

## When God Says No

You meet a man who is very much in love and convinced that he has found the woman whom he should marry. He loves her and feels that he can make her happy in a way that no one else possibly could. He writes out the proposal and memorizes it word for word. To seal the deal he prays diligently and enthusiastically in the name of Jesus Christ that she will say yes and that they will be married. The moment comes, he delivers the proposal and she says “no.”

You talk to a woman who really needs the job she applied for. Her children are hungry; they need shoes; there’s no money left. The job is a perfect match. The hours are right. The pay is good. The benefits are particularly important. She’s one of the finalists. There are six or eight people in the final cut and she’s in for the last interview. As a committed Christian she prays before that interview asking that God will prepare the way for her, that he will make it happen, that she’ll be sure to get the job. And again the answer is “no.”

Anyone who has done very much praying knows what a divine “no” is all about. There are some people who become very angry with God when he turns them down. They write him off and sometimes vent that hostility in rage against God’s name, against God’s people, against God’s church. There are other people who have a fatalistic attitude. They say, “Well, if that’s the way it’s going to be, then that’s what I’ve got to accept.” But how we respond to the divine “no” may be one of our most life shaping decisions. It may even determine whether we ever pray again.

There are many who when they hear God say “no,” quote the words of Jesus in Matthew 21:22: “If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer”. They say, “I believe, I really believe. I have so much faith that I was astounded when God didn’t do it. What other conclusion can I come to except that the Bible must be wrong or that God is a liar?”

Come on. Is it really that simple? Is it really that clear cut? Is that the way we think and operate in the other areas of our lives?

For example, if you have poison ivy you go to the drugstore to buy an over the counter medicine to treat it. Out of all the choices you pick a bottle of calamine lotion that says right there on the bottle that it will fix your poison ivy. But you know it’s more complicated

than that. You know you have to buy it, take it home and use it according to the directions. In fact, when you open the box and take out the bottle of calamine lotion, you’ll probably find a large piece of paper with fine print. It tells you all about the chemical makeup, the contra-indications, the possibility of an allergic reaction. It tells you things like “Not to be consumed internally.” And you think to yourself, “Who would drink a bottle of calamine lotion?”

In the same way there are people who believe that God will give them absolutely anything they ask for just because they believe. It’s not that Jesus’ promise, if we believe we will receive whatever we ask in prayer, isn’t true. But we need to understand that it is in the context of the rest of what the Bible has to say — you may call it the fine print. You discover in the Bible, for example, that Jesus the night before he was crucified asked that the crucifixion be canceled. Three times he prayed that and every time the answer was “no.” Or St. Paul, who had been used by God to heal many people, was turned down repeatedly when he was sick and prayed for a cure. St. Peter, another au-

thor of the New Testament, in I Peter 3:7, tells men not to be inconsiderate and disrespectful to their wives or their prayers will be

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hindered. Or in the Old Testament, Daniel the prophet prayed and thought he got a “no”, but then an angel appeared to him and said that he was sent from God with the answer “yes” as soon as Daniel prayed but it took him twenty-one days to deliver the message because of a demon that delayed him.

Now if Jesus, Paul, Peter and Daniel got temporary or permanent “no” to their requests, we should not be surprised if God also answers “no” to some of our prayers. Consider the whole matter from God’s point of view. Consider some of the reasons why God may say “no” when we pray.

Surely near the top of the list is that God sometimes says “no” because many of the things for which we pray would actually ruin us if God granted them to us. We are prone to ask for a life of ease and yet we would admit that it’s the hardships of life that make us strong. We tend to pray that there be no suffering and yet the Bible clearly explains that if we are to have solidarity with Jesus Christ that we need to at least in part experience some of his suffering. We

tend — I tend to pray for a quick answer to whatever we seek. But God counts patience to be an important virtue for us to learn.

It is a concept that every parent understands. Every parent has to say “no” sometimes to a pleading child, whom the parent loves, simply because it’s not in the best interest of that child. Your two-year-old comes to you and asks for matches and you say “no.” Your eight-year-old seeks an unlimited supply of candy that will rot his teeth and you say “no.” Or your seventeen-year-old says, “Could I have your checkbook and credit cards for spring break?” In each case you say “no”, not because you don’t love the child, not because you don’t care, not because you don’t understand the child’s perspective, but because it’s not in that child’s best interest.

Well, God’s a parent, and a very good parent. A parent who is so committed to us as children that he is willing to say “no” even if it will trigger our anger against him. But that’s not the only reason that God says “no.”

Common sense tells us that God can’t say “yes” to two contradictory prayers. There are soldiers on both sides, on the eve of a battle, praying for victory. There are people who this morning prayed for rain and some who prayed for sunshine. There are people who pray, a dozen of them, that they will all get the same job that has been advertised in the newspaper. And God will say “yes” to some and “no” to others. We need to understand that the God who created the laws of physics which include that two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time because that would be contradictory is a God who has created the law of non-contradiction. He does not contradict himself. That’s not who God is. I think that there are millions, probably billions, of cases every day when God receives requests that contradict each other. And so to some he says “yes,” and to some he says “no.”

