

When my father, Pastor John Dey, asked me to write a series of devotionals for my home church, I quickly accepted the task on account of the overflow of theological thoughts I have acquired in isolation. Gardner-Webb University transitioned to an online setting in the middle of March, and I have been teaching from afar ever since. My isolation, however, has been quite productive. I have been teaching, uploading lectures, and reading/interpreting the biblical text for my students. On some level, the COVID-19 pandemic opened my eyes to the biblical meaning of “suffering.”

The COVID-19 pandemic occasioned my discovery of how the church should *properly* react to suffering. Persons have reacted quite differently to our current situation. Some have developed conspiracy theories in an effort to reopen the economy and call out the “oppressive” leaders in office. Others have remained aloof to the situation and have pretended that the virus cannot harm them. While others have experienced an overwhelming sense of anxiety and paranoia. The most disturbing reaction, however, has been the rioting on account of the government’s alleged infringement on individual “rights.” Please do not mistake this comment for complete disdain towards all forms of protest—I believe that protests can be powerful if conducted appropriately. Moreover, I empathize with the individuals who riot on account of the hardships or financial strain occasioned by the lockdowns. My concern, however, is directed at the participants who claim that they are “suffering” on account of the government’s “oppressive” tactics (such as limitations on traveling). It seems as though many rioters are protesting minor inconveniences that prohibit their individual rights. In effect, they fail to consider the needs of the society.

My opposition to the latter mentality stems from my love and knowledge of the General Letters (Hebrews, James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, and Jude). While preparing class lectures on these letters, I noticed the overarching theme of *suffering*. These letters also address correct responses to suffering. The General Letters, in my opinion, are the most overlooked texts in the New Testament (if not the entire Bible). However, the profound messages within these letters demand consideration. These letters helped me understand how and why the first-century Christian church suffered, which I believe can provide both encouragement and guidance in the present context.

Before delving into the General Letters, we must journey to the first-century world. The ministries of Jesus and many other figureheads of the Bible arose during times of religious persecution. The Roman Empire was notorious for persecuting religions that opposed *Pax Romana*—Roman Peace. Rome’s conquests and domination, they believed, were dependent on the empire’s relationship with the gods. Roman officials believed that as long as the empire appeased the gods, the gods would enable Rome’s continued success. As a result, Rome forced its citizens and subjects to worship the emperor and the Roman pantheon. Most polytheistic religions were unaffected by such demands; however, Christianity and Judaism’s monotheistic beliefs precluded the worship of any other deity except for Yahweh. Roman officials interpreted this belief as an attack against the Roman Empire, for it allegedly threatened the empire’s stability and the relationship with the gods. As such, Christians were either persecuted or were forced to worship the emperor and the gods. Most likely, opposers of the Roman order were executed. Paul and many of Jesus’ disciples suffered this fate. Those “lucky” enough to survive were subjected to extreme peer pressure to abandon their Christian beliefs for the sake of the Roman Empire.

When we see terms related to “suffering” in the New Testament, we need to picture this oppressive reality. If we read the Bible carefully, we can see the anguish and emotion of the authors. In James 1:1, the author describes the audience as “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.” Similarly, in 1 Peter 1:1, we are introduced to the letter’s audience, “the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.” Both of these authors describe the audiences (two separate audiences) as exilic. Those familiar with the Old Testament will recognize this callback to the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles, moments in history when two foreign empires forced Israel and Judah into exile. The authors, therefore, are describing these audiences as oppressed—as the marginalized in their respective societies. Members of these audiences were undergoing extreme “peer pressure” from their neighbors. Roman citizens and subjects would ostracize the Christians because they refused to worship the emperor and the Roman gods. Christians were physically and emotionally abused unless they committed apostasy—the abandonment of the faith. In the first-century world, Christians received minimal rights as a consequence of their faith.

The most convicting parts of these letters are the authors’ instructions to maintain a Christian identity amidst persecution. Nowhere in the Books of James and 1 Peter are the audiences allowed to pity themselves. First Peter 1:17 charges

the audience to “live in reverent fear during the time of your exile.” Despite such catastrophe, these audiences were instructed to maintain their Christian identity amidst imperial persecution. How, then, do these books describe the Christian identity? And, how can we relate this identity to the COVID-19 pandemic?

As Christians, we are called to maintain our Christian identity no matter the suffering or situation. Each author offers a similar perspective as to the underlying purpose of a Christian: *to care for others*. James charges the recipients to care for the powerless. According to James in 1:27, “*religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*” He later quotes the golden rule to encourage the audience to treat the poor with dignity and respect. First Peter 2:12 charges the audience to serve as examples to the Gentiles—the persons who are persecuting them due to their faith. James and Peter command the audiences to maintain their Christian identity, which entails service and caring for persons in the world. Most importantly, the audiences’ Roman rights were of no concern for the authors because they are heirs and citizens of the kingdom of God, not Rome. Hope is found in God’s kingdom, not in Rome.

From this brief synopsis of James and Peter’s understanding of the Christian identity, there are many lessons we can glean from the audiences’ responses to suffering. The General Letters assisted me in rationalizing my suffering compared to the suffering of the first-century church. Although we are certainly suffering on account of COVID-19, I am grateful that my true identity—my identity as a Christian—has remained intact. Although we are suffering on account of unwanted restrictions, we do not live in a nation or a first-century world where Christians are outlaws. We can fulfill our Christian identity despite the current (and *temporary*) restrictions. We are obligated to maintain our Christian identity amidst this pandemic. Christians are called to act according to God’s commandments and to care for the marginalized, no matter the circumstances. Thus, we need to prioritize the needs of our neighbors. Although our meetings have transitioned to an online setting, we can still care for the marginalized of the society—which may require forfeiting some of our desires or our sense of normalcy. The audiences of the General Letters were not instructed to “bear arms” or to fight for their rights as Roman citizens; the audiences were charged to forgo their Roman citizenships for the kingdom of God. The problem with how many Christians respond to this pandemic is that their responses expose their true loyalty. Individualism has influenced many in the western world. As such,

when “rights” are restricted (such as having to wear a mask in public) many people riot for the wrong reasons and identify themselves as oppressed. To state differently, individuals fight for their *own* American privileges. It seems as though many Christians have forgotten their Christian duty (to care for others) in fear of losing their American rights.

My questions to you are questions that many Anabaptists before me have asked: Where should our allegiance lie? Does our identity as Americans overrule our identity as Christ-followers? I fear that many Christians would struggle to answer these questions honestly in our current context. The Christian identity underscores the mandate to care for others. Although we are all suffering, we must find unique ways to fulfill this biblical obligation—we must prioritize the marginalized and the community. Individualism must be placed aside.

