

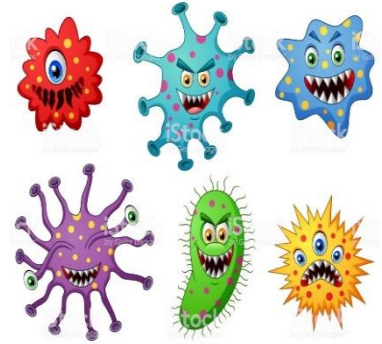


# The Corona Chronicles

Reviewing the Church through a time of crisis

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## 1 Peter and Discipleship

### Introduction:

The author of 1 Peter addresses the community members as “exiles” (1:1) and “aliens” (2:11) because that is how the followers of Jesus experienced life in the Great Roman Empire.

They lived out their faith in the midst of a world that was hostile towards them and they found that following Jesus put them very much out of step with the values and the goals of the bulk of the Roman society of which they were members.

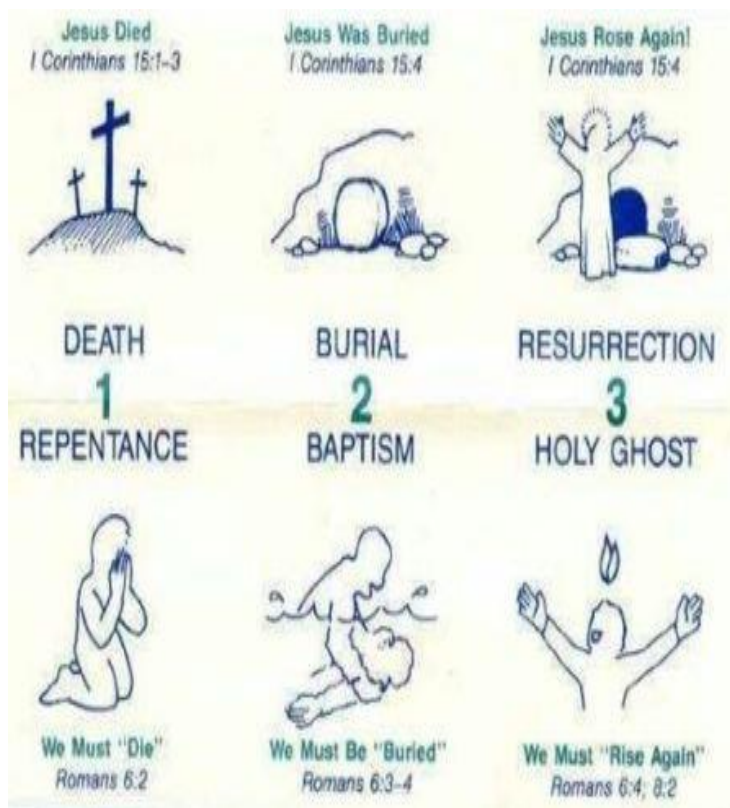
Living the Gospel meant that they had chosen an alternative way of life and in the world at that time, being significantly different made you suspect in the eyes of those around you **4:3-4**...*You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry. <sup>4</sup>They are surprised that you no longer join them in the same excesses of dissipation, and so they blaspheme.*

\*\*\*\*\* Christians stood out from the rest of the community *by the way they lived.*

**Note:** What does Peter understand by the words “aliens” and “exiles”? Clearly the Christians were to be in the world, for it was to the world they were sent. ***How would that be reflected today, the dangers, risks and mistakes that can be and are being made by Christians, the Church? Why those particular words?***

When the epistle speaks of suffering and persecution, it is not simply talking about persecution that leads to martyrdom but the ridicule, oppression and marginalizing that comes with being a powerless minority group trying to live out a particular rule of life in the face of the cruel ways of the majority. The things making it difficult for believers to follow Christ in the way he expects. That is the life they live and yet, in the face of all of hardship, this letter presents a picture of joy, hope and optimism and offers an

enthusiastic encouragement to those who believe.



