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1st Corinthians 10:13, ESV

¹³ No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

1st Corinthians 15:33–34, ESV

³³ Do not be deceived: “Bad company ruins good morals.” ³⁴ Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame.

Getting out of Singapore.

There was a man with whom I worked very closely as a researcher many years ago, and I found out in September of 2020 that he had died in September of 2019. It was one of those things that makes one stop in their tracks and reflect on the past. I found out that he was dead, and we'll call him Charlie, when someone else from my long past sent me email that mentioned off-hand that Charlie was dead. I don't know how he died, but after I tell you this story, you might wonder, like I did, if his death was perhaps related to what I'm going to tell you about him. Charlie was four years older than me and had gotten his Ph.D. five years before me. I worked under him. He was brilliant, kind, and loved to

crack jokes. Each day he brought into work a cantaloupe for lunch and a six pack of diet soda to drink. But that wasn't all he drank. He also drank a lot of liquor, but he did that privately. He was almost fired for showing up intoxicated for work multiple times. But he was definitely a functioning alcoholic; as a researcher he was extremely accomplished; he published numerous papers and books, and he received millions of dollars of research funds. I considered him not just my boss and my mentor, but also a dear friend.

We once attended a conference in Singapore together. In case you're not aware of it, Singapore's population is about 75% ethnic Chinese, 15% Malays (people from Malaysia), and 8% Indian. The Indian population is particularly poor, for the most part. Singapore is a city state, made up mostly of a single island just south of Malaysia, and north of Australia. It has an oppressive regime. There is very limited freedom of expression, peaceful assemblies are often deemed illegal, the death penalty is used for a variety of sometimes non-violent crimes, and many minority groups are brutally repressed. Tough laws keep society orderly. Being intoxicated could land you in prison for a long time. Don't get into trouble in Singapore, especially with drugs or alcohol.

Well, Charlie and I flew into Singapore separately, but we flew out together. I had not spent much time with him at the conference. We were in

the same specialty, but he, being more senior than me, had a number of old friends that he hung out with, while I spent most of my time with inexperienced researchers like me. Well, when we met up at the airport to get on our international flight together, Charlie was having a lot of trouble walking, talking, and standing up straight. I had never seen him very drunk; he did his drinking alone in his home and was not a social drinker. I didn't drink at all. But there he was, showing up at the international terminal flat out drunk. The man behind the counter looked at the two of us. His eyes settled on Charlie with his bloodshot eyes and constant sway, and I knew we were in big trouble.

Let's look at our Bible passages. They are from 1st Corinthians. This letter is addressed by the great evangelist Paul to the Christians of Corinth, a commercially powerful port city in Greece, on the coast of the Mediterranean. The church in Corinth has problems that Paul wants to address. There are conflicts between Jewish and Gentile converts to Christianity. There are problems between the varying economic and social classes represented in the church. There are tensions among people who want to be leaders in the church in Corinth. It's noteworthy that all of these problems are things that we face today. Our first quote comes from a piece of the letter focusing on helping people avoid idolatry and to worship only the one true God. Our passage says:

¹³ No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

This says three things. First, all humans are tempted by the same sins or mistakes. Second, God will not give us a burden that we cannot ultimately handle. And third, if God gives us a difficult temptation or moral burden, God will also give us a way to avoid that mistake.

Our second quote comes from a part of the letter dedicated to a discussion of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is near the end of the letter and Paul is reassuring us that just as Jesus was resurrected, we will all one day be resurrected. He is making it clear that death is nothing to fear. Here is the quote:

³³ Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals." ³⁴ Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame.

There is one major point here I would like to emphasize, and it's something we all tell our children. You have to watch out who you hang out with. Bad company leads you to a bad place. This was one of the problems in Corinth.

But alcoholism is a disease, a tendency that is genetically related, something that some people are prone to and others are not. Addiction is a burden that only some people must bear. It is very wrong to call it a sin. The

tendency to become addicted to something like alcohol can be triggered by a failure in marriage or work, by isolation or sickness, or by any number of other stressors in life. I cannot tell you what caused Charlie to have repeated problems with alcohol. I can say that he lived alone, had a couple of girlfriends that broke up with him, and that he did not make friends easily. He didn't attend a church or have hobbies. He was very kind, very polite, and very supportive of other people. He was extremely far from being an arrogant, self-centered academic. He was truly a deeply good person. It broke my heart to see him in a drunken stupor at the airport in Singapore. I should say that years later, he did eventually beat alcoholism, at least for a while, but then I lost touch with him for a number of years. I don't know what came of him or if he ever relapsed.

