

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

*St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA*

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## Testing

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I am going to take the opportunity provided by our 1 Corinthians text to address two major problems in American Christianity today. The first is proof-texting, and the second is literalism. Both can and have led people astray from what Paul is trying to communicate in these verses. These two problematic hermeneutical tools have led people astray from what Jesus taught too, which is even worse in my mind!

If you take a quick look at our text from 1 Corinthians today, is there any verse that sounds like a common saying when people are going through a tough time? That little clause in verse 10:13, “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength,” sounds an awful lot like “God won’t give you more than you can handle,” right? This is a classic example of proof-texting or taking a scripture verse (or two) out of its context because that isolated text supports your argument.

The problem with proof-texting is that removing scripture from its context can drastically change its meaning. It's through proof-texting that we end up with stories like the one from Texas<sup>1</sup> in which a mother murdered her children believing it to be God’s will, in part because she felt she had to “get her house in order” before the end of the world, which is a phrase used several places in scripture<sup>2</sup>, often connected with preparing for death.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2004/LAW/03/29/children.slain/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> Cf 2 Samuel 17:23; 2 Kings 20:1; Isaiah 38:1

This same verse also powerfully illustrates the trouble with literalism. Biblical literalism is a house of cards hermeneutic, requiring all sorts of mental gymnastics to avoid the whole thing falling apart. My go-to response to literalism is usually to ask in how many days God created the world: six days as described by Genesis 1 or one day as recorded in Genesis 2. Biblical literalism, like proof-texting, is simply another way of isolating scripture, this time from its historical, cultural, and linguistic settings.

Isolating particular verses from their context is never a good idea! Chopping up scripture and putting disparate verses together doesn't work well either! Removing them from their historical and cultural context limits meaning too significantly. So, to understand this often-twisted clause, let's look at the context of 10:13 to avoid the dangers of proof-texting and literalism.

“God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength.” The first thing to note is that Paul is writing to a particular congregation in Corinth at a specific time, dealing with specific issues. And given the nature of some portions of this letter, we know that the congregation there was conflicted and was coping with competing interpretations of God's truth.

Now, let us consider the literary context of this tricky verse. Chapter 10 of 1 Corinthians is part of a longer lecture Paul gave that started waaaay back in Chapter 8, “Now concerning food sacrificed to idols...”<sup>3</sup> Clearly, the congregation in Corinth had some conflict around eating this food. Paul goes on and on (as he is wont to do) until wrapping up his arguments in Chapter 10. Heck, the verse immediately following where we end today's pericope reads, “Therefore, my beloved, flee from the worship of idols.”<sup>4</sup> The literary context gives us theological context; Paul is talking about idolatry!

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor. 8:1a

<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor. 10:14

To avoid literalism, let's look at the Greek used in this clause. Of particular import are the pronouns used. Here's another area where biblical literalism falls apart: what language are you literal with? English? Koine Greek? Biblical Hebrew? Translation matters! And by looking at the Greek it is easy to conclude that it is inappropriate for someone to read this clause as saying, "God won't give **you** more than **you** can handle." In Greek, the pronouns are all plural! A more literal translation of this clause would be: "God is faithful, and he will not let [y'all] be tested beyond [all y'all's] strength." So, if you wanted to keep that other saying, it would be more appropriate to say: God won't give you more than you can handle *together*.

How about the word "tested" or *peirasthēnai* (πειρασθῆναι) in Greek? Once again, it's connected to a plural pronoun, so it's communal testing. In Scripture, the word is often translated as tempted rather than tested. Its case (Aorist, Infinitive, Passive) suggests that the testing was completed in the past but does not indicate duration or manner of action. In the context of a letter to a congregation dealing with temptation, it would indicate that God has tested the congregation at Corinth already and may be continuing that testing as they struggle with this issue of eating food offered to idols.

This theme of communal struggle against idolatry becomes even more apparent when we consider other cultural and historical cues in our reading. Paul alludes several times to the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for forty years. And why were they wandering for so long? The golden calf...idolatry. Why did "twenty-three thousand fell in a single day"? Worshipers of Baal were tempting them to commit idolatry.<sup>5</sup>

Then there's the way the clause starts: "**God** is faithful." At the culmination of a lengthy teaching on the community's need to avoid idolatry, Paul reminds the congregation that while we struggle and argue about being faithful to God, God has no such struggles in being faithful to us. This is

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<sup>5</sup> Numbers 25

something followers need to be regularly reminded of lest they fall into despair.

Let's retire the phrase "God won't give you more than you can handle" or, at the very least, let's provide proper context for it if we must use it: God is faithful, we are not, and thankfully, we can resist the temptation of idolatry far better in the midst of community, for communal endurance for the struggle against idolatry is greater than the individual's.

So we find, once again, that community becomes centered when we strive to follow the Way of Christ. Even our ability to resist the greatest temptation, idolatry (especially self-idolatry), requires community. During this season of reflection, I invite you to reflect less on your personal struggles and more on our neighbors' unique struggles. Along with that reflection, consider these questions: How might we endure those struggles together? How can we be more faithful in caring for one another?

Amen.