

# **Facebook Theology**

“God Won’t Give You More Than You Can Handle”

September 17

## **TITLE SLIDE**

Today we’re starting a new teaching series called Facebook Theology. Before we decided on “Facebook Theology” as a title for this series, we considered calling it “The Bible Doesn’t Say That”. In the end, that felt a little pedantic and what we really want to do is not go around sniping everybody’s ideas about God.

What is Facebook Theology? Sometimes, and especially during crises, complicated issues of faith get boiled down to pithy, repeatable, half-truths masquerading as something "the Bible says." Of course much of what I call Facebook Theology actually existed long before Facebook. But for now, social media is where most of this hack job theology hangs out, and ideas that in the past would’ve died at the end of aunt sally’s prayer brunch spread unchallenged by scrutiny and tradition. It’s not that it’s bad stuff, but maybe not quite good stuff. In this sermon series, we’re taking a look at 4 well-worn Christian catch phrases and uncovering what they reveal about God and ourselves.

The first Facebook Theology we’re going to tackle this morning is:

## **SLIDE 2**

“God won’t give you more than you can handle.” I’ve heard this phrase uttered in small groups, in hospital waiting rooms, around campfires, in sunday school, in prayer meetings, at bars and restaurants, over the phone and between pages of books. It’s shared between coworkers, close friends, strangers, family, and all varieties of people of faith and others just vocalizing a faith they don’t practice.

This is a universal Christian catch phrase that has been around long before Facebook, yet it is the epitome of the kind of theological sentiment that thrives on social media platforms - theology that sounds about right, is

inspired by scripture, even, but is at best inaccurate and at worst harmful. I hope by the end of our time today, we can replace this cliché with a better promise of God that is both true and helpful.

We're going to break it down this way: the problem with the seemingly harmless statement is 3-fold: 1-it's biblically inaccurate, 2-it paints a troubling picture of God, 3-it might prevent us from asking for help that we need.

Some of you might even be sitting here today thinking..."God doesn't give you more than you can handle"...that IS in the Bible right? I swear I've read it myself and I've even said that to myself before choking down dinner at grandma's.

Well it's not in the Bible, not exactly. It sort of comes from the Bible. Let's look together at the scripture that inspires the idea that "God won't give you more than you can handle."

You can follow along on the screen, or you can grab a blue bible in front of you and turn to page ????. We're looking at 1 Corinthians 10:7-14.

### **SLIDE 3**

A few quick notes before we get started. In 1st century AD, the church in Corinth (a large port city in Greece) - to whom Paul wrote this letter - would've been brand new converts, in a brand new church in the center of a very metropolitan and very pagan city. There was a popular phrase at the time: "to live like a Corinthian" was synonymous with drunkenness and promiscuity. In other words, the people of this church are struggling to leave behind a way of life that they've only recently come to realize is not God's way. And based on the topics and tone of Paul's letter, you get the impression that if it could be going wrong, it was going wrong. So with that backdrop let's look at a portion of this letter.

**7** Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry."<sup>[a]</sup> **8** We should

not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. **9** We should not test Christ,<sup>[b]</sup> as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. **10** And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.

**11** These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come.

Paul is drawing a parallel between the struggling believers in Corinth and the struggling Israelites coming out of Egypt during the time of Moses almost 1500 years before them. He wants them to know that they are not unique in their struggle, that in fact, the earliest remnants of God's people also wrestled with sexual immorality and idolatry as they learned to follow God. And so to encourage them further, Paul continues:

**12** So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!

**13** No temptation<sup>[c]</sup> has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted<sup>[d]</sup> beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted,<sup>[e]</sup> he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

### ***TITLE SLIDE***

Paul's intent here is to tell these struggling Christians that their temptation is normal! That God will not allow them to be overcome by their temptation to turn back to their pagan gods, animal sacrifices, and temple prostitution. God will provide a way out - an escape route - a way to resist the temptation.

