

Comfort; Series: Breath and Mud Dangler

Isaiah 40:1-11; 2 Corinthians 1:3-11

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“God will not give you anything more than you can handle.” Have you seen this before? Have you said this before? Now, it does say in 1 Corinthians 10 that God will not let us be *tempted* beyond what we can bear. And then some people generalize this to mean that God won’t let anything happen to us that we can’t handle. And there *is* a measure of comfort in these words. People might use them as a way of saying, “Hey, you got this! If God let this happen to you, he knows that you are going to be able to handle this.”

God will not give you anything more than you can handle. It’s also a phrase that pastors and theologians love to hate. I type it into google and the first few articles that pop up are defiant refusals of this: “God WILL give you more than you can handle.” Or this meme:



The reason we love to hate this phrase is, first of all, because it’s not biblical. But also, there is a bit of a falsity to its comfort. Let’s say you’re going through something really, really

hard and someone says, “Oh, don’t worry – it’s okay – God won’t give you more than you can handle” - and you’re *not* handling it. You *can’t* handle it. You’re *losing* it. Does this mean your faith isn’t strong enough? Does this then mean that you’re not a good enough Christian?

No, if you’ve got more than you can handle, you actually might be in a situation similar to what Paul was in and what he later reflected on when he was writing 2 Corinthians. He said, “We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death” (2 Corinthians 1:8-9). We don’t know exactly what he was referring to. There are any number of hopeless places Paul landed: shipwrecks, beatings, imprisonments. Whatever it was, it sounds kind of like Paul was in a situation that he couldn’t handle.

There have been times in your life when you just couldn’t handle it. You just couldn’t bear it. You just couldn’t manage. You just couldn’t even. And there *will* be times that will be far beyond your ability to endure. There will be times of despair. There will be moments, perhaps even in this next year when you will feel as though you have received a death sentence. When you feel as substantial as dry grass blowing in the wind... When the fickleness and faithlessness of the people around you absolutely astounds you and you feel more alone than you thought you could ever feel.

Maybe you’re in the midst of that moment right now. If you’re not there, I want you to remember a time when you have been there, or imagine what would have to happen for you to get to the place of saying, “I just can’t even.” [Silence]

And now, I want you to think about all the things that you might try to do in order to ‘handle it.’ When you can’t even, how do you try to handle it...

I will tell you the two categories of things that I do... First, I will try to figure it out.



Just keep calm and figure it out, Heidi. I will write lists and draw diagrams and journal and talk it out with my spiritual director and analyze and over-analyze and under-analyze and Figure. It. Out. That's me trying to handle the unhandle-able. I figure it out.

And often that doesn't work. So, then I have another category of response. I Check Out. Food. Facebook. Netflix. Fancy drinks. Insert your poison. I can't even. And I can't figure it out. I will just check out.

Maybe you Figure it Out... Or Check Out... Or perhaps you're someone who tends to Freak Out. Or Flake Out. Or Act Out.

Folks, there's another way. When Paul wasn't handling it. Wasn't enduring it. When Paul couldn't even, this is how Paul reflected on that... "But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us" (2 Corinthians 1:9b-10).

Our God is a God of deliverance and, as Paul says in the first verses of 2 Corinthians 1, a God of comfort. "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles" (2 Cor 1:3-4a). The God of ALL comfort, who comforts us in ALL our troubles.

Paul here is echoing words that we sang from Isaiah 40 this morning. "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" (Isaiah 40:1). When you can't even. When you can't handle. When you can't endure. When you can't figure it out. And when checking out doesn't make the problem go away... and when freaking out or flaking out or acting out just makes the problem worse... the God of all comfort comes to you... on a way in the wilderness... he comes to you on a highway in the desert.

If you have more than you can handle – if the time is up for you and you are tapping out – this is the time to look and see your God coming to you over those raised up valleys and lowered hills and smoothed out rugged places. This is your time to perhaps even see that he has been with you all along... handling things through you and in you even when you thought you were handling them All By Yourself.

I want to just say a couple of things about that word 'comfort'. First of all, though we might sometimes associate the word 'comfort' with warm fuzzies and soft things, this is too narrow an understanding of the word. The Latin origin of this word helps us here... *Com* – means with – and *fort/fortis* – strong/strength. The comfort of God is a Strong Comfort. A Mighty Comfort. Like the walls of a fort.



