

Thanks For Nothing

Appreciating Withholding

November 26, 2023

Today we're learning to thank God for what He holds back! Cuz His love isn't *only* seen in what we *have*, but what we *lack*! So, today's question is: **What's the best thing God *hasn't* given you?** There's *a lot* to choose from; just think back to every *unanswered prayer* and take your pick!

And while we're *ruminating* on our *answer*, let's remind ourselves of an all-time *favorite* gift that God says He *does* give:



Come to Me, all you who are *weary* and *burdened*, [which is all of us btw...] and I will give you rest. – Matthew 11:28 NIV



Now we're talking! Who doesn't love *rest*?! Just *imagine* unwrapping a *single* week of real, *worry-free*, *put-your-feet-up* rest this Christmas... it'd be the *best* gift you ever got! Cuz we're *all* *weary* and *burdened* and *aching* for all the rest we can get! Like this little break between holidays that comes after the constant chaos of family and cooking but before the consuming craziness of *more* family and Christmas. Cuz all we really *need* is a little *peaceful* pause to get a grip on some *rest*, *right*? Then *why* did the Guy who gives us rest say *this*:



Do not suppose that I have come to bring *peace* to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. – Matthew 10:34 NIV



Wait, what?! How does God give us rest without peace? And why exactly did He pack a *sword*?

Well, I hate to be the bearer of Good News, but Jesus came to start fights and light fires! Cuz He knows us better than we do – and **peace isn't the productive part of our path to rest!**

And we know that because *we had it* back at the beginning and it didn't take! It was *already* all *good* in the Garden and it was *us* who made the original *fuss*! And because we weren't content with *God's* peace and quiet, He kicked us out to let us learn what *restless work* was *all* about! And after living *this* life of relentless *labor*, I don't know about you, but I'm ready for the *rest*!

Which is exactly how God's plan works – He does *whatever* it takes for us to learn our lesson. And **when the easy way won't work, the hard way works wonders!** So, even if it stings a bit:

Blessed is the one whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. For He wounds, but He also *binds up*; He *injures*, but His hands also *heal*. – Job 5:17-18 NIV

And we know all about how well *this approach* to teaching *works*, cuz oftentimes, **pain is part of the tough love tactic used to crack hard hearts.** Sometimes we *need* to be *scared straight*, sometimes we *need* ultimatums in an *intervention*, and sometimes we just *need* a healthy dose of Christmas movies. Cuz *that's* a genre that's all about spreading *peace* and goodwill on earth – yet *suspiciously*, every *star* of the story seems to need *tough love* to learn those lessons!



I mean it took time-traveling ghosts to show how *bleak* Ebenezer Scrooge's broken life was before *he'd choose* to build it *back up!* It took a guardian angel *erasing* George Bailey from existence to teach *him* to love and *appreciate* the life *he* wanted to *leave behind*. And it took a *lifetime of misery and mistakes* to move the Grinch from *misanthrope* to *Mr. Wonderful!*



So, in *our* life's little movie, if all or *our* restless chaos is written by a *loving God*, we should *all* be *wondering*, *all* the time, **what's the purpose of my lack of peace?** What's the *lesson* I'm supposed to *learn* as the star of *my* story?



Because if a loving God *is in control*, **He'll only allow our hurts and hardships if they're absolutely necessary parts of the path to perfection.** So let's look at *three possible purposes* God holds His peace in the middle of *our* mayhem:

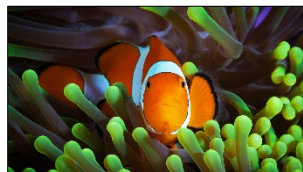


First, when God *withholds* something we *want* – but *can't* quite *reach*, **He demonstrates our deficiency.** He *shows us* there's some things even our *hardest* work won't ever *supply*. You ever notice the *weird reason* God kicked us out of the *Garden* so *quickly*:

[Adam] must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever. So the lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. – Genesis 3:22-23 NIV

We had to go or else we'd *stay alive!* Why wouldn't He *want that?* Well, cuz **there's a lot to learn from the fear of death!** In fact, **all adversity reveals our inadequacy.** And our unwinnable battle with *death* is a constant reminder of how much we all *miss* real *life*. And *seeing* what we're missing is *huge* – cuz we gotta know *what* we lack before we can *want* it back! Just ask a *fish!*

Y'see, fish don't know they're *wet*. And how could they? **When something is everywhere you can't notice it anywhere.** Yet, the *second* you take a fish out of water, they know all about it. They need it to *breathe*. They need it to *move*. They need it to *live*. And as they start *drying* and *dying*, all fish *instantly* know they want the water *back!* Well *likewise*, when God kicked us out of His perfect *presence*, only *then* did we learn how *He* was the key to *our life!* Cuz **He is the living water that we didn't know we needed til we started drying and dying.** And *that's* still part of the plan:



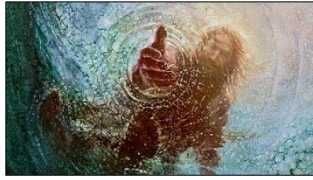
[God marked humanity's] appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from any one of us. 'For in Him we live and move and have our being.' – Acts 17:26-28 NIV



Some things are impossible to appreciate until we experience life without them and all *our* restless reaching apart from God gets us to really ponder the life-giving peace of His *presence*. Because, despite the *discomfort*, sometimes, **we have to learn lessons against our will;** it's called *discipline* and nobody's a real big *fan* of the feeling:

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. – Hebrews 12:11 NIV

Only the fear of *death* truly teaches the *love* of *life*. Only *vulnerability* truly teaches *humility*. And only **being saved truly teaches trust**; which brings us to our *second* purpose in God withholding His peace: He **illustrates His sufficiency**. Cuz once our *deficiency* has us *reaching* for real life, we start seeing what *it really looks like*; so every minute we're *dying* for what we're *missing*, **we're learning to love what leads to living!**



And **God gave us Jesus to provide the picture of perfection**, so we'd see He's the single *source* of the *salvation* we're *all* seeking:

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful Word. After He had provided purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. – Hebrews 1:3 NIV



Y'see, *prior* to Jesus, every single human who lived a life *apart* from God's presence *died* – despite all *their* efforts to *survive*. So when *Jesus* became the first person to defeat death, **we saw sufficiency where all other humans had deficiency**. And when someone actually achieves our *objective*, it only makes sense to try and follow in their footsteps.



