

YOU CAN STAND

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Would you be happy if I could grant you three wishes today? Alas! It's not in my power. But at least let me tell you about three wishes.

A married couple, both 60 years old, were celebrating their 35th anniversary at the beach. They stumbled over an old brass lamp, half-buried in the sand, and a genie popped out. He thanked them for releasing him and congratulated them on their long marriage and invited each of them to make a wish. The wife wished they could take a cruise around the world. Poof! A handful of tickets for a world cruise appeared in her hand. She shrieked with delight! Then, the husband said, "I wish I had a wife 30 years younger than me." Poof! The husband aged 30 years.

A man found a brass lamp, rubbed it vigorously, and a genie appeared. "For freeing me from the lamp, I will grant you any wish you desire," the genie said. The man replied, "I want a spectacular job. A challenge that no man has ever succeeded at or has ever even dared to try." Poof! Said the genie: "You're a housewife."

A woman was walking along one of our beautiful California beaches when she stumbled across an old lamp. She picked it up and rubbed it and out popped a genie. The genie said, "For setting me free from the lamp, I will grant you one wish." The woman thought quickly and said, "I've always wanted to go to Hawaii, but I'm scared to fly and I get very seasick. Could you build me a bridge to Hawaii so I can drive over there to visit?" The genie laughed and said, "That's impossible! Think of the logistics of that! How would the supports ever reach the bottom of the Pacific? Think of how much concrete...how much steel!! I'm good, but not THAT good! No, think of another wish." So, after some serious thought the woman said, "Well, I've never been able to find the right man. You know, one that's considerate and fun, likes to cook and helps with the housecleaning, is good in bed and gets along with my family, doesn't watch sports all the time, is faithful to me and a thoughtful and attentive dad. That's what I wish for... a good mate." After a moment of silence, the genie asked, "Did you want that bridge with two lanes or four?"

Now, I have good news and bad news. The bad news is that God is not a genie. And the good news is that God is not a genie; God is real, and Christ has power to act in your life. And that's not just wishful thinking.

Let's learn something today about how God *actually* does work in our lives. Would that be good?

Paul knew something about God working in his life, even through difficult situations, so let's consider what he wrote to the church in Corinth.

1 Corinthians 10:1 I don't want you to forget, dear brothers and sisters, about our ancestors in the wilderness long ago. All of them were guided by a cloud that moved ahead of them, and all of them walked through the sea on dry ground. ² In the cloud and in the sea, all of them were baptized as followers of Moses. ³ All of them ate the same spiritual food, ⁴ and all of them drank the same spiritual water. For they drank from the spiritual rock that traveled with them, and that rock was Christ. ⁵ Yet God was not pleased with most of them, and their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.

⁶ These things happened as a warning to us, so that we would not crave evil things as they did, ⁷ or worship idols as some of them did. As the Scriptures say, "The people celebrated with feasting and drinking, and they indulged in pagan revelry." ⁸ And we must not engage in sexual immorality as some of them did, causing 23,000 of them to die in one day.

⁹ Nor should we put Christ to the test, as some of them did and then died from snakebites.

¹⁰ And don't grumble as some of them did, and then were destroyed by the angel of death.

¹¹ These things happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us who live at the end of the age.

What was the basis for Paul's warning? The parallels between the ancient Israelites and contemporary Christians. They had many spiritual advantages and helps, yet they sinned (idolatry, sexual immorality, and grumbling).

Why did Paul think it was appropriate to warn us? Because we are prone to the same sins. And we are living in the last days (which means, we will soon stand before our Examiner, the Lord Jesus Christ, to give an account).

Also, like the forefathers and the Corinthian Christians, we are generally oblivious to our sinfulness. We rationalize and make excuses for our behavior, and imagine that we, compared to those who lived a long time ago, are superior, advanced, evolved.

The two concluding verses of this passage are especially worthy of our reflection, even our memorization.

1 Corinthians 10:12 If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall. ¹³ The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure.

Let me unpack them line by line.

IF YOU THINK YOU ARE STANDING STRONG, BE CAREFUL NOT TO FALL.

This is the concern of Paul's heart that prompted the commentary about the example of the forefathers. We want, and need, assurance in our walk with the Lord. But assurance can open the door to pride and arrogance. Therefore, we must be especially careful.

Pride goes before a fall. Activities associated with pride and arrogance include scoffing, contempt, and mocking. And if engineering our own downfall is not enough to give you pause, consider God's attitude toward human pride:

Proverbs 15:25 The Lord tears down the house of the proud.

