

## **When No Is Really Yes**

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God's house of prayer, says Dr. Arthur T. Pierson, is several stories high and God wants you to explore the entire place. It is sad, therefore, if you limit your visits to the ground floor because it is accessible and a bit more familiar. Some of God's rarest treasures are tucked away in the attic. You will find a more intimate relationship with him as you mount the stairs of faith and explore all four levels in God's house of prayer.

### **Four Levels in God's House of Prayer**

*The first floor* is at ground level where answers are obvious and immediate. Here is the place to begin. On this plane you are conditioned by experience to attempt the tougher climb to finer things.

It doesn't take much faith to do some things. To push a switch on the wall, for instance, and receive the light this simple act makes possible. You have been conditioned by experience to expect light as a result of completing an electrical circuit. You are disappointed if, on rare occasions, it does not come.

Faith is involved here - faith in something outside of, beyond, and above yourself - but it is a rather elementary faith. Nevertheless, having experienced the dependability of electricity's response to your simple gestures of faith, you are encouraged to mount the stairs of learning to more sophisticated electronic concepts.

Similarly you need to begin your exploration of God's house of prayer on the lowest level. Here the results are easy to recognize, like light in response to the flicking of a switch. Through answers which are obvious and immediate, your faith is strengthened. The dependability of God's love is assured. Your spirit is conditioned. You are made ready for the more trying tests to come.

When you reach *the second floor* in God's house of prayer, you discover some answers are not so easily recognized. Often they are delayed or disguised. A case in point is that of the apostle Paul, who prayed he might go to Rome. When, after long delay, the answer came, it was hardly in the form he had expected.

Instead of arriving as a sturdy herald of the triumphant Christ, he was carried in, a victim of shipwreck, barely clinging to a thread of life. His prayer had been answered, but in a way that was delayed and disguised. Only a mature faith, conditioned by long experience, could see the Father's hand, as Paul did.

A still higher plane is *the third floor* in God's house of prayer where petitions are apparently denied. On the surface the answer is "no." But hindsight reveals the apparent "no" was actually "yes." More about this in a moment.

*The fourth floor* is where prayer appears to be entirely unheeded by God. I will deal at length with this in the concluding chapter of this book. But, for the moment, consider: if, on the ground floor, you have experienced obvious and immediate answers to prayer, and if, on that lowest level, you have been repeatedly reminded of the faithfulness of God - that he does indeed work all things together for good - cannot the disappointment of apparently unanswered prayer be left with him?

God's time and your time are not the same. He doesn't die as you do. He has all eternity in which to work out his plan. So, in spite of de facto "proof" to the contrary, you must believe God's way is best. The day will dawn when faith gives way to insight and you know in full that which, at the moment, you know only in part. We all look forward to that day.

Having said this much about the highest of prayer planes, I would invite you to return to the third floor where your literal requests are denied, while your genuine desires are fulfilled. It is here that "no" is really "yes."

**Ailment Ten: Misreading God's Kindness**

Often God follows this bewildering course out of kindness. He wants to give you more than you asked for. And, as Paul so aptly put it: "God is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think" (Eph.3:20).

Dr. Kenneth N. Taylor is well-known for his paraphrase of *The Living Bible*. Growing out of Dr. Taylor's desire to make the Bible understandable to his ten young children, *The Living Bible* has helped countless people around the world to grasp the vitality and power of God's Word.

Those who are privileged to personally meet this warm, humble man soon discover that Dr. Taylor has great difficulty in speaking. His manner of speech is halting. His voice very hoarse. He sounds much like a man with a severe case of laryngitis. However, his problem is not a temporary one.

During a whirlwind speaking tour for the Moody Literature Mission in 1962, Dr. Taylor caught a lingering cold. Later in the tour while giving a luncheon talk in Portugal, his voice suddenly gave way. At first, it seemed certain Dr. Taylor's problem was nothing more than laryngitis brought on by his cold and the strain of the trip. But months passed and there was no improvement. Doctors were unable to diagnose the difficulty or prescribe effective treatment.

In the ensuing years, Dr. Taylor and his family have prayed repeatedly for a cure, but his condition has not improved.

"My problem is annoying and embarrassing," Dr. Taylor says. "But it has forced me to concentrate on writing and on the publishing company. Without it, I might have been drawn into an extensive number of speaking engagements which would have taken my time and energy away from these other things. God has richly blessed our work here and I am grateful. I still hope to be healed, but if God chooses to leave me as I am, I am content." Instead of spreading the gospel directly through speaking and preaching, Ken Taylor has reached millions with God's truth through *The Living Bible* and other Christian books published by Tyndale House, the publishing company he founded.

