

God Will Not Give You More Than You Can Bear
(Half Truths: Things You Only Thought Were in the Bible, Part 4)

1 Corinthians 10:6-13; Matthew 11:28-30

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Churches of Portland and Decatur, Indiana on May 28, 2017]

I

It's a statement I have heard many times over 37 years of ministry.

Usually I've heard this statement spoken by a person who has just...
been diagnosed with a terminal illness,
learned of the death of a loved one,
been let go from a job,
or is facing with some other personal crisis.

Usually the person, in the midst of the crisis, will say something like this:

*"I'll get through it somehow...
after all, as the Bible says...
God will not give you more than you can bear."*

II

I suspect every one of us has heard some variation on those words before.

Perhaps someone has spoken them to you when you were in the midst of a crisis...
or perhaps you have spoken them to someone yourself.

It's important to recognize that people mean well when they say these words.

Their intent is to encourage and strengthen others in their time of need.

They certainly don't intend to put obstacles in the path of someone's faith.

And at times, words such as these may bring a measure of comfort, as if to say,

"I know you are going through a tough time right now. You feel like you are sinking. The burden is too heavy. You don't know how much more you can

take. But it's going to be all right...you're going to get through it, because God will not give you more than you can bear."

So would it surprise you to know that this is not a verse in the Bible?

Many people assume that it comes from the Bible—
perhaps near that verse in the Book of Hebrews (4:15) that says Jesus was
“tempted in every way as we are tempted, yet without sin.”

But I can tell you that those exact words are not found in Hebrews or anywhere else in the Bible.

But maybe that doesn't matter.

Maybe it doesn't matter that this saying is not found in the Bible.

It still could be true.

It still could express the message of the Bible...right?

It could, but upon reflection, I'm not sure it does.

For although these words sound reassuring,
in the long run they probably do more harm than good.

Like the other sayings we are considering in this series,
we need to reflect on where this statement might go wrong.

So let's look at how the saying “God will not give you more than you can bear”
falls short of being “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,”
and then search for the whole truth behind the half-truth.

III

People who say “God will not give you more than you can bear,” probably think they are quoting 1 Corinthians 10:13.

In fact, they are misquoting this verse and ignoring the context in which it was written.

Paul was writing to the Christian community at Corinth,

a large port city in Greece,
where Paul founded the church around A.D. 51.

Corinth was about as cosmopolitan a place as one could find in the Roman Empire.

Pagan influences were everywhere.

I have been to Corinth and seen the ruins of some of the dozen or more temples that stood there in Paul's day.

If you purchased meat from the local butcher, it probably came from an animal that had been sacrificed to a pagan god at one of those temples.

Corinth's reputation in the Roman world was such that "to live like a Corinthian" was a popular saying for a life of drunkenness and sexual licentiousness.

Most of those converted under Paul's ministry were former pagans who were trying to leave the idol worship and temple prostitution that were part of religious life in places like Corinth's shrine to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love.

Temptation was everywhere and Paul writes to encourage those young followers of Jesus in order to keep them from reverting back to a pagan lifestyle.

So the context for 1 Corinthians 10:13 is to remind the Corinthian Christians that they are not the only ones who have dealt with such challenges.

When the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they too gave in to idol worship and sexual immorality and had to face the adverse consequences of their actions.

Paul describes how God struck down the Israelites because of their sin and then issues the warning:

Do not become idolaters, as some of them did...

These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us...

So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.

No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.
(1 Cor. 10:7, 11-13)

Paul is telling the Corinthian Christians that their experience is not unique—
just as the Israelites were tempted,
so too the Corinthians will be tempted.

In fact, we are all tempted.

Jesus himself was tempted.

This verse is not about God declining to give you more burdens in life than you can handle.

It is about God helping you in the midst of life's burdens.

The Greek word for "tempted" can also mean "tested."

Temptation is indeed a test of your character, your faith.

And the good news, according to Paul, is not that God will **not** give us more than we can bear.

Neither is it that God will lead us into greater temptations than we can handle.

Instead, Paul is saying that God will always be there to provide us with the strength to endure,
no matter what trials or testing may come our way.

IV

So when I hear someone say,

“God will not give us more than we can bear,”

it makes me want to raise the question:

“Do you think it is possible to have a burden greater than you can bear?”

I think the answer is yes, one can have burdens beyond one's ability to carry.

Adam Hamilton writes in his book, Half Truths: God's Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn't Say, of a woman he knew who told how she got angry with her therapist when he told her he disagreed with her saying, "God won't give you more than you can bear."

"Are you kidding me?" he said. "Surely you don't really believe that. I can tell you plenty of stories about people who had more than they could handle. In fact, my profession consists of helping just such people."

The therapist reminded the woman that in her case, she had come to him because the emotional pain and difficulty she was facing had been more than she could handle.

In addition, the woman's mother had committed suicide because life had become more than she could handle.

At first, the woman was angry with her therapist for questioning her belief,
but the more she reflected on it,
the more she concluded he was right.

Sometimes we face situations that truly are more than we can bear,
and that's why we turn to others for help—
to a caring friend,
a pastor or pastoral counselor,
or a support group of people with similar struggles.

There are also times when we retain burdens from the past that should long ago have been laid aside.

That is what is so helpful about the motto of Alcoholics Anonymous:
"One day at a time."

Recovery is not done all at once,
but rather one day at a time.

Neither can we live our lives all at once,
but only one day at a time.

There are likewise times when we borrow burdens from the future that are not yet ours.

