

**The Bible Doesn't Say That:  
God Won't Give You More Than You Can Handle  
2 Cor.1:3-11      Psalm 69:1-3; 13-17**

Our series...

As I read this, I'd like us to ask ourselves: have I ever felt like this before?

Have I ever prayed a prayer like this before? Or simply try to imagine how David is feeling as he prays this prayer:

## **Psalm 69**

<sup>1</sup> Save me, O God,  
for the waters have come up to my neck.

<sup>2</sup> I sink in deep mire,  
where there is no foothold;  
I have come into deep waters,  
and the flood sweeps over me.

<sup>3</sup> I am weary with my crying;  
my throat is parched.  
My eyes grow dim  
with waiting for my God.

(more petitions, for another 10 verses...)

<sup>13</sup> But as for me, my prayer is to you, O LORD.  
At an acceptable time, O God,  
in the abundance of your steadfast love, answer me.

With your faithful help <sup>14</sup>rescue me  
from sinking in the mire;  
let me be delivered from my enemies  
and from the deep waters.

<sup>15</sup> Do not let the flood sweep over me,  
or the deep swallow me up,  
or the Pit close its mouth over me.

<sup>16</sup> Answer me, O LORD, for your steadfast love is good;  
according to your abundant mercy, turn to me.

<sup>17</sup> Do not hide your face from your servant,  
for I am in distress—make haste to answer me.

This is the word of the Lord!

Any words come to mind that summarize what David might be feeling or going through?

As we look at phrases that are commonly thought to come from the Bible, this morning's phrase is one of the *most* common: God won't give you more than you can handle. We've probably heard it, maybe even had it said *to us*, and some of us may have said it *to* someone. I have. I remember the time years ago when I said that to someone who had been in a car accident and was generally struggling with life in a series of unfortunate events. I learned fairly quickly, based on this person's reaction, that telling them that God won't give them more than they can handle was not helpful! Nor was it Biblical.

If it isn't in the Bible in as many words, where does this saying come from? A couple places. One, it comes from good intentions—mixed, perhaps, with a little anxiety. In an attempt to encourage someone who is going through a difficult time, who is experiencing loss or distress or difficulty, a person may feel uncomfortable and not know what to say to them. So we want to alleviate both

*our* anxiety and *their* distress by saying something hopeful in a good-hearted desire to bring comfort.

Saying “God won’t give you more than you can handle” is a well-intentioned way of saying, “you’re strong,” “you can handle this,” “you’ll get through this,” and so forth. All of which may be true in many instances; but for the person who is going through what they’re going through, they often don’t feel like they’re strong, or that they can handle it, or that they’ll get through it.

This may be something that a person says to *her/himself* when experiencing a difficulty, as a way of alleviating their own discomfort, or giving themselves hope, or maybe minimizing what’s happening (“this isn’t so bad,” “I can handle this, and I’ll get through it”). But there’s a difference between someone saying this to themselves, and a person saying it to another.

So, that’s one place where this phrase comes from: well-intentioned, good-hearted effort to give someone a boost of encouragement.

Second, the phrase “God won’t give you more than you can handle” may also have its origins in a passage in the Bible which closely approximates it: 1Cor.10:13: “No temptation (or ‘testing’—same Gk word) has overtaken you that is not common everyone. God is faithful, and will not let you be tempted (or

tested) beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.” Let me read that again...

This is a terrific passage, and a great encouragement. However, the apostle Paul is talking specifically about temptation, or a type of testing that, as he says, is common to everyone. In other words, he’s talking about life! When we read all of I Corinthians chapter 10 we see that he is talking about the Israelites being tested in the wilderness, and then other types of temptations and tests.

So when we read it in context, we see that this passage has more to do with common temptations that we face than with unusual or tragic circumstances or loss. That passage is more applicable to, say, Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness, and to the petition, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (in other words, ‘please provide a way out’) than it is about responses to suffering, tragedy, or difficult situations. Jesus was given a way out when he was tempted, and we have spiritual resources available to us, to call upon when we’re struggling with temptation.

