

8-31-25: That's Not in the Bible!: "God Never Gives You More than You Can Handle"

Today we continue with the second installment in our end-of-summer series called, "*That's not in the Bible!*" We're exploring some familiar aphorisms that Christians often say to one another, assuming we're spouting Biblical wisdom...but we're not. These sayings are not in the Bible, and in many cases the Biblical witness is exactly the opposite.

Today's topic is, "God never gives you more than you can handle."

Unlike last week's "God helps those who help themselves," today's unbiblical teaching doesn't have a detailed and multi-cultural backstory. It's actually just a bad paraphrase, a misinterpretation of a text we heard just a moment ago, I Corinthians 10:13.

What the passage actually says is this: "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."

Now, that's *close* to "God never gives you more than you can handle." But it's not quite the same. The Scripture is about temptation; it's part of a larger argument Paul is making about Jewish and Gentile Christians living in community together. So why, I wonder, are we so quick to generalize it, to turn it into a commentary about what God is up to when the unspeakable happens?

My guess is that we have turned I Corinthians 10:13 into "God never gives you more than you can handle," because we *want* that to be in the Bible. We want it to be true. We want assurance that God is in control, that nothing will ever happen to us that will completely undo us. But the Bible doesn't offer that reassurance, and that terrifies us.

When Christians get scared, we reach for Biblical truths. And when we can't find one, we are tempted to create a little thing called a "platitude." Platitudes sound like truths; they are *meant* to offer comfort. But the problem with platitudes is that the comfort they offer comes at the direct expense of the person who is suffering.

Think about it: Has anyone ever said this to you, "God never gives you more than you can handle." And tell me, was your life particularly *cheery* when someone said this?

No, of course not! People pull out platitudes when the unthinkable happens: a death, divorce, or diagnosis; the loss of a job or a home. We get uncomfortable when something bad happens to someone else, because it makes us realize that bad things might also happen to us. So we spit out some platitude – "God never gives you more than you can handle," or "Everything happens for a reason" (that's next week – also not in the Bible!) – in an attempt to alleviate our own discomfort.

When we're afraid, our compassion recedes. And before we know it, we are trying to soothe ourselves at the expense of the person who is suffering. Because *unspoken* part of this platitude is, "I could *never* survive what you're going through! God must think you can handle it. But thank goodness God knows that I cannot! Therefore God will afflict me with lesser trials, like long lines and bad internet connection."

Friends, next time someone says something like this to you, I'd suggest you just look them in the eyes and say, "Ouch."

So. The Bible does not say, "God never gives you more than you can handle." That we've established. But what *does* the Bible say about suffering, about when horrible things happen to us?

Two things. And the first is a gift. The Bible gives us the sacred practice of *lament*.

A few moments ago, Cliff read us Psalm 13. “How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all day long?” Not exactly “The Lord is my shepherd,” huh? Psalm 13 is a psalm of lament.

Psalms of lament are cries to God from the human experience of suffering. And there are a *lot* of them in the Bible. Of the hundred and fifty psalms, nearly *one-third* of them are psalms of lament. And it doesn’t stop with the psalms! We find lament in the prophets, and in Job – there’s a *book* in the Bible called Lamentations! – lament is a practice our spiritual ancestors knew well.

In contrast, we live in a culture that teaches us not to complain – buck up and rub some dirt in it. So when life *does* become more than we can handle, we shut down, bury our grief, pretend we’re fine. If our grief is too big to hide, maybe *we* hide out and separate ourselves from the community, so no one thinks we’re just a whiner. We might stop praying because we feel like we have nothing to say to God in our anger or despair. Life has given us more than we can handle, and then in our shame, we are left to handle it entirely alone.

But friends, the Biblical practice of lament encourages us to do the exact opposite.

Lament invites us to take all our pain, anger, sadness, and fear, and pour it out before God and one another. The Biblical laments do not mince words: “My tears have been my food, both day and night,” one sings, “I am poured out like water,” says another, “all my bones are out of joint.” Jesus himself quotes a psalm of lament from the cross, Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Our culture may call it whining, but the Bible calls it a spiritual practice. To lament is to complain *in faith* to God, trusting that the God who breathed life into our bones suffers alongside us. To lament is to admit to our suffering and to call upon our community to bear witness to it. To grieve with us. To pray with us. And then, when one day things *do* get better, to laugh and dance and rejoice with us.

Which brings us to the second thing that the Bible says about suffering. And, perhaps ironically, we find it back in the verse where this all started: I Corinthians 10:13.

Because you see, what I quoted a few minutes ago came from the NRSV – the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible – which is usually one of my favorite English language translations. But in this case, the NRSV falls a little short.

The problem is – and you’ve heard me say this before – that Paul uses the Greek word *humas* several times in this text, and the NRSV translates as ‘you.’ That’s accurate but a little misleading, because the word *humas* – the ‘you’ – is plural. So let me re-read I Corinthians 10:13 to you, this time from the GBSV: The Ginna Bairby Southernized Version:

“No testing has overtaken *y’all* that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and God will not let *y’all* be tested beyond *y’all’s* strength, but with the testing God will also provide the way out so that *y’all* may be able to endure it.”

This is a consistent thread throughout Scripture. The Bible is not about you, it’s about *y’all*; it’s not about me, it’s about we and us. Later, in the same letter, Paul will write to the Corinthian Christians that we are all members of the Body of Christ, and if one member suffers, all suffer together with it. In Galatians, he will tell believers to bear one another’s burdens. In Romans, he’ll tell us to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Friends there is *plenty* in this life that is more than we can handle, but the good news of the gospel is that we do not have to handle it alone.

So what does the Bible say? Life is hard, and it *will* knock us off our feet sometimes. But we worship a God who loves us and holds us and suffers with us. And this God has set us in community – the church – to bear these burdens together.

And, if I understand it, the promise of the Scripture is this: Nothing will overtake us that we, as a community, cannot handle. If we hold one another, walk the road together, and take turns shouldering the load. Amen.