

WHEN GOD SAYS, "NO"

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

How many times has this happened to you?

Your bank closed its doors hours ago, but you desperately need some cash.

You drive over to the bank and park yourself in front of the ATM.

You insert your card, and the machine asks for your code.

Quickly, you punch in the numbers and wait...

But the screen says, "Invalid Code." ATM language for "NO."

Okay...maybe you just punched in the wrong number.

So...you very slowly...methodically...punch in the code.

And up pops the same message:

"Invalid Code."

By now there is a line of cars behind you populated with frustrated faces and hands poised inches from their car's horn.

You begin to sweat.

And suddenly...you remember that you changed the code and put the number in your phone.

Quickly, you look it up and punch it in and...

Victory!

With a few more button pushes you are on your way, and all those people behind you are now smiling.

To get your money you just had to punch in the right code.

So, what's the code to use with God to get what we want?

If ever someone needed that code, it was the Apostle Paul.

He had a major, major problem...something so very painful that he described in chilling terms:

"Therefore, so that I would not exalt myself, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to torment me so that I would not exalt myself."

2 Corinthians 12:7

What was a nice guy like Paul doing with a thorn in his flesh?

It was all due to a flight that Elon Musk would love to sell tickets for—a transport into heaven.

Humbly, the apostle refers to himself in the third person:

"I know a man in Christ who was caught up to the third heaven fourteen years ago.

Whether he was in the body or out of the body, I don't know; God knows. I know that this man...was caught up into paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a human being is not allowed to speak."

2 Corinthians 12:2-4

Evidently, God was concerned that Paul might allow this heavenly visitation to go to his head. Paul explains:

"Therefore, so that I would not exalt myself, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to torment me so that I would not exalt myself."

2 Corinthians 12:7

Ouch!

That word, “thorn” is better translated, “stake”—sharp and painful sticking in Paul.

Delivered by Satan—that’s bad.

But given by God—that’s worse...note the passive voice, “a thorn in the flesh was given to me”—in the Bible nearly always a reference to God.

Much like God allowed Satan to whack Job...God allowed Satan to insert a stake into Paul.

A stake sent to “torment” him—the Greek word here refers to humiliating violence that happens over and over again.

It was...awful.

And sent by God to keep Paul from turning his heavenly trip into an ego trip.

**Paul would have preferred a memo.
Instead, he got a stake.
A stake that he desperately wanted to
God to remove.
So, he approached God's ATM and
punched in a prayer...and up popped
those dreaded words, "Invalid Code."**

The stake in his flesh remained.

But he just had to get rid of this thing!

**Once again, he approached God's ATM
and punched in the same prayer...only
to be greeted by the same words,
"Invalid Code."**

Hey...but three's a charm.

He tried again.

**This time...one word appeared in all
caps followed by an exclamation
point—"NO!"**

Sometimes God says NO to prayer requests.

Sometimes God Says "NO" Even to the Deserving

Like the Apostle Paul.

I mean, had not Paul done more than enough to get this request granted?

Just look at his service to God resume:

"Five times I received the forty lashes minus one from the Jews.

Three times I was beaten with rods.

Once I received a stoning.

Three times I was shipwrecked.

I have spent a night and a day in the open sea.

On frequent journeys, I faced dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers,

dangers from my own people, dangers from Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers at sea, and dangers among false brothers; toil and hardship, many sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, often without food, cold, and without clothing. Not to mention other things, there is the daily pressure on me: my concern for all the churches.”

Whew!

Surely, Paul deserved to get a YES from God on this request—to remove a stake jammed in his flesh by the Enemy.

But all he got was...NO.

**That is truly strange because it sounds like Paul was punching in the right code.
You know...**

God Will Say, "YES," If I Pray for What I Truly Want

The Bible says it right there in Psalm 37:

"Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart."

Psalm 37:4

Some people reword that Scripture to read:

"Just ask for what you want deep in your heart, and God will give it to you every time."

But no—the psalm begins,

“Delight yourself in the Lord”

which means to delight yourself in what delights the Lord.

So like Jesus’ prayer on the eve of His death:

“Not my will but yours be done.”

God will give us the desire of our heart if the desire of our heart above all else is His will.

God will say, NO, to what is not His will--even when we ask for what we really, really want.

Okay, let’s try another code:

God Will Say, "YES," If I Pray Really Hard

Just be fervent...cry out to God.

In all my years as your senior pastor...our church never prayed harder for anyone than we did for Jessica Schroen.

In her mid-thirties, she was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.

She and her husband, J.D., had four young children.

