

**“God Won’t Give You More than You Can Handle”
OAK GROVE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

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1 Corinthians 10:1–13

Let us pray for the awareness and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Living God, help us so to hear your holy Word that we may truly understand; that, understanding, we may believe, and, believing, we may follow in all faithfulness, seeking your honor and glory in all we do; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ²and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³and all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. ⁵Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

⁶Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. ⁷Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.” ⁸We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. ⁹We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. ¹⁰And do not complain as some of them did and were destroyed by the destroyer. ¹¹These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. ¹²So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. ¹³No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful and will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but

with the testing God will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

As I mentioned last week, over the next several weeks this summer, we will focus on those sayings that we hear often, or maybe even utter ourselves, but may or may not be in the bible. This week we turn to the phrase “God won’t give you more than you can handle.”

This phrase, like several we will talk about this summer, are, I think, are well-intentioned and well-meaning attempts from people who don’t know what to say as others are facing difficulties or adversity. It’s hard to know what to say when people are suffering. We want to offer a word of encouragement.

When people say, “God won’t give you more than you can handle,” I think what most people are trying to say is something like, “I know things are tough right now, but I know you will make it through this. God will be with you.” It is an attempt to let the person know that things will be alright, and that God will see them through. But I believe the phrase, “God won’t give you more than you can handle,” is pretty problematic, and I would recommend that we think about it before we use it to encourage someone facing trouble, because I’m not sure it carries the intent we think it does, and it may not actually be all that helpful, and it’s not very biblical, although I can understand why people think it might be in the bible.

“God won’t give you more than you can handle,” seemingly derives from scripture. Most people cite 1 Corinthians 10:13 in this way. But doing so, I believe, both misquotes what Paul actually says, and misses the context in which he says it. Listen to what Paul says in verse 13. He writes, “No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful and will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but

with the testing God will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.”

The word that Paul uses in this verse can be understood as tested or tempted. And the people who take this verse to mean, “God won’t give you any more than you can handle,” I think, believe that tested is the best translation here, so that they are saying something to the effect of, “God won’t test you beyond your limits.” But if you look at the context of the passage, which is important for any interpretive work, it seems more plausible that Paul is talking about temptation and not testing.

Paul is writing to the church he formed in Corinth. Corinth was a large port city in Greece. It was a pluralistic and multicultural place. People from all over the world were likely there. The Corinthian church was a minority culture within this pluralistic setting. There would have been pagan temples spread throughout the town. Many in the Corinthian church would have come from some of these pagan religions. It was a safe bet that if you bought meat in the marketplace, it would have been sacrificed to pagan idols, something that the early church was concerned about. Not only was that a concern, but many pagan religions also had temple prostitutes. Paul is warning his new church community about their former lives, about the temptations of their pagan religion and leaving behind worship of idols and temple prostitutes that would have been part of their former practice. As this new church was seeking to follow Jesus, they would have been tempted by their former lives. Paul is trying to encourage them in this new way of life.

The context of this part of Corinthians is a matter of self-discipline in the face of temptation, particularly of sexual immorality and idol worship. Paul seeks to assure the faith community by reminding them of the story of Israel wandering in the desert. Reminding them that they are not the first to face such challenges. Paul reminds the Corinthian church that the

Israelites gave into sexual immorality and idol worship. And reminding them that God is faithful and will supply a way out of the temptation. The Good News, Paul says, is that God will supply a way out of the temptation.

Like most scripture that is seemingly familiar to most people, or perhaps when scripture is used in popular phrases like, “God won’t give you more than you can handle,” I’m not so sure that talking about issues of misinterpretation of the original context will convince people to reconsider using the phrase. It is so much in common usage that I think it is helpful to address the problems within the misquoted phrase itself. I think it helpful to talk about the problems this phrase may have when it is used as encouragement for when people are facing troubles or hardship.

One of the things I am concerned about with the phrase, “God won’t give you more than you can handle,” one of the things I find problematic is that this is simply not true. I know of plenty of people who have faced things that are overwhelming, and they simply cannot handle them. There was one family I knew at my former church where problem after problem seemed to pile up. A job was lost, a grandfather was ill, a daughter ran away, another child had special needs and was struggling in school and social circles. This was all in the span of a few months, all at once. It just seemed too much. There were days when the father couldn’t get out of bed, he couldn’t function because he was overwhelmed with all of the problems he faced. I know others when faced with their problems can’t handle them, and they have turned to alcohol, or drugs, or some have completed suicide. The statement that “God won’t give you more than you can handle,” just simply isn’t true, there are absolutely times when life is too much for one person.

Secondly, I struggle with the notion of the first part of the phrase, “God won’t give you...” It implies that whatever hardship comes your way, whatever painful thing you may be going through, it was God that gave it to you. This is where I also struggle with the phrase, “Everything happens for a reason.” If that is true, along with, “God won’t give you more than you can handle,” then it must mean that it is God that is giving us the bad things that are happening. I know there are some in the Christian faith who hold this understanding, they believe that God actively creates or allows bad things to happen. That these things happen in order to test our faith or refine our faith through fire and trials. There is some scriptural basis for this belief, but I cannot believe that any good and all-loving God gives us bad things in order to make our faith stronger. You cannot convince me that the suffering of the world occurs, that natural disasters befall entire countries, that babies die, that people lose jobs, or get cancer, that abuse in relationships occur, that children go hungry so that God can teach me or anyone else a lesson. We will face suffering and adversity, it is a part of life, but it is not created by God. In fact, just the opposite, I think the story of our faith tells us that we have a God who shows up and suffers and faces rejection. Our faith tells us that suffering, and death are not the last word.

