

When God's NO is the Best Answer to Your Prayers

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Introduction: One of the most dreaded questions at a job interview is when the interviewer asks, "**what's your greatest weakness?**" How do you answer that question? If you don't come up with something, you sound arrogant, but if you come clean with your weakness, they might not hire you.

One job search website describes some strategies for answering that question. One approach is to disguise your weakness as strength. For example, you might say, *"I'm such a perfectionist, I sometimes work too hard and expect others to do the same."* Another strategy is to minimize your weakness by explaining how you've already overcome it: *"I can be a very task-oriented person, but I've learned to delegate responsibilities to others to accomplish tasks."* A third strategy is to share a real weakness, but make sure it is completely irrelevant to the position. If you're applying for an accounting position, for example, you don't want to admit that you're not good at math. If you're applying for an electrician's job, don't say you are color blind, or not very organized.

Maybe you heard about the manager being interviewed for a new position. "My department has turned a profit every quarter for the past five years, I've never had personnel problems, and I've gotten superior performance reviews."

"Very impressive," the interviewer replied. "And what's your greatest weakness?" "I tend to exaggerate."

Revealing our weaknesses is one of the last things in the world we want to do, whether we're looking for a job, pursuing a relationship, or talking to friends. We don't like to admit our weaknesses to ourselves, let alone to other people. If you're placing an ad in the personals section of a newspaper, you're probably not going to lead with, "Bi-polar, overweight, unemployed man looking for a relationship that will last longer than my previous three marriages."

We know we have weaknesses, and so does everyone else. We're not designer vases made of crystal to be admired from a distance. We're not stainless-steel

pots that never scratch, rust, or dent. We're ordinary, fragile, imperfect jars of clay that happen to be carrying within us a treasure called the life of Christ. If we have that life within us, we are God-strong even in the face of weaknesses.

Transition: Let's imagine that a pastoral search committee received a cover letter from a candidate that read like this: I'm applying for the pastoral vacancy you advertised. I'm a good organizer, and I have been a leader in most places I've gone. I have been able to preach with power, though people say I am not a great speaker. I've done some writing, but some people have found my letters hard to understand.

I have never preached in one place for more than three years at a time, and most of the churches I've served were small. My preaching has led to riots and disturbances, and I've been jailed on several occasions. My health is not good, but I have a good work ethic. I generally work well with people, but I have found there are some people I simply can't work with. I don't have a permanent address, but I will do my best to keep in touch.

This could be the cover letter for the apostle Paul. He wasn't applying for a position when he wrote this letter to the Corinthian church, but he was fighting for his job. Even though he had founded the church in Corinth, many people there were beginning to question his credentials as an apostle. He wasn't one of the original disciples. He wasn't as gifted a speaker as some others. He found himself in trouble just about everywhere he went. In short, he wasn't the kind of leader the Corinthians wanted to be associated with. So, he finds himself in the awkward position of persuading his readers of his credentials.

Let's look at what he says in 2 Corinthians 12:1-10.

"I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. 2I 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. 3And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows— 4was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to

tell. 5I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. 6Even 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, 7or 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. 8Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 9But 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. 10That 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."
(NIV)

Pray

Today's Message: When God's NO is the Best Answer to Your Prayers

Paul describes a remarkable spiritual experience he had 14 years before, in which he was "caught up" into what he calls the third heaven and given insight into spiritual realities. The Corinthian church was an experientially oriented church; they craved visions and spiritual experiences. Many teachers in Corinth claimed such experiences as their credentials for ministry. In response, Paul reminds the church that he was having visions and dreams when they were still in spiritual diapers.

Notice that Paul hasn't said a word about this vision for 14 years. Not a hint. And even now, he doesn't tell us anything about what he saw or what he heard. In fact, he's so reluctant to build his reputation by talking about powerful supernatural moments, that he won't even use the word "I." Instead, he says, "I know a man who ...," he talks about himself in the third person.

What does Paul want to talk about? What does he think are the telltale signs that someone is a real Christian leader? **His weaknesses. Not his strengths.**

There has been much speculation about what Paul means by a "thorn in the flesh." The word we translate "thorn" was used to describe a sharp instrument

that caused pain, lodged deeply, and was difficult to remove. So, the "thorn in the flesh" was not a minor annoyance; it was NOT a "pain in the neck." Rather, it was a chronic source of pain and continuous anguish so debilitating that it hindered his ability to serve Christ.

Here are the two most likely answers for Paul's "thorn in my flesh."

One is enemies, of which Paul had many. For example, Paul says, "Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm." If you've been insulted, like Paul was, or attacked, or had your work undermined, then you know that it feels like having a thorn pushed into your flesh till you bleed. In Numbers 33 adversaries/enemies are referred to as "thorns in your flesh."

