

## Message Road Map

### Series: Half Truths

#### Message 3 of 5: “God Won’t Give You More Than You Can Handle”

#### Scripture: 1 Corinthians 10:13; Ps 23 and 46

I want to begin this morning by asking, have you ever been overwhelmed? When preparing the message for today, I thought about times in my life when I felt pushed to my limits, and one thing that came to mind was the transition from my first to my second church. My first church appointment was challenging because I had little on-the-job experience and had to translate everything I learned in college to hands-on ministry. I often felt overwhelmed *and* underequipped, so I would say to myself, “God will never give me more than I can bear.” Fortunately, in this first appointment, the people were great and together we revitalized the church. But then I was moved to my second congregation, and the occasional feeling of being overwhelmed became constant. From the very beginning, I discovered an entrenched group of people who were unwilling to make the changes necessary to turn the church around, and they ran-off every pastor that tried. It was in this appointment that I realized how mean some church people could be, and why some of my unchurched friends wanted nothing to do with it. I felt emotionally and spiritually abused in several interactions and frequently thought about leaving the ministry altogether. Over the course of a year and a half, a few healthy leaders saw the writing on the wall and finally did what should have been done years prior—they closed the church. But in the process, what kept me from leaving the ministry was the idea that God will not give me more than I can bear.

What about you? Can you think of a time when you were overwhelmed and thought, “I just can’t handle this?” How did it feel? How did you get through it? For many people, even those not very religious, the idea that there is a God who will not give us more than we can handle is something that helps them survive the day. And the idea does not lack *all* scriptural support.

We read in **1 Corinthians 10:13**:

*No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. 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.*

So, what’s the issue? Why are we calling this phrase a half truth? Well, when we are not in throws of suffering and think more deeply about this phrase, we see a few problems.

First, while some Christians reference 1 Corinthians 10:13 to give it scriptural support, a closer look reveals the inaccuracy of this kind of interpretation. Again, this verse reads, “*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.*” Clearly, Paul is not speaking in general about all the bad things that happen to us in life. Rather, he is talking specifically about temptation. He is not saying that God will never give us more than we can handle, but that God will help us remain faithful during times of trial.

Remember that 1 Corinthians was a letter that Paul sent to the Christians living in a large port city in Greece. Like many port towns, it was filled with people from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds who practiced different religions. Pagan influences were everywhere, including idol worship that involved temple prostitution and drunkenness. So, Paul wrote to the new Christians in Corinth to say, “Look, I know you are facing enormous temptation to go back to your old life, but Jesus calls us to be different, to live according to the value system he lived and died for.” And in order to help them endure this temptation, Paul reminds them that God will give them everything they need to resist. He seems to be saying, God will not let you get to a point where you are so overwhelmed by temptation that you lose the ability to choose the good and are essentially forced to sin. Rather, God will always give you a way out so you can remain faithful. So again, Paul is not saying, “God won’t give you more than you can bear,” but, “God will strengthen you in times of trial.

At this point you may be thinking, “Ok, maybe this saying is not quoted verbatim in the Bible, but does that mean that it’s completely unbiblical?” And the answer to this question lies in the second concern that emerges when we look closely at the wording.

When we say, “*God will not give you more than you can handle,*” the first part of the saying implies that whatever difficulty or pain we experience in life, it is God who gives it to us; that God is somehow the cause of our suffering. But we have already seen in the first message of this series that this is untrue. There is something fundamentally wrong with saying that God gives people cancer, or an abusive spouse, or financial ruin, or the loss of a loved one to induce horrible suffering, and then backs off right before the person breaks. This is not how God builds character, strengthens faith, or teaches us a lesson, and to suggest otherwise makes God out to be a monster. If you missed the first message on this topic, you can get the audio and video on our church app or website.

But the main idea here is that God does not *give* us suffering. Nor does the Bible promise that God will magically remove our suffering. Rather, we are promised that whatever we go through in life, God will be *with us* and *fight for us*. God gives us everything we need to survive the pain but and come out on the other side with a renewed sense of meaning, purpose, and value. So, while God does not *cause* our suffering, God does lead us through it and bring something good out of it. And this is what we mean by redemption, something I’ve seen countless times in my ministry. I have seen so many people just like you go through horrible and unimaginable things, things that make me think, “I don’t know how they’re going to survive this.”