Proverbs 16:5 The Lord detests the proud.

Isaiah 26:5 The Lord God humbles the proud.

James 4:6 God opposes the proud.

Just when you think you're standing strong, you're in great danger! Why? So impacted by your own press release, you get careless, distracted, inattentive. You need to stay spiritually alert.

What are three ways to "be careful" not to fall?

Here are my suggestions: Check your balance. Watch where you put your feet. Use your hands to hold on.

THE TEMPTATIONS IN YOUR LIFE ARE NO DIFFERENT FROM WHAT OTHERS EXPERIENCE.

I used to see this comment in just one way: You're not alone; others have been where you are now. Don't feel picked on, singled out. You're in good company. It's nothing new. It's not that unusual. Take heart. Don't be discouraged. This explanation focuses on your present feelings, and is an attempt to encourage you. That's good.

But in the context of this remark (the story reminding us about the forefathers' stubborn sinfulness), I see something else (the other side of the same coin): You are susceptible to the same sins as those who have gone before you. You are not impervious. Be careful. Don't be headstrong. Don't be haughty. Take heed and humble yourself, lest you fall. This explanation focuses on our innate weaknesses, just like our forefathers, as a warning to spare us heartache. That is merciful, for *"the human heart is most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?"* (Jeremiah 17:9)

It's a blow to our pride to hear this, but we are as human as the next person. Jesus knew what was in people, and He trusted no one. He said, *"From within, out of a person's heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, lustful desires, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. All these vile things come from within; they are what defile you."* (Mark 7:21-23)

Those words assault my self-image! They destroy my imagination that I am a “pretty nice guy.” They offend me! But they are accurate.

I don't mean that ALL of those things come out of me ALL of the time—or you. Through good training, self-discipline, or fear of the consequences those things are held at bay MOST of the time. But the capacity is there—in me, in you, in every human being.

We do not read that list and think to ourselves, “I have no idea what Paul's writing about. What do those words describe?” In fact, we know each of the things he has listed. Each has a clear meaning, and most, if not all, have a memorable example from our past. We are familiar with those attitudes and behaviors.

Now, if you have imagined that you're the only one who is familiar with those things, and have tried to hide that from others, posing as a “good person,” you're about to be set free! God already sees you and has posted this description in the Bible for all to see. It's His version of Facebook, or Instagram, or the Post Office bulletin board—and your face is on it! He sees you—accurately—yet He loves you. He does not push you away or reject you. He embraces you. He forgives you. He puts the robe of sonship on your shoulders and the ring of family authority on your finger.

Listen...

AND GOD IS FAITHFUL. HE WILL NOT ALLOW THE TEMPTATION TO BE MORE THAN YOU CAN STAND.

Everyone say aloud: “God is faithful.”

And say aloud: “He will not allow.”

Now put them together and say it: “God is faithful. He will not allow.” Say it again!

God loves you. He will not allow the test to be bigger than you. He will not allow it to overwhelm you. He will not allow it to undermine you. He will not allow it to overcome you. He will not allow it. It cannot happen. He has set a limit. He has placed boundaries. He put a cap on it. You are in His care. And nothing can separate you from His love.

He will not allow the test to be “more than you can stand.”

I am actually glad He did not say, “More than you can outrun” or “More than you can out-swim.” All He expects of you is to stand.

Stand your ground in faithfulness. Stand your ground in honesty. Stand your ground in mercy. Stand your ground in lovingkindness. Stand your ground in generosity.

Don't give up. Don't quit. Just stand.

The faithful God will not allow the test to be more than you can stand.

WHEN YOU ARE TEMPTED, HE WILL SHOW YOU A WAY OUT SO THAT YOU CAN ENDURE.

When we are tempted, most commonly, we don't want to endure, we just want it to end. We pray for miraculous deliverance when we should be praying for wisdom and courage and strength.

When God allows a test, His aim is for us to endure—to stand faithful.

If His chief concern was to end it, He wouldn't have permitted it in the first place.

Let's face it. We want it to end; He wants us to endure.

Who is likely to win that struggle?

So why not get on the winning side at the beginning and set your mind to endure. That's when you'll discover the "way out."

If I can just SEE the way out, I can endure.

If I know I only have to wait five more minutes, I can wait. It's when I have no idea how long it might be that I panic or become discouraged.

If I can see the light at the end of the tunnel—even if it's distant or dim—I can keep moving forward toward the light.

This is where your sanctified imagination can help you.

