

The title of this morning's sermon is, "*When God Says No – Part one.*"

Go ahead and open your Bibles to **James 1**.

We have been in a series called, "*Pursuing Wisdom.*" It's been about two months because of the weeks that I couldn't preach when I was in bed. Then I preached a few sermons about our bodies breaking down. The pause in the series came at a good time, because I want to talk to you about a somewhat new topic, and that's God saying no.

When we started the series I told you that wisdom is not:

- Knowing the future
- Knowing why God is or isn't doing what he's doing

Instead:

- Wisdom is being able to handle trials well
- Wisdom is being able to navigate through the twists and turns of life.

I'm convinced this is why **James 1:2-5** is written the way it is:

- Verses 2 through 4 are the familiar verses about trials.
- Then verse 5 is about asking for and receiving wisdom...

James 1:5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

Sometimes people draw a clean break between verses 4 and verse 5 as though there's no relationship between them:

- They'll teach on trials in verses 2 to 4.
- They'll teach on wisdom in verses 5 to 8.

But they won't discuss the connection between verses 2 to 4 and verses 5 to 8.

The fact is, James talks about wisdom in **verse 5** because we need wisdom during trials.

One of the unique trials we experience is God not answering our prayers, or at least not answering them the way we want. I don't think it's too much to say that when God doesn't answer our prayers the way we want:

- it can be very difficult.
- It can cause hurt and confusion

And it takes wisdom to respond well.

So we are going to spend the rest of this sermon, and next week's sermon, looking at examples in Scripture of God not answering prayers so we have the wisdom to respond well.

Keep James 1:5 in mind and turn to James 4.

Let's start with Lesson 1...

God might say no because (lesson 1) we're being selfish.

The book of James contains one of the most obvious reasons God might not answer our prayers. Look at verse one...

James 4:1 What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?

Think about something for a moment...

Why does conflict take place?

Isn't because we are selfish people who want things, and when we don't get them, we do sinful things to get them, such as quarrel and fight?

Most of our quarrels and fights are the result of us not getting what we want!

Look at verse two...

James 4:2 You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.

Notice the words **desire, have, covet, and obtain**. This is a verse about our selfishness and getting what we want.

James 4:3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

James was talking about desires and passions and he says we are not going to get our prayers answered when we are just to have those desires and passions satisfied.

Do you see the parallelism between James 1:5 and James 4:3?

- **James 1:5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.**
- **James 4:3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.**
- **James 1:5** is all about asking and receiving. It couldn't be worded more encouragingly
- **James 4:3** is the opposite. You ask but don't receive.

It's like God wants to encourage us that when we ask the right way, for the right reasons we should be very confident that we will receive. But if we ask for the wrong reasons we should be very confident that we won't receive.

And how do we ask the wrong way?

Simply put: we ask selfishly.

So something important for us to consider when we pray is this:

- Are we asking selfishly?
- Are we thinking only about ourselves?
- Are we praying for something simply because of what we can get out of it?

If the answer is yes, then we should probably be prepared not to have that prayer answered.

The next lesson...

God might say no because (lesson 2) it's not His will.

Go ahead and turn to **John 14**.

Jamison referenced these verses in his sermon, so you'll have some recent familiarity with them.

Look at **verse 13**...

John 14:13 Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14 If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.

These are fairly notorious verses when it comes to praying, because it sounds like we can get whatever we want as long as we ask in Jesus' name.

When I pray, at the end of my prayer, I will often say, "In Jesus's name." I do this because I want people to know I'm a Christian, and I am praying to the God of the Bible.

But to be honest with you, I'm not convinced that when Jesus said these words that he meant for us to say, "In Jesus's name," at the end of our prayers.

Why is that?

Because I'm not convinced that Jesus meant this as literally as they sound. It is this literal interpretation that has led to the confusion.

So if Jesus didn't mean we should say, "In his name," then what did he mean?

He meant to pray according to his will:

- His name refers to His character and who he is.
- To pray in his name means to pray what he would pray, or pray as though we are him.

Listen to these complementary verses...

1 John 5:14 This is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ASK ANYTHING ACCORDING TO HIS WILL he hears us.

So if we pray according to His will then we can be confident He'll answer.

But how do we know what his will is?

We do have a clue in the verse. It says **that the Father may be glorified in the Son.**

When we pray in Jesus's name the request must bring glory to the Father. If it doesn't then we can probably be certain the request will not be answered.

I want to share an example of God saying no that I learned about recently that encouraged me and I hope encourages you too...

As you know we started using Sermon Audio to livestream our service. I subscribed to their newsletters, which are written by Steven Lee, the founder.

Now let me introduce one other name...

Over the years I've listened to a few messages from Pastor Alan Cairns. He passed away last month. Steven Lee sent out a newsletter honoring Pastor Alan. I was surprised to learn that Pastor Alan was Steven Lee's pastor. Listen to Steven recount a time he desired something but learned that it wasn't God's will...

