

# The Gift of Forced Interruption

Well, hello everybody. Hope you're having a good morning, or evening, or afternoon, or middle of the night—whenever it is that you're watching this. If you have a bible, turn with me to Matthew 11. Last week, if you listened in, we talked about this really unique, really bizarre moment in history that we're in right now with the Coronavirus. For most of us, we've never seen anything quite like it—where businesses are shutting down and people are sheltering-in-place and clearing out grocery store shelves. For most people, the only time we've seen anything like this is in like really bad apocalyptic movies from the 90s.

But last week we spent some time talking about all of that. And we talked specifically talking about how, for followers of Jesus, this all is an opportunity to ask—not just “when is all of this going to be *over*?”—but actually “what is God wanting to accomplish *through* all of this?” We said that **the thing about the God of the bible is that he has the uncanny ability to work *through* even the most difficult of scenarios for his glory and for the good of his people.** And so as God's people at a time in history like this, we want to be constantly asking the question “what does God desire to *accomplish through* this?” So that's what we're doing for a few weeks here through these teachings.

So last week, we talked about **the gift of forced *helplessness*: how realizing that we're not in control of our world, as terrifying as it might be, is actually a *good thing*, for us to realize.** Because it's an opportunity to come to terms with how things actually are in the world. And we talked about how one thing God might be trying to show us *in* all of this is that we aren't—and never have been—in control. And how as followers of Jesus, we don't *have* to be in control, because we get to experience something far better: knowing that the God of the universe is forever for our good, no matter how *out-of-control* things might seem. That was *last* week.

This week, I want us to shift gears and talk about something *else* God might be trying to show us through this whole ordeal. But let's kick things off by reading this famous, oft-quoted teaching from Jesus in Matthew 11. Pick it up with me in v. 28:

*[28] Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. [29] Take **my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. [30] For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.***

Now, we're gonna circle back around to the *details* of this passage as we go along. But at its core, **these verses are about rest. Or more specifically, about a way of life that leads to rest.** That's what Jesus is getting at here. And just if we're completely honest, that's something that we could use some *help* with in America, right? As a society, we aren't good at resting. At least not *true* resting. Quite the opposite: we tend to *prize* overworking and busyness on a regular basis. We wear those things like badges of *honor*. In some ways our society and economy actually seem to *demand* that we overvalue those things—the great “American dollar” is *powered by* it. **A lot of us feel like we have to overwork just to keep up.**

But into all of that comes the *interruption* of the 2020 Coronavirus, where things in our society and economy are all screeching to a halt. Just this Tuesday, Knox County's *Safer-at-Home* order went into effect, mandating that all *non-essential businesses be closed*. So the incessant demands from our economy and workaholic culture have been, at least temporarily and for a lot of people, silenced. **So this week, I thought it might be good to talk about the gift of forced *interruption*.**

**There's really no denying that the Coronavirus has *interrupted* most everything about our normal way of life in society.** Many of us find ourselves, all of a sudden, out of school. Or out of work. Or working from home. Or *continuing* to work from *home*, but now with kids who are growing more stir crazy by the minute. Even our *leisure* has been interrupted: movie theaters are closed, our favorite breweries and restaurants have closed or moved to take-out only. We now feel like we have to go to the *grocery store* a couple times a week just to see if toilet paper is in stock. And even those of you for whom life has gotten *busier* right now instead of *less busy*—those in medical professions, or managers of grocery stores, and the like—even for you, there is no denying that your normal rhythms of life have been *interrupted* in *substantial ways*.

So just about any way you want to slice it, all of our lives have been *interrupted*, in *some way*, by what is going on. So the question is, *what should we do with that interruption?* Or, to frame it in the way we did in last week's teaching, *what might God be trying to accomplish **through** this interruption?*

I think there are at least *two* things he could be trying to teach us. First...

