

INTRODUCTION

Life is full of pain and suffering and people are looking in every place imaginable to find help. Someone recently told me a joke about a woman who accidentally slammed her door on her cat’s tail. The poor cat’s tail was cut off by the sharp edge of the door, and the lady was distraught—the cat wasn’t too happy about it either. Immediately, the woman put her squalling cat in a box along with its severed tail. She jumped into her car, but instead of driving to her local vet, she drove to her local Wal-Mart. She took the box, walked in and grabbed the first associate she found and opened the box. The Wal-Mart worker said, “Ma’am I’m sorry about your cat, but what do you want US to do about it?” The woman said, “Well, I heard that Wal-Mart was the world’s largest retailer.”

Wal-Mart offers a lot of products, but they can’t fix a wounded cat—neither can they fix severed relationships or wounded hearts. But God can.

How good are you at converting things? Sometimes we have to convert liters to quarts, or kilometers to miles, or fractions to decimals. Some conversions are simple, and others are hard. If you’re overseas and need to convert Celsius to Fahrenheit, simply multiply the Celsius temperature by 1.8 and then add 32. Some conversions are easier than others! In this passage, we’re going to discover how it is possible to have our troubles converted into joy.

2 Corinthians 7:2-7. “Make room for us in your hearts. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have exploited no one. I do not say this to condemn you; I have said before that you have such a place in our hearts that we would live or die with you. I have great confidence in you; I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged; (Here’s our key thought) in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds. For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.”

In this section of 2 Corinthians, Paul has been recounting some of the problems and troubles he faced. Even though Paul started the church at Corinth, there were members of the church who had been making public accusations about his honesty and integrity. In addition to problems with the church, Paul faced a multitude of personal problems. But instead of moaning and groaning about them, he used them as opportunities to display God’s grace and power. If you don’t have any problems or trouble, then you don’t need to hear this message. But if are facing personal troubles, financial difficulties, family conflicts, relational problems, physical, mental, or emotional adversity, then you might want to pay close attention. As we study this passage from God’s Word together, it’s my prayer that you’ll discover the secret of converting your troubles into joy.

I. THE SOURCE OF TROUBLE

When I was a kid I loved reading super hero comic books. Superman was my all-time favorite. I

can remember paying a dime for Superman comics in the early 1960s. Of course, if I still had them, they'd be worth a lot of money, just like all my Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris baseball cards that I attached to my bicycle wheels with clothespins to make a whirring sound as I rode it! In addition to Superman I also liked The Green Lantern, Flash, and the Incredible Hulk. Batman was okay, but he didn't have superpowers, he was just a smart guy with a bunch of neat tools in his belt. I was attracted to the guys with superpowers. Superman was faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful, than a locomotive, and able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. Look, up in the sky! Is it a bird? Is it a plane? Splat! It's a bird...No, it's Superman!

I'm telling you this because I used to have this misplaced fantasy that Bible characters were superheroes who possessed superpowers. Look up in the Bible! Is it a prophet? Is a priest? No, it's the Super Apostle Paul! When I would read about these characters they would sometimes take on superhero status, but the truth is they were flesh-and-blood people just like us.

Superman was immune to every kind of trouble on earth—he only had to watch out for kryptonite. I used to think the New Testament characters like Peter, Paul, and Mary were immune to the kinds of problems and pain we all face. But I've been cured of this myth by simply reading about all the problems and pain these Bible characters faced.

There used to be a show called “the Perils of Pauline,” well, when you go back to some of Paul's words in chapter 6, we can read about some of the particular perils of Paul. In 2 Corinthians 6: 4-10 he mentioned, “in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger... dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.” Let's look at four different sources of trouble, but I don't want to linger here, I want to move to on the truth of how these troubles can be converted to joy. As we talk about these, see if any of them apply to your life right now.

1. Physical fatigue

Paul wrote, “This body of ours had no rest.” Are you suffering physically today? Paul's body was wracked with pain from frequent beatings and lack of sleep. The great football coach, Vince Lombardi, once said, “Fatigue makes cowards of us all.” As I look around at people today, everyone seems tired. Not just tired, but as they used to say in South Alabama, “Taared.” Why can't a bicycle stand up without a kickstand? Because it's two-tired. Why can't some of you function as you should? Because you're too tired.

