



WESTMINSTER
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Did God Really Promise Never to Give You More Than You Can Bear?

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Psalm 57:1-11
1 Corinthians 10:1-13

It's a note that maybe you could have written: *Pastor, lately I've been feeling that I just can't stay strong enough for one more problem. I always ask for, and receive, the strength to go on, but it's so tiring. Could you possibly do a sermon on the idea of God's promise to never give us more than we can bear?*

Illness strikes, worries at work, your parents need care, school and friends have changed for the worse, or whatever the problem, the trouble, the breakdown that is devastating. What about God's promise to never give us more than we can bear?

All of us could have written that note. There are times when we don't know how we can go on or why we should even try: We have felt the "destroying storms", as the Psalmist says...we know the agony of the "lions that greedily devour human prey"...we have found ourselves deep in the "pit along our path."

And either we say it, or somebody says it to us: *"Well, don't you know what the Bible says, 'God promised never to give us more than we can bear.'"*

Or maybe you've heard people say, *"Everything happens for a reason. God doesn't put more on you than you can handle."*

These are common ways people have of expressing their understanding of providence. The theology behind these

statements is that the events have somehow and for some reason been ordered and orchestrated by God.

We may not know why something has happened, but to give the event, the situation some meaning, a reason, we tie it all to God.

Sometimes it's a celebration but most often times, it's a tragic event.

The Old Testament story of Joseph tells of how his brothers tried to kill him and then sold him into slavery as a young boy. He rises to power in Egypt and then confronts his estranged brothers with his understanding of providence.

"Don't be afraid," Joseph tells them. "Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

Does this mean that God wrote the screenplay, directed all the actors, and produced this evil in an effort to guide Joseph toward Egypt?

And what about the book of Job? Or our text this morning that says God will not let you be tested beyond your strength? Aren't these all about God's promise never to give us more than we can bear?

No, look at the verb we use: that God would not **GIVE** us more than we can bear. That is not what Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians.

Look back at that 13th verse in chapter 10. It contains Paul's understanding of providence: **God is faithful.**

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Paul knew the book of Job, the story of Joseph, and he knew our psalm, and he reaffirms the steadfast love of God, the faithfulness that extends to the heavens.

God is not in the business of making life more difficult, because life is difficult enough on its own. God does not promote evil to eventually produce good, even if you can argue that the end outweighs the means.

God does not add burden upon burden to our lives until we reach some breaking point, and then God stops, like a cruel farmer who beats and beats his old mule bound and determined to get the most out of it.

God is holy. Evil cannot be endorsed or sponsored or supported by a holy God.

God is faithful. It's not about the source of our test or our tribulation or our problem. What Paul wants to assure us about is the source of our strength: ***God is faithful.***

I think about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the young German theologian who was arrested and executed for his role in the plot to assassinate Hitler during World War II.

He wrote a friend from his prison cell that his ordeal convinced him that life does not give us more than we can handle this day.

Listen again, “Life does not give us more than we can handle this day.” Bonhoeffer never believed that God was responsible for what happened to him:

- God did not send Hitler.
- God did not direct that Bonhoeffer be arrested.

- God did not set Bonhoeffer up to die just a few weeks before World War II ended.

Rather, Dietrich Bonhoeffer accepted that life is a journey with many dangers, toils, and snares, but no more than we can handle each day: That's the lesson from Job, from Paul, because God is faithful.

You see, one of the first steps of this journey is to hear what Jesus is saying in the Sermon on the Mount about anxiety and trouble enough for today.

We often try to live in more than one day. We hold on to the regrets from yesterday. We borrow anxiety from tomorrow. Then we wonder why it seems more than we can bear today.

And because of who we are, there's got to be a reason outside of us and our world. It must be God!

But Jesus points to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field and how God cares for them, and says, *"So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."*

One day at a time, sweet Jesus. We cannot live all our days at once nor take on the burdens of all those days at one sitting, just one day at a time. And sometimes, it's really more just a half-day at a time, sweet Jesus.

And yet, it seems to me that Jesus is also pointing to a second step in this journey, that is, Jesus' counsel here is not enough to answer our question completely.

Don't get me wrong. Jesus is on the mark, but I don't think he intended it to be the one answer for all circumstances.

