

INTRODUCTION

The phrase “God helps those who help themselves” is often uttered with a harsh tone of condescension, but not so with the statement, “God won’t put more on you than you can bear.”¹ These words are usually spoken out of deep concern and compassion. There is no criticism implied in this statement, only kindness.

Join me down at the funeral home for a minute. Joan is standing beside the casket of her husband of 45 years. It is visitation time and friends are dropping by to share their condolences. A caring friend approaches her and hugs her and asks, “How are you doing, Joan?” Joan chokes out her response, “Not too good, Betty, I really think I’m losing it. I don’t think I’m going to be able to stand this pain. It’s just too much!”

Betty feels she needs to say something to help her friend so she says, “Oh honey, I’m so sorry. I really am. Just remember, God won’t put more on you than you can bear.” Joan nods mutely. Now, Betty isn’t trying to mislead her friend. She’s just trying to encourage her to hang in there and not give up.

After Betty leaves Joan ponders those words. She thinks, “If God won’t put more on us than we can bear, then what’s wrong with me? Because I don’t think I can bear this pain.” Hours earlier she stood in her husband’s closet and when she caught a whiff of the unique fragrance of his clothes, she fell to the floor and curled into a fetal position and cried until her tear ducts were dehydrated.

No, she realizes she isn’t doing a good job of enduring this pain. She thinks she must not be very close to God, or maybe her faith is just so weak she can’t trust God enough. So, she pulls herself together to speak to the other friends. She thinks she’s doing better, but then as she’s driving home later that night, a song comes on the radio that reminds her of a special memory with Jim and suddenly she’s blubbing again. No, she’s definitely not bearing it well. So she wonders, “What’s wrong with me?”

The problem is that Betty expressed a theological maxim—she made a categorical statement about the character and nature of God. It’s like saying, “God is holy.” Or “God is love.” Or “God has promised He will never leave us nor forsake us.” All of those statements are found in the Bible. But as you search the pages of scripture, you *never* find the statement: God will never put more on you than you can bear.

So, I want to say to Joan, and all the other folks who have passed the breaking point, “There’s nothing wrong with you. Betty meant well, and she really cares for you, but she’s no theologian. Your pain IS more than you can endure alone. And God didn’t put it there, by the way.

One reason Bible believing Christians think the Bible says “God won’t put more on you than you can bear” is because there is a scripture that *almost* says that. The Bible does say in I Corinthians 10:13, “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be TEMPTED beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted he will also provide a way out so you can stand up under it.” God is faithful and He will not allow you to be

tempted beyond what you can bear. I can assure you when you are tempted to cheat, steal, commit adultery, worry, or murder, you can never say, “Sorry, God, that temptation was just more than I could endure.” God always makes a way to escape temptation. But can you say “God won’t put more temptation on you than you can bear?” No, because the Bible clearly says God never tempts us. “When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.” (James 1:13)

So if you have a friend who struggles with lust, and he’s leaving on a business trip it is appropriate to say, “Just remember, friend, God won’t allow you to be TEMPTED beyond what you can bear, so resist the temptation!” If you ever hear anyone say they gave into temptation because it was more than they could bear, you know they’re lying.

But I’ve never heard people share this psuedo-scripture when someone is facing temptation. It’s usually quoted when someone is in the midst of painful trouble. That trouble may be in the form of emotional, physical, spiritual, or relational pain. Let’s carefully consider this question “Will you ever experience trouble, stress, or pressure that is more than you can bear?” I’d like to offer four observations about the statement, “God won’t put more on you than you can bear.”

I. FOLLOWERS OF JESUS MAY EXPERIENCE UNBEARABLE PRESSURE

Most of us would agree Paul was a true follower of Jesus. But we learn this man who was “in Christ” sometimes faced trouble and pressure so severe he couldn’t bear it—or at least he couldn’t bear it alone. Here is his amazing confession found in 2 Corinthians 1:8-10, We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships (*thlipsis*) we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us with your prayers.”

Paul could stand here today and say, “I’ve faced so much pain, so much pressure and hardship in my life as a Christian that I finally had to admit that as a sufferer I was powerless to help myself. I once heard the expression ‘God won’t put more on you than you can bear.’ That’s not true. There have been times I’ve been so burdened down with the weight of problems and despair I couldn’t bear it. I wouldn’t even be here today if God hadn’t delivered me.” In 2 Corinthians 11:24-28 he recounts some of the troubles he faced: Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles, in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea, and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.”

