

As I envision Moses on Mount Nebo looking down onto the Promised Land, it doesn't seem fair. Here was the man who had served selflessly for a full generation, leading the people of Israel across the desert to the threshold of the land God had set apart for them, and now God would not allow him to enter that land. “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” God says to him. “I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there” (Deut. 34:4). Moses is able to lay eyes on the land where his descendants will live. He can see places where God's people will raise their families and plant their crops and raise their livestock, but he will not be allowed to enter it.

Remember up to this point Moses had said yes to all that God had directed him to do, even though Moses would have been content not to. God called Moses while he was peacefully tending sheep for his father-in-law, to go to the King of Egypt and demand that he let God's people go, and his initial response was to pushback. Please send someone else. But he went anyway. God commanded Moses to climb Mount Sinai and receive the 10 commandments, and Moses obeyed. He loved the people of Israel when they were not easy to love. For forty years he put up with their whining and complaining as they made the long trek across the desert. For forty years he endured the desert sun beating down on the back of his neck and the sand whipping up in his face, and the scarce rations available to them. Now they were about to enter the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey and abundance, and Moses is not allowed to go there.

As I picture in my mind Moses there on that mountain full of sadness, I can't help but think back over my life, as I'm sure you can as well, and consider those times when you've experienced the same. Life is full of crossroads, and each time we approach one, we are often thinking, “God this is the direction I'm hoping I can go, this is where I want to live, this is the job I've dreamed about, this is the person I wanted to marry,” and you pray about it, and earnestly seek God's favor for it, and the result is not what you were hoping.

As a pastor I can recall standing at the bedside of many a church member, praying that God extend their lives. I remember one particular request made for a personal friend who had fatal blood clot which came without warning. At the time both of his sons' wives were pregnant with his first

grandchildren. As we stood at his bedside in hospital, I remember praying silently, "God if Bill could have just one more year to see the birth of his grandchildren, to hold them and watch them in their crawling stage and maybe their standing stage. If you could just grant him that, he would be ok with that."

In the same way, I'm thinking if Moses could have had just one more year given to him, he could have walked the land which he had worked so hard to get God's people to. He could have seen the vineyards and the fields and seen God's people build their homes and begin raising their families as permanent residents and not nomads. I can picture him picking up the soil in his hands and said, "yes, this is enough." Yet in each instance the answer was no. My friend Bill never had the chance to see his grandchildren. Moses never had the chance to step foot in the land of promise. What do we do when God says No?

I think there are times when we get so wrapped up in our personal regrets and disappointments that we don't see the bigger picture. If we examine more closely this man Moses and the stage of life he was in we have to consider that he was 120 years old. And while the Bible tells us he was remarkably preserved for a man of that age, it has to be acknowledged that he was not a young man.

And then I have to consider what lay ahead for Moses and the people of Israel. The Promised Land, while it was a land flowing with milk and honey, a land of abundance, it was also a hostile land. When the spies went out to search out the land they were to inhabit, it became obvious that the Israelites were going to have a fight to secure this land. They needed someone who could lead them into battle, someone who was adept with the sword and was a bone fide warrior, and that man was not Moses; rather, it was a man named Joshua. Joshua was a warrior and he would be the one to whip the Israelites into a standing army. He would be the one most suited to lead them to engage the formidable foes which stood before them in this land they were to claim as their own.

You see, Moses had a role to play. He was the one best suited to lead the Israelites out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, he was the one best qualified to confront the Pharaoh and demand that he let God's people go. He was the right guy to ascend Mount Sinai and receive the Ten Commandments from God, and appropriately, he was the right guy to deliver those commandments and interpret those commandments to God's

people. He was the right guy to lead them to the threshold of the Promised Land, but he was not the right guy to lead them into battle. That responsibility fell to a man named Joshua. Moses was the lawgiver; Joshua was the warrior.

What this means is that when we experience the “no” of God, it is often God’s way of showing us what our role in life is supposed to be. As we go through different experiences in life, the failures we endure have a way of hammering out what our true gifts are. Rather than seeing the “No” of God as a rejection of who we are or what we consider important, the “No” becomes an opportunity to make a new discovery.

It seems to me that the great people of the Bible are those who recognized their proper station in life, and they came to this recognition through a pounding series of “NOs” from God. John the Baptist understood his role was to prepare the way for the Messiah and not be the messiah. Mary, the mother of Jesus recognized that being the mother of Jesus did not mean being given the status of a queen, it meant suffering and allowing Jesus to go off on his own without her. The disciples of Jesus eventually came to realize Jesus was not going to lead an armed rebellion against the forces of Rome, and that they were not going to be power brokers in this armed rebellion, but they came to this recognition through a series of “no’s” from Jesus: “This is not the way of the Kingdom of God.”

What this means is that when God says “NO” it is just as much of an expression of his love as when God says “Yes.” The NO experiences of life are what mold us and shape us into the kind of people God wants us to be. We parents understand this. The easy way is the “yes” way in parenting. Dad, can I stay up late tonight? Dad, can I take the car on a road trip for just a few days and I’ll be sure to bring it back? Dad can I have as much to eat of whatever I want whenever I want it? The easy way is to say “Yes” but the easy way is rarely the right way in the kingdom of God. I’m reminded of the commercial which is interviewing young people who are seemingly resentful of their parents who are constantly harassing them when they were growing up about where they were going out at night and what they were going to do. One of them said, “When I asked you to stay out passed curfew you said ‘NO.’ When I asked you if I could go out of town to go to the football game, you said ‘NO.’ You were constantly wanting to know where I was and what I was doing and what time I was going to be home. I dreaded asking you for things because I knew the

answer was not going to be what I wanted. So let me say this: Thanks.”
“No” is what sets the parameters and limits which we all need.

When we become confident that God knows what he is doing with us, it can actually be a freeing thing. There is great freedom when we believe God is at the wheel of our lives. I remember growing up in Pittsburgh and every year we would go to the amusement park known as Kennywood. And when I went to Kennywood as a kid with my parents, I knew that they would only allow me to rides they knew I could handle. If they knew I could handle the scooter, they would say yes. But when it came to riding a roller coaster like the Jack Rabbit or the Thunderbolt, and they didn’t think I was ready, they would say “NO.” I could be completely confident that they knew what was best for me. I didn’t have to worry because their yes and their no were all I needed for me to feel secure. When we trust in God’s providence, and believe in God’s sovereignty, when we are confident God’s way is the right way, we can move forward in life with assurance.

And one more thing to consider. When we experience the “no” of God today, it does not eliminate the yeses from yesterday. God said, “yes” to Moses and affirmed him as the leader of God’s people. He said “yes” to him receiving the Ten Commandments. God said “yes” to him leading through the harsh desert terrain and leading them to the threshold of the land of promise. But now it was time for him to step down. Well done, good and faithful servant Moses. You were faithful in what God entrusted to you. “Never since had there arisen a prophet in all of Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequaled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land” (Deut. 34:10-11).

So understand this: it may be that when God is about to do his most significant work with you as his creation, when he wants to reveal a piece of who you are and what God wants you to be and what you are capable of becoming, it will often begin with this one word statement: No.