A MAN to MATCH the MOUNTAIN

Overcoming The Obstacles of Life

David Roper
CONTENTS

Introduction 7

Joseph
Iron in Our Souls 13

Gideon
The Strength of a Man 31

Manasseh
A Fresh and Better Start 49

Elijah
Dark Night of the Soul 69

Moses
Any Old Bush Will Do 81
Heigh Ho! Heigh Ho!
It’s Off to Work We Go 95

Cain
The Way of Cain 123

Jehoshaphat
Facing Our Fears 143

David
The Discipline of Disgrace 159
The Beauty of Holiness 169
Dear Abby 181
The Harder They Fall 195
When People Throw Stones 209
Failing Successfully 229

Jonathan
Making a Friend 245

Abraham
Loser Take All 261

Caleb
Finishing Strong 275
Joseph
IRON IN OUR SOULS

Life is not as idle ore,
but iron dug from central gloom,
   And heated hot with burning fears,
   and dipped in baths of hissing tears,
And battered by the shocks of doom
to shape and use.

—Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Schroeder, garbed in oversize catcher’s mask and chest protector, strides out to the mound, hands Charlie Brown the ball, and says, “The bases are loaded again, and there’s still nobody out.”

“So what do you think?” Charlie Brown asks.

Schroeder ponders the question for a moment and replies: “We live in difficult times.”

Indeed we do. As a friend of mine laments, “If it’s not one thing it’s another, and some days it’s both.” Painful, mortifying, and expensive things keep happening to us. “One woe doth tread upon another’s heel so fast they follow,” Hamlet complained—cruel events that seem devoid of sense and meaning, bitter ironies that thwart our desires, foil our plans, frustrate our hopes, and break our hearts.
And the beat goes on. We keep telling ourselves that things will get better and life will get easier as we get along in years, but that’s a fool’s dream. Sometimes the harder tests are farther along.

When Earl Weaver was manager of the Baltimore Orioles and bane of American League umpires, he used to charge out of the dugout bellowing, “Is it going to get any better or is this it?”

Well, I hate to tell you, but this is it! Things may not get better; they may get worse. It is the worst of all worlds. In fact it could not be any worse.

I used to think that life was mostly fun and games with a bit of trouble thrown in now and then to keep me honest; now I know it’s the other way ’round: there are serendipities and other happy surprises along the way, but most of life is a vale of tears. The basis of life is tragedy.

And so I ask myself, Is there some reason to endure my troubles, some meaning for them beyond myself and my present circumstances?

When confronting these questions, which I must do from time to time, I think of Joseph, whose stress-filled and star-crossed life touches me to the core. Through his suffering, I have come to learn the meaning of my own.

Some years ago I came across the following psalm, one section of which amounts to a summary of Joseph’s life story.

He [God] called down famine on the land [of Canaan] and destroyed all their supplies of food; and he sent a man before them—Joseph, sold as a slave. They bruised his feet with shackles, his neck [Hebrew: soul] was put in irons, till what he foretold came to pass, till the word of the LORD proved him true.
IRON IN OUR SOULS

The king sent and released him,
the ruler of peoples set him free.
He made him master of his household,
ruler over all he possessed,
to instruct his princes as he pleased
and teach his elders wisdom (Psalm 105:16–22).

The Hebrew text of the last line of verse 18 reads curiously, “his soul came into iron,” a phrase ancient Jewish translators and rabbinical exegetes interpreted to mean, “iron entered into his soul.”

If this translation is correct, and I believe it is, it has to do with one of the ways by which God turns us into stronger and better men—He puts iron into our souls.

The preparation

Joseph was cursed from the beginning. He was his father’s favorite son, an ironically unhappy circumstance that earned him the deep dislike of his brothers.

But then Joseph cursed himself as well. He added to his brothers’ resentment by flaunting his most-favored status, literally wearing it on his sleeve. The “coat of many colors” he wore was actually a long-sleeved garment with stripes on the sleeves to indicate rank. The reason he wore it was to parade his own importance and put his brothers down.

