

Bethany Presbyterian Church

21 May 2017

II Corinthians 12:7-10

God of the prophets, God of consuming fire, Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; in your covenant faithfulness send forth the fire of your Holy Spirit to accompany the reading and hearing of your Holy Word; that your truth and righteousness may be emblazoned upon our hearts. Set our souls on fire with a holy passion, that we may offer ourselves as living sacrifices of obedience and praise to you, the one and only True and Living God; through Jesus Christ who is our eternal prophet, priest, and King.  
Amen.

## **FACING GOD'S NO**

We believers justifiably and understandably emphasize the healing miracles of the Scriptures. As we are all aware, the Bible is replete with instances of healing that come as a response to a command or prayer of faith by a believer. Our problem is that while the Bible is full of examples of God saying yes to prayer requests from believers for healing, our own lives and experience are full of examples of God saying *no* to such prayers. How do we respond when God says *no*, when as far as we can tell, based on our understanding and reading of the Scriptures, we're saying and doing all the right things? We are praying in the name of Jesus, we are praying in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and we have invited the Holy Spirit to come. We have touched and agreed with another believer and have bound the power of the adversary and rebuked the illness. We have fasted and prayed the prayer of faith, have been anointed with oil, and have laid on hands. We have prayed believing and expecting—and God still said *no*.

Let me say at the outset that this is a very difficult message, because I do not have the answer to the troubling questions: "Why does God say *no* sometimes? Why are some people healed and others not healed?" I have prayed for some people, and God said yes. Yet when I prayed for my own mother's healing, God said *no*. God didn't say to wait; God said *no*. I find it frustrating, baffling, and painful to visit believers who truly love the Lord and to see them suffer and yet are unable to do anything about their condition. I pray for their healing, others pray for them, and God still says *no*. Then, at other times, when we

are about to become completely discouraged, we pray for somebody else for whom only a miracle will do, and God says yes. We are amazed and awed again by the power of God. Why are some people healed and others who are just as deserving not healed? To put the matter personally, why are some people healed when my mother, my father, my companion, my child, my best friend are not? To put the matter even more personally, why are some people healed when *I* am not? God, why are you saying *no* to my healing?

That was the question Paul was wrestling with in the text. Paul began this chapter by talking about a momentous spiritual experience he had had in which he was taken up to heaven. He did not know whether the experience was in the body or out of the body, but while he was there, he saw and heard inexpressible things. Paul stated further that to keep him from becoming conceited about his experience in the heavenly realm, a thorn in the flesh, a messenger from Satan, was given to him to torment him. Now I do not know what the thorn was, but I believe two things: it was physical and it was painful. Thorns are painful. Paul described this spiritual experience as having taken place fourteen years earlier. We don't know when Paul started being tortured by this thorn, but if it was anytime near the experience, he had been suffering a long time.

As a good believer, Paul took his thorn to God in prayer not once or twice but three times. Paul repeatedly prayed, pleaded, promised, and agonized with God to heal him, to take the thorn from him. And guess what? God said *no*. Could God possibly say *no* to Paul whom he had taken to heaven and to whom he had revealed the inexpressible? Could God possibly say *no* to Paul whose life he had turned around on the Damascus Road and whose feet he had put on a street called Straight? Paul was blinded during his conversion experience. He was healed of his blindness, but God said *no* to the removal

of the thorn. At the beginning of Acts 28 we read that Paul was shipwrecked on the island of Malta and was bitten by a poisonous snake—a viper fastened itself onto Paul's hand. Paul shook it off in the fire and went about his business. He didn't swell up and he didn't die. The Bible doesn't even say that he prayed for healing, yet he was healed. He was healed of a snakebite that the Bible doesn't even tell us he prayed over, yet God said *no* when he prayed over his thorn.

During his own ministry Paul was empowered to heal others. In Lystra he healed a man crippled from birth. In Ephesus he cast out a demon from a tormented girl, and in Troas he restored life to a young man believed to be dead. Yet his own thorn was not healed. When he and Silas were locked in jail, they prayed and sang so powerfully that the earth shook, the prison doors flew open, and their chains fell off. Yet when he prayed about his own thorn, nothing happened.

After God said *no* to Paul, God said *instead*. When God says *no*, look for God's *instead*. God never says *no* without an *instead*—a substitute, another blessing, another answer another revelation, another solution, another way God said *no* to Moses: “You will not enter the Promised Land. *Instead*, I will transport you across the barriers of time and put you on the snow-kissed crest of Mount Hermon to speak with my Son, Jesus, the fulfillment of the Law, who is about to give his life as a ransom for many” When David's son by Bathsheba was stricken with illness and David prayed and fasted for the child's life, God said *no* to David's prayer, and the child died. Later, when Bathsheba became pregnant again, God said yes, and Solomon was born. The writer of Hebrews tells us in Hebrews 11 that many of the faithful died without having received the promise. Instead God prepared for them a better country a heavenly one.

When God says *no*, look for the *instead*. That's just a fancy way of saying what the old preachers used to say: "God will never close a door without opening up a window." Let me rephrase that: God will never close a window without opening up a door. Often that which God opens for us and does for us, with us, and through us after a *no* is broader, deeper, taller, and more wonderful than the narrowness of our request.

