

Comebacks

HOW TO GET BACK UP AFTER
LIFE KNOCKS YOU DOWN

by *Dion Garrett*

Why Me?

“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33b).

“In this world you will have trouble ...” now *that’s* an understatement. Even in my relatively pampered, North American life, I am constantly amazed at how trouble-filled life is. There are the obvious things: chronic diseases, car accidents, storms, earthquakes, crazies who commit acts of mass violence. And if all that wasn’t enough, you add in the complexities of human relationships—things like betrayal and dishonesty. Then mix in things like bankruptcy, foreclosure and markets that can gobble up in a night half of what you’ve been able to scrimp, save and put away, and I think Jesus nails it—although in a pretty nonchalant way—that, yes, in this world *we will have trouble*.

Now, if you’re one of the few people reading this who is *not* nodding along in affirmation of how dead-on truthful Jesus’ statement is, here’s my advice to you: just wait. Trouble will find you. And when it does, you will likely ask the question that every person who has ever drawn breath asks when such trouble comes: “Why me?”

“Why me?” is a loaded question. It comes packed with emotions like confusion and shock, loneliness and betrayal. It’s also loaded with assumptions, namely, assumptions that what’s happening to you is unique. It assumes God is singling you out, punishing you, or displeased with you. And I guess I see how you could think that’s true, until you start to look around and notice the muffled cries of people every day, who are embroiled in their own epic battles.

There’s a funeral home about a mile from my house, which means I drive by it a lot. It’s crazy to me that nearly every day I drive by, the parking lot is full. Most days it blends in with all the other packed parking lots of the shopping centers around it, so I don’t stop to consider what it means. Every once in a while when driving by I look at those cars. It’s then the reality of what’s going on in there comes crashing in. As I’m heading to work, picking up the kids, or grabbing a cup of coffee with a friend, that is, doing the normal stuff of life, someone else’s world is spinning. Someone else is trying to figure out how she will face tomorrow. Someone else is wondering if he’ll ever feel normal again. *Someone else*. Every day in my community someone else’s life is turned upside down. *Every day*. But until it’s *me*, until it’s *my day*, I live as though the world is full of gumdrops, rainbows and pony rides. I don’t live in the *real world* where suffering is a universal part of the human experience.

Maybe you’re reading this because it’s *your day*; trouble has visited you, and you are trying to figure out how you will ever move forward. Or maybe everything is rosy for you, and you’re only reading this because someone recycled all your usual bathroom reading material, and this is all you can find. To those in the first group, please know you are not alone. At this very moment, there are millions of people grappling with the exact same kind of pain or loss you are dealing with.

The Divine Cry

Unless you're a "misery loves company" kind of person, maybe what I've said so far doesn't help you much. Please keep reading anyway. Every time we're tempted to ask, "Why me?" we should remember not only the universality of human suffering, but also recall the reality of *divine* suffering. Jesus, who spoke the warning, "In this world you will have trouble" was not excluding Himself from that omen. Even as He spoke these words to His followers, He was preparing Himself for complete betrayal by a close friend. This was then followed by total abandonment by everyone who mattered to Him. He was on a no-turning-back collision course with false accusations, torture and, ultimately, His own brutal death. Jesus spoke those words as a prophecy over His own future. He knew even *He* was headed for trouble.

For some reason that reality brings me great comfort. It should bring all of us comfort. It means God has not asked us to endure anything He Himself has not endured. It means He is intimately acquainted with suffering and loss. Jesus, the Son of God, the One through whom the world was made, the Crown-Prince of Heaven, experienced His own "Why Me?" moment, when He wept in a garden, begging His Father to consider writing a different ending to His tragic story. He voiced it again when He cried out from the cross, "My God, My God why have You forsaken Me?" Jesus understands trouble. So does His Father in Heaven. Think about it this way, God the Father had to watch as people He created and loved, turned on His beloved Son. There are few things more painful to witness as a parent than watching your kids hurt each other. Can you imagine the pain in the Father's heart as jealousy and hatred reached a hideous crescendo, and His own created people shed the blood of His only Son?