2. Personal attacks

Paul wrote, “We were harassed at every turn” Everywhere Paul went there were those who publicly and viciously opposed him. Have you ever been the target of angry words? It hurts doesn't it? As kids we learned, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” We soon learned what a lie that is. Critical, angry words actually leave deeper and more severe wounds than sticks and stones.

I love to read the writings of Abraham Lincoln. He displayed amazing wit and grace in the face

of withering criticism. One of my favorite quotes was his response to the charge that he was two-faced. Never known as a handsome man Lincoln replied, “If I were two faced, would I be wearing this one?” I love his quote in response to his critics. He wrote: “If I care to listen to every criticism, let alone act on them, then this shop may as well be closed for all other businesses. I have learned to do my best, and if the end result is good then I do not care for any criticism, but if the end result is not good, then even the praise of ten angels would not make the difference.”

3. Outward conflicts

Paul mentioned “conflicts on the outside.” This phrase applies to troubling circumstances over which we have no control. There are only two kinds of circumstances in life: Those that we can do something about and those that we can’t. There are so many things that can go wrong in our lives that we can’t control. Two things that come to my mind are: weather, and other people’s behavior.

Dale Pond and I were returning from China a few weeks ago, and we were in San Francisco trying to get to DFW. That was one of the evenings of severe storms when hundreds of flights in and out of DFW were cancelled. The flights were so overbooked for the next couple of days that we couldn’t even confirm space on flights into DFW for two or three days. That was something over which we had absolutely no control. Some travelers were going ballistic, but Dale and I were both cool about it, and eventually got a redeye flight to Chicago that arrived at about 5 a.m. and then a connection to Oklahoma City, which was as close to Dallas as we could get! Life is full of “outward conflicts” over which we have no control. In fact someone has said, “Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans!”

4. Inward fears

Paul also mentions, “fears within.” There were times when Paul feared for his own life. Fear can paralyze you. At the height of the Great Depression in 1933, FDR spoke these words in his first Inaugural speech: “This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.” There are other things to fear rather than fear. I fear thunderstorms (as a pilot), I fear sharks, and fear rattlesnakes. But there is a kind of paralyzing fear which can rob you of life. Fear is one of Satan’s most successful ploys. Many of the things we fear never materialize. My favorite acrostic for FEAR is False Evidence Appearing Real.

As you look at this checklist, can you relate to some of the troubles Paul faced? Now, let’s talk about how these troubles can be converted into JOY!

II. THE SECRET OF JOY

After mentioning all these troubles, Paul wrote, “in all our troubles, our joy knows no bounds.” Then he goes on to reveal the secret to converting your troubles into joy. He wrote, “But God, who comforts the downcast.” Paul was not a superhero with superpowers, but he was a follower

of Jesus who discovered the supernatural power of God. The secret of converting your trouble into joy really isn't that hard to find. It's found in a relationship with God. I believe Paul had discovered at least four dimensions of the secret to having unbounded joy in the midst of unbearable trouble.

1. Turn to God FIRST when you're in trouble

Earlier in this same letter Paul wrote, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles.” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4) He recognized God is the only reliable source of comfort and strength in times of trouble.

Have you ever known someone who was ill, and the doctors have done all they can do, so they say, “the only thing you can do now is PRAY.” When a sick person hears that, they sometimes grimace and say, “Oh no! Has it come to that?” In other words, they act as if prayer is the last resort. But seeking God in our trouble shouldn't be our last resort; it should be our first response!

How many of you drove or rode in a car to church today? That's just about everyone. How many of you have checked on the status of your spare tire in the last month? Raise your hand (and guys, when I say spare tire, I'm not talking about your stomach). Hmm...not too many of you have been concerned with your spare tire—you just assume that it's there if you need it in case of a blowout. I fear that some Christians unintentionally treat God much like they do a spare tire. You know God is there, and you just assume He will be available to help you if and when a blowout occurs and you don't have any other recourse. When you face trouble is God your first response or is he your last resort?

King David, who was no stranger to pain and trouble, wrote, “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.” (Psalm 46:1) God doesn't want to be your 911 number, He wants to be your 24/7/365 number—your EVER-PRESENT HELP—right *now*. So turn to Him first, not just when things get really bad and you've run out of all your other options.

