

The Bible Doesn't Say That: God won't give you more than you can handle

2 Corinthians 1:3-11

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From the very first week of the lockdown, Karen Blair, a professor of psychology at St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia has been collecting daily diary entries from more than 1000 Canadians across the country.

And she asks them to journal some specific questions like: "If you could talk to your future self 7 days from now, what would you ask?" And then a week later she gets them to answer. It's like a time heist.

Anyway the goal is to uncover the anxiety people are wrestling with during the pandemic. And the responses she has recorded are wry, panicked and heartbreaking:

Q: Is it getting worse or better?

A: It's worse. It's a lot worse and getting even more worse.

Q: Did you get to say goodbye to grandpa?

A: No, he died before I got better.

Q: How stressed are you at work right now?

A: Holy ****, you have no idea.¹

Now, at present, Northern BC has been largely spared of the worst of the infection, but that doesn't mean we've been spared the side affects.

Maybe you know people like I do who have had their weddings indefinitely postponed or canceled. I know of funerals that haven't happened and may never happen. I know of people who have been unable to visit loved ones in the hospital because guests can't get in, and then those loved ones died.

I know of people whose struggle with mental illness has been exacerbated because of being quarantined by themselves. Suicide rates have increased. All sorts of stuff. People are stressed. And while most of us are going to survive this, it's hard to say whether we are "handling it" or not.

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So how have you been affected by this? Or let me put a positive spin on it: if COVID went away today what is the first thing you'd be happy to leave behind?

If you are watching this live go ahead and fire your answer into the chat, or if you're at Lighthouse let's do some discussion.

- 1.) What is your name?
- 2.) What is the most annoying part of the COVID lockdown for you?
- 3.) Would you say people in your family/friend groups are "handling" COVID just fine, or is it taking its toll on them? How do you know the difference?

¹ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-even-when-covid-19-is-beaten-the-stress-and-depression-of-the/> (Accessed June 17, 2020)

Alright, come on back together....

Today we are going to talk a bit about encouragement, and the encouragement the Bible gives us when we are walking through difficult times. We are also going to talk about the encouragement the Bible doesn't give us. So have you ever been told "Don't worry, God won't give you more than you can handle"?

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Go ahead and grab your Bible, we are in 2nd Corinthians 1 today. And we are coming to the conclusion of our "The Bible Doesn't Say That" series. It turns out people think the Bible says all sorts of things it doesn't actually say.

So the Bible doesn't say God helps those who help themselves. In other words if you work hard then God will get behind what you are doing. Frankly, it isn't our work that matters with God, it's His. And people who think they can work hard enough to get God to help them always miss out because the truth is that God helps those who can't help themselves. God helps sinners who need a Saviour.

The Bible also doesn't say that if we are obedient God will bless us with good stuff. So if you want to be rich and healthy then give money to church and do your devotions. God will out-give you in return. It's a warm-fuzzy idea, it just isn't in the Bible.

What the Bible actually says is none of us have been obedient. The Bible says "You are not good." And so none of us deserve anything good from God. And besides, the blessing God gives out is not His stuff, but Himself. God is the reward.

And today we are going to look at the fact that it's great news that God hasn't promised to never give us more than we can handle.

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Now last week we looked at two passages that seemed to contradict on the topic of judgment, and we are going to do the same today. Our main text today comes from 2nd Corinthians chapter 1, so go ahead and get that ready. But we are also going to look at the text people think says "God won't give you more than you can handle."

So would you stand up with me wherever you are, and let's look at 2nd Corinthians chapter 1 starting in verse 3. Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read 2 Corinthians 1:3-11]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

Now 2nd Corinthians is the most autobiographical of all Paul's letters – he talks about himself and his own experiences throughout the book. And Paul starts the letter taking a very real look at his own suffering.

Now he's doing this because in Corinth there were a bunch of "super apostles" running around who were preaching something similar to today's health and wealth gospel – in essence saying "if you are good with God then everything is going to be awesome." But Paul responds by saying – verse 8 – don't be misinformed. Things have been so hard for us, so beyond our own ability, that we were sure we were going to die.

Now that's a bad sales pitch isn't it! Like if you were trying to convince someone to follow you as you follow Christ, wouldn't it be better to start off with something a bit more encouraging?

Paul says "No, it's not helpful to tell people "Everything is Awesome" or "Absolutely everything makes sense when you're older." These are a couple great lies from movies I let my kids watch.

Paul thinks good news has to be true to be good. And the reality is lots of times it's not going to be "okay" and you might not "make it." And that's because there simply is no promise in scripture that God won't give you more than you can handle.

