

GOD IS NOT ACCOUNTABLE TO YOU!

Today's Text: 2 Cor. 12:1-10

Extracts:

And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong [2 Cor. 12: 7-10].

Teenager Rachel Canning is a cheerleader at Morris Catholic High School in Denville, New Jersey, USA.¹ Rather than obey her parents, Sean and Elizabeth Canning's order to stop seeing her boyfriend, she moved out of home. In response, her parents revoked her privileges and informed her private school that they were no longer responsible for her tuition. Rachel filed a suit in the Superior Court of New Jersey, Morris County, for an order to declare her "unemancipated" and still the responsibility of her parents to pay her tuition, living expenses and even the legal fees for the lawsuit. On Tuesday, March 4, 2014, the court denied her the order. She has reportedly dropped the case and gone back home after reconciling with her parents!

It took the law court to teach Rachel that the privileges she was enjoying at home were not a right but only by her parents' grace and they were not accountable to her. Believers behave like Rachel when it comes to asking God, their heavenly Father, for one favour or the other. Most people do not expect "No" for an answer! When they do not receive, even when they perceive that they are in good standing with God, they cannot understand why. They had better learn from Paul's experience. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, he has told the story of his vision of Paradise and how a thorn in the flesh was placed on him to keep him from revealing secrets that he had seen or heard. Thrice he prayed to have the ordeal removed and thrice he was denied! Instead, the Lord told Paul that His grace was sufficient for him, that is, the Lord was not accountable to him. Wow! What is this grace and how does it affect us? Let us find out from this week's study.

¹ Story is based on the following sources: Michael M. Wechsler, "Girl Who Sues Her Parents Drops Case, Returns Home," Mar. 13, 2014, <http://www.thelaw.com/journal/girl-who-sues-her-parents-drops-case-returns-home-10528/> and Michael M. Wechsler, "Teen Denied Support In Lawsuit Against Her Parents," Mar. 6, 2014, <http://www.thelaw.com/journal/teen-denied-support-in-lawsuit-against-her-parents-10526/>

1. Background: God says ‘No’ to Paul’s prayer!

A popular quote by believers from the Sermon on the Mount states [**Matt. 7: 7-8**]:

*Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For **everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.***

The word of God also states that the earth is the LORD’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those that dwell therein [**Ps. 24: 1**]. So, *if what we are asking, seeking or knocking for belong to God, should He not have a say in how He dispenses with His property? Is He accountable to us for what He chooses to do?*

Let us ask David, the king of Israel, for an answer. His son from his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba was sick. David pleaded with God for the child’s life. He fasted and lay all night on the ground. On the seventh day, the child died. David washed up and ate food. When his servants questioned his conduct (fasting when the child was ill but eating after he had died), David replied them, “While the child was alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, ‘Who can tell whether the LORD will be **gracious** to me; that the child may live?’ But now that the child is dead, why should I fast?” [**2 Sam. 12: 15-23**].

David asked but received the answer he had not prayed for. He knocked by fasting and the door of his son’s healing was shut. Well, we could rationalize by saying that God had already sent to him through Prophet Nathan that, even though He had forgiven the king for the sins of adultery and murder (for he had also killed Uriah, Bathsheba’s husband), the child would surely die [**v. 13**]. So, *we can rationalize it by saying that God did not answer David’s prayer because it was the punishment for his sins. We can readily say that a person reaps what s(he) has sown* [**Gal. 6:7**].

But Paul’s case does not fall into that category. He was in such good standing with God that he was given the privilege to have a vision of Paradise where he heard “inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter” [**2 Cor. 12: 1-4**]. In order not to exalt himself above measure “by the abundance of the revelations” that he had received, Paul was given “a thorn in the flesh,” that is, “a messenger of Satan” to buffet (beat) him [**vv. 5-7**]. Let us dig more deeply into the story from there:

a) *The affliction was meant to keep Paul in check*

Paul told us that the “messenger of Satan” was put on him to torment him “lest I be exalted above measure” [**v. 7**]. Satan thrives on pride and self-elevation [**Is. 14: 13-14**]. If Paul were a modern-day pastor, Satan would pump him up to make CDs and DVDs and sell them all over the world. He

would appear live on *TBN* or *EWTN* to let the world know that he had been to heaven and back! To prevent such arrogance, God put on Paul a distressing spirit. Buffeting gave Paul body aches and pains that even Luke his physician could not heal or relieve! So, for humble Paul who cherished his privileged position with the Lord, that thorn in the flesh was an unbearable nightmare.

