

When God says no, look for the Yes

Oct. 5, 2008 - Deuteronomy 3:23-29

How do you respond when someone says no to your request? Do you try to convince them to say yes? Do you come up with reasons why you are the exception? I recently had someone say no to me. We went through the process of applying for passports. I already had mine. But we wanted to get them for Lori and our 3 kids incase of persecution for sports loyalties. So we got the applications. We filled out all the forms. They went and got their pictures taken. Then we had a guarantor sign the forms and pictures. We double and triple checked the forms. We gathered up the necessary documents. I arranged my schedule to go to the Passport office at Northgate mall. We hoped and prayed that everything would go fine with our application.

After a not too bad wait, I got to see an agent. She began to review our forms. Then I saw her reach for the dreaded highlighter. “Oh no. Hopefully it’s something minor that just needs a correction, I thought. She scrutinized the forms further and measured the pictures. Finally, she went back to Lori’s form. “There’s one line here that you forgot to fill out. You’ll have to take it back to her, have her fill it out and

initial it.” The line simply asked if Lori wanted her last name to be printed as her maiden name or married name. If she wanted her married name, you just had to fill out the date of the wedding and print out the name.

I looked at the line and wondered how we could miss that. But then I wondered why can’t I just fill that out? I had filled out the rest of the form and Lori had signed it. There was no signature required here. So I spoke up. “Can I just write in our wedding date and last name? After all, I have ID that says I live at the same place my wife does.”

“No,” she replied. “Passport Canada won’t accept it and it would be irresponsible of me not to point that out to you.” In my mind, I’m thinking, “I understand that. I realize that. But it’s one line and I have brought proof with me that I live at the same residence she does which is what your website instructed me to do if I was submitting an application for someone else.” But she was still working on the kid’s applications so I didn’t want to give her an excuse to find something wrong with them.

She accepted those and off I went. But I was not so happy with her no. I thought about going out into my car, filling out the line and forging Lori's initials. Then I could go back in and hope I got assigned to another agent. If the same agent got assigned to me, I would just distort my face and hope she didn't recognize me. After all, didn't this woman know how much time we'd invested in this? But I said no to going criminal. I drove home. I got Lori to fill out the appropriate line. And I went back to the office another day with a four year old daughter tagging along because I was sure it would be a shorter line up. It's so much fun sitting in a government waiting room with a four year old for over an hour. "Let's count those ceiling tiles again." Thankfully they accepted it. But it is frustrating when someone says no to what seems like a perfectly reasonable request.

It can be even more frustrating when that person is God. What do you do when God denies you something you really want and think you deserve? How do you respond when He says no to a perfectly reasonable request? "Lord, please heal my loved one. Please change my job situation. Please open that ministry door. Please let us get that house. Please help this business to succeed so I can support my

family. Lord, bring many to this ministry event. And the Lord says no."

Well friends, when God says no, it is possible to respond productively instead of pouting. Today, we're going to look at a situation where God said no to a prayer request from one of the greatest characters in the Bible. We will discover more of God's character and wisdom. We will learn some productive ways to respond when God says no.

We continue in our series on prayer today. These first five messages focus on internal issues we have to address when it comes to prayer. This stuff has to be dealt with again and again. We need to keep coming to God with simple prayer; keep confessing our sins to God through confessional prayer and learn the giving up control prayer or we will always wrestle with God or stop praying. After one more message next week, on dealing with ourselves in prayer, we're going to look upward. Because when we've prayerfully addressed our internal issues, we can more clearly see upward to the one we pray to. Then in the New Year, we're going to look outward in prayer as we consider prayer that makes a difference for others.

Here, we're still dealing with the internal issue – what about times when God says no to our request. Today, we'll see God say no to Moses. Then we'll discover 2 answers to the question “when God says no how can we respond productively instead of pouting?” We will start in the book of Numbers, chapter 20, verse 2. Then we'll go to the text on prayer, Deuteronomy 3:23-29.

Numbers 20:2-13 NIV

² Now there was no water for the community, and the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron. ³ They quarreled with Moses and said, "If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the LORD! ⁴ Why did you bring the LORD's community into this desert, that we and our livestock should die here? ⁵ Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!"

⁶ Moses and Aaron went from the assembly to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting and fell facedown, and the glory of the LORD appeared to them. ⁷ The LORD said to Moses, ⁸ "Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink."

⁹ So Moses took the staff from the LORD's presence, just as he commanded him. ¹⁰ He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" ¹¹ Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.

¹² But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them."

¹³ These were the waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarreled with the LORD and where he showed himself holy among them.