At the heart of this Letter and so at the heart of what it means to be a Christian sits the passion and death of Jesus. This suffering and the movement from death to life is seen as being the pattern of life for all believers (and as well for all humanity). While Jesus “the just one” was put to death, God raised him to life again (3:18). *There is always more going on than we can know or understand.*

Significantly though, this was not just something personal to

Jesus. He died for our sins, for both the righteous and the unrighteous and in his death all are given a message of hope. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus tells us that death is not the final word – life is the final word. This journey from death to life is played out in baptism and it is what offers light and hope in the darkest moments of the human journey. ***Donald Senior*** writes:

*the author of 1 Peter orchestrates this death-life theme to the full: it is the meaning of baptism, the basis for Christian hope, the motivation and content of Christian witness and the final verdict on human destiny.*

This is the message the author offers to his community of faith, to those who are exiles and who find themselves living under the pressure of a hostile secular society. On the basis of this message he advises believers on how to live in that world but only after he has outlined his own vision of what it means to be a Christian.



Those who are baptized into Christ are especially blessed, beloved and *made beautiful* in the eyes of God...*made beautiful in the eyes of God*. They are his especially chosen ones, God's *living temple* (2:4-10). It is only when he has set out the fullness of the Gospel message does the writer then go on to talk about how to go about living the meaning of this faith. But before the action, before the way of life, comes the Gospel message, the statement of faith and it is only out of the faith commitment that the action grows.

**Questions:** If you were asked to present the fundamental basics of our faith as Christians, what would you write down? How might that content be life transforming?

**1 Peter** does not offer some easy way of living and he does not urge the believers to sit back and remain hidden away in order to avoid the dangers that come with being noticed and standing out.

- They are not to run away from the world or to go into conflict with it.
- They are however, to participate as fully as they can in the world that oppresses them (2:13...).
- They are not to attack the world, be critical of it because of its evil ways.
- They are to respect the world around them, even being gentle with it in order that their lives may give witness to the Gospel and the world repent and believe in Jesus Christ.

- Certainly, there is no hint of the believers setting up some kind of ghetto from which they launch attacks, judgments and criticisms against the society and from within which they find solitude and safety.

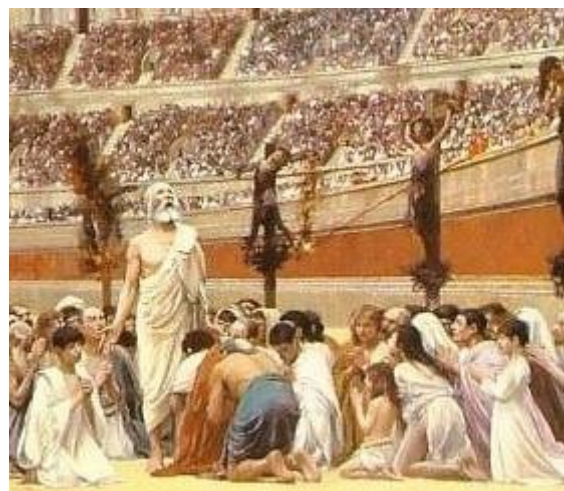
One of the great insights of the letter is the way it urges believers to participate fully in the structures of the society in which they live, even when they are in conflict with what they believe. They are sent into the world as light and salt, agents for God’s flavouring of a world in need. They are called upon to submit themselves in obedience for the *Lord’s sake* because it is by living an authentically Christian life in the midst of these difficulties that the work of God in transforming the whole of creation is furthered.

It is in the faithful life of the believer that God carries out his missionary work (the *mission dei – God’s mission*). But to have the kind of faith, strength and determination to continue to live the Gospel in such circumstances (he gives the example of a slave living under a cruel master) and at the same time to maintain one’s dignity requires a great deal of “inner freedom” (2:11-16).

In order to be free, they need to let go of the inner passions that can tear them apart and instead fill their lives with the living Lord Jesus. While on the surface such a statement seems somewhat simplistic, it rests at the heart of the call to discipleship. To be a faithful Christian one has to die to self. There is cost to discipleship that has to be paid for evil remains a power in the world and anyone who allows themselves to be caught up in their inner passions and controlled by their human weaknesses may well find themselves devoured by lion like demons:

**5:8-9...** *Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.<sup>9</sup> Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.*

**Questions:** What is the meaning of “discipline yourselves”? “Keep alert”? What does it mean “to resist him, steadfast in your faith”?



Finally, it is also important to understand that 1 Peter, while addressing the life of the individual believer also speaks to the faith community, to the Church. It is the love and the service of the faithful that binds the Church together and it is this unity of the household of God that gives such a powerful witness to the world.

