

EXPLORE THE JOYS OF TRIALS

Pain and suffering are unavoidable on this earth, and the Bible warns Christians they'll face extra hardships for their faith. Yet Scripture adds that we should "consider it pure joy" when we "face trials of many kinds" (James 1:2, NIV). So how can you—and your teenagers—make the leap from struggling with trials to embracing them as an important part of your faith journey?

Counselor and avid outdoorsman Steve Merritt says when you're lost in the woods, there's incredible relief at finding a trail, even though you still have a ways to go. "Life sometimes provides times when we know we aren't home yet, but we know we're on the way," he writes. "God has us in his strong arms, and there's a solid faith that the struggle, doubt, loneliness, or *whatever* befalls us here will someday be a faint, distant dream. I desperately need to remember times I've found the way—or maybe when the way has found me."

Merritt recommends helping teenagers build "places of memory," as the Israelites did in the Old Testament. "Help them drive a stake in the ground, where the fog of life's fears, worries, and troubles lifts, and God's presence and character shine through. Tell kids stories of when this has happened in your life and how you've chosen to remember those times—giving you hope for the times when the trail is hard to find."

THE VIEW

Group Magazine asked more than 20,000 Christian teenagers what they'd like to do more of in their youth ministry. The top answer was "learn more about Jesus" (91%), but these other top vote-getters show young people's desire for guidance as they face hardships and struggles:

- Get help dealing with tough issues in my life (79%)
- Pursue tough questions in the Bible (78%)
- Receive counseling for tough things I'm going through (70%)
- Receive mentoring (54%)

TIPS >>>

In his new book *Sifted* (David C. Cook), *Group Magazine* editor Rick Lawrence explores the heavenly purpose of earthly trials:

- **Perseverance is the "produce" of suffering.** For Christians, persevering through hardships is the "organic harvest that transforms our souls from a famine to a feast," Lawrence writes. The apostle Paul addresses this cause-effect relationship in Romans 5:3-4.
- **God's "sifting" reveals to us who he really is.** When God allowed Satan to sift Peter like wheat (Luke 22:31-32), the process revealed God's love, "colossal goodness," and purpose for Peter, the church's future leader.

- **God prays for us amid our trials.** God promises to pray for us and, most importantly, for our faith, which is the "vehicle that will propel us through our sifting."
- **Trials lead us to turn back to God.** "Until we have lost what we've taken for granted," Lawrence writes, "we can't really see its true value." Peter's denials of Jesus, although painful, led him back to intimacy with his Savior.
- **Trials offer us the privilege of strengthening other people.** Just as Jesus told a restored Peter to "feed my sheep," Jesus allows us to minister to friends and family members undergoing their own difficulties. Through our attachment to Jesus, we receive the courage to reach out and help others.

PONDER THIS

- What types of trials or roadblocks have you faced in your walk with Christ?
- How have those experiences led to eventual joy or to a closer relationship with God?
- What message would you like to share with your teenagers about persevering through life's struggles?





ON THE JOURNEY

Expert Insights for Parents of Teenagers

By Mike Howerton

At SimplyYouthMinistry.com, Seattle youth pastor Mike Howerton, author of *Miles to Cross*, shares thoughts about traveling our faith path:

I've always loved heading out on new roads, enjoying the process of travel and my traveling companions almost as much as the destination. There's a faith connection here, although it's become cliché. We're on a spiritual journey.

Faith isn't a happy hop to heaven. It isn't checking a box on a card. Those are only steps in a long line of steps along the unpredictable, beautiful, exhilarating, exhausting,

wild, personal journey of faith. God is infinitely bigger than we give him credit for, working long before we think to thank him.

At times I've been amazed at the privilege of knowing God and living in communion with him. Other times, I've been frustrated with my noticeable lack of spiritual progress and distracted by my own disposition toward selfishness.

Faith isn't linear, an ever-ascending bar graph from frustration and disappointment toward progress and potential. Like any journey, exciting times co-exist with

difficult times. Like any journey, it's always nice to know roughly where you are and where you're headed.

God longs to walk with you on this journey, to be with you in times of progress and in times of "stuckness." He wants to walk *with* you every step of the way. That's the relationship your heart longs for: to know and be known, to love and be loved. That's the relationship God provides. I pray that you will know God's love and experience the joy he provides along your unique path and journey with him.

RESOURCE



In *Ten Tough Things* (Group), Rick Lawrence explores 10 challenges that God gives Christians, as well as the ways he equips us to carry them out. These Bible studies show that the "tough things" of the Christian life are actually the joys of the Christian life.

BIBLE FOCUS

The Lord will guide you continually, giving you water when you are dry and restoring your strength. You will be like a well-watered garden, like an ever-flowing spring.

Isaiah 58:11

MEDIA SPOTLIGHT

MAINSTREAM MUSIC



THE BLACK KEYS

Background: This rock band produces big sounds despite being only a duo; they combine blues licks and modern rock to great effect. They formed in Ohio 10 years ago and remained barely known for years—although their songs were optioned for films, TV, and commercials. Their 2010 album *Brothers* vaulted The Black Keys into the mainstream and earned them three Grammy Awards, including best alternative album.

Albums: *El Camino* (2011), *Brothers* (2010), *Attack & Release* (2008)

What The Black Keys Says: In response to being called sellouts, the band says they'll license fewer songs on the new album. Drummer Patrick Carney says, "Once you start selling records, you can't really justify having two songs in Cadillac commercials. It looks greedy. And it is."

Explore: The band's offbeat humor is evident in the "Lonely Boy" video— www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_426RiwST8. The Black Keys don't stream music on sites such as Spotify.

CHRISTIAN MUSIC



THE FRAY

Background: This crossover rock band started when three members met while leading worship at their Christian school in Denver. Epic Records eventually signed them. The Fray's debut went double-platinum, and they were #84 on Billboard's Artists of the Decade list. Many of their songs have been on TV shows and in movies.

Albums: *Scars and Stories* (2011), *The Fray* (2009), *How to Save a Life* (2005)

What The Fray Says: Of the new album's title, singer Isaac Slade says, "We've been through a lot of stuff personally, and as a band we're still together.... We like the idea of scars...because they're healed. ... They're still kind of a road map of where [you've] been, and sometimes kinda point to where you want to go."

Explore: You can listen to their albums on Spotify and can download "Heartbeat" at www.thefray.com.

MOVIES

Movie: *Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance*

Genre: Action Adventure

Rating: PG-13 (for intense sequences of action and violence, some disturbing images, and language)

Synopsis: Nicolas Cage returns as the devil's bounty hunter. He must embrace his new role to save a young boy from Satan.

Our Take: The first movie was terribly written and terribly acted but made tons of money—so here's the sequel! The film will likely offer muddled, inaccurate theology hiding in over-the-top action.

Movie: *Gone*

Genre: Thriller (for violence and terror, some sexual material, brief language and drug references)

Rating: PG-13

Synopsis: Jill, who escaped a kidnapper a year ago, comes home to find her sister gone. She sets out to rescue her sister and bring down the man who's responsible.

Our Take: Many books and movies now feature empowered girls who kick butt. This film may whet people's appetite before *Hunger Games* hits theaters in March.

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VIDEO GAME



SSX—EA reboots its hugely popular snowboard franchise this month. Players will tackle some of the craziest mountains in the world with big tricks, helicopter drops, and avalanches to outrun. This game will be full of family-friendly fun. (PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360)

Mario Party 9—Speaking of family fun, *Mario Party 9* provides a bunch of different games to play together—some competitive and some cooperative. This game will also work great in a youth ministry setting. (Wii)