Joseph further distanced himself from his family by repeatedly relating a set of dreams about his future happiness and prominence—dreams that in fact turned out to be true, but which, when repeated again and again, only fueled the resentment of his brothers. They “hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said” (Genesis 37:8).

Joseph had a lot of growing up to do. Israel’s wise men would have called him a peti—a young, untutored fool.
A MAN to MATCH the MOUNTAIN

God’s problem, if I can put it that way, was to prepare a place for His people. Jacob’s sons had assimilated into Canaanite culture, even the best of them, Judah, buying into the corrupt morality of the land (see Genesis 38). It was necessary to extrude the family from Canaan to cure them of its corruption. But before God could prepare a place for His people, He had to prepare a man for that place. And this is the story of that preparation.

“God’s preparation,” Oswald Chambers said, “is definite, drastic, and destructive.” The making of Joseph was all of that. A series of shocking and calamitous events cascaded down on his head, like bricks tumbling out of a dumptruck. He was snatched from his doting father by his brothers, cast into a pit and passed on to a band of Bedouins who in turn sold him into slavery in Egypt.

In Egypt, though we are told repeatedly that “God was with him” (Genesis 39:2–3, 21), his life unfolded into a series of tragic indignities. He was tempted by a determined seductress who, when spurned, accused him of raping her. He was summarily tried, convicted, imprisoned, and left to languish in companionless isolation for a dozen years or more, forgotten by family and friends. His life became a series of terrifying intrusions.

Like Roy Hobbs, the protagonist in the movie and the novel, *The Natural*, Joseph “never thought his life would end up like this.” The pit and prison were never in his plan.

And in your life and mine, are there not things we could never have foreseen: deep disappointment over what might have been; unrelieved heartache over dysfunctional families, unfaithful spouses and friends; piercing sorrow over lost loves; lonely dark periods that hide the face of God and obscure His Word?

The question is, How do we regard these intrusions? Have we grown bitter and resentful against them, against the people who forced them on us, against God? Are we frustrated
because our plans have been disrupted? Are we full of bitterness and cynicism because we think some blind fury is against us?

There is a better way: the way God’s humble saints have always gone. It is to know that Love and Wisdom is guiding all the way. God is working out His purpose in spite of all that happens to us. He is working though He does not seem to be working at all. Quietly, invisibly, inexorably He is taking the worst that is happening to us and slowly turning it into good.

Listen to Joseph when life’s lessons were drawing to a close: “You sold me,” he said to his brothers, “but God sent me” (Genesis 45:4–5). “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Genesis 50:20).

Behind every circumstance of his difficult life, Joseph saw the good intention and guiding hand of his Father, working through every circumstance to accomplish His will.

Missionary statesman Eric Liddell, best known as the hero of the movie *Chariots of Fire,* has written, “Circumstances may appear to wreck our lives and God’s plans, but God is not helpless among the ruins. Our broken lives are not lost or useless. God’s love is still working. He comes in and takes the calamity and uses it victoriously, working out His wonderful plan of love.”

My friend and mentor Ray Stedman used to say that one mark of maturity is the capacity to ignore secondary causes. The main thing is to see God “working out His wonderful plan of love” in everything that comes our way. Whether our circumstances come from human beings or some devil, all creatures are under God’s control. They are “holding to our lips the cup which the Father’s hand has mixed” (F. B. Meyer).

God is not implicated in any way in the evil that others do, but He assumes control and accepts responsibility for everything that happens to us. When Satan appeared before God
after doing his worst to destroy Job, the Lord said to him, “You incited me against [Job] to ruin him” (Job 2:3). There are no accidents in God’s universe, no maverick molecules to spoil His plan. “[His] purpose is everywhere at work” (Ephesians 1:11 NEB).

“What do you understand by the Providence of God?” the Heidelberg Catechism asks. “The almighty and ever-present power of God whereby He still upholds, as it were by His own hand, heaven and earth together with all creatures, and rules in such a way that leaves and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and unfruitful years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, and everything else come to us not by chance but by His fatherly hand.”