If God declared the universality of trouble for *everyone else* but allowed Himself to remain immune, He'd be justified in doing so, I guess. After all, He's God, He can do whatever He wants. But the fact He allowed pain to reach into the highest realms of heaven to pierce His own heart makes me love Him. He has joined us in our pain and understands it. We are not alone when we experience pain and loss, God has been there. God is still there, standing with us and for us.

Knocked Down or Knocked Out?

So by now, hopefully, you're convinced that when life sucker-punches you, it's nothing personal. We will all have troubles in this world; it's only a matter of when. Now let's go further. I believe we can agree on at least one other thing. Although trouble visits all of us, there is something *different* about the way that trouble *leaves* each of us. Have you ever noticed this? Trouble can visit two people in nearly identical ways, and one person emerges bruised but not broken, arguably stronger than before, while the other pulls down the shades, dims the lights, and retreats into endless grief. In other words, **while trouble finds all of us, only some of us seem to be able to comeback from it.** I'm convinced spending time and energy trying to figure out why trouble comes to us doesn't help anyone. Those who are truly wise will instead devote themselves to another question: **What's the difference between those who experience trouble and grow through it and those who are crushed by it?**

Before we dive into that question here's one other observation: I've noticed that *everyone* loves a comeback story. Whether it's Batman mending himself after the villain Bane nearly destroys him or an Olympic athlete who overcomes a tragic childhood or a devastating accident, our ears perk up when we hear a comeback story. There's something universally appealing about them. I'm not sure why we do, except that maybe we're all a bunch of drama hounds, but I have a theory. Maybe God planted the love of a comeback story deep in all of us because that's ultimately Jesus' story, when He *came back* from the grave on Easter. Never has a greater comeback happened in history. Jesus actually came back from the defeat of death—victorious. To take it a step further, maybe God planted the love of a comeback story deep in all of us, not only to prepare us for Jesus' comeback, but also to prepare us for the day when we'd need to make one.

Getting back to the question at hand: what's the difference between those who experience trouble and grow through it and those who are crushed by it? Let me be clear, I don't think there's any inborn difference. It's not as if some people are born stronger and more able to come back after trouble knocks them around. If there is any such difference, it's marginal at best. In my experience, people who are able to make comebacks are people who know something about life and about God. But what they know is no real secret; it's hidden in plain sight.

The Open Secret

In Mark 4, a guy by the name of Peter recounts a very memorable life event. He was a follower of Jesus, one of the 12 who were closest to Him. Later on in life his friend Mark wrote down this account as a lasting witness to what Peter had experienced with Jesus. We now know it as the Gospel of Mark. This event was one of the many events in Peter's life, convincing him that Jesus was more than a man, even more than a prophet. The proof became so compelling for Peter that he spent the rest of his life telling a skeptical world about Jesus.

The scene is the Sea of Galilee, which is really more like a large lake, and Jesus and His disciples are in a boat in the middle of it. Remember, we're talking about a lake here, so when a fierce storm comes up, the disciples (many of whom were no strangers to life in a boat) are caught completely off guard, and they begin to fear for their lives. Jesus, on the other hand, is snoring in the back of the boat. The disciples are outraged about this, which only confirms a hard lesson I myself have learned: *in a crisis, no one appreciates the calm guy.*

You think it'd be nice to have a level-headed person in the group while everyone is freaking out. *Nope!* If you're a calm person by nature, here's my advice. Take some acting lessons, so you can join in the hysteria when trouble comes. It'll extend the life of your relationships.

Jesus was apparently beyond taking acting lessons, so He remained in the boat, asleep. And Mark 4:38 says how the disciples responded.

“Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke Him and said to Him, ‘Teacher, don’t You care if we drown?’” (Mark 4:38).

Did you catch that? “Teacher, don’t You care?” We’re all tempted to go there when trouble visits. We automatically assume God doesn’t care. **We doubt God’s character.**

Rather than assuming Jesus’ nap was the same as Him saying, “Hey guys, not to worry. Everything will turn out okay! I’m not even gonna lose sleep over this.” The disciples assumed the worst about Jesus—that He didn’t care. By the way, I get it. I understand how hard it is not to go there when you’re frightened, in danger, or in pain. At the same time, you can’t let yourself stay there because you’ll never be able to make a comeback from there.

