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WHEN GOD'S "NO!" IS FINAL

Today's text: Deut. 3: 23-29; 2 Cor. 12: 7-10

Extracts:

1. **"And I besought the Lord at that time, saying, I pray Thee, let me go over, and see the good land that is beyond Jordan, that goodly mountain, and Lebanon. But the Lord was wroth with me for your sakes, and would not hear me: and the Lord said unto me, Let it suffice thee; speak no more unto Me of this matter"** [Deut. 3: 23, 25-26]
2. **"There was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice that it might depart from me. And He said to me, My grace is sufficient for thee; for My strength is made perfect in weakness"** [2 Cor. 12: 7-9]

There is a genre (type) of stories in African folklore called "endless stories." One such story that I used to love was about two crafty negotiators. The first one was the village chief to whom all petitions and requests were addressed by the people. His nickname could literally be translated as "Yes is out of the question!" The people wanted something very badly from their ruler. So, they hired a wise man whose nickname could literally be translated as "I never take No for an answer!" You can imagine the outcome! No matter what argument was put forward by the wise man, the answer from the ruler was the same, "no!" Since the wise man would not take "no" for an answer, he had to make another strong argument. The session would go on endlessly until both the storyteller and the listeners would fall asleep!

This story came to my mind when I began to meditate on today's topic. Believers have come to assume that, provided that they are right with God, He will grant them their prayer requests. After all, Jesus has assured us that "whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in My name, He may give it you" [Jn 15:16], and that "every one that asketh receiveth, and he that seeketh findeth, and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened" [Mk 7:8]. For that reason, we indulge in persistent praying over a particular matter. Right now, some of us are there. Yet, nothing seems to be happening. Are we asking "amiss" [Jam. 4: 3] or is the Lord's hand too "shortened that it cannot save" or His ear too "heavy that it cannot hear" [Is. 59: 1]? The answer in both cases is "no!" The problem is that we have refused to realize that sometimes God's "no!" is final and not negotiable.

Let us learn more about the subject in today's lesson.

1. Background

Our background material for today's lesson comes from the book of Deuteronomy, Chapters 1-3. It is Moses' first sermon to the children of Israel as they were on the verge of entering the Promised Land. It was on the first day of the eleventh month of the 40th year [**Deut. 1: 3**]. The generation that disobeyed in the wilderness had died away. Therefore, his congregation consisted mainly of the "little ones" who had "no knowledge between good and evil" [v. 39]. Moses needed to remind them of their past [**Deut. Chaps. 2-3**] so that they could appreciate where they were going. It was in that context that Moses made the point that is the subject of today's lesson.

Moses was a prayer warrior. Each time the children of Israel disobeyed God, it was Moses who stood in the gap on their behalf before Him. For example, when the people believed the evil report by ten of the twelve spies sent to investigate the Promised Land, God was determined to wipe all of them out of existence:

*How long will this people provoke Me? And how long will it be ere they believe Me, for all the signs which I have shewed among them? **I will smite them with pestilence, and disinherit them, and will make of thee a greater nation and mightier than they** [Num. 14: 11-12]*

Moses fell on his face and reminded God of His goodness and promises. Rounding up his petition, Moses said, "Pardon, I beseech Thee, the iniquity of the people *according unto the greatness of Thy mercy*, and as Thou hast forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now." In response, God said, "I have pardoned *according to thy word*" [vv. 13-20]. In the end, instead of wiping off the whole people, only the disobedient generation was denied entry into the Promised Land [vv. 21-24].

We do know, from scripture, that Moses was very close to God. He was the one used to deliver the children of Israel from bondage in Egypt. It was through him that God gave the Ten Commandments to the world. At the Transfiguration, he along with Elijah appeared and held discussions with Jesus Christ [**Matt. 17: 1-4**]. Clearly, Moses is today in heaven. While on earth, God spoke of Moses as follows: "with him will I speak *mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of God shall he behold*" [**Num. 12:8**]. How many of us today can dream of that kind of proximity to God?

Here then comes the puzzle! Earlier in their journey, the people clamoured for water. God commanded Moses to speak to the rock, unlike the previous time when He asked him to strike the rock. Rather than speak to it, Moses struck the rock, not once but twice [**Num. 20: 7-11**]. Water did gush out of the rock but God was angry with Moses. He told both Moses and Aaron, "Because ye believed Me not, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore *ye shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them*" [v. 12]. Not quite

long after, Aaron died [vv. 22-28]. I believe that he and Moses had repented and had been forgiven (otherwise Moses could not have visited the Transfigured Christ from hell!). Yet God did not allow him to enter the Promised Land. When he prayed to God for grace, God's "NO" was very emphatic: "*Speak no more unto Me of this matter*" [Deut. 3: 26]. In other words, the matter was closed. God's "no" was final and unequivocal!

2. How can we know that God's "No!" is not final?

To answer this question, we need to examine situations when God changes His mind after first refusing to answer us positively. Here are a few examples:

a) *When we remove spiritual obstacles*

It is possible that at the point that we are making our prayer requests, we are blocking our chances because of the spiritual obstacles in our relationship with God. Here are some of such obstacles:

- Sin

"The Lord is far from the wicked but He heareth the prayer of the righteous" [Prov. 15: 29]. "Your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you, that He will not hear" [Is. 59:2]. Therefore, unconfessed sin can lead God to refuse our prayer. However, "if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" [1 Jn 1:9].

King Ahab killed Naboth and took from the poor man his vineyard, which was close to the palace. God sent the prophet Elijah to tell the king that He was going to destroy him and his posterity. When the king heard that, he "rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly." Then, the Lord told Elijah, "Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before Me? Because he humbleth himself before Me, *I will not bring the evil in his days, but in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house*" [1 Kgs 21: 1-29].

- Pride

When some of us are asking for God's favour, we behave as if He should be beholding to us. Like the Pharisee who looked down on everybody in the temple, we expect God to reward us with prompt response to our prayers because we are not like the rest of the people. But it is only those who humble themselves that God exalts [Lk 18: 9-14].

Naaman was a Syrian captain who needed healing from leprosy. Following the information provided his wife by their Jewish housemaid, the top army officer came to Israel for help. When he was brought to Elijah's home in the company of his numerous servants, the prophet told him to go and dip himself seven times in the Jordan River. He was angry. He expected the man of God to come lay hands on him and call the name of his God. After all, were there not better rivers in Damascus? His servants prevailed on him to humble himself, do what he had been advised and see what would happen. He did that and his leprosy disappeared! **[2 Kgs 5: 1-14]**. "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble" **[Jam. 4:6]**.

b) *When we persist*

If there are no spiritual obstacles, and we persist in our prayers, God can change His mind and grant our request. Jesus Christ illustrated this principle ["that men ought always to pray, and not to faint"] with the Parable of the Woman and the Judge **[Lk 18: 1-8]**. The unjust judge was not willing to hear the woman's case or to give her justice but she persisted. Consequently, the judge said, "Though I fear not God, nor regard man, yet because this widow *troubleth me*, I will avenge her (i.e., give her justice), *lest by her continual coming she weary me*." Jesus then asked us believers, "shall not God avenge His own elect, which cry day and night unto Him, *though He bear long with them*?" Of course, He would!

We are familiar with the story of the Gentile woman who cried to Jesus for healing for her demon-possessed daughter **[Matt. 15: 21-28]**. Scripture says that Jesus "answered her *not a word*." Even His disciples came and asked Jesus to send the woman away "for *she crieth after us*" but His response was, "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Not still discouraged, she ran ahead and fell at the feet of Jesus who told her, "It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs." She replied, "Truth, Lord; yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master's table." At that stage, Jesus succumbed and granted her request! Her daughter was healed that same hour.

3. So, when do we then know to stop asking?

When we have done all that we have discussed above and God refuses to change His mind, then, we should know that it is time to stop praying and start thanking Him for refusing to answer us positively! Here are examples of such circumstances:

a) *When God's sense of justice is at stake*

God is not a respecter of persons [2 Chron. 19:7; Acts 10:34; Rom. 2:11]. He has one penalty for the same offence no matter who has committed it, king or subject, prince or pauper. Therefore, when two people are in a similar situation, a prayer request that He will not grant to one will also be denied the other. Two examples will drive this point home.