In my third church, our friends Casey and Cindy served as our worship leaders. Even as a young couple they experienced the trauma of losing a baby. Shortly before birth, they discovered that their daughter, Sela, had passed away, so Cindy had to deliver a full-term, stillborn little girl. A year later, Cindy’s sister, Cathy, was diagnosed with skin cancer, and very soon after the diagnosis she passed away. Then at age forty, Casey had a massive hemorrhagic stroke after working late into the night at the church. The brain bleed was so bad that the doctor advised against surgery because he would likely die on the operating table and if he happened to survive, he would probably live in a vegetative state. But Cindy could not let him go and asked them to do the operation. Casey survived the surgery and, according to the doctors, had a miraculous

recovery, but the stroke still left him permanently disabled. When I think about the suffering this family endured, I don't know how anyone could survive it. But they held onto their faith, asked God for help, and eventually God brought them through it. They not only found a way to make life bearable, but they rediscovered joy, and their family continues to experience many happy moments together. They also discovered a new purpose in life. They wrote a book focusing on how God led them through all the trauma around Casey's stroke and redeemed the situation. Now they travel around to different churches to share their story and offer people hope.

While I've never been through anything like Casey and Cindy, I can think of countless seasons of grief, sadness, and depression through which God brought me. Perhaps one of the hardest things I've ever endured is when my ex-wife relocated to North Carolina with our one-year-old son, Jackson. I was so depressed that I wanted to die. It was just too much to handle. And it's only by the grace of God that I'm still here today, not just surviving but thriving. With God's help and the support of the people that God put in my life, I found a way to stay close to Jackson, and now we have a wonderful relationship that gives me immeasurable joy.

What about you? Can you think of a time when you were overwhelmed with grief, depression, anxiety, or fear, a time that you thought might break you? How was God present? Did God help you survive it? Did you find joy again? Did God find a way to bring *anything* good out of it?

When we go through times like this, the promises of scripture can help sustain and strengthen us.

Consider, for example, the **23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm**:

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me."*

Note that the author doesn't say that God puts us in the valley of death, but that God will be with us in the valley of death. Also consider **Psalm 46**,

*God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth gives way, and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging" (1-3).*

This helps us to see how God works: God abides with us, suffers with us, strengthens us, and guides us through hardship, and finds a way to bring something good out of it. And it's important to know this because all of us, at one time or another, face overwhelming circumstances that we cannot handle by ourselves.

And this brings us to the third reason why we should stop using the phrase, "God will never give you more than you can bear." It assumes that if you remain in God's good graces you will never face horrible things that you can't handle alone. But experience teaches us that this is not true. Again, at some point in life, we *all* face terrible things that we cannot handle alone, and when these times come, this common saying might tempt us to think that it's because we did something that took us *out* of God's good graces, something that angered or offended God such

that he is punishing us. But, again, we have already seen that God doesn't work this way to accomplish his purposes.

In addition, we might be tempted to think that because we're good Christians, we will never face situations that we can't handle on our own strength, and when those times come it will be difficult for us to ask for help. This is important because when we pray and ask God for help, God almost always answers our prayer *through other people*, and if we can't ask for help then we might miss God's solution. Indeed, when we go through something horrible, reach the end of our rope, and cry out to God for help, God may choose to help us through a doctor, therapist, pastor, spiritual director, family member, or close friend. But if we can't admit our need and reach out for help, there a sense in which we tie God's hands and thwart the ways that God is trying to help us.

When we pull all this together, we realize that the phrase, "God will not give you more than you can bear," is problematic because it lacks scriptural support, runs the risk of blaming God for our suffering, and it makes us reluctant to ask for help when we need it the most. And as we've considered these things, we've been reminded that all of us go through overwhelming things that we cannot handle on our own, and if we turn to God, He will give us what we need to keep moving forward. He will guide us through the darkness and lead us to a brighter day. And God will probably do this through other people that he puts in our lives.

I want to end by saying that that we don't have to *entirely* give up the phrase, "God will never give you more than you can bear," which may be comforting if this saying has helped you in the past. Rather, we can rephrase it in a way that's more biblical and helpful. So, the next time you are going through a hard time (or trying to help someone else going through a hard time), instead of saying, "God will never give me more than I can bear," change it to something like this: *No matter what life throws at me, I can handle it with God's help and the support of the people that God puts in my life.*" Say it with me: *"No matter what life throws at me, I can handle it with God's help and the support of the people that God puts in my life."*

How can we let that message sink from our heads to our hearts? How would your life change if you truly believed that God was working through the people around you to help in times of trouble? How would it strengthen your faith? How would it help you navigate suffering? How would rephrasing this common saying help you bring more comfort to others who are going through hard times? These are a few questions that I hope you will ponder today and the week to come.