Or it may be that God turns us down because what we ask for is inappropriate. I’m glad that God turns down prayers that are inappropriate. There are those who have prayed, “God, help me to rob the bank today”, or “Don’t let the IRS figure out that I cheated.” There are people who make all kinds of inappropriate prayer requests.

In the end of Luke 9 in the New Testament, there’s a story of how Jesus and his followers were on their way to Jerusalem and the route that they took was through Samaria where there was racial animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans. It was too late for them to get to Jerusalem that night so the followers of Jesus asked if they could stay overnight in the

Samaritan town. The Samaritans hated Jerusalem and they hated the Jews so they said “no”. The followers of Jesus didn’t particularly like the Samaritans either so they had a simple and straightforward prayer request, to bring down fire from heaven and burn the village to cinders. It was an especially inappropriate prayer because it was based on racial hatred. And the answer to the racist prayer was “no.” While we may think that they were terrible to pray that prayer, the truth of it is that at least on occasion we too pray inappropriate prayers: that she’ll break her leg, or that he’ll lose his job or that their company will not do particularly well. And God says “no” because the prayer is inappropriate. And it’s a good thing. We ought to be grateful that God says “no” to such prayers.

Then there are those occasions when God says no to a prayer because the relationships are wrong. I mentioned a moment ago that Peter wrote in I Peter 3:7 that a man’s prayers may be hindered because he treats his wife disrespectfully or with a lack of consideration. Whenever I read that, I think to myself, “How did Peter get that information? Did God speak to him about it?” I think it more likely come from experience. I picture Peter one day out in the backyard of his house caught up in his prayer time with God. He’s feeling deeply connected with God when he hears his wife call, “Peter.” He ignores it because he wants to talk to God. She calls again and again, and finally he says, “I’ll be right there.” He walks in the house in a few minutes and says, “Do you know who I was talking to? I was talking to God and you interrupted! This had better be pretty important.” Without even the consideration of hearing what his wife wanted, he began to put her down, to be critical and disrespectful. And whatever happened between them, finally he gets back to praying and says, “God, I’m back.” But it was like God wasn’t there. No matter what he prayed, it was as if the heavens were made of steel. And Peter learned a profound lesson, that when a man treats his wife with disrespect or lack of consideration it hinders a man’s prayers.

Peter understood from experience that relationship is an important part of prayer. Not just with the wife or husband, but especially with God. For it is important to God that we have a right relationship with him. And so it must often happen that we ask God for something and he says, “Let’s straighten our relationship out first and after we’ve done that, then you can ask me again.”

Sin messes up our relationship with God, so confession should precede asking for anything. It’s just like asking your boss for a raise; you want to be sure

you are on friendly terms first. The good news is that God promises that if we confess our sins he will forgive them and cleanse us and restore a good relationship. It is important to God that our relationships be right.

I've wondered how many times good prayer requests are spoken to God and God has said, "Wait a minute, first you need to straighten things out with your son or your daughter." Or, he says, "Look, you have been holding a grudge against your old boss ever since you left the company and you've got to forgive her even if she doesn't deserve it. You need to straighten out that relationship and then you come back and ask me again." Relationship is important to God. And many times God's "no" is because a relationship is wrong.

Or it may be, that God simply wills something that is different from what I will. Let's say I want a certain candidate for the Senate to be elected. And I pray that. But God wants a different candidate elected to the Senate. And it comes down to a choice between what God wants and what I want. Which do you think God should choose? Obviously he should choose what he wants. His will should override my will.

Some say "Then what's the point of praying? If God's going to do what he wants anyway, why bother to pray?" A better question would be, "What's the point of having a God if he is always going to do whatever we want?" It's a good thing that God doesn't let my will rule over his will. God is wise and it's a good thing that his will prevails in the choices that have to be made.

Or, perhaps yet another reason that God says "no" is simply because the time isn't right. The answer may not be "no" but "later."

Now is not the right time. When you read the biography of Jesus, whenever he does something spectacular like changing water to wine, making a blind person see, a lame person walk, his followers say, "Let's tell everybody that you are the Christ." Jesus says, "No, not now. My time hasn't come." Then they ask him six weeks later, "Can we tell everybody now? Can we announce to all of Israel that you are the King, the Son of David?" "Not yet. Not now." It isn't so much that Jesus was rejecting what they were requesting; in fact he intended what they requested. But it was a matter of timing.

And so it is with many of the things about which we talk to God. God is dealing with putting all of the

pieces together for many lives, not just ours. He is pulling together many factors to bring them to the perfect timing. And so "no" may simply be "wait."

We have many expressions in our society such as "timing is everything." We often say that his timing was just a little bit off or that she was in the right place at the right time. So what seems to be a no from God may simply be, "Now is not the time."

But then, maybe it's simply because something else is more important. It isn't that what we ask for isn't good; it's that God has something more important that needs to be accomplished. It may be that we're asking him so that we'll look good, but it's more important that he look good. It may be that he has an idea that we've never dreamed of.