"Most people don't know this about me, but although I was studying Computer Science at Bob Jones University, I had a strong desire to go into ministry. I spoke with Pastor Alan about this matter and to my surprise he, in essence, told me 'no' as he said he detected other gifts in me. It was a humbling rejection but in retrospect, over 20 years later, I can now see the providence of God in that day.

Even though my path to full-time ministry was blocked, my love of preaching and my desire to be engaged in Kingdom work never diminished. I remember watching [Pastor Alan] tirelessly pour his heart and soul into sermons to a congregation of only a handful of people. 'What a shame that more people weren't able to hear this,' I thought. I remember looking at a wall of cassette tapes in the back room collecting dust and thinking, 'These could still be a blessing to so many people.' There needs to be a platform where small but faithful churches could upload their sermons and reach thousands. If it were not for [Pastor Alan's] courage and honesty with me, Sermon Audio may never have been born.'"

Steven desired to preach, but that was not God's will. God brought great glory to Himself by having Stephen establish Sermon Audio.

Sometimes we can look back and see God's fingerprints on situations and be thankful that he didn't answer the way we prayed. In other words, we can be thankful that we didn't get what we wanted.

Then we can even pray, "God I'm so glad you're in charge. What you decided is so much better than the way I would have had things go."

Other times it seems like God says no, but he was really just saying not yet. In my life, this occurred:

- When I wanted to get married
- When I wanted to become a pastor

It seemed like he was saying no, but it was just not yet.

The difficulty with not yet is it looks like no one until it happens

But for wise people, regardless of whether it's no or not yet, they continue to trust God and walk by faith.

The next part of lesson one...

God might say no because (lesson 3) sin has consequences.

Go ahead and turn to **Deuteronomy 3**.

Let me give you the background to these verses...

Moses led the nation of Israel out of Egypt. They wanted water, and famously God had Moses strike the rock to bring water out of it for the people.

This generation rebelled, they were not able to enter the Promised Land, they had to wander for 40 years until they died.

Then Moses was going to bring their children into the Promised Land. But the children were a lot like their parents, and they cried out for water as well. Instead of striking the rock, God told Moses to speak to the rock. In a moment of very uncharacteristic anger, Moses rebuked the people and struck the rock anyway.

As a consequence, God told Moses that he would not be able to lead the people into the Promised Land. Moses still greatly wanted to enter the Promised Land, so look at **verse 23**...

Deuteronomy 3:23 "And I pleaded with the Lord at that time, saying, **24** 'O Lord God, you have only begun to show your servant your greatness and your mighty hand. For what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as yours? **25** Please let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and Lebanon.'

Now I have 4 thoughts:

1. First, Moses has sacrificed a lot to lead these people these 40 years. It wouldn't be too much to say that much of the time it was a nightmare. There was at least one occasion when Moses was so miserable he wanted to die. So if it was up to me, I think he sacrificed so much he should be able to go.
2. Second, from my perspective Moses's sin wasn't that bad. He struck a rock when he was supposed to speak to it. It's not like he murdered someone...like he did 40 years earlier in Egypt. So let the guy go. It doesn't seem like it was that big of a deal.
3. Third, we are talking about Moses. He is one the greatest intercessors in the Old Testament. If anyone's prayers are going to be answered it's going to be his.
4. Fourth, he's the friend of God. **Exodus 33:11 The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.** This is how God spoke to Moses. Of course he's going to get what he wants.

But I'm not God, so look at Moses recount God's response...

Deuteronomy 3:26 But the Lord was angry with me because of you and would not listen to me. And the Lord said to me, 'Enough from you; do not speak to me of this matter again. 27 Go up to the top of Pisgah and lift up your eyes westward and northward and southward and eastward, and look at it with your eyes, for you shall not go over this Jordan. 28 But charge Joshua, and encourage and strengthen him, for he shall go over at the head of this people, and he shall put them in possession of the land that you shall see.'

God told Moses to climb to the top of the mountain look over the Jordan and that would be as close as he would get on this side of heaven. God's plan was for Joshua to bring in the people.

God was angry at him for asking. He said, "Don't even talk to me about this matter again."

God sounded like an angry parent who says, "Quit asking me! Don't bring it up again."

Let me share one more example with you...

David murdered Uriah and committed adultery with his wife Bathsheba. She was with child, and God told him that his punishment would be that the child would die.

I have some thoughts about this situation too, and why I would expect God to answer David's prayer:

1. First, God already told David through the prophet Nathan that his sin was forgiven. So David is forgiven and that would make me think the child would live.
2. Second, the child didn't sin. Why should the child die for David's sin?
3. Third, this is David, the Man after God's own heart. God loved him tremendously. If anyone's prayers are going to be answered it is his!

But I think you know what happened...