Deuteronomy 3:23-29 (NIV)

²³ At that time I pleaded with the LORD : ²⁴ "O Sovereign LORD, you have begun to show to your servant your greatness and your strong hand. For what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do the deeds and mighty works you do? ²⁵ Let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan—that fine hill country and Lebanon."

²⁶ But because of you the LORD was angry with me and would not listen to me. "That is enough," the LORD said. "Do not speak to me anymore about this matter. ²⁷ Go up to the top of Pisgah and look west and north and south and east. Look at the land with your own eyes, since you are not going to cross this Jordan. ²⁸ But commission Joshua, and encourage and strengthen him, for he will lead this people across and will cause them to inherit the land that you will see." ²⁹ So we stayed in the valley near Beth Peor.

God said no? (D 3:23-26)

It is 40 years after they left Egypt in the mighty Exodus.

Moses and the people of Israel camp across from the Promised Land.

You campers think you have difficulties claiming a camping spot in the summer? The Israelites fought two enemy armies for the right to camp across from the Promised Land.

It's just about time for them to cross over. It's just about time for them to realize a Promise God made to their fore father Abraham about six or seven hundred years earlier. He would give them a promised land. So in chapters one, two and three of Deuteronomy, Moses reviews Israel's history from the time they camped at Mount Sinai through the forty years in the wilderness up to their present day. Moses has seen God begin to deliver on the Promised Land. God

helped Israel defeat these enemy kings. The Promised Land beckoned from just across the river. There was just one problem from Moses' perspective. He wasn't allowed to go in. God pronounced sentence on him that he would not enter the land. So Moses reveals to the people, an anguished prayer he offered up to God.

It's a model prayer. Verse 23 tells us he pled with the Lord. He begged or entreated God for mercy. The humble servant of the Lord comes asking for a favor. In verse 24 Moses acknowledges God's greatness. Remember how we learned that prayer starts by recognizing God is God and we are not? That's what Moses does in 24. "O Lord God, you have begun to show your servant your greatness and your strong hand. For what God is there in heaven or on earth that can do the mighty deeds you do?" This is not an attempt by Moses to flatter God. Moses worships God because of all he has already seen God do.

Then in verse 25, he makes his request. "Please let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and Lebanon." He solemnly requests that the Lord show compassion. He knows what the Lord said back in Numbers 20. But He calls on the

Lord to show mercy and allow him to see the fruit of his life's purpose. He's really spent 80 years on this – 40 years in the desert until the burning bush, 40 years since the exodus. Surely God would be merciful and allow him this blessing.

Sometimes in the Christian life, God has given us a vision. We long to see some ministry happen or some change to occur within the church community or our family. We get a glimpse of the Promised Land. We get a snapshot of what it might look like if that dream became reality or that ministry took off or that obstacle removed. We wonder will we be given the time to see that vision through.

But then in verse 26, comes God's jolting response. "That is enough," the Lord said. Do not speak to me anymore about this matter." Talk about throwing cold water on an idea. Talk about shooting down Moses' request. God doesn't literally use the word NO. But His response adds up to a big fat no in the sky. God refuses Moses' request and refuses further discussion on the matter. Whoa. C'mon God. Doesn't that seem a little unreasonable? Couldn't You show some mercy for Your servant? After all, remember all the stuff

Moses went through in leading this mob. It seems God is being pretty unreasonable to us at first glance.

Yet we dare not jump to such conclusions. Instead, we must engage in the first productive response when God says no. **1) Trust His**

wisdom. Trust God's character. Trust Him.

Notice God has allowed some discussion on this matter. "Do not speak to me about this matter again." It seems to me that Moses has spoken to God about this quite often. God and Moses have been going back and forth in prayer about it. God has allowed Moses to ask him for this undeserved mercy. God didn't strike Moses dead. God invites His people to come and make requests of Him. But we also see the reality that God sometimes says "No" to our requests. Accepting this reality protects us from living with a distorted image of God. We can begin to believe God is like a mall Santa who says yes to anything ever asked of Him. God often does say yes. I went through my prayer journal looking for the times God said no to some prayer request I had offered. I struggled to find any. I'd say God has said yes to 90% of the requests I've logged. But God sometimes says no. God sometimes limits the amount of consideration He will give

some requests. Yes He pours out mercy for sins again and again. Yet He sometimes says no to requests in other areas.

God does not say no out of vindictiveness or to go on a power trip. He does not say no out of emotion or vengeance. Flawless reasons and perfectly holy character back up His "no" answers.

Why did God say no here? Moses reveals one reason in the first half of verse 26. "Because of you, the Lord was angry with me and would not listen to me. **God said no because Moses, the mediator, in some way bore the sins of the people.** God said no to Moses because of the people's sin. Moses the leader was identified with the sins of the people and suffered with them.

