

I Didn't
Sign Up
for This

FINDING HOPE
WHEN EVERYTHING
IS GOING WRONG

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Revell

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

ISBN 978-0-8007-2807-6

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17 18 19 20 21 22 23 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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With gratitude this book is dedicated to
Bruce and Hazel Larson,
whose relentless encouragement and grace
helped me experience life as a great adventure
regardless of circumstances.
Among the many lessons they taught me
is that truth is a person, faith is a verb,
and relationships matter.

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Acknowledgments

I am grateful for all the people whose lives in one way or another have contributed to the writing of this book. When *Getting Past What You'll Never Get Over* was published, I was surprised by the kind response of readers who wrote and shared their own stories of struggle and growth while going through hard and often unfair experiences. Their courage and faith were inspiring and gave me hope for the journey.

I am fortunate to have a collection of friends who encourage me regularly. Special thanks to Larry Stone, David Doherty, Bob Marlowe, Richard Merte, Sheila Gustafson, Chris Fulkerson, Randy Toms, Jane Knickerbocker, David Shiesser, Susie Weber, Sam Beler, Scott Tapp, John Ware, Pam Proske, David Pardee, Baron Schaaf, and John Berg.

Thanks to Lonnie Hull-DuPont, who is a brilliant editor, kind friend, gifted author, and fascinating person. Thanks for your gifts of affirmation and encouragement.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to my friends at Harbor Church in Seattle. We began in a home, moved to a pizza parlor, and grew in an old dance hall, and we know God isn't finished with us yet. You are my church family, and I'm grateful for your partnership in ministry.

Finally, I thank my family, who has hung in with me in joy and sorrow. Eileen and Damian never give up and never let me give up. Their love helps me find hope when everything's going wrong, and we have a lot of joy along the way.

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I Didn't Sign Up for This

An adventure is only an inconvenience rightly considered. An inconvenience is only an adventure wrongly considered.

G. K. Chesterton

Where did my life go wrong? Did it just sort of meander off track until I got stuck in the proverbial mud? Or was everything going great until someone or something caused me to crash and burn? I don't know, but however I got here, I'm sure of two things: this is not the way I thought my life would be, and I didn't sign up for this.

Do you ever get to the point where you know if there is just one more setback you might lose it? I think back on times when I just wanted to pound the table in frustration because

nothing seemed to work out the way I hoped. There are times in our lives when we can try to make good decisions, be responsible, take action, put things right, make amends, and choose wisely. Yet all our efforts and well-meaning intentions don't seem to make any difference.

The other night I was feeling nostalgic and I like old movies, so I started to watch *The Fugitive*. One of my favorite scenes involves a train that collides with a bus transporting prisoners and suddenly goes off the rails. First the engine, then one train car after another crashes and smashes as the train breaks apart, destroying everything in its way. In the movie, the crash lasts only a few seconds, but it seems to go on and on. Just when I think the crash can't get worse, it does, as more train cars smash into the pile of wreckage.

The film's portrayal of the train wreck got me thinking about some painful experiences that had left me feeling as if I had experienced a personal train wreck deep inside. These feelings come when, unexpectedly, our lives derail and we find ourselves in a seemingly never-ending deluge of problems, pain, and personal disasters.

In business and science, this situation is often referred to as the cascade effect. One small and seemingly insignificant thing occurs that triggers something else, which brings about still more responses until we find ourselves cascading like a waterfall toward the rocks below.

As I was eating lunch with a friend I hadn't seen in several years, I listened to him share some of the personal journey he had been on. The last time we had been together, honestly, I had been a little jealous. He was a great person. He was handsome and fit—a natural athlete with a beautiful

wife and three marvelous kids. His business was thriving, giving him stock options and money that were far beyond my dreams. He had a growing faith in Jesus and was active in community and church events. To me, it seemed he had it all. What could possibly go wrong?

While I ate my Reuben sandwich, he shared some of his own cascade effect. He talked of choices that were bad, mistakes that were costly, and regrets that still haunted him. Investments that went sideways cost him a lot of the money. He told how pride caused him to drift away from his faith and how he began to pull away from people who cared for him. While the cancer diagnosis he received helped him refocus, it probably wasn't going to be enough to save his marriage, as his wife announced she didn't want to be married to him any longer.

Now he faced the reality of trying to reestablish his career, be a single parent, and battle the disease that was growing in his body. All without the love and support of the wife he hoped wouldn't leave. Suddenly, he pounded his fists on the table and exclaimed, "I don't want this! I don't want this!"