2 Samuel 12:16 David therefore sought God on behalf of the child. And David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground...18 On the seventh day the child died. And the servants of

David were afraid to tell him that the child was dead, for they said, “Behold, while the child was yet alive, we spoke to him, and he did not listen to us. How then can we say to him the child is dead? He may do himself some harm.”

Let me be clear about why these examples are so important...

Moses and David were:

- loved by God
- they were forgiven for their sins
- they were wonderful spiritual men
- they served the Lord faithfully for decades
- they were tremendous heroes of the faith
- they were two of the greatest men in the Old Testament...along with Abraham they're part of the big three

But even their sins had consequences.

And it's the same for us:

- We can be loved by God
- We can be forgiven
- We can be spiritual people
- We can serve the Lord faithfully

But our sins have consequences, and one of those consequences might be unanswered prayers.

It's not that we're bad Christians, or unforgiven. It's that God disciplines those He loves, and one form of that discipline can be unanswered prayers.

The next lesson...

God might say no because (lesson 4) of the other person.

Go ahead and turn to **Jeremiah 7**. Second major prophet: Isaiah, Jeremiah.

Here's the context. Jeremiah was the prophet to the Jews right up until they went into exile in Babylon. He repeatedly warned the people that they needed to repent, but they didn't listen.

The prophet Jeremiah repeatedly interceded for them, but look at **verse 15** to see what God said about the Jews...

Jeremiah 7:15 And I will cast you out of my sight, as I cast out all your kinsmen, all the offspring of Ephraim.

Ephraim is another name for the northern kingdom of Israel who had been conquered by the Assyrians. So God says he's going to cast the southern kingdom of Judah, or the Jews, out of the Promised Land just like he did with the northern kingdom of Israel.

Now God has some interesting words for Jeremiah...

Jeremiah 7:16 “As for you, do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer for them, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you.

God told Jeremiah that He would not hear his prayers for these people.

So you say, ”Why wouldn't God listen to him?

- Was Jeremiah not prayerful enough?
- Was he not godly enough?
- Did he not have enough faith?

Not at all. Look at the next verse to see why God said he would not answer Jeremiah's prayer for the people...

Jeremiah 7:17 Do you not see what **THEY ARE DOING** in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem?

In other words, “I am not going to answer your prayers because of them...not you.”

It had nothing to do with Jeremiah:

- He was a great man
- He was prayerful enough
- He was godly enough
- He had enough faith

But the people's actions were at fault.

Turn to **Jeremiah 15**. Look at verse one...

Jeremiah 15:1 Then the Lord said to me, “Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn toward this people. Send them out of my sight, and let them go!

Now it's getting even worse!

God said if Moses and Samuel, two of the greatest intercessors in the Old Testament, both stood before God He would not even answer their prayers for the Jews. God would still cast them out of his sight into Babylon.

Let me show you one more place. Turn to the right to **Ezekiel 14**. Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel.

Look at **verse 13**...

Ezekiel 14:13 “Son of man, when a land sins against me by acting faithlessly, and I stretch out my hand against it and break its supply of bread and send famine upon it, and cut off from it man and beast, 14 even if these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they would deliver but their own lives by their righteousness, declares the Lord God.

Nobody is perfect, but these three men are about as close as you can get on the side of heaven.

Ezekiel 14:15 “If I cause wild beasts to pass through the land, and they ravage it, and it be made desolate, so that no one may pass through because of the beasts, 16 even if these three men were in it, as I live, declares the Lord God, THEY WOULD DELIVER NEITHER SONS NOR DAUGHTERS. They alone would be delivered, but the land would be desolate.

When God says these three men would not deliver, what does he mean?

He means if these three were part of the nation at the time they would not be able to deliver the Jews from exile.

These accounts with the Jews show us God can say no and it has nothing to do with the people praying, and everything to do with the people being prayed for.

So here's the application for us...

Sometimes when we are praying for others:

- It could be their repentance
- It could be their salvation
- It could be their humility
- It could be for them to do something we think they should do
- It could be for them to stop doing something we think they should stop doing

But our prayers are not answered.

Then we might feel like it's our fault:

- If we only prayed a little more
- If we only had a little more faith
- If we were only a little more mature

Then God would say yes.

But these accounts show us you could have:

- Jeremiah
- Moses
- Samuel
- Noah
- Daniel

- Job

And even these great men would not be enough to deliver some people.

I'm sure we have all prayed people before. It can be one of the most discouraging things when those prayers are not answered.

Remember this lesson:

- It's not necessarily our fault.
- We don't need to feel bad.

It might not have anything to do with us. It might have everything to do with the people themselves.

Let me conclude with this...

Hearing no from God can be quite a trial. I understand.

But God knows best. His ways are right. He is all knowing and if the answer is no it's because that's the perfect answer. He understands time and purpose better than we can imagine.

Wisdom means trusting God and walking by faith including when we hear now. Let's pray.