
Learning how to

talk to God

from the great prayers of the Bible

When God Says No

Matthew 26 & 2 Corinthians 12

Lake Arrowhead Church, Waleska, Georgia

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WHEN GOD SAYS NO

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The majestic creator of the universe has invited us to talk to Him. Prayer is the wonderful gift of experiencing a relationship with God and having a conversation with Him. The invitation to pray proves how much God loves us and cares about us. It's also the way we cry out to Him anytime about anything. And it really makes a difference because He promises to listen and He promises to act.

There are 650 prayers in the Bible, and this spring and summer, we've been *learning how to talk to God from some of the greatest prayers of the Bible*.

We began with the Lord's Prayer, when Jesus taught the disciples how to pray. "Our Father, who is in heaven, Hallowed by Your name ... give us this day our daily bread."¹ We looked at David's prayer of adoration, "O Lord, O Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth."² We looked at David's prayer of intimacy and meditation, when he prayed, "O Lord, You have searched me and known me."³ We studied David's prayer of confession and repentance, when he admitted to God, "Against You, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight."⁴ We looked at Solomon's prayer dedicating the temple to God as he "knelt on his knees ... and spread out his hands toward heaven," and said, "O Lord, there is none like You."⁵ We looked at Jonah's prayer of desperation, when he cried out to God from the belly of a whale, and said, "I called for help from the deep."⁶ We looked at Jeremiah's prayer of disappointment when he felt abandoned by God, and yet was able to say, "I still have hope, because the Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning, great is Your faithfulness."⁷ We heard Jesus give us permission to ask and we dealt with the question of how much faith it takes for God to answer our prayers.

The invitation to pray is incredible. The Lord said, "Call to Me and I will answer you" (Jeremiah 33:3, NAS).

However, this morning, we are going to look at an aspect of prayer that requires deep and unwavering trust in God. *When God says no*. What are we to think when God says no?

- What is a person to think when they don't get the job they needed and prayed for?
- What is a young couple to think when they can't have children?
- What is a woman to think when she asks God to salvage her marriage only for it to end in divorce?
- What are we to think when we pray for a loved one struggling with depression, who instead of getting better, commits suicide?
- What are we to think when we pray for healing, and instead, a loved one dies?
- What are we think when our prayers result in disappointment, pain, or grief?
- What are we think when we pray for good things and God says no?

With all the vast promises about God inviting us to talk to Him, giving us permission to ask, loving and caring about us, and promising to hear and answer us, *what are we to think when God says no?*

WHEN GOD SAID NO TO JESUS

In our lifetime, we're going to receive some yes answers and we're going to receive some no answers to our prayers. And we've got to trust God with both His yes and His no.

In Matthew 26, we see that even Jesus experienced His Father's no. After sitting in the upper room, enjoying the Passover meal, and being together for what would be their last supper, "Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane" (Matthew 26:36, NIV). It was a grove of olive trees where Jesus often retreated to pray. This was night of His arrest and the night before He was crucified. And that night, He knew what was coming.

He said to His disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray" (Matthew 26:36, NIV). And walking a distance away from the group, He took Peter and James and John with Him, and the Bible says, "He began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death'" (Matthew 26:37-38, NIV). Again, He knew what was coming.

Then going a little farther, Jesus fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39, NIV). Then He returned to His disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak" (Matthew 26:40-41, NIV). Then He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done" (Matthew 26:42, NIV). And "when he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing" (Matthew 26:43-44, NIV).

Luke's account of that night includes this detail. "An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22:43-44, NIV).

This passage reveals the intense emotions Jesus felt. He was deeply "troubled" and "distressed."⁸ His soul was "overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." He was "in anguish" and "prayed earnestly." Why? Because of the cup He was about to drink.

What was that cup? The cup of suffering. Jesus was human, so of course He dreaded the physical pain He would suffer on the cross. The cup was also the judgment of God.⁹ It represented the wrath of God poured out on Him as He took on the sin of the world. Isaiah 53 says, "He was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed. All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord laid on him the sins of us all" (Isaiah 53:5-6, NLT). Jesus did not merely carry our sin and nail it to the cross. He absorbed our sin, He became our sin, and nailed Himself to the cross.¹⁰ And by doing so, He became our substitute and died in our place.¹¹

Isaiah 53 also includes this troubling statement. “It was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and make his life an offering for sin” (Isaiah 53:10, NIV). Another version says, “The Lord was pleased to crush Him” (NAS). But why would God do that? The Hebrew word “crush” means to break into pieces, to pulverize into dust. Why would God do that to His own Son?

The cross teaches us about God’s love, but it also teaches us something else. It teaches us about God’s holiness, God’s wrath, and God’s justice.¹² The moment Jesus absorbed our sin, His Father looked away, because He cannot look upon sin. That’s what Jesus dreaded that night in Gethsemane, anticipating the awful separation from His Father as He absorbed the sin of the world. At the cross, we see the holy justice of God requiring punishment of sin, and we see the holy love of God offering forgiveness of sin.