Instead of “God won’t give you more than you can handle,” scripture tells us again and again that God is with us, that God is for us. One preacher says, “It’s not that God won’t give you more than you can handle, but that God will help you handle all that you’ve been given.”ⁱ This slight turn of phrase takes away the understanding that God gives us troubles. It does not suggest that God would load you down with burdens, but only to the breaking point. Rather, the notion that God will help you handle all that you have been given take seriously that in life we will have adversity and troubles, and that God will walk through those trials with us. That is the promise we hear in the Shepherd’s

Psalm, Psalm 23, “even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, because you are with me.” The psalm expects that there will be shadow times in life, that we are faced with threats and hard times. God will not keep it from happening, but God will be with us and comfort us in those times.

My faith and trust in God is not that God will not give me more than I can bear, it is that when I am going through the bad things, I can put my trust in the belief that God will sustain me, comfort me, guide me, care for me and walk with me. I can reach out and know God’s presence. I can scream and cry out to God in my anger and frustration, in my despair and doubt. I can give thanks for those times I see and sense God’s presence in my life. I can affirm that God tells me that suffering and death do not have the last word, even when I can’t fully see it or understand it in the moment.

“God won’t give you more than you can handle,” simply isn’t true, and I don’t think God is the giver of bad things. And I also think that we miss the mark when someone uses this phrase to encourage someone because it implies that if you have enough faith, you can make it through the problem or hardship you are facing, and more to the point, you can do it alone.

Over the years, I promise you, you will hear me say the following thing many times because I think we need this reminder often. That is, one of the worst things we do when we read scripture is to read it in the singular as if the message is written just to us as individuals. This is an unfortunate limitation of our language for the second person, that there is no distinction for the singular “you,” and the plural “you.” The letter that Paul writes is written to a plural you, you all, or as I would say in my former state of residence, Texas, all y’all. Even if the phrase were, “God won’t give you more than you can handle,” it would be more

fitting to misinterpret it as, “God won’t give us more than we can handle,” or “God won’t give all y’all more than y’all can handle.” This encouragement is meant for the whole community.

This relates to the first problem I noted about this statement of supposed encouragement, it isn’t true, there are simply times when it is too much for one person to bear. There are times when we must turn to others for help and support. Whether that be professionals, or our family and friends, or the community of faith. When we are going through struggles, when we are facing difficult times, it is OK to admit that we need help. This does not make us weaker, rather it makes us strong.

One of the most difficult times in my life (and I have been given permission to share this) was about 13 years ago when Kelly, my wife, and mother of my two children, was facing a very serious operation. She required brain surgery and it was not a simple procedure, and there was a very real possibility that she would not make it through the surgery. H, our older daughter, was three at the time and Olivia was seven months old. Kelly spent several weeks in the hospital and endured several months of physical therapy. She was unable to lift more than five pounds for several months which meant she could not pick up or care for our kids in most ways. We never would have made it through that difficult time if it were not for the help of others.

As soon as Kelly went into the hospital, my sister got in the car with my niece and travelled seven hours to Illinois where we lived to watch the kids. Our dear friend Terri showed up a week later with an open-ended plane ticket. People cleaned my house, people made us meals. My colleagues lead programs at the church for which I was responsible. My senior pastor gave me extra time off. The church helped us pay some of our medical expenses. Several people came to stay with us over many weeks to help with the girls after I had to return to work. We had the

expertise of an exceptional neurosurgeon and neurologist, let alone the care of dedicated nurses around the clock. I had my friend and fellow pastor come to the hospital almost every day and pray with me or just to sit next to me when words were too much.

During that period, it was all too much. We could not handle it all. I could not bear it all by myself. And I, we, didn't have to. We had the support of friends, family, neighbors, trained medical personnel, and our community of faith. It was maybe the hardest time in my life, but not the only time since then (I had my own significant medical issues and spinal surgery about two years ago) and it won't be the last. During these hard times, and during that time 13 years ago has been, it was also the time where I felt closest to God and to my community of faith. It was during that time that I felt most palpably true that God, along with the community that surrounded my family, helped me handle all that I was given.

In those shadow times, in those times when it is all a little too much, in those moments, we turn our eyes to the hills and cry out to our God. In those moments when we are weak is when we find our strength in God. When we are in the midst of struggles, when it all seems too much to bear, we look to the community of faith that surrounds us, we look to God as our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble. We do not need to do face the troubles and hardships of life alone. We trust in the promises of scripture that we are better together, that we need not fear when the world falls apart, or when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, because God is with us, our community is with us, and there is a way out and a way forward.

Amen.

ⁱ Adam Hamilton, *Half Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn't Say*, page 94.