

Getting Up Again and Again

Second Corinthians 1:3-6; Proverbs 24:16

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Recently, my husband and I had a chance to watch a film entitled *Les Miserables*, actually on his birthday. I recall reading this novel by Victor Hugo when I was a high school student, but had forgotten most of it. Many of you may be familiar with this classic novel in world literature.

It is a story about a man called Jean Valjean in the social background of 19th century France. When Jean Valjean was still a small boy, he was extremely poor. Hungry, one day he was not able to resist stealing a piece of bread from a store. Because of this petty crime, he was caught and put to jail for 20 long years. He practically spent his entire youth days under the worst condition of being deprived from all his human dignity. While in prison, all he learned were stealing, deceiving, betraying, and things of this sort from other inmates. When he was released from prison on probation, he found himself nowhere to go, no money to buy food, and no job to live by.

He went into a monastery to solicit some food and lodging. The superior of the monastery took him in and prepared a good meal for him. But at night, Jean Valjean tried to steal some silver spoons from the monastery. Found at the scene of the crime by the superior, Jean Valjean knocked him down and ran away with the silver spoons. Soon he was caught by policemen who brought him back to the monastery to prove his theft to the superior. Jean Valjean knew he was going to be sent back to jail.

But to his great surprise, the superior told the policemen that he gave Jean Valjean the silver spoons. Seeing Jean Valjean in the hands of policemen, the superior of the monastery said to Jean in a loud voice, "Why didn't you take the silver candle stands too? I promised to give you candle stands as well, didn't I?" Saying this, the superior put silver candle stands in Jean's bag. Seeing this, the policemen freed Jean and left the place. When they were gone,

the superior said to Jean, "I ransomed you from the hands of evil with silver, so now you belong to God." This was the moment when the light of God was lit in the heart of Jean Valjean. That light continued to shine for the rest of his life.

About ten years later, Jean Valjean by the providence of God became a mayor of a small town in France and was greatly respected by its citizens. He was a kind mayor who did everything he could for those who are in need, especially for the oppressed, the weak, and the jobless, such as peasants, prostitutes, and orphans. But trouble began when one day a new chief of the police station was dispatched to his town. It so happened that he knew Jean Valjean in the jail long time ago. He began to find opportunities to bring a charge against him, being a convict before and now a mayor of the town.

Because the new chief police officer persistently tried to expose his past and seek his downfall, Jean Valjean forsook his mayoral position, but continued to live giving love to the needy. He even adopted an orphan girl whose mother lived and died miserably, because of poverty.

Being branded as a fugitive criminal, Jean Valjean goes through all kinds of trials and life dangers. However, amidst all these circumstances he continued to live a life of love and mercy. Overthrown by the evil intention of the chief police officer many times, Jean Valjean gets up again and again from despair. His life was a series of falling down and getting up.

The climax of the story is very impressive, where the chief police officer withdrew himself from his objective, knowing the futility of his pursuit because of the love brought forth from the life of Jean Valjean. Thus Jean was finally liberated from the bondage of his accusers. It was a victory of love. The quiet smile on the face of Jean was filled with the comfort of God after so many years of deep agony.

The Scriptures teaches us that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ is the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, and the same God comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God (2 Corinthians 1:4). The Scripture also tells us that a righteous person falls seven times, but that

person rises again (Proverbs 24:16). In our lives, we have all kinds of trials and failures. But our life is not meant to be crushed with misery. Just like Jean Valjean who got up again and again each time he fell, we are meant to rise up each time we fall. Such life is full of excitement because it testifies that God comforts us in all our troubles.

I would like to focus particularly on two characters that appear in the Bible today: one is prophet Elijah, and the other is a woman named Hagar, the maidservant of Sarah, the wife of Abraham.

First let us look at the life of Elijah. When he received a call from God, he immediately and courageously brought forth the Word of God to King Ahab to correct his practices. But knowing that his life was in danger as threatened by Queen Jezebel, Elijah got very afraid and ran away for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, and traveled a day journey into the desert. Elijah came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. Elijah said to the Lord, "I have had enough, Lord. Take my life: I am no better than my ancestors" (1 Kings 19:4).

If we imagine the feeling of Elijah when he said these words, we can perhaps interpret him in the following way: "No one is on my side anymore. All my efforts are in vain. I have no hope. I want to die." Elijah got desperate and perhaps had the feeling of accusing God for calling him to do all those things against the king. He lost all his energy to do anything. He felt alone and was therefore hopeless.

How about the life of Hagar, the maidservant of Sarah, the wife of Abraham? Hagar was definitely in a disadvantaged position of being a maidservant. And because she gave birth to a child for Abraham, which was an intention of Sarah, her master, and not hers, Hagar was expelled from their home with her child, Ishmael. The Bible says that Hagar was given some food and a skin of water and sent off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the desert of Beersheba, the same area where many years later the prophet Elijah also wandered. When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went off and sat down nearby, about a bowshot away. Hagar thought, "I can not watch the boy die." As she

sat there nearby, she began to cry. Hagar was in desperation because of grief to have to see her child die.

