

ðA Way of Escapingö (God Doesn't Give you More than You Can Handle)
 Psalm 23,: I Corinthians 10:13, James 1:12-16
 Farmville Baptist Church
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God never gives us more than we can handle. We've all heard that, haven't we? I suspect many of us have said it. As with the phrase, ðEverything happens for a reason,ö often we tell ourselves, ðGod doesn't give me more than I can handleö when we are going through a hard time ó the thought can motivate us to stay the course and keep on keeping on. I'm usually all for anything that helps us navigate through hard times, but this statement, used in this way, is not biblical. Why? As always, it has to do with context.

People usually cite I Corinthians 10:13 as the source for this statement ó we heard Sandy read it for us earlier. There are two main problems with interpreting this Scripture to mean that God doesn't give us more than we can handle. The first is that Paul is not talking about hard times or suffering in this passage, he's talking about temptations and tests. Once again, Paul is writing to one of the churches that he founded ó this time the one in Corinth. Corinth was a port city known for pagan influences and idol worship. There were temples to numerous deities all over town. If you bought meat in the local market, it probably had been sacrificed to a pagan god at one of the temples. And there was more than idol worship going on in Corinth. In the Roman world, the phrase ðto live like a Corinthianö was synonymous with drunkenness and sexual license.ⁱ

Think with me about when you first became a Christian. What bad habits or ungodly practices did you have to leave behind in order to follow Christ? Many of the new Christians in Corinth were working to leave behind idol worship and visits to temple prostitutes that were a part of the pagan religious life. This was not easy, because they remained surrounded by sexual

immorality and friends who continued in that lifestyle. They were trying to follow Jesus, but they were slipping back into their former ways. Paul was writing to help them avoid these temptations and sins. With this context in mind, listen to the verses that lead up to the one Sandy read earlier:

“Remember our history, friends, and be warned. All our ancestors were led by the providential Cloud and taken miraculously through the Sea. They went through the waters, in a baptism like ours, as Moses led them from enslaving death to salvation life. They all ate and drank identical food and drink, meals provided daily by God. They drank from the Rock, God’s fountain for them that stayed with them wherever they were. And the Rock was Christ. But just experiencing God’s wonder and grace didn’t seem to mean much—most of them were defeated by temptation during the hard times in the desert, and God was not pleased. The same thing could happen to us. We must be on guard so that we never get caught up in wanting our own way as they did. And we must not turn our religion into a circus as they did—“First the people partied, then they threw a dance.” We must not be sexually promiscuous—they paid for that, remember, with 23,000 deaths in one day! We must never try to get Christ to serve us instead of us serving him; they tried it, and God launched an epidemic of poisonous snakes. We must be careful not to stir up discontent; discontent destroyed them. These are all warning markers—DANGER!—in our history books, written down so that we don’t repeat their mistakes. Our positions in the story are parallel—they at the beginning, we at the end—and we are just as capable of messing it up as they were. Don’t be so naive and self-

confident. You're not exempt. You could fall flat on your face as easily as anyone else. Forget about self-confidence; it's useless. Cultivate God-confidence." Then verse 13 that we heard earlier, "No testing or temptation 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 or overcome it."

So this passage is about temptation, not hard times or suffering. We are all subject to temptations, even Jesus was. It's a normal part of being human. And the good news, is that God will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can withstand, he will provide a way of escape.

This leads us to the second problem with the phrase God does not give us more than we can handle. This Scripture tells us that God gives us a way of escaping, but notice it does not say that God causes us to be tempted. Like we talked about in the first week of this series, God doesn't give us bad things to handle. The book of James reinforces this idea. Sandy read this for us earlier, but it's worth hearing again.

¹² Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord^[a] has promised to those who love him. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; ¹⁵ then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. ¹⁶ Do not be deceived, my beloved,

But what about the Lord's prayer you might ask? Don't we pray lead us not into temptation, doesn't that imply that God might do that? If we focus on "lead us" it doesn't imply that at all. Hear it this way, Lead us not into temptation (as we would lead ourselves) but deliver us from evil. ⁱⁱ

And that's the problem isn't it? While God wants to lead us away from temptation, when God provides a way, we often don't pursue it. ⁱⁱⁱ Like many folks, I've picked up some extra weight during the pandemic. But instead of stocking the fridge with healthy snacks, I can't quit buying things that self-sabotage my efforts to do better. I keep putting temptation right in front of myself. We do this to ourselves all the time? Alcoholics hide a bottle, porn addicts stash a magazine or keep an internet site bookmarked on their computers. Then when we give in, we often blame it on the enemy. "The devil made me do it," Flip Wilson used to say. The reality is that the devil can't make us do anything, and resistance is not futile. But we do have to be responsible to follow the way of escaping that God creates for us.

Finally, we need to acknowledge that sometimes life is more than we can bear. We talked about this last week when we addressed the phrase "God helps those that help themselves." If we are like most folks, at some point we absolutely will face things that are more than we can bear. These things are not part of God's perfect plan, they are not sent by God. ^{iv} They are a part of what it means to live in a fallen world. Scripture does not promise that we won't go through hard times, but Scripture does promise that God cares for us and walks with us. We hear this promise in our psalm lesson today. "Yea, though I walk through the deepest valleys, under the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for YOU ARE WITH ME." The psalmist knows that he will experience hard times? and heaven knows David did, but he takes comfort in knowing that he will not be alone. In the New Testament, Romans 8 reminds us that nothing,

absolutely nothing can separate us from God's love.

Back in the fall, I shared with you Annie Johnson Flint's story. You may remember that Annie, born just after the Civil War, lost both parents before she was six and she was adopted by a childless couple. While she was still in her teens, she was afflicted with arthritis and lost her ability to walk. She aspired to become a composer and concert pianist, but her illness deprived her of the ability to play. She began to write poetry and set several of her poems to music. When she could no longer open her hands, she would type using only her knuckles. Out of her deep affliction, and using three passages of Scripture, she wrote the words to one of my favorite hymns, He Giveth More Grace.

He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater
 He sendeth more strength when the labors increase
 To added affliction He addeth His mercy
 To multiplied trials His multiplied peace

When we have exhausted our store of endurance
 When our strength has failed ere the day is half done
 When we reach the end of our hoarded resources
 Our Father's full giving is only begun

His love has no limit, His grace has no measure
 His pow'r has no boundary known unto men
 For out of His infinite riches in Jesus
 He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again

Will you pray with me please: O God, how grateful we are for the way you walk with us in every moment of our lives. In those moments when we are tempted and tested, help us remember that we can resist and that you do provide a way of escaping. You give us the strength we need when we turn to you. When we walk through difficulty and adversity, help us remember that these burdens did not come from you, but that you have said you will help us bear them. Thank you for people who come along our path and help carry us through those challenging times. Help us have eyes to see those around us who need our help ó and to see how we might be instruments

of your help for them. How grateful we are, Lord, that you are our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, even when our world seems to be falling apart. Amen.

ⁱⁱ Adam Hamilton, *Half Truths*, p. 81.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 86

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 87

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 93