

“God Won’t Give You More Than You Can Handle: Half Truths”

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Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Psalm 46; 1 Cor. 10:7-13

Theme: suffering, trials, grace

Occasion: Half Truths, sermon series

The problems are piling up – at work, at home, with the family. A good friend of yours just got a diagnosis of cancer. Your mother died a month ago. The bills are adding up. And you come home to discover that the dog has thrown up in the living room. Just then, a good friend calls you on the phone.

You answer it, and you’re not in the best of moods, *more* than a little irritable and frustrated. Your friend asks you how you’re doing and you tell her or him. Thinking they’re being helpful they say something like this:

“I know you’re going through a tough time right now. Just remember, God never gives us more than we can handle.” How do you feel? Comforted, knowing God is going to help you get through this? Or, more like you’d like to reach through the phone and choke your friend, for offering a trite cliché when you’re really hurting?

Undoubtedly people mean well when they say these words. They mean to encourage and strengthen others. They certainly don’t *intend* to place obstacles in the path of someone’s faith. And, at times, words such as this may in fact bring comfort.

And yet the idea, that God won’t give us more than we can handle, is another of those biblical half-truths that we can often repeat without giving it much thought. It’s an idea we really need to reflect upon before we use it again, if ever.

So, let's think about where this statement goes wrong and search for the whole truth behind the half-truth. Like many spiritual half-truths, this one has *some* scriptural basis. People usually cite 1 Corinthians 10:13 as the source of this idea, that *God won't give you more than you can handle*.

Listen to what Paul *actually* writes: "No temptation has seized you that isn't common for people. But God is faithful. He won't allow you to be tempted beyond your abilities. Instead, with the temptation, God will also supply a way out so that you will be able to endure it."

If we look at the context of Paul's words, we see he was talking about *temptation*, including sexual immorality and idolatry, verses 8 and 14, but *not* about trials and hardships. Paul is writing to the Christian community living at Corinth, surrounded by pagan influences everywhere.

The new Christians to whom Paul is writing are trying to leave the old life behind. So the context for this verse is *self-discipline* – learning how to control oneself in the face of temptation, particularly the sins of sexual immorality and idolatry.

This passage is *not* about God deciding to cut back on the number of burdens in life that you can handle. It's about God helping you when you are tempted to sin. In the book of James, we read that God is not the one who offers us temptation, but rather God offers us an alternative, so we can make a better choice.

The first thing making this half true is that it interprets scripture incorrectly. The second thing making this a half-truth, is that it implies *God is the one* giving people problems and causing all of the suffering in the world.

We've already talked about this concern, when we talked about the phrase *everything happens for a reason*. When awful things happen, I think its bad theology to blame them on God. It implies that our good and gracious God somehow takes divine delight in causing people to suffer. God does not give us pain and difficulty to see how well we can handle them.

What kind of a God tests his children by having their spouses beat them, or causes a brother to take his own life, or gives someone cancer to see how their family and friends can handle it? I refuse to believe in that kind of a God!

We will all face adversity in our lives. We will all experience hardships. We, or someone we love, may face terminal illness. We may struggle with debilitating depression or suicidal thoughts or grief so heavy we feel like we'll suffocate. *Know this*: God didn't cause it.

Imagine what the people of Puerto Rico are going through. Their economy was already near bankruptcy, their utility systems were already outdated and dilapidated, and then a hurricane smashes into their island. Did God think, "Can you take any more?"

Or imagine the people of Myanmar, suffering from genocidal war. The army comes through and kills almost everyone in the village. And then two weeks later they come back and rape the surviving women. What kind of a God *causes, or gives* those things?

Can you imagine saying to one of those villagers, or someone suffering the after-effects of a hurricane, "There, there, God won't give you more than you can handle."? Life *can* be cruel, and *awful* things happen to people. I have spoken to families who have endured one tragedy after another. And when they think it can't get any worse,

something else comes along and they're devastated in a new way. Let us not blame God for that kind of suffering.

The Bible never promises we won't go through hard times. The Bible *does* promise that God will be with us, no matter what happens. Psalm 46:1 says "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble."

So let me suggest a *different* response which we can offer to people going through hard times. It is a response which won't trivialize their pain, nor cause people to have the wrong thinking about what kind of a God we worship. This new saying is grounded in Scripture and it offers us the hope we need.

Instead of that other phrase we've been talking about, let's offer someone the comforting words *God will help you handle all that you've been given.* (repeat) Here's why I like this phrase so much better:

First of all, it doesn't suggest that all the struggles and suffering are given to you by God, or that God has been piling the burdens on, but he's going to stop just short of your breaking point. Instead, it acknowledges adversity happens in life, and it promises that when you go through trials and tribulations, God will walk with you through it all.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me." The Bible assumes we will go through dark times, but it also offers us the assurance *we will not be alone.* God is with us always, even to the end of the ages.

My years of pastoral ministry have taught me that people can and do find strength to survive the worst experiences, and that some

of the most important resources they have, are their faith in God, their experience of God and God's care for them.

My faith is strengthened when I listen to you tell me how God has helped you through difficult times. I listen to some of your stories and I wonder how I would have responded. Your faith and your trust in God have inspired me to trust God more.

My trust in God is not that He won't give me more than I can bear, because I don't believe God is the one who would give those things. God is not testing me by bringing bad things into my life.

Instead, I trust that when bad things happen in the course of my life, God will sustain me, walk with me, hold me near, comfort and care for me. I can talk to God, even if I can't see God.

There are times when God will come to my assistance through other people. Sometimes I realize it in the moment and other times it's not till I look back that I see God answered my prayers for help by using other people.

And there are times in my life when God answers my prayers for assistance, by telling me to ask for help. God doesn't expect us to carry all of our burdens alone. God has given us family, friends, community resources and more. When you're walking through hard times, it's all right to admit, "I can't handle this alone; I need help."

So hear this: It's not that God won't give us more than we can handle. Rather God will help us handle what we've been given. Amen. Let us pray.

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Half Truths* by Adam Hamilton, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016. Chapter 3: "God Won't Give You More Than You Can Handle," pp. 79-102.