

Have you ever felt overwhelmed? Maybe it was a time in your life where you lost a loved one or went through a time of sickness. Maybe it was related to your job or family situation.

In her book: “Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved” Kate Bowler shared about a time when she felt overwhelmed. Before she was diagnosed with stage four cancer, she shared how she really suffered with pain in her hands all the while trying to finish her dissertation. She said, “By day, I had to make endless accommodations for the weakness in my arms in the way I answered email, graded papers, chopped ingredients for dinner, and went to the gym...Life had become an obstacle course of things to be overcome to the sound of a ticking clock.”<sup>i</sup>

There has been or will be a time in all our lives where we feel like we simply cannot bear the burdens we are facing...when we feel completely overwhelmed and uncertain of what to do. Whether this feeling lasts a second or goes on for months, well-meaning friends and family may tell us: “Well, God won’t give you more than you can handle.”

Just like the other phrases we have studied, the intention behind these words is caring and helpful. The people who say this phrase believe in our inner strength, in our faith, and our ability to overcome whatever obstacle has been placed in our path with the help of God.

But like the promises of the prosperity gospel from last week, this saying puts more faith in the individual than it does in God’s providence. This phrase also discounts free will and that our actions and the actions of others also lead to our suffering.

Today we start our fifth Sunday in “The Sticks and Stones: The Things We Say Sermon Series. We have already tackled 1) Love the Sinner Hate the Sin 2) You’ll Be in My Thoughts and Prayers 3) God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and 4) the prosperity gospel. Along the way we have found that the origin of several of these phrases are by well-meaning people who used the Bible out of context.

Today is no different. Although there is no specific origin for the phrase “God won’t give you more than you can handle” upon research it seems that this phrase stemmed from a misunderstanding of 1 Corinthians 10.

*Christianity Today* tells us “There's a well-known verse in 1 Corinthians 10, (v13) where Paul tells his readers that ‘God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.’ It's a reminder of God's grace, that, as the next line tells us, ‘he will provide a way out’ when we're faced with serious temptation... Yet somehow, through a mix of poor exegesis and the prevalence of a kind of self-help gospel in the modern church, that verse has become seriously misquoted; turned out of shape and repurposed as something quite different. Something dangerous and unhelpful...”<sup>ii</sup>

The dark side to this phrase is that it leaves the person who receives it feeling that they are not good enough or faithful enough because they feel like they can’t handle whatever situation they are in. It may also leave them not wanting to share more about their lives.

The truth about life and our faith is that because of the effects of sin in the world we sometimes have to bear more than we can handle; this is why we need God, and this is why we need the church.

Reading through the New Testament we see that even the Apostle Paul felt overwhelmed in his suffering. In 2 Corinthians 1:8 Paul says, “We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself.”

Colin Matoon from the Biblical Counseling Coalition reflects, “This passage shows us Paul was burdened beyond his strength. To be burdened beyond one’s strength is to have more than he or she can handle. God, through Paul, is saying people can experience more suffering than they can handle.”<sup>iii</sup>

So, the Bible does indeed discount the phrase “God won’t give you more than you can handle.” Sometimes I do wish this phrase was true. Being a pastor for over 10 years I have seen people dealing with more than can handle; be it a health crises, or loss of a loved one, it seems like some people can never catch a break. Suffering happens because we live in a fallen world.

Ever since Genesis 3, where Adam and Eve committed the first sin, we have had to deal with tragedy, death, and sorrow. Jesus was the only one who could overcome sin and death and offer us hope and new life. Yet in our humanity, we still have deal with suffering and death. This is why we turn our hope to the second coming of Jesus Christ.

Did you know that the most recent person to claim that they knew when Christ would return was Ronald Weinland, a member of The Church of God, Preparing for the Kingdom of God (COG-PKG)?<sup>iv</sup> In June 2019 he predicted that Christ would return by Pentecost 2019. That day has come and gone, and Christ has not returned yet.

