WHEN GOD SAYS NO
Ps. Antony Njoroge – 14 September 2014
Unanswered!
Sermon Notes

WHEN GOD SAYS NO…..

Good morning to all of you thank you for taking time to come for today's service, I must admit that this sermon series has been one of the most challenging to prepare and preach, however it was encouraging to follow some of your responses on FB and twitter and the common feeling is that this is so real!....I would encourage you to keep it going because you just don’t know who will be encouraged with that tweet, our twitter handle is @mavunokampala, mine is @kigwin, the has tag is #WhenGod.

For those who weren’t here, we started this sermon series about the universal frustration that most of us have experienced at some time or the other. Whether you are a Christ follower or not; no matter how much faith you have or what your beliefs are - we have all gone through a season where our prayers were unanswered and God was ‘unavailable’ He just didn’t seem to pay attention to my needs or concerns.

And what sometimes makes it so challenging is when you are in those seasons where you are begging with God to intervene on your behalf - it could be for your family, health, or even marriage – and you’re not even asking for extravagant things – just the bare reasonable necessities of life! You’re saying God I am not asking for a brand new car, just transportation to get to work. God I am not asking to be rich! I just need a job to feed my family! I’m not asking for tall, dark and handsome, I just want a godly man! It just seems like, if God is there.... if God cared, he would surely answer my prayer. And sometimes it’s not just for a day or a week. For some of us it is an entire season when God just seemed unavailable. And some are right in the middle of that season today, where you’re you are saying if God is such a loving God, why would He refuse to answer requests that most fathers would answer for their child?

When we stay in such seasons for long, we begin to doubt the character and the existence of God – does God really love me? Was it something I did? Is God really good? Does God really exist in the first place? Because surely, if He exists and if He has the power and if He really loved me, then surely – HE WOULD DO SOMETHING!

Last week we began with the story of a man who loved God and who lived out God’s purpose, but at his deepest point of need, God seemed silent about His situation. And we learnt a tough lesson for such times, in the form of a question: will you trust God’s plan or will you make a God who fits your plans? Today we want to talk about someone who got a different response from God. The title of our message is ‘When God Says No’. Please turn to 2Corinthians 12:7-10. As you turn there, let me paint the context of our story...

Paul was a driven high achiever who was offended by Christianity. His life mission was to stamp it out once and for all. Driven by those convictions, he went from house to house dragging out both men and women to throw them into jail. But something dramatic happened one day that changed his life forever. He was on his way to a town called Damascus to arrest more followers of Jesus when to his shock, Jesus
appeared to him in the midst of very bright light and gave him a new mission. From that time on, his mission was to preach about Jesus to all the people of the world. God has a sense of humor doesn’t He? Many of us here were completely antagonistic about Christianity – we thought it was boring, irrelevant, maybe even dangerous – yet today, God is using us to speak about him to our workmates and family!

So Paul spends the next 20yrs of his adult life getting on ships and travelling into hostile environments to spread the good news about Jesus. He faced much opposition from hostile skeptics; he was shipwrecked, he almost drowned, he was beaten with stones, he was bitten by a snake, he was chased out of many towns, and yet despite all this, he just kept going on – faithfully serving God.

But even as he served God so faithfully, Paul had a major problem. It was a recurrent and agonizing problem, so unbearable that he called it ‘the thorn in my flesh’. If you’ve ever stepped on a thorn, you know how unbearable that is – you can’t walk normally, every step brings you pain and you just have to stop and dig it out! What this ‘thorn in the flesh’ was is a subject of much speculation. Some scholars think it was epilepsy or depression. Back then, people thought all seizures or mental illnesses were a form of demonic possession. Some think it was a physical illness, for example chronic bouts of malaria. Some think it had something to do with his weak eyesight.

All we know for sure is that it was some kind of painful problem that was a constant inconvenience and hindrance wherever he went. This ‘thorn’ was holding him back from the very work that God had called him to do. Maybe it stopped him from serving more effectively. Maybe it was even embarrassing as he prayed for others and they asked him, ‘but what about you Pastor Paul, if you say God is with you, how come He hasn’t cured you yet?’ It became such a big deal that Paul did exactly what you and I would do. He asked God to remove it. And I’m sure as he did so, he had no doubts that God was going to heal him. After all, he was Paul – the man who loved and served God, the man that God has used to bring healing to hundreds if not thousands.

