

## Urban Legends 2

### *God Never Gives Us More Than We Can Handle*

I got a call and I immediately went to the hospital to meet someone from our congregation. Just to let you know, I asked her permission to use this story. Her husband had an incurable disease and he was battling depression. His father and his brother before him had taken their own lives.

Her husband was in such despair that he swallowed a bottle full of pills in an effort to end his life. He wasn't successful and was admitted to the hospital. When I got there he was in bed. His wife was in the room and so was a required suicide watch individual.

As I spoke with the wife the suicide watch woman was listening to every word. Finally she said to the wife, "Honey, just remember, God won't give you more than you can bear."

I know she meant well, but as soon as I heard those words come out of her mouth I thought, "Oh no. I can't believe you just said that." I watched the wife's face drop as she looked at the woman and she said with an exasperated and forceful tone, "Listen, God's already given me way more than I can bear."

Who was right, the hospital volunteer or the distraught wife? Is the bumper-sticker and church sign slogan that we see so often "God won't give you any more than you can bear" really true or is another one of those spiritual urban legends we can so easily buy into?

I want to challenge you with this thought this morning. There are plenty of times in life when God not only allows us to experience more than we can bear, but there are times He sovereignly causes the burden.

#### *I. We Have To Accurately Interpret God's Promises*

Let's begin with a challenge. **Turn to II Timothy 2 page 1168**

We started out last week in II Timothy and pointed out that these were the final words of a man who knew he was about to die. In 4:6 he writes, *For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand.* (II Timothy 4:6)

His name was Paul and God had rescued him out of a life of religion and legalism and set him free in Jesus Christ. God used this man to touch much of the Roman world of his day with the message of Jesus.

II Timothy is comprised of his final challenge to a young pastor named Timothy. This was it.

All the other distractions of life were gone. Paul was focusing in on the top priorities. Look what he says. He gives a description of God's faithfulness and then...

#### **Read verse 14**

We don't want to get into a bunch of dead-end arguments about spiritual things. That won't help anyone. It will just confuse people. Here's what we should do instead...

#### **Read verse 15**

We don't want to give our personal opinions. Sometimes people sit around in Bible studies and say, "Now, what does this verse mean to you?" And everybody in the study gives his or her personal opinion and it's just left like that.

Look at what this verse says. "Be diligent to rightly divide God's truth." In other words take your time, use accepted rules of biblical interpretation, and come to an understanding of what the Bible says so you can apply it to your life.

The question isn't, "What does this verse mean to me?" It's what does a verse mean in it's context and then how can I apply it to my life?

The word translated "rightly dividing" is an interesting word in the original. It's *orthotomeo* which is actually from 2 words in Greek.

It's from *orthos* which means "straight" (if you break your arm you see an orthopedist to straighten it back out) and from *temno* which means "to cut."

So the command is be diligent to cut it straight, to get it right. If we don't get the Bible right we can be part of creating a spiritual urban legend like God never gives us more than we can handle.

So where does that false statement come from? **Turn to I Corinthians 10 page 1125**

I've heard this passage quoted so many times by people who want us to believe that God won't give us more than we can handle.

## **Read verse 13**

Now notice. This verse talks about being able to bear up under what? Not suffering, but temptation. Now obviously if we were suffering we can be tempted to look for a way out that's sinful. But the promise of the verse isn't specifically about suffering at all.

Look at the verse right before it. Verse 12 is like the preface to verse 13.

## **Read verse 12**

This is specifically about temptation, not suffering. There's always a way to escape temptation. Some times it's to flee. To run.

You can't just replace the word "temptation" with "suffering" or "hardship." That's not rightly dividing the word of truth.

*I. We Have To Accurately Interpret God's Promises*

*II. We Need To Be Honest With God's Word*

If the intent of the Bible is to say that God will never allow His people to have more trouble than they can bear, we have a glaring contradiction with other verses.

For instance, **turn to II Corinthians 1 page 1132**

Here's Paul describing his missionary work in Asia.

