

THE
UPSIDE
OF
DOWN

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THE
UPSIDE
OF
DOWN

Finding HOPE
When It HURTS

JOSEPH M. STOWELL



Discovery House Publishers

Books, music, and videos that feed the soul with the Word of God

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Gratefully dedicated to the twenty alumni of the Moody Bible Institute who, in the course of their service to Christ, gave their lives as martyrs for the cause. These honored servants, of whom this world is not worthy, have suffered, like Christ, to the shedding of their own blood. They live on in our hearts as a penetrating reminder that not only is Christ worth living for, He is worth dying for.

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WITH APPRECIATION

A special thanks goes to the many who, in their suffering, have permitted me to be a partner with them as I have stood by their side, hoping to encourage them to look for the growth and glory. I appreciate their willingness, as well, to let all of us who read this book hear their stories, that somehow we may not feel totally alone in our struggle.

But beyond their struggles, we all owe deep gratitude to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who came not to reign in comfort and ease but to suffer, that by His stripes we might be healed. If He had not led the way through the path of sorrow, we would surely be without hope.

INTRODUCTION

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 is not a random ride at all. Those who understand the work of God in and through our troubles understand 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 still is there.

Our only hope in it all is to stay in the car and find something solid to hold onto through every turn of the experience.

The Upside of Down is about learning to trust in God's work and provision as the divine superstructure underneath every trial. It is about believing that the guiding and guarding work He performs will keep us on course.

This book is not primarily about the ultimate healing of our hurts, since the end of the ride is God's responsibility. This book

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is rather about learning to respond productively in the midst of trouble. It is about finding those things that we can cling to with certainty. It is about understanding the ultimate purpose behind our suffering so that we will be willing to stay on board.

This is a book about hope—hope in that which is wonderfully solid and real. It is about hope in God, who works all things toward that which is good and who never wastes our sorrows.

Choosing to Trust

Standing by her bed, I was ready to break the news to her that her baby had not made it through the night. I only hoped she wouldn't ask, "Why?" I had no answer to that question. I could only speak of Whom—of Him—and of what He had done.

There were just a few things Debbie could cling to that were certain, safe, and sure. Though she would feel the press of the cascading, unanswerable whys and the despair of all that was uncertain; though she would no doubt wrestle with self-punishing thoughts; though seasons of anger and self-pity would seek to lengthen their unwelcome stay; she could cling to a few certain exclamation points. If she would hang on, she would make it through.

Though her perspective would be different now—never again so naïve, so unsuspecting, so believing that trouble was what happened to someone else—she would make it.

She and David did. Richer. Deeper. Riper. Fuller. More realistic. More able to help others in the healing process. More capable and ready to understand. More deeply in love with their Father in heaven. They now knew what it meant to give up a son.

It was late Saturday night, the night when pastors like to get a good sleep to face the rigors of Sunday, when the unsettling ring of the phone awakened me. The caller was a man in our church. With

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urgency in his voice, he told of a head-on collision that had just taken place up the road from his home. A drunk driver, passing, had met head-on an oncoming car at the top of a rise. The car with the DWI driver slid into the ditch in flames, leaving the three occupants of the other car seriously injured. The caller went on to tell me that he thought the people in that car were from our church. He mentioned their names. I knew immediately who they were.

David had attended college with me and was now an attorney with a blossoming law practice. Debbie was a homemaker whose life had become enriched with the birth of a son. Sean was the third occupant of the car.

The caller went on to say that the ambulance had already taken all three to the hospital. I hung up quickly and called the emergency room. Had they been admitted? Yes, they had, the nurse told me. Their condition? She wasn't allowed to give that information over the phone. But I was their pastor. "If you're their pastor, you should come as soon as possible."

As I hurried into the emergency room, I walked past the first cubicle where my college friend lay unattended, unconscious. In the next cubicle, a doctor and several nurses were working feverishly over the body of the couple's precious son. Then, from across the room, I heard someone calling.