This passage is not about God declining to overwhelm you with burdens in life, but about God helping with temptation.

So maybe that seems like "case closed" on our first bit of Facebook Theology. But ideas about God don't necessarily have to have an accurate corresponding scripture in order to thrive. We can't disarm the sentiment

simply by pointing to scriptural inaccuracy. This is an idea that people *feel* to be true as much as they believe it to be a promise from the Bible.

I mentioned that this catchphrase is everywhere. And about two weeks ago, I started reading the autobiography of Matthew Perry of *Friends* fame. Michele received this book for Christmas and I've been eyeing it for some time because I've always been a big Friends fan.

Anyway, I'm not 20 pages into the book and I see our little catch phrase right there. Perry writes:

#### **SLIDE 4**

"I have been told that when someone is *really* sick a kind of disconnect happens - a 'God only gives you what you can handle' kind of a thing kicks in.

Matthew Perry isn't writing a book about faith or God. It's not a spiritual journey (at least so far). It's kind of a throwaway line about him being in so much pain from years of destroying his body with drugs and alcohol that he literally went into a coma. This idea is so embedded into our understanding of the way the world works and the nature of God that it being Biblically inaccurate matters very little to anyone.

So I want to spend a little time examining this catch phrase, to show you that we should eliminate it from our theological repertoire.

First off, I want to prove that it's simply not true by showing you a photo of having more in life than you can handle. Some of you might want to shield your eyes.

#### **SLIDE 5**

This is Murphy. He's a 4 ½ month old yorkie that we got in the middle of July and he is 1000% more than we can handle. I'm being serious. Please send help.

Ok all joking aside let's look at the first part of our phrase

### **SLIDE 6**

“God won't give you...”

I believe we should all tread carefully when toying with the idea of God giving us bad things in life or willing bad things to happen to us. There is theology out there that suggests that God ordains everything that happens, good or bad. That life only works as an extension of his divine will and that includes disaster, sickness, poverty, abuse, and war. So if life is terrible, it's because God wants it to be so. Since God has dominion over everything, nothing happens outside his will and that means everything from genocide to tsunamis are given to us by God.

That is something I simply cannot believe. I think that paints a worrying picture of God. But that is what we're adopting when we suggest, “God won't give you more than you can handle”. On the one hand it sounds benevolent, but on closer examination I question it's theology...why is God piling all this up on me anyway? Why is God who is not willing to hurl me off the cliff willing to walk me right up to the edge?

Certainly some suffering is caused as a direct consequence of living apart from God. And certainly God in the scriptures has caused suffering as a punishment for wickedness. But I think the suffering you and I experience and witness comes from a variety of sources. Sometimes it's a direct consequence for the choices we've made. Sometimes it is the result of living in a sinful world populated with sinful people. Sometimes it's random and senseless. And sometimes we can be persecuted for the sake of Christ - though not very often in our current culture.

But to suggest that God is the source of all calamity and chaos is something I simply cannot believe. God being the source of suffering and tragedy goes against my understanding of the nature of God

### **SLIDE 7**

John wrote (1 John 1:5)

God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.

**SLIDE 8**

And later in that same letter John would write “God is love.”

**SLIDE 9**

James wrote of God’s goodness saying that God can’t even be *tempted* to do evil. That God is the source of all goodness.

Not only do I think that God is not giving me all the bad stuff, but I think even if we were to say that God at the very least won’t let us be fully overcome by suffering, it makes him a pretty lousy God. Imagine a parent whose parenting strategy was “I will let any and all harm come to my child but will draw the line at them being totally annihilated.” That would not be love.

So when we’re talking about pain in life, I have a problem with a theology that says God is the giver of suffering.

**SLIDE 10**

The author of Hebrews (in the NT) says that because Jesus also suffered, he is able to help us. Now that’s some theology I can get behind.

