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**April 12, 2015**

**When God Says "No"**

**Selected Scriptures**

Well, if you are part of Grace Fellowship, if you are part of this church, you know what the sting of "no" feels like. I mean, all of us as a church have been praying mightily for Hadassah Bontrager to experience this miraculous healing from her leukemia, and early Monday morning, God formally said, "No." And the pain of that "no" has been felt throughout this entire body and especially obviously with the Bontragers. *1 Corinthians 12:26* says: *If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now, you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.* If you knew the Bontragers in even a distant sort of way, then perhaps the "no" was something that you just kind of noted and maybe moved on. And I know that I get lots of prayer requests from people that I don't know and sometimes their distant circumstance is as dire as Hadassah's was and because I don't know them, I just kind of acknowledge the "no," and I -- and I move on. And the closer that you get to the circle of people who knew Ken and Deborah, the more that "no" takes on a life of its own. The deeper the sting becomes until you get to the family who knows exactly

what that sting feels like. Jan and I met with Ken and Deborah on Monday morning, and we can tell you exactly what they are doing with that sting. They are rejoicing in their sorrow. And again, let me had been very, very careful here. It's very easy to sound flippant and cavalier when talking about some of the deepest pain anybody is ever going to feel, and they are feeling that pain. So how can I say that they're also rejoicing? Well, it's not me who is saying this, actually it is God, and he says it in multiple places. In *1 Peter 1:6* he says this, he says: *In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials. James 1:2* says: *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.*

See, both Peter and James are speaking about combining two things that we seldom think of as belonging together, and that is sorrow, great sorrow, and joy. Peter says rejoice even though you've been grieved by various trials. James says count it all joy when we encounter various trials. And so we ask how do you do that? Well, first we have to go back and re-examine what God means by the use of the term "joy" or "rejoice" in the midst of deep sorrows and trials. You know, a few months back we did a study on the fruits of the Spirit, and in that study, we examined just what God meant by the term "joy." And I said then that joy is probably better defined by first stating what joy is not. And joy is not

happiness. Happiness is a feeling of elation that is tied directly in to circumstance. You might say that happiness is directly related to what is happening. I'm happy if I get a raise at work; I'm happy if my family is healthy and everybody's doing well. I'm not happy if I find out that I'm sick or if a loved one is in some kind of a crisis. It's been said that circumstance is what creates happiness. Attitude is what creates joy. And God's joy is a unique form of attitude. God's joy is a vessel that floats above circumstance. While circumstance can certainly drown happiness, it cannot sink a joy that is riding above it. That's why the Bible frequently commands us to rejoice regardless the circumstance. *1 Thessalonians 5:16: Rejoice always.* And again *James 1:2: Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.* You see, on the surface, that scripture, it really seems to make no sense at all. I, for one, count it joy when I'm able to avoid trials of any kind. I mean, actually it would be probably more accurate to say I'm happy when I avoid those trials. To say that I am joyful when I can't avoid them requires a bit more understanding of what the word "joy" actually means. You see, joy and happiness march side by side during the good times, but when things start to go south, happiness falls down but joy keeps marching.

So how can I say I'm joyful when I'm surrounded by bad things? I mean, am I supposed to be joyful when I'm sitting in a broken down

car, looking at a pink slip, trying to figure out if my persistent cough isn't the sign of something more sinister? I mean, I am I really, really supposed to be joyful at that? Well, God says unequivocally, yes, and he even backs it up with some concrete examples. We look in scripture and we find the story of the Jews in the book of Hebrews and we see this group of people who are rejected by their fellow Jews, persecuted by the Roman government, mistreated by the Christian community and generally mistreated by everyone else. And yet God makes it clear. They had joy. *Hebrews 10:32* says: *Remember the earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to taunts and afflictions, and at other times you were companions of those who were treated that way. For you sympathized with the prisoners and accepted with joy the confiscation of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves have a better and enduring possession.*

