

“It’s Too Much”

September 18, 2022

Half Truths series

God won’t give you more than you can handle. Or maybe you’ve heard this: *If God brings you to it, God will bring you through it.* I can see why we might say this to ourselves - because we believe that God is with us. These words can be a source of comfort for some, but wow, it can be rough to hear when someone says it to us in a difficult time in our lives. Depending on the situation, it can really be a source of more pain and hurt when we’re already hurting.

When it’s said in a time of stress or when things seem to keep piling on, it’s just not helpful. When there’s illness or financial struggle or grief or caregiving responsibilities - or any combination of them - or all that’s happening in the world - hearing *God won’t give you more than you can handle* feels thoughtless. We assume it will be a welcome word to the ears; one writer says it’s more like a wet willy - uncomfortable and slimy - and just gross.

It’s like *everything happens for a reason* with more force and a deeper gut punch. *Everything happens for a reason* is nebulous, but *God won’t give you more than you can handle* attributes whatever is happening to God. And that’s not always fair, just, or true.

How can we possibly say that God - who is good - gives us terrible, painful stuff to “handle.” What does that even mean? Nick Page writes, “This saying portrays God as perpetually stress-testing his followers, as a kind of cosmic scientist experimenting on lab rats to see just how much pain they can take.” That’s not what we believe about God, and it’s not how we want anyone to understand God because why would anyone pursue a relationship with God?

Would we say that in response to the world’s hurts right now? We need to be careful about assuming that we understand the will of God. We’re called to more than these “verbal emojis” or “Jesus jargon” as one writer says. Life is difficult enough in some seasons. We don’t need to make it more difficult with words that don’t help. And that’s really the catch. We stand in need of help, and we’re called to help.

We need to meet people where they are – not attempt to “talk down” or minimize the struggle because that’s what these clichés can do. Doing theology is hard work, and we can’t fall into a shallow pool by leaning on sayings that don’t really help us. We’re called to be more thoughtful – thinking, reasoning, seeking to understand – and sometimes getting to a place where we acknowledge that there are things we don’t understand. We can’t make it make sense. To water down the mystery of life

and faith into platitudes and clichés doesn't help us or anyone to grow in holiness of heart and life.

We're invited into deep relationship with God - Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of the universe. We're called to care about and connect with each other on more than a surface level. Our willingness to witness to God who knows the depth of human despair and sorrow - and the heights of joy - is vital. Christian Piatt writes, "Being a Christian is not about having all the answers at the ready." Our call is to love, and "part of loving others is actually understanding what they want or need, not just giving them what you think they want or need." Our willingness to reflect the love of God, showing empathy and compassion, is the antidote to these clichés. So rather than offering a platitude, maybe we should listen and then say, "I'm so sorry. How can I help?"

I wonder if that's why Psalm 46:10 resonates so powerfully: *Be still and know that I am God*. If we're in a conversation, some of us may want to "fix" a problem that someone is sharing. Is anyone feeling convicted? But, many times, there's no "fix" to it - and that's not really the need. We don't have to fix it (because we can't), but we're called to care and bear each other's burdens. Sometimes we just want someone to listen. Sometimes we just need to speak out of our hearts because it's a way to let go and unburden ourselves. Listening really is a gift we offer to each other.

So where do we get this from? One of the Scriptures that appears to support this idea that *God doesn't give us more than we can handle* is from **SLIDE: I** Corinthians 10: 13 (NIV) ¹³ No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to humankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

This is a place where context matters a lot! Paul is talking about the temptations we face and the choices we have before us. He's addressing a community in Corinth - a port city in Greece situated between two waterways with seaports on each side. Corinth was a major trade route in the Mediterranean, a crossroads with people from many places coming and going, and a city known for its pagan influence, which meant multiple temples with opportunities for people to worship idols and overindulge in many ways.

Paul reminds those who receive this message that they are not the only ones who will be tempted. We all are and will be tempted. It's a part of being human, but our faith offers us strength and help to resist it. We have some control there. Pastor Adam Hamilton writes, "when I'm tempted, there is always a way out. The problem is that I may not be looking very hard for the exit." Paul isn't talking about tough times

we face, so to use this as a word for someone in a crisis or someone who is dealing with a long-haul issue isn't helpful.

Remember our series on the Lord's Prayer when we talked about that phrase - *And lead us, not into temptation, but deliver us from evil...*? That's Paul's intent here - to tell his readers that it isn't that God leads us into temptation, but God offers us a way out as we depend on God for help. The writer of Hebrews, too, offers that same advice - that God is our Helper and won't leave us on our own when we face struggles. There's a lot of wisdom in Hebrews about how we treat each other.