## The Necessity of Slowing Down

In the Scriptures, and specifically in Leviticus and 2 Chronicles, we read about what we might label a “*forced Sabbath*.” For background, from the very beginning of Israel’s history as a nation, God put into place all these rhythms of *rest* in their life together. They were to rest once a week, every week. God felt very *strongly* about them doing this, to the point that there were severe *consequences* for *not* doing so. But there was more than just a *day* of rest every seven days—there were also sabbath *years*: a *year* of rest every seven *years*. Where all of Israel would stop their work and just live off of what they had *for a year*. Now, first off: can you *imagine* if our society even *attempted* something like *that*? One, a lot of people wouldn’t have the ability or the self-discipline to save up over six years in order to have enough to live off of during the seventh year. Two, even for those that *did* do that, we would go insane. We wouldn’t know what to *do* with ourselves during an entire year with no work. But for the nation of Israel, God set up all of these rhythms, and sort of *built them into* how his people did life. Because of just how *important* rest was—because of the necessity of slowing down.

But God also periodically **gave his people *warnings*: he said if they *didn’t* participate in these rhythms of rest, he would take his people into exile and essentially *force them to rest***. *Force* them to slow down. A guy named Wayne Muller, who wrote a *book* on the Sabbath, essentially says that when we *refuse* to rest or slow down, eventually injury or illness *become* our sabbath. A *forced* sabbath. (Now, let me pause for just a second right here and make sure you’re not hearing me wrong. I am *not trying to make the point* that God sent the Coronavirus just to force us all to take it easy.) *Not* my point *at all*. But at the same time, I *am* making a general *observation* that **there are two ways to start resting: you can *choose to rest*, or you can be *forced to rest***.

A lot of pastors I know have learned this the *hard* way. They spend years upon years working 80 hour weeks with no days off, and then eventually their bodies just say “enough” and give out. Now, a lot of us may not be at *that* point. Maybe a lot of us weren’t working 80 hour weeks. But we still might be living at a pace of life that is unhealthy and unsustainable. We go from one thing to the next as fast as we possibly can, rarely slowing down to ask any questions about whether it’s good for us to do that or not.

And so **one thing we can learn in a season of forced *interruption* is that slowing down is *vital* to our physical and emotional health. It’s really *non-optional***. And

listen, “rest” is not as simple as just saying “okay, I’m just gonna sit on the couch for a bit.” It takes a little more intentionality than that. It takes strategically working it into our daily and weekly rhythms. It takes getting our smartphones out of our hands and peeling our eyes away from Netflix for a bit.

So I would love for us to just pause for a second and reflect on all this. I’ve got two questions for you, and I’m gonna get you to actually hit pause on the teaching once I unpack each of them and ask you to really reflect on them for a moment. So grab a journal, or a sheet of paper, or the Notes app on your phone, and prepare to think through these. You ready? Okay, first question:

- **Is “rest” a regular rhythm in your *daily* schedule?** Now, let me just offer some clarification here. When I say *daily rest*, I don’t mean coming home from work and watching an hour of Netflix or TV each night. That’s usually not rest, that’s *escapism*. I mean do you have a time during the day where you do something productive, other than what you spend the rest of the day doing. Do you have something you can give your *complete focus* to without getting distracted by other, more *urgent* things. So maybe for you that’s going for a walk. Maybe that’s reading—not reading *Instagram* posts, but reading like a *book*. Maybe for you that’s cooking—maybe cooking is actually super restful and enjoyable for you. Maybe it’s gardening, woodworking, creating art of some sort, board games. It could look any number of different ways, but do you have a *daily rhythm* of rest? A time where you slow down, and devote your mental and emotional energy to something that replenishes you? If not, start brainstorming what that *could* look like: a daily rhythm of rest. Alright, press *pause* on the video and think through that one for a second. Do that now.
- (Okay, second question...) **Is “rest” a regular rhythm in your *weekly* schedule?** So same question, but now on a *weekly* basis. Do you have at least one day where you rest, once-a-week? Most people I know use *Sunday* as the day for that. Sunday tends to be a little slower, a little more relaxed, a little more care-free. For me personally, Sunday is *work* day, so in my family, it’s usually *Fridays*. On Fridays, I try to leave my phone in the bedroom most of the day, and we just spend the whole day doing fun and relaxing things as a family. We have two small children, so “rest” is always a *relative* term, but we try to avoid the hustle and bustle of our everyday life on that day. So for you: do you have a day like that? A day when you rest from the type of things you do the rest of the week? If not, spend some time brainstorming what *that* could look like going forward. What

does, or what *should weekly* rest look like for you? Okay, go ahead and press pause and think through *that* question.

