

When God Answers, “No”

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Introduction

Last week, we considered the relationship between faith and prayer, this week we consider when God answers our prayers with “No...”

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

¹ I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. ³ And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—⁴ was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. ⁵ I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. ⁶ Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, ⁷ or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Exposition

I. When God answers, “No,” some people might ridicule you (Vv. 1-7a)

To understand this point, we must remember why Paul is writing to the church in Corinth in this second letter. Essentially, false teachers had crept in and were ridiculing Paul’s ministry. In particular, it seems that they were ridiculing Paul’s ministry and trying to disparage it on account of the suffering that he was enduring. Unlike Paul, it seems as though the false teachers were boasting of their spiritual experiences and heavenly visions. So, here in verses 1-7, Paul gives a third-person defense of his own spiritual experiences. In other words, Paul does not deny that he has had significant spiritual experiences or even heavenly visions. Instead, Paul makes it clear that such experiences are not the essence of the Christian life.

The false teachers in Corinth were likely ridiculing Paul because he was suffering, and they were not suffering. And as wild as this may sound, I’ve heard people do this type of thing in our day and age. I recall not too many years ago watching a video where a very prominent, self-appointed “Christian” leader responded to some of his critiques by essentially saying, “Look at the type of car you drive. If God were really blessing you, then you would have nice cars.” In other words, you appear to be suffering, and because you are suffering, God must not care about you or be blessing you. This is likely pretty close to the types of things that Paul was dealing with in Corinth: false teachers who were ridiculing his ministry because he did not walk around boasting about spiritual experiences or heavenly visions, but instead, he was suffering.

This should serve as an important reminder for us that, at times, there will be people in our lives who have a poor understanding of God and His ways, and they will say things that hurt us and frustrate us. Sometimes their intentions will be good (like Job's friends), but the impact of their words will be salt in the wounds. At other times, some people will take advantage of your suffering and seek to hurt you. You are not alone in this. The apostle Paul endured such ridicule. And not just Paul, but even Jesus, as He was in the midst of great suffering, He was ridiculed.

How can we make it through moments like this? We must remember that the Christian life is not one free of weakness, pain, struggle, sickness, or sadness. Anyone who teaches that this is the destiny of the Christian life in this world has not paid attention to Jesus Himself. Jesus promised us that "in this life, we would have trouble." Yet, He also promised that he "had overcome the world." Like Paul's opponents in Corinth, we may be tempted to believe that all God ever intends for his people are the spiritual high moments. We might think that the "real Christians" are the ones who can speak so clearly and compellingly about their "heavenly visions." Yet, Paul, as we will see, finds more grace in the valleys of His life.

II. When God answers, "No," it's not because nothing is wrong or because God is inactive (Vv. 7b-10)

In verses 7-10, Paul addresses the source of his suffering, which is the object of the false teachers' ridicule. Paul explains that while he could have walked around boasting about spiritual experiences and heavenly visions, God had other plans. God loved Paul enough to prevent him from becoming conceited. So, God gave Paul a "thorn in his flesh." But it is not only God who is active in Paul's suffering, but also Satan. Whereas God gives Paul a "thorn in the flesh" to prevent him from becoming conceited, it appears that in the same act, Satan is involved, sending his messenger to torment Paul.

So, here in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, we have God at work in Paul's suffering to keep him from being conceited, which is a good thing. And yet, we also have Satan at work in Paul's suffering to torment him, which is a bad thing. Two realities at work in a singular experience. God is refining Paul. Satan is tormenting Paul. The "thorn in the flesh" and the "messenger of Satan" are one and the same in this passage. We do not know the specifics of this issue, but we know that it is very unpleasant, and it drove Paul to sincere, pleading prayer for God to take the thorn away.

And how does God answer Paul's request? He says, "No." Now, did he say know to Paul because there wasn't anything wrong in Paul's life? No. There was something very real and wrong in his life. He was being tormented. Yet, does God's answer to Paul mean that He was inactive in the apostle's life? Again, the answer is "No." While Paul did not get what he requested from God, that did not mean that God was not still working in His life. There was purpose in the pain and suffering. When God answered, "No," it was not because He had decided to withhold something good from Paul, but rather, God intended to work in Paul's life.

There are so many implications for us from these verses this morning. The first is that as we pray, we must bring our will before God, making it known to Him. We must not hold back our desires. We tell Him what we want Him to do on our behalf. This is what the apostle Paul did. He pled with the LORD, "Please take away the thorn!" And God answered, but not in the way that Paul originally asked. He told Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness." In hearing God's answers, Paul responds with submission to God's will.