This is the mystery of Sovereignty: God works in spite of evil. No, He works through evil to accomplish His will. “He permits evil,” Augustine said, “to transform it into greater good.”

“Everything is against me!” Jacob cried in his distress (Genesis 42:36). No, “In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

Annie Johnson Flint, that arthritic poet who herself wrote “through nights devoid of ease,” put it this way:

In a factory building there are wheels and gearings,
There are cranks and pulleys, beltings tight or slack,
Some are whirling swiftly, some are turning slowly,
Some are thrusting forward, some are pulling back;

Some are smooth and silent, some are rough and noisy,
Pounding, rattling, clanking, moving with a jerk;
In a wild confusion, in a seeming chaos,
Lifting, pushing, driving, but they do their work.

From the mightiest lever to the tiniest pinion,
All things move together for the purpose planned;
And behind the working is a mind controlling,
And a force directing, and a guiding hand.

So all things are working for the Lord’s beloved;
Some things might be hurtful if alone they stood;
Some might seem to hinder, some might draw us backward;
But they work together, and they work for good;

All the thwarted longings, all the stern denials,
All the contradictions, hard to understand.
And the force that holds them, speeds them and retards them,
Stops and starts and guides them, is our Father’s hand.

What God is about

Søren Kierkegaard, Danish philosopher and theologian, once pointed out that most of us are like the schoolboy who stole the teacher’s answers before a math exam. Our aim is to memorize the answers so we won’t have to work through the problems.

The problem with suffering, however, is that sometimes there’s simply no answers, at least no earthly answers: now we “know in part”; we see only “the fringes of His ways” (Job 26:14 NASB). The full explanation awaits heaven where God will supply the reasons for all that we’ve been going through. In the meantime we have to rest in the fact that there is more to life than we can know. “A real Christian is an avowed agnostic,” Oswald Chambers said. “His attitude is ‘I have reached the limit of my knowledge. From here on I must trust God.’”

I write this because I’m always a little uneasy around those sincere but too-certain folks who can explain everything that comes my way. Like Job’s comforters their answers, though well-meaning, only make me more miserable. I’m
much more comfortable with those who say to me, “I’m not sure why you’re suffering, but I’ll wait here with you and pray.” Friends like that are a pure benediction.

Nevertheless, having issued that caution, I would like to offer some thoughts about suffering. That’s all they are—some thoughts about some things I’ve learned over the years about my own pain.

**God is working for our good**

It’s said of Jesus that, “although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered” (Hebrews 5:8). The worst brought out the best in our Lord; He was made perfect through misery and tears (Hebrews 2:10).

Why should we expect less? “To this you were called,” Peter insists, “because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps” (1 Peter 2:21).

Repeated rejection, deep loneliness, deferred hope are the means God used to shape His Son into the matchless man He became. Should we be surprised that He does the same for you and me?

Emerson wrote as though thinking of Joseph, “Chambers of the great are jails, And head winds right for royal sails.” God is making us great. He is shaping us into men whose lives are redolent with beauty and grace. Through suffering we learn to bear pain without complaint; to endure insult without retaliation; to suffer shame without bitterness. He makes us more like the men we have always wanted to be.

We learn to “live friendly,” as Quakers say. We become more patient with others, more tolerant of their weaknesses and failures, kinder, gentler folk, easier to get along with, easier to work with, easier to be around.

We learn to deal with our discomfort and discontent with things as they are. We become more “peace-loving,
considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness” (James 3:17–18).

“Sorrow is better than laughter,” Solomon said, because it’s “good for the heart” (Ecclesiastes 7:3). Sorrow—with bitterness removed—uncovers hidden depth in us. It makes us think long and earnestly about ourselves and the kind of men we are. It makes us ponder our behavior, our motives, our intentions, our real interests. We learn to know ourselves as never before.

