Tantalus

&

Sisyphus

Allusion
In Greek mythology, Tantalus was a king who offended the gods and was condemned to suffer eternal hunger and thirst in Hades. He stood in water up to his chin, but when he bent to drink, the water receded. Ripe fruit hung over his head, but each time he reached for a piece, the wind blew the boughs out of his reach.
To be “tantalized” or to be like Tantalus is to be offered something desirable which is then withheld.
Examples

- After being nominated for an Emmy Award numerous times and losing, the actress began to feel like Tantalus.
- The poor peasants were tantalized by the aromas drifting down the street from the palace banquet.
In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was a king who offended Zeus. His punishment was to spend eternity in Hades rolling a giant boulder up a hill. Each time the boulder neared the top, it would roll back down to the bottom and Sisyphus had to start all over.
A seemingly endless, perhaps futile task can be referred to as a “labor of Sisyphus” or as “Sisyphean.”
Examples

- Painting the Golden Gate bridge is a Sisyphean task. Once it is completely painted, it is time for another coat.
- My mom did not buy my argument that making my bed every morning is a labor of Sisyphus since I’m just going to mess it up again every night.