This sanctuary was nearly full on this level as we gathered one night to pray for her...as we gathered to pray hard for her.

Someone in the church organized a 24-hour prayer chain for Jessica that went on for months.

We prayed and we prayed and we prayed...prayed fervently that God would heal her on this side of heaven. He said,

"NO—I will call her home and heal her there."

If praying hard were the right code, Jessica would be with us today.

Okay...the "pray hard" code does not work.

How about this one?

God Will Say, "YES," If I Pray with Persistence

We even have a story told by Jesus to back up this view.

The parable of the widow who went to a judge and said,

“Give me justice against my adversary.”

For a while the judge was unwilling, but he later gave in to the woman saying,

“yet because this widow keeps pestering me, I will give her justice, so that she doesn’t wear me out by her persistent coming.”

So, there you have it—just keep asking God until you finally wear Him down.

No—Jesus told this parable to encourage us to pray always and not give up.

He did not teach that God is bound by our persistence.

Jim and Sally Conway's daughter, Becki, was 15 years old when she began having trouble with one of her knees—doctors found a mysterious lump.

The family physician broke the news—malignancy...they would have to amputate her leg.

The Conways were devastated. Pastor Conway recalls,

"I refused to believe this news. I determined to prevent this surgery by praying until God promised to heal her."

Praying until God promised to heal her.

"You're not going to have your leg amputated,"
he told his daughter.

**God's answer to the pastor who just knew that he could pray God into a YES?
Becki's leg was amputated.**

Persistence is not the code.

Okay...how about this one...

God Will Say, "YES," If I Pray in Jesus' Name.

Didn't Jesus say that?

"Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

If you ask anything in my name, I will do it."

John 14:13-14

But please note that the words, "in my name" mean "in accordance with my will."

Well...let's punch in this one:

God Will Say, "YES," If Another Believer Prays in Agreement with Me

More words from Jesus:

"Again, truly I tell you, if two of you on earth agree about any matter that you pray for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.

For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them."

Matthew 18:19-20

But once again—note those three crucial words—“in my name.”

Two or three are gathered together in His name...in submission to His will.

Every prayer uttered is spoken under an umbrella...



The words of Jesus spoken on the eve of His death...at the end of His fiercest petition:

Not My Will But Yours Be Done

Sometimes God says, NO, to even our most heartfelt and passionate, reasonable and persistent prayers.

But please...know this:

When God Says, "NO," He Always Says, "GRACE"

God did not just refuse Paul's passionate request and leave it at that.

His answer was NO...but there was more...

"Concerning this, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it would leave me.

***But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'
2 Corinthians 12:8-9***

The word, "grace" here refers not to God's unmerited favor that saves us...but to God's awesome power that sustains us.

**When God told Paul,
"My grace is sufficient for you,"
He was declaring,
"My power will be enough for you."**

His power will be enough for us when God does not grant us what we wanted...when God does not give us the desire of our heart...when God declines our request repeated over and over again.

His power will be enough for us when what we desire never comes...

- **That precious baby so longed for**
- **That cure so prayed for**
- **That someone special so searched for**
- **That freedom from pain so dreamed of**
- **That SOMETHING so deeply desired.**
- **That request so very...reasonable.**

But God said, NO.

But God also said, "Grace."

And when He said, "Grace," He said, "Power."

Power sufficient.

Enough...to live with the disappointment of the NO.

And why will it be enough?

Because if God says, NO, to something we deeply desired...

If God says, NO, to someone we deeply desired...

Our disappointment saps us of strength, BUT...it opens the door...opens the door to the power of God.

***"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."
2 Corinthians 12:9***

God's power expands in us...when we are weak.

The weaker we become, the stronger He becomes in us.

And so, we pray,

"Lord, my tank is empty of my strength which means...it is full of Yours."

When God says, "NO" to something we really want...when God says, "NO" to something we really think we need...when God says, "NO" to our heart's desire...it's a gut punch.

It saps us.

But that weakness makes room for His power.

Whenever God says, "NO," He always says, "Grace."

Shauna was a Christian and so were her parents.

Shauna died from an aneurysm at the base of her brain.

She was eight years old.

Her mother, Barbara, grew despondent.

Through her tears she finally told God,

"I give up.

I will not ask anything of You anymore, and I expect You not to ask anything of me."

But then it happened.

First—one child and then a second and then a third and then...so many more.

Foster children...

Foster children who filled Barbara's life with so many smiles and so many kisses that her broken heart...was healed.

When God says, "NO," He always says, "Grace."