The substance of Dr. Taylor's prayer (that he be healed from his vocal difficulties) was denied. But his deeper desire (that he be able to communicate God's truth to others) has been fulfilled. He was given more than he asked for. The “no” was really “yes”!

### **Ailment Eleven: Misunderstanding God's Way**

A second reason God takes you to the third level of prayer is to teach you the wisdom of his ways: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isa. 55:8, 9).

The prayers of Monica, the mother of Augustine, for her son are an example. During his formative years Augustine showed little of the saintliness for which he later became famous. In fact, during his youth he was a pleasure-mad cynic. Again and again his devoted mother prayed for his conversion. And, when he announced one day he was going to Rome, a center of sensual living, Monica fervently pleaded with God that he be kept at home. “If I can't handle him here, Lord,” she reasoned, “how can I possibly protect him in that wicked place so far away?”

But, in spite of all her praying, Augustine went to Rome. There, in the course of events, he came under the influence of Ambrose, the great Bishop of Milan, and was converted. Was Monica's prayer answered? Of course! But not in the way she had expected. Her desire that he stay at home was denied. But the desire behind her desire (that is, her basic wish that her boy might become a child of God) was granted. The heavenly Father had led her to the third level in his house of prayer so that she might see the ultimate wisdom of his way in working all things together for good.

### **Ailment Twelve: Miscalculating God's Purpose**

Still a third reason God responds in this strange manner is that some larger purpose might be served.

Let me call your attention to the witness of Adoniram Judson, the great Baptist missionary:

“I never prayed sincerely and earnestly for anything but that at sometime - no matter how distant a date - in some shape, probably the last I should have devised, it came.”

But look at his life:

He asked that he might go to India. He was compelled to go to Burma. He prayed that his beloved wife might be healed. She died and was buried beside their two children for whom he also had prayed. He pleaded with God that he might be released from prison. He lay there for months in chains. How could Adoniram Judson possibly say that his prayers had always been answered?

Think again of the prayer behind the prayer. For Judson it was that his life and work as a missionary might have a maximum of meaning to the lives of other men. So when the door to India was closed, God led him to Burma where he ultimately found fields more white unto harvest than would have been true in the land of his first choosing.

When his beloved wife was taken from him, he learned dimensions of human need that enabled him to empathize with the needs of others in a fashion that formerly had been impossible. There has rarely been a great man who has not known a great sorrow. In drinking deeply from the cup of grief, Adoniram Judson was molded by God into a man who could really minister to the heartaches and heartbreaks of people.

When he was kept in prison despite his plea for release, he learned what it meant to be captive. Thus Christ's description of himself as one who had come to “set the captives free” took on new significance for Judson. Later, when Judson saw men enslaved by the chains of sin and self, he was able to proclaim the message of freedom in Christ with a conviction that previously had not been present in his preaching. He was not talking theory now, nor was he parroting pleasant platitudes. He was talking with the fervor of one who had been in prison. One who knew what it is to be a captive in chains. One who could relate the experiences of that captivity to the bondage of those imprisoned by sin.

In each instance, though the letter of his prayer was denied, the spirit of his prayer was honored. The prayer behind his prayer was answered. Thus he could say near the close of his days: "I never prayed sincerely or earnestly for anything but that at sometime - in some shape - it came." He knew that "no" can really mean "yes" when God wants to serve some larger purpose than the person who prays could understand.

Or come a step closer to the inner circle of the saints. Ponder the story of Moses, who repeatedly prayed he might enter into the Promised Land, but whose petition was not granted. Here was a giant among men, a stalwart of the Lord, a leader of the people. Yet the one thing for which he repeatedly prayed was denied him. Why? Because this man who stood for God in the midst of the people had on one occasion been exceedingly ungodly.

In a moment of anger and impatience he struck a rock in disobedience to God. The false image of God which that act gave to an immature people had to be erased. Somehow they needed to know that this picture of God as one with flashing eyes and flailing fist was distorted. More important, they needed to learn that no man - even a leader - can sin and get away with it.

Moses had dishonored God. For the sake of the people, more than his own, he had to be punished. So, God, in effect, said to him: "Moses, you will not go into Canaan. You may lead the people up to the border. You may even see inside. But you cannot go in."

How Moses prayed for a reprieve! How he earnestly petitioned God for a reversal of this decision. Not once, but over and over he asked until God finally said: "Speak no more to me of this matter" (Deut. 3:26).

I believe that if only Moses had been involved, God would have granted his request. God loved him. But there were other people to be considered. They had to be taught the necessity of obedience, and in a way they would never forget. So his petition was denied in order that this larger purpose might be served.

