

DEFOREST B. SOARIES, JR

SAY
YES

WHEN LIFE

SAYS

NO

DAVID COOK™

transforming lives together

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SAY YES WHEN LIFE SAYS NO
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This book is dedicated to the memory of my late father, DeForest B. Soaries, Sr., who taught me to put my faith in God into action on God's behalf.

[The blind man] replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"

John 9:25

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PREFACE

As a child I was very close to both of my grandmothers. Because my family lived with my maternal grandmother in Montclair, New Jersey, during my childhood years, I was much closer to her as a child than I was my paternal grandmother, who lived in Brooklyn, New York.

Grandma Pinkard, my maternal grandmother, attended the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), a Pentecostal denomination founded in 1897 by Bishop Charles Harrison Mason. Her pastor was Bishop Frederick Douglas Washington followed by Bishop Norman Prescott. She was the official “mother” of the church—which meant she had tremendous influence over the leaders and members of the church.

When my brother and I would visit my grandmother’s church, it was strikingly different from the church we attended, where our dad served as pastor. The most apparent difference was the music. In our church we sang hymns precisely as they were in the

hymnal. It was almost an unspoken rule that all of us learn how to read music and sing hymns in perfect four-part harmony.

Our church organist and her husband were both graduates of the famed Juilliard School in New York. The choirs mostly sang European anthems, with a Negro spiritual sung from time to time. For the most part, though, all the music was strictly classical, European, and in precise alignment with the written score.

On the other hand, Grandma's COGIC church music was much more inspirational, improvisational, and unscripted. There was no need for hymnals in Grandma's church. It wasn't that her church didn't sing hymns. They sang hymns, but much differently than we did. They didn't just *sing* the hymns—they also *translated* them by the way they sang them. The COGIC approach to church music was much more akin to the tradition established by Tommy Dorsey in Chicago in the mid-twentieth century when he was accused of bringing jazz and “worldly music” into the church.

It was the COGIC style of music that gave birth to so many secular artists who got their start by singing in church. The rhythm, the beat, the clapping and swaying embedded in black Pentecostal music made it virtually indistinguishable from secular music in many ways. But there were also praise songs in Grandma's church that were never written anywhere else. These chants were not merely translations of European hymns but rather expressions of faith and affirmations of life's ultimate realities.

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There was a spontaneity to the songs we sang at Grandma's church. If you attended one of the church services, you would find that, in the middle of a service, someone would start singing aloud: "He's sweet, I know; He's sweet, I know. Storm clouds may rise; strong winds may blow. I'll tell the world wherever I go that I've found a Savior and He's sweet, I know."

Like Israel's songs that started being sung in Exodus 15 when God delivered them by parting the Red Sea, these types of praise interludes grew out of challenging circumstances and accompanying faith in God. These words offered affirmation for those who had continuous exposure to the bitterness of societal unfairness—but their faith was in a God whose grace, mercy, and promises were so sweet that they mitigated all the physical and social pain and suffering.

The most memorable of these chants, which has now become standard in almost all black church traditions, was the one-word praise song that defiantly said "*Yes!*" Anyone in the church was authorized to start this song or chant. That one word ignited popular participation among a worshipping congregation of maids, butlers, drivers, custodians, beauticians, nurses, waiters, and waitresses—people who had been socially and economically marginalized and defined as second class.

At a very young age, I was able to appreciate the profound power in a people who had endured so much humiliation and pain, singing with hope and clarity: "*Yes!*" Life had said "*No!*" to this entire community, but their faith in God gave them the capacity to respond with a resounding yes. Yes, we will gain

our civil rights. Yes, our children will become governors and senators and presidents. The theme for this book was born in that one-word song that I first heard at Trinity Temple Church of God in Christ. *Yes!*

Say yes when life says no.

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INTRODUCTION

When life says no to you, what could make you say yes?