The second possibility is physical disease. Most likely an eye problem that just won't go away, because Paul writes in Galatians 4:13-15:

"As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you, 14and even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. 15Where, then, is your blessing of me now? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me."

Even though we'll never be 100% sure exactly what Paul's thorn is, we know this: It's a "weakness" (v. 9), it "torments" you (v. 7). And it's a "messenger of Satan" (v. 7), meaning, those who contended with and fought against him, cast him in prison, beat him. The term "messenger" in Paul's writings always referred to a person.

Paul's thorn remains undefined, so that all those with a "thorn" can readily apply the spiritual lessons from this passage and receive grace.

What's your "thorn in the flesh?" What personal weakness, vulnerability, or disability causes you pain or hinders your ability to serve Christ freely and effectively? Maybe it's something obvious; maybe it's something no one would ever guess. It could be something you've lived with for a long time or something that's happened to you recently.

According to Paul, **disabilities don't disqualify us.** In fact, when we own our weaknesses, God can turn them into strengths. Weaknesses keep us dependent on Christ and allow him to shine through us in ways he couldn't if we were healthy and strong.

So, what is this text primarily about? NOT that he's had visions, even though he's had amazing ones, not that he's so much more experienced and qualified than the troublemakers in Corinth; but his WEAKNESSES, for it's through them that Christ's power rests on him.

What do we do when faced with a "thorn?"

I. Ask God to take the thorn away.

Paul is not suggesting that we simply give in to our weaknesses and vulnerabilities without a fight. Remember, God created us to live; there was no sickness or death before the Fall. When we encounter things that hinder us from fulfilling our God-given purpose, we ought to push back.

That's what Paul did. In verse 8 he writes, ***"Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me."*** He fervently and repeatedly asked God to remove his thorn. He asked God to take it away, so that he might serve Christ at full strength. We should do the same thing.

When people are sick, we should pray for healing.

When people have addictions, we should pray for their deliverance.

When people have been wounded by life or circumstance, we should pray for their recovery.

Certainly, we pray in submission to God's will. But let's not mistake submission to God for surrender to sickness or suffering.

Here is our dilemma. You cannot be a Christian for very long before you pray for something, and it happens. And then you pray for something else, and it doesn't. How do you handle God's NO?

A. General Rules about Prayer Requests

1. If the request is wrong, God will say, “NO.”
 2. If the timing is wrong, God will say, “SLOW.”
 3. If you are wrong, God will say, “GROW.”
 4. When everything is in place with His will, God will say, “LET’S GO!”
- God wants to move that mountain for us; to change that circumstance; to answer that prayer.
 - You’ll be amazed at how often God will say, “Let’s go!”

No matter how spiritual you may be, there are going to be times that God says “No” to your prayers. It doesn’t matter how much you have sacrificed, endured, and accomplished for the cause of Christ.

A Pastor’s Story: When I was a newer Christian, still in college, I visited Julie, who’s now my wife, on her campus. And there I met her roommate, Sally.

Sally, to be honest, looked pale, and a little sickly. Julie explained to me that Sally had a blood disorder, and it left her unusually weak. The most she could manage per day was one trip across campus, so she walked slowly to her first class in the morning and stayed over on that side of campus until the last one was over, because she didn’t have enough strength to walk back & forth.

That night, Julie and I met Sally at the cafeteria, and going through the serving line with her, when we got to the place where dinner was being served, the worker on the line saw Sally, and reached back for a plate they had prepared for her. It had 1 thing only: boiled potatoes—plain, no butter. And then to make them even less appetizing, those plain potatoes had been wrapped in clear, plastic Saran Wrap and left to cool on the counter, which she ate with a handful of pills.

The next spring, Sally was in the chapel on campus, praying. And she had a vision of Jesus. Jesus stood before her and said, “My blood is yours.”

She came back to the room that evening and told Julie, “Jesus healed me. I can stop taking my meds.” And Julie said, “I don’t think you should do that. At least

talk to your doctor.” So, she did, and the doctor confirmed: Something dramatic had happened. Her blood picture had returned to NORMAL.

A couple of years later, we went to Sally’s wedding, and she looked radiant.

So, I learned early on that God can do ANYTHING! And he answers prayer.

A few years later my nephew was born. And for some reason, he didn’t want to nurse, and he wasn’t thriving. So, tests were run, and it was discovered that he had congenital heart abnormalities.

His dad and mom prayed for him! My wife and I prayed. Our entire family did, and so did plenty of Christians around the country who’d never met him.

We prayed that God would heal him when he went through an open-heart surgery. And then another. And another. And another. But at 8-1/2 months, he died. I walked into the funeral home and there sat this tiny white casket at the front, and it didn’t make sense. Why would God say yes to one prayer for healing, and say no to another?