I want to make an important point today. There is a big difference between things that are our fault and things that are not our fault. But there are times when we find ourselves in the gray zone, impacted by something that is common to the human condition, like our first passage says. What happens is that we are innocently placed in a situation where we suddenly have a responsibility to act. But God doesn't put us in a situation where we are totally defenseless. There are things we can do. It's how we react to situations that we have not caused that tests our resolve, our character, our willingness to put our dependence and faith

totally in God. God does give us the strength to do our part. It doesn't mean that everything will work out great. But it does mean that we can feel good about ourselves. We regain our faith in ourselves simply by doing whatever we can do when we confront a problem. We hand our anxiety and any guilt we might feel over to God. We simply do the best we humanly can do - and then we ask God to please help us with our problem and to take the burden off our shoulders. We walk with God and know that we are not alone.

My friend Charlie did his part to the best of my knowledge. He did seek help. I don't know if he was able to stay sober up to the point of his death. I have no idea how he died. But he was a very good man whom you could trust with anything, your money, your child, your life, your future. Paul says something about drinking later in Corinthians. It is both metaphorical and literal: ²¹ *You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons.* You can't pray to God and live a corrupt life, and part of that is that we must all fight whatever weaknesses we might have. Let me finish the story of Charlie and me, and our situation at the Singapore airport. The man behind the counter gave Charlie a hard stare, then he called a manager over. The manager came. The man behind the counter told his manager that Charlie seemed to be publicly drunk. He motioned for a man who was either a police officer or a security guard, I actually

couldn't tell which. My heart was pounding. Then I calmly said that my friend was very sick, that he had been born with a serious medical condition that sometimes caused him to look like this. I showed the manager my business card, which said that I had a Ph.D. and that I was a professor. I showed them my friend's business card. All the while, Charlie is swaying and looking totally out of it. I repeated that this was a medical condition and that he was born with it. Then the manager nodded, a bit reluctantly, and they let us board the plane.

Charlie slept for the first part of the flight, then he woke up. He remembered what had happened in the airport terminal. He thanked me for rescuing him. He thanked me for lying for him. I told him that I didn't lie, that he was indeed born with something that periodically caused him to have problems. He nodded thoughtfully. When the flight attendant came by and asked us if we wanted anything to drink, he ordered a diet Pepsi.

There is a line at the very beginning of Chapter 5 of Paul's letter to the Galatian church:

5 For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

In this part of the letter, Paul is giving his readers moral advice. This is one of the greatest truisms of our faith, that belief in God, belief in Christ, sets us free. We

are no longer slaves to the things that happen on Earth. Paul goes on to say that it is the Holy Spirit within us that gives us this freedom:

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

He tells us what the Holy Spirit dwelling within in us gives us:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control.

The Holy Spirit resides within us and is always there to empower us when we are facing challenges in life. We don't fall apart. We don't give up. We don't become bitter. We do what we have to do, and with God lifting us up through the power of the Holy Spirit, we face difficult times with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness – and yes, self-control. Often that is the critical one, self-control. Some of us have a tendency toward addiction, often involving alcohol, prescription drugs, illegal drugs, cigarettes, even food. Some of us get angry easily; we lose control of ourselves and lash out. Some of us are born with a tendency to be envious of other people. One problem is that we often focus on guilt in Christianity. We judge each other. In today's society, we are extremely cruel to people who do something of which society does not approve. It can be very easy for someone who wasn't born with a tendency to become addicted to simply write off an alcoholic as being weak or

irresponsible. What we should be doing is helping each other with the battles we need to fight. We also need to accept personal responsibility for the things we need to change about ourselves - even if we can never fully overcome our limitations, and yes, even if they are not at all our fault.

It is important to remember that much of what happens to us in life – even if society tells us it is all our fault – is not entirely our responsibility. We find ourselves in situations that are difficult, that catch us by surprise, and we don't always do the right thing at first. We get ourselves in trouble. But we adjust, we learn, then we do our best. It took Charlie a long time to deal with his problem. He made a lot of mistakes along the way. But we always give ourselves a lot of grace and we forgive ourselves when we mess up – even if others don't forgive us. God wants us to live in joy. Please pray briefly with me.

God, I was born in your image, but I was also born imperfect. Empower me, through the Holy Spirit within me, to recognize the things in me that lead me to bad places. Give me the strength to rise above my problems and emerge stronger and closer to you. May I never judge someone who perhaps faces far worse limitations than I face. Let me live without anxiety, but with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,²³ gentleness – and yes, with self-control. Amen.