When trouble comes it’s automatic to begin to question God, to doubt Him. That’s because of a string of faulty assumptions, i.e. bad logic, which goes something like this: if God is all-powerful and all-loving, then He would never let me endure hard things like this. Therefore, I am either unloved, or God is unloving. A few of us might also assume God is weak, but in my experience that’s not many of us. Most of us get angry with God because we believe He *could’ve* done something to help and He chose not to. “Teacher don’t You care?” This is a dark, dead-end road. Whenever trouble visits us, we all start down this road initially, but it’s those who remain on it who end up in “Despairsville.” If you don’t know about Despairsville let me tell you, it’s a place few ever leave, even though it’s a terrible place to visit.

On the flip side, there are others who start down this road, and they later do a U-turn. These people understand what the disciples didn’t understand in the boat that day (although later on Peter learned it). In spite of their troubles, they understand that

1. God never promised us a life without trouble;
2. God can bring redemptive value out of even the most senseless difficulties we endure;
3. God is always *good* to those who love Him.

The Fairy Tale of a Trouble-Free Life

Let’s break those down. We’ve already talked extensively about Jesus’ promise of a life of trouble; I just want to add one more thing. Even though we know trouble is universal, we all tend to live life with a false sense of security, believing in a life that has not been promised to us. A few years ago, a friend of mine from a solid, deep, Christ-loving, Christ-honoring family, lost his 18-year-old daughter. It was a senseless car accident. No one was drunk; no one was particularly negligent. It was an *accident* and yet that accident took a beautiful life. I grieved that loss more deeply than any other loss I can remember. I was absolutely broken about it. Then, a few days into that journey into grief, I realized something profound. I was only partially grieving for them, the rest was for me. I was grieving the loss of the make-believe world I had created where the kids of Christ-honoring families didn’t die in car accidents. I was grieving ahead of time for the trouble that may yet happen in my own family, to my own children.

If you still believe you are entitled, because of your faith, your goodness, your good looks or anything else, to a trouble-free life, the sooner you put that fairy tale to death, the better. In this world *you will have trouble*. Stop believing that God has promised you anything better.

Lately, as I tuck my kids into bed each night, I’ve begun to realize there could be great trouble awaiting us when the sun comes up. I don’t fear it. I don’t worry about it, but I acknowledge it. Then I say a prayer of thanks to God for the *abnormal* day we’ve enjoyed—a day without trouble.

No, I'm not depressed. And although some people who know me might call me cynical, I don't believe I am that either. I'm simply living under a new understanding of how life works. God has not promised me a life without trouble. Instead, He is teaching me how to "take heart," even as I'm experiencing trouble, because He has overcome. People who make comebacks, they seem to know this. They either learned it before trouble ever visited them, or they learned it along the way. Regardless, they know it! And that makes a tremendous difference.

Redeeming Trouble

About the time I was putting to death my fairy tale of a trouble-free life, I started noticing something in my prayers that disturbed me. When it came to praying for people I love, all of my prayers were prayers of *protection*.

Now prayers for protection are not without precedent (see John 17:11-15); still, I realized that's *all* I was ever praying for. Then I thought back on my own life. I didn't experience anything close to a trouble-free life as a kid. In fact, back when my wife was just my girlfriend, I used to get a kick out of sharing true stories from my semi-tragic childhood with her. Her eyes would get big and well up with tears and she'd say things like, "You poor thing!" and then she'd throw her arms around me. It might have been a *little bit* manipulative, I'll admit, but in romance a guy has to leverage whatever he has to work with.

Still, as I reflect on the numerous troubles I experienced in my life, I repeatedly come to two strong conclusions:

1. God isn't the source of my troubles. The source is usually bad decisions, selfish behavior, or the result of human brokenness.
2. God nevertheless *uses* those troubles to form me.

Now as an adult I try to imagine my life without all the garbage I experienced growing up, and I can't fathom it. A man named Joseph summed it up well when he faced his brothers, who had brought unimaginable trouble into his life. He said, "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). In Joseph's tragic life and in our own tragedies, we can know that when bad things happen, God isn't to blame. Yet, if we trust Him, He can *use* those things for unimaginable good.