In addition to ICor.10 there are other places in the bible that speak encouraging words about God’s help (like we talked about last week) and about God’s comfort (as we heard in the reading from 2Cor1) that sound approximately

like “God won’t give you more than you can handle,” but the phrase itself doesn’t occur in the Bible.

And it isn’t in there, mainly—in my opinion—because the phrase suggests that God is the dispenser of difficulty. God won’t *give you...* more than you can handle. I can’t find a place in the Bible that says God inflicts people with hardship, on purpose. The Bible says that God is the giver of good gifts, the giver of grace, the giver of the Holy Spirit, and much more.

Yes, God does *allow* difficult things to happen, which is a mystery, and I’ll talk about this in a moment, but we first need to be clear that God doesn’t actively will pain or tragedy on any person. Think about it, what kind of God *gives* someone an illness, or the untimely death of a loved one, or a natural disaster?

Perhaps the saying “God won’t give you more than you can handle” is akin to “everything happens for a reason” which is also not in the Bible. I thought about giving a separate message on that one (everything happens for a reason), but realized it’s a lot the same as “God won’t give you more than you can handle” because both sayings assume that God has some hidden purpose, some hidden curriculum for us to learn from, in giving us hardships.

Is there a reason for everything? I’m not so sure. Eccl.3 says there is a “*season*’ “for everything, and that the natural ebb and flow of life from good

times to hard times, birth and death, crying and laughing, and so forth, is a normal thing. But *reasons for exceptional* difficulties are not always clear; not in the moment at least. And the truth is, sometimes things happen that *are* more than we can handle in the moment, or they certainly feel that way. Ps. 69 is a good example.

Another good Biblical example of this is Job, and this is why his story is in the Bible. Not to explain why is there suffering, or what is God's purpose or reason for giving him, or anyone, all of these losses and hardships. The Bible never asks about the origins of suffering, or even of evil. Those are questions the Bible doesn't ask directly. Maybe they are hinted at, but not directly asked ("Where does evil come from?" "Why is there suffering?") The Bible *does* give us ways to *respond* to suffering, in light of God's faithfulness and love.

So here is Job: he loses everything: his family, his property, and eventually his health. Tragedy upon tragedy, and Job has nothing left but his faith (such as it is). And then along come Job's friends and here is what it says (2:11-13):

<sup>11</sup>Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home—Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They met together to go and console and comfort him. <sup>12</sup>When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. (this is a common way to express grief/mourning in the middle east) <sup>13</sup>They sat with him on the

ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great. (that's the end of chapter 2)

To me, the book could've ended right there and it still would've been a great book (after only two chapters!). Friends just sitting quietly and compassionately with their companion who is suffering. No attempts to explain it; no anxious responses to try to comfort him. No lessons that Job should be learning from his experiences. It's a beautiful picture.

But... the silence didn't last long! Job's friends decide to open their mouths and try to explain Job's suffering to him and give him advice—for the next 35 chapters! And they come out sounding like fools. This is part of wisdom literature in the Bible: not only giving us questions and situations to wrestle with in God's presence, but also giving us examples of what *not to do* in certain situations. And that's what the middle part of Job is: a good example of a bad example. Too many attempts to explain something that can't really be explained, when what was needed was simple presence and compassion.

Again, the truth is that sometimes there *are* situations that are more than a person can handle. There are times when life is just overwhelming. And there aren't easy answers to explain why. And what's needed in those times is to know that we are loved, and that we are not alone.

Over the years I've seen or received many letters from people who underwent great hardship and heartache, where they expressed their gratitude, not for what was said, but for the fact that someone simply sat with them, was present to them, often in silence, or compassionately came alongside them in small acts of caring.