2. Look for joy IN the midst of trouble

If you think you'll only have joy after you've passed through your time of trouble, then your missing out on the joy you could be experiencing in the midst of your trouble. David sang, “When I said, ‘My foot is slipping,’ your love, O Lord, supported me. When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought JOY to my soul.” (Psalm 94:18-19) Notice David didn't say, “AFTER my foot slipped, and I regained my balance, I had joy.” No, it was WHILE his foot was slipping, it was WHILE he was suffering from great anxiety that he experienced the joy of the Lord.

While you're in the middle of pain you have a choice to either focus on your trouble or to look for joy. The choice is yours. In other words, trouble is inevitable, but misery is optional. I've known people who go through times of trouble, and their negativity just makes their situation worse. Do you look for trouble, or do you look for joy?

I recently found a fascinating short poem entitled, “Trouble” by David Keppel. It goes, “Never

trouble trouble / Until trouble troubles you; / For you only make your trouble /Double-trouble when you do; / And the trouble—like a bubble— / That you’re troubling about, / May be nothing but a zero / With its rim rubbed out.”

President Theodore Roosevelt was one of the most positive, joyful individuals to ever occupy the White House. He used to say, “When you see trouble coming down the road at you, nine times out of ten, it will run into the ditch before it gets to you, so why bother with it?” I say, “Bully for you! Teddy!”

3. Rely on Godly friends to strengthen you

When Paul was suffering, another way that God converted his trouble into joy was by sending his friend Titus to be with him. Paul wrote, “But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus.” (2 Corinthians 7:6)

One of my mentors in the faith used to say, “God always works through human instrumentality.” For a long time I didn’t understand what he meant, but I’ve come to learn that all he was saying was that God uses people as His instruments.

I like the story of the little boy who was frightened in his room when there was a thunderstorm rumbling overhead. He cried out to his daddy, “Daddy, I’m afraid. Can you come in here and hold me?” His dad was sleepy and called back from his room, “Don’t be afraid, son, God is in there with you.” After a few minutes, the son yelled back, “Dad, I know God is here, but I need someone with skin on!”

Sometimes we need someone with skin on, and that’s why God gives us friends. There is a wonderful promise in Proverbs that says, “A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.” (Proverbs 18:24)

A friend is someone who walks in when everyone else walks out. You will have lots of acquaintances in your life, but if you have two or three real friends you are a rich person. Maybe you’re thinking, “I wish I had a friend like that.” So, try being a friend and help other people through their tough times. Then you’ll find you have friends to help you through your tough times.

4. Stay connected to your church family

Even with all the problems Paul had with the congregation at Corinth, he wrote, “I have great confidence in you; I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged.” (2 Corinthians 7:4) Paul was separated from the people in Corinth, but the report that Titus brought served to encourage him. Because of the church’s encouragement, the next words Paul wrote were, “in all our troubles, my joy knows no bounds.”

In the old song, “Home on the Range” there’s a line that says, “where seldom is heard a discouraging word.” That should be a description of every church. God intended His church to be a place of encouragement. There is only one verse in the New Testament that talks about

attending church: Hebrews 10:25. That verse says we should not miss meeting together with other believers, in other words, we must stay connected. The reason we gather together according to this verse is to encourage each other.

I wish I could say church is a place where seldom is heard a discouraging word, but I don't want to lie to you! Sadly, attending church can be a less-than-encouraging experience. There is someone today that you'll meet who may be facing the worst crisis of their life, and your smile, handshake, or hug may help them more than you'll ever know.

It reminds me of the man who woke up one Sunday morning and told his wife, “I'm just not going to church today. You go and take the kids. I'm tired of going and getting beaten up. Nobody is friendly to me, and I just don't get anything out of it.” His wife said, “I think you should get out of bed and go to church.” He said, “Well, give me just three reasons why I should go to church.” She said, “Number one, the Bible says we should stay in the habit of attending church. Number two, the kids and I need you to set a good example for us. And number three, you're the pastor.”

