

More Than You Can Handle

In the name of Jesus who calls us to repentance and to faith in him; dear friends in Christ: “The Lord never gives you more than you can handle.” How many of you have ever heard that? How many of you believe it? It’s a phrase that’s often shared among Christian people, especially when some kind of crisis strikes one of us. It’s meant to be helpful. When it’s spoken to someone who’s suffering, it’s a way of saying, “Don’t worry, if God allowed this to happen to you, it’s only because he knows you’re strong enough to take it.” But just as often I hear the phrase coming from the lips of a victim, someone who is suffering: “I know the Lord will never give me more than I can handle.” Then it’s a form of self-encouragement. It’s a way of saying, “I’ve got to pull myself up by the bootstraps and face this thing – God knows I can do it.”

Actually, God knows nothing of the sort. Quite the contrary, he knows that you and I can’t handle it. In fact, his purpose in sending us troubles is very often to remind us of that. He’s saying, “You *can’t* deal with this. You need me. You need my strength and comfort to see you through this. You need to look to me for deliverance or for the strength to endure.” It is the height of human pride to imagine that we can handle whatever God in his wisdom sends our way. And when we stubbornly cling to the myth that “I can handle this”, we miss entirely the message the Lord is trying to impress upon us.

Today’s Epistle lesson describes a number of events that happened during the Exodus from Egypt and the subsequent wanderings in the wilderness. The main point in that whole story is “You can’t handle it.” Remember where the story begins? God’s people are in slavery. They’re being made to work hard under cruel taskmasters. Life is unbearable. They can’t handle it. So what do they do? Exactly what the Lord wants them to: they cry out to him for help. And he hears and delivers them. Then in the departure from Egypt, they come up against the Red Sea. Pharaoh has changed his mind, and has sent his chariots to recapture Israel and bring them back into bondage. So God’s people have the sea on one side and the Egyptian army barreling down on them on the other. “We’re doomed!” they cry. “We can’t handle this!” No; but the Lord can. And he does. It’s that way throughout the whole wilderness experience. They are in the desert where there’s no food or water. And yet they survive because each day the Lord gives them what they need – gives them what they need expressly for the purpose of teaching them that they can’t handle it, and that they need to look to him to give them everything to support this body and life.

There are a hundreds of other places we can go in the Scriptures that stress this. When the Lord confronts Cain after he’s killed his brother, Abel, and tells him that he’s being driven out of the land, Cain cries out, “My punishment is more than I can bear!” When Job faces all his woes, he stoically maintains a stiff upper lip for about a chapter, and then bursts loose in piteous wailing, cursing the day he was born. When David learns that his infant son is going to die on account of his adultery with Bathsheba, he spends seven days in agony pleading with the Lord for the child’s life. Can you imagine someone walking up to him and saying, “Buck up and deal with it, my lord the king. The Lord never sends you more than you can handle”? I expect that for encouragement like that, David would have that person’s foolish head on a stake. So please, don’t believe that the Lord never sends more than you can handle; and for pity’s sake, don’t ever say it to someone who is suffering.

Life in this fallen world is more than we can handle. Were not the Lord sustaining us by his grace and mercy every moment of every day, we would be utterly lost. Speaking personally, the day I imagine that I can handle serving you as a pastor, is the day I need to resign my call. I know

what I am. I know the darkness and weakness within. The trouble is that I don't know it well enough. But of this I'm certain: any good that comes of my ministry is the Lord's doing, not mine. And of course, the ministry of the church is all about rescuing people from sin and death, which is a lot more than any of us can handle. Friends, if we could handle it, then we wouldn't need a Savior as great as the one God sent us in Jesus Christ.

With all this in mind, we need to ask a question. Where did this idea that "God never sends us more than we can handle" come from? It's so common and widespread throughout the church, and yet so obviously opposed to Scripture; so how did anyone get the idea in the first place?

Good question. It comes from a misreading and misapplication of a portion of today's Epistle reading. It's the last part, where Paul says, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."

Did you catch all that? He's not talking about life in general. He's speaking specifically of temptations to sin. And he's not talking to everyone. He's speaking to members of the church, to believers, to people who trust in Christ, who have the Holy Spirit, who have a regenerated nature in addition to their old sinful natures. And he's saying, look: the trials and temptations you are facing is the same sort of stuff everyone has to deal with. They are nothing extraordinary. They are not super temptations that when they come you're forced to succumb, saying, "I just can't help myself!" That's what the Lord promises not to subject you to: a temptation to sin that is guaranteed to make you fall. No. He won't let that happen to you. But it doesn't say that the Lord will make the temptation go away. What it says is that he will provide you a way to escape the temptation.

