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## ***“God Never Gives You More Than You Can Handle”***

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***1 Corinthians 10:12-13 (CEB)***

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As we go through life, we all encounter people who seem to have so many different things happening to them. It seems like they have a disproportionate amount of difficult, challenging life events and experiences. Maybe you are that person. It seems like they can never catch a break or catch their breath. And I wonder how many well-intentioned people will say to them, “Oh, well, God never gives you more than you can handle.” Raise your hand if someone has ever said to you “God never gives you more than you can handle.” I would be curious to know how that made you feel. Because to me, that statement makes it seem as though some of us are intentionally given more stuff to deal with than others. That some of us have greater capacity for carrying the hard things of life. It also says something about God that I do not agree with: that God is the one giving us all of these hard things to go through. “God never gives you more than you can handle.” But based on our scripture reading, it kind of sounds like the Bible says that: “[God]...won’t allow you to be tempted beyond your abilities.” It is similar, isn’t it? We can see why this verse of scripture has been hijacked. Perhaps in this situation we should also say, “The Bible doesn’t mean that.”

It is helpful to know the context of this scripture passage because it is going to lend a lot of clarity about what the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote that to the Corinthians. Part of the reason Paul wrote to the Corinthians was to address various disputes and beliefs held by the Corinthians that departed from the gospel he had preached during his time there. The Corinthian church was largely Gentile with varying religious backgrounds, including idol worship. Paul is dealing with the question about eating food that has been offered to idols.

The Corinthians highly valued knowledge and the possession of knowledge. Paul celebrates and acknowledges it but also offers a warning when he says in 1 Corinthians 8 “Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we all know that ‘all of us possess knowledge’... Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that ‘no idol in the world really exists,’ and that ‘there is no God but one.’ Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth- as in fact there are many gods and many lords- yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ‘Food will not bring us close to God.’ We are no worse off if we do eat it, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.” Knowledge is great but it needs to be wielded wisely. They have the knowledge that these idols and gods do not hold any real power. It does not really make a difference one way or the other if they eat meat sacrificed to idols because these gods have no potency. However, there are those who are newer in the faith who are still in the process of changing their hearts and lives and understanding about all these things. Paul is telling them to not make things unnecessarily difficult for the newer Christians. However, eating meat that came from an animal sacrificed to a pagan god was not the problem Paul wanted to address. It was the idol worship and sexual immorality.

Idol worship and sexual immorality may not seem inherently connected, but they were closely connected in the pagan temples of Corinth. Temples would often have prostitutes, particularly in Corinth’s shrine of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. Paul is exhorting the Corinthians to not become idolators or indulge in sexual immorality; to not fall

back into their old habits and pagan practices. He accomplishes this by sharing selections from the wilderness narrative. He wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, "I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness. Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did." Paul is using the wilderness narrative as an example for the Corinthians. It reveals that God's chosen people, who enjoyed the privileges of that status and identity, were still prone to temptation. Likewise, the knowledge that the Corinthians possess will not prevent temptation from happening. "Despite confidence in their own knowledge and the implied right to indulge in idol-offerings, the people of Corinth are reminded that complacent self-confidence is no certain guarantee of constant loyalty to God."<sup>1</sup>

All that to say, what Paul is really talking about here is temptation. When he said "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 of it so that you will be able to endure," he was not talking about hardships and trials in life. He was affirming that as God's people, we are accountable and responsible for our behavior. Paul was encouraging them to have self-discipline in the face of temptation, particularly the temptation to their former pagan practices. Knowledge will only go so far. They need to proactively respond to temptations and recognize that God will provide a way for them to avoid it. God provides a way out and we have the choice to follow it or not.

While we can see why "God never gives you more than you can handle" closely relates to this passage, it holds an entirely different meaning. While the statement intends to offer encouragement in the midst of hardships and difficulties, it is not about those things. It is about God helping you when you are tempted. We know that Jesus himself was tempted. Temptation itself is not sinful, but the follow through action that potentially steps into sin. In addition, scripture affirms that God does not give us temptation. James 1:13 reads, "No one, when tempted, should say, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one."

