York harbor demonstrates that what happens in the midst of disappointments can often be a prelude to good things beyond our imagination.

If, in the normal course of life, things that seem to be disappointing, difficult, and defeating can be processed into something magnificent and significant, how much surer is this process with the hand of our wise and powerful God guaranteeing the outcome.

We must take caution, however, against slipping into an irresponsible fatalism that sees God as both the source and the processor of pain. Within the “all things” of Romans 8:28 are the reality of human choices and consequences.

In her book *Affliction*, Edith Schaeffer tells of a child who fell off a cliff to

his death and of another who slipped through the ice into a frozen lake. Did God push the child from the cliff? Did God push the boy through the ice? No, these tragedies occurred because we live in a fallen place and are a part of a fallen race. It was a choice to venture too close to the edge of the cliff, a choice not to check the safety of the ice. But it is the powerful, creative hand of God that takes these tragic settings of life and works them all together for good—regardless.

Life is a lot like a jigsaw puzzle. Often our lives can seem like a thousand pieces spilled onto the table. They seem to be confused, disoriented, senseless, and tragic. But then God comes and carefully, wisely, in His way and in His time, puts the pieces together. In the end, the puzzle is something that makes sense—a good

thing of beauty. That's what we know.

As Paul affirmed, “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6).

PAIN IS A PROCESS WITH A PURPOSE

The third dynamic is that God has no process without purpose. The guarantee of Romans 8:28 states that we know that God processes in us all things toward good. That's His purpose. For the believer, there's no pain without the purpose of a good result.

I stood in the church foyer and said to a set of relieved parents, “God has certainly been good to spare you your son.” The night before, their son had been in a terrible auto accident. He was rushed to a hospital more than an hour away for special treatment. All night he hung on to life by a

thread. He had made it!

Standing next to his parents was another couple whose daughter had been killed in a car wreck a few years before. It was then that it hit me. *Had God not been good to them? What was I saying about my definition of “good”? What must my comment have meant to the parents who were less fortunate?*

God defines *good* for us in Romans 8:29. The text says that this process is for those who have been called according to God’s purpose. What is God’s purpose? According to verse 29 it is to conform us to the image of His Son—and that is good.

Anything that will bring us to a more accurate reflection of the quality of Christ in and through our lives is good. Whatever it takes, pain or pleasure, is good if it conforms us to His likeness. That’s God’s goal in the process of pain.

He takes all that He permits and makes it a part of the process to bring us to reflect the image of Christ.

When our family was at a conference years ago, Matthew, our youngest child, fell and broke his wrist. I have never seen anything like it. His arm took a sharp left at his wrist and then turned again to resume its normal journey to his hand. It was grotesque.

We rushed Matthew to the hospital where the doctor began to set his wrist. I watched as the doctor pulled and twisted Matthew’s arm. The doctor began to perspire, and I felt like jumping up and pulling the doctor off my son. But I simply sat and watched. I knew that Matt’s arm needed to be restored to its original design and purpose. But pain and several weeks of inconvenience would be a part of the process.

When we are broken and

hurt by sin and self-will, our good and loving God must often reset us too. Set back to His intended purpose, the image of His Son. Set back to a heart of compassion, righteousness, and love. Set into the original purpose of His glory through us.

God not only has the intention of conforming us into what is good, but He also has the power to complete the project.

I love what the prophet Isaiah said when he wrote that God would “comfort all who mourn, to console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified” (Isa. 61:2b-3 NKJV). God is able to restore the years that the locusts have eaten (Joel 2:25).

Michelangelo carved the

sculpture *David* out of a hunk of stone. Other artists take colored oils and canvas and create masterpieces. Beams of steel are bent and welded to create strange-looking monuments in our city squares. But I have never seen an artist even attempt to make something beautiful from ashes. Only God can do that (Isa. 61:3).

God is able to bring the love of Christ into our lives. It may take some brokenness. It may require that we go through a time of need to become sensitized to the needs of others. If it requires pain to do that, then it is good.

Can we weep with those who weep? God may need to stain our cheeks with tears so that we can genuinely empathize as Christ does.

Are we self-sufficient? The tragedy of our affluent culture is that we rarely sense our need for God,

when in reality we desperately do need Him. God may need to strip away some of our security, as painful as that may be, to conform us to the God-sufficiency that Christ displayed. That would be good.

Are we faithless? It may take the impact of a tragedy for us to experience the reality of God so that we learn to lean on and trust Him as Christ did. That would be good.

Are we proud, indifferent, carnal, selfish, unforgiving, negative, or angry? God has something better—the lifestyle of His Son.

God is able to effect positive change in us. He knows what is best. He knows what it takes. He will, as the loving, all-powerful sculptor, chip away until Jesus is seen in the hardened hunk of our lives.

For those of us who

know God, pain is a process with a certain purpose. We don't make it through tough times. We are made through tough times—made into the beauty of Christ Jesus.

And that is good.



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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