Can we use Paul as an example of a Spirit-filled Christian? He told us to follow his example. And you can’t deny the fact he bore pressure beyond his ability to endure. So, the first point is to

understand sometimes Christians hurt so deeply that it *is* more than they can bear. A few weeks ago, Dr. Howard Hendricks made an observation I haven’t forgotten. He said, “Sometimes life gets so tough that you don’t just *hit* rock bottom—you crash through it!” So, welcome to suffering. Now, let’s move on the second observation about this misquote.

II. THIS MISQUOTE HAS CREATED UNNECESSARY CONFUSION AND GUILT

This misquote is usually spoken out of kindness, but it can cause great confusion and guilt.

1. Theological confusion: Does God put adversity on me?

It can create confusion about God because it suggests it is God who put adversity and trouble in our lives. Is God a malevolent deity who weighs His children down with pain and suffering? No, the Bible teaches He is a loving Father who has plans for good, not to harm His children. I’m a dad, and as imperfect as I am, I would never burden my children with suffering. The only time I ever intentionally caused pain to my children was when I had to discipline them. And as we discussed in the message on “Spare the Rod; Spoil the Child” God sometimes disciplines His children to bring them back to His heart.

The vast majority of suffering in the world comes from the devil and from the consequences of living in a fallen world full on sin. God doesn’t *put* this suffering on us, but He *allows* suffering to happen. God usually gets blamed for every disaster and accident. How many times have you heard someone ask, “How could God allow those children to die in that tornado?” More than a few times, I’ve heard someone say something like, “I just can’t believe in a God who allows all those people to die in an earthquake in Peru.”

The purpose of this message is not to fully develop this topic. (See March 29, 2002 message, “Why do Good People Suffer?” for more information on this topic) But in a nutshell, the reason sickness and natural disasters are present in this world is because we are living in a messed-up fallen world. It’s part of the consequences of corporate sin. Suffering exists in this world like nuclear fallout after an atom bomb. We all suffer from the “fall-out from the fall.” In a way, it’s like a person who smoked two packs of cigarettes a day for twenty years asking, “God, how you allow me to get lung cancer?” Blame sin, blame Satan, blame our bad choices, but don’t blame God for putting trouble in your life. Life isn’t fair, but God IS good.

2. Emotional guilt: Why am I falling apart?

This misquote causes guilt because it can make broken people think they are second-class Christians if they pass the breaking point. There are thousands of Christians who have mental and emotional problems—perhaps they have a chemical imbalance causing them to suffer from clinical depression. They’ve heard this theological platitude so many times they may avoid seeking professional help. They presume if they are truly right with God they don’t need to see a doctor. And if it is true God won’t put more on them than they can bear, then it stands to reason they shouldn’t have to take medicine to deal with their emotional pressure. So instead of admitting they may need professional help, or taking medicine to correct a chemical imbalance, they continue to press on thinking they ought to be able to handle the stress and pain.

I recently read the about a woman named Ellie Petersen who found herself suddenly facing a terrible nightmare of adversity. Ellie’s four-year-old granddaughter came over to her house to play while her mother ran some errands. They were out in the yard playing catch with an inflatable ball. Ellie accidentally threw the ball over Ashley’s head and she watched in horror as Ashley ran between two cars parked in the curb toward the street. Ellie screamed for her to stop, but Ashley never heard her—she ran into the street and never saw the car that hit her.

Ellie was sitting in the ER waiting for Ashley’s parents to arrive. Her good friend from church, Rebecca, heard the bad news and rushed to the hospital to console her. In her desire to say something to help, Rebecca said, “Pull yourself together, Ellie, remember, God won’t put more on you than you can bear.”

The article observed: “The words hit Ellie like a sledgehammer. Instantly, thoughts and feelings swirled around her brain until she thought she would pass out. Was she supposed to bear this? Was she less of a Christian because she couldn’t? How dare Rebecca speak so smugly and sanctimoniously to her...it wasn’t HER granddaughter who was lying here, broken. Shame was added to her guilt and despair, grief was multiplied as condemnation was heaped upon her shoulders, all in the name of kindness.”