Okay. So hopefully that helps some, to think through how to implement this rhythm of rest into our lives, or at least more than we do right now. Remember back to our Matthew 11 passage for just a second. The part of that passage that gets quoted the most is v. 28: “*come to me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.*” But what a lot of people miss is that *right after* that verse, Jesus clarifies what he means by “coming to him.” Verse 29 says “come to me, and *learn from me*, and [through *that*] we will find rest for our souls.” **In other words, “coming to Jesus” isn’t just showing up and having him automatically give us rest. It’s coming to him, and learning from how he does life, and it’s that process that gives us rest.** Do you see the difference there? What Jesus wants us to do is to take cues from *his* rhythm of life. That we would implement patterns of work and rest in a way that is sustainable, and **that his rhythm of life would become our rhythm of life.**

And here’s the good news—for most of us, **this rhythm of rest is more possible to implement right now than it ever will be ever again!** Now is absolutely the time for most of us to put into place a regular pattern of rest in our lives. And then, hopefully, if you implement it during this time of “forced” rest, you’ll see the value in it, and be able to continue practicing it even when society returns to normal. Hopefully that makes sense.

Now, like I said earlier, there are probably *some* of us for whom rest is pretty impossible right now. If you work in a hospital, rest might not really be in the cards during this critical season. Same with some other professions. But maybe for *you*, you could just make a mental note to, when all of this settles down a little, ask these questions and put rhythms like that into practice. You’ll probably be very aware of the need for it then too.

But that’s the first thing I think God might be wanting to teach us in this current situation. Second, I think he also wants to teach us about...

## **The Necessity of Spiritual Habits**

Secondly, I think God might want to use some of this time to show us the importance of spiritual habits or practices. For those of you who have been around our church for a bit, these are the things we tend to focus on at the beginning of every year, during our *Formation* series. These are what Christians have historically called “spiritual

disciplines:” things like bible reading, prayer, fasting, meditation on the Scriptures, even things *like* resting—things along those lines.

In Matthew 11, Jesus also talks about this thing called a “yoke.” Did you catch that? Now, just in case that was confusing to you, he’s not talking about eggs. A “yoke” in that day was shorthand for a rabbi’s set of teachings. And more specifically, it was a rabbi’s *way of life*. It encompassed a lot of things, but one thing that was front and center was how that rabbi practiced the spiritual disciplines. So the point is that **if we want to join in on this rhythm of life from Jesus, it’s going to include how (and how often) we put those types of things into practice.**

Now, here’s why I think God might be trying to teach us this specifically *right now*, at this moment in history. Currently, and for the immediate future, there are no Sunday Gatherings (at least not in their traditional format). Currently, and for the immediate future, there is no easy way to share life with your LifeGroup on a regular basis. **All the “programmed” things that we as church leaders have put in place to contribute to your spiritual growth—those things are either *gone* or are *more incomplete* because we can’t be together in person.**

So I think that provides us with **the perfect opportunity to answer the question, “am I taking responsibility for *my own* discipleship to Jesus?”** “If I take away all the things that *other people* do to contribute to my spiritual health—church gatherings, in-person LifeGroup meetings—if I take away those things, is there anything actually *left* in my discipleship to Jesus?”

**You cannot—I repeat, you *can not*—outsource your spiritual growth.** You can’t outsource it to church leaders, you can’t outsource it to other followers of Jesus. Those people can *help* with your spiritual growth, they can help *equip* you and *resource* you to *pursue* spiritual growth—but **they can not do it for you.** It won’t work like that. So I think right now, with all of those things mostly gone, it is a great time for us to ask ourselves: *have I been doing that?* Have I been outsourcing my spiritual growth to other people, or have I been taking responsibility for it myself?