Early Christians experienced the same thing. The Bible tells us that, ***“God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, 12so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.”*** (Acts 19:11-12, NIV).

But the Bible also says, in Paul’s own words: ***“Erastus stayed in Corinth, and I left Trophimus sick in Miletus. ’ (2 Timothy 4:20)***

Wait. What did you just say? Why, Paul, did you leave your friend and co-worker sick? Why didn’t you just pull out your handkerchief and heal him?

Because to be a Christian is to experience this reality in prayer: Sometimes God says yes, and sometimes God says no.

How do you and I respond to this?

It’s essential that we learn about this. Because if we don’t, when we hit a NO, we might stop praying. Or get discouraged, feel defeated, or blame ourselves for not having enough faith. Or decide God isn’t like we thought He was.

But if we learn from God's Word how to respond to His No Answer to our prayer, we will move on to an even closer relationship with God.

Whatever your thorn is, notice what Paul does with his: "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me." I pleaded. And I pleaded. And I pleaded.

I imagine Paul's prayers: "Lord, you gave me a tour of heaven so why would you allow this thorn? You gave me the highest high, so why now this lowest low? Lord, take this away!" No answer.

But Paul doesn't stop praying. "Lord, please, I beg you, take this away from me. I know you have power, and I know you love me. Take away this torment!" Still No answer.

Does that make Paul stop praying? Nope. "Lord, this thorn is keeping me from doing the work you've given me to do! Don't you want your gospel to spread, but how am I supposed to do that when I can barely read or write?"

Since the thorn came after his vision, and the vision came 14 years ago, Paul may have been praying these prayers for years.

Whatever your thorn is, may I lovingly encourage you to not stop praying, just because you have prayed and not yet gotten an answer.

Jesus prays three times that the cup of suffering will be taken away from him. Paul prays three times for this thorn to be removed.

Ask, and then keep on asking? Sometimes, I notice, people wish something was gone. They hope it goes away. But they don't really ask God to change it or remove it. They complain to others about it but still may not be asking God to remove it.

So, ask. And if you don't get an answer, ask again. And if you still don't get an answer, ask again. Because when Paul finally gets an answer, it is an answer that is so profound, it's still encouraging Christians 2,000 to this day.

TAKE-AWAY: Keep Asking God until you get a YES, or the Grace to Live with NO!

II. Accept God's Sovereign Will.

Sometimes God takes the thorn away, but sometimes, in his wisdom, he does not. No matter how spiritual you are. Not matter how much you have sacrificed, endured, and accomplished for Jesus. No matter how hard we pray or how much faith we muster up. Like Paul, we must accept God's sovereign NO. In verse 7, Paul indicates that God allowed the thorn for a purpose: **"to keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations."**

Sometimes God allows sickness and suffering into our lives to accomplish some greater good—something we may never understand in this life. So sometimes when we ask him to take the pain away, he says, "Not yet." He will eventually heal and restore and deliver; if not in this life, then in the life to come.

So, it was for Paul. In verse 9, he uses the phrase **"he said to me"** to suggest that God had spoken the final word on the issue. That expression was used to describe the edict of a king, a declaration that was final and had continuing effect. There came a moment when Paul had to stop asking God to take the thorn away and accept it as the sovereign will of God for his life.

There are echoes here of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane. Jesus prayed three times for the Father to take away a far more horrific thorn than the one Paul had to contend with. But Jesus, too, accepted the sovereign will of his Father when he said: ***"nevertheless, not my will, but Thine be done."***

We will all experience moments when, after persistent and believing prayer, it becomes evident that God is doing something we can't understand and wouldn't choose. We should recognize that God has a greater purpose in mind.

STORY: Joni Eareckson Tada was an athletic young woman who broke her neck diving into the shallow waters of the Chesapeake Bay and was paralyzed from the neck down. In that moment, she lost nearly all her physical abilities. Even the simplest of chores became impossible for her. Along with physical disability came emotional despair and spiritual struggles. She was depressed and suicidal and railed at God for allowing such a thing to happen.

But at her lowest point, when it seemed that absolutely everything had been taken away from her, she turned to Christ and discovered that his grace was

enough for her. For a time, she asked God to take it away. What a testimony it would be if she were healed! Think of all she could accomplish if she wasn't stuck in a wheelchair. But at a certain point, Joni accepted that God's will for her life included a wheelchair.

She began to understand that God could accomplish more through her weakness than through her healing. For decades now God has been doing just that. His power has been made perfect in her weakness. Through her books, her artwork, her speaking, and her organization she has touched the lives of millions of people. Confined to a wheelchair, with virtually no physical strength whatsoever, she has changed the world. God's grace has been enough for Joni, but she's had to appropriate that grace every day.

When God doesn't seem to be saying anything, rest your confidence on what God has already said.