***In a world that is starved of meaning (Senior)***

***it is the Church that is called to***

***witness to the power of love***

***in transforming lives.***

### **But it all has to begin with God:**

The life of the Christian should be filled with joy and hope because of *the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (1:3)*. It is because of God's love for us that we are filled with hope. It is because of his freely offered mercy that we have been given a new life in Christ, we are reborn (through the waters of baptism) and so have abandoned a life that is filled with meaninglessness and despair. In Christ we move beyond despair into a life of hope – whatever of the situation in which we find ourselves living.

The passage below outlines one way in which we can understand “Church” in the light of 1 Peter's teachings. Work through each of the verses pondering what these revelations can say to our own faith communities. How might we go about teaching these and then implementing them to shape our place in the wider world?

**4:7-11**     <sup>7</sup>The end of all things is near; therefore:

- *be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers.*
- <sup>8</sup>*Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins.*
- <sup>9</sup>*Be hospitable to one another without complaining.*
- <sup>10</sup>*Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.*
- <sup>11</sup>*Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God;*
- *whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ.*
- *To him belong the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.*



## **We are galvanised in discipleship through the gift of a living hope**

For Peter, our baptism brings about a new-birth-into-a-living-hope and to an *imperishable inheritance*. We have hope because of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Hope is not blind. It is living the present knowing the future is already secured for disciples by Christ. That is our firm foundation for life; our sure hope, our promise regarding things to come. If Jesus did not rise as the Christ, we are all lost and the most foolish of people. But he did rise from the grave and so we are not foolish.

The faithful mercy shown by the Father to his Son is extended to us and it is the resurrection that is the foundation of our hope. Building on the great images of the *pilgrimages* undertaken by men like Abraham and his wife Sarah and then Moses and finally the Israelites during the exile in Babylon, 1 Peter speaks of an inheritance that is “kept in heaven”. Given that it is a heavenly reward, it is not something that is going to be weakened or destroyed by the powers of this earth. It is there awaiting the faithful pilgrim and it is a promise that can be relied upon because God is ever faithful.



**Why is the image of pilgrimage so fundamental to our daily lives as disciples of Jesus?**

**Ponder this in light of the Exodus: Divine assistance and judgment, presence, vision, covenant, and God feeding, guiding, protecting**

## **In God alone is there hope because all things rest in God**

Our hope is in God and that hope is not just about what might be awaiting us in the future. In God there is no time as we know it on this earth. God is past, present and future all rolled into one. Thus, what we do, think and say is as much about the future as it is about the present. How we live; what we do; everything about us from birth to death is sanctified by Jesus the incarnate Son of God who is our Christ and Saviour. He is why we are precious in the eyes of God, and why our deeds contributes to this world and to our lives in the world to come. The gift of hope comes to us as a way of energizing us in the hope of transforming the present. The Christian engages the world of today with this living witness of hope.

## Like gold refined in fire

**1:6-9** *In this you rejoice even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials,<sup>7</sup> so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.<sup>8</sup> Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy,<sup>9</sup> for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*

This chapter really needs to be studied in its entirety as Peter brings together a number of themes as he sets out his comprehensive picture of our struggles for faithfulness. The chapter opens with a beautiful traditional Jewish prayer form called a *berakah* “blessing”: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, offering praise to God the Father, the source of mercy, for the benefits Christians have received.*

Mercy is not a word we ponder all that often and yet it was divine mercy that enabled the covenant made with Moses and with David. By speaking of God’s mercy as the basis for the blessings received in Christ in the New Covenant, Peter strongly indicates continuity with the action of God in the Old Covenant. God has not changed!

Peter gives praise to God the Father for two important benefits. The first he describes as being a new birth to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. It is through the resurrection of Christ we receive this new life, a share in the life the Son himself was given on Easter morning from his Father.

The resurrection of Christ is both the *cause* and *source* of our new birth into God’s people and household. This brings us back to the sacrament of baptism—the sacrament of our “new birth” which was initially only celebrated in the early Church at Easter, the feast of the resurrection. This is why Peter keeps talking about a *living hope*. That hope will be complete when Jesus Christ returns again. Knowing that reality is what allows us to transcend the darkness of the present (different to escaping suffering and death). Jesus will return because he is not still lying in the grave. He rose and he lives and is thus our *living hope*.

This *living hope* opens our eyes to see an inheritance Peter says is *imperishable, undefiled and unfading*. Therein is our certainty, a certainty that never fades, even in the darkest of moments. It is unfading because it rests in Christ himself. Whereas all

earthly treasure is subject to decay, Peter assures us that we have an inheritance—eternal life with God—that cannot perish, that has no stain or defect, and that will never lose its glory.