So, those of us who usually say “I just don’t have time to regularly read the bible,” that excuse just got taken away from most of us. We now have all the time in the world. Those of you who were reading through the bible with us this year: most all of us (except maybe those of us who work in the medical field), should be caught up on our reading plan by the time all of this is over. No real excuse not to. God might *use* this crisis,

among other things, to expose just how many of our excuses to avoid the spiritual disciplines were legitimate. He might use it to **expose whether it was ever actually a time problem, or whether it was a *desire* problem all along.**

Now once again, if your life actually got more *hectic* during this season, doing this is going to look a little different for the moment. Maybe for you, if you're a doctor or a nurse or some type of essential personnel, reflecting on *Scripture* in this season looks like reading one verse in the morning that you know you're going to need, and just letting it marinate in your mind and heart throughout whatever you're doing. Revelation 21 says that God is "making all things new." So maybe it's that verse, and then in every situation you find yourself in that day, you're reminding yourself "God, you're making all things new. You're making all things new." Maybe for you, *prayer* looks a lot more like a dozen little prayers of "please help, Jesus" throughout the day. Maybe it looks like before every patient you see, saying "Jesus, help me make the right decision." "Help me comfort." "Help me give hope." Maybe for you, you take great comfort in how Romans 8 tells us that the Spirit prays *for* us when we don't know what to pray. So for some of us, the application may look different, but I think in this season we're going to need to, more than ever, see the importance of taking responsibility for our own discipleship to Jesus.

So let's spend a little time here pausing and reflecting as well. Here's the question I'd love for us to ask ourselves:

- **What am I doing currently to contribute to my spiritual well-being?** What things could you point to, right now, in your life, that are contributing to you growing spiritually? Do you have a time set aside each day to be in the Scriptures? Do you have regular times of the day that you spend time in prayer? What things are *you doing*, regularly, to contribute to your love for Jesus? And just to be clear, I'm not so much talking about things like "well I show up to Sunday Gatherings." That's great—I'm glad you do that, but for most of us that's more *passive* than it is *active*. The only thing you're doing is getting there, and then expecting other people *there* to contribute to your spiritual growth *while* you're there. With LifeGroup, it could be passive *or* active, depending on your posture once you get there. For some of us, we show up to LifeGroup with the posture of "okay, I'm here—now I hope these people make it worth my while." But for *others* of us, we show up to LifeGroup ready to *contribute* and be actively *involved* in the discussion. So it could be either. But I'm talking here about things you *actively* do, on a recurring basis, to be formed more and more into the image of Jesus. Take just a second, pause the video, and answer that question.

Okay, hopefully the questions we've reflected on today give you something to go on for the coming week. Hopefully they give you ways to consider how God might use this "forced interruption" to teach us all healthier rhythms of life.

So we'll just close our time with this. Keep in mind that **what Jesus is offering here is not a freedom from effort or a freedom from discipline.** In fact, quite the *opposite*. Him using the term "yoke" indicates that what he's talking about is a new *kind* of effort and a new *kind* of discipline. But what he *is* offering is a freedom from the incessant demands of workaholic culture. A freedom from the breakneck speed required to keep up with the world around us. A freedom from the narrative you'll hear all day long, from every corner of our society—the belief that "you are what you accomplish."

Jesus rejects that notion, and he gives us something better. What he offers us is that "we are what *he* accomplished." You and I—every one of us that call ourselves followers of Jesus—are now defined, once and for all, by his work on the cross. *That* is what makes us worthy. *That* is what makes us important. *That is* what gives us value and worth. We do not have to work to make those things true of us. *Jesus* has made those things true of us already.

And if we're going to put this stuff into practice, we're going to need to believe *that*. Everytime we're trying to rest and we're tempted to pick up our phone and check that email inbox, we're going to need to remember that we *are not* what we accomplish. That our value comes from the cross. Everytime we're tempted to stay another hour or two at the office to get ahead, we're going to need to remember that we *are not* what we accomplish. And even as we pursue these spiritual habits and disciplines, we're going to need to remember that we are not what we accomplish. That our value comes from the cross. That's where our value, our worth, our worthiness, has been settled once and for all.

So here's to working from that basis, to taking up Jesus' yoke, which is easy and light, and to learning from him in a time of "forced interruption." Let's pray together.