One of the things that this teaches us about prayer is that pray is not simply about bringing our request to God. It is also about bringing our lives in submission to God's will for us. This is what the apostle Paul demonstrates. He wanted the "thorn in his flesh" to be removed. There was nothing inherently good about the thorn. It was a messenger of Satan. And surely Satan's intention was not for Paul's good. Yet, Christ responds to Paul and tells him, essentially, "You think that you need the thorn removed. But what you actually need is more grace." So, having made his will known, Paul submits his will to Christ's will, recognizing that whatever God wills will ultimately be right and good, even if, at the moment, it is hard to see and understand.

With this perspective, then, we can address the matter of God's activity when God answers, "No," to our prayer. I've read where one pastor says, "God never does nothing in answer to prayer." I believe this is right. Just because it seems at the moment that God has answered "no" to our prayer, that does not mean that God is not actively working all things for our good as people who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

You might ask, "Well, if God is not answering my prayers as I have asked them, then what is He doing with them?" While this would be for another study at a different time, I think that the language in Revelation 5 and 8 suggests that none of the prayers of God's people have escaped His notice and that there is a coming day when every prayer that accords with the hallowing of God's name and the coming of His Kingdom will be answered with Christ's final victory over our enemies of sin and death when He brings justice into the broken world and grants everlasting life to His people through resurrection. I believe that we can trust the Judge of all the earth to do right according to His holy, perfect character.

Conclusion

So, when God answers, "No," what is He doing? We've spent a good bit of our time considering how others might respond and considering what God is not doing, but what is He doing? Here is where I can only speak in principles and not particularities. What I mean is that I can give you a general sense of what Scripture reveals about what God is up to in the world, but I cannot speak with great particularity about what He is specifically doing in your life or my life. In this life, there are simply things that we will not fully understand, but that does not mean that we cannot have hope.

This morning, we have considered Paul's example, but there are two other examples that I want us to consider that I hope will be helpful for you this morning. The first example is the life of Joseph.

By most estimates, after Joseph, the beloved son of Jacob (Israel), was sold into slavery by his brothers, Joseph spent roughly 13 years in prison before ascending to the number 2 position in Egypt under Pharaoh. After a severe famine hit the land, Joseph's brothers came to Egypt for help and eventually discovered that their brother was alive and well. After being saved by Joseph, their father, Jacob, died, and the brothers who had sold Joseph into slavery began to fear that he would take his revenge on them. This brings us to **Genesis 50:15-21**...

While the brothers intended evil against Joseph by selling him into slavery, through the very same act, God intended good by bringing him to Egypt, allowing him to rise to a great status in the land, which would result in many people being kept alive. This passage does not say that God took what was intended for evil and made it work out for good. No, this passage says that God had his own divine intention that was not perceivable at the moment by everyone involved until nearly 13 years after the story began. I have no doubts that Joseph prayed during those times in prison; I have no doubt that Jacob prayed for his lost son, who was thought to be dead, but the answer did not come when they wanted to come because God had bigger and better plans than they could even imagine. This is an example of a delayed answer to prayer, and we would do well to keep it in mind when it appears that God has answered our prayers with "No."

Now, the second example is where we will conclude this morning's message. It is found in **Matthew 26:36-39**. In these verses, we find ourselves standing on holy ground, as Jesus Christ, the Son of God, prays to His Father. As Jesus contemplates the suffering that He is about to endure for the salvation of the world, in His perfect, sinless humanity, He prays, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me, nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."

What we witness in this scene is Jesus, in His humanity, making His human will known in prayer to His Father in heaven. Father, if it is possible for me to secure the salvation of the world without going through the type of suffering that I am about to go through, I make that my request. Yet, what do we see Jesus doing? He brings His human will in submission to God's will. He makes His request known to His Father, and then acknowledges that if the Father's answer to His request is, "No," then He gladly submits to and accepts the Father's answer.

And in this case, there was no other way for the world to be saved than for the cup of God's justice toward sin to be satisfied through the sufferings of Jesus, the Son of God. Thus, even Jesus knows what it means to make a request and receive the answer, "No," because there is something bigger at work in the world than the momentary alleviation of pain, suffering, and injustice. Therefore, when the answer to our request is "No," we ought, as always, to resolve to entrust ourselves to the perfect will of God for our lives. **And because Jesus was willing to submit Himself to God's will, there is hope for you...**