When darkness seems to hide His face, I rest on His unchanging grace.

In every high and stormy gale, my anchor holds within the veil.

His oath, his covenant, his blood... support me in the overwhelming flood.

When all around my soul gives way, He then is all my hope and stay.

On Christ the Solid Rock I stand. All other ground is sinking sand. All other ground is sinking sand.

TAKE-AWAY: An Unremoved Thorn does not mean an Unanswered Prayer

III. Appropriate God's grace.

Here's the answer that Paul got, because he didn't stop praying: ***"But [Jesus] said to me, '[Paul,] My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'"***

The answer to your prayer—all 3 of your prayers, Paul—is No. The thorn in your flesh will not be taken away. But here's something even better: My grace will be enough for you. My divine power will keep you going. And in fact, when my power works with your weakness, something wonderful happens. People look at you and

think, “How does he keep going?” How does Paul keep on trusting God when he has this thorn in the flesh? It must be God.”

But if Paul was strong on his own and just kept going and going, people would say, “His ministry would be an advertisement for Paul, not for Jesus Christ.”

Jesus still says to you and me: “My power is made perfect in your weakness.”

This, finally, is an answer Paul can live with. Now he can stop praying. He wanted the answer “YES, I will remove the thorn.” But now Paul realizes, **God’s NO is better than my YES.**

Paul realizes, “Now I don’t need you to take away this thorn, Lord, because you’ve given me something so much better.”

Once we accept our situation as God's will, we must appropriate God's grace. Grace here refers to all of God's resources—his strength, joy, and peace. Grace is God’s presence, favor and power. If we draw near to Christ, He will give us his heavenly strength and comfort.

Notice “*appropriate*” is an active word—aggressive, even. It means “to take possession of something or make use of something for oneself, even without permission.”

We, of course, have permission to take hold of God's grace; it becomes available to us when we invite Christ into our lives. But we still must appropriate it. There's nothing passive about Paul's response to the thorn in the flesh. According to verses 9 and 10, he not only endures his weakness, he boasts about it.

He knows that God can accomplish things through his weakness that could not have been accomplished through his strengths. We can't stop at acceptance. We must appropriate God's grace; actively and aggressively take hold of it. We must claim his promises, obey his commands, ask for strength, and then seize the opportunities our weaknesses afford us.

STORY: Joni tells the story of being in a ladies' restroom during a Christian women's conference. A well-meaning woman who was putting on lipstick in front of the mirror said to her, “Oh, Joni, you always look so together, so happy in your

wheelchair. I wish I had your joy!" Several women around nodded, "Yes, how do you do it?"

Joni replied, "I don't do it. Let me tell you how it works. After my husband leaves for work at 6:00am, I'm alone until I hear the front door open at 7:00am. That's when a friend arrives to get me up. While I listen to her make coffee, I pray, 'Oh, Lord, my friend will soon give me a bath, dress me, sit me up in a chair, brush my hair and teeth, and send me out the door. I don't have the strength to face this routine one more time. I have no resources. I don't even have a smile to take into the day. But you do, Lord. May I have yours? God, I need you desperately.

"So, what happens when your friend comes through the bedroom door?" one of the women asked.

"I turn my head toward her and give her a smile sent straight from heaven. It's not mine. It's God's. And so," she said, gesturing to her paralyzed legs, "whatever joy you see today was hard won this morning."

God's grace has been enough for Joni, but she's had to appropriate it every day. And so do we. In the face of weakness, we turn to God and ask Him to fill us to overflowing with His grace.

TAKE-AWAY: When God chooses NOT to use His Power to take away the Pain, Trust in His Power to take you through the Pain by His Grace.

CONCLUSION:

Paul's reason for even asking God to take this problem away was because he thought that he could be a more effective servant for God, He could accomplish more for God if God would just heal him. In other words, he thought his thorn weakened him and made him less effective.

But God wanted Paul to be in a position where he was forced to realize and remember that anything of any substance that was accomplished was because of God's power not because of Paul's power.

All these statements are true:

The Lord Jesus has the power to take away the thorn that's tormenting us.

Jesus' grace is sufficient for the thorns he allows in our lives

Jesus' power is made perfect and shown to be even more amazing in our weakness.

A little ninety-year-old lady in Springfield, Illinois used to say to her Sunday School Class, "I have served the Lord for so long that I can hardly tell the difference between a blessing and a trial."

All I can say is: Have you experienced what it is like to live with the daily grace of Jesus Christ in your weakness, lifting you up like a life preserver in a stormy sea?

Then you will know that as good as YES is, God can give us a NO with so much grace we can even rejoice in our weaknesses.

When Paul realized that his thorn in the flesh was God's instrument for a greater anointing, he was happy to stop praying further about it to be removed and glad to accept His sufficient grace, and so should we.