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# MORE THAN WE CAN HANDLE

1 Corinthians 10:1-13



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Has anyone ever seen one of those coffee mugs with a Christian saying or Bible verse on them? Maybe something like, “all things are possible with God,” or “be still and know,” or even something more succinct like “choose joy.” I’m not trying to advertise for Amazon here, but there are a whole slew of these mugs with short, punchy Christian quotes on them - you can even branch out into wall plaques and reusable water bottles and laptop stickers, too. It’s a whole industry!

Anyway, the reason I am telling you about this is that most times, these coffee mug quotes are directly taken from Scripture, and to those in the “know,” who recognize the context and understand the meaning, that’s fine. Other times, the coffee mug quotes are summaries of something important from our Christian faith, rather than a Bible verse. Sayings like, “choose joy” or “prayer is my superpower,” or “Jesus is my rock and that’s how I roll.” These Christian sayings and familiar Bible verses have formed a Christian pop culture, a kind of coffee mug Christianity: short, simple and to the point, expressing ideas from our faith that encourage, uplift or strengthen our resolve.

These faith concepts have high exposure, among us as Christians, yes, but they’re also highly visible to non-believers, too - on coffee mugs, Facebooks posts, bumper stickers and laptop stickers, pins and water bottles, you name - you can probably find what you want.

One of those high visibility, often-repeated phrases is this: “God promised he would never give us more than we can handle.” Have you heard that before?

Perhaps you’ve thought it yourself, when the road got a bit rough, or perhaps you’ve shared it with others, to help them through their own rough spot. It’s probably a little long for a coffee mug; it might do better on a wall plaque or on Facebook, maybe, but it is a coffee mug Christianity kind of saying.

God promised he would never give us more than we can handle.

It hits the big three, doesn't it? Faith, hope and love. It speaks to faith, because no matter how bad it gets, God has faith that we can do it, that we can endure and run that part of our race. God loves us, too, and makes promises that reflect that love all the time, all through the Bible. I think my favourite image of God's love in the whole Bible is from Hosea, one of those obscure minor prophet books in the Old Testament, where we read about God and his people being like a loving parent and son. God the parent picks up his son, nuzzling cheeks and hugging, supporting and fiercely protecting, steadying our toddler steps. This saying is also a word of hope and encouragement, that's usually why we say it, to ourselves or to others: to encourage determination, a keep-going kind of spirit, because it's never going to be so bad or so hard that we can't handle it.

God promised that he would never give us more than we can handle.

But...here's what's been bothering me. Does it build your faith in God to believe that he's kind of hands-off, letting us handle whatever he gives us - trouble and hardship and challenges and grief - letting us handle that on our own?

Because that's what the saying says: that God thinks we've got this, whatever kind of trouble "this" is. Sounds to me more like the worst sort of boss or teacher, who sends you off without any guidance or instruction other than "I'm confident you'll figure it out - you can handle it."

The other implication in this saying is that God gives us stuff we're going to need to "handle," and that sounds like trouble to me, like hardship and challenging circumstances.

Is that a loving thing for God to do? To give us experiences we have to suffer through, that need to be handled? Does it give you hope and encouragement to believe that God sends trouble your way, and then lets you handle it? Because, depending on the nature of the trouble, that would make me feel anything from worried to scared to angry.

I guess I should probably stop lurking around on Facebook and looking at Christian coffee mugs on Amazon.

But encountering this saying, and remembering when I've heard people at church say it or something very like it, it got me wondering. So I went looking to see where it was in the Bible, or if it was more of a general principle, something extracted from the Bible as a whole.

The reason this grated a bit on me this week is because of Elijah, last week. Elijah could not handle the trouble and hardship...he was completely overwhelmed by it, to the point of hiding in a cave at the top of a mountain in the middle of the desert. Our children's Bible lesson this week was Jonah - not by any planning on my part, we're just there in our journey through the Bible this year - and Jonah could not handle what he was experiencing either. What our children's story left out was that Jonah, sitting under his vine and hearing God's decision to be merciful and welcoming to the Ninevites, Jonah then said, I would rather die - this is too much, I am overwhelmed and done.