"Pastor, Pastor!" It was Debbie. Though conscious, her face had been torn by the impact of the crash. I stood next to her and spoke with her for a brief moment. We prayed together. As I turned around to walk back to Dave, I saw the nurses pull the curtains around the child and leave him alone. He had slipped on to be with his Father in heaven.

Dave and Debbie's injuries were so serious that they were transferred by ambulance to a larger hospital, where Debbie underwent several hours of extensive surgery while Dave remained unconscious. Debbie's parents asked if I would please stay through the night and wait for Debbie to wake up from the anesthesia. They were sure she would ask about Sean, and they felt I should tell her.

I sat through that night wondering what I would say. What could I say? I didn't know the why of what happened. I still don't. Neither do they. All I could do was turn her heart toward that which was certain and true.

As morning came our church service started several miles away. For all those at church it was another Sunday, another day like every other day. But for Dave and Debbie everything had changed, and it would never be the same. Without notice or warning their existence had been intercepted by tragedy. It was as though they had suddenly been placed into a separate sphere of existence. All around them the rush and routine of the masses living their lives to the beat of all that is normal went on without interruption, but they were no longer a part of that. Dave, Debbie, and those of us with them were struggling with issues of life at their deepest and most profound level.

What I felt through that night and what Dave and Debbie would wrestle with in the days and months ahead was that torturous tension between feelings of anger and betrayal and the felt need to throw ourselves humbly at God's feet, pleading for mercy and grace to help.

I knew that the words I would say would point the arrows in the right or wrong direction—toward the growth and glory that God could bring through the tragedy or toward the destruction and ruin Satan had in mind. Whatever those words would be, they needed to lift these young parents' hearts and minds toward Him, their only hope for healing.

I prayed for wisdom.

The Trouble with Life

Growing up in a pastor's home, I remember falling asleep at night to the sound of my parents working in our living room with people whose lives had experienced that "great fall." People who somehow hoped that my father would be better than "all the king's horses

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and all the king's men" at putting the pieces of their lives back together again. I remember the sobs of the alcoholic who was back on a binge after having lost his family and a successful career.

The first sermon I preached was in a New York City mission. I doubt if I will ever forget the impact of sitting on the platform and looking out over that sea of glazed faces, knowing that at one time many of the listeners' lives had been full of dreams, their marriages filled with hope and expectation, their careers on the upward track. Now life had taken a tragic turn, and their lives were empty of resolve, void of dignity, and depleted of hope. Mere existence.

Following in my father's footsteps, I was off to seminary where I was exposed to four years of in-depth study of theology, biblical data, and ministry theory and skills. Within the first few months of landing in the pastorate, a young wife and mother came to see me after a service, wanting to know if she could stop by during the week. The appointment was set. She arrived, sat down, and proceeded to tell me she no longer loved her husband. There was no one else, she did not want to leave her husband for the children's sake, and she did not want to feel this way about her husband. She told me that many of their friends seemed to have happy and fulfilling relationships with each other, and it was her goal somehow to reclaim those lost feelings that had at one time held so much hope for fulfillment and happiness. I scrambled for something meaningful to say.

That was the beginning of my regular exposure to the tyranny of trouble in people's lives. I filled many hours of ministry standing by people like Martha, who was married to one of my close friends from high school. Only weeks after she and her husband began their life's work as a missionary couple, she watched her husband—my friend—die a slow and agonizing death. I've walked with men through the ego-wrenching pain of job loss and marketplace failure. I've listened to the probing questions of a widow, who, after years of sacrificing her husband's presence to the ministry, stood with great anticipation on the threshold of retirement and life together at their North Carolina hideaway, only to learn

that his life had been taken in a plane crash over the chilled Alaskan Ocean. What hope can there be for a young wife and mother who has discovered explicitly sensual love notes passed between her husband and their high-school babysitter detailing nights away at a motel in a nearby town?