You've heard comeback stories that testify to this. A mom who lost her son in a drunk-driving accident creates an advocacy organization that saves millions of other parents from the same grief. A girl rescued from the sex-trade in Cambodia uses her life to help hundreds of young women have hope and a future. You'd never blame God for the trouble, but you can see how God *uses* the trouble, he *redeems the trouble*, and accomplishes good in spite of it.

Can you believe that about your life? Can you hold these two ideas in tension—that God is not the *source* of your trouble, and yet He can *use* your present troubles to form you?

Here's a word of caution for those of you trying to help someone else make a comeback. One of my pet peeves is when well-meaning Christians say to someone in the wake of tragedy, "Everything happens for a reason!" If you've said that recently, don't be too hard on yourself; I'm sure I've said it at some point too. But if you never say it again you're doing everyone a favor. Everything does not happen for a reason. We live in a world tainted by the evils of sin and death. There is a harsh randomness to sin that is cruelly *unreasonable*. And yet, God is infinitely good. Cruelty and randomness are no match for Him. These ideas must be held in tension. God does not cause our troubles, but He can dramatically change the effects troubles bring to our lives.

I'm currently in a trouble-free season of life. As badly as I want this season to last forever for me and, especially, for my kids, I understand that without trouble there's little chance of formation. The Bible talks about this repeatedly.

"My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline, and do not resent His rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those He loves, as a father the son he delights in" (Proverbs 3:11-12).

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2-4).

"In all 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 the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Peter 1:6-7).

So now I've changed the way I pray for my kids and even myself. I pray for *formation* instead of *protection*. I'd be lying to you if I said I no longer pray any protection prayers, but now in my heart I have it settled that if I could have one thing for my loved ones and me it would be God's forming hand in our lives, even at the expense of protection. That also means that God will probably have to *allow* (not *cause*) trouble, and I'm learning to be okay with that too because I know Jesus has overcome the world. Therefore, trouble never gets the final word. God has taken trouble, and He makes it work for Him now. God is not the cause, but He changes the effect from that which would crush us, into that which will form us. If you want to be resilient in life, if you want to be the kind of person who makes comebacks, you've *got* to know this truth too.

A God Who Is Good

Once you debunk the fairy tale of a trouble-free life and you accept how God uses trouble (not causes) for establishing good things in your life, you'll have an easier time believing God is good, even when life isn't so good.

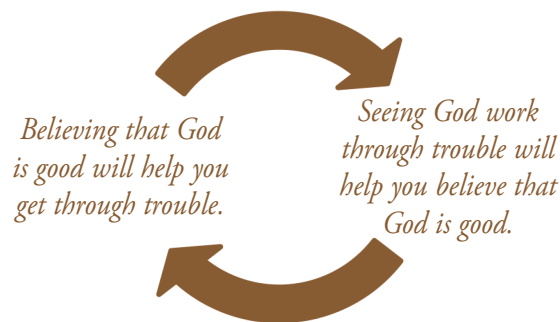
Let's go back to the disciples in the boat. After accusing Jesus of not caring about them (i.e. not being a very "good" leader), Jesus stands up, speaks authoritatively to the wind and waves, and immediately they die down. Then He turns to His disciples with an all-important question: "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" Mark says they were even more terrified now, and they asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey Him!" (See Mark 4:40-41.)

The disciples were freaked out by Jesus' power. It was like nothing they had ever seen. Suddenly, the boat felt a lot smaller. Now they knew this "teacher" was more powerful than anyone they had ever known, and that was terrifying.

But it was only half the lesson. Jesus wasn't just *flexing* to show off; He was answering their indictment against Him: "Teacher, don't You care?" Of course, He cares, more than they would ever know! But they sure did struggle to see it. Even as He showed them the ultimate demonstration of His love on that Friday we will forever call, "Good," they still didn't get the point of this Teacher's biggest lesson ... that He is good! He cares!