It's easy to look back and wonder what happened to our "other" life. Where would we be today if this hadn't happened or that would have happened or if we had made a different choice along the way? Would we be better off? Would our lives be noticeably better? Perhaps. Yet ultimately, it doesn't matter.

Whether our lives are filled with celebrations or marred by regrets, our stories are still our own stories, and ultimately,

they are gifts to us and from us to those with whom we choose to share them. When we choose to value only the good experiences, remember only the victories, and celebrate only the blessings, our lives end up lacking balance and depth of character.

Perhaps this is one reason the Bible encourages people to “give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thess. 5:18). It is fairly easy for me to be thankful during the wonderful circumstances I’ve experienced, but it is not so easy to stay thankful during the painful, sad, and disorienting experiences. We are not told to give thanks *for* all circumstances, but we can willfully choose thankfulness not merely in difficult times but especially in difficult times.

As we begin to lay claim to all of life, owning our failures and successes, our heartbreaks and our celebrations, we can discover a new freedom that is rooted in the acceptance of our whole selves. More importantly, we can recognize that we are unique, unrepeatable miracles and that our lives, with all their ups and downs, are gifts from God that are valuable and matter very much.

In my own experience, I have found a tension at work within me. One side of me wants to appear as if I have a certain level of success, my life is fairly good, I’m surrounded by people who are respected and comfortable in their lifestyles, achievements along the way have helped me to be happy, and I pretty much have it all together. Yet the other side of me reminds me of disappointments, hurts, failures, betrayals, and insecurities that seem to know no end. I also share a common fear that I’ll be found out, that people will discover I am not who I appear to be but am

covering up my real self and pretending to be a better person than I really am.

I lived many years under the shadow of a great misunderstanding. I don't know how I got this idea or where it came from, but I believed that as soon as I got my life all together and was successful, the adventure would begin. I thought that when I worked through these problems and fixed those issues and resolved some conflicts and settled some troublesome relationship struggles and met my established goals and experienced a comfortable, prosperous, trouble-free life, then the adventure would begin. Then I could step out in faith following Jesus, living abundantly, and being a good example for others all because I had everything under control and problems had been taken care of.

Do you know how long I waited to start living confidently, untroubled by problems and cares, following Christ in faith on a great adventure? I wasted so many years! Until one afternoon my friend Bruce Larson pointed out that if I was waiting to step out in faith until I had resolved everything and gotten my life fixed up and running smoothly, I would completely miss out on what God wanted to do in and through me. He helped me see that if I had everything together, I didn't need faith. I began to see that we need to let Jesus be Lord of our entire lives and trust him with our struggles and successes in order to experience life as a great adventure.

Paul, writing in 2 Corinthians 6, provides an intriguing example for us. He had started the church in Corinth and helped them through his letters as he traveled and taught in many other cities. Evidently, in his absence, some had tried to undermine his character through rumor and falsehood,

to the extent that he now sought to commend himself to them and not let his ministry be discredited. Of course, what discredits a ministry more than presenting an image on the surface that is shown to be false when the reality under the surface is exposed?

He writes in verse 4, “Rather . . . we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger.”

Reading this, I wonder how his examples can possibly make a good impression. I'm not sure I would be that open on a job application or a marriage proposal or any time I wanted people to like me.

But Paul keeps going in verses 5–10:

in purity, understanding, patience, and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as imposters; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor yet making many rich; having nothing, yet possessing everything.

This passage startles me with its incredible honesty. I wonder if I have the courage to be that honest when talking about the events in my life.

Paul appears to be saying that if we are to really see his life, we need to consider all of it: difficulties and virtues all thrown together. We don't have to be ashamed or hide parts

of ourselves or pretend some things aren't there. We can be confident because Christ meets us in our entirety and uses all the parts, not just the parts we would like to feature in order to show ourselves in the best light.

This feels a little radical to me as I look back to the way I was raised. For me, there was always a sense that wherever I was, whoever I was with, I probably didn't belong. This feeling was particularly strong when I went to church. It seemed to me, from my perspective as a child, that everyone was so wholesome.

My friends seemed to come from loving, normal families and have parents who were successful, peaceful, and easygoing. They went to church or synagogue, their dads went to work, and their moms were fabulous cooks. I couldn't expose the truth that my mom didn't cook very well. As a kid, I even took over the cooking for a while just because I couldn't take it anymore. I got the food money each week, and whatever was left over I got to keep for my allowance. I soon figured out that tuna noodle casserole cost less than roast beef and was more profitable for me.