But really, if you want to talk about prolonged hardship, suffering and immense, on-going challenges in the Bible, you've got to check with the apostle Paul. His letters are brutally honest about everything, including what the early days of establishing the Christian church were like. He never sugar-coats just how hard things got sometimes, writing about their imprisonments, beatings, hard work, hunger, sorrow, insomnia, distress and mistreatment.

Listen to what Paul wrote in one of his letters: "We want to remind you, friends, of the trouble we had in the province of Asia. The burdens laid upon us were so great and so heavy that we gave up all hope of staying alive. We felt that the death sentence had been passed on us."

Was the trouble in Asia more than Paul could handle? Yes.

Even with the help and support of his co-workers in ministry, he was, they were all, overwhelmed: personal strength at an end, despairing of life itself. So how did they get out of it? Paul writes about how, instead of trusting in their own strength to get out of it, they were forced to trust God totally and rely completely on God: "From such terrible dangers of death God saved us," Paul wrote, "and we have placed our hope in him that he will save us again, as you help us by means of your prayers for us."

In typical Paul fashion, he answers our big question - in times of trouble, rely on God to handle it - and he answers our follow-up question of what God handling it will look like. God has a lot of resources he can use to help, including his own strength and miraculous intervening power, but also us, too - people. Both his faithful believers who will be aware that they're helping, and the rest of God's creation, too, even the people and things that we wouldn't expect - that wouldn't themselves expect - to be part of how God handles trouble, when it comes our way, and we chose to rely on him.

So we've de-bunked part of our saying: if we revise it with this new information, instead of "God promised that he would never give us more than we can handle," we would now have to say, "God promised that he would never give us more than God can handle."

But we haven't gone far enough yet, because that still leaves us with God "giving us" situations or experiences that need to be "handled." And that still doesn't sound very loving to me.

God spends so much time, in the Bible, trying to teach us how to stay out of trouble and avoid hardship and suffering; that's what all those laws and covenants in the Old Testament are about, that's what so many of Jesus' parables and teachings are about.

God wants us to stay out of trouble and not suffer; when we can't manage it, he comes up with a plan to rescue us, and that plan is Jesus. Not just Jesus' life and teaching, but Jesus' death and resurrection, too, and the new life, the new heaven and new earth, that are coming. Literally everything - the whole of salvation history and human history, too - all of it is about God trying to keep us out of trouble, to end our suffering, and then doing wild, reality-breaking miraculous deeds to make that happen.

But if trouble doesn't come from God, then where does it come from?

There's a real temptation - often with all the good intention in the world - to believe that God does send trials and troubles our way, or that he allows us to experience them.

We excuse God's action or inaction when we experience trouble by saying that God wants us to learn something, or grow in our faith, or get better at relying on him. We say that trouble and grief can turn people toward God, that suffering is the seed of faith. We have to be very careful how we think and speak about this; people, children, suffer some pretty horrendous experiences; I won't list any examples, because if you watch the news, or have any family or friends at all, perhaps even personally - you know what I mean.

What would it say about us if we worshipped and served and loved a God who could hurt us badly in one moment and then promise to save us in the next? What would it say about God?

God does not allow or inflict that kind of trouble. It's sin. And we need to be careful about how we think and speak about sin, too: trouble in our life is not our punishment for losing our temper at a loved one or doing something ill-advised when we were teenagers.

Trouble might be a consequence of a sin: if you knock my favourite coffee mug on the floor and it breaks, I'll forgive you, but we've still got a broken mug to deal with. Actions have consequences. And so does sin - not just our personal sins, but sin everywhere, touching everyone and everything.

The first story in the Bible that explains the nature of sin - the story of Adam and Eve and God - tells us that the root of sin is broken relationships of all sorts: between human beings and their Creator, between human beings and the rest of creation, and just between human beings.