The New Age movement talks of a visualization that is supposed to be able to generate or create a new reality. Some of the prosperity preachers in Christendom teach similar nonsense. God has not given us authority to create a new reality—especially not one that we might dream up for ourselves.

What He has given you and I is the measure of faith that is able to release and produce the reality that God has willed. In order to employ my faith I must be able to SEE what it is that God wants to produce. I need to see it, and then believe that I receive it.

Mark 11:24 I tell you, you can pray for anything, and if you believe that you've received it, it will be yours.

In order to “believe that you’ve received it,” as Jesus required, you must first be able to SEE it.

Long, long ago, God called Abram away from His hometown to a place he had never been, and promised Him an inheritance there. Listen to what God said to him: *“The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, “Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you.”* (Genesis 13:14-17; ESV)

The principle that I am describing is embedded in that passage. Let me break it down for you:

Lift up your eyes. You need a higher vantage than usual. You won’t find faith while gazing at the floor. Sure, you’ve got problems, but you’re not helped by gazing at them or dwelling on them.

Look from the place where you are. Don’t wait for a change in your circumstances before you start trusting God specifically for the way out. From the middle of the storm, from the heart of your fear, from the center of your pain—begin to look up.

All the land that you see I will give to you. Do you remember how Paul described God’s ability to the church at Ephesus? *“Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!”* (Ephesians 3:20-21). God is able to do so much more; all we have to do is use our sanctified imagination to see it and ask for it. What can you see from where you are today?

Walk through the length and breadth of the land. That is, encourage your imagination. Explore your dream. Put it on paper. Draw it or write it out. Every week I walk through the remodel project. I imagine the new sanctuary ceiling covered with sheet rock and paint. I imagine the lighting in the room. I stand in the elevated media booth and look toward the stage. I imagine the instruments of worship. I walk into the cry room and look out through the big plate glass window and imagine watching the worship service. I walk into the restrooms and imagine the tiled floors and new windows. That’s what I hope you’ll see when I invite you to wander back there and look at the progress.

I even walk through this room and imagine the new nursery for the little ones who will come to playfully learn about Jesus, and the new kitchen for our meal functions (with a 90-second

dishwasher!) and the new coffee bar serving home-made goodies and raising funds for ministry to our young people.

I step outside and stand under the trellis that is to be, and imagine a paved, striped, and well-lit parking lot. Then I step around the corner and imagine the expanded playgrounds and see kids climbing and swinging, while adults sit on benches to watch or prepare picnic tables for lunch.

This is some of what I see as I review the architect's drawings. This is what I see as I pray. This is what I see as I invite people to give and to participate with us.

What do *you* see when you invite people to church? Do you see them saying no? Do you see them scoffing at your request? Is that what God wants to do in them? See what God wants.

If you're praying for a loved one to be saved, FIRST ask God to help you SEE that person as a Christian—one who loves God and follows Jesus Christ. Too often we just moan to God about their present condition and behavior. That's all we see: their unbelief, their rebellion, or their sinful habits. We need to use our sanctified imagination to see them the way God wants them to be, and believe that we receive THAT.

If you are praying for healing for yourself or someone else, you must first SEE the person you're praying for in their healed condition. See them fit and fruitful. See them full of energy and aglow with the testimony of God's power. Then believe that you receive THAT.

How did we get to the place where we think that God responds to human need?

Doesn't YOUR heart break to see the need of humanity today? Then, surely His does too. But He's looking for something else. He's looking for, and has pledged Himself to respond to FAITH.

"The prayer of FAITH shall save the sick." (James 5:15)

If it was human need that moved the hand of God, then Jesus would have healed *everyone* at the Pool of Bethesda, instead of just one man. He would have forgiven every harlot in the city, and every tax collector.

When the storm threatened the lives of His chosen disciples, He would have said, "Stand back. I've got this." Instead, He asked, "Where is your faith?"

Can you see the way out of your dilemma? I don't mean, "Can you see each step required to reach the exit?" I mean, can you see yourself reaching the other side of the challenge? Can you

see yourself with the healing God wants you to have, with the provision God wants you to have, with the blessing God wants to give you?

Because, if you can, and you will apply your faith to that vision—to God’s desire for you—then you will be able to endure and get to that place. You will overcome the challenge. You will pass the test. You will have what you see.

What do you want God to do for you? Can you see what He wants to do for you? If you can, then pray for THAT. Don’t pray for what you wish or hope, but pray and believe for what you can SEE!

God is not a genie, but His promises are “Yes and Amen” through Christ Jesus. Stand your ground and pray in faith.