b) *Understandably, he prayed to have it removed*

Understandably, Paul prayed over the matter. He wrote, “Concerning this thing, ***I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.***” ***The Lord refused and said to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness”*** [2 Cor. 12: 8-9].

You can imagine how devastating that could have been for that man of God. It is like telling a blind pastor with a successful healing ministry that God has refused to heal him! Some skeptics are likely to say behind his back, “Physician, heal thyself!” Well, God was not accountable to Paul. His grace was sufficient for him.

c) *Paul then resigned himself to his fate*

Rather than feel bad, Paul accepted his fate “most gladly.” ***He valued the power of Christ resting upon him over the inconvenience of the thorn in his flesh. Therefore, his infirmities meant nothing any more.*** Thereafter, he took pleasure in infirmities, reproaches, needs, persecutions and distresses for Christ’s sake. He then accepted that when he was weak, then he was strong [vv. 9, 10].

We can then see why Paul was able to bear so much suffering for Christ. For example, five times, he received thirty-nine stripes from the Jews. Three times, he was beaten with rods. Once, he was stoned and more [2 Cor. 11: 24-27]. He was able to take it all because he had accepted his fate, namely, that God was not accountable to him as to why he had to bear that torment for the rest of his life while he himself gave comfort and ministered healing to others. If it made his ministry more powerful and more successful, so be it!

2. Let’s try to understand something about this grace!

We know that God is far from the wicked but He answers the prayer of the righteous [Prov. 15: 29]. Yet, the Lord told Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness” [2 Cor. 12: 9], implying that his prayer to remove the thorn in his flesh was not answered- as he had wanted it! So, why would God “refuse” to answer the fervent prayer of a righteous person?

My recent experience opened my eyes! I was looking into my wardrobe to pick what to wear to work the following day. There were some shirts or ties or jackets that I had not worn for over a year. There were some that I use almost every week. How did I determine what to wear and what not to use? If those clothes had feelings, what would they be saying about my “discriminatory” practices? If they could do it, would some of them not fast and pray for me to pick them on my next outing? Well, if they could question me, I would tell them to shut up! I would quote them the Scriptures which say to us, “O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honour and another for dishonour?” [Rom. 9: 20-21].

So, to answer my earlier question, here are possible reasons, among others, why God would say, ‘No!’ to the prayer of a righteous person:

a) *You may simply be a bait God is using to get to His purpose!*

The worm that a fisherman puts on his hook is to attract fish to catch with his net. Meanwhile, that innocent worm is in pains which the fisherman is not in any hurry to remove or relieve! Righteous people can be so used by God. The whole duty of man on earth is to fear God and keep His commandments [Eccl. 12: 13]. Therefore, God can use us for whatever purpose. One of such purposes is as a bait to glorify His name.

For example, when God sent Moses to Pharaoh of Egypt to set the children of Israel free from bondage, He added, “But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go” [Ex. 3: 10; 4: 21-23]. It was only after ten plagues that devastated Egypt before Pharaoh allowed the Hebrews to leave. Even after he had let the people go, God again hardened Pharaoh’s heart to pursue them so that “I will gain honour over Pharaoh and over all his army, that the Egyptians may know that I am the LORD” [Ex. 14: 4]. Can you imagine the hardships that Moses had to pass through as God’s bait?

