

When God Says “No” to Your Earnest Prayers

Before reading this article, please read/reread 2Corinthians 12:7-10.

If we have prayed very much in our lives, there have likely been times that though we prayed sincerely, earnestly, and consistently for something- perhaps the restoration of health for a sick/dying loved one, or a new or better car/home/job/whatever, the answer from God was apparently “No.” Been there, done that, right? But when this happens for some, they lose faith in prayer, or even in God altogether, and quit (praying and/or believing). Usually, we overlook all the *other* blessings He has and continues to shower upon us, **or what He gives instead of that for which we asked.** The apostle Paul helps us in those times that God says “No”...

It is indeed unfortunate that some folks look at 2Corinthians 12:7ff and seem to fixate on Paul’s “*thorn in the flesh*” and what exactly it was. If that’s you, please note v.10 where, I believe, he identifies this “*thorn*” as “*weaknesses... insults... distresses... persecutions... difficulties*” with which, after God said “No,” he was then “*well content.*” Now, with that out of the way- at least as much as I intend to move it, let’s take a closer look at **what God gave the apostle instead of removing “the thorn.”**

Understanding of its purpose, vv.7,9. Remember that Paul is chronicling this event *from his past* (the verb “*entreated*” is in past tense, as is God’s *reply*). Why is this important? Paul **now**, as he *writes* to the Corinthians in *hindsight* and with the obvious advantage of *revelation* (cf. v.9), understands the purpose and benefit of the *thorn*. But he surely didn’t “get it” **while** he was earnestly *entreating the Lord* those *three times!* It was only with additional *revelation from God* and *time* that he understood the *purpose* and *benefit* of the presence of the *thorn*. So, when God says “No” to our sincere pleas, we probably need to seek answers from His Word, and give it some time. Perhaps then we, too, will understand *why* God refused our request... and be in a better position to “see” what He supplied instead.

Humility, v.7. Paul had been abundantly *blessed* by God. Because “*of the greatness of the revelations*” (cf. vv.1-4,7), God deemed this *thorn* not only *beneficial* but *necessary* to “*keep me from exalting myself*” (note he mentions this twice in v.7!). It kept him humble. We, too, have been greatly blessed by God with *knowledge*, *understanding*, and *wisdom* regarding His revelation. Additionally, we are “*blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ,*” Ephesians 1:3! Perhaps, we, like Paul, need to hear “No” from time to time to keep from *exalting ourselves*. We love our children, and want to say “Yes” to their every request. But we know that’s not good for them. God, our great Heavenly Father, loves and wants “the best” for us too... and sometimes, that means saying “No”- perhaps to just help us be *humble*.

Trust, vv.7-10. I cited all four of these verses for a reason. What becomes readily apparent from reading all of them together is this: Through *the thorn* remaining, **Paul learned to trust God.** He learned to *trust* Him regarding *what was best*. He learned to *trust God* for *protection* from this potentially deadly *thorn*. Basically, he learned to *trust God* regarding the things that he (Paul) could not control. We need those lessons also. And we may be getting opportunities to *trust God* when He says “No” to our prayers too!

Sufficient Grace, v.9. We probably understand the concept *grace* fairly well, while its magnitude surely escapes our mental grasp. But the “unmerited favor” God extended to Paul to deal with *this thorn* is also said to be “*sufficient,*” v.9. We think of “sufficient” as merely “enough.” The Greek word from which it is translated (*arkeo*) is defined as “to be possessed of unfailing strength” (Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon). Think about that. Paul is being promised, along with *the continuing presence of the thorn*, the “unfailing strength” of God grace to deal with it! We look at Acts 14:19-21 and wonder how in the

world Paul was able to get up from being *stoned, dragged out of the city, and left for dead* and continue preaching. The answer is simple: It wasn't from "in the world" that he got such strength but "out of the heavens"- he was "possessed of unfailing strength" of God's "*sufficient*" *grace!* When we ask God to "remove" our obstacles, and He says "No," remember this, get back up, and keep going because He has given you of His magnificent grace the strength to overcome!

Perfected Weakness, v.9. I know that sounds like a contradiction. It isn't because we think of "weakness" as an "imperfection," but in in this spiritual application, "*perfected*" isn't "flawless." Instead, *teleo* (the word from which "*perfected*" is translated) refers to "being brought to an end; finished; completed" (*Ibid*). We are, thus, not "*perfected*" by becoming "flawless" but *whole, complete, finished*. And when does such occur? When we learn to lean not our own strength or flawlessness and allow our *weaknesses* to be aided and supported by God's *grace* and *power*. And how do we come to such a realization? You got it: By trusting and relying on God's "*sufficient grace*" to overcome our "thorns" rather than asking Him to remove them! That's exactly what Paul did when he, through God's refusal, learned that "*when I am weak*" (in *myself*), then "*I am strong*" (through God's *sufficient grace* and *power*), v.10b.

Contentment, v.10. The lack of *contentment* with God's provisions implies some not-so-attractive conclusions: 1) that we know *what is best* for us better than God; 2) that we know *ourselves* and *our capabilities* better than God; and, 3) that God is to *serve our purposes* rather than the other way around. Of course, none of those is true; and worse, they spiritually destructive, physically demoralizing, and make us just plain miserable. But with *contentment*- even with our "thorns," enables our *trust* and *reliance* on God to bring "*great gain*," cf. 1Timothy 6:10. Which in turn, allows us to not only "deal" with our "thorns," but to be "*well-content*" in so doing... and perhaps even to be *thankful* for them!

So, when God says "No" to your earnest, sincere, and consistent prayer, instead of losing your faith in prayer or Him, reread this text (2Corinthians 12:7-10), and remember to look for what He gave you instead of your request: *Understanding, Humility, opportunities to Trust* and be *Perfected* in Him, and be *Well-Content* even with your "thorns"! (Philip C. Strong; Southport Church of Christ; 7202 Madison Ave, Indianapolis, IN 46227; online at southportcofc.org; email to mrpcstrong@hotmail.com)