God said no to Paul's request; instead the Lord spoke to him and said, "My grace is sufficient for you" (II Corinthians 12:9). Why grace? The Lord could easily have said, "My love (or peace or will or salvation) is sufficient." Why grace? Let's remember what grace is. Grace is the unsought, unasked for, and unmerited goodness of God. Grace is what God does for us without our asking. We ask for blessings, forgiveness, and peace, but grace is what God gives because God is good—all the time. When God says *no*, God is saying, "I will give you what you need without your asking for it." When you have a thorn, you may not know what to ask for. The pain may be so acute, the heartbreak and sorrow may be so piercing, the burden may be so heavy, that you may ask for relief or release in any way, even death. But remember, even without your knowing what to ask for, God will still take care of you.

I once went to see a church member who had been hospitalized several times. This individual was not simply a church member but was a true believer in the Word of God. We had been praying for him very earnestly He went to the very threshold of death and recovered enough to return to church once again to worship, but after that he suffered a relapse and was again staring death in the face. When I went to visit him in the hospital, he didn't even recognize me. I remembered that he had asked the Lord not to take his presence of mind away so that he would not find himself unable to call on the name of

the Lord. So I asked God, “Why would you let him get this way? His greatest desire was that he have presence of mind to worship you.” But as I was preparing this sermon, I felt as if the Lord was speaking to me and saying, “Without their asking, I will take care of my own. Whether this believer has presence of mind to call upon me or not, I’m still taking care of him. He’s still in my hands.” When God says *no*, remember God’s grace is still sufficient. God takes care of you even without your asking.

I could end the sermon here with these words: “My grace is sufficient.” Just knowing that without my asking, God is going to bless me, keep me, protect me, feed me, and watch over me when I’m helpless is enough for me to shout my way, pray my way, and fight my way to victory. But that is not all the Lord said. The Lord also told Paul: “[My] power is made perfect in weakness” (II Corinthians 12:9). In other words, the Lord says,

After I say *no*, not only will I continue to take care of you, but my power will still work through you even in your diminished capacity and weakened condition. Because you are weak, my power can compensate for anything you lack on your own. What I will do in you will be all the more glorious and all the more miraculous because you are weak. I know you desire to have all eight cylinders. I’m going to leave you with only four, but when I get through with the four you have left, that four will do as much as eight. My power is made perfect in weakness.

This Paul, the one who had the thorn that God didn’t remove, wrote or influenced fourteen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, logged more miles in his travels, and established more churches than anyone else in the Bible. He is quoted more often than anyone except Jesus. “My power is made perfect in weakness.”

One of the most dynamic preachers I have ever known was a frail, wheelchair-bound, one-hundred-pound man with crippling arthritis and heart disease. But when he began to sing, with his broken body and gnarled hands, “His Eye Is on the Sparrow,” he had the strength of a Samson. “My power is made perfect in weakness.”

Charlotte Elliot, an invalid who was bedridden for fifty years, composed the great invitational hymn that has probably brought more souls to Christ than hymn ever written, "Just As I Am". "My power is made perfect in weakness."

See blind Fanny Crosby writing "Blessed Assurance," "Pass Me Not," "Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross," "I Am Thine O Lord," "To God Be the Glory," "Close to Thee," "Savior More Than Life to Me," and over five thousand other hymns. "My power is made perfect in weakness."

See sightless Milton writing about paradise or deaf Beethoven composing symphonies or near-deaf Thomas Edison perfecting the phonograph. "My power is made perfect in weakness."

When Paul realized all that God's power could do through him, no wonder he moved off "Complaining Avenue" onto "Praise Boulevard" and said, "Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (II Corinthians 12:10).

## **LET US PRAY**

God of ages past, Lord of present years, and Oversoul of all time to be, you guided our fathers and mothers in their pilgrimage and wait no less to guide their children. To you we turn as thirsty people to a fountain flowing. Ever have you been our haven and stronghold, and even in the hours when we knew it not, still were you the sanctuary never failing. So to you we bring this day all that we are and ever dream to be, confessing that apart from your power there is nothing that can shelter or save. If there be those among us who face separation from loved ones, with months or years of not seeing or touching, let each find a lodgement of heart in yourself, and though the days be many and the miles long, bind each to the other in their bondage to you - apart but together, still one though two. If there be those among us who carry the burden of some great pain and live always so crushed by its load that strength disappears and hope is lost, lift up their eyes to the hills whence all our help descends, and teach them how wonderful is your might when all else falters and fails. If there be those among us who have done what is evil in your sight and never face dawn without dread of their guilt, reveal to them how great is your mercy to them who do truly and earnestly repent of their sins. If there be those among us blessed with abundance in body and soul yet still striving steadfastly for none but themselves, lead them back to the light, and replenish their strength as they give it away. Lord, as best we can, we call to mind all your people in all of the world. So instruct us, we pray, in the ministries of your love that we become the bearers of your healing peace to some who suffer pain or hardship. Empower your true servants everywhere that they so your will in faithful courage, and to you be the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Through Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray: "Our Father ... Amen."