Several years ago I applied for a doctoral program at an Ivy League university and I really had my heart set on it. I went for the interview with the head of the department and he said to me, "You match all of the qualifications for this program, but so do all the other seven hundred applicants and we have only twelve slots open for next year." I still prayed confidently that God would get me what I wanted and that was admission to that school. And the answer was "no." I ended up applying to another school and went there instead.

God was good to me in saying "no." I learned from professors, made friends and benefited in ways that would have been impossible had God answered my prayer the way I wanted. In retrospect, I see that I was most interested in getting a degree from an Ivy League university and God was most interested in getting me the education I needed.

I want to add an eighth reason to the list of why God says "no" to our prayers. It is that sometimes

we ask the right thing but we do it for the wrong reason. Let's suppose, that I pray that you will come to Wooddale Church because here you will experience the Bible teaching and the Christian nurture that will shape your life wonderfully and positively. But my real motive for the prayer, never spoken either to you or to God, is that I need to borrow some money, and you look like an easy touch. I had no intention of paying that money back at all. I figure that if you come to church here, then you and I can get acquainted and I can ask you for the cash that I seek. God says "no" to my prayer, to protect you from me. And instead, he sends you to some other fine church in this metropolitan area and it is there that you grow spiritu-

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ally and there you are nurtured and there you become all that God wanted you to become.

It wasn't that my prayer was bad — my prayer was good. But the motive behind the prayer was something completely different than what that prayer appeared to be. I think if we're honest about it we'll admit that we ask God for a lot of things with bad motivations. God would teach us some very bad habits if he gave us everything we wanted for the wrong reasons. He loves us far too much to do that to us.

We've considered a list of eight reasons that God may have for saying "no" to prayers which is by no means a complete list, but now let's make it a little more personal and talk about how to respond when God says "no" to our own very heartfelt requests.

What if I plead my heart out to God and I have no place else to turn and the answer is still "no"? What do I do? How do I respond? I'd say that a place to begin is to seek an explanation from God. Ask him to explain which of these eight reasons, or some other reason not on the list, applies. Is it not for now, or is there something wrong with my relationship, or is my motive out of place? Remember that God is a loving God, he's generous, he delights in giving good and perfect gifts to all of those who are his. When we ask him and he says "no," most often he will tell us why and help us to understand. He wants us to know. But, if he doesn't explain why — then that's God choice to make.

If we're parents, we've been there. I remember times when our children were young they would ask for a bike or a toy or to go someplace special and we'd say, "No, we can't do that." And they would ask again and again and finally we would use the ultimate weapon of all parents, and say, "Look, I'm the father, you're the kid and the answer is no!" That never convinced a child but it's something that parents have to say; it's part of the routine of parenthood. Perhaps the reason that we don't want to explain to them is that the bike has already been bought for a Christmas present or that we're planning a trip to the amusement park as a surprise. Sometimes parents say "no" for very good reasons that just can't be explained.

Whether God explains or not, the next thing to do is to submit to God's decision. When my heart pleads for something and the answer is "no," it is not an easy thing to submit to what God says. But when we refuse to submit, we are flirting with trying to become God. It's almost as if I'm saying, "God, I know better than you know. My choices are better than your choices. I'm smarter than you are." And that's a dangerous thing

to do with God.

And so I submit to him. I tell him that I trust him. We trust Jesus to save us from sin and hell. We trust God to give us eternal life. If we can trust him for the big things like eternity, heaven and hell, life and death, surely we should trust his ability to decide how to best answer our prayers. Trusting is what being a Christian is all about.

If we have asked for him to explain and we have said that we will submit, what then? If God still says "no," I'd say to ask again. Repeat the request.

The Bible is full of examples that encourage us to just keep coming back and asking over and over. That's what Paul did; that's what Jesus did. That's what the Bible says that we are to do.

For years my daily prayer list has followed the same format even though some of the names and requests change. For more years than I can remember there has been one particular request for which the answer has been "no." It's obviously very important to me or I would not have repeated it so many thousands of times. I've asked God to explain to me why. I have chosen to submit although it's not been easy to submit to what his choice might be. I have concluded that it is a prayer that I am to keep praying, even if the "yes" that I request doesn't come for years. What I'm saying is that we just need to be sure that when we repeat requests, that we have first asked God to explain and that we have made sure that we submit.

Now I'm going to ask you to consider praying a very hard prayer. You have to decide whether you want to do it or not. First, think of some pressing and important prayer which God has answered "no." With that specific prayer in mind, I'd invite you to pray to God:

Lord, help me to understand why you say "no," even if it will be a difficult lesson for me to learn. And God, I submit to you and will accept your answer with gratitude and faith, even if I never understand why — because I trust you.

*Faith Matters* is the Broadcast Ministry of  
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church  
6630 Shady Oak Road  
Eden Prairie MN 55344  
612-944-6300  
[www.wooddale.org](http://www.wooddale.org)  
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