I must confess for much of my ministry, I felt that it was my job to stomp on the collective toes of the congregation, and if the people left church muttering about how badly they felt, I thought I had done a good job preaching the gospel that day. That was until I figured out that “gospel” means GOOD NEWS! Since then, I've been trying to get people to smile, and even laugh—and while your mouths are open laughing, I try to slip some tasty truth in there for you to chew on!

You may be the one in need of encouragement today, or you may be the one God is calling to encourage someone else. I believe the best way to receive encouragement is to give it to others. Encouragement is like a boomerang, it always comes back to you. There's a wonderful poem by Walter Isenhour that describes the value of encouragement. It's called “A Little Push and Pull.” It goes:

A Little Push and Pull

A little push when the road is steep
May take one up the hill;
A little prayer when the clouds hang low
May bring the soul a thrill;
A little lift when the load bears down
May help one to succeed;
A little pull when the will slows down
May help one gain his speed.
A little clasp from a hand that's kind
May lift from crushing care;
A little word from a voice that's sweet
May save one from despair;
A little smile when the heart is sad
May bring a sunbeam in;
A loving word when the spirit droops

May help one rise and win.
A little love for a soul that’s lost
May help him seek God’s grace;
A little tear and a “God bless you”
May brighten someone’s face;
A little deed from a Christian’s heart
May bless a weary soul;
A little boost when the battle’s hard
May take one to his goal.

— Walter E. Isenhour

CONCLUSION

That’s the amazing thing about God’s power: He can convert our troubles into joy. When the world does it worst to us, that’s when God can do His best for us! Do you think I’m making this up? Here’s a quick reality check. Joseph in the Old Testament—beaten up by his brothers—trouble. Sold into slavery—double trouble. Spent time in prison for a crime he never committed—triple trouble. Through it all, Joseph kept his focus on God, and he found joy in the midst of his troubles. So that in Genesis 50:20 Joseph said to his brothers, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good...for the saving of many lives.” Joseph did look at the thorns, he looked at the rose. He never focused on the black clouds; he looked for the silver lining. He never stopped making lemonade with the lemons life gave him.

What about you? Are you allowing God to convert your troubles into joy? Jaded, bitter people often make fun of people who have a “Pollyanna mentality,” but the older I get the more I love the story of Pollyanna. I’m sorry I didn’t get to see the Tyler Civic Theater version a few weeks ago, but I heard that our own Mary Katherine Bauman delivered a great performance. Pollyanna was a first a best-selling novel written by Eleanor Porter in 1913. Based on the success of the first book, eleven more sequels were written which are called “Glad Books.” Since then the story has been adapted for screen and stage.

In the story, Pollyanna is an orphan, the child of missionaries, who has been sent to live with her straight-laced aunt. Pollyanna’s philosophy of life centers on what she called “the glad game.” The game consists of finding something to be glad about in every situation. The glad game originated one Christmas when they opened up the missionary barrel hoping to find a doll that Pollyanna had requested. Instead of a doll, they discovered a pair of crutches. Pollyanna’s dad made up the game on the spot and asked Pollyanna to look at the crutches and try to think of something to be glad about. Pollyanna thought for a moment and said, “I’m glad...I’m glad...because I don’t need ‘em!” In the story of Pollyanna, her positive attitude changes an entire town.

I play the glad game a lot. I recall a few years ago, a lady was criticizing me verbally for something I said or didn’t say or did or didn’t do, I don’t recall the details. She was irate as she got up in my face. I stayed kind and sweet throughout, and assured her of my desire to resolve the issue she brought up. As she walked away, I tried to play the glad game. After a moment I

smiled and thought, “I’m glad...I’m glad that I’m not married to that woman!”

Can you imagine how our lives would change if we started looking for JOY in the middle of every situation of trouble? It sounds like what Jesus said in John 16:33, “In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! For I have overcome the world!”

OUTLINE

I. THE SOURCE OF TROUBLE

1. Physical fatigue *this body of ours had no rest*
2. Personal attacks *we were harassed at every turn*
3. Outward conflicts *conflicts on the outside*
4. Inward fears *fears within*

II. THE SECRET OF JOY

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“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus...the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles.” *2 Corinthians 1:3-4*
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4. Stay connected to your church family
“I have great confidence in you; I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged.” *2 Corinthians 7:4*



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes