

# Corona Christians

*I Peter 4: 19*

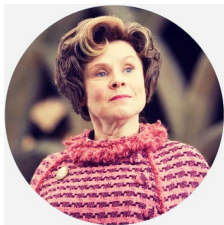
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With Hurricane Katrina and Gustav, the riots and the flood of 2016, we have seen some hard, weird times. But nothing as eerie and strange as these last ten days. If it was a flood, we could send the Cajun Navy to rescue people. If it was a Hurricane, we could show up with saws and remove debris. But now a bunch of doers have to just “shelter in place.” The best thing we can do for each other is to stay away from each other. Weird. Very, very, odd.

God granted us a sense of humor for times like these. Of course, this suffering isn’t funny. But as Jimmy Buffet said, “If we couldn’t laugh, we would all go insane.” I’ve seen quite a few funny responses.



I love the meme with a picture of Delores Umbridge, She’s the tyrannical, rules-loving teacher in *Harry Potter*. Clearly she designed and delights in our social isolation.



And I thought the new drink meme was brilliant. It’s called a *quarantini*. Same thing as a martini, but you have to drink it at home alone!



I loved the fake advice video where the guy tells us, “Stress is *good* for your immune system! So keep breathing quick, shallow breaths. Keep all the fear inside you. You’ll be fine.”



Or the one where the Dad in the isolating family keeps hiding from his children. Husbands, wives, parents and kids are about sick of each other by now and we've got a long way to go! We're gonna need to laugh to get through.

Yes, strange days indeed. Thankfully, Scripture speaks to these kinds of times. Peter wrote to Christians scattered throughout the ancient world: "Let those who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good." There it is. A one sentence prescription for how to deal with suffering that is beyond your control. The one sentence has two steps: 1) Entrust your soul to a faithful Creator. 2) Keep on doing good. It sounds a lot like the first and second great commandments: Love God with all your heart. Love your neighbor as yourself. What do we do in Corona times? We entrust our souls to a faithful Creator. We continue doing good to one another and our community.

As always with Scripture, this advice runs way deeper than it sounds. In fact, Peter has given us an entire worldview in this simple sentence. Let's unpack this a bit. He begins by saying, "Let those who suffer according to the will of God..." This kind of suffering means undergoing something you would not choose, did not bring on yourself, and cannot control. Such suffering means enduring what creates feelings of pain, distress, agitation, discomfort all the way to its end. OK, we get that. We're all suffering on multiple levels these days: economically, socially, emotionally, and, some of us, physically. Nobody sleeps well. Nobody quite knows what to do. Nobody focusses well. Nobody knows when this will end. We check the boxes for undergoing suffering.

But why does it have to be this way? How do we understand why a faithful Creator God allows such suffering? Let's look at these questions in light of two important realities we have rediscovered these last ten days:

**1) We Are All Connected.** A virus spreads because humans interact. We have to. We touch things. We touch each other. We trade. We share. We relate. There is no such thing as an independent person. Our wealth and technology fueled the illusion that we are autonomous individuals who do what we want and no one can stop us. Until you can't get toilet paper or a loaf of bread. Until you get sick and require care. Until your money vanishes, your business halts and your job can't be funded. More than ever, we realize that all people in the whole world are connected.

As Christians, we already knew that. We just forgot for a while. We have some foundational truths: I did not make myself. God made me. He gave me a real existence in a real world. I'm not a shadow character. I have a real life. I'm not a robot following a fatalistic script. I have real choices. But this real life has never *once* been independent. My conception occurred as the result of the interaction of two people. I then grew as an individual, unique human being within my mother's womb. From the moment of that conception, I was different than she is. I wasn't part of her body, I was *in* her body, alive in my own right. But also, from the moment of conception I was *dependent* on her for sustaining my life. The same was true after I was born. I wouldn't have lived a day without care from others.

The same is true now as an adult. We are all interconnected and no one can sustain life wholly alone. That's just the way God, whose nature is Love, planned it. For he made *us* to be connected in love. Love means relationship. Love and life go together. We cannot live in isolation. That's what makes these quarantine days so hard. We need each other. We need God.

That's a good thing. We cannot help but interact. The more we interact in love, the more we flourish. As John told us, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God, for God is love" (I John 4). For ultimately, it is God who keeps our life. He preserves me. His thoughts, his will keep me in existence. He loves me and he sends me to love and be loved. We are all connected. It means disease spreads. It also means love and hope and healing and life spread as well. We're learning how to creatively express such care in these strange days.

## **2) We are each personally responsible.**

So, no one is independent and no one is autonomous. But each one of us has a part to play. New words have entered our vocabulary. Self-quarantine. *I'm practicing isolation*. The art of social distancing. Each person is called upon to wash hands, sanitize, and maintain proper space. It only works when we all do it.

We're all connected. We're all personally responsible for our interactions with others. Those two truths are ever intertwined. I'm connected to you. I can't live without you. But to the level of my ability, I have to do what is required of me. That's part of caring for you. Connection and personal responsibility are dance partners. We have real lives in a real world that have real consequences, both for worse and for glorious better.

