

When God Says No  
John 14:12-14

Some years ago I got word that a young girl in the church was in the hospital. I hadn't been at the church long and didn't really know her or her family. But I went on over to check on her. Her parents were in the room when I got there. I introduced myself to them. They thanked me for coming. The girl was about ten years old. It was evident that she could care less who I was or why I had come. She was arrogant and rude and ill-mannered. I asked her mother about her illness. Her mother said, "She has been running a low grade infection for several days and she has developed a rash." I didn't say anything, but alarm bells went off in my head. These were the symptoms of leukemia. And, sure enough, the next day she was diagnosed with leukemia. She was quickly transferred to St. Jude's Hospital in Nashville, Tennessee. This family was well known in the community, and almost all the churches immediately began praying for her.

Several weeks later I was able to drive to Nashville to see her. I was amazed at the transformation that had taken place. In those weeks she had become a mature young woman. She welcomed me as graciously as I have ever been welcomed. She explained her treatment to me and took me on a tour of St. Jude's. She introduced me to other children who were patients. I noticed they were all mature beyond their years. Struggling with a life threatening illness seems to cause many young people to grow up quickly. She invited me to her family's room at the Ronald McDonald House for lunch. After visiting with her and her family I prayed with them and returned to East Texas.

A few months later, she became very ill. The community redoubled their prayers, and she got through that crisis. She improved so much that we became more and more confident that she would overcome the leukemia. Nowadays, many children do recover from it.

Then, after nearly a year of treatment, she again became desperately ill again. The medicine was more than her body could tolerate. Once again we held prayer vigils for her. However, within a matter of a few days, she died.

Her funeral was a celebration. We celebrated the beautiful young woman she had become. We celebrated her freedom from sickness. We celebrated her entry into eternal life. Although we grieved, our faith gave the church and the community much comfort.

However, one of the men in the church, a retired medical doctor, suddenly stopped attending. I went by to check on him. He said, "I've lost faith in God. With all the prayers that we had lifted up for that young girl, if there is a God and if God is good and loving, how is it that God did not answer our prayers and heal her?"

It was a fair and honest question. I wish I could say I was able to give him an answer which satisfied him. I couldn't.

Have you ever felt like him? Haven't we all been disappointed at some time or another with God? Something we prayed for, something of great importance, didn't turn out the way we asked. Has God ever said no to you? If so, you are in good company.

God said no to Paul. Paul prayed on several occasions that God would deliver him from his thorn in the flesh, some ailment that he had which reoccurred periodically.

Personally, I think he had diverticulitis. But that's probably because that is my thorn in the flesh. Anyway, God finally answered Paul by saying, "My strength is made perfect in weakness." In other words, God was using this thorn in the flesh to remind Paul to trust in God's strength and not in his. God said no to Paul's prayer.

God even said no to one of Jesus' prayers. In the Garden of Gethsemane, as Jesus was preparing himself for his impending arrest and torture on the cross, he prayed, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." In other words, "If there is any way to spare me this suffering and death, please don't make me go through this." But, of course, we know he did die on the cross. The answer to his prayer was, no.

Sometimes I hear people say that if we have enough faith, if we believe hard enough, God has to give us what we ask for. To them I say, "How much faith does it take? More faith than Paul had? More faith than Jesus had?" That's a pretty high standard.

Sometimes God says no. And even when the answer is yes, it's not always the way we had in mind. It was very important to Becky and me that our children get a good college education. When our children were small, Becky and I prayed that God would make it possible for them to get a college education at good colleges. They did get excellent college educations, but not the way I had in mind. What I had in mind was that God would provide the money for us to pay for their education. My daughter went to a fine private college in New York. I'm still paying for it and will probably be paying for it the rest of my life. My son got an excellent education by going to West Point. So far it has cost him one tour of duty in Iraq. That wasn't what I had in mind when I prayed that they would get good educations. God answers our prayers, but God doesn't always answer our prayers the way we had in mind.

God doesn't always answer our prayers at the time we have in mind. We expect God to answer our prayers immediately, but that usually isn't the way it happens. Someone told me that he keeps a prayer diary. For many years, every time he prays for something, he writes it down in his prayer diary. He goes back through his prayer diary periodically to remind himself of the things he has prayed for. He says that almost everything he has prayed for over the years he has received. However, the answer often comes so long after his prayer that when the answer finally comes, he has forgotten he had prayed for it.