That’s the danger of this spurious theological statement. There are multitudes of people under unbearable pressure, and they have passed by the breaking point. They’re struggling with the death of a spouse, or the death of a child, or a divorce, or a job loss, or a cancer diagnosis, or an unfaithful spouse, or a teenager arrested on drug charges, or a parent with Alzheimer’s. I could go on endlessly. We are surrounded by people with broken hearts, broken hopes, or broken homes. When these broken people hear the statement, “God won’t put more on you than you can bear” they think, “Uh, oh. What’s wrong with me?”

Okay, then, *why* does God allow me to experience unbearable pressure? We won’t know all the reasons until we see Jesus face to face, but I believe one of the reasons God allows us to pass the breaking point is because:

III. UNBEARABLE PRESSURE TEACHES ME THAT I CAN’T MAKE IT ALONE

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 1:9-11, “But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us with your prayers.” Paul basically said two important things we all must learn:

1. I can’t make it without God

Paul confessed it got so bad he “despaired even unto death.” His pain and despair was so deep he just knew he was going to die. But then he turned to his heart to God, and thought, “Hey, even if I do die, my God raises the dead, so I’m going to hang on to Him.”

I do a great deal of my research online using the search engine Google. The good thing about the Internet is that it provides an unlimited source of information. The bad thing about the Internet is that it provides an unlimited source of information. A few weeks ago, I simply plugged in the phrase “God won’t put more on you than you can bear” (in quotation marks to refine the search) There were more links than I could trace, but one of the links took me to a message board. And when I read what one struggling mother wrote, I wept. Here are her exact words:

Where do i start? i need a new place to live. i need a new job. i need to be able to support myself and the boys without counting on johnny, who is in self-destruct mode. (two tickets gone to warrant, his Mack truck unregistered for two years, probably on drugs--grey skin, wild eyes...) people don't want to rent to a single mother with two boys and a cat. people don't want to rent to a woman with bad credit. people don't want to rent to a crisis magnet. to summon the energy to look for yet another job (third in two years), and look for another home (third in two years), look for other childcare (fifth in two years) is more than i can bear. the bible says god won't give you more than you can bear. okay, god, i can't bear this. i need help.

I have never used instant messaging or posted on a web board, but when I read those words I composed a reply telling her the Bible never says that, and that God will help her. I gave her some scriptures and told her to seek help from of God’s people. I don’t know if the response ever got back to her or not. I gave her my email address and if she writes, I’ll connect her to one of the ladies in our Women in Motion ministry. But how many more people like her do you think are out there? They may be in your office, or your apartment complex or they may be living in your home. Our message to them is, “YES, God does sometimes allow you to bear more pressure than you can endure—so you will seek Him.”

2. I can’t make it without your prayers

When people reach the breaking point, they first think they can tough it out alone. When they can’t, then they call upon the Lord, but part of trusting the Lord with your pain is to seek the help and prayers of fellow strugglers. That’s why the Bible says we are to “Bear one another burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:2) The law of Christ is to love your neighbor as yourself. One way you show your love to others is by helping them carry their burdens. You may think, “I’ve got enough burdens of my own, I don’t want to carry anyone else’s!” You’ll find when you carry others burdens, yours gets lighter, too. And we should take all our worries and cares and do as God directs us: “Cast all your cares upon Him for He cares for you.” (I Peter 5:7)

Hurting people need the love and prayers of other people who have gone through some of the same pain. We have a Grief Share ministry here that allows grieving people to share their burdens with others—and I’ve heard countless testimonies from people who have told me our Grief Share ministry literally saved their life. We have a Divorce Recovery ministry here because people who go through the tragedy of divorce need the support and care of people who know just how recently divorced people are feeling.

IV. GOD SUPPLIES HIS GRACE TO SUSTAIN ME IN TOUGH TIMES

I confess I used to believe God won’t put more on you than you can bear. I used to say it to people as if it came right from the scriptures. I remember saying it once to a lady who lost her husband unexpectedly. When I said, “God won’t put more on you than you can bear.” She smiled and proceeded to teach me a lesson I never got in seminary. She said, “Oh, I’ve heard that before. But I’ve never found it in the Bible. And I’ve found the opposite to be true. I’ve found at times God WILL allow us to suffer more than we can bear—it makes us depend on Him. I *have* found that God will never put more on you than God can bear, however.”