I've watched trouble compound itself into networks of complexity, weaving chains of despondency and despair around extended families, friends, and ensuing generations. Untangling those networks often brought to ruin through abuse and addiction seems at times an impossible task.

All of life runs unsettlingly close to the ditch. Trouble is indiscriminate in its timing and its choice of target. Job, who bore the scars to validate his wisdom, said, "Man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7). In fact, the entire landscape of our existence is vulnerable. From health to emotions, mind, finances, marketplace, family, and friends—trouble stands at the brink of it all, waiting to make its unwelcome, untimely, usually unexpected entrance.

No one is exempt.

No arena of life is out of bounds.

Given the inevitability of trouble, it's no surprise that we spend great amounts of time, energy, and money trying to overcome our problems. Counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists are in abundant supply. Group therapy sessions are crowded. Support groups for nearly every affliction imaginable are available, even in some of our churches. Groups for addiction, abuse, stress, grief, and over-eating offer hope. There is even a group called Super Moms Anonymous, whose sole purpose is to give support and relief to women who are trying to deal with the stress of combining a career, a husband, and raising a family.

Big-ticket seminars offer hope. Meditation says you can feel better by getting in touch with yourself, and health clubs offer exercise programs and group activities to make life with all of its troubles more tolerable and meaningful.

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Many of the alternatives compound our problems. Alcohol, drugs, the unbridled pursuit of sensual pleasure, and the consuming passion to accumulate things, status, power, and prestige offer themselves as elusive remedies; cruises and exotic vacations are advertised “escape weekends”—but our trouble still goes with us.

We laugh on the outside while we’re crying on the inside. We often feel lonely in a crowd.

Ultimately, we end up wondering if there is any genuine, enduring hope when we hurt.

Grinning and bearing it offers resolve but no solution. Getting mad only tends to bring more grief and anguish as we walk through life like a fight looking for a place to happen. Getting even starts wars that escalate and sap our resources, as bitterness eats away at our souls. Withdrawal creates additional conflict as we end up living in a ghetto of one, watching from the sidelines as the rest of the world races by.

Is There Any Hope?

Though there are rarely simple solutions and never lasting quick fixes for our troubles, there are realities that produce hope and healing in the midst of hurt.

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.

The right answers begin by asking the right questions. And the right question is not *why*. Though it is no doubt our first question in the midst of pain, it is not the most tragic question. For that we can be thankful. Attempts to resolve hurt by seeking spe-

cific personal answers to the question *why* usually compound our problems rather than solve them, since there are rarely adequate answers.

Being preoccupied with the *why* syndrome may even create a downward cycle of despair that is tough to recover from. You know you are on the wrong track when all you can think of is the following questions:

Why me?

Why me again?

Why now?

Why did this have to happen?

Why did God not stop it?

Is there something wrong with me?

Is there something wrong with Him?

Is there something I've missed about life?

Why are others seemingly free from trouble?

Why don't people understand?

Why don't people care?

Why don't they get their act together?

Why do I keep blowing it?

Why do I keep living?

Processing problems in the “why zone” too often leaves us cynical, hardened, angry, and confused. The only right answer to *why* is “I don't know why—and if I don't know why, I need to suspend judgment until I do.”

Job's devastating experience is helpful at this point. Only a brief part of his story deals with recounting his problems. The bulk of the material in the book of Job focuses on the advice of his wife and friends, who try to answer the question *why* and who counsel him from that perspective. Their efforts only compound his problem. In the end God resolves the mental anguish by turning Job from the question *why* to the question *who*.

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Hope begins when we start with the right question: “Who?”

The answer to *who* is threefold.

Him—God our Father in all His supreme authority, presence, and power.

Me—target of the trouble and in sole control of my responses and actions.

Them—the people around me who may have caused the pain, who awkwardly try to help me in my pain, and who don’t understand, sometimes don’t even care.

We must immediately get the “them” in perspective. Since we can’t control them, we are not wise to focus on them or expect much from them. If God sees fit to use some of “them” to provide hope, then let it be an added blessing.