One woman said that when she was in the depths of a severe depression that lasted for months, and people tried to cheer her up in various ways, the best thing that a friend did for her was come over to her house once a week and simply rub her feet. Didn't say anything; just sat at her feet and gave some compassionate touch while she sat in her recliner.

This is a great example of the ministry of silence. Of simple compassionate presence. Sitting on the ground with someone in sackcloth and ashes so to speak. Listening.

If the Bible doesn't say "God won't give you more than you can handle, what does the Bible say?

*God helps those who help themselves* (just kidding!). One thing that the Bible communicates is that, at times, there are situations that *are* more than a person can handle (whatever "handle" means—Survive? Not die from? Control? Not be overwhelmed by?).



In the reading from Psalm 69, it's pretty clear that David is praying to God in the midst of circumstances that are overwhelming to him. He uses some pretty specific and creative imagery: he's stuck in thick mud, going under, with waters up to his neck, the mouth of the pit closing around him. His body is exhausted from his misery—parched throat, eyes drained dry, fatigue in his bones. What he's saying is: I *can't* handle all of this! The good news is that he turns to God, is praying to God, and believes that God can help him—which tells us that God is not fragile; God can handle our grief, anger, disappointment, doubt. There are places in the psalms and other parts of the Bible where someone praying really lets God have it. And God is not offended by that, or so fragile that he can't take it. God welcomes our honest responses to life's struggles. It's a sign of our faith, actually, to cry out to God in this way. Because we know God can do something. And will, at the right time.

In 2 Corinthians 1, Paul's autobiographical story in verses 8-11 clearly shows that he has more struggles than he can handle too. Paul says that he and his companions were "so utterly burdened *beyond our strength* that we despaired of life itself." I wonder if any of you have ever been there!

He continues by saying, "Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the

dead (really nice turn there! From death to resurrection). He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope..." This passage shows us that Paul was burdened beyond his strength. It was more than he could "handle." And he and his companions turned to God, in hope.

In the midst of experiencing life's heavy burdens, the message of Scripture is clear (here are 3 things, briefly, which can be an encouragement to us, or an encouragement to someone, in the place of "God won't give you more than you can handle"):

Know that:

**God is with you.** Elie Wiesel (in *Night*; his recounting of his time in a concentration camp as an adolescent), tells a time of being forced to watch an atrocity in the camp. He heard someone behind him ask "where is God?" and he heard another voice say (the voice within), "God is right here, with you." This is the suffering servant, Jesus, who is with us in our suffering. And not just with us, but actually suffering what we are suffering. Feeling what we are feeling. Which leads to:

**God weeps with you.** Remember Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus? What did he do, before raising Lazarus? "*Jesus wept.*" (shortest verse in the Bible, John 11:35).

Even though Jesus knew that he was about to raise Lazarus, because of his

compassion for Martha and Mary and the family, Jesus wept with them. Not just *for* them, but *with* them.

And in the midst of our pain and life's burdens, Jesus feels what we feel (which includes laughter and celebration too!) Like I mentioned last week, God is not the unmoved mover, who sets everything in motion and then steps back to let things run their course and let humans fend for themselves. God is moved by what moves us.

So, God is with you, God in Christ rejoices with you, and weeps with you.

Finally:

**God is faithful.** God can be trusted. Because God is with us, because God truly empathizes with us, we can unburden our burdens onto God, continually hand them over—even if it's in the form of letting God have it! Again, that's actually an expression of faith. As Paul says, confidently, in the midst of his great burdens, "On God we have set our hope." We can put our faith in God's faithfulness.

This is what the prophet Jeremiah proclaims as he walks and weeps his way through the city of Jerusalem after *their* 911, the destruction of the city by the Babylonians (which was way more than they could handle!). From Lamentations 3: "The thought of my affliction is wormwood and gall; my soul is continually bowed down within me. But this I will call to mind, and therefore I have hope:

the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end;  
they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness.”

Because Jeremiah knew that God was with them, God wept with them, and  
God can be trusted.

Great is Thy Faithfulness