Why doesn't God always give us exactly what we ask for right now? Why does God sometimes say no? Because God is wiser than we are. God has a plan for this world and for us. Sometimes what we want doesn't fit God's plan. And oftentimes what we pray for has to be reshaped to fit into God's plans.

That's why Jesus ended his prayer in the Garden with these words, "Nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done." Jesus knew that his life was a vital part of God's plan for the world. He didn't want to have to suffer and die. However, if that was the only way God's plan for the salvation of the world could be accomplished, he was willing to set aside what he wanted to fulfill God's plans and purposes.

Whenever we pray for something, our prayer should always end with, "Nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done." In other words, "This is what I want. But if what I want doesn't fit into your plans and purposes, just tell me no, and I'll accept it. Your plans and purposes are far more important than mine."

Of course, this raises another question: If God already has everything planned out, why should we pray for anything except, “thy will be done?” I have heard people say that they never ask God for anything except “thy will be done.” Why ask for things when God has a perfect plan for every detail of your life? All you need to ask is that you be in God’s perfect will. So, don’t ask for anything, except that God’s will be done in our lives.

However that leaves us no freedom to express ourselves and our wants and desires. The truth is that God doesn’t have everything planned out. Yes, God has plans for our lives and for the world. But God has left plenty of room in those plans for us to have a say.

God is like Abner Doubleday. For those of you who don’t know, and everyone should know, Abner Doubleday was the man who wrote the rules for baseball as we know it today. Every baseball game that is played today is an expression of the plans and purposes of Abner Doubleday. So, why should the players play if Abner Doubleday has already decided how the game will go? Well, he didn’t decide everything about how the game will go. The players have to follow his rules. But every game is different; because the players and coaches have plenty of room within the rules to influence how the game will go.

God has given us the rules and God has determined ahead of time that goodness and righteousness will prevail in the end. However, exactly how and when that will happen depends on us.

Or, to use another illustration, God is like an art teacher. My wife took a class on water coloring a few years ago. There were about eight or nine people in the class. On one occasion the teacher put a photograph of a barn at the front of the class and told them to paint a picture of a barn. They went to work. Now, there was no question that when they were finished, they would all have painted a picture of a barn. The teacher had determined that ahead of time. However, when they were through, their pictures were very different. They had the freedom to draw their barns the way they saw them and the way they wanted them to look.

That’s the freedom God gives us. Within the broad strokes of God’s plans and purposes for us, God has given us the freedom to shape our lives and our world the way we would like them to be.

One of the ways we shape our lives and our world is through prayer. When we pray, God listens. God looks for ways to give us what we ask for that are in harmony with God’s plans and purposes. Sometimes what we want just doesn’t fit. In those cases God says no, and, if we are wise, we will gratefully accept God’s answer. The last thing we want is something that is contrary to what our good and loving God wants for us. That would bring nothing but regret.

However, when our prayers are within God’s plans and purposes, God does give us what we ask for gladly. Sometimes God has to be pretty creative to fit our requests to those plans and purposes. Sometimes we have to wait until the right time. But God does find a way to say yes to the vast majority of our prayers.

The truth is God did answer our prayers for that young woman, just not the way we had in mind. She was freed from her illness. She was freed from all illness. She received complete and permanent healing from all diseases. We prayed that she would live. She received eternal life. Her family and her friends prayed not to lose her. They

didn't. God had made provision for the day they would be reunited with her for all eternity.

We ought to pray. God wants us to pray. God has given us the freedom and the power to join with God in shaping the world and our lives. God wants us to take hold of that freedom and use it. Go ahead and ask for what you want. Don't feel like you are being presumptuous. Trust God's love. But also trust God's wisdom. Always end your requests with, "Nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done." Trust God's wisdom when God says no. Trust God's wisdom when God chooses to answer your prayer at a time or in a way that you didn't have in mind. Trust that God's way is even better than yours.

Go ahead and ask. And thank God in advance for the answer. However God chooses to answer our prayer, it will be the right answer.

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