Ever since then, Hebrew and Christian mothers have taken their children in their arms and have told their little ones, who always love a story, about Moses - a man of God, a leader of the people, a stalwart of the faith - who could not go into the Promised Land because he was disobedient. Through the telling of that tale, both young and old have had this great fact nailed down for them: *Disobedience can be forgiven, but the consequences must still be faced.*

If Moses could speak to us now, I believe he would say he is glad his prayer was denied. Deeper, wider, and higher than any concern for personal achievement was Moses' desire to lead the people into full possession of all God had promised them. This was the prayer behind his prayer. While his superficial desire was denied, his real request was answered. He was given a "no" which turned out to be "yes," and thus a larger purpose was served.

Or consider the experience of Paul. Three times Paul prayed that he might be relieved from a "thorn in the flesh." So far as we know, he never was. He carried this malady (eye trouble, epilepsy, allergy, recurrent attacks of malaria?) with him to the grave.

But did Paul pray in vain? Not at all. Though God denied the petition, he answered the man. He said to Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Cor. 12:9).

Through this grace of God, Paul learned to triumph in suffering. He entered into a relationship with the Father such as few men have shared. With the pain came the presence of Jesus and the persuasion that: "The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18).

For Paul that gift was quite enough. Although his petition (that he might be relieved from the thorn in the flesh) was denied, the petition behind his petition, the longing behind his longing, the desire behind his desire (to know Jesus and the power of his resurrection) was granted. And Paul lived to speak lovingly of the day when "no" was really "yes."

One last scene completes the picture, and here we truly tread on holy ground. A figure kneels in the Garden of Gethsemane. Below him is the brook of Kidron. Behind him stands a grove of gnarled olive trees. Above him is a rotund moon whose brightness makes the shadowy rocks all the more foreboding. As he kneels there, this One who knew no sin struggles with the indescribable horror of taking on himself the sin of the world: "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." (Matthew 26:39).

There is desperate urgency in these words. "If there is any other way - if there is any other alternative, if there is any other means - whereby the salvation of the world can be secured, let this cup pass. Please!" But the cup did not pass.

Why not? So the prayer behind his prayer (that all might be saved) could be answered. Through a momentary denial of the letter of Jesus' prayer there came the eternal answer to the spirit of his prayer. The real purpose for which he had come was fulfilled. Thus, in the most wonderfully significant way ever known, God's "no" became "yes."

Do you see now the wonder and wisdom of the third floor in God's house of prayer? By a delayed or disguised answer he is able to serve some larger purpose or teach the wisdom of his way. Or perhaps even to provide you with more than you ask for. Do not try to limit God as to the method of his reply. Do not confine him to only one answer. Instead, seek to know and do his will more fully, persuaded that what he plans for you is better than anything you plan for yourself.

Perhaps this reasoning can help you to see more clearly the "yes" behind the "no" that sometimes greets your prayers for a Christian loved one who is close to death. If you have followed the biblical injunction, you have prayed for the healing light and love of Jesus to bring help and hope and wholeness.

But, having prayed the prayer of faith, you must not limit God to a temporary restoration of the flesh. Remember that from the Christian point of view, which measures things not by time but



by eternity, death may be the only true healing there is. Certainly it is the only complete healing, the ultimate instance in which “no” is really “yes.”

A mother who had prayed earnestly that her boy might return from the war unscathed found herself clutching a telegram which began with the harrowing words:

“We regret to inform you.”

For a while her faith was shattered.

But later God gave her grace to write these words:

We asked that he might live: Eternal Love  
From out the fullness of His boundless store  
Hath granted him to share the life above,  
Alive for evermore.

We asked for health: and faith can almost see  
His radiant face, his movements swift and strong:  
With every power quickened, joyously  
His soul is breathing song.

We prayed at last, that he again might come  
To see the home that he had held so dear:  
And peacefully he reached a fairer Home,  
And dearer - but not here.

O Wisdom infinite and Love supreme!  
This light on sorrow, care and doubt is thrown,  
Beyond our prayers, our hopes, our brightest dream,  
What God hath given His own.<sup>2</sup>

## **CORRECTIVES**

**For Ailment Ten - Misreading God's Kindness**

Before closing the ledger and marking a prayer “unanswered” check to see whether, in kindness, God has not given more than you bargained for. He often ignores what you say and responds to what you mean. Let him!

**For Ailment Eleven - Misunderstanding God's Way**

God's way is best. Despite seeming proof to the contrary, a search for the more enduring evidence demonstrates this principle to be true. The apparent denial is often God working in "mysterious ways his wonders to perform.”

**For Ailment Twelve - Miscalculating God's Purpose**

The letter and the spirit of your prayer are not always the same. Therefore, God's greater interest is in the prayer behind your prayer. The desire behind your desire. He wants to serve this larger purpose. So do not limit him as to the method of his reply. Do not confine him to only one all along.