It is guaranteed because God is holding it ready for us in heaven. He holds that inheritance in his sacred hands. In his presence (heaven) there is no moth and rust eat away at and consume that which Christ has won for us by his death and resurrection.

In the incarnation, the distance between heaven and earth was take away. We have *God with us* and so even in this life we are safeguarded through faith by the power of God. This is why we live without being overwhelmed by fear. Not that fear evaporates. It is tempered, limited and controlled by the ever-present *Christ-with-us*. Not even death can hold captive those who live and die in the Lord.

The biblical word for this is *Salvation*. We live now as men and women who are *saved*, and at the same time, look forward to our future destiny that will be ours when Christ returns. Salvation is both present and future; it is something that we have already entered into through faith and baptism but that will be completed only when Christ comes again. The final time refers to Christ's return and the end of the world.

### **What does all that mean for us?**

It is a way of saying what Jesus told Nicodemus in **John 3:3**...*Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. That phrase "born again" talks of God's gift of a new life available only to those born of water and the Spirit.*

Perhaps a better translation might be *born from above*. The Greek allows for both possibilities. Our new life flows out of being made one with God in Christ and through the Spirit, realities made possible for us through faith and the sacrament of baptism. The difficulty here is how being baptised demands a lifetime of growing in Christ. It is not all complete in baptism.

If we pursue this to its logical conclusion, we would celebrate with Peter that we are not born again from seed that perishes. We come from an imperishable seed. It is a helpful



image because we know about seeds. Every kind of seed produces something of its own kind. Grass seed produces grass. Human seed produces humans. In an analogical way, divine seed, the Word of God, produces a new birth that brings about the fruits of divine life in us.

That is truly a beautiful image. As we grow from the seed of faith in us, we grow in the ability to be holy, to love one another and to endure for the sake of Christ. We can love, be merciful, welcoming, compassionate, and witnesses to the Gospel when we grow in Christ. When we nourish that precious seed. As it is with perishable seeds we plant to grow fruit and vegetables in our gardens, if we want to produce the *fruits* demanded of us by Jesus we have to nourish and cultivate this living seed.

**Question:** This is the fundamental starting point for all renewal. It is thus essential that we establish the way we are going to cultivate the seeds planted within us at Baptism. How can we grow our lives further in Christ? What might each of us consider exploring in the area of spirituality?

### **The Peter paradox**

It is only after laying down that foundation Peter now introduces his great paradox: Christians experience joy in the midst of suffering. He goes on to warn us of how we must be ready to suffer through various trials that are an inevitable part of the life of all the faithful. We know this suffering is not the end. There is something more to life and death than the dying itself.

This is where Peter uses the analogy of paralleling the testing of our faith to the purification of gold by fire. If gold, the most precious of earthly substances, requires purification, how much more does our faith—more precious than any earthly gold—benefit from the purifying fire of our trials... *For in fire gold is tested, and worthy men in the crucible of humiliation (Sirach 2:5).*

This does not mean suffering is good. There is nothing inherently good about any kind of suffering. What Peter is offering is the vision possible for those who are *born again, born from above*. As Christ brought life out of death through the love of his Father, so too the faithful can see in the darkness of pain and suffering, the light of hope already shining for them. It is through their witness to the God reigning over them and through them in their suffering and even dying that they offer hope to the world: they say to the world *it's only death*. The paradox is that in death life is changed not ended.

A faith tested is a faith made more pure. We have persevered in faithfulness when we could have more easily compromised the Gospel for the sake of an easy life. When Jesus is revealed in his coming again, all these trials will result in praise, glory, and honour for those who have endured faithfully. They will hear the Lord say, *well done, my good and faithful servant* (**Matt 25:21**). Peter says we should be rejoicing with an indescribable and glorious joy in the present time. Despite serious trials, the living hope we have in Christ brings a joy so profound it transforms the way we live in the world. Here is that paradox again. Hope through faith brings about a deep joy that comes from already possessing a foretaste of our heavenly inheritance.

### **The Hope sandwich**

In our text here we find *joy always dominates*. It comes across *in the structure of the passage*. Either side of the talk of suffering, there is a message about joy. Yes, there will always be suffering and sometimes those trials and tribulations dominate the present to the point where they threaten to overwhelm us. It is then, says Peter, that the strength of our faith brings forth a vision of hope.

