

The Mystery of Prayer
“What if God says, “No!”?”

Introduction: Today we conclude our prayer series and season of prayer and fasting.

Tackled two tough subjects:

- Do my prayers even matter?
- Does God answer all my prayers?

Today: What if God says, “No!”?

(Prayed for a job, relationship, finances, miracle or healing, what then?)

- We prayed, agonized, interceded
- Still, the answer is “No.”

Didn't Jesus call us to persistence?

And He said to them, "Which of you shall have a friend, and go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; 6 for a friend of mine has come to me on his journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; 7 and he will answer from within and say, 'Do not trouble me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give to you'? 8 I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs. 9 "So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 10 For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Luke 11:5-11 NKJV

Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart, 2 saying: "There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. 3 Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, 'Get justice for me from my adversary.' 4 And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, 'Though I do not fear God nor regard man, 5 yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.'" 6 Then the Lord said, "Hear what the unjust judge said. 7 And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? 8 I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?" Luke 18:1-8 NKJV

So—what if the answer is “no” even after persistence?

Paul's Thorn in the Flesh—What do we know?

1. Thorn (skolops)—a pointed piece of wood, pole, or stake.

“Paul is thinking graphically of a body helplessly impaled. He sees himself as if it were transfixed, painfully held down and humiliated for the purpose, twice stated, that he should not be self-exalted.”—Philip Hughes

2. A “Messenger from Satan”

- a. Satanic in origin—attributable to demonic agency
- b. But, permitted by God and allowed despite persistence on Paul's end for his good.

(ILL) Job

For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Hebrews 12:10 NKJV

3. Paul actually admitting that God was responsible for his thorn.

NOTE: James Scott calls it the “Divine Passive”

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago — whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows — such a one was caught up to the third heaven. 2 Corinthians 12:2 NKJV

How he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. 5 Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. 2 Corinthians 12:4 NKJV

And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. 2 Corinthians 12:7 NKJV

(See “caught up”/ “was given”

IMPORTANT: This admission would further create doubt regarding his apostleship in the “super-spiritual” church of Corinth.

4. Nature of Paul’s thorn is highly disputed

Likely: Bad eyesight

What then was the blessing you enjoyed? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me. Galatians 4:15 NKJV

See with what large letters I have written to you with my own hand! Galatians 6:11 NKJV

QUESTION: Maybe never recovered from Damascus Road like Jacob when he wrestled with God

5. Paul fully expected God to respond to his prayers

- a. Healed before

From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; 26 in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; 27 in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. 2 Corinthians 11:24-27 NKJV

- b. Would be later (Acts 28—serpent bite)
- c. Prayed authentically

6. His prayer was not unheard
7. The answer did not come immediately (3 times)
8. God said, “No!”

What about when He says “No!” to us?

CAVEAT—His ways are not ours, past finding out. We see through a glass darkly. He is a good Father. Much we do not and will not know. Faith trusts His heart even when we can’t trace His hand. BUT SOME THINGS we do know.

Five Truth Statements

I. When God says “no” to your prayer, you can be assured that there is a good reason.

And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. 2 Corinthians 12:7 NKJV

- A. This does not mean you will know the reason—you may never know.
- B. But, the reason will be for your good.

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. 4 But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. James 1:2-4 NKJV

(ILL)—Clubbed feet—Power/Wisdom

II. When God says “no” to your prayer, His grace will sustain you.

- A. God’s answer

And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 2 Corinthians 12:9 NKJV

“Human weakness and divine grace go hand-in-hand”

- B. We must trust

C. He is all I need to endure

(ILL) Breath of Life

The air which our body requires envelops us on every hand. The air of itself seeks to enter our bodies and, for this reason, exerts pressure upon us. It is well known that it is more difficult to hold one's breath than it is to breathe. We need but exercise our organs of respiration, and air will enter forthwith into our lungs and perform its life-giving function to the entire body. The air which our souls need also envelops all of us at all times and on all sides. God is round about us in Christ on every hand, with his many-sided and all-sufficient grace. All we need to do is to open our hearts.

(ILL) Blessed of Assurance

Born in 1820, Fanny Crosby took ill at six weeks of age. A local "doctor" prescribed an eye salve that soon blinded her for life. As a result, she learned to develop her other senses, including a very keen memory and sense of creativity. After becoming a Christian, she used her wealth of memorized Scripture to compose more than 9000 hymns! She held no animosity for the so-called doctor. She saw her blindness as a divine opportunity to impact the world for Christ, praying often that God might use her music to bringing others to a saving faith in Jesus. "Don't blame the doctor," Ms. Crosby once said. "He is probably dead by this time, but if I could meet him, I would tell him that he unwittingly did me the greatest favor in the world."