That leaves two points of focus.

Him and me.

In the first episode of the *Star Wars* trilogy, Princess Leia, captured by the evil forces of the universe and helpless to improve her condition, logs a laser beam message into the computer chip reservoir of the android R2D2. The message is directed to the only one who can help her, Obi-Wan Kenobi. He is the last vestige of that which is moral, just, and good in the universe. The message urgently pleads, “Help me Obi-Wan Kenobi. You’re my only hope.”

Captured by forces beyond ourselves and locked into circumstances beyond our control, we log prayer messages, hoping that they will be heard by the eternal God, who is the only true and reliable source of all that is moral, just, and good in the universe.

No doubt it sounds simplistic, and to some even unwelcome, to say that ultimately God is our only hope. Nevertheless, it is true that help and healing begin and end in all that He is and all that He provides. That is not to say that He does not work through pastors, wise biblical counselors, friends, sermons, books, groups, the study of His Word, experience, circumstances, or prayer. Nor is it to say that healing cannot be sudden or that it may be slow or even

that some pain may be permanent, requiring a special adjustment that is both victorious and fulfilling. It is simply to affirm that our hope and eventual healing begin by looking in His direction. Through the work of the Spirit and according to the principles and power of His Word, ultimately He is the genuine Helper and Healer. Without Him, help is at best cosmetic, incomplete, temporary, and sometimes misguided.

When Scripture speaks of *hope* it literally means to trust in a present and future help that is certain. Our English word for hope lacks this element of certainty. I could say every day for a year, “I *hope* this problem is gone by tomorrow morning” and each morning accurately express the English sense of *hope*. It is little more than a wish, a “hope so.” It does not need to be grounded in a certain reality.

Biblical hope is grounded in certainty. The only certain, steady reality when life takes a downward turn is our Father in heaven and the helping work of His Spirit through the guiding principles of His Word. God is full of certainties that provide something solid to hope in. Those certainties are like handles to which we cling. They are exclamation points amid the nagging question marks. God is not slippery or inaccessible. He is more than a mystical, ethereal notion. He is more than mere mental theological truth. He is real. Really there. Really here. In all His compassionate power He cannot be anything but what He is. Nor does He hoard His resources. He shares them. In time. In abundance. In wisdom and strength. He is more than words. He is wonder and power.

When we begin with *who* we begin with Him. It may only be a determined resolve to look trustingly in His direction. It may be unsophisticated. But it must begin with Him.

For some, hope in God will seem to conflict with thoughts of His distance and the damage He has permitted in our lives. However, if we are willing to open our hearts and minds, we will come to know how, when, and the ways in which His certainties can become realities that bring hope and eventual healing.

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With the psalmist we can come to enjoy the confidence of proclaiming,

*The Lord is my light and my salvation;
Whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the defense of my life;
Whom shall I dread?
When evildoers came upon me to devour my flesh,
My adversaries and my enemies, they stumbled and fell.
Though a host encamp against me,
My heart will not fear;
Though war rise against me,
In spite of this I shall be confident.*

*One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek:
That I may dwell in the house of the Lord
 all the days of my life,
To behold the beauty of the Lord,
And to meditate in His temple.
For in the day of trouble He will conceal me in His tabernacle;
In the secret place of His tent He will hide me;
He will lift me up on a rock.
And now my head will be lifted up above my enemies around me;
And I will offer in His tent sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing, yes, I will sing praises to the Lord.*

*Hear, O Lord, when I cry with my voice,
And be gracious to me and answer me.
When You said, "Seek My face," my heart said to You,
"Your face, O Lord, I shall seek."*

(Psalm 27:1-8 NASB)

and to finally rejoice,

*I waited patiently for the Lord;
He turned to me and heard my cry.*

*He lifted me out of the slimy pit,
out of the mud and mire;
he set my feet on a rock
and gave me a firm place to stand.
He put a new song in my mouth,
a hymn of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear
and put their trust in the Lord (Psalm 40:1–5).*

The Other Side of Who

The other side of *who* is *me*. Me—with all my feelings, hurts, confusion, and questions.