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Because you and I know that sometimes the day's troubles are more than sufficient for the day, and even though we ask for and do receive the strength to go on, it is so tiring.

Sometimes it is not a matter of carrying sorrow over from the past or borrowing trouble from tomorrow. Sometimes all of life comes crashing down on us all at once: a friend betrays you, the doctor comes with bad news, the pink slip comes at the end of the day, the marriage just doesn't work. Sometimes it all seems too much to bear.

And when life seems unbearable, mere words fall short.

Kate Bowler, professor of theology at Duke Divinity School, had everything going for her and then was diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer.

She's written a book entitled *Everything Happens for a Reason (and Other Lies I Have Loved)* and in it she lists some things not to say, and then responds to them:

- *Things are going to get better. I promise.* Well, fairy godmother, (says Kate) that's going to be a tough row to hoe when things go badly.
- *God needed an angel.* This one takes the cake [she says] because (a) it makes God look sadistic and (b) angels are, according to Christian tradition, created from scratch. Not dead people looking for a cameo in [the movie] "Ghost".
- *Everything happens for a reason.* The only thing worse than saying this is pretending that you know the reason. I've had hundreds of people [she writes] tell me the reason for my cancer...When someone is drowning, the only thing worse than failing to throw them a life preserver is handing them a reason.

Whether it's the well-intentioned advice of a friend, or a well-done sermon, or even the divinely profound wise words of Jesus, words are simply not enough.

If words were enough, Jesus would not have been crucified. He could have simply told us about how to triumph over life's troubles.

But Scripture is not a self-help book that gives us four secrets to a happy life or ten steps to a successful career or any of those other magic formula books found on our book shelves.

And Jesus knows more than words are needed; even the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus knows, is not enough all by itself.

The fact is we were never promised a life without trouble:

- Yes, there are 'destroying storms'.
- Yes, we fall prey to 'lions who greedily devour'.
- Yes, there are 'pits' into which we have plunged to the depths.

So says the Psalmist, so says Paul, so says Jesus about today's troubles, knowing full well there could be more

tomorrow. That's why when I hear people attribute horrible, terrible, and even sinful acts as the providential hand of God, I cringe.

People do reap what they sow, suffer the consequence of their actions; those are the examples of the people of Israel Paul writes about.

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People do endure horrific events beyond their control, beyond imagination, but that does not mean that God is the source of unbearable suffering.

God can take these horrible and terrible things that happen to us, even our sinful acts against each other and use them for his own purposes.

“God works together for good for those who love him.”

That’s how Paul says it. But these are not mere words for Paul; they are the redemptive relationship we have in Jesus Christ.

For Jesus said it this way, *“Come unto me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”* He says, *“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”*

That is how God works for our good, we who are tired and don’t know how we can go on. This yoke is why Paul can say, *“Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

When we suffer, we suffer with Jesus. Or to say the same thing in another way, when we suffer, Jesus suffers with us. We are yoked.

In the Apostles’ Creed we say that Jesus ‘descended into hell.’ I remember the woman who told me that, for her, it was the most treasured part of the creed. When I asked why, she answered simply, *“Because hell is where I’ve spent most of my life.”*

Hell, the dark night of the soul, a sense of being forsaken, a place of despair, a time when the day's own troubles are more than enough for today.

We have been there, and Jesus has been there with us. We are there, and Jesus is with us, yoked in faith, us with him, him with us; so that when our world is falling apart, we do not fall away.

This is the only promise from God that truly reaches into the depths of our darkest hours and speaks to our most profound pain.

The story is told of an old preacher whose wife of many decades died after a long, debilitating illness. Their love for each other had been deep and strong. They were inseparable.

No one expected him to show up for church that next Sunday, much less to preach. Surely the grief would be too much to bear. But, when Sunday rolled around, there he was. When the time came for him to preach he climbed into the pulpit.

This was his sermon, two sentences: *"I am here today to tell you that I have hit bottom. And, it is rock solid."*

It is not that we will not fall far and hard. But, when we are at our lowest, when we have fallen further than we ever thought was possible, when we get to the bottom, we will find the rock-solid forever love of God waiting on us.

That is the promise of God, the forever love of God from which we can never be separated.

**Did God Really Promise Never to Give
You More Than You Can Bear?**

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



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