If Christ has *not* been raised, your faith is futile; ... But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead – 1 Corinthians 15:17,20 NIV



And so, the billion dollar question becomes, **how did He do it?!** Well, by *being* “the exact representation of [God's] being”. He *was* the perfection that sustains all things. He *was* the source of living water that all *us* flopping fish need to live! And He came to call us home:

You who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace [as a bridge between certain death and living water] – Ephesians 2:13-14 NIV

[Cuz God sent Jesus] to reconcile to Himself *all things*, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross. – Colossians 1:20 NIV

So, *here's* the surprise: **God doesn't give peace, He gives Jesus!** And that's way better – it's like getting the *fountain* after asking for a *sip*. And that's when we learn **real peace isn't the absence of adversity; it's the presence of Jesus!** And the more we come to know *Him*, the more God teaches us it's **the relationship, not the rules that keep paradise perfect!** Just like a *fish* needs to be in *water* to stay alive, we need to be in *God's presence* to stay alive. And *that* can only happen through a *relationship* with *Jesus*. So *no wonder* **there's always a subtle stipulation to every gift God wants to give** – did you notice it in the beginning? Jesus said:

Come to Me, all you who are *weary* and *burdened*, and I will give you rest. – Matthew 11:28 NIV

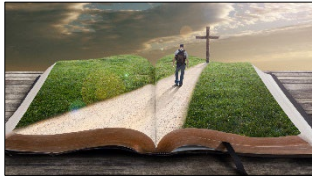
God's *got* everything we need to live, but by *keeping things* in His *Son's hands*, His withholding accomplishes a *third important purpose* He **provokes our pursuit!** And *this* is of *critical* importance to God's plan cuz *actions* speak louder than *words* and we need a *trustworthy way* to *sincerely say* we *regret* walking away from the relationship. So what could be a better *demonstration* of our *desire* for *restoration* than *pursuing* the peace we previously left? Like Peter says of the righteous:

They must turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it. – 1 Peter 3:11 NIV

[So] Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace – Romans 14:19 NIV

[And guess who leads us there? Well, Jesus said] I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father [And His life-giving presence] except through Me. - John 14:6 NIV

[So no wonder He said] Do not suppose that I have come to bring *peace* to the *earth*. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. – Matthew 10:34 NIV



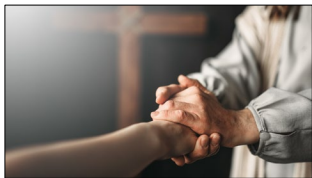
Because **peace is not His reason for coming here, it's a byproduct of His reason. His reason for everything is restoring our relationship!** And *in that relationship, there's comfort, joy, peace, rest, and every other part of perfect.* So God came here as Jesus to make the way for *that relationship*, but He holds *back* His peace because **an awareness of our adversity increases the desire for our destination.**



It's the same reason my wife and I work hard each year to make sure every Christmas morning starts off with pain and frustration. Cuz every kid in our family wakes up to a notecard that leads each kid to conquer more clues in a sinister scavenger hunt that takes them everywhere from *car trunks* to *toilet tanks* before *revealing* their *biggest present* of the year. And *why* do I keep it up with my kids? Cuz *I'm pure evil!*



But *beyond* that, it makes them all *aware* and *inspired*. **It puts 'em in the present.** *Otherwise,* it's possible to passively receive gifts without ever being *awake* enough *appreciate* what we're given. But, when we make the *effort* to *pursue* our prize, it *captures* our *attention* and makes us *mindful* of our *motivation*. **Pursuit forces our focus and communicates what we appreciate.** And *that's* just what our relationship with God needs to be *restored*; deliberate decisions to *demonstrate* devotion!



So, *yes,* God's *gonna* give us that *peace* that *brings* real *rest* – but it *must* come after *we* come to *Him*. So, He **holds His peace to teach us to grab hold of Him!** Because when we're *weary* and *burdened* by our life of labor *apart* from Him, we'll naturally be *driven* to the One who holds the perfect *peace* we're constantly *craving*; and *in His presence,* *find* our *rest!*

Look, there's some *misinformation* going around these days, but **your life isn't about feeling good, it's about learning good.** And *nothing* teaches us to appreciate *rest* like *exhaustion*, and nothing teaches us to appreciate *peace* like *chaos*. Cuz nothing teaches us to appreciate *comfort* like *pain*.

[But remember,] Though [God] brings *grief*, He *will* show *compassion*, so great is His unfailing love. For He does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone. – Lamentations 3:31-33 NIV

So, when we *wonder* why God *won't* give the *peace* we so desperately want this holiday season, **don't hate, appreciate!** *Tough* love is still *love* and if you're feeling like God's *not* giving you the *peace* you want It just means **He's reminding you that He has what you lack – and coming to Jesus is how He gives it all back!**

For the Lord God is a *sun* and *shield*; The Lord will give grace and glory; No good thing will He withhold from those who **[what]** walk uprightly. **[Where? To Him!]** – Psalms 84:11 NKJ

So thank the Lord for holding His peace, it might just be what leads to Him holding you!