APPLICATION

One hundred years later a young mother stood at her pew singing, "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine. Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine." The setting was a small country church in rural central Maryland. She had begun to attend because friends had invited her, suggesting that our church would be a positive place to bring her children. Week after week she sat in the pew, listening to the sermons and singing the hymns as her children attended Sunday School in the classroom below. One Sunday she came to me and said she had had a revelation. She was singing the song, "Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine," and suddenly realized she herself owned those words. There had been no bolt of lightning, no cathartic awakening—just an ever growing sense and belief that Jesus had indeed lived and died in her place. God used the song to awaken her to the reality of her own new salvation. "God," as Fanny often proclaimed, "is not the author of our infirmities, but He can certainly redeem them and use them for His glory." Because of her prayerful submission to His will, God continues to honor her submission nearly a century after her death. "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

III. When God says “no” to your prayers it is a privileged invitation to reveal His power through your weakness.

(ILL) Japanese Art

According to Japanese legend, a young man named Sen no Rikyu sought to learn the elaborate set of customs known as the "Way of Tea." He went to tea master Takeno Joo, who tested the younger man by asking him to tend the garden. Rikyu cleaned up debris and raked the ground until it was perfect, and the garden immaculate. Before presenting his work to the master, he shook a cherry tree, causing a few flowers to fall onto the ground. To this day, the Japanese revere Rikyu as one who understood to his very core wabi-sabi. Emerging in the fifteenth century as a reaction to the prevailing aesthetic of lavishness, ornamentation, and rich materials, wabi-sabi is the art of finding beauty in imperfection and profundity in earthiness, of revering authenticity above all. When a white pottery bowl breaks, for example, one might glue it back together with white lacquer to disguise the breaks, making it look as new and complete as possible. But in the East the bowl might be glued back together with lacquer sprinkled with gold to highlight the cracks and imperfections. Japanese culture sees the aesthetic value of imperfection in wabi-sabi just as much as the Greeks valued perfection in their art. Wabi-sabi is seen as beautiful because it is imperfect and broken. The gospel is like spiritual wabi-sabi. It is the story of how God redeems imperfect, broken people and uses them to bless a fractured world.

And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong. 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 NKJV

A. Corinth was a Greek city—proud of strength, perfection, wisdom—weakness, imperfection was not of God.

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent." 20 Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. 22 For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. 26 For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. 27 But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty. 1 Corinthians 1:18-27 NKJV

B. No greater sign of weakness and pain than the cross.

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; 13 but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. 1 Peter 4:12-13 NKJV

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Philippians 3:10 NKJV

IV. When God says "no" to your prayers you can expect an opportunity to reveal Christ that is unique to you.

A. Paul carried this philosophy throughout his ministry

But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, 13 so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ; 14 and most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Philippians 1:12-14 NKJV

NOTE: When God said, "my grace is sufficient" he said "then I will rejoice so His power can work through you."

B. Others in Scripture were in unique places of ministry

(ILL) Joseph saved a nation (instead of praying “get me out of pit/prison/Egypt”)

(ILL) Rudolph

One of the most beloved songs of the Christmas season started out as an advertising gimmick. In 1939 Montgomery Ward tapped advertising executive Robert May to write a poem that their store Santa Claus could give away to children who came to visit him. "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" first appeared in a little booklet published by the department store chain. More than 2.5 million copies were handed out. And by 1946 more than 6 million copies of the poem were distributed. Rudolph's story came to musical life in 1949 when May's brother-in-law, Johnny Marks, wrote the music. After it was turned down by Bing Crosby and Dinah Shore, singing cowboy Gene Autry recorded it. Today "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" is the highest-selling Christmas carol, at more than 25 million units. What makes this little carol so loved? Some people might say that it's the pluckiness and courage of Rudolph, the alleged hero of the story. But the real beauty of the story focuses on grace. By grace, Santa chooses Rudolph despite the fact that he's a clear outsider and "reject." He has a defect—his big, annoyingly shiny red nose—that has usually disqualified him from getting chosen for other reindeer games. But despite all the other available candidates, who did Santa choose (or "elect") when the fog rolled in? That's right, the one with the weird shiny red nose. The "weakness" that was considered a liability by Rudolph and his fellow reindeer became the "strength" that Santa used to accomplish his mission.

V. When God says “no” to your prayers, it may be so you will never forget what He has done for you.

- A. Jacob and hip (always a limp but always His power)
- B. Paul and Damascus—eyesight—always with me
- C. When He changed you, when He comforted you, when He gave you peace

Conclusion: Prayer is a mystery—(a partnership beyond our comprehension)

- 1. Our prayers matter
- 2. He is a good Father—always gives good gifts
- 3. Sometimes says “no” but always a reason

(ILL) The Mystery— Amy Carmichael

To look up into a dark sky and see it suddenly open as lightning plays across it, to see in one revealing flash deep into the kingdoms of light, is to know what prayer most truly is. There is mystery, but beyond that darkness is not a deeper darkness, but light—kingdoms of light.