

August 14, 2005

**So Is It Really True:
That God Will Never Give You More Than You Can Handle?**

Dr. William A. Ritter

Duke Chapel

Scriptures: II Corinthians 11:24-27, 12:7-10 and Romans 5:1-5

Introduction

Thank you, Craig. It is an honor and privilege to be here. Since the fall of 1992, I have occasionally worshiped here, read and raided sermons preached here, and attended my daughter's baccalaureate here. But at the conclusion of this morning's service, I will become the answer to an ecclesiastical trivia question, namely: "Who was the last guest to preach in this pulpit before Sam Wells claimed it as his own and made his initial mark upon and from it?"

Over a career spanning forty years and four churches, I learned that ministry was neither a sprint nor a marathon, so much as a relay, making me the last of many to pass the baton from Willimon to Wells. So Sunday next, come with joy and gladness to welcome your new Dean of Duke chapel.

Sermon

Even as we gather, I have one friend who is addicted to prescription pain medication, and another who, while rejoicing in the relief provided by a popular pain reliever, is troubled by rumors of side effects currently being investigated by an FDA probe. Pain is a popular news story these days. Specifically, should a drug that relieves it be made available for it, even though questions have surfaced concerning it? When the subject is physical pain, the names that surface are Vioxx and Celebrex. When the subject is mental and emotional pain, the spotlight turns to Prozac and Zoloft. And I am speaking to any number of you this morning who are taking, or have taken, one or more of the above. Meaning that you are far from indifferent to the outcome of the conversation. How much pain is too much pain? And how much will you risk in an effort to relieve it?

But there's a corollary question, isn't there? Probably a prior question. Namely, what's causing it? And sometimes the answer is easy and obvious....as in a pinched nerve. But sometimes the answer is less easy and less obvious....as in a crushed spirit, or a fractured heart. Some causes being easier to find than others. And some causes being easier to fix than others.

But when there is no quick-fix to the pain, we tend to link it with another word to describe its ongoingness and seeming uncorrectableness. That word being "suffering"....as in "pain and

suffering.” If you are going to sue somebody, that’s the phrase you employ. “You did this to me, leaving me with pain and suffering.”

Not that anybody ever sued God. Although I don’t know that for sure. Job certainly wanted to. And even got God to take the stand (as you will remember). But when God finished his opening statement (his four-chapter-long opening statement), Job recognized how unprepared he was in spite of how long he had waited. So he declined further cross examination and simply said: “No further questions.”

But why, you ask, would anyone sue God for pain and suffering? I suppose because God is often identified as being the source of pain and suffering. The Bible is full of people who figure that, where pain and suffering are concerned, God not only ladles it out but occasionally piles it on. Deservedly? Usually. But not necessarily. For, as Job contends: “I didn’t deserve this.” Leading his friends to say: “Think again. Look harder. Dig deeper. You must have.”

Job’s friends don’t come off very well in the Bible. “Who needs them?” we ask. “Nobody likes them,” we answer. Truth be told, none of you even remember their names. Maybe we should have a little quiz this morning. I’ll offer five pounds of coffee for anyone who can come up with the names of Job’s friends. But heck, let’s scrap the contest and save me the coffee money. Would you believe Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar? But if you read their testimony (which goes on for pages and pages), they were just trying to be helpful.

Which is what friends do, don’t they? Try to be helpful, I mean. Especially when faced with pain and suffering. Your pain and suffering. Not knowing what to say, friends figure they are supposed to say something. And in “saying something,” they would rather sound profound than trivial. So they introduce God into the equation, even though they are not entirely sure God fits in the equation....or if God does, where God does. So they say any number of godly-sounding things like:

“You may not understand it now, but someday you will see that God had a reason for this.”

“I know it’s hard to lose a five year old, but God must have needed another cherub for the heavenly choir.”

I can go on and on with lines like that, spoken in funeral homes and hospital corridors, or printed on cards that are mailed by people who find it easier to send something than say something. Which I do not knock at all....theology being (at that point) secondary to friendship. For what will be remembered at the end of the day....or at the end of the siege....will be the effort made, not the theology expressed.

But I am amazed that most such attempts to introduce God into the equation end up blaming God for the problem. Consider the phrase contained in this morning’s title: “God never gives you more than you can handle.” The intent being to instill confidence in your ability to handle things.

“Sure, this is hard. But you’re up to it. You can do it. I know you can do it. We know you can do it. God knows you can do it. Otherwise, God wouldn’t have given it.”

To which I will eventually take exception. But not before commenting on a trio of underlying assumptions. The first concerns the word “more” (as in “God never gives you *more* than you can handle”). The word “more” implies that there are greater and lesser degrees of pain and suffering. Which is probably true. Speaking personally, I have a high pain threshold. For years, I let them drill my teeth without numbing my mouth. “Triple N Ritter,” my dentist used to call me....No Novocain Necessary. I’ve been lucky, I guess. I have lived 64 years with no serious pain....no prescription pain medication....no broken bones....not even a discomforting headache. And yet, there have been other days when I have been heard to grit my teeth and say: “It hurts. In fact, it hurts like hell.”

Given the amount of time I spend in hospitals, I am often bedside when somebody in a white coat asks somebody under a white sheet to rate their pain on a scale of 1 to 10. Which, given enough comparable data, most people can do. If yesterday’s pain was a 7, today’s may be a 3. In fact, I recently heard somebody answer that question with the number 3.5. Talk about specificity. But it’s all relative, don’t you see. If the only pain you’ve ever felt is, objectively speaking, a 1, it may feel like a 10....because you’ve never known a 10. By definition, the first pain you ever feel is the worst pain you’ve ever felt.