Just picture the scene. You come home from work one day and you find that the locks have been all changed on your property and you're barred from entering your own home, and there's an official notice from the government on your door that because of your faith, you have now forfeited all of your property. That may not be happening yet, but all around the world that is a common experience for those who claim Christ as Savior. Now, could you accept with

joy the confiscation of your possessions? I guess you could say it all depends on your definition of the word "joy." You see, the world does not know how to separate the idea of joy from the idea of happiness. And the dictionary defines "joy" this way, it says: "The emotion of great delight or happiness caused by something exceptionally good or satisfying." Well, since losing your possessions could never qualify as something exceptionally good or satisfying, the world sees no way whatsoever to find joy in those circumstances; but God sees it very differently. And so it becomes very critical to understand not only where joy is found, because it's found in our hearts, but to understand what joy really is. My working definition has been this: Joy is a settled state of contentment based on the knowledge that God is good and that he is in control. And I recently came across what I thought was an even better definition, this is Kay Warren, she says this, she says: "Joy is the settled assurance that God is in control of all the details of my life, the quiet confidence that ultimately everything is going to be all right, and the determined choice to praise God in every situation." She lays out three different words that are critical to understanding what joy is: control, confidence, and choice. And she says you experience the fruit of the Spirit known as joy when you fully realize that God is in complete control, when you're fully confident that God is good all of the time, not just in the good times, and when you make a conscious choice to praise

him regardless the situation. And so we say, okay, how do you get this joy? Well, we get it like we get all of the fruits; we get it by abiding in Christ. So abide in Christ and enjoy your joy. That sounds like religious mumbo jumbo. I don't blame you for thinking that that doesn't make any sense. Let me put it to you this way. You see, abiding in Christ really means growing to know Christ in ways that only he can be known. Did you ever meet somebody only to find out that the more that you got to know him or her, the more your first impression turned out to be way, way off, either for the better or for the worse? And as you got to know them, you realize that they're not at all the way you thought they were originally. You know, God says the very same thing about his connection to us. You see, we all tend to form our impressions of God based on the number of things, not the least of which is our relationship with our fathers. And each of us have a tendency to create God in our own image. God tends to become an amplified version of ourselves. In fact, in *Psalm 50*, God says this, God says: *You have done these things, and I kept silent; you thought I was just like you.* Well, if we search the scripture, we quickly discover that Jesus is not just like us. In fact, we discover that in some ways he is altogether different. Sooner or later we become disappointed in that difference. God just doesn't think like we think. I mean, and we think how could it be that the Lord of the universe, the one who came to earth in the form of a man and lived a perfect life and

then he died for me, how could it be that he would -- and then you fill in the blank, whatever it is that you're disappointed with God about.

And one disappointment that we all almost all universally share is this idea of God's apparent silence. I mean, how often did you just wish that God would say it, just say "no," rather than often seeming to simply imply silence. We so desperately wish if not for the answer we sought then at least for some kind of explanation for why God appears to be so willing to disappoint us. I used to say all the time, if God would just drop a note from the sky, I think I'd be able to handle anything. But, you know, God insists that he already did more than that. In fact, God does not explain himself today with notes or with words or even with deeds. Instead God insists that he explains himself today with a person. *Hebrews 1:1* says this, it says: *Long ago God spoke to the fathers by the prophets at different times and in different ways. In these last days, He has spoken to us by His Son.* See, God says from Eden on I've spoken to you many, many different ways, but my final word to you is "Jesus." And God doesn't give us an explanation; he is the explanation. And God's answer to all of the disappointments that we face is his son and his son's answer to all those disappointments is the cross. *Romans 8:32* says: *He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also*

*with him graciously give us all things?* Do you see what God is doing here? You see, God is arguing from the greater to the lesser. What he's saying is, look, if I gave you a house, don't you think I'd give you the keys? If I gave you a car, do you think I'd not put gas in the gas tank? And what he's telling us, he says, look, I gave you my son. Is that not enough? Does that not prove to you that I have your best interest in mind? That's what the cross says to us. And when life is painful, we have to learn to take that pain to the cross. And when life doesn't make any sense at all, we have to take that to the cross as well. And when God says, "no," well then especially then we have to take that to the cross. Okay. So how do we do that? Well, practically speaking, we take what we already know about the God that we serve and we apply that knowledge to those areas where our circumstance would challenge his goodness, his faithfulness, or his love for us. It's about giving God the benefit of the doubt when there seems to be too much doubt to warrant that.