I also knew that our family didn't get along very well. We weren't soft-spoken or easygoing. There were actually lots of fights in our home. Some were between one or two family members, but some escalated into big, loud, and sometimes violent brawls involving kids and parents. I guess we were encouraged to be fairly "assertive."

But then we'd go to church and on the way be warned not to say anything or do anything that might reflect poorly on our family. When we got there, we'd pile out of the car and look around at the other families, who appeared to have no

problems at all. Maybe those early experiences taught me that it's better to pretend all is well and to try to appear good in order to fit in with all those people whose lives seem so much better and so much easier than my own.

Now when I read Paul's list of experiences, I'm encouraged that we don't have to pretend with each other; we can share honestly because we are loved by God regardless of who we are. Paul, writing to the church in Corinth, seems to tell them who he really is with all his giftedness and difficulties so that they can know him and accept him as a real person needing grace. Paul shares the truth of his life, letting them know he accepts the problems along with the blessings. His writing seems to indicate the bad experiences were not entirely unexpected. Possibly they weren't shocking to him, nor were they a shame for him to hide or ignore.

It appears that Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus was a trip that went completely out of his control. He began full of confidence and fury, sure of himself and his plan to stop the followers of Jesus even if it meant killing them. Then he had an experience with Jesus that stopped him in his tracks. Falling from his horse, he lay on the ground unable to see and not fully grasping the impact of his experience. He was then led into town, deeply disturbed, lost, blind, and needing the care and support of others perhaps for the first time in his life. Everything had gone wrong, and he probably had no idea how much his life would change now that the real adventure was about to begin.

Like many of us, Paul began his relationship with Jesus in a context of turmoil, pain, weakness, and shocking dependence. Why then would he assume the adventure of

faith would be any different? I'm impressed that his life and ministry continued to reflect some of the same chaos and adventure as his conversion. Perhaps Paul felt free to share honestly with the church in Corinth because this adventure was exactly what he had signed up for.

I'm reminded of a couple who came to see me. It had been many years since I had officiated at their wedding, and if we had taken a picture of the three of us that day, it would have been painfully obvious a lot of living had taken place between the wedding and our meeting. After a few minutes reminiscing about their wedding day, we began to share about our lives since that day.

They shared some of the experiences and life events that had shaped them so far. They longed to have children but had lost two babies midterm and were heartbroken. The wife told me of her health problems that seemed to never end. The husband had lost his job again, and they were worried about how they would survive with finances drying up much quicker than they had imagined. They were about to lose their home in foreclosure if something didn't come along soon.

Then right in the middle of our sharing, the husband looked at me with pain and frustration in his eyes and said, "You know, John, we did not sign up for this. This is definitely not the life we were expecting back on that day you married us."

In that moment, I felt so sad for them. I also felt a little guilty, thinking perhaps if I had been a better pastor I would have prepared them better to handle what lay ahead for them.

At first, I didn't know how to respond, but then I went over to my file cabinet and opened it to the folders I had kept of all the marriages I had performed along with some notes from the premarital counseling. I looked through the pages in their file.

“Wait a minute, according to my notes, you committed to love, cherish, and be faithful to each other in sickness and in health, in times of plenty and in times of want, in joy and in sorrow. You *did* sign up for this!” We all started to laugh, realizing how much we don't understand about life as we make commitments.

“Are you sure that as you said your wedding vows that day you weren't really saying, ‘I will love you only when I'm happy, wealthy, and well?’” Perhaps at times, we all think that in the back of our minds. Even when we do sign up for all of it, the good and bad of life, when we get the painful stuff, we don't want it. We want the pain to go away, and we might even consider giving up or just running away. This can happen in many situations, even in our relationships with God. We might start out enthusiastically committing to follow him through the ups and downs of life, living by faith and trusting him for whatever life brings. But then when difficulties surface and life is tough and painful and heartbreaking, we think, “This is not what I signed up for.”

So we walk away from the Lord, believing he let us down and wasn't there for us, otherwise life would have been less painful. But I am finding that at this point when everything goes wrong, we need the Lord more, and we need to know we aren't alone in the struggles. When the worst happens, I want us to be able to say, “I did sign up for this—and the Lord has promised to be with me through it all, even to the end.”