## **Read verse 8**

Now he didn't say, "Man, it was really tough but God didn't give us more than we could bear so we were OK." He says, "We were burdened beyond measure, above strength" The NIV says, "We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure."

In fact he says, "We actually thought it was all over for us. We felt like we were going to die."

And here's the take home for us today. Paul's suffering wasn't unique. Maybe today your saying, "Ed that verse describes my life right now. It's all coming down on me and I can't handle it."

That's the way that wife felt in that hospital room that day. "God won't give me more than I can bear? Oh, we're way past that point."

That's the reality for us at times in our life. But just remember, it's a biblical reality for people in scripture.

Listen to these cries of desperation from the Psalms:

*The pangs of death surrounded me, and the floods of ungodliness made me afraid. The sorrows of Sheol surrounded me; the snares of death confronted me. (Psalm 18:45-5)*

*How about this: I am a reproach among all my enemies, but especially among my neighbors, and am repulsive to my acquaintances. Those who see me outside flee from me. I am forgotten like a dead man, out of mind. I am like a broken vessel. For I hear the slander of many; fear is on every side; while they take counsel together against me. They scheme to take away my life. (Psalm 31:11-13)*

*My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, while they continually say to me, "Where is your God?" (Psalm 42: 2, 3)*

As you read through the Bible you'll encounter a whole list of people who felt like life was way more than they could handle. There's not only David in the Psalms but Abraham, Jonah, Job, Elijah, Jeremiah.

When we're honest with the Bible we have to admit that there's a whole list of examples of people who felt like they were at the end of their rope. That there was no way that they could bear the sufferings of life.

*I. We Have To Accurately Interpret God's Promises*

*II. We Need To Be Honest With God's Word*

*III. We Can't Live By Feelings But On The Reality Of God's Truth*

I always remember John MacArthur saying at a pastor's conference that a preacher's main job is to say the same basic things over and over in different ways. How true that is.

There's really only so many core spiritual truths. One of them is that we're sinners before a holy God and we need God's forgiveness. We try to talk about that here every chance we can. That's a bottom line core biblical principle that's woven all through the Bible.

We're coming up to Passover and Easter. Think about what both of those holidays say. Passover is a remembrance of God's rescue of His people by the blood of a lamb. Easter is a celebration of the resurrection of the ultimate lamb of God, Jesus Christ.

It's in God and His redemption that we have life now and eternal life in the life to come.

Salvation through Jesus Christ alone is a core spiritual truth. In fact it's like the nucleus of all spiritual truth. It's the core of the core. It's where we all need to begin.

The Bible says, *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.* (John 3:16)

That's a simple, straightforward truth that doesn't need complex interpretation to cut it straight. The question would be, have you believed?

Another core spiritual truth deals with how we live after we place our faith in Christ. It's this: God wants us to live by His truth not on our feelings. This is another one we seem to hit on quite regularly here.

Feelings are so deceptive. One day we're up, the next day we're down. Everything from our health to our interpersonal relationships to our circumstances can affect how we feel.

Suffering affects how we feel.

Now look at this. **Back to II Corinthians 1 page 1132**

**Read verses 3-9**

I want you to see 2 things in those verses. First, I want you to see the reality of trouble. Look at the words that are being used: tribulation, trouble, sufferings, affliction, despair.

Trouble isn't just for evil people. In fact, sometimes it seems like evil people live more

trouble free lives than people who are trying to do things God's way.

Asaph struggled with what looked to him like such an injustice. Listen to this from Psalm 73...

*My feet had almost stumbled; My steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the boastful, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*

*Behold, these are the ungodly, who are always at ease. They increase in riches. Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocence. For all day long I have been plagued, and chastened every morning. (Psalm 73:2,3,13,14)*

At that point he was saying, "Why bother living for God. The people who cheat and steal do better in life than I do."

Asaph was running on feelings right then. You could just hear him wine, "It's not fair!"

Then he says this... *When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me-- Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end. (Psalm 73:16,17)*

He says, what cured me of my self-focus was thinking about how the wicked will fare in eternity. Asaph had to get the eternal view. That's what we need.

Not only does II Corinthians 1 use terms like suffering and tribulation but look at the other side. This is getting God's view. Blessed, mercies, comfort, consolation.

There's being pessimistic and there's being realistic. I'm a "glass is half-empty" type of person and my wife is a "glass is half-full" type. I keep trying to convince her that I'm just a realist, but she's not buying it.

Paul was being a realist here. It's tough living in this world. But he wasn't a pessimist. That's why he could write so much about comfort and hope.

There will be distress or hardships, but there is also "comfort." Paul had every reason to encourage the Corinthians because he knew that whatever troubles came their way, God's "comfort" would be more than sufficient! God had promised it.

When life's difficulties seem unbearable, God's grace and comfort will be equal to your

need. His presence will carry you through and His supernatural help will be sufficient.

God hasn't promised us an easy path, but He has promised to be with us. *He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."* So we may boldly say: *"The LORD is my helper.* (Hebrews 13:5-6)

*I. We Have To Accurately Interpret God's Promises*

*II. We Need To Be Honest With God's Word*

*III. We Can't Live By Feelings But On The Reality Of God's Truth*

*IV. We Must Follow The Biblical Plan To Deal With Trouble*

Here's some practical steps to take when trouble hits.

1. Draw near to God

*The LORD is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.* (Psalm 34:18 NIV)

A unique thing about the God of the Bible is He has first hand experience at being human. He took on humanity in Jesus. That means He knows exactly how it feels to experience trouble. He knows what a broken heart feels like. He knows what it's like to be crushed in spirit. He knows and He's right there with us.

*Let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.* (Hebrews 4:15,16)

When trouble overwhelms you, be careful you don't let it warp your view of God's loving character. Difficult trials don't mean that God has forsaken us, or that our troubles come directly from His hand.

There are plenty of other sources for trouble in a fallen world. There's the original rebellion of Adam and Eve and the curse God placed on the earth. There's the invisible spiritual enemies we face. Sometimes we suffer because of the sinful choices of other human being and then at other times we get in trouble as a consequence our own foolish or sinful choices.

You know, Sometimes God spares us from trouble. I have to believe the hand of God

has been on me for protection so many times in life. But sometimes He allows us to suffer, and sometimes to even suffer greatly.

Sometimes that suffering is far beyond anything we can bear ourselves.

But whatever the source of our trials, God extends comfort to His children - even when he allows trouble to correct a sinful, stubborn attitude in us.

Even divine discipline comes from a loving Father and is always for our good.

Listen to this explanation from Hebrews 12. This is the New Living Translation.

*And have you forgotten the encouraging words God spoke to you as his children? He said, "My child, don't make light of the LORD's discipline, and don't give up when he corrects you. For the LORD disciplines those he loves, and he punishes each one he accepts as his child."*

*As you endure this divine discipline, remember that God is treating you as his own children. Who ever heard of a child who is never disciplined by its father? If God doesn't discipline you as he does all of his children, it means that you are illegitimate and are not really his children at all. Since we respected our earthly fathers who disciplined us, shouldn't we submit even more to the discipline of the Father of our spirits, and live forever?*

*For our earthly fathers disciplined us for a few years, doing the best they knew how. But God's discipline is always good for us, so that we might share in his holiness. No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it's painful! But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way. (Hebrews 12:5-11)*

What's the result of responding and learning from God's discipline? It's not weakness. It's strength.

The next verse says, *So take a new grip with your tired hands and strengthen your weak knees. Mark out a straight path for your feet so that those who are weak and lame will not fall but become strong.* (Hebrews 12:12,13)

So when trouble strikes:

1. Draw near to God
2. Ask others to pray for you

**II Corinthians 1 page 1132 again**



## **Read verses 9-10**

Paul says, adversity just proved to us that we can't trust in ourselves. Our trouble was so bad it was like we needed a resurrection from the dead!

## **Read verse 11**

He says, "It was really bad, but your prayers made all the difference for us. You helped us through your prayers."

In I Thessalonians 5 Paul wrote, *Brethren pray for us*. In II Thessalonians 3 he wrote, *Finally brethren pray for us*. The writer of Hebrews 13 says, *Pray for us*.

These great men of God, these apostolic writers of scripture, coveted the prayers of people.

There are a lot of solid reasons why you should be part of a local church. God wants us to worship corporately. He wants us to learn and grow from sound teaching. He wants us under the direction of godly leaders. He wants us in a place of service.

But here's one we often overlook. God wants us to be surrounded by His people who will pray for us as we go through the deep waters. He wants us around people who will hold us up by their prayers.

Tom Warner writes, God uses trials and troubles to humble us and bind us together with fellow Christians. We're commanded to bear one another's burdens, and if they're to bear our burdens, we need to "bare" that burden, i.e., we need to let some fellow believers know about our struggle and tell them we need their help and prayers. Don't be too proud to do that. (And don't forget to pray for others when they're in need.)

1. Draw near to God
2. Ask others to pray for you
3. Realize that pain can prepare you to minister to others

## **Read verse 4 of II Corinthians 1**

There is no better comforter than someone who's been through deep trials and suffering.

None of us like pain. I don't and you don't. But isn't it amazing how God uses those painful experiences of life to give us empathy and compassion for others.

And we don't necessarily have to go through the exact suffering that someone else does to comfort them. Probably none of us will go through the type of things that Paul endured. He was beaten within an inch of his life on more than one occasion. He was whipped, jailed, put in chains, and shipwrecked. I really doubt if that's in your future or mine. I hope not!

But his words are God inspired words so they've comforted millions of people over the last 2000 years. This happens because the principles of comfort are the same no matter what the problem might be. And the One from whom the comfort comes is the same.

Here's where we get our comfort: from a sovereign, caring, omnipotent, and omniscient heavenly Father who's in control of the universe and is working all things together for good in our lives.

That's comforting in any situation.

We don't need to say to someone who's suffering, "I know how you feel" because we don't. But we can say, "You know, I went through some hard times when I was out of strength.

It was more than I could handle. But can I share with you how God comforted me because He wants to comfort you with the same comfort?"

Will God ever give us more than we can bear? Sure He will. But always for an ultimate purpose.

In II Corinthians 12 Paul talks about having a thorn in the flesh. We know he had some debilitating disease that affected his eyesight but we don't know all the details.

He goes on to say that he pleaded with God to take this thing away. Three times he prayed and said, "This is too much. I can't handle it. God, please take this away. You've allowed more than I can bear."

What turns out to be so important for us is two things; first, what God didn't say and second, what He did say. First of all God didn't say, "Paul, my child. Just calm down and take it easy. Remember Paul, I won't ever give you more than you can bear."

Here's what God did say. Listen closely because there's going to be times in all of our lives when we get the same answer. *But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* (II Corinthians 12:9a)

And of course Paul really got angry at God for not answering him the way he wanted. No. Listen to this.

This is where God wants all of us to be spiritually. This is part of the reason that He gives us more than we can bear.

*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.* (II Corinthians 12:9b-10)

That's not always an easy place to get to, is it? Maybe you're not there today. But remember, Paul didn't get there overnight and we won't either. But it's a precious goal.

The power of God is demonstrated and perfected when we come to the end of our strength. When we're completely weak.

That's what salvation is. That's where we start by saying, "God I know I can't save myself. I know Jesus died for me and I want to trust Him as Savior."

If that's where it all begins, let's not leave that understanding there, but let's apply it to everything in life. "God I know I can't get myself through this situation I'm in but just like I had to trust you alone to save me, I trust you alone to see me through."

*For when I am weak, then I am strong.*