So, let's sum up what we've said: suffering exists because the world is real. There are real laws of nature. There are things in the world more powerful than me. Things that can pierce my skin, poison my lungs, crush bones or just break my heart. In this real world, hurricanes blow and diseases spread. That's the way it is.

Christians also understand that in a real world with real choices, people make bad ones. We violate God's will. We rebel against being connected and responsible for each other. We want more for ourselves. We take, we cheat, we harm. Moreover, when our first parents sinned, death and suffering entered the world. Now we are bent towards self first. Now we are prone to hurt each other. Much suffering occurs because people have in-curved hearts that do wrong.

We also know that there is a malevolent spiritual power that seeks to thwart human flourishing. He seeks to poison love and undermine trust among interconnected people. He seeks to turn us from personal responsibility to recklessness or neglect. Both evil in the human heart and the Evil One create suffering.

But still, the heart asks Why? Why does a good, all powerful God allow it to be this way? Surely there is more suffering than any personal sin deserves? Why is it so hard?

There are lots of books written to explain suffering. Lots of messages given. But here's the dirty little theological secret. Not one explanation of the *why* of our suffering truly answers the question. Not one answer fully comforts the human heart. Life hurts and then you die. Fancy talk doesn't change that. Asking "Why?" and expecting a satisfying answer in this life is a pipe dream. What can we do?

We have to change the question. The question is not "*Why* is there suffering?" The question is "*What* has God done about it?" This is where it's so very important that we Christians have a real, deep, robust, daring understanding of the journey of Jesus to save us. The God I require in a world full of violence and violent viruses is only found in Jesus. And we believers need desperately to recover a fuller understanding of the journey he went on to answer our suffering with his love.

*Let those who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator and keep on doing God.* How can we know our Creator is faithful in the midst of the world's pain? Only by looking at Jesus as God among us.

Jesus is God keeping faith with us. The Creator stepped into creation. And did not remain aloof. He engaged the agony of choosing whether to save himself or embrace fully the suffering at the heart of humanity. Jesus hourly entrusted himself to his faithful Father, even under immense pressure. Willingly Christ followed the path where all human pretension to having independent life lived our way leads: death. Christ's answer to our agony is his body writhing on the cross to which he was spiked. His answer to our sin which isolates us from God and one another was to embrace that very fate. Jesus underwent the fearful isolation at the heart of all our God-denying. He cried out "My God, why have you forsaken me?" He knew what it was to feel absolutely alone in the universe as if it would be forever. That soul wrenching prayer was not answered in the moment he uttered it. On the cross, Jesus could not find his Father. He looked into the jaws of bitter death and saw only emptiness.

Still, without comfort, without assurance, Jesus prayed again at the last. He entrusted his soul to a faithful Creator. "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." Then he died. And stayed dead. There was no immediate rescue. Jesus suffered death. He underwent the dark isolation, the frigid loneliness, the everlasting quarantine of the spirit. His journey on Holy Saturday encompassed the entire deadly coronavirus world of decay and dissolution. Jesus waited in death, still in hope even though all hope had vanished.

That is the only answer to suffering that makes sense. I still can't know the full answer to *Why?* But I can begin to know what God did about it. He made it his own. So that we are not alone. Not even when the worst happens.

Jesus endured death so that we who die in flesh need not stay in death.  
Jesus made himself a companion to every pain, agony or loss.  
And because he keeps his humanity into eternity, Jesus *still* has all the memories of what life in the world is like for us.  
Jesus *still* knows and feels what we feel.  
Jesus *still* yearns over his little ones.  
Jesus *still* shows up in every suffering.  
In his death and descent and resurrection, Jesus took away the sins of the world.  
He also took up in his loving embrace the suffering of the whole world.  
He grasped it all.  
He still holds it all.  
He's got the whole world in his hands.  
Every agonizing moment of every person belongs to him.

He yearns for us to know that, and entrust ourselves to him, our faithful Creator who united himself to us.

The journey of Jesus to the depths is why the Christian answer to the world's suffering has always been to sail into the world's pain. Not away from it. To keep on doing good. We are only isolating for a while as a gift of love. But we are not disengaged. We have sent our best and brightest to the frontlines of the battle. And we will send more as it becomes loving to do so. To tend, to care, to feed, to rebuild. We remain in prayer together.

Oh yes, we are Corona Christians. We know that we are all interconnected. A God who is love has his life in love as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He made us in his image. We have relearned these truths this week:

Each one of us dependent on each other.  
Each one of us personally responsible to care for each other.  
We worship the God who answered our suffering with his forsakenness.  
He answered our loneliness with his own isolation.  
He answered our grief with his tears, and  
He answered our dying with his cross.  
Then he upped the whole game.  
He passed through death into life.  
Like a pearl diver bursting the surface with the precious prize.  
Like a heavyweight lifter settling the load and then clearing the whole world  
above his head.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus answered our suffering in the deepest depths. And took it in love to the highest heights. Now he sends his Corona Christians to do the same. To answer with hope, faith and love. Let those who suffer entrust themselves to a faithful Creator. And keep on doing good!

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<sup>1</sup> The images of the pearl diver and the weight lifter are beautifully articulated in chpt 14 of C.S. Lewis' *Miracles*.