And so imagine His shock when God’s answer was ‘NO!’ Say what? God was that you? I think I must be hearing voices in my head, I mean this is not an unreasonable request! If you heal me, I can be more effective in doing your work. NO! God I don’t think you understand just how hard it is to do what YOU have called me to do, with this thing in my life. It’s embarrassing and it makes me look weak. And by the way, it also makes You look bad!

But God’s answer was still NO. I know you, I called you, through you my message will be heard by many, your sayings will be quoted for thousands of years to come, over half the New Testament will be written by you, in fact you will be one of the most famous guys who ever lived, you will be so famous people will name their kids Paul (anybody named Paul in the house?) But NO - I am not removing that thorn.

What in the world could be going on? Let’s read the actual account to see if we can make sense of this...

READ 2Cor.12:7-10 (NIV)

7 To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given to me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me.
Paul was saying that this ‘thorn’ was so awful that it actually felt like it was from Satan. And perhaps it even was! It was so awful that it was a constant torment to him. So he goes to God and says, “all I am asking you to do, is what I have seen you do for other people. God I am asking you to heal me”.

*8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.*

Now this doesn’t mean he prayed on Friday evening, Saturday morning and Sunday afternoon. No - these are three seasons of prayer. They were probably when the situation flared up and things got really bad, and he thought I am never going to be able to go on. Maybe he fasted and prayed we don’t know. But it got so bad he didn’t just ask God he pleaded with God and how do we plead with God? God I will give more, I will serve in church till I die, I will never pick up another drink, I will give you my first whole salary to church, I will never cheat on my taxes, I’ll never jump traffic lights again!

We all like to sing that song, ‘When Jesus say Yes, nobody can say no!’ But have you thought about the reverse situation? When Jesus says NO, nobody can say yes! Who wants to sing about that in church! Those situations when heaven slams the door in your face. When God refuses to do something reasonable and yet you know He has the power to just say the word and it will be done! What would a loving God do that? Why would He flatly refuse to honor such a reasonable request? Here’s what Paul went on to hear...

Verse 9... *But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you.”*

God says to Paul, “I am not going give you what you are asking for, when you think you need it, because my grace is all you need right now. You’re just going to have to learn to deal with this issue, because all I’m willing to give your right now is My grace”

If you’ve ever been in a situation like that, you’re probably asking, ‘What does that even mean? What is this ‘grace’? How does that become a substitute to what it’s obvious I really need?’

*Grace here simply means the divine resources needed to bear the weight of your situation. It is the ability to get up and get through another day. The ability to go to work and endure it one more time. The ability to come home to the unknown one more afternoon. Grace is the ability and the energy and the faith to keep going in spite of the fact that nothing around you had changed.*

Many of us like Paul have begged God at one time or the other. God I don’t think you understand how the fighting in my family is killing me softly, how this recurring sickness is affecting my progress, how our marriage problems are messing our children, how lack of an education is holding me back, how the inability to have children has taken a toll on my marriage... Lord I am not asking for something unreasonable and if you really loved me, You would do something about this!

See, none of us like to take NO for an answer. It makes it worse when it comes from God. But here’s what is amazing about this passage. God’s NO comes with a promise.

*For my power is made perfect in weakness.*

God’s power is best experienced by us and seen by others in our weakness. This sounds sweet but it is neither easy nor natural. Here is what’s natural. We want to be the gal on TV holding that super large 200M UGX cheque we won in a raffle and saying ‘thank you Jesus’! We want be the student with the highest grades carried shoulder high by our peers, giving glory to God. We want to be Lupita holding...
that Oscar and say, “I wanna let everyone know that their dreams are valid. And of course thanking God for it. Everybody is there, cheering you on as you win. Yes, We all want God to get the glory from our lives, but we want it to be on the platform of our strengths and not our weakness.

That’s why we wait for when we can give our victory testimonies - how God blessed me with a fantastic job with a great salary and benefits, how God healed me miraculously when everyone else had given up hope, how we got triplets after the doctors said they’d never have children… these are the stories we can’t wait to give! But the stories that move you - the people that move me - those whose stories jack up my faith to a whole new level - are the people in whom God has chosen to showcase His power, not just in their talents or opportunities or successes, but in their weakness. Those where things haven’t worked and you think maybe you should encourage them but you spend some time with them and they leave you feeling encouraged. These are the people who make you scratch your head and you think there has to be a God -there is no other explanation for that. How are they taking their situation with such grace? It can only be God who takes them through that. To be honest, those are some of the most impressive Christians you’ll ever meet in your life. Because you see, God’s power is shown best in our weakness.