And that’s why God said no to Jesus. So that we might be saved. Three times Jesus asked His Father to take away the cup, and three times the Father said no.¹³

Look closer at Jesus’ prayer. “My Father.”¹⁴ It’s an intimate prayer between a father and a son. He loved His Father and His Father loved Him. “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.” “Oh Father, is there any other way?!” Of course, Jesus dreaded what was coming. He wanted to avoid the cup, to avoid the cross, to avoid the physical pain and the emotional separation from His Father. And yet, He prayed, “Not as I will, but as you will.”

Jesus surrendered to His Father’s will. He submitted to His Father’s plan. Jesus trusted His Father when He said no.

WHEN GOD SAID NO TO PAUL

There was also a time when God said no to Paul.

In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul described being “caught up to the third heaven” (2 Corinthians 12:2, NAS). He said he “was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak” (2 Corinthians 12:4, NAS). Paul was allowed this glorious experience to embolden him to preach the Gospel.

Then he writes, “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me” (2 Corinthians 12:7-8, NIV). Three times, sound familiar?

We do not know what the “thorn of the flesh” was. Being “of the flesh” suggests it was some physical ailment. Paul said it “given to me.” God gave it to him. God afflicted Paul with this “thorn in the flesh.” It was also “a messenger of Satan” meant to “torment” him. So, this “thorn in the flesh” was some physical ailment given by God and allowed by God, as a tool of Satan, to torment Paul. It reminds us God allowing Satan to afflict Job to test his faith. And the reason? “To keep me from becoming conceited” because of the glorious visions he experienced.

Satan used this “thorn in the flesh” to torment Paul, and God used it to humble Paul. It served a divine purpose.

And like Jesus, three times Paul asked the Lord to take it away, and three times the Lord said no. Yet according to Paul, the Lord said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9, NIV). The Lord was saying, “I am enough.” Grace is God’s promise to be with us and to help us endure His plan. The Lord promised to be with Paul and to help him endure that “thorn in the flesh” and to persevere as it served God’s purpose in his life.

And what was Paul’s response to the Lord’s no? One of the greatest statements of faith ever made. Paul said, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. 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” (2 Corinthians 12:9-10, NIV).

Paul did not just accept this “thorn in the flesh,” he delighted in it. “I will boast ... gladly about my weaknesses.” “I delight in my weaknesses.” Because “when I am weak, then I am strong.” Paul was saying, “If this thorn is God’s will, then I want it. If this thorn is God’s plan for me, then I want it. If this thorn will fulfill God’s purpose, then I want it.” Paul stopped asking the Lord to remove it, and instead, thanked God for it, and relied on God’s strength to help him endure.

Paul accepted his circumstances, he delighted in his affliction, and he trusted God’s purpose in his suffering. Paul trusted God when He said no.

WHEN GOD SAYS NO TO US

What about when God says no to us? What are we think when He says no? Why does God sometimes say no? The same reason parents sometimes say no. Do parents give a child everything they want? Of course not. Sometimes, parents say no to candy and insist on the child eating broccoli. Sometimes, parents say no to playing outside and take your medicine instead. Why do parents say no? Because they love their children and know what’s best for them.

And that’s why, sometimes, God says no as well. Because He loves us and knows what’s best for us.

In 2008, we moved from Marietta to Austin. If you remember, this was when the housing market crashed. My daily prayer was to sell our house in Marietta. And for 17 months, God said no. And when we finally sold it, we lost \$100,000 in equity. God’s no was financially devastating to us. When we found a house in Austin, there was a bidding war, and we lost the house we wanted. I was disappointed and frustrated. But in a week, we found another house on the same street with the same floor plan for \$40,000 less. So God’s no to house number one turned about to be a financial benefit to us. And when we sold our house in Austin and moved to Lake Arrowhead, we sold it in 17 hours and reaped a \$100,000 benefit. So God’s no in 2008 was financially hurtful to us, but in 2019 we rebounded.

In 2010, our son Adam developed bone cancer. So did one of his high school classmates. Adam survived, but his classmate did not. I'm sure that father prayed the same prayer I prayed. I'm sure that father prayed with the same intensity and tears and faith that I prayed. But God answered one with yes and answered the other with no.

Sometimes we pray for a loved one to be healed, and they get better, and we rejoice. And sometimes, we pray for a loved one to be healed, and they die, and we mourn. Sometimes God says yes to our prayers and sometimes He says no. And that's where faith comes in. In both cases, with His yes and with His no, no matter how He chooses to answer our prayers, we must trust that He loves us and cares about us and that He knows what's best.

Now, both Jesus and Paul received an explanation for God's no. We may not get an explanation. We may never understand why sometimes He says yes and sometimes He says no. But there are some biblical reasons that remind us that He loves us and knows what's best.