Likewise, God is not the one who gives us the hardships and trials we encounter in life. Therein lies the problem with "God never gives you more than you can handle." Those first four words: God never gives you. They imply that God is selectively and intentionally giving us hardships and giving them in a disproportionate and unfair manner, even. This idea connects to Rev. Call's sermon last week on "Everything happens for a reason." Some things in life do have a clear reason and cause and effect for happening but then we get to the harder things in life, there are things that do not have a clear answer or reason. I know that I myself have been wounded by the notion of "everything happens for a reason", or "this is all part of God's plan," particularly when scripture is wielded along with those statements. What do they tell us about God? Do we view God as loving, good, and close to us? Or do we view God as judgmental, harsh, and distant from us? Our understanding and view of God greatly impact how we perceive and respond to things that happen in life, whether to us or others.

The hardships and challenges we face in life are not part of God's perfect plan. God does not send these things to us, but we recognize that they are part of our human experience. God does not give us hardships and trials, but God promises to be with us as we go through them. We trust that when bad things happen, God will sustain us, walk with us, hold us near, comfort us, and care for us. When we go through hard times, it is important for us to have scripture truths

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<sup>1</sup> The Anchor Bible Commentary, 1 Corinthians (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1976), 247.

that we can hold on to. The Psalms are a great source because they run the gamut of human emotion and experience and yet affirm God's truth. Here are a couple truths to hold on to:

**Psalm 23:4** *"Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me."*

**Psalm 46:1** *"God is our refuge and strength, a help always near in times of great trouble."*

Scripture affirms that God is with us and that nothing will separate us from the love of God. God helps us to handle everything that happens to us and will never leave us on our own. God's love and presence are steadfast, no matter the circumstances of life.

There are times in life when we face situations that are completely beyond what we can handle. We know that God is with us, but we can also turn to others for help. In my own life, I have greatly benefitted from grief counseling and loss support circles. When my dad died in March of 2019, it became apparent after a few weeks that what I was experiencing was way more than I could handle on my own. I did not know how to navigate the devastating loss associated with my dad's death, plus being a new mom (Mina was born just two months prior), plus leading a congregation. I decided to begin grief counseling. Thankfully, the Hospice of Greater Cincinnati offered free individual counseling because I was not ready for a group experience at that point. It was so helpful to have a place where I could go to process my loss and to be validated in my experience of grief. It helped me to realize I was not crazy, I had not lost it, I was grieving. I have also participated in a support circle for pregnancy loss, which was immensely helpful. It is good to know that you are not the only one going through a particular situation and that there are people who can journey alongside you. The challenges and hardships we encounter have a way of making us feel isolated, so it is good to be reminded that we are not alone. The support we all need when we go through challenging times looks different for each individual person. Sometimes we need to see a therapist or a counselor. Other times we might benefit from a support group. Sometimes we need to visit our doctor or meet with a pastor. What you need is unique to you, but God has given us a multitude of resources in other people who can help.

One of the commentators on this passage pointed out Paul's use of the 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural "you" in verse 13. "[God]...won't allow you 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." Now, that might seem obvious, given that Paul is writing to a group of people and not a single person. However, I think this emphasis underscores a greater truth: the hardships and trials we encounter in life are never meant to be carried alone. The challenges in life are not meant to be experienced in isolation. God does not intend for us to struggle by ourselves but to receive loving support and care from our community. That could be our biological family, the family we create, or our church family. As part of the Body of Christ, we bear one another's burdens. When one part of the body hurts, the rest of the body feels it. When we are baptized, confirmed, or join as members of the church, we make a promise to each other to surround one another in love. To confirm one another's hope. To be faithfully present with each other. This is what covenant community looks like.

God never gives you more than you can handle. The Bible doesn't really say that does it? Maybe let's lay that one to rest and instead try, "How can I help you?" "I'm here for you." While the main impetus behind this sermon series is to explore whether the Bible says these statements we hear and sometimes say, an important outcome of this is to develop empathy. The point is not to fix a problem or make someone feel better with a particular pithy phrase, but to be present with them as God is present with us. We allow ourselves to feel and sit with them in the grief, the challenges, the uncertainty. We embody the love and presence of God to others. We support and journey alongside each other. Our care and compassion reflect that of our Creator God, who is our ever-present help in time of need. God is always with us and helps us handle what comes our way. Thanks be to God. Amen.