Israel had been rebellious towards God many times since their exodus from Egypt. They wanted to return to Egypt when things got tough. They even rebelled against Moses. One time his own brother and sister rebelled against His authority. Moses endured a lot of suffering because of the people's sin. In fact, he'd endured 38 years of suffering that didn't need to happen. They had one before been at the threshold of the Promised Land. Numbers 13 and 14 tell us they sent out 12 spies to search it out. Two, Joshua and Caleb, came back and

said it was a good land and with the Lord's strength, they could take it.

10 said it was a good land but the obstacles were too great and they couldn't take it. The people sided with the ten. They doubted God's ability to bring them in and talked of returning to Egypt. God pronounced judgment on this rebellious lot. None of them would enter the Promised Land. But their children would.

So for the next 38 years, the Israelites wandered the desert while the rebellious generation died. The Bible tells us just over 600,000 men were in Israel at that time, 20 years or older. So that means there were probably around 2 million people. All those 20 and older were sentenced to death. So if there were 1.2 million adults, that meant nearly 100 died every day. Moses led a people who heard the death wail 100 times a day. 100 funerals every day in that community! Yet Moses continued to minister and lead and mediate. Moses suffered with his people.

Then they complained about water in Numbers 20. True, Moses lost his temper during this encounter. But if they had never complained in the first place, he would never have been in that situation. And if they had never rebelled against God the first time

they neared the Promised Land's threshold, he would never have been placed under their constant strain. In a sense, he endured some of God's wrath on the people. He suffered with them for those 38 years even though He trusted the Lord to bring them into the Promised Land.

In doing that, Moses serves as a type of Jesus Christ. This is like Jesus, He suffered on our behalf. Jesus committed no sin. We did. We justly deserved God's wrath upon our sin. We violated God's holy standard. We tried to take control. We have sinned and failed to give God glory in everything. Yet Jesus went to the cross to take the punishment due us upon Himself. Unlike Moses who suffered with his people, Jesus suffered instead of His people. On the cross, God poured out the wrath we deserved onto His own Son. Jesus' sacrifice satisfied God's wrath. So God can save us now without compromising His holy justice. When a person trusts Christ through faith, God justifies us. He declares us to be in right standing with Him on the basis of Christ's work on the cross. This is the good news of the Gospel: For by grace you have been saved through faith.

My friend, if you are not a Christian here today, then this moment is for you. God calls you to put your faith in Christ; to trust

Christ and His sacrifice on your behalf on the cross. By putting all our trust on Him; not on our good works; not on our resume; not on how many commandments we've kept; but on Christ, God will justify us; save us from His wrath; adopt us as His children and declare us not guilty forever. Will you accept Jesus' call to come to Him and trust in Him?

In a lesser but similar way, Moses bore the wrath of God on the Israelites. He suffered "because of" the people's sin – a sin that he did not directly share but would eventually induce his own failure. He entered into the suffering of his people and ultimately shared the consequence of failing to enter the Promised Land with them. So God said no to Moses' entry into the Promised Land because of the people's sin.

But there was an even more basic reason. **God said no to Moses' request because Moses disobeyed God.** Is anyone else a little disturbed by Moses placing the whole blame on the people in verse 26? From Numbers, we discover God had every right to ban Moses from the Promised Land based on this account. Moses sins on several levels. First, he claims credit for what God is about to do.

Numbers 20:10 – "Listen you rebels, must WE bring you water out of this rock?" Not the Lord, we as if he had the power to do that within Himself. Then look at *how* he brings water out of the rock. He strikes it! God commanded Moses to speak to the rock. But he strikes it twice. It is like Moses is so frustrated with the people he goes up and bashes the rock in a rage. That's not what God commanded. Here, the leader of Israel rebelled against the Lord. Here Moses takes credit upon himself for God's work. It is serious business to be ministering on behalf of God and then take God's credit onto yourself. God decided not to overlook this. By preventing Moses from entering the Promised Land for this act, the people would remember the seriousness of breaking faith with God. They would be warned that if this great leader can stumble and fall and be held accountable so might they. God is absolutely just and within His rights to say no to Moses. Sentimentality didn't trump what God decided. In fact, if God wanted to go the whole way, none of Israel deserved to go into the Promised Land. They had this tendency to rebel. Yet by His mercy, He still let the children of the rebels enter in. When God says no, God's character remains flawless.

When God says no in our lives, we must trust Him. Trust in the holy, perfect, just, loving, faithful character of God. One productive response is to reaffirm our trust in Him and His wisdom.

There's another productive response that God invites Moses to accept. When God says no

2) Look for His yes

When God says no, it doesn't mean He's done with us. God still has His purposes to accomplish in this world and in our community. God still wants His people to live out their lives glorifying Him and fulfill the works He has for them to do. So when God says no to something, we must look for what He says yes to.