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And here's the danger. If you buy into false promises like this then when life hits the fan it only leaves you two options. You can blame yourself that your faith isn't strong enough, or you can decide God isn't real or doesn't care.

That's the problem with making the Bible say something it doesn't say. When reality strikes you come apart.

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But doesn't the Bible promise this? What about 1st Corinthians 10:31 where Paul says: God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, He will show you a way out so that you can endure. (1 Corinthians 10:13)

Doesn't this say God isn't going to give you more than you can handle?

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Not quite. What this says is God won't allow you to be tempted or tested beyond what you can handle. In other words you are never going to find yourself in a spot where it is impossible not to sin by walking away from your faith. God always makes a way for you to escape. You can choose obedience.

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Really? I mean I've been in some pretty tempting situations. Is there always a way out?

Yes, but sometimes the way out is a few steps back. Here's what I mean:

If alcohol is the thing that tricks you into relying on it instead of relying on God then it's pretty stupid to complain "Ah man, God lied. I was hanging out at the bar last night and doing great. And then the bartender made a mistake and gave me a drink for free. It was impossible to say no!"

Or if lust is your thing, it's pretty stupid to complain – "I was on the internet at 2am last night just minding my own business when all of a sudden something popped up and boom – not fair! God, you didn't make a way out for me."

In situations like these it may very likely be impossible not to sin. But that's not the full story.

One of my mentors once told me that in instances like these we need discipline. And he defined discipline as something we can do that enables us to do something impossible."²

So what does that mean? How do you do something impossible?

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Well I've told you before that pornography is an issue for me – it's a huge danger. So if I'm online by myself I get into trouble. It doesn't matter how good my intentions are when I start out. Maybe I'm researching the Augustinian theodicy – you know that one right? God's perfect and creates everything, and yet sin exists. I'm just doing some research. And boom I'm looking at stuff I shouldn't. It's impossible for me not to.

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Do you have a sin that keeps popping up in your life and just won't let go? You find yourself in the same spot over and over again?

No? You've mastered sin and you're perfect now? If that's you I give you full permission to tune out for the rest of this. But what do the rest of us do?

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I used to think the goal was getting stronger and stronger my faith till temptation was irrelevant. That's what I was shooting for. After all everyone I met in church gave me the impression they were perfect – have you met those people? Is that the goal you've got for yourself – becoming a super Christian? How's it working out for you?

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If it's not going well the Bible has good news. Discipline isn't about becoming a super Christian. Discipline is doing something you can do that enables you to do the impossible.

So for me it's some software called Covenant Eyes which monitors every computer and phone I use and sends screen shots of anything questionable to Pastor Dave over at the Alliance church.

Can you imagine if a pastor got an email with all the funky sites you visited?... Neither can I! So now when I'm on the net and temptation arises to look at something I shouldn't, I can't because the thought of Pastor Dave calling me to chat about an email my computer sent him is a heinous thought.

² This comes from Dallas Willard.

So I'm not super strong. I'm a sinner, who manages not to sin because I did something pretty easy in a moment of strength – I just set up some software – and it enabled me to overcome a temptation that in the moment would be impossible.

This is Paul's point. God always makes a way for us to stand up under temptation. There is always a way out. And if you want to honour Jesus you need to find that way out and use it. Jesus followers refuse to give themselves to sin – they fight it and resist it with everything they've got. And God has made it possible, by His grace, for us to do that.

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But what Paul doesn't say is that you are going to get out of every hard situation you encounter because God won't let you experience something you can't handle. That's not remotely true. In fact the Bible is packed with stories of people who encountered more than they could handle.

Think teenaged David facing a trained military expert who also happened to be huge? Was David some kind of superhero? Do you know any 16-year-old superheroes? How about some 75-year-old ones?

But when I was in Sunday school that's the way David got painted. And the point was "You should follow God then you will be able to beat all the giants in your life too."

But that is a massively wrong way to read that story. There is no promise that you are going to beat your giants. Some of your loved ones might get COVID. And some of them might die and you might not "handle" that very well. Some of you are struggling with depression and this lockdown is making it worse. And if someone tells you "Don't worry, God's not going to give you more than you can handle" you are going to want to punch them in the face.

Of course that will be a temptation, and God will give you the ability to stand up under that temptation. But there is no promise that you aren't going to suffer from depression.

