

SOLITUDE SHORTS *from* HODDER FAITH

ESSAYS IN EXTRAORDINARY TIMES

Solitude Shorts is a series of essays from Hodder & Stoughton, provided free of charge for Christian reflection during the Covid-19 pandemic. Isolation may well be the word of the moment, but perhaps we might rather reframe this time as one set apart for solitude, something Christians have sought throughout the ages. For we are never isolated from God, who is closer to us than we are to ourselves, in the words of St Augustine. As the title suggests, the essays are all brief, taking approximately only five minutes to read. Please distribute them to whomever you feel might gain some encouragement. If you would like to receive these essays directly on publication, please [fill in your details here](#) to be added to our newsletter. Today's essay is written by a medical doctor in Syria, who has been in self-imposed lockdown in his house for more than three years. His essay is addressed to those of us in the U.K. and contains real wisdom from his own experience of how he coped when the world changed around him.

Storms of Solitude

by

'Dr A' and Samara Levy

A message from a Syrian Christian in isolation

Closing the front door was one of the most dreadful moments of my life. It was the day my place of safety became my prison. I not only closed the door on my life but also on my identity, on my self. I was a very successful doctor, living a lovely life, in the most beautiful place on earth, surrounded by family, friends and community. One day we woke to find our world had changed beyond recognition. Our world mutated into a *real* dystopia. We were in that place that you are in now. We also saw stockpiling, people fleeing, others staying home, community efforts to care for those who were wounded, grieving or destitute.

We also saw hundreds, sometimes thousands, of deaths every day. The weapons did not discriminate, yet the majority of our dead were young people. War measures meant the freedoms we had had before, now became a distant memory. Most people kept the new rules; others broke them; still others profiteered or stole from hospitals. We all paid a very high price in this war. And we learnt to swallow a new normal.

At the peak of the war I was the busiest doctor in Syria, treating thousands of patients each month. People were broken and mutilated, and I put my heart into mending them. I had worked and studied hard to build my career and reputation as the best in my field. But my situation changed overnight. God instructed me to withdraw from my community and isolate myself, for more than three years. I cannot share the reasons now, but will be able to do so soon. God was protecting me yet, on the face of it, it was the most illogical decision I have ever made, and the most distressing. It was a sacrifice. Suddenly I could not leave my home, speak with friends or even interact with neighbours. I was shut away from society. Nor could I share the burdens of this loneliness. No one understood. Not even my closest family.

The days of the week have lost meaning. Along with the weeks, months and years they have come to be measured instead by the number of sunsets I see. My calendar works around the day the milkman arrives. My daily routine is ruled by the time my family return home. Hours are marked by the number of logs burnt in winter or the cups of tea I drink.

Watching the sunset has become a ceremony. I have gained a new pleasure from the vibrant and noisy evensong performed before the birds fall silent as the blanket of dusk rolls out each night. This has become a new form of worshipping God, as the sun leaves the day

behind. It seems dreamlike; each sunset different from the one before. The colours and shapes change each night. As I watch, I pray, thanking God for the beautiful picture he paints each evening, giving me this contentment. The last breath of the day whispers softly, sweeping over me, just as the sun vanishes below the horizon. With each sunset, I tell myself I had never experienced this kind of joy in my busy old life, nor this peace in my heart. I simply sit in the presence of God. I'm no longer in control, no longer rushing. Just God and me, side by side.

As those initial days in the house blended into weeks, months and, then, years, the old doctor was deconstructed, humbled and broken down, just like my hospital, destroyed by a bomb. The identity I had built began to disappear. But as I lost myself, I found a more precious identity in Jesus. As I distanced myself from the world, he welcomed me into his world. He rearranged my priorities. At first, I tried to keep my old life. There was a sense of safety and comfort in my routine, even in a war zone like Syria. But I became a different person. I began to have new dreams, hopes, routines and a new mission in life. But it only happened when I embraced change. Acceptance was challenging, yet essential to moving forward. I had to let go of my old dreams, hopes and routines. The things which had given me a sense of safety were the very things which, before, had held me back. Once I let go, God began to rebuild me. He gave me a desire to start learning the guitar. (I had never had any interest in learning music). I started to do carpentry and carving, when I had never even held a nail before. Every time I created something, I felt surprised.

I began to achieve more in God's mission, too. The work to build a hospital, distribute aid, support war orphans and widows with a long-term vision goes on even today. I no longer feel it is me who is really doing it. I am just a channel God uses. I am no longer fighting for *my* vision, reputation, or what I think I should do. I am now simply open, listening to him. Previously I had trusted our old medical system or the supermarkets, filling my car with fuel, or going to meet people. My new trust is simply in God, that he will protect me. I did trust God in the past, but for what I wanted or thought I needed. Now I understand my trust must be for his will, not for mine.

No matter how hard the storms rage, God is in control. It may feel as though Jesus is sleeping while the storms blow around or inside us. But we can learn so much through experiencing the wind and waves. In these moments we grow, become closer to God, catching a glimpse of his vision for our lives. Often, our prayer is that the storm should pass, yet still God allows us to encounter it. Each storm we survive strengthens us. Through surrender and prayer, we can find the most peaceful place, with him, in the eye of the storm. God is good, and will refresh your heart. Now, in your quiet place, listen carefully to his voice as he talks to you.

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Solitude Shorts: Essays in Extraordinary Times © Hodder & Stoughton. Issue 4, 1/5/20. Edited by Andy Lyon. Written by 'Dr A' and Samara Levy. Samara Levy runs [Samara's Aid Appeal](#), an organisation geared towards serving Syria and the Middle East with medical and humanitarian help. They are currently raising funds for a new hospital in Syria which is currently being designed. You can read more about Samara's story in her recent book, [Rebuilding the Ruins](#), published in 2019 by Hodder & Stoughton. All royalties go back into supporting Samara's ministry to those who are poor, vulnerable, broken and spiritually hungry. Samara can be contacted [via her website](#).

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