Look at the Yesses He offers Moses.

Yes #1 – See the entire land

Verse 27 again. “Go up to the top of Pisgah and look west and north and south and east. Look at the land with your own eyes, since you are not going to cross this Jordan.” Moses asks to go in and see the land. God says go up and see the land; the whole land. So though Moses wouldn't be setting foot in the land, He would get to see the

whole land from a vantage point He might never have had.

Sometimes God answers yes to our prayer requests in ways we don't expect.

We might pray, God please give me the strength to do more ministry. God give me more time to get caught up on all that there is to do. God might say “No. I want you to depend more on the Body; Let the rest of the Body do its work.” I remember in the previous church we served, we went through a time when we had no youth ministry yet we had youth in the church. I was so tempted to just dive in and take over the youth ministry. But I was already at full capacity. I might have been able to carry that ministry for one or two months before collapsing or letting other things suffer. So we introduced the idea of permanent part-time youth pastor. We worked towards that. When God brought it about, those youth pastors did way more than I could ever have done in investing in those youth. Sometimes, we might think our request is the only solution possible. But through God's no, He directs us to a different solution He provides.

Yes #2 – Get Joshua ready (there's kingdom work to be done).

Verse 28. God instructs Moses to prepare Joshua to lead the people: Commission him; encourage him; strengthen him. Moses wanted to see those two or three areas of the Promised Land. But the enemy had to be defeated first. It was a formidable enemy. They needed someone who would lead them in the conquest of that land. Moses was 120 years old. It was time to prepare the next leader. Sometimes God says no to our requests because there is other kingdom work to be done.

The Holy Spirit said no to Paul and his companions who wanted to go further north into Asia to minister. Instead, God called Paul over to Greece and the Gospel came to Europe. We saw last week that God the Father refused the Jesus' request to let the cup pass because the greater kingdom work of the cross was necessary. Here in Deuteronomy, God's no to Moses resulted in Moses delivering the speeches that make up the book of Deuteronomy. The legacy of Moses ends up to be not a tombstone in the Promised Land. His legacy is this Word. Dan Block calls Deuteronomy the Gospel According to Moses. Deuteronomy is the most quoted book by the

New Testament. So if God says no to some request, He usually has something else for us to do of equal or greater importance.

Yes #3 – A super surprise is coming!

Moses did not set foot in the Promised Land during those days. At the end of Deuteronomy, he ascends the mount, sees the land and dies. But about 1200 years later, something surprising happens.

Luke 9:28-36 NIV

²⁸About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. ²⁹As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. ³⁰Two men, Moses and Elijah, ³¹appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. ³²Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. ³³As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what he was saying.)

³⁴While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. ³⁵A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." ³⁶When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves, and told no one at that time what they had seen.

I wonder if that moment was stunningly satisfying for Moses.

Here God allowed Moses to set foot in the Promised Land alongside the ultimate deliverer. God sometimes follows up “no answers” with “yesees” we could never have dreamed of.

There was a mother our family knew who had four children. Her youngest child was 8. They were “done” having kids. She was set to get on with the rest of her life. But then at 40, she found herself pregnant. She prayed. “Why did you allow this to happen God? Why would you say “No” to the wonderful retirement plans and freedom we were looking forward to? The answer came back “To teach you to love again.” This woman had settled into a life of carrying out her role as mother and wife. It was difficult through the many hours her husband was away. Their communication was not the best. Her resentment grew towards God, her husband and her children. You would seldom if ever see her smile. But then came this little bundle of a girl. Suddenly, they were thrown back into that wonderful world of new life and unexpected surprises. The Mom began smiling again. God said No to her plans to get on with “freedom” from the “burdens” of life. He said yes to rekindling joy- in- her- for - Him and the life He entrusted to her.

When God says no, look for the yes.

No I won't heal you or your loved one because its time to say Yes to them in glory.

No, I haven't told you everything about your future but I say Yes to trusting me with working it out.

No, I won't give you that expansion or extra project at work because its time to say Yes to more time with your spouse and family.

Professional, I haven't made you the most prominent and well known in your field. But will you say Yes to what I've called you to without the fanfare?

Housewife, No you won't live the glamour life and you might not look like those air brushed models on magazine covers in grocery checkout. But I say yes in entrusting to you one of the most important responsibilities in the world; nurturing children and keeping a home.

No, I won't promise an easy Christian life. But I say yes to engaging in the life purpose for which I created you; to glorify me by enjoying me forever. God sometimes says no. But because of His flawless character and enduring faithfulness, we must not pout. Instead trust His wisdom and look for His yes.