Adam and Eve didn't have to eat the forbidden fruit. They were equipped with the means to say, "No". Cain didn't have to kill his brother Abel. In fact, the Lord warned him about dwelling on his evil thoughts and where that would lead. He didn't listen. David, when he spied from his rooftop the lovely Bathsheba bathing and inquired who she was, didn't have to send for her. The moment that he heard that she was a married woman, he could have said, "Oh well, I guess she's off limits then." These people all chose to sin. They knew that what they were contemplating was wrong. They had the ability to resist or to avoid sinning. The Lord provided them with ways out. But they allowed themselves to fall for their temptations and enter into sin.

The same is true of us. The Lord has promised not to allow you to be tempted beyond your ability to bear it. He will always with the temptation give you a way out, a way to keep from falling. The question is whether you'll take advantage of the way out he provides. Take for example one of the strongest temptations to sin: someone who's addicted to alcohol. The person knows this is a weakness. The craving is always there. But it takes a conscious decision to go into the liquor store. Even after having gone in, he doesn't have to buy that bottle of vodka. And when he secrets it home, he doesn't have to open it. And once he opens it, he could pour it down the sink. He doesn't have to drink it. At each step he chooses to do it, chooses to cross a line he knows he ought not cross. He's hardly in a position afterward to say, "I couldn't help myself." He could. And there were other ways out. If he was having a particularly bad time of it, he could have called his AA partner. He could have checked himself into a detox facility. Or he could have gone directly to the Lord in prayer, to God's Word for strength to stand against temptation, or to his pastor for private confession and absolution. There's a source of immense spiritual strength that's all too often overlooked and neglected. But the point still stands: the Lord gives us ways out of every temptation. The question is always: will we take them?

It's important that we do. Consider the context in which Paul writes this passage: he's telling of the Israelites in the wilderness with Moses. He says they were all "baptized" in their

passage through the Red Sea. They all ate the bread that God gave them from heaven. They all drank from the Rock that Moses struck with his rod. And we know that they all stood at the base of Mount Sinai, saw the Lord descend in the form of terrifying fire and smoke, and they heard him speak – that is, they had God’s Word. And what happened? They made a golden calf and worshipped it. They said, this idol, not that scary guy on the mountain, is our god. And then they got up to engage in pagan revelry. And many of them died as a result. Many more died later, when seduced by Moabite cultic prostitutes. Others died when they rebelled against the authority of Moses. Still others died when they complained bitterly about the food the Lord gave them and he sent them the snakes to adjust their attitude. Not everyone who began the journey made it to the Promised Land.

These things happened to them as examples and warnings for us. For we too have been baptized, baptized in a much greater sense than they ever were. We are baptized into Christ: into his death for our sin, into his burial, and into his resurrection – the same resurrection by which we receive the Holy Spirit and live a new life in him. And we have God’s Word, not just a portion of it like they did. They had Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus. We have the whole thing – the whole counsel of God. And we have spiritual food and drink: not just manna and water from a rock that were foreshadows of Jesus; no, we have Christ’s very body and blood given and shed for us for the forgiveness of our sin and the strengthening of our faith. That, my friends, is more than you can handle. When you kneel here at the altar, you receive the eternal God in your hand and in your mouth.

And receiving him and his forgiveness and his strength, you are equipped to stand against all the temptations of the evil one. With Christ in, with, and for you, you need not fall when tempted. And even if you do fall, through the gift of repentance and reconciliation, he’s ready, willing, and able to lift you up again. In Christ we are given everything we need to make it to the eternal Promised Land – which is why it’s so piteously sad and tragic when one of us who began the journey and who has all the advantages falls into temptation and the deception of sin and refuses to repent and utilize the gifts of grace that Christ gives us in and through his Church. It happens when we think we can go it alone, that we can do this by ourselves, that this journey we’re on is something we can do our own. We can’t. You can’t. It’s more than you can handle.

Therefore let us learn the lesson from those who fell along the way, who turned from the Lord, who fell into idolatry and sexual immorality, who rebelled against Moses, who despised the food the Lord gave them to sustain them on the way – who thought they could stand on their own. And let us make all the more use of the gifts of God’s grace that enable us to stand against temptation, that we too may inherit the eternal Promised Land. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!