And so David's not the hero in his story. Yes, he chucks a rock and the giant falls. But David makes it clear that the victory isn't his. Before the fight starts he tells Goliath:

Today the LORD will conquer you, and... everyone assembled here will know that the LORD rescues His people, but not with sword and spear. This is the LORD's battle, and He will give you to us!" (1 Samuel 17:46-47)

David says "Don't get confused. I'm not the hero. I'm not handling Goliath. I'm in well over my head. But God shows up when we are in over our heads. But don't misunderstand what I'm saying. The Bible doesn't promise you will defeat your giants.

Think about depressed Elijah, running into the desert because Jezebel is hunting him. Now Elijah's a beast. He's the guy who calls fire from heaven and stops it from raining. But that's on good days. He's a bit of a manic depressive, and on his off days he's really off.

And that's where we find him when he's trying to die in the desert. But an angel finds him and says: "Get up and eat for the journey in front of you is too much for you."³

Elijah's not the hero in that story. He's not reaching deep into his own abilities and wrestling through. God just shows up when he is in over his head. But don't misunderstand what I'm saying. The Bible doesn't promise you won't suffer.

Here's a hint to what it does promise: think Nebuchadnezzar telling Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego he's going to chuck them into the furnace. This situation isn't within their ability. Fire kills people, that's the point. And their response acknowledges this: "God will save us, or He won't. But either way we aren't bowing down to your golden boy."⁴ Now God does save them, but there was no promise He would. And there is no promise God will deliver you from your situation. The promise is that He will meet us in our need.

So think Jesus on the cross crying out "My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?⁵ Why have You turned Your back on Me?" That's not the cry of someone who is being given only what they can handle. That's a cry of despair. And the cross didn't go away.

And the Bible is full of texts where people encountered situations beyond what they could bear. And that's what Paul speaks of in our passage. But look what he says:
 We were crushed and overwhelmed beyond our ability to endure, and we thought we would never live through it. In fact, we expected to die. But as a result, we stopped relying on ourselves and learned to rely only on God (2 Corinthians 1:8-9)

This is why God allows us to encounter things beyond what we can bear. He knows that in these situations we are open to Him meeting us where we are. And this is what we need.

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So let me ask you, what is it that you want most for yourself right now? Is it being able to go on the vacation you had planned pre COVID? Is it getting a new 86-inch TV? Or a new car, or a new house?

Maybe it's more important than those kinds of things. Is it good health for yourself or a loved one? Or how about a stable job so you can provide for your family?

Or maybe it's one of those things the world tells us are the most important things in life. Maybe the thing you want most for yourself is love and good relationships with your loved ones. Or maybe finding that special someone so you can stop being so lonely? What is it you want most in life?

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³ 1 Kings 19:7

⁴ Daniel 3

⁵ Mark 15:34

Now there is nothing wrong with any of these things. But all of them, every one of them, is a secondary thing that isn't going to matter a thousand years from now.

Nobody is going to care if their RRSP's were enough to keep them comfortable in retirement. Nobody is going to care if they were lonely or even if their loved ones had enough food. Nobody is going to care, not even you.

Now I'm not saying these things aren't important – they are. And God cares about them. And He wants those things for you. But they aren't the most important thing. And what happens is that our focus can get stuck on important things so that we miss the Ultimate Thing. Good people get strung up in this. And God knows this. And He wants the ultimate good for you. He wants abundant life for you.

And so in His mercy He allows us to encounter things beyond our ability – hard things, brutal things – so that we stop relying on ourselves and learn to rely on Him. And this isn't God toying with us and laughing at our misfortune. It is Him lovingly leading us towards the One Thing that is going to bring us the abundant life that we are all seeking – Himself.

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So where are you at today? Is there stuff going on in your life that you aren't "handling"? Sure, you aren't dead yet, but you aren't driving through on cruise control either. You are struggling. Is there anything in your life that has taken you to the end of yourself?

If there is, then the Bible has some incredible news. God gives us more than we can handle because He cares and hasn't walked away. God doesn't want us to be lulled into ignorantly thinking small things are going to make us happy. And so He uses difficulty to wake us up to our need for Him. And the result is the abundant life He designed us for - life with God.

So friends, the message of scripture is not that God will only give you what you can handle. He may very well take you beyond your ability. But in the midst of need, in the midst of trouble, God promises to meet us and walk with us if we will turn to Him.

So stop trusting in yourself, you aren't enough. And you've never been enough even when things were going good. But, in His grace, God is calling you to Himself right now, and He's enough for you. It's not an accident you're hearing this. Direct your eyes to Him. Look to Him for salvation. He knows that He's what you need.

Let me pray for us.