I was not expecting my life to take a drastic turn. Just before Thanksgiving in 2010, a round of medical tests revealed I had prostate cancer. That diagnosis translated into one great big *no!* After deciding to allow the doctor (actually, the robot the doctor controlled) to remove my prostate, I took my otherwise very healthy body to our local hospital, and my life has never been the same.

After receiving that diagnosis, I started reading John 9 to review the miraculous power of God to heal the sick. I have been familiar with this chapter of the Bible since I was a child. The entire gospel according to John has been one of the books I have regularly reviewed all my life. It is the gospel that makes it clear that Jesus is the Savior of the world—that He existed in the beginning, that He is God become flesh, that He died to pay the penalty for all my sins, and that He rose from the grave.

I love all the Gospels. But in the gospel of John, Jesus turned water into wine (see ch. 2), He introduced the concept of being born again (see ch. 3), He fed thousands of people by expanding a little boy's lunch (see ch. 6), He rescued a woman who was about to be stoned for committing adultery (see ch. 8), He raised Lazarus from the dead (see ch. 11), He washed His disciples' feet (see ch. 13), and He prayed for His disciples (see ch. 17). If you had time to read only one book of the Bible, I would recommend the gospel of John.

The more I engage in conversations with people who have experienced life's many nos, the more it is evident that people need help in finding their yes when their no becomes overwhelming.

A young man recently left an excellent job to take what he thought was a better offer, only to be laid off after two weeks when the company canceled his project. The parents of a twelve-year-old gave up on their child because he was so different from anything they had expected a twelve-year-old to be. The mother wept as she told me she was sorry she ever gave birth.

When your finances have gone past their breaking point and you just can't see your way out of a personal quagmire, when your relationships with your family or friends or your church get so strained that you can no longer envision how they can get better, when you can't afford essential medication or healthcare—it seems as if life is saying no to you, and it is difficult to get to the yes side of life. Moving forward can be hard to imagine because you're struggling just to get a grip on your present circumstances.

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My passion is to be used by God to inspire and instruct people by teaching them the value and vision of life as revealed in the Bible. This book seeks to share what God did for my life through John 9. And by sharing my testimony, I believe God can change your life.

This book is for three types of people.

1. You're in the middle of dealing with a major no. You may be experiencing problems physically—as I did—or perhaps your struggle is financial, relational, vocational, political, or educational. And it seems insurmountable and undefeatable.
2. You're doing fine, but there is a no on your horizon. You are happy just holding on to what you have. You are not trying to get anywhere new or do anything innovative; you're content with your present status and with trying to stay out of everyone else's way. Complacency! However, if you stay as you are, you will be ill prepared for the moment when life says no. And believe me, it will eventually say no. Nobody is exempt from this experience.
3. You have worked your way through a no, and now you want to keep making progress. You are not driven by greed, but you realize you can still achieve more. And you want to achieve the right way and for the right reasons.

Interestingly, the blind man who is the hero of the story recorded in John 9 fits into all three categories.

Out of my respect for this man whom Jesus healed and out of my gratitude for the example he has given all of us, I no longer call him just “the blind man.” Rather, I refer to him as Mr. Blind Man. I wish to be consistent with the respect Jesus showed for this man and the genuine concern He showed for the man’s future.

So Mr. Blind Man had been blind for such a long time that he had adapted to blindness. But his blindness also represented a significant no. After his encounter with Jesus, he discovered that he still had to deal with life saying no. That is why he made such an impression on me.

While I was focused on my one physical challenge, Mr. Blind Man taught me so much about my need to commit to a lifestyle of yes ... because the nos never go away.

Mr. Blind Man’s significant no in life was his blindness. Blindness may describe one’s inability to see, but it is not always a physical ailment. It is as much the inability to see hope. Sometimes people’s lives have declined to the point where there’s something they want but they cannot see it, even if an opportunity exists right in front of them. But when life says no, that means there is some aspect of life you cannot see.

Some people cannot see (or imagine) their children ever being mature and responsible. So many married couples cannot see their marriage ever being as happy and joyful as it once seemed. Others cannot see their neighborhoods ever being safe. There are even clergy members who believe that God called

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them to ministry, but they cannot see an opportunity to use their gifts in a productive ministry.