When we look at a situation or think about an experience that we or someone else is having and we think, "that is not right - that is not how it ought to be," well, that's our first indication that what we're looking at is sin. No one's fault, maybe, in a cause and effect sort of way; but sin nonetheless. And that is not something God gives us; but if we rely on God, it is just the sort of trouble that he can help us handle.

So our saying, God promised that he would never give us more than we can handle, requires further editing: God promised that if we rely on him, sin and the trouble it causes us won't be more than God can handle. Still not quite there yet.

The closest match in the Bible that I could find to our saying in its original form is in what we read together today, 1 Corinthians 10.

There, Paul writes that “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation he will also provide a way out so that you may be able to endure it.” Temptation, spiritual testing, not trouble or suffering.

I won't go into too much detail, but suffice to say that the people Paul was writing to were playing with spiritual fire, and Paul was worried they - or other Christians, following their example - would get burned. They were choosing trouble, as human beings so often do. The quick Old Testament history review is given as warning labels, basically; do not do what you are about to do, because it never goes well. Each one is an example of succumbing to the temptation to turn away from God and God's purposes for us, and the negative consequences - not punishment - of that turning away.

The people Paul was writing to were willing to risk it, thinking they were mature enough in their faith to resist the temptation they were immersing themselves in - and so Paul warns them not to get arrogant and think they were unshakeable. Paul also encourages them, though, by saying that we all do face the temptation to be disloyal to God, to turn away from Him, in various circumstances, whether we do like the Corinthians and put ourselves in a risky situation or not.

Temptation to lose faith is inevitable. But it's not inevitable that we'll be overwhelmed by that temptation and fall.

This is where we are promised that God will not give us more than we can handle. No faithful Christian need ever say that they had no choice but to turn away from God, from faith in Jesus, because the temptation to do so was too much for them to handle. God will provide the spiritual resources we need to endure, and an escape route, too; either himself or through communities of Christians who support and love and build one another up. This is the area where God promises not to overload us with more than we can handle: the temptation to choose sin over God, and to let our relationship with God break.

So let's recap: what have learned?

Sometimes we might experience more trouble, grief, suffering, or hardship than we can handle, but God promises we can rely on his strength when our own fails. God doesn't send trouble our way, but sin making things not right in us and in creation means that we will experience trouble. God has done and continues to do extraordinary things to protect us and rescue us from the power and pain of sin. And God will provide the spiritual resources we need to chose to stay loyal and faithful and with him, no matter what temptation to turn away we might face.

The underlying tension here is relationship vs experience; our relationship with God vs our life experiences, the things that happen to us or our loved ones, or that we see happening around us. You know that other saying, what comes first, the chicken or the egg - it's kind of like that.

What comes first: the relationship or the experience? Do we let our experiences of hardship shape our relationship with God? Or do we let our relationship with God shape our experiences of hardship?

Whenever those questions about hardship or negative situations come up in Scripture, God or Jesus or the Spirit repeatedly turn the emphasis back to the relationship, inviting us to let that shape how we endure trouble and suffering and how we make sense of it afterward in terms of our faith.

That making sense might see us recognizing that something genuinely awful happened, that there is no lesson to be learned for us, and that we chose to believe that God is still good and loving anyway.

But that making sense may well let us say that our faith or trust grew deeper because of suffering. Either way, meaning-making like that can only happen within the warm embrace of a loving, trusting, unbroken relationship between us and God.

The temptation for us to chose to break that relationship - that's the only time we're promised that we won't be tempted beyond what we can handle, with God's faithful and generous help.

So our coffee mug Christian saying, “God promised that he would never give us more than we can handle,” seems to be dangerously false...even if it is catchy. If you had it on a mug or a bumper sticker and someone who didn’t have a relationship with God read it, I’m worried they might get the wrong impression about God and about what it means to belong to him.

If we were going to come up with a new saying, I think that it would have to start with: God promised that our faith in him would never be so tested that we would have no choice but to give into the temptation to turn away from him. And the rest would be that when overwhelming trouble comes and our own strength falters, God promises that we can rely on him and on his strength to handle that trouble with us. Thanks be to God. Amen.