Suffering and trial are fenced in, so to speak, by the overwhelming reality of the great joy that is ours even now in Christ.? In the natural order of things, joy and happiness are equated with the absence of suffering. When suffering arrives, sadness and grief naturally follow. But that is not the Peter vision. He speaks of an *indescribable and glorious joy* in the midst of all kinds of suffering but it is a joy obtained only through living the gospel.

Since we have a *new birth* and a *living hope* within us, the trials of life cannot quench our joy. We can see this in the lives of many of the saints and martyrs. Saint Francis called this suffering in joy a *perfect joy*. Jesus had said all before this when he reassured his disciples *blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude and insult you, and denounce your name as evil on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice and leap for joy on that day! Behold, your reward will be great in heaven*” (**Luke 6:22–23**).

Peter's letter is addressed to believers who live "in exile", that is, to suffering Christians. He urges believers to rejoice (1:6,9) in the midst of their suffering. It is not as if they are removed from the harshness and pain of their world. On the contrary, it is in suffering they can find joy, freedom and meaning for life.

For Peter, suffering should be seen as a kind of purification, a test or a trial (to use imagery and language from the Old Testament) and as metal is tested in the fire, so believers are tested in suffering and the apparent silence and absence of God. When a Christian suffers because he or she believes (and this is the kind of suffering of which he speaks) then that person's faith is tested and strengthened. Even "ordinary" suffering that comes as a part of our weak humanity – sickness, disease, accidents, etc – can help to purify the way we understand ourselves in creation and strengthen the resolve of the person who is suffering.



### **Take what we suffer to the Cross**

But here he is not talking about putting up with pain and hardship as there is not much that is necessarily redemptive in a kind of stoic "hanging in there" in the face of pain. Suffering is transformed by faith when it is seen as being caught up into the saving work of God. It is through faith in God that the sufferings we endure now assist in God's transformation of creation. How is this so? For the author it is about our dying to self, about our ability to place ourselves into the hands of God in even the darkest of moments, in even those times when God seems most absent. Redemption comes through dying and as we die to self in these moments of pain, we open ourselves up to being given a new life in Christ.

Believers are urged to love Jesus and to trust in him for to love him is to experience his saving power and it caught up in the saving power of God that our sufferings are changed into joy. We are shown that our joy grows out of a belief that our trust in God is rewarded by his faithfulness to us. Such trust in God brings about the transformation

of the whole of our human existence and through the transformation of the individual believer the transformation of the whole of creation.

Jesus is the one who transforms sorrow into joy, darkness into light. A good example of this is the way Jesus spent His last evening before the cross comforting His disciples.

Jesus understood that it's easier to endure a season of trial if there's an end in sight, so He spent time talking to His followers about the future. At this point, Jesus was just hours from the cross. Still, He reassured His disciples that the time of their suffering would come to an end and would be replaced with joy. In every sense, Jesus was preparing these men for what was about to transpire.

Although Jesus encouraged His disciples, He didn't sugar-coat what was about to happen. The disciples were entering into a time of suffering. They needed to understand how following Jesus meant a fullness-of-life following – good things along with the not-so-good.

He told them they would weep and mourn and warned there would be others who would celebrate His death with great joy. Undoubtedly, the world's gloating would intensify their pain. However, Christ's enemies would not celebrate for long.

Jesus compared what was coming to a woman giving birth. The pains of childbirth are agonizing but must be experienced. However, after a woman gives birth to a child, she is so overjoyed with the baby that she quickly forgets the suffering caused by the labour. In the same way, the disciples would experience intense grief, but when the reality of the risen Christ was revealed to them, their joy would be so intense their suffering would seem minimal. Jesus said,

*a woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world.*

**John 16:21**

*So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. — John 16:22*

For Christians, all suffering has an expiration date. No matter how dark our days may seem, the Bible teaches that all grief will come to an end and will be replaced with eternal peace and gladness. In the book of Revelation, the apostle John wrote,

*He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. — **Revelation 21:4***

**For discussion:**

- What are the "sufferings" we need to "endure" today as we proceed towards the goal of an intimate union in Christ? What is the 'good' we anticipate receiving

during suffering and at the end of our sufferings? In terms of both ourselves and our faith community?

- How might our contemplation of the cross of Christ assist us in persevering through hardship and faith challenges. As individuals? As a parish community?
- Are we able to articulate the nature of the impurities from which our own lives and the life of our faith community in the world need to be “refined”? What is the nature of the refining process? How might we set up this “refining” process?