The bad news is that each one of us has a moment or a season or an aspect of our lives in which we are entirely blind—we can't see something positive happening when life has said no.

What about you, my friend? Where has life said no to you? What yes would you like to see in your life? Life has probably said no to you a million times. But I'm guessing there is one big no on your mind that caused you to purchase this book. Life has said no, and you'd love to turn it into a yes. Hold that intention in your heart and mind as you read these pages, because there's good news ahead!

The purpose of this book is to help us shed this attitude of never doing better—of settling for less than God's best—and, instead, dream for ourselves and work to turn our dreams into realities, our blindness to sight, our no into yes. My prayer is that God will use Mr. Blind Man to help you as much as God used him to help me.

I was reading John 9 for perhaps “the thousandth time” because I wanted to be inspired once again by the power Jesus displayed when curing a man of his lifelong blindness. Throughout my life I have found that studying the Bible is inspiring and instructive every time.

Studying the Bible is encouraging because it reveals the possibilities life has to offer when you are engaged with God's power. So many stories in the Bible describe human achievement that occurs when our effort is combined with divine power.

Studying the Bible is instructive in how to seek the outcomes God's power can produce. Even when I am reading the Bible purely for inspiration, I almost always receive instructions from God while being inspired by His Word.

MY STORY

That is what happened to me when I read John 9 on this particular occasion. It was the year I had experienced a significant surgery. It was the year I felt life had said no to me. The pain of the operation and the recovery process were overwhelming. My mind could not imagine ever living a normal life again, much less living a joyful and prosperous one.

The years before my surgery had been fantastic! I had been serving a dynamic, progressive, influential, and growing church for twenty years. I had spoken to a million teens as a youth speaker and evangelist. I had helped launch the contemporary gospel music industry as manager to artists including Tramaine Hawkins, BeBe and CeCe Winans, Commissioned, Fred Hammond, and Marvin Sapp. I had served as the first black man to be New Jersey's secretary of state, and I had been appointed twice by the president of the United States—once as an independent director of the Federal Home Loan Bank of New York and then as the first chairman of the United States Election Assistance Commission in Washington, DC. In the same year of my surgery, CNN featured our church's finance ministry, *dfree*, in a ninety-minute documentary.

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I was married to the most Christian woman I had ever met, and I was the father of twin sons who led their high school basketball team to a state championship! I was in excellent physical condition—walking four miles every morning, drinking water and no soda, eating healthy foods, and abstaining from tobacco and alcohol. God had been good to me, and life could not have been better.

Having had this serious physical challenge, I decided to spend time reflecting on the healing power of God.

This experience was not my first challenge with life trying to tell me no. I had had many previous experiences where I had depended on God's power. I had trusted God for help with employment, help with finances, help with relationships, help with enemies, and help with community projects.

But I had never needed to trust God for healing because I had never been sick before—at least not ill enough to require surgery.

Rheumatoid arthritis had afflicted my body when I was twenty-four years old, but it didn't need surgery, and I knew God had taken care of that. My doctor told me I would be crippled and incapable of walking by the time I turned thirty. When I bumped into my doctor at thirty-five years old and he saw that I had no trouble walking, he was shocked. I assured him that God had healed me. I shared with him that I not only was walking but also was not experiencing pain in my knees, which he thought would have stopped working correctly by that time.

Yes, I had had some minor skirmishes with physical issues, but cancer is in an entirely different category of illness. As soon as the doctor told me I had cancer, my mind went straight to death. Period. In my mind the word *cancer* was synonymous with *death*! I needed to embrace the fact that my relationship with Jesus included the power to heal my body, or cancer was going to kill me.

I went to John's gospel, remembering that in chapter 9 Jesus revealed His ability to overpower a debilitating physical affliction. I went to that chapter to gain hope as I wore a catheter on my leg and took pain pills every four hours. What happened to me during that time was life changing. I was reading John 9 to see what Jesus could do for me as a Christian, but I ended up hearing God say something different.