That’s true! Using Paul again as an example, he had one chronic problem that never seemed to leave him. It’s often called his “thorn in the flesh.” This is what Paul wrote about it in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, “To keep from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Through the years, scholars tried to guess what Paul’s “thorn” problem was. The theories range from epilepsy to sexual temptation, to eye problems. I’m glad we don’t know what his thorn was. It’s like men’s socks: One size fits all. Whatever his thorn was, the principle applies to whatever point of pain we face. Three times Paul begged God in prayer to take it away. But God allowed Him to suffer this thorn for a reason. It made Paul depend on God instead of himself. And Paul just learned to live with the thorn.

Christians sometimes go through tough times. Robert Schuller once wrote a book entitled *Tough Times Never Last But Tough People Do*. I never really liked that title because it suggests if you’re just tough enough, you can endure through temporary tough times. But for some people tough times *do* last. What about the inmate serving a life sentence? Try telling him tough times don’t last. What about those parents who have a severely mentally or physically handicapped child? Try telling them tough times don’t last.

The truth is sometimes tough times go on and on and none of us are tough enough on our own to handle it. So I’m thinking about writing a book entitled “Tough Times Seem to Go on Forever But Weak People Cry Out to God for Help.”

CONCLUSION

For the first twenty years of my Christian life I thought since I was a Spirit-filled Christian I should never display any kind of weakness or need in my life. When I was 29, I was under a lot of stress and didn’t even know it. We recently built our first home and had done a lot of the work ourselves. In addition, I was finishing my doctoral work at Southern Seminary. To top it off, my mother was living with us and was dying from breast cancer. All the time I was also pastoring a growing, active church.

Looking back, I thought I had it all together, but I wasn’t willing to admit the amount of stress in my life. The way I dealt with it was to just work harder. After all, if I “broke down” and shared my pain with someone else, it would prove either I wasn’t strong enough or that God wasn’t doing his job. I started losing weight, without trying to. I went to a doctor and he ran tests including a colonoscopy, but they couldn’t find anything physically wrong with me.

I was leading a MasterLife group with five couples, and during one session toward the end of the cycle we were sharing prayer requests and I was mentioning my mother, and my doctoral work when suddenly out of the blue, I started weeping. I had never been much of a crier because my dad subtly taught me that real men don’t cry. As I wept, these precious friends (they’re still my friends) gathered around me and hugged me and prayed for me.

It was my first of several “break downs” I’ve had since. In fact, Cindy can tell you now I cry at anything. We were watching the movie “Seabiscuit” the other night and during the big race as Seabiscuit pulls ahead she was clapping and I was sitting there crying like a baby.

As I look back, I think God did a powerful work in my life when I was 28. He introduced me to the experience of brokenness. To us, a broken dish is worthless, or a broken television is no good, but to God, brokenness makes a vessel more usable. God uses broken things. The little boy brought the five loaves and two fish to Jesus and He broke them in order to feed thousands. When Mary brought the spikenard of perfume to anoint Jesus, the vessel had to be broken before the fragrance filled the room. And the body of Jesus had to be broken before we could be forgiven. My personal prayer continues to be that God will use my life to give Him glory, and I realize I must be broken for Him to do that. I don’t know where I’d be today, if God hadn’t broken me in 1983. I suspect that if I had “toughed it out” and said, “Shake it off, David, remember, God won’t lay more on you than you can bear,” that I probably wouldn’t be here sharing this message with you.

So remember, God *will* sometimes allow you to suffer more than you can bear—but that’s okay, because His grace is sufficient!

OUTLINE

I. FOLLOWERS OF JESUS MAY EXPERIENCE UNBEARABLE PRESSURE

II. THIS MISQUOTE HAS CREATED UNNECESSARY CONFUSION AND GUILT

1. Theological confusion: Does God put adversity on me?
2. Emotional guilt: Why am I falling apart?

III. UNBEARABLE PRESSURE TEACHES ME THAT I CAN’T MAKE IT ALONE

1. I can’t make it without God
2. I can’t make it without your prayers

IV. GOD SUPPLIES HIS GRACE TO SUSTAIN ME IN TOUGH TIMES



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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes