

Answered Prayers: Pt 2, Request Denied
Mark 14:32-36
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10/13/13

And they went to a place called Gethsemane. And he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” And he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch.” And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.”

All throughout Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is a man on a mission, resolute, focused, healing, and teaching with laser-like intensity. Even after he realized that he was ultimately headed for the cross, Jesus doesn’t even really bat an eye. He simply shifts his focus and moves forward even more resolutely.

And yet for this brief interlude in verses 32-36, it seems as though Jesus momentarily steps out of character. On either side of these verses, before and after, our Lord is handing over some last minute instructions to the disciples on how they will remember him through the Lord’s Supper. And then, he faces his captors who will take him before the authorities. And yet, these four short verses where Jesus invites his disciples Peter, James, and John to wait with him in Gethsemane while he goes off to pray seem somehow uncharacteristic of Jesus. So what’s going on? It appears as though Jesus is acting out of character.

Have you ever had an experience when you had something in your life that caused you to panic?

During my senior year in college, I took a Scuba Diving class. And the final exercise of the course was an open water dive at Square Lake in Stillwater, Minnesota. No more swimming pool diving; this was the real deal. For our test, we descended to the bottom of the lake, twenty feet down, took off our goggles, removed the regulator from our mouth and then put them back on again. After taking out my regulator and removing my mask, I attempted to put the mask back on and clear the water from it by exhaling through my nose, only instead of blowing out, I inhaled a nose full of water. In that moment, I was totally panic-stricken. The only thing I could see in front of me was the bubbles of my instructor’s regulator and so I grasped after it.

Author Malcolm Gladwell wrote an article for the New Yorker back in 2000 entitled *The Art of Failure* in which he described the difference between choking and panicking. Panic, he said, is when a person will momentarily forget what they know and revert back to basic survival instincts. Being without air twenty feet below the surface, all I could see was my instructor in front of me with his regulator securely in his mouth, so I reached for it. All I could think about at that point was my need to get air.

What is fascinating about our text this morning is that Jesus, in showing vulnerability and fear, actually reveals more to us about his character and mission, and is able to connect with you and me in a unique way, unlike any other moment in all of Scripture. Jesus, the man of faith, the Son of God, is scared. Jesus is not like Socrates, who was so calm and dispassionate about life that he spouted off one-liners as he drank down the hemlock. Nor was he like the Jewish soldiers of the Maccabean revolt who fearlessly went to their death praising God all the way.

In his final hours, Jesus begins to see the actual horror of death. Like a chasm in front of him, panic sets in. Something happened there that shocked the unshockable Son of God. So what does he do? Jesus prays. “Abba,” (the most gentle and intimate name for God in all the scriptures) “Father, if there is anyway that this mission can be taken from me, will you do it?”

Jesus, in his moment of deepest despair and worry, prays. What makes Jesus such a compelling figure and man with whom we can relate is that his response to something unthinkably frightening is the same as ours.

You don’t need to pretend that the diagnosis, or the economic instability, or the threat of losing something or someone close to you is not scary. It is. In this moment when Jesus was apart from all the others except Peter, James, and John, Jesus prayed because he was scared.

And yet God’s answer to Jesus’ cry of desperation came back “no.” The truth of the Bible is that there are times when the prayers that are expressed by God’s people come back denied.

Now, I want you to think of yourself for a moment. Some of you will pray for things in your life and you will not get the answer you hope for. Has this ever happened to you? Maybe it happened recently.

Why? Why does this happen?

First I want to say three reasons that are not necessarily true about why it happened.

1. You didn’t use the right words or formula.
2. You are a bad person
3. You didn’t have enough faith.

Jesus is the man of faith, perfect in his being, and yet still God responded to his prayer with the answer “no.”

Why? The Bible tells us that God loves us and God wants the best for us, and yet all around us and even in our own lives we hear the word “no” to the requests of our hearts. Why?

For the next few moments, I want to share a few reasons why I believe God sometimes answers our prayers with the word no. It's not an exhaustive list, but I hope it will at least begin us reflecting about how God is present even when prayers don't get answered in the way we want them to

First, I believe that sometimes God chooses not to do for us what we can do on our own with our gifts and our work. Think of it this way: if I am a person who really wants friends, and I pray, "God, please give me people in my life who will be my friends," but then I'm around people all the time and I never talk to them. And we wonder why God didn't answer our prayer. Or this one, imagine a person comes into this church and sits down and you notice that they look lonely, so you pray God help that person not to be lonely, and next week they come back and they still look lonely so you pray harder, but you never invite that person over to your house. Or this one, imagine if one day my son Christian comes to me and says, "Dad, I want to play outside, but I have math homework." What does a good father say to that request? I'd say no, mainly because I love my son, but also because I'm bad at math.

Second reason why I think God at times answers our prayers with no: God says no to the form of our request in order to give us the substance. Sometimes we ask for things in life which we think will be good for us, but in actuality are very bad. Imagine a person who is lonely and desperately wants a spouse, but the person they want turns and runs from them and they say, "God, why didn't you give that person to me?" when it turns out he or she was an awful person to begin with. Sometimes God denies our requests in order to give us the substance.

There is an amazing example of this from history. Have you ever heard of a person named Augustine? Augustine lived in North Africa, was a brilliant young boy, and his mom was a Christian and his dad was a pagan. And Augustine's mom knew how special he was so she prayed, "O God, please let him become a Christian." So she prays, "God, please let him never leave here because I need to have influence on him." Then she begins to think to herself, "God, please especially do not let him go to Italy, because that place is awful, filled with all sorts of nasty things." Guess where he goes. Italy. And she might think, "O God, why did you deny my request?" But when Augustine goes to Italy, he meets a chap named Ambrose of Milan and becomes a Christian. And Augustine would go on to become one of the most important and influential people in the Christian faith, someone we still owe gratitude to even now. Why? Because God said no to his mom's request.

The third reason, and this one is hard, is that sometimes God wants us to learn the lesson that His grace is sufficient for us. There is another person in the Bible who prays fervently for something and the request is denied. Three times in 2 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul prays that God would remove the thorn in his side, and three times God denies his request. And because it was denied, Paul had to depend more fully in Jesus. In verse 9, Jesus says to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." The less Paul had to depend upon himself, in his inability, the more he could depend upon Jesus for all that he would need.

You and I have the amazing opportunity if God has said no to something we want, to go on trusting and living in the truth that God's grace is enough. And that is an amazing witness.

Finally, the reason why I believe sometimes God denies our prayer requests is that sometimes God's no to us means God's yes to someone else. In the Garden of Gethsemane, God said no to Jesus' request that the cup of judgment and wrath be taken away from him, so that God might say yes to you and me. God's no to Jesus on the cross of Calvary was God's yes to you and me and all who would believe in the atoning and saving work of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes in life, God might answer our prayer with the word no, but—and this is a hard one, I know—sometimes God's no to us is so that it might be a yes to someone else. When God said no to Jesus what he was in effect doing was saying no to himself so that he might say yes to the world. And because of this, we can rest assured that Jesus is still at work redeeming the world, even when the answer to our prayer is no.

This is the most important thing I want to say this morning: God's redemption is going to have the last word, you can believe that. There was a time in between when Jesus went to the cross and when he was raised again, it was hard and it was dark and it was lonely. But the promise of his resurrection is that God will ultimately have the last word, and God's last word is "yes." You will be rescued from that thing, and what this passage reminds us is that all we can do when we keep getting the "no" is to abide with him. Keep walking, keep praying, keep trusting. In just a few moments, we will sing an absolutely beautiful hymn, it's one of my favorites. Close your eyes with me if you will and listen to the words as I close:

*I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.*