All the children of Israel who disbelieved did not enter the Promised Land [Ps. 95: 8-11]. Of the 12 spies, only Caleb and Joshua who returned with a faith-filled report reached there [Num. 14:30]. Aaron was with Moses when God commanded him to speak to the rock in Meribah. God's reason for not letting him reach the Promised Land was because "ye rebelled against My word at the water of Meribah" [Num. 20: 22-24]. I am sure that Aaron repented before he died in the wilderness and, like Moses, he is in heaven. However, if everybody else who breached God's principle was not allowed to enter the Promised Land, why should Moses? That would have amounted to partiality.

We also know the story of David who had an adulterous affair with the wife of one of his soldiers [2 Sam. Chaps. 11 and 12]. The woman (Bathsheba) became pregnant and when David's attempt to cover it up failed, he sent her husband (Uriah) to the thickest part of the battle where he was killed. David went on to marry his wife. God sent Nathan the prophet to let David know of his sin. David repented [Ps. 51] and God forgave him, that he would not die [2 Sam. 12: 13]. However, "because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, *the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die*" [v. 14]. When the child fell ill, David fasted for seven days, asking God for the boy's life to no avail. On the seventh day, the child died [15-18].

Both stories have an important message for us: *repentance may remove hell but not justice*. That where God's integrity is on the line, He will have mercy but the punishment for the offence will not be removed. Moses went to heaven but he was not allowed to enter the Promised Land.

b) *When it is God's will*

Since we are made for God's pleasure [Rev. 4:11], we are like clay in the potter's hands [Is. 64: 8]. Therefore, when granting our request is against God's will, He will refuse, no matter how efficaciously we have prayed.

Everywhere else in the Gospels, Jesus prayed for something only *once* and His Father would grant it. At the grave of Lazarus, He prayed thus, "Father, I thank Thee that Thou hast heard Me. *And I knew that Thou hearest Me always*" [Jn 11: 41-42]. However, in the Garden of Gethsemane, as He approached His crucifixion, the main purpose for

which He came as man to die for our sins, His Father refused to hear His prayers! Jesus went to pray *two times* to His Father, saying, “O My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me; *nevertheless not as I will, but as Thou wilt.*” Listen to His prayer when He went back the *third time*, “O My Father, if this cup may not pass away from Me, except I drink it, *Thy will be done*” [Matt. 26: 36-42]. Soon after, He left with His disciples to face His fate. That should also be our attitude. *Stop praying once you know it is God’s will.*

c) *To demonstrate our total dependence on God*

People of God can easily get drunk with pride and begin to think that their spiritual powers and privileges are due to their own effort. To prevent that, God will put a weakness in their lives that they cannot deal with to remind them of their dependence on Him. A miracle worker through whose prayers God has given children to the barren may find that his own wife cannot bare children in spite of his fervent prayers. After Jesus had appeared to Gulshan Esther, a Moslem girl who had been crippled from infancy for 19 years, and received her healing from Him, she was left with the mark of her past in her hands. She asked Jesus, “Why don’t You make it *all whole?*” Jesus replied, “I want you to be My witness.”¹ She is still carrying the marks!

Paul had been given the privilege to have a glimpse of heaven in a vision, under the condition that he should never reveal what he saw to any man. To remind him of this ‘covenant,’ God put a thorn in his flesh, “the messenger of Satan to buffet me, *lest I be exalted above measure.*” Three times, Paul prayed for God to remove it and God told him (apparently after the third prayer), “My grace is sufficient for thee; for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Thereafter, Paul gladly accepted his state “that the power of Christ may rest upon me” [2 Cor. 12: 1-10].

4. Conclusion

The bottom line is that you may never know what to pray for and when to stop asking unless the Holy Spirit guides you [Rom. 8:26]. That is why I recommend Solomon’s approach. Offer thanks and offerings with a joyful heart *at all times*. Then, the Lord Himself will come to you and say as He did to Solomon, “ask what I shall give thee.” Solomon received much more than he had asked for [1 Kgs 3: 3-15]. God could also have refused to answer what He considered a non-negotiable matter. May God also extend that kind of privilege to you.

¹ **The Torn Veil** [London: Marshall Pickering, 1984; p.62]