- Sometimes God says no *to humble us*. As Paul said, "To keep me from becoming conceited there was given me a thorn in my flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7, NIV). Satan used the "thorn in the flesh" to torment Paul, but God used it to keep Paul humble.¹⁵
- Sometimes God says no *to test our faith*. The Lord led the Hebrews through the wilderness for forty years, He said, "to test you in order to know what was in your heart" (Deuteronomy 8:2, NIV).¹⁶ God tests our faith, not to show us where we are wrong, but to show us where we need to grow.
- Sometimes God says no *to protect us*. David said, "This I know, that God is for me" (Psalm 56:9, ESV). And He is for you even when He says no.
- Sometimes God says no *to provide something better*. The Lord explained to the prophet Isaiah, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9, ESV). He sees what we cannot see. He sees the implications of our requests and knows it may not be best for us.
- Sometimes God says no to our prayers *because it's not His plan for us*. To Jeremiah, the Lord said, "For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11, NIV). David believed this when he said, "The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me" (Psalm 138:8, ESV). Sometimes His no is because He has a different plan.
- Sometimes God says no *to discipline us*. Hebrews 12 says, "The Lord disciplines those he loves ... God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness ... No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness" (Hebrews 12:6, 10, 11, NIV).

- Sometimes God says no to our prayers *when we ask selfishly*. “When you ask, you do not receive,” James said, “because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” (James 4:3, NIV).
- Sometimes God says no *to build our character*. “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character” (Romans 5:3-4, ESV).¹⁷ Sometimes He says no to our prayers, even allows hardship, to make us more like Jesus.
- Sometimes God says no to our prayers *to make us more dependent on Him*. Paul said, “So that Christ’s power may rest on me ... For Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses ... For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9-10, NIV).¹⁸ Hardship makes us depend on God.

It may be theologically helpful to list some of the reasons why God says no, but sometimes, often times, we can see no reason. God does not always explain Himself and we’re often left with mystery. And even if we knew the reason for God’s no, reasons do not always comfort. Oh, if we’re overlooked for one job, only to receive a better job later, we thank God for it because we see He had something better for us. But if my wife dies in a car accident, no reason is going to comfort me. Again, even if we knew the reason for God’s no, reasons do not comfort.

Let’s admit that it’s hard to accept God’s no to our prayers. But if we truly believe He is good, that He loves us and cares about us, and that He knows what’s best, then we will embrace His no. At some point, we must join Jesus and Paul in saying, ***“Lord, I want what You want more than I want what I want.”***

CONCLUSION

Jesus trusted His Father when He said no, but still had to endure the cross. Paul trusted God when He said no, but still had to endure the thorn in the flesh. So, when God’s no is disappointing or hard or painful, will you trust Him?

What will you do when God says no to your prayer? You can pout feeling He has deprived you of something you deserved. You can be envious of others whom God has blessed in the way you wanted to be blessed. You can get angry with God and argue and complain and decide to never trust Him again. You can allow confusion and disappointment to destroy your faith, and you can walk away from God.

Or you can pray as Jesus prayed. What Jesus prayed in Gethsemane can be a template for us. “My Father.” Talk to God as your father. Never doubt His love for you. And ask Him for what you want. As Jesus asked, “If it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.” “Lord, if it is possible let this cancer pass from me ... please take this problem away ...” Never hesitate to pour out your heart to Him. He is your Father and He loves you and you can talk to Him anytime about anything. But we must end our prayers the way Jesus ended His prayer. “Not as I will, but as you will.” Jesus surrendered to His Father’s will, so surrender to His will for you. Jesus submitted to His Father’s plan, so submit to His plan for you. And Jesus trusted His Father when He said no, so trust Him when He says no to you.

In faith, trusting in God who loves you and knows what's best, may you say, "***Lord, I want what You want more than I want what I want.***"

NOTES

¹ See Matthew 6:9-13.

² See Psalm 8:1.

³ See Psalm 139:1.

⁴ See Psalm 51:4.

⁵ See 2 Chronicles 6:13-14.

⁶ See Jonah 2:2.

⁷ See Lamentations 3:21-23.

⁸ See Matthew 26:37 in both the ESV and NAS.

⁹ See Psalm 75:8, Isaiah 51:17, 51:22, Jeremiah 25:25, 49:12, Revelation 14:10, 16:19.

¹⁰ See 1 Peter 2:24, 3:18, 2 Corinthians 5:21.

¹¹ This is the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement. Penal referring to penalty, to deserved punishment. [See John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), pages 133-163.]

¹² When one denomination was publishing a new denominational hymnal, they requested to include a hymn by Keith Getty, "In Christ Alone." However, they asked to edit the lyrics to soften the message to align with the denomination's theology. They wanted to change the lyric "on the cross, as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied" to "the love of God was magnified." Why? Because progressive/liberal theology rejects the notion of God's holy wrath toward sin and the atonement and substitutionary death of Jesus.

¹³ Matthew 26:44 says, "He went away and prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more" (NAS).

¹⁴ In Mark 14:36 records Jesus saying, "Abba! Father!"

¹⁵ We see the same thing in Deuteronomy 8:3, "He humbled you."

¹⁶ The same theme as James 1:3, "the testing of your faith." Also, 1 Peter 1:6-7.

¹⁷ The same theme as James 1:2-4, "Consider it all joy, when you encounter various trials ... faith produces endurance."

¹⁸ See Deuteronomy 8:3. "He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (NIV). The Lord allowed hardship to make them more dependent on Him.