**TITLE SLIDE**

I think God’s true role in our suffering is not one who wills it to happen, but one who can help us endure it, learn from it, and ultimately make good come out of it.

Psalm 34 says,

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted  
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

Peter wrote (1 Peter 5:7): **7** Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

And from what Cheri read for us this already in Psalm 46:

God is our refuge and strength,  
an ever-present help in trouble.

**2**

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way  
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,

The true benevolence of God is not that he won't let you be crushed, but that when you are crushed he is there to help you.

It's not that God won't give you more than you can handle, but that God will help you handle all that you've been given.

### ***SLIDE 11***

You've probably never heard of t. She was a Christian poet and some of her writings were made into hymns.

Annie was born on Christmas Eve in 1866. By age 3, her mother died and her father became so ill that he couldn't take care of her, so Annie was given up for adoption. Before she finished high school, her loving, adoptive parents had also died. Annie started her career as a teacher, but early on became wheelchair bound due to a generative disease. She gave up teaching and spent the rest of her life in a sanitarium where others could take care of her. Since she couldn't teach anymore she turned to writing poetry.

Listen to the words of this poem entitled He Giveth More Grace

1. He giveth more grace as our burdens grow greater,

He sendeth more strength as our labors increase;  
To added afflictions He addeth His mercy,  
To multiplied trials He multiplies peace.

### ***SLIDE 12***

God is not giving us suffering, I hope we can agree, but the idea that there's some upper limit of pain that he's sparing you from is as absurd as it is insulting. Absolutely, without a doubt, people suffer more than they can handle. Be it from sickness, or loss, or depression or anxiety, or just life being terrible for just too long...people get more than they can handle.

And what I think is the biggest tragedy of "God won't give you more than you can handle" is that it leaves you feeling like it's up to you to endure, to white-knuckle your circumstance, because God is doing his part of not allowing you too much suffering. But folks, some of you have more than you can handle. Maybe the pain of loss is too much to handle. Maybe the disappointment of a career or bad health has overwhelmed you. Maybe you feel trapped in your marriage or in addiction or by anxiety. Your attitude shouldn't be "well it could be worse" it should be "I should get help!"

It's okay to not be okay.

On the night in which he was betrayed, Jesus confided in his disciples in saying

### ***SLIDE 13***

"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

### ***TITLE SLIDE***

Don't fall into the trap of believing that God is withholding an end point of pain - more than you can handle. I believe God sustains us. I believe he cares for us. And I believe he can help us in tough times. But some of us are living with more than we can handle right now - living beyond our



capacity to cope. Seek help. Reach out to friends. Talk to your family, health professionals, pastors, your small group. And don't stop short of lifting your concerns to God in prayer.

We need to trust in God, not as some kind of pain gatekeeper, but as the one who will walk with us through life. The friend that mourns with us. The light and life that sustains us. The father who instructs and disciplines us. The mother who defends us and advocates for us. The lover who holds us close. The brother who fights for us. The sister who is present with us.

He giveth more grace as our burdens grow greater,  
He sendeth more strength as our labors increase;  
To added afflictions He addeth His mercy,  
To multiplied trials He multiplies peace.

You gotta wonder...why do people say this phrase anyway. What good is it to anyone? I admit, it does sound reassuring on first pass. That there is some kind of built-in protection from being overwhelmed with sorrow or tragedy. But mostly we say this because we don't know what else to say. When our idea of God being good comes into sharp contrast with our experience of overwhelming loss or pain, it's a handy little slogan. Because when you are hurting, when you are disappointed, when you have far too much life to balance, or when you see a loved one going through that, you need SOMETHING to remind you that God is still good.

My hope is that we can agree to purge Facebook Theology from the way we understand God and how we relate to people who are struggling. God's promise is much bigger and better than a slogan that fits on a bumper sticker. Remind yourself this in adversity: God loves you, can help you endure this pain, and can even work it out for goodness.

So let us be thoughtful in our understanding and compassionate in our caring for others.