Robert Browning Hamilton put it this way:

\[
\begin{align*}
I \text{ walked a mile with Pleasure} \\
\text{She chattered all the way;} \\
\text{But left me none the wiser} \\
\text{For all she had to say.} \\

I \text{ walked a mile with Sorrow,} \\
\text{And ne’er a word said she;} \\
\text{But, oh, the things I learned from her} \\
\text{When Sorrow walked with me.}
\end{align*}
\]

Most of all, our suffering enables us to know God as we’ve never known Him before. Job said of his own misery: “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you” (Job 42:5). In the words of an old Audrey Meier song, God washed Job’s eyes with tears so he could see.

Sorrow is the means to that end to all things—God Himself. It brings us heart to heart with Him. Paul said he rejoiced in his sufferings because suffering produced perseverance, proven character, and hope (Romans 5:3). But more than that, he insisted, it taught him to “rejoice in God” (Romans 5:11).

When repeated strokes have robbed us of health, friends, money, and favorable circumstances, God then becomes the
only thing in life for us. We come to love Him for Himself and not for what He has to give. We cry out with the psalmist, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.” The nearness of God becomes our only good (73:25–28).

“What do you think of your God now?” asked a cynic of an old saint, who for twenty years had suffered great physical pain. “I think of Him more than ever,” was the reply. This is the sweet aftermath of suffering.

When it comes down to it, I don’t think God can do much with any of us until He has taught us to mourn.

**God is working for others’ good**

Pain serves another purpose, one beyond ourselves: it is meant for others. It prepares us to connect with the deeper needs of those around us and to give comfort and counsel on a level we could never otherwise give.

Paul writes:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer (2 Corinthians 1:3–6).

God’s messengers are sent to the weary. There are so many of these folks in the world. They need those who have been comforted with God’s comfort and who can give that comfort to others. To do this requires months and sometimes
Years of lonely suffering.

Years ago I heard J. Oswald Sanders relate an incident that took place early in his ministry. He had spoken in a church and in his own estimate had hit the long ball. On the way out he overheard two elderly women critiquing his message: “What did you think of Mr. Sanders?” one asked. “Oh, he’ll be much better,” the other replied, “when he’s suffered a little.”

The needs of people around us are exceedingly profound. Hurt by the complexities and cruelties of life, they cry “out of the depths,” as the psalmist did. Those who have known deep sorrow themselves can speak to that fathomless deep in others. They have great compassion for those who suffer; they can speak to the misery that others feel. In the words of an old ballad, “the anguish of the singer makes the purest, sweet refrain.”

Oswald Chambers wrote this in *Baffled to Fight Better*:

In his epistle Peter refers to those who have plenty of time for others. They are those who have been through suffering, but now seem full of joy. If a man has not been through suffering he will snub others unless they share his interests. He is no more concerned about them than the desert sand; but those who have been through things are not now taken up with their own sorrows. They have been made broken bread and poured out wine for others. You can always be sure of the man who has been through suffering, but never of the man who has not.

“You speak like one who has suffered,” said Arctura, one of George MacDonald’s characters. “That is how we are able to help others,” was the reply. When it comes down to it, God uses best those who are closest to tears.
Those who sow in tears
will reap with songs of joy.
He who goes out weeping,
carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy,
carrying sheaves with him
(Psalm 126:5–6).

Afterthoughts

There are other thoughts that come to mind as I think about my own pain. The first is that suffering does not last forever. There will be an end. The apostle Peter writes:

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed (1 Peter 1:6–7).

And again he says:

After you have suffered a little while, [the God of all grace] will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast (1 Peter 5:10).

“God has come to wipe away our tears,” George MacDonald wrote. “He is doing it; He will have it done as soon as He can; and until He can He would have them flow without bitterness; to which end He tells us it is a blessed thing to mourn because of the comfort that is on its way.”