I can’t tell you how many times over the last eleven years someone has talked to me about suffering in their life....disappointment in their life....great grief and pain in their life....perhaps occasioned by a great loss in their life. And then (almost guiltily) they will stop in mid-sentence and say: “Of course, given your son’s suicide, this is nothing compared to what you and your wife went through.”

Well, I don’t know whether it is or whether it isn’t. What I do know is that to them, at that moment, it feels about as bad as it can feel, and it hurts about as bad as it can hurt. So I never quantify pain (yours being a 4, mine a 9). Neither do I minimize it. Pain’s pain. That’s what I tell them. Pain’s pain. Meaning that the word “more” is relative, maybe even to the point of having no meaning.

My second concern is with the word “handle” (as in “God will never give you more than you can *handle*”). But I have discovered that handleability varies from person to person and experience to experience. Our ability to handle something is directly related to when it hits us....what we have undergirding us when it hits us....and (perhaps even more important) who we have around us when it hits us.

I have a pair of colleagues who are not only both clergy, but who are married to each other. While they were still in school, their first child was born physically handicapped and mentally impaired. Seriously so. Recently, the husband sent me an e-mail recalling his son’s birth some thirty years ago. Reflecting upon that time, he wrote: “Ready or not, it forced us to grow up real fast.” Which they did. But they know of others who didn’t. And I suspect they would be the first

to say that there were moments early on....maybe even later on....when it was touch and go, even for them.

Which brings me to my third concern, this time with the word “never” (as in “God will *never* give you more than you can handle”). If that be true, then God miscalculates far too many times to be trusted. For the burdens people bear, break the people who bear them far too often. Yes, breaking points vary. But I have discovered that most of us have one. Which is why I do not believe God ever introduces suffering into someone’s life as a means of testing them. Because far too many fail the test.

Sure, some suffering tests us. Sure, some of us pass with flying colors. Sure, some of us are better for it....wiser for it....more understanding and compassionate for it. Sure, people (like bones) have been known to heal stronger at the very place where the break occurred. But there is nothing automatic about that. And while God can help that to happen....will help that to happen....wants more than anything for that to happen....God does not know that will happen, nor can God assume that will happen.

Pain’s pain. Handleability varies. Everyone has a breaking point. Which brings me to the most critical word in the sentence “God never gives you more than you can handle.” Actually, I’m zeroing in on two words here, those being the words “God gives.” So let me say it right out. Where pain and suffering are concerned, I do not believe that God is in the distribution business.

The Bible is full of suffering. And the Bible is full of people who wish God would bring suffering into the lives of others (especially the “sic ’em” Psalms). What the Bible is not full of is people asking God to send more suffering their way. Paul, as we read earlier, boasts in his sufferings, actually listing them (complete with numbers) in his letter to the Corinthians. Five floggings. Three beatings. One stoning. Three shipwrecks. Thirty-nine lashes. Ever in danger from rivers....from bandits....from Gentiles....and from false brothers and sisters. Cold, hungry and naked, to boot. And (I love this): “Under constant daily pressure because of anxiety from my churches.” Not to mention the “thorn in his flesh” that never went away in spite of multiple pleadings that God make it go away.

But Paul stops just short of laying this off to God’s doing. Over and over again, Paul says: “God can use this.” But Paul does not say: “God did this.”

In the Romans passage, Paul again boasts of his sufferings....suggesting that suffering has toughened him up and taught him how to endure without losing hope. In effect, Paul is saying: “God has helped me come to terms with suffering, even to the point of finding peace in the midst of it.” But never does Paul say concerning it: “I have been singled out by God for it.”

From time to time, when a couple gives birth to a child who is less than perfect (and, sooner or later, all children will be less than perfect....but I am talking serious limitations here, birth defects here, mental handicaps here, life-expectancy boundaries here), friends will go to the Hallmark store in search of just the perfect card to send them. And the card selected will often suggest that, faced with the need to find perfect parents for such a challenged child, God searched high and low until he settled upon and selected them.

Which, at first glance, feels like a tremendous vote of affirmation for those parents. Which is how it was meant. And which may be true. Those parents may indeed be perfect. And if not, God may work to make them perfect. Years later, they may even say: “That child was the best thing that ever happened to us.” After which they will describe everything from lessons that would have never been learned or love that would have never been shared, had that child never been conceived. Although it may also turn out that the birth of that child soured the marriage, split the family, broke the home, and created lifelong problems for the child and the society onto which the child was thrown.

For all I know, those parents may be perfect for the job. And, even if they aren’t, God may empower them for the job. But I do not believe God starts out with a quota of already-compromised children to place and then goes looking for people with whom to place them. And my second reaction, were I to receive one of those cards and read that God thought my wife and I were perfect for the challenge, would be to say: “Does that mean if we were less so, our child would have been more so....perfect, I mean?”

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My friends, life is filled with hard and painful challenges. As to why they come in the number they do, and the magnitude they do, to the people they do, I do not know. Concerning those people, some bear up. Others break down. Those who bear up, gladden God. Those who break down, sadden God. But God loves all of them....seeks to help all of them....would never do anything to hurt any of them....and (I believe this with all my heart) never *did* anything to hurt any of them.

Where pain and suffering are concerned, God is not in the distribution business. Can any of you really hear God saying:

A little for you....you can’t handle it.

A lot for you....you can handle it.

A medium amount for you.....you may or may not be able to handle it.

Again I say, God is not in the distribution business. So what business is God in? That’s too big a question for too short a time. But I owe you something. So, for starters, let me try this. Where pain and suffering are concerned, God is in the sharing business.

One day, I happened upon God and thought I would tell him about my son. Whereupon God listened. God cried. God put his hand on my shoulder. And then God did a very strange but truly wonderful thing. God put his hand in his back pocket, took out his wallet and, flipping through those little vinyl jackets, said: “Bill, I’ve got a picture I want to show you....”