Rather than seeing what I thought Jesus might do for me, I learned what I needed to know and do in order to say yes to life even while the cancer was trying to make me believe life was saying no! I wanted divine power to deliver me to a better set of circumstances. I wanted to hear a yes from God. But what I needed was for God to first hear a yes from me. God wanted me to see what I needed to do to even have access to divine power. God wanted me to retain a yes mind-set even though cancer was telling me no.

Honestly, there was a part of me that had given up on ever getting better. I was hoping Jesus would do it. I knew Jesus could do it, but deep down I did not expect Him to heal me. The no of cancer resonated so loudly in my head that it had penetrated my

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heart and my spirit. God used John 9 to teach me that as long as I was alive and breathing, there was also a yes left in me. God used John 9 to reveal to me that I should still plan to accomplish something new. And that I should expect my new endeavors to happen, even if physical healing didn't come.

I believe that as long as there is breath in your lungs and blood in your veins, God does not want you to stay stagnant. Each day God wakes us up is another opportunity to improve and to influence others. God will help us do just that. Whenever something happens in our lives that feels, looks, or sounds like a no, God wants us to find our yes and pursue it. The gospel according to John 9 has inspired me to think this way.

EXPAND YOUR VISION

Verse 1 of John 9 says, "As [Jesus] went along, he saw a man blind from birth." Jesus saw a man who was blind, and He healed him, enabling him to see. That is all. There it is! When we say that Jesus can make the blind see, those words are based to a large extent on what Jesus did in John 9. But this book has less to do with optometry than it does with getting to our yes when life says no.

Mr. Blind Man has become my hero. He was born blind. Life had said no to him from the day he was born. But he had so many yes responses in him that he ended his day with the ability to see as a gift from Jesus.

It was this man's willingness to say yes in response to so many nos that changed the way I began responding to my recovery and the rest of my life.

Despite how young I look (smile), I am old enough to remember being denied access to certain restaurants because of the color of my skin. I remember when skin color alone relegated African Americans to a status that was demeaning—a depressing and brutal period. It was a time when life in America seemed to have said no to millions of African Americans. This period is still an influential part of our current experience in this country.

A meeting with a spiritual adviser helped remind me of that reality. The meeting occurred not long after the governor of New Jersey asked me to accept her appointment to serve as New Jersey's thirtieth secretary of state. When the governor invited me to be secretary of state, I sought counsel from the chairman of our deacon board, my top adviser.

He was from Mississippi, and his memories of the obstacles he'd faced while attempting to vote in his home state caused him to break down in tears when he learned that I was being invited to serve in this critical position. He described how he had to pay a fee and take a literacy test to be able to vote as a young man in that Southern state. He implored me to take any opportunity I could get to help improve the circumstances of our people. The truth is, we are not far removed from those tough days when denial of the right to vote was a resounding no for black people.

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My grandmother used to tell me stories about black people not being allowed to eat at diners between New Jersey and her home state of Virginia when she would travel there for family events. She always ended her story with, “But it won’t always be that way.”

There was hope. We always expected things to improve. There was also a strategy. Bold visionaries like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who had “a dream” in 1963 that his children could live in a country where they could enjoy the rights and opportunities we have today.¹

My grandmother’s generation believed in saying yes even though racial injustice seemed to say no constantly. The difference between that period and our present generation is that too many of us seem incapable of even dreaming. We seem to be stuck in life’s no without a vision of how to achieve our yes! “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Prov. 29:18 KJV). That applies not only to leaders needing a vision for their followers but also to us having a vision for ourselves. My prayer is that this book will help you establish or expand the vision you have for yourself.

Life says no to us. Since the fall in the garden of Eden, life has been a series of nos said to men and women. Neither does God always say yes to us, and we respect His will. But I believe there are many times when a divine yes is available to us, but we leave it on the table because we have not heeded the example of Mr. Blind Man. Turn the page, and let’s see what yeses will come to you.