These two characters, Elijah and Hagar, were in two different situations of life, but they were both facing a similar kind of feeling, a feeling of desperation and loss of strength to live and loss of hope.

But the Scriptures are filled with promises. Psalm 37:24 says, "Though he stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand." Second Corinthians 1:4 says, "God comforts us in all our troubles".

Just as these Scripture passages promise, an angel of the Lord touched Elijah and said to him, et up and eat. Elijah looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then laid down again. The angel of the Lord came back the second time and touched him and said, et up and eat, for the journey is too much for you. Elijah got up and ate and drank what the angel provided. Strengthened by that food, Elijah traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, also called the mountain of God. Strengthened and comforted by the provisions and the Word of God, he was restored in strength and energy, thus going on to work for the Lord to bring God message to his people and kings.

In the case of Hagar as well, God did not leave her nor forsake her. God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid: God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation." God's words to Hagar were full of tenderness and comfort. Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water nearby. Ishmael grew up to be a man and Hagar got a wife for him from Egypt.

From these two characters, we can learn three things about life difficulties:

1. In many cases people lose hope and strength to live on emotional level, and emotion has a lot to do with interpersonal relationships. In the case of Elijah, the hatred and anger of Queen Jezebel against him tortured him

emotionally as well as physically. In the case of Hagar, the jealousy and irritation of her master, Sarah, cornered her into despair.

2. Different people react against sufferings of life in different ways. Reactions vary depending on inherent personality, difference of gender, age, degree of physical health, and cultural background and so forth. Elijah was perhaps a very serious type of person with introvertive character. He blames himself so much so that he wants to end his life. Hiding in a cave seems to indicate his introvertive tendency. He applied himself with his whole heart to serve the Lord and burned himself up physically and emotionally.

In contrast to him, Hagar seems to be more extrovertive. She may have been a little bit ambitious. She was unbending and when she got pregnant with a child of Abraham, she became arrogant toward her master, Sarah. When her son, Ishmael, was making fun of Isaac, the son of Sarah with Abraham, Hagar did not seem to mind it. Hagar may have wanted his son Ishmael to be an inheritor like Isaac to the house of Abraham. But when she was at her breaking point in life, she cried in a loud voice.

3. God extends His hands of help according to the specific needs of the specific people regardless of their position in life or their degree of faith. God did not give more help to prophet Elijah because he was a prophet, nor did God overlook the agony of maidservant Hagar because she was a maidservant. God gives necessary help and comfort to each person according to his or her needs at the right time in order to encourage them. God does not show favoritism. To Elijah who was burned out and had lost confidence in the work of God, the Lord first tried to recover his physical strength by giving him fresh baked bread and water and words of encouragement. To Hagar who was at the peak of her anxiety about the life of her son, God gave her words of assurance and comfort that the Lord himself is going to save him.

We also sometimes in our daily living experience desperation. It may be due to interpersonal relationships, or due to economic constraints, or it may be spiritual, physical or social problems. Even our past traumatic experience may haunt us and force us to fall down. But let us remember: "Though a righteous person falls seven times, he rises again"(Proverbs 24:16), and

"Though he stumbles, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand." (Psalm 37:24).

Though we are not be able to rise up on our own strength, we can rise up again when there is the strong hand to support. God shows no favoritism. He helps and upholds us in the best way at the right time, so that we can rise up again.

Believing God does not mean that things will go just the way we want them to, nor does it mean that we pray for such end. Rather, believing in God means that in the events of life that God gives, we do not get crushed with misery but get up again and again by the special comfort and help that comes from God. It means believing that God works everything for good to those who love Him.

Though you may fall seven times, you still rise up eight times, because you have faith in God. And only those who have experienced such fallings and rising ups in life truly understand the hurts and sorrows of other people. And people receive comfort just by being with those persons. The person who rises up again and again will be able to help others to rise up also. We are earthen vessels. We are weak and fragile. But God chooses those who are weak and reveals His glory to them.

"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" (2 Corinthians 1:3-4), or "Though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again" (Proverbs 24:16).

Let us pray:

Our Loving Lord, thank you for giving us faith in You. Guide us so that we can walk our lives with certainty. Help us to live believing that You make everything for good whether in prosperity or in adversity. May we remember the promise that You will uphold us when we fall. Strengthen the muscle of our personality by getting up again and again by Your Word, so that we may be able to give comfort to those who are in adversity of life. And above all may we know for certain the promise given in the Scriptures,

"Though he stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand"
(Psalm 37:24).

In Christ name we pray, Amen.