It’s when the room is darkest that I can see the light of a candle most clearly. It’s when I reach the end of myself, that I can experience God’s power in my life most tangibly. It’s when all my human talents and wisdom and strategies have failed and I have no human reason for joy and hope, but somehow I’m still encouraged and trusting, that it doesn’t make sense, unless God Himself was in it! When God says NO, it has nothing to do with His not loving me enough. Maybe He just wants me to experience His supernatural strength in ways I never could have when everything was holding together. And that is why Paul continues to say in v.10,

*That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

As Christians, we’ve often been taught that if we have enough faith, then our life should look a certain way. Because of course when I look good then God will end up looking good! So we learn to even package our problems to make us look good! We smile because we dare not show people in our Life Group how badly our marriage doing. We hide our weaknesses and imperfections. We fear sharing our failures, the ugly parts, the skeletons in our closet. It’s sort of like the Hollywood version of Christianity. BUT God is saying that thing that you are hiding is what I can use to bring me most glory. That pain, that failure, that imperfection, that loss – the solution might not be to take it away but to turn it into something beautiful that demonstrates the supernatural power of God.

When Paul finally got this, he didn’t just take NO for an answer, but he actually began to celebrate the fact that even when things didn’t work out, God could turn his weakness into something beautiful to demonstrate His supernatural power. He embraced his weaknesses as an opportunity to experience God’s strength. “I don’t have to pretend I have my act together. I can be real about my issues”. As we say at Mavuno, we’re called to be ‘real people, with real issues, before a real God’.

There are plenty of instances when God will leverage on your success, talents, victories and allow you to experience great victories. However you need to know that there are also times when He will say “NO” ... I am not going to leverage your success. And I am not going to leverage on the skill I have given you. I am going to leverage on your weakness. I am going to leverage on your inability. I am going to leverage
on your lack of opportunity. I am going to leverage on your failure. I am going to get glory from you. But I am going to do it on the stage of your weakness, and not your strength.

And here's the thing to note - you will never experience God's perfect power until when you learn to accept His NO and celebrate His strength in your weakness. God's perfect power always begins with 'not my will but your will be done'. God's perfect power is always experienced in the gap between what I want and what God has chosen for me. I once listened to an amazing woman named Joni who is one of the most powerful speakers I've ever heard. And yet her greatest power came from her greatest weakness. Here is some of her story… JONI VIDEO...

Let me end with a little story. A water bearer in India had two large pots, each hanging on one end of a pole, which he carried across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, and while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream to the master's house, the cracked pot arrived only half full. For a full two years this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots full of water in his master's house. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its imperfection, and miserable that it was not living out its potential.

After two years of shame and bitterness, it finally spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream. “Why haven’t you bothered to fix me?” “What’s the problem?” asked the bearer. “For the past two years, I’ve only been able to deliver half my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your master's house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work, and you don't get full value from your efforts,” the pot said.

The water bearer felt sorry for the cracked pot, and told him, “I’ve always known about your crack. But let me ask you a question, have you ever noticed the beautiful flowers on the side of the trail?” The pot said, “yes, you often stop to pick some on the way home. But what does that have to do with anything?”

The bearer replied, “What you might not have noticed is that the flowers are only on one side of the path - yours. You see, I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you've watered them. If not for what you refer to as ‘your flaws’, I would never have had all these beautiful flowers to decorate my master’s house!”

Every one of us here this morning has had our own fractures, our flaws, our weaknesses. Sometimes we may have wondered why God doesn’t just fix us – and take those flaws away. And He may one day. But if we will surrender them to Him, the Lord will use even our flaws to grace His Father’s table.

I’d like us to end with prayer. This message gives us permission to ask God to remove our thorn. We’ll be doing that the last weekend when we have our worship/healing service. But today, I would to encourage someone who needs to pray a prayer of surrender...

PRAYER

I have pain/skeleton/something I’ve been holding on to/desperately hiding – use it for your glory Lord. Should you choose to take it away, I will rejoice. But should you choose to leave it there – I will rejoice because in my weakness, You are strong.