Although it took them a while to see it, the disciples eventually learned this lesson. Ironically, once they learned how good Jesus is, that's when the trouble really started. Because they trusted in Jesus and wanted to share Him with everyone around them, they began to be persecuted. Trouble started to make prolonged and repeated visits in their lives. Yet, instead of despairing, the disciples were more convinced of Jesus' (and, by extension, the Father's) goodness than ever before.

It takes faith to believe God is good, even when life is far from good. It takes deep heroic faith—the kind that can only be given by the Holy Spirit (see Luke 11:13). But when you begin to trust God's goodness in the middle of trouble, that's when an incredible cycle begins to unfold.



It becomes a great, reinforcing cycle. The more you **TRUST** in God's goodness in the midst of hardship, the more you will be able to see His goodness at work, which enables you to trust even more in His goodness, etc.

But here's the deal, you have to begin somewhere. **You have to make a decision to trust that God is good, no matter what.** This is different than making a decision to believe that Jesus is Lord or that Jesus is your Savior; God has to bring you to that. This is a choice you are empowered to make *after* you've come to know Jesus. It's a decision to trust He is good even when everything around you seems to be screaming the opposite, and then to sit back and watch as He *shows you His* goodness.

Whenever you face suffering or deal with hopelessness, let it drive you to Jesus' cross. Seeing Him suffering and dying for your good, and rising victoriously from the dead will put you on the cycle of seeing God work through trouble to convince you He is good. Or as He promises in Psalm 50:15, "Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me."

Can God show you His goodness even if you're not looking for it? Of course! But when we're not looking for it, it's too easy to miss. If the disciples had already figured out this truth about God's goodness as the storm enveloped their boat that day, it would've been a lot easier to wait on Jesus expectantly, instead of waking Him up in a panic. The people you know in life who have made comeback after comeback, the people who have endured unimaginable things and have not only survived, but thrived, they are the people who have learned to **trust in God's goodness, no matter what.**

And here's a quick tip to get you started if you're having a hard time on this one. No matter how bad things might be right now, start looking for signs of God's goodness today. Write down ten signs of God's kindness every day, no matter how small they are. Once you start trying to see them, you'll notice there are a lot of them.

It's Time to Come Back

The most difficult part of your comeback still lies ahead. These words won't magically make everything better, although I wish they could. Before you ask for your money back let me reassure you that reading this hasn't been a complete waste of time. Understanding what's been written here is a great start. But the difficult part comes next: putting these words into practice. Jesus once said, "Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock" (Matthew 7:24). Ultimately, you have to act. You have to do what every fighter who has ever been knocked *down* but not *out* has done; you have to pick yourself up off the mat. No matter how exhausting and painful, you have to get your legs firmly beneath you and begin to stand on something solid. Depending on what you're facing it may sound impossible, but you are not alone. There are people all over the world who are also making the choice to get up after life has knocked them down. Join them! Begin making your comeback. But here's your secret weapon: right now, right there with you, Jesus is present. He cares. He's good. He knows what it's like to be knocked down, and He has shown the world that He has the power to rise.

Practical Next Steps

Here are a few practical suggestions on how to begin your own comeback based on what's written here. These aren't exhaustive, but they should help get you started.

1. God never promised us a life without trouble.
 - a. Give thanks to God for days without trouble, realizing how special they are.
 - b. Support those in the world who are living through great hardships right now by volunteering to help them, praying for them, and/or giving financially to bring them relief.
 - c. Read through the Gospels, especially the latter parts, to remind yourself that you are not alone; God is no stranger to trouble.
 - d. Join a support group of people who are going through similar troubles; the more you realize you are not alone, the better.
2. God can bring redemptive value out of even the most senseless troubles we endure.
 - a. Think about past troubles and how God used them (not caused them) to form you. Try writing them out.
 - b. Start praying more prayers of *formation* than you do prayers of *protection*.
 - c. Read biographies of people like the Dutch Christian Corrie ten Boom, missionary Jim Elliot, or other inspiring figures who were shaped by their troubles.
3. God is always *good* to those who love Him.
 - a. Keep a gratitude journal of the ways God is showing you His goodness, no matter how tiny.
 - b. Read stories of God's goodness to others. The book of Psalms is a great place to start, so are the early parts of Gospels where Jesus cares for people who are hurting.

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