In trouble, the most strategic part of me is my will. It remains intact in spite of loose ends around my jumbled emotions and me. Our wills are the only entities we control and the only point of certain relationship with Him.

Often, despair in pain is deepened by the thought that there is nothing we can do about our situation, that we are victimized by overwhelming and uncontrollable circumstances. Our every effort to protect ourselves from husband, wife, child, or parent, our every effort to correct failing health or reverse financial loss has been frustrated. What do we do when there is nothing left to do, when life is out of control?

What do we do when even our trust in God seems shaky? When answers are not immediate, and God seems far away? When we do not know how to tap into His help and are left to wait passively for Him to answer, wishing for some spectacular flurry of divine activity to deliver us? What are we to do when that rescue doesn't come and unfulfilled expectations for His help turn our hearts toward doubt? When we begin to slip back to the *whys*—Why me? Why not them? Why now? —and tend to doubt His goodness and even doubt that He actually does love and care for us?

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Perhaps we will doubt that we are worthy of His concern. Increasingly we may even feel that there is no hope for us in God. And when we begin to believe that for us He is not there and He does not care, we cross a threshold of vulnerability to the debilitating forces of anger and cynicism that bring us further distress and eventual defeat.

Before that happens, we must turn to the entity over which we exercise exclusive control, our wills, and think correctly about the choices we have to make and respond constructively.

My thoughts, my responses, and my decisions are always within my jurisdiction in the midst of trouble. I can choose to keep looking to Him even when all is quiet in the sky. I am in charge of my choice to seek forgiveness when I have failed and to forgive others when they have failed, to persevere in correct and productive responses, to love or hate, resent and seek revenge. The old song that declares, “It’s not my brother or my sister but it’s me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer” strikes at the heart of it all.

It is no coincidence that when Scripture speaks about trouble it never wallows in the despair of our hopeless circumstances but always guides us to the Lord and then specifically prescribes achievable options that we *by choice* either embrace or reject.

If we are to find hope and help when it hurts, we must begin with the *who* of it all. We must hope in the certainty of what is true about God and then be committed to control the *me*, so that within the context of what the Lord prescribes, we can respond correctly and constructively to our situation.

Though we often view trouble as an issue of *me* versus *my circumstances*, in reality hope dawns when we refocus our thinking and view our situation as a matter of constructively and biblically controlling the *me* and trusting the truth about Him—the One who controls my circumstances.

If we choose not to cultivate our hope in Him, where will we place our hope? Is there anything greater, more just, more equitable, more powerful, more reliable, and truer than God? Or are

we children of lesser gods? Will we hope in the gods of comfort, peace, pleasure, and self-fulfillment? Will we deify ourselves to be the ultimate helper and healer through clever, manipulative, vindictive, or even well-intended schemes? Or will we be children of the true and living God, who is indeed our ultimate and final hope when we are overwhelmed?

Healing begins with a choice to place our hope in Him. The process continues as we choose to cultivate and commit ourselves unconditionally to those certainties and principles of response that are anchored in the bedrock of what we know to be true and sure regardless of how we feel or how difficult the circumstances around us.

It is an issue of where we look. We can look downward in despair and outward in fear and confusion as we survey our circumstances. Or we can look upward to Him and inward to our choices.

Sometimes, however, hope in God may be threatened by the haunting sense that He is the One to blame for all our troubles. Since He is a God who is all-powerful and sovereignly aware of every moment and movement on this planet, could not He have prevented what happened and granted us an exemption from trauma, as He seems to have done for others?

Is He to blame?

Could a loving God who says He is concerned for us ever have a reason to let us experience such trauma? Until we understand His place in our problem, hoping in Him will be a tough assignment.