Do you know what cross you have to bear for accepting Christ? Satan will be asking God for permission to test your faith, as he did with Job [Job 1: 6-12] and the apostle, Peter [Lk 22: 31-32]. ***For no understandable reason, you may find your family in trouble, your career in decline or your finances collapsing. You may fast and pray and no respite appears to be in sight. Like Paul, go and celebrate!*** You may be passing through floods but you will not be drowned. You may be inside a raging fire but it cannot burn you [Is. 43: 1-2]. ***Fear not! When God has caught the fish He is looking for, relief will come to you, the bait! How long it takes is by His grace, but He will NEVER leave you nor forsake you*** [Heb. 13: 5-6].

b) *Or what you are asking for may not be good for you*

Sometimes, a blunt but negative answer may be better for you than a positive response. In qualifying His A-S-K [Ask-Seek-Knock] principles, Jesus asked, “Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him?” [Matt. 7: 9-11].

The sons of Zebedee, James and John, came to Jesus to ask that they be given a seat each on His right and left in His coming kingdom. Jesus replied them, “You do not know what you ask... to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared” [Mk 10: 38, 40]. *So, if God loves you, He will block that promotion or transfer or business deal that you are praying and lobbying for if it could put you in trouble or your life in danger.* You could be asking for a serpent, thinking it was a fish! That is why it is popularly said that every disappointment is a blessing. I know of a friend who was denied a well-deserved promotion to the position of Senior Lecturer in a Nigerian university. A few months later, he landed a job in industry that doubled the pay of the position he had lost on campus. He thanked God for His grace and mercy!

c) *Or your spiritual maturation is first required*

Sometimes, we may be entitled to what we are asking for but it is not yet time. We need a gestation period (like a baby in its mother’s womb) to give us *time to grow and mature into the fullness of God’s promise or purpose* for us. For example, Abraham was seventy-five years old when God promised he would be the father of many nations [Gen. 12:4], but he did not have Isaac until he was a hundred years old- a waiting time of twenty-five years [Gen. 21: 5]! David was anointed king as a teenager [1 Sam. 16:11-13] but was not crowned until he was thirty [2 Sam. 5: 4]. It was during the long interval that Abraham established himself as the father of faith while David grew from a shepherd boy to become a leader of God’s own chosen race.

You cannot ask for a car when you are not even old enough to drive!

Therefore, you can only get toy cars as a baby but graduate to public transport (or be chauffeur-driven) as you grow older. *Therefore, if you do not consider your earthly father wicked to deny you a vehicle before you can drive one, why do you expect your heavenly Father to grant you what you are not yet mature enough to appreciate or use?* That was why, on the verge of entering the Promised Land, God said to the children of Israel through Moses, “The LORD your God will drive out those nations

before you *little by little*; you will be unable to destroy them at once, lest the beasts of the field become too numerous for you. ***But the LORD your God will deliver them over to you, and will inflict defeat upon them until they are destroyed*** [Deut. 7: 22-23]. So, it is only by His grace that you will get to your land of promise.

In sum, God answers every prayer and promptly too. However, some of such answers are not what we expect. Sometimes, it is a yes; sometimes, a no; sometimes, a wait.² But ALL have been answered in line with God's plans and purposes. God's judgments are unsearchable and His ways are past finding out [Rom. 11: 33]. You cannot play His counsellor or teacher [Is. 40: 13-14]. Therefore, His grace is sufficient for you and it is used in your best interest if you can trust Him. That is Paul's message to us in this week's study.

3. Conclusion: Jesus has shown us the way!

Jesus was in deep agony in the Garden of Gethsemane as His death on the cross became imminent. His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. An angel from heaven even appeared to Him, strengthening Him. He knelt and prayed more earnestly, saying, "Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours be done" [Lk 22: 41-44]. His Father's will was for Jesus to die for all of mankind so as to save us from eternal damnation [Jn 3: 16-17]. He made that prayer three times [Matt. 26: 39-44] and three times, His Father's will prevailed. As He died on the cross, the last words of Jesus were, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit" [Lk 23: 46].

Jesus has shown us the way to go about unanswered prayers. Paul followed it and he triumphed against trials and tribulations. That is the best way for you too to go. Stop asking questions that have no answers. Thank God for the grace and the privileges that go with it.

God is not accountable to you and I.

² "Failure means postponed success," *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 1 No. 5: 30 Sept. 2000; http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_1/PDFs/Failuremeans.pdf