



Held back to be held still: a reflection on spiritual vocation and discipleship in medicine

Crystal Lemus Torres^a

^a BS (Neuroscience), Medical Student, DeBusk College of Osteopathic Medicine, Lincoln Memorial University, Knoxville, Tennessee, USA

Abstract

In a world driven by ambition and achievement, it is easy to equate spiritual readiness with personal success. *Held Back to Be Held Still* is a reflective narrative that explores how God uses seasons of waiting and perceived stagnation to unearth deeper spiritual truths. Through the lens of personal ambition, singleness, and a transformative experience in West Africa, the author wrestles with the collapse of self-made identity and the discovery of divine timing. Anchored in Scripture and written with vulnerability, the piece invites readers—particularly those in healthcare and mission-driven vocations—to consider how God’s delays may not be obstacles, but sacred pauses meant to realign the soul with eternal purpose.

Keywords: Christian global health, faithfulness, Christian medical missions

All my life, I have pushed myself—physically, mentally, intellectually—to become the best version of a life partner someone could ask for. I strove to become “ready,” believing that if I sharpened every edge, filled every gap, and shone brightly enough, love would come. And if it didn’t? Then at the very least, I would have succeeded on my own.

After all, I had the resume: published books, marathons, academic accolades, scholarships, and a vibrant social life. I thought I had “arrived.” I thought I had crossed the finish line. But when I looked up, expecting a hand to hold and a next chapter to write together, I found I was standing alone.

The truth didn’t come like a lightning bolt, but more like a quiet betrayal. Had I overdone it? Was I too much? Too whole? Had men been looking not for a partner—but for a project?

Bitterness crept in. Why was it so easy for others? Why was I still waiting while others stepped effortlessly into the promise of companionship?

I built a castle to cope. A tall one—made of sand and striving. I told myself I was above the noise—that I’d rather be single forever than shrink to be loved. And for years, I stood high on that pedestal. Until, on the coast of West Africa, God brought in the tide.

In The Gambia, I was asked more about my faith in one week than I had been in a decade. Each question peeled back a layer of the passive, lukewarm belief I had unknowingly adopted. I thought I had been faithful by not questioning God. But in reality, I had surrendered wonder for comfort.

And then came the wave.

My sandcastle, my illusion of readiness, collapsed. I saw clearly that I wasn't waiting for someone to catch up—I was the one who had fallen behind. Spiritually stagnant. Chained to ambition. Drenched in my own self-will.

I've had a recurring dream for years. In it, I'm back in middle school, switching books at my locker. The bell rings. My friends scatter to class. I try to move—but I can't. I'm frozen. I look down. Cinder blocks are chained to my ankles. The late bell rings. Doors slam shut. I'm still there. Alone.

That's exactly how I felt: trapped in success, gasping for something eternal.

But oh, how good is our God that He does not leave us to live in delusion. *"Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain."* (Psalm 127:1) I built a castle, and He washed it away—not in wrath, but in mercy.

Now, for the first time, I understand: I am not behind. I am at the beginning. The starting line is under my feet.

I used to wonder what disasters God kept from me by placing those cinder blocks around my ankles. Now, I thank Him for them. *"For I know the plans I have for you,"* declares the Lord, *"plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future."* (Jeremiah 29:11)

Yes, I long for marriage. I long to raise children. I yearn for a partner to share both the mundane and the majestic. But more than all of that—I want God's timing. Because when I reflect on what I could have settled for in seasons of restlessness, my frustration melts into gratitude.

"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens." (Ecclesiastes 3:1) I am not being punished. I am not delayed. I am being divinely cultivated.

So here I am, no longer atop a castle, but kneeling on the shore. And for now, I'll play in the sand. Or maybe, just maybe—I'll search for the key to the chains. Perhaps they weren't meant to hold me back. Perhaps they were always meant to hold me still... until I was ready to be free.

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