While we wait for that comfort, we can be assured that
God mitigates our suffering. He will not allow us to be pushed beyond our ability to bear it. Every hour is timed with exact precision. Every situation is screened through His love. We will not suffer one moment more nor will we suffer more intensely than is necessary. “To a close-shorn sheep God gives wind by measure,” is an old Basque saying.

Furthermore, for every moment of distress there is an ample supply of God’s grace. It arrives with every ordeal. “Give us this day our daily bread” applies to every gift God gives. “As your days, so shall your strength be” (Deuteronomy 33:25 NKJV). God has said:

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze (Isaiah 43:2).

There will be deep waters through which we must wade; there will be fire through which the ore of our character must pass. But in the midst of them God promises to be our partner, our companion and faithful friend. He has called us into fellowship with Him and He will see us through.

And then, when He has completed His work and we are fit for His kingdom, He will take us home. What a day that will be!

Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes
(Revelation 7:16).

Isaiah speaks of a day when “the former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind” (Isaiah 65:17). We cannot now forget the past, but some day our sad memories will fade away. We will not recall what once was intolerable—the sleepless nights, the humiliating failures, the final partings, the deep disappointments, the bitter death that broke off a life just as it was beginning to bloom. These are the “former things” that will be remembered no more. “When do we forget our sorrows?” Richard Baxter asks. “Is it not when we are home?”

Some years ago I read a story about an elderly couple returning from fifty years of stressful ministry as missionaries in Africa. As it turned out they were on a ship with Theodore Roosevelt, who was returning to America from a hunting safari.

When the ship reached New York there was a huge crowd awaiting the Roosevelt’s arrival, but, due to an administrative mix-up, no one from the mission came to greet the couple. They were forced to retrieve their own trunks, load them in a taxi, locate an apartment, and move in by themselves. No one seemed to care.

Bitterness began to grow in the old gentleman, and he angrily complained to his wife, “We’ve come home and no one cares!” “Well now,” she replied, “You must tell the Lord your trouble”—which he did. He went on a long walk and talked things over with God. When he returned, his wife knew by his face that his anger had dissipated.

“What happened?” she asked. He replied, “I got the first words out of my mouth, ‘I’ve come home . . . ’ and the Lord interrupted me.

“What did He say?” his wife asked.

“Well,” the old man replied, “He said, ‘Ah, there’s your problem. You’ve not yet come home.’”

Such a little while to wait! In the epistle to the Hebrews it
is called “a very little while,” literally, “yet a little while, how little, how little.” It is a very little while when compared with the span of eternity; we will have endured a very light suffering when compared “with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

**The noblest part**

“Suffering is a great thing,” Dostoevsky said. “You may not believe my words now, but you’ll understand it someday.” Ordinary men can never understand. These words can be understood only by those who know what God is about:

```
When God wants to drill a man
   and thrill a man and skill a man
When God wants to mold a man
   to play the noblest part;
When He yearns with all His heart
   to create so bold a man
   that all the world will be amazed,
Watch His methods, watch His ways:

How He relentlessly perfects
   whom He royally elects;
How He hammers us and hurts us
   and with mighty blows converts us
   into trial shapes of clay
   which only God can understand,
While our tortured heart is crying
   and we lift beseeching hands.

How God bends, but never breaks
   when His good He undertakes;
How He uses whom He chooses
   and with every purpose fuses us;
By every act induces us
   to try His splendor out—
```
God knows what He’s about!

—Dale Martin Stone

Joseph was hammered and hurt more than anyone I know (except our Lord Jesus), but through it all he learned the meaning of his suffering and the measure of God’s grace. When his sons were born he enshrined that lesson in their names:

Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh and said, “It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father’s household.” The second son he named Ephraim and said, “It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering” (Genesis 41:51–52).

Jacob said of Joseph in the end, “Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine near a spring, whose branches climb over a wall” (Genesis 49:22).

My life is but a field
stretched out beneath God’s sky,
Some harvest rich to yield.

Where grows the golden grain?
Where faith? Where sympathy?
In a furrow cut by pain.

—Maltbie Babcock