Tim Keller in his latest book *Walking With God Through Pain and Suffering* compares two events that both occurred in this little teeny town of Dothan. Dothan was this tiny little backwater town that Joseph found himself in when he first went to look for his brothers. That's the part that started the process of Joseph being sold into slavery that ended up with him being second in command of



all of Egypt. And again, we all know the story. In fact, I spoke about it just last week. Just to recap, Joseph gets kidnapped and sold into slavery by his brothers, he then gets arrested and he winds up in prison where he meets the wine taster of the head of all of Egypt. And through a series of divine events, Joseph predicts this enormous famine and he provides a means of providing for it and so he winds up being second in command to the Pharaoh. Meanwhile, famine is stalking all of the other countries except Egypt and it's so because of Joseph's brilliant planning and his brothers now years removed from having sold him into slavery and no longer recognize him, come to him seeking to buy food. Well, Joseph eventually reveals himself to his brothers, and of course they are terrified that he's going to exact his revenge. And Joseph sums up all of what took place that brought him from slavery to second in command of all of Egypt by saying to his brothers in the classic scripture of *Genesis 50:20*, he says: *As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.* And I pointed this out last week, I mean, Joseph knew exactly what his brothers intended: They intended harm. But he also knew that God had the power to superintend that harm for good. And Joseph was given the privilege of actually being able to see God's plan unfold. Took him almost 20 years. Tim Keller points out that over an almost 20-year period, Joseph prayed again and again and again to God. And again and again and again, God's answer to Joseph was "no."

But it was not just "no," it was a "no" that was wrapped in silence. I mean, we learn only afterward that God's "no" was the most faithful, loving, and kind response Joseph could have ever received. Keller puts it this way, he says: "It is perhaps most striking of all to realize that if God had given Joseph the things he was likely asking for in prayer, it would have been terrible for him. And we must realize that it was likely that God essentially said "no" relentlessly, over and over, to nearly all Joseph's specific requests for a period of about 20 years. Most people I know would have given up and said, 'If God is going to shut the door in my face every time I pray, year in and year out, then I give up.' But if Joseph had given up, everything would have been lost." Keller then compares the events that started in the town of Dothan with another event that took place in the very same town, although by now this town has become a large city. It involves the prophet Elisha, and he's lodging in the city of Dothan when the king of Samaria, along with his entire army, comes to capture him. And the scripture describes what happens when his servant wakes up to see the city is now surrounded by a hostile army. This is 2 Kings 6, it says: *When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. And the servant said, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" He said, "Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." Then Elisha prayed*

*and said, "O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see." So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. And when the Syrians came down against him, Elisha prayed to the LORD and said, "Please strike this people with blindness." So he struck them with blindness in accordance with the prayer of Elisha.*

Well, here we have the exact same city but a vastly different response from God. You know, Joseph from the time he was thrown into that cistern by his brothers gets 20 straight years of resounding "no's" from God. And Elisha in the very same city gets almost an instant answer to his prayer with the hills lighting up with the chariots of fire of God's angels. And then afterwards he gets an almost instantaneous follow-up answer to prayer in the blinding of the Syrian army. Joseph gets 20 years of "no's," and Elisha's servant gets an almost instantaneous "yes." So we say why so? Well, the answer is obvious when you go through all the permutations that it took to bring Joseph to second in command of all of Egypt. You work that out and you find out if he hadn't been sold into slavery, he wouldn't have become Potiphar's slave, and if he wasn't Potiphar's slave, he wouldn't have been accused of rape. If he hadn't have been jailed for that accusation, he never would have met up with Pharaoh's wine taster and his ability to interpret dreams would never have been known. And so you walk your way all

those different permutations through the whole process, there's a dozen or more of those still to come and you finally arrive at Joseph at second in command in all of Egypt and you quickly realize he got there by a series of "no's." And if any of those "no's" had been changed to a "yes," it would have altered God's plan, caused the destruction of many, including Joseph's family. So God's repeatedly said "no" to Joseph and "yes" to Elisha, because both of those answers were precisely what they needed for their good and God's glory. Keller says this, he says: "God was just as present and active in the slow answers to Joseph as in the swift answer to Elisha. He was as lovingly involved in the silence of that cistern as he was in the noisy spectacular answer to Elisha's prayer. And indeed, it could be argued that Joseph's salvation, while less supernatural and dramatic, was greater in depth and breadth and effect. The Joseph story tells us that very often God does not give us exactly what we ask for. Instead he gives us what we would have asked for if we had known everything he knows." That last sentence is critical. "He gives us what we would have asked for if we had known everything he knows." You know, God asks -- Paul asked God three separate times for healing, and three times God said "no." *2 Corinthians 12*, it says: *So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the*

*Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. You know, Ken and Deborah and all of us at Grace prayed over and over and over for a "yes" for Hadassah. God said "no."*

So how do we pray? How do we pray knowing that God might say "yes" and he might say "no?" Well, there are three different ways that we can pray. We pray presumptively, we can pray despairingly, or we can pray joyfully. Presumptive prayer seems to -- seeks to put God in our debt. You know, Jesus did say that anything that we pray in his name that we will receive. He said in *John 16*:

*"Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full."*

Jesus didn't mean that his name was a magic wand that you wave over your prayer and then suddenly it has super power. What he meant was that any prayer that you prayed as if you were him, that is, in his name, he would answer. So that any prayer that you prayed with his heart, his mind, his intentions, and his desires would absolutely be answered. Presumptive prayer twists the notion to my own personal end. It attempts to put God in a situation where he has no other choice but to answer my prayer the way I think it

should be answered. I've read of numerous tragedies where parents withheld insulin from their diabetic children just to prove that if their faith was great enough, God would be forced to heal them of their disease. The children died. God absolutely can heal a child of diabetes but it's his choice to say "yes" or "no." It's not ours. The wonderful thing is Hadassah understood that right from the beginning.

Now, the opposite end of that spectrum is the prayer prayed with little or no faith. It's the equivalent of the statement that Job's wife made to Job at the height of their struggle when she said in *Job 27:9*: *"Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die."* *James 1:5* goes on to say: *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.*

Okay. So if I can't pray presumptively for expected results and I can't pray with deep doubt because then I receive nothing from the Lord, then what venue is left for me to pray? Well, remember those scriptures that I spoke of at the very beginning that combined joy

and sorrow. Once again it's important to revisit just what "joy" is. It's this deep sense of contentment knowing that God is a good God, an all powerful God, a God who is in control, a God who is worthy of trusting, and regardless the outcome, I know it will be for the best. The book of Acts points out how the early church learned how to pray like that. They learned how to pray joyfully. In Acts 2 Peter is preaching. In Acts 2:36, he says this: *"Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."* Harsh stuff. Difficult stuff. And the crowd is cut to the heart, and the crowd says, "What must we do to be saved?" And 3,000 people are added to the church that very day, and it's very obvious that God is growing the church. Well, five chapters later, Stephen gives an almost identical message, it's also harsh. After giving a brilliant historical summation of God's dealing with Israel, he says in Acts 7:51: *"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you."* Well, the same crowd is now furious, and they stone Stephen to death. And this unleashes the first wave of persecution and only because we have the whole book of Acts, we begin to realize that God is now about the business of scattering his church. Persecution drives the saints, and everywhere they go, the gospel is being established and the church is growing. So Stephen's death is in reality a huge blessing. Easy for me to say

that because I'm not Stephen. See, God's will for Peter was to have his message gloriously received and have thousands convicted and saved. God's will for Stephen was to have his message furiously rejected and to have his life forfeited and have the church undergo severe persecution. So in a manner of speaking, God seems to be saying "yes" to Peter and "no" to Stephen. And yet when we look at the terrible response that Stephen receives, we see this split screen description that has earth cursing and heaven cheering. Listen to what happens in Acts 7:54. It says: *Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him -- that's at Stephen. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.*