In our lectionary passage today from Luke 12:40 we hear this good news: “You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” Matthew 24:42 tells us: “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” None of us know the day or hour that Christ is returning, but we are called to be ready and to keep watch.

When I heard about the two mass shootings last weekend the first words that came to my mind were “How long O Lord?” These words are from Psalm 13 which reads:

“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say, “I have prevailed over him,” lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken. But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me.”

This Psalm, written by David, shows many of the feelings we experience when the burdens of this life seem to consume us, and yet at the end of the psalm, even in the midst of suffering, David is able to praise God.

When we say, “How long O Lord” we also ask, how long until Christ returns? Especially on the dark days in our nation and world, we wait and hope for Christ to return and redeem the world.

In a sermon entitled: “The Second Coming of Christ” Billy Graham shared: “People ask me, “Do you really believe that Jesus Christ is going to come back to this earth again?” Yes, I do. The Bible teaches that Jesus is coming again. And I don’t see any other hope, because we’re heading toward a catastrophe in our world.”<sup>v</sup>

We wait and hope for Christ to return because people are suffering. When people feel like they cannot bear to the pain of this world they turn to alcohol, drugs, and addiction. Others suffer from depression and loneliness and grief. Sometimes people suffer in silence thinking they can take the burden on their own shoulders, but as the church we know that we do not suffer alone, God is with us and the church is with us.

When we see someone going through a difficult time, instead of saying “God won’t give you more than you can handle” a more biblical response is “In the midst of your suffering God is with you and I am here for you.”

Time and time again we see that God journeyed alongside those who were suffering. In the Old Testament, God led the Israelites out of slavery to the promised land. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ spent most of his time with people who were suffering in mind, body, and spirit and we are called to do the same.

So, what kinds of actions can we take when we see our family or friends overwhelmed or consumed with pain or grief?

1) Authenticity goes a long way. Just as David the psalmist was completely authentic in Psalm 13, we too are called to share our whole lives with each other, not just the good parts.

Did you know that even with the advances in technology people are more lonely now than ever? Many health care advisors are calling this a “loneliness epidemic” and a “2018 survey from *The Economist* and the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) finds that over one fifth (22%) of US adults say they always or often feel lonely, lack companionship, or feel left out or isolated.”<sup>vi</sup> So, it is up to all of us to help people feel more connected.

Responding to someone with the phrase: “God won’t give you more than you can handle” might completely shut them down and they may not share more about their lives, but responding with, “Tell me more about what’s going on...” opens the door to hear what is really going on with someone you care about.

It is also important for us to be honest about our lives and share our struggles. No one is perfect and we find solace when we find others who have been through what we are going through.

2) Don’t be afraid to ask for help. This past week I found myself in need of help and grace. My father-in-law Earl had suffered a heart attack and stroke. My husband went to be with his parents, so I had to bring my rowdy three-year old son with me to a church council meeting and the teacher appreciation lunch. My son was acting crazy, the church was patient. The church showed up to help me cut and transport tomatoes.

I am thankful to live in a community of believers who help each other bear our burdens. Don’t be afraid to ask for help, if you don’t ask other may not know you need support.

**The good news for our lives today is that Christ will return in victory!** In the meantime, we are called to shoulder each other’s burdens and rest in the presence of God. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Kate Bowler. “Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved. Random House. New York New York. 2018. P. 15.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/why-its-time-to-stop-saying-god-wont-give-you-more-than-you-handle/92915.htm>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2015/11/04/moving-beyond-god-wont-give-you-more-than-you-can-handle/>

<sup>iv</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church\\_of\\_God\\_Preparing\\_for\\_the\\_Kingdom\\_of\\_God](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_God_Preparing_for_the_Kingdom_of_God)

<sup>v</sup> <https://billygraham.org/decision-magazine/january-2009/the-second-coming-of-christ/>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.itchronicles.com/technology/does-technology-make-us-more-alone/>