

“Be a Mess”
2 Corinthians 12:8-10
11.21.21

Introduction

Over the last fifteen years of being in ministry, I have had conversations with countless people who are experiencing difficult circumstances in life. They are experiencing hurt, loss, and tragedy. And I can't tell you how many times I've heard someone say, "Pastor, I know that the Bible says God won't give us more than we can bear, but I think that I'm at my breaking point."

Well, I've got some news, and I hope you'll receive it as good news. The Bible never says that God will not give us more than we can bear. We get this saying from a verse that is often taken out of context.

In 1 Corinthians 10:13, Paul says, "No temptation has seized you that isn't common for people. But God is faithful. He won't allow you to be tempted beyond your abilities. Instead, with the temptation, God will also supply a way out so that you will be able to endure it" (Common English Bible).

In this passage, Paul is not talking about stress, conflict, health problems, or relationship problems—he is talking about temptation. The idea is that when we face temptation, God will always make a way for us to resist temptation, just as Jesus taught us to pray, "lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil."

Really the biggest problem with this old adage, "God won't give us more than we can bear," (aside from the fact that it is not in the Bible) is that it gives us the impression that God is the one who gives us the burdens that we bear. It causes us to see God as this divine being who is loading us down with one problem after another until we find our breaking point. I want us to take just a moment and let it sink that this way of thinking is toxic, and it is not in the Bible.

In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul talks about some of the trials he has faced during his apostolic ministry. He says that he has been imprisoned, flogged, received thirty-nine lashes with a whip, similar to Jesus. My understanding is that thirty-nine was the limit because forty lashes had the potential to kill someone. Paul says that three times he was beaten with rods and was pelted with stones. On three different times he was shipwrecked during his travels, and this is only naming a few of the challenges that he faced as a missionary leader in the Church.¹

Reading about Paul's experiences seems to make it clear that sometimes life does give us more than we can bear. The good news is that God does not give us more than we can bear; instead, God gives us the grace we need to sustain us.

¹ 2 Corinthians 11:23-29

Digging Deeper

After naming all of his hardship, Paul goes on to tell us that God has given him “sufficient grace” in his time of need. I wanted to dig into this a little more, and so I looked up the Greek word that is translated “sufficient.” Want to know what it means?

It means sufficient! It means “enough.” God gives us enough grace for when we experience that figurative “thorn in our flesh.”

God does not always give us *abundant* grace, where all of our hurts and pains and sorrows just suddenly disappear. Instead, God gives us *sufficient* grace in our time of need.

Sufficient grace helps us to continue to being dependent upon God for God’s strength, so that we no longer live out of our own strength. The truth is that at the end of the day, no matter how strong we are, or no matter how strong we think we are, we will never be as strong as God. Sometimes it takes a thorn in our flesh so that we stop trying to live out of our own strength.

Reflection

It reminds me of when my kids were really little, and I would ask them to pick up their toys or maybe I would watch them dig a little hole with a shovel. They would work so hard trying to do it on their own, but eventually their strength would bottom out. As their dad, I would come in behind them and help them finish the job. I was available the entire time, but I did not intervene until they were completely out of strength, and of course I was able to work longer and harder than they were.

I think this is a good picture of God’s sufficient grace at work in our lives. Paul says that it is when we are weak that we experience the strength of Christ. It’s like our weakness empties us and makes us available for the strength of God.

Paul’s teaching is ironic. In our culture we are taught to be strong and never show signs of weakness. We are afraid of being demoted, or not getting a job, or losing someone’s respect. But Paul actually encourages us to embrace our weakness, because when we run out of our energy, that is when God steps in and gives us the strength that we need—the strength of Christ. This is what Paul calls “perfect strength.”

Today I want to encourage you to *be a mess*. Whatever circumstances you are facing—if you are just trying to hold it all together and be strong for appearances, it’s okay to let it go. It’s okay to not be okay.

There have been times that I have tried to endure difficult circumstances on my own, and let’s be honest, it is just absolutely exhausting. I simply surrendered. And it’s kind of strange the amount of peace I felt when I realized that the circumstances were beyond my control. It was out of my hands. I was trusting God to be my strength.

So, as counterintuitive as it may sound to us, it is okay to be a mess. It is okay to acknowledge that we're broken and sometimes we're not able to keep going. Especially right now. I've talked to so many people who are trying to cope with life's challenges, and it is more than most of us can bear right now.

This reminds me of an idea that I came up with a few years ago. I think we all have an emotional immune system, just like we have a physical immune system. When our physical immune system is low, something as simple as a common cold can be a serious threat to our wellbeing. It doesn't take much to cause us real danger.

The same is true with our emotional immune system. Sometimes life just keeps piling one problem after another. It doesn't have to be a big problem that does us in—it can simply be a small issue that becomes the straw that breaks the camel's back. I'm witnessing this a lot with folks who are trying to survive the pandemic.

I sense that there are so many of us who are on the brink of giving up, and so today I want to give you permission to do that. It's okay to give up, and it's okay to give in. It's okay to say, "I can't do this anymore." Sometimes saying it is the most liberating thing we can do, because when we surrender in our weakness, we experience the strength of Christ.

Invitation

What will that look like for you to receive God's sufficient grace? God's grace is already available—God makes it available—the question is whether we are going to receive it. Will we humble ourselves to receive it?

Maybe the invitation today is to spend some time in quiet reflection, simply admitting that there are some things that you need to hand over to God. Maybe there are some things in your life that you need to stop trying to control and manage and trust in the sufficient grace that God is giving you, and trust that in your weakness, the presence and strength of Christ will be made known.

There will not be small groups November 24th

Happy Thanksgiving! I love you all!

Pastor Jonathan