Those are burdens we choose to impose upon ourselves—
 and there's no reason to put the blame on God,
 or to fret as to why God would expect us to bear them.

It's our decision to be so burdened.

After all, God has given human beings the gift of free will.

With that freedom comes the ability to make tragic mistakes, like...
 texting while driving,
 carelessly handling firearms,
 or smoking and drinking ourselves into an early grave.

Sometimes we blame God for the burdens that we,
 by our own poor choices,
 have brought upon ourselves.

But what about present-tense burdens?

What about those times when life comes crashing down on us—
 all at once—
 today?

What about those times when it all seems too much to bear?

What about those times when your heart is in pieces
 and your mind is a blank?

This is where the Apostle Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 10:13 are most helpful,
 for he tells us two important things:

First, **we are all tested**—every person is subject to tests and trials of their faith and commitment.

Just as the Israelites were tested in the wilderness,
 so it is the common lot of every human being to face times of testing,
 temptation, and trial.

Second, **we are not alone**—

God, who is faithful, is with us and provides us the strength to endure.

Eugene Peterson's paraphrase in *The Message* gets it right:

No test or temptation that comes your way is beyond the course of what others have had to face. All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; he'll never let you be pushed past your limit; he'll always be there to help you come through it.

Notice that it is not that God gives us more than we can bear,
 but that when our burdens seem overwhelming,
 when we are pushed to the very limit of our faculties,
 God steps in to give us the strength to endure.

V

Many years ago I heard a sermon that has stayed with me.

(This doesn't happen very often—how many of my sermons will stay with you after I'm gone from this pulpit? Don't answer that!)

The sermon was on Jesus' words in Matthew 11:28-30:

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

The preacher said some burdens are one-handle burdens—
 we just have to bear them ourselves.

Grief is a one-handle burden.

The person who has suffered a loss has to go through the time of grieving in order to reach acceptance and healing.

That is why the Apostle Paul wrote in Galatians 6:5,
For all must carry their own loads.

The Greek word for load means a soldier's pack.

Anyone who has ever served in the military knows you have to carry your own pack—no one else is going to do it for you.

There are burdens in life that are like that.

But the preacher went on to say that some burdens are two-handle burdens—we share them with another.

Raising children is, or should be, a two-handle burden—shared by mother and father alike.

Illness can be a burden we share with others who are or have gone through the same thing.

During the years I served as chaplain at Mt. Pleasant Retirement Village I facilitated a Caregivers Support Group.

Most of the members of the group struggled to care for a loved one with Alzheimer's disease.

The members were helped by knowing that they were not alone, that someone else had been through what they were going through, and that other people can help them bear that burden.

This is what Paul described in the same chapter, Galatians 6:2, when he says, *Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*

But then, the preacher said there are burdens with no handles.

For those kinds of heavy burdens we have no choice but to turn to the One who says,

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

For burdens that are more than we can bear,
God promises that if we cast our burden on the Lord,
God cares for us and will never fail us or forsake us.

Annie Johnson Flint was a Christian poet who experienced unbelievable suffering.

She endured the loss both her birth parents and her adoptive parents;
 she was afflicted with a form of arthritis so severe,
 that she had to give up her chosen career as a school teacher.

She was confined to a wheelchair, and was so debilitated that she lived the last 40
 years of her life in a sanitarium where she was cared for by others.

Her hands were so gnarled, she could not hold a pencil,
 so she dictated her poems to friends.

And yet, despite all that, she produced some of the most inspiring religious poetry
 ever seen.

Here is one for you when you feel the burdens of life are beyond what you can
 bear:

*God has not promised skies ever blue;
 Flower-strewn pathways all our lives through.
 God has not promised skies without rain,
 Joy without sorrow, peace without pain.*

*But God has promised strength for the day,
 Rest for the labor, light for the way,
 Grace for the trials, help from above,
 Unfailing sympathy, undying love.*

VI

Friends, when life is unbearable, words fall short.

Trite phrases about God not giving us more than we can bear really do not help.

And sorrow can be so deep that we cannot hear the words of the Bible—
 well, maybe we hear them,
 but grief renders them unreal.

In such times, words simply are not enough.

If they were, Christ would not have had to be crucified.

He simply would have told us how to triumph over tragedy.

He simply could have told us a better way to bear our burdens.

But that is not what he did.

Taking our burdens upon himself...
 he died...
 on a cross...
 giving his life for the life of the world.

And when life overwhelms us with burdens that are more than we can carry,
 he invites us to take his yoke upon us and find rest for our souls.

A missionary to the jungles of Ecuador knew what it was to have burdens beyond what she could bear.

Her children contracted polio; her husband was lost in the jungle.

Later she said,

“I was too exhausted to pray. I moved like an automaton from one task to the next. God understood and I felt [God’s] presence.

*“God gave me a simple sentence that kept me going day and night. I want to share it with you. It will sustain you through anything. I’ve proven its worth. I just affirmed, ‘**For this, I have Jesus.**’”*

Sisters and brothers, we will always have Jesus!

Someone who will never leave us or forsake us...

Someone to go with us through every dark valley...

Someone to bring the light of grace to our every sorrow.

For all this, we have Jesus.

Amen.

Sources:

The original source of this sermon was my great friend and colleague, the Rev. Charles W. Julian, Muncie, Indiana, who lived the message of this sermon as he faced a three year battle with melanoma until his death in January 1996.

Adam Hamilton, Half Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn't Say, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016, 79-101.

Emmitt Johnson, sermon on Matthew 11:28-30 preached at Green Lake, Wisconsin, date unknown.

Eugene Peterson, *The Message*.