And another caveat for all of us. Often when I talk to people who are struggling and have heard *God won't give you more than you can handle*, they also hear from someone well-meaning people something like this: **SLIDE** "I don't know how you do it." Many times, they'd like to respond with the truth: *I don't have a choice*. I hope we can help one another do better in caring for each other. No one means to be intentionally hurtful, and yet we say things that can hurt.

One way that we've tried to modify this cliché is to say **SLIDE** *God doesn't give us what we can handle. God helps us handle what we are given*. It's better, but it's not great because it still implies that we're "given" the struggles. Flipping the script might be something more like: *God helps us to handle the adversity and struggle we face in life*. We can safely say that, though I'd caution anyone to say it right away. Take time to listen well, talk less, and acknowledge the struggle first. We do need to invest in life together - to be there for each other for the long haul rather than offering phrases that don't acknowledge real struggles.

And we need to be clear about what God does promise. It's not a life free of any hard times. It's not that we'll be able to handle everything by ourselves. It's the promise that we don't go it alone - that God is with us, and that we can be with each other, offering hope and help. Who are the people who have carried you in the name of Jesus? Who has helped you? Who has listened to you? How has reflected God's love to you? That really matters and gets us to whole truth - that God helps us, and we can help each other.

And though I don't say to add more to difficult times in our lives, our witness to others in difficult times matters too. It's an opportunity to share our faith in a new way, with a new perspective, and possibly a new angle. It's a time to be honest about how faith makes a difference when we go through hard times - because it does. I hear it constantly: "I don't know how anyone deals with hard stuff without a faith foundation." When we share that authentically, it is an invitation to others to trust in God. I've been privileged to hear that witness from people, and it has changed my life and deepened my faith. It's made me realize how vital our witness is.

In an article published after Queen Elizabeth's recent death, Jan White shared about the queen's faith, including a statement she made in her Christmas address in 2002, the year she experienced the death of both her sister and her mother within two months of each other. Queen Elizabeth said, "I know just how much I rely on my faith to guide me through the good times and bad. Each day is a new beginning. I know that the only way to live my life is to try to do what is right, to take the long view, to give of my best in all that the day brings, and to put my trust in God... I draw strength from the message of hope in the Gospel." What a word and witness in a hard time.

Musician Eric Clapton has dealt with numerous struggles, including the death of his young son and drug and alcohol addiction that lasted for more than 30 years. In his memoir, Clapton wrote about his recovery process, including one particular moment. **SLIDE** "In the privacy of my room I begged for help. I had no notion of whom I thought I was talking to—I just knew that I had come to the end of my tether, and I had nothing left to fight with. *Then I remembered what I had heard about surrender, something I thought I could never do, that my pride just wouldn't allow it. But I knew that on my own I wasn't going to make it, so I asked for help, and, getting down on my knees, I surrendered.*"

Clapton goes on to say, "Within a few days, I realized that something had happened for me... I had found a place to turn to, a place I'd always known was there but never really wanted, or needed, to believe in. From that day until this, I have never failed to pray in the morning, on my knees, asking for help, and at night, to express gratitude for my life and, most of all, for my sobriety. I choose to kneel because I feel I need to humble myself when I pray, and, with my ego, this is the most I can do. If you are asking why I do all this, I will tell you: because it works... In some way, in some form, my God was always there, but now I have learned to talk to him." What a powerful witness.

A woman named Annie Johnson Flint experienced a lot of adversity at a young age. Her mother died. Her father couldn't care for her and her sister, and so they were sent to live with another family. Both of her adoptive parents died when she was young, and she developed a degenerative disease that made her unable to walk or live on her own, so she was in a facility where she could receive care. Flint was a poet, and much of her work focuses on the power of faith and the gift of grace. One poem is printed out for you (I'll post it), and it's a deeply authentic and honest word that moves us beyond cliches.

"What God Hath Promised" by Annie Johnson Flint

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

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

*God hath not promised we shall not know
Toil and temptation, trouble and woe;
He hath not told us we shall not bear
Many a burden, many a care.*

*God hath not promised smooth roads and wide,
Swift, easy travel, needing no guide;
Never a mountain, rocky and steep,
Never a river, turbid and deep.*

What a word and witness.

God helps us to handle the adversity and struggle we face in life. That's the promise. That's the grace. That's the whole truth. May we claim it, witness to it, and share it - that the world might know.

Thanks be to God. Amen. Let us pray...