Well, here's my point. You see, it's very easy to see God's "no" in a very limited, very earthbound sense. And when we look at what happened to Stephen and we look at his death, and we see it as a gigantic "no." And yet heaven reveals Jesus, instead of sitting at the right hand of the Father, he is now standing, and he's standing



in honor in order to receive Stephen. You see, heaven sees things often times very differently than we do. And fast forward five more chapters to Acts 12. Now Peter's been arrested. Shortly before that, James, one of the great early leaders of the church, has been executed by Herod. God appears to be saying "no" all over again, and the church is shocked to lose one of its greatest leaders but they respond now exactly as they should. This is Acts 12:1, it says: *About that time, Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church. You see, by this time the church has learned a great deal about prayer and it's learned and understood what joyful prayer is all about. They know that Herod is only keeping Peter until the Passover holiday is over so he can execute him and curry more favor with the ruling Jews. But their response this time is different, their response is: *But earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.* Now, the church didn't pray presumptively. I mean, Stephen's death showed them that they couldn't box God into one specific response. And they didn't pray despairingly. They*

had seen that Stephen's death had been the catalyst for the church to spread to Judea, Samaria, and the rest of the world, so they knew that God was at work even in this dire situation. Instead, it says they prayed earnestly. They prayed joyfully. They prayed with a deep sense of contentment knowing that God was a good God, that he was thoroughly in control no matter what the outcome. And we know that and we know that because the church's prayer was met with a stunning miracle that nobody anticipated. Peter is chained to two Roman guards and he's watched by two more when an angel comes into his cell. This is Acts 12:6, it says: *Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals."* I'm just so struck by this. Peter -- Peter is so out of it that he's got an angel, this incredibly powerful creature, and he's telling him would you get dressed? Put your shoes on, would you? It says: *And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me."* And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they had passed the first and second guard, they came

to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." Well, the Jews were expecting to kill him. But the Christians didn't know what to expect. See, by now all they knew is they knew that God was a good God and that ultimately he was always in control. And when Peter shows up at the house of Mary, they literally don't know what to think. This is Acts 12:12. Speaking of Peter, it says: When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, "You are out of your mind." But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, "It is his angel!" But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Tell these things to James and to the brothers." Then he departed and went to another place. See, they had learned to pray joyfully. You know, if God had said "no" to

Peter and Herod had taken his life, the response would have been "Praise God." If God had said to wait and Peter languished in prison, the response would have been "Praise God." But God had said "yes." And Peter was delivered and the church was so shocked that Rhoda, the servant girl, was told she was crazy. And when the good news finally dawned on them, there was nothing but joy because the church now understood God's grace.

Those of us who know the Bontragers are experiencing right now the sting of God's "no." You know, it's one thing to look on Joseph's string of "no" answers and to understand his frustration but none of those "no's" have the finality of death like Hadassah's "no" did. And when I read in *Psalm 139: All my days were written in your book and planned before a single one of them began*, I'm encouraged, I'm encouraged that this was the best possible circumstance for God, for the kingdom, and "yes" for Hadassah. And I say with Peter in *1 Peter 1:6: In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials*. You see, we learn to apply God's command to view sorrows joyfully only when we begin to fully grasp that God is in complete control. And that we are fully confident that God is good all of the time and that we make the conscious choice to praise him no matter what the outcome. We just trust that God's ultimate plan is always for our good and for his glory. And sometimes we pray and

we seek and we ask and sometimes for our good and his glory, God says "No." And that doesn't make it any less painful. I don't know why God chose to take Hadassah at the age of 19, but I do know that Hadassah is experiencing right now something that Stephen experienced. She's got the grand welcome into the kingdom of light. You know, a few months back, the night that we were anointing her, she told us as elders what her prayer for her sickness would be. She said, "Whether I live or whether I die, I just want God to be glorified." Well, God's answered that prayer with a resounding "yes." And this afternoon we, as a church, we have the opportunity to further her legacy by attending, by serving, and by praying, and by praying for God's grace to be abundantly poured out at her service, that God to be glorified as she wished, and so we rejoice in our sorrows. Let's pray.

*Father God, we do thank you for Hadassah. We thank you for the legacy that she left. And Father, she is still about the business of glorifying you, and we thank you for that. And we want to pray today, Lord, especially as many, many, many are gathering for the service at 4:00 o'clock, that everything that takes place during that service would glorify you, and that you would give every single one involved in it, from the very last to the very greatest, the means and the grace to be able to do just that, and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*