But here's another thing about that word, comfort. In the Hebrew, the word comfort is *nacham* and it can mean... wait for it... to sigh or to breathe strongly.

Our God is a God of breath. He formed humanity out of the dust of the earth and he breathed into humanity the breath of life. And from the breath of the lungs of God comes the Word – the word that created – the word that endures forever. Oh, my broken and beautiful brothers and sisters, can you feel the breath of God – the deep sigh of God – the *nacham* of God reaching deep into your faded hopes and withered dreams? "Breath of heaven, hold me together, be forever near me, breath of heaven. Breath of heaven, lighten my darkness, pour over me your holiness for you are holy. Breath of heaven."

Perhaps the comfort of God comes to you in a mystical breath. Perhaps the comfort of God comes to you through reading Scripture – the word of the Lord which stands forever... Perhaps the comfort of God comes to you through a song that has long reminded you of God's presence and faithfulness generation after generation after generation. Perhaps the comfort of God best reaches the deep places of your heart through creeds and confessions. "What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I am not my own, but belong, body and soul, in life and

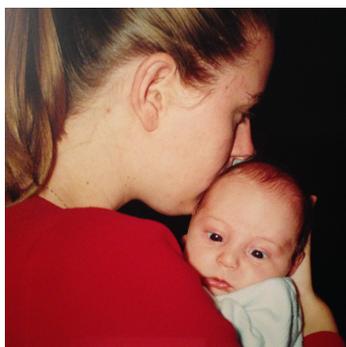
in death, to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ..." (Question and Answer 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism).

Yes. Yes *and...* I imagine that the God of all comfort has come to you also through the hands and feet and ears and eyes of the people in this room – and perhaps beyond – through your brothers and sisters in Christ.

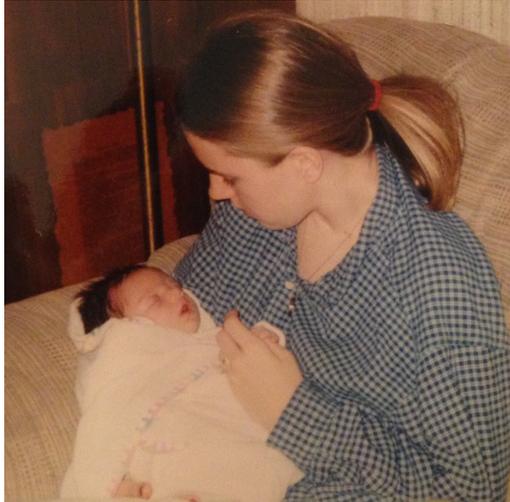


That is the way it works, after all. Paul writes that God comforts us... so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God (2 Cor 1:3). Comfort comes to us by way of the comforted. And really, wasn't that what God told Isaiah to do? Isaiah 40:1 is a command! God is talking to Isaiah and telling him to "Comfort, comfort my people!"

Sometimes people comfort us on purpose with intentionality, and sometimes they just do it by being there – not even realizing what a comfort they are to us... After my first husband died, 17 years ago, in those first months, this was my favourite kind of comfort. I would find babies.



This is my elementary school friend's baby, Austin...



and then the youth pastor of my parents' church - their baby, Annika,



and then here another baby from my parents congregation, Ingee.

In these children I experienced the sigh, the deep breath, the *nacham* of God, into the deep depths of my pain.

When we have experienced comfort – the comfort of God in all kinds of its forms – we are better able to comfort others... It is the path that comfort takes. And in order to experience comfort, we have to have experienced the pain that begs for the comfort. Poet, Edward Hirsch, said, “Implicit in poetry is the notion that we are deepened by heartbreaks, that we are not so much diminished as enlarged by grief, by our refusal to vanish – to let others vanish – without leaving a verbal record.”

When you grieve – when you lose – you could try to figure it out or check out... Or, you could realize that pain is not to be figured out – and certainly doesn't go away when you try to check out – and is only exacerbated when you freak out or flake out or act out - that pain is met best by comfort – and when we face and experience the pain – and receive comfort – we are enlarged and our capacity to comfort others is increased.

So, perhaps, today, you need to receive the comfort of your brothers and sisters. Perhaps, you are being called to extend that comfort.

St. Teresa of Avila is known to have said these words – words that have been put to music and will be sung on your behalf in just a moment:

