

***Inside* Life**

Issue 33
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The Greatest Pandemic

Shots in the dark

The benefits of slow

**Where is God
in a coronavirus world?**

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Inside Life

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Inside Life is a magazine of understanding. Rather than just reporting on life, **Inside Life** seeks to delve inside the marvellous mystery that is life, to discover what it is all about. What does life mean? Where did it come from? How can we make the most of it?

Inside Life provides insight and answers to life's deep questions and challenges, and aims to provide articles of lasting hope, help, and encouragement for successful living in today's fast-moving world.

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Our Cover: As the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic continues its devastating rampage across the planet, our lead article identifies an even more deadly virus, one which has infected every person who has ever lived.

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2020—*what a calamitous year for the world!*

The greatest pandemic

by Rex Morgan

The COVID-19 coronavirus has rampaged across the planet, and seems to have hijacked us and taken our lives captive.

Millions have been infected. Hundreds of thousands have died. Companies too many to number have gone bankrupt, with multiple jobs lost, schools closed, and

countless people left impoverished and grieving. Most nations have been sealed off from the rest of the world. Who would have believed it was possible just a year ago?

But as catastrophic as it has been, COVID-19 is not the greatest pandemic of all time. There have been other immensely destructive ones, including HIV/AIDS, SARS, Cholera and Ebola. The 1918 influenza pandemic killed around 50 million people. The Black Death,

also known as the Plague, killed an estimated 75 to 200 million in the 14th century, about half the population of Europe at that time.

But these dreadful diseases shrink into insignificance when compared with another noxious infection that has been storming across the globe for millennia. This vicious virus has been caught by everybody on earth today, and in fact has infected every single person who has ever lived! One hundred percent of all people



Pandemics are nothing new. This engraving of the devastation of the Black Plague pandemic in Naples in 1656 was created by Micco Spadaro, an eyewitness to its horrors.

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have tested positive for this deadly plague—the virus of sin.

Sin is a spiritual rather than a physical virus, but it has had terrible physical consequences. It has brought nations to their knees, filled multiple jails with prisoners and hospitals with patients, and ruined countless marriages and families. It has wreaked far more havoc around the world than any other disease.

What is this virus called sin? Sin is usually thought of in a religious context, referring to disobedience against the laws of God. But you don't need to know any of those laws to recognise what sin is. Most people naturally understand that behaviours like stealing, lying, murder, jealousy, and hatred are bad, harmful, and reprehensible actions that cause pain and difficulty for ourselves and others.

Even in a secular setting sin is defined as “an act regarded as a serious or regrettable fault, offence, or omission”.¹ But although we acknowledge that actions of this type are wrong, all of us have indulged in them at times, and most of us rather frequently, resulting in untold hurt and pain.

The Bible records that sin began right back with the first humans, Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden. It traces the disease down to the very first infection, the “patient zero” at the origin of a cluster that has multiplied relentlessly all the way down through history until today—a gigantic cluster, encircling all of humanity! The Bible declares that everyone has sinned,² and that sin has caused death to come upon us all.³

If there is a loving God, it is fair to ask the question: “Why doesn't he prevent this?” God knows very well that it's happening, of course, or he wouldn't be God. And he vehemently dislikes it! But he has reluctantly permitted the presence of sin because he is working out an ultimate purpose through it all.



A stained glass depiction of Adam and Eve being expelled from Paradise for their sin against God.

It is natural to assume that if there is a God, he is the one in charge of all that happens in the world. But how can that be reconciled with the perilous state the world is in: the poverty, crime, wars, and disasters that abound? The Bible's answer is that God does not control everything that occurs on earth at this time, but has given permission to an adversary, called in the Bible Satan the devil, to have temporary authority over the planet.

The Bible reveals that this Satan is a powerful spirit being originally created as an angel, who became resentful of God's authority and eventually rebelled against his maker.⁴ God exiled Satan to the earth, where he has allowed him a short time of dominion.⁵

Satan is described variously in the Bible as "the God of this world",⁶ "the prince of the power of the air",⁷ and "the prince of this world".⁸ We are told that he has taken humanity captive to do his will,⁹ and the whole world lies under his sway.¹⁰

The Bible makes the startling statement that "Satan has deceived the whole world".¹¹ This is the ultimate cause explaining the evil and suffering abounding all over our beleaguered planet.

Most people are totally oblivious to this situation, and don't have a clue they are deceived. Of course, by definition, if they did know it, they would no longer be deceived!

When you come to think of it, it is obvious that God isn't controlling things on earth because human beings and governments clearly aren't following his way of showing nothing but love to ourselves and our neighbours in everything we do. Rather, God allows us the capacity for free choice and we humans have used that to decide for ourselves how to conduct our lives. This is exactly what Satan wants us to do, ever since he encouraged Adam and Eve to take the fruit from the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil"

The images of the coronavirus show it as a furry ball, covered with prickly spikes or nodules that can be compared to the deadly tentacles of sin—hatred, lust, pride, jealousy, and greed—that latch onto our minds and drag us into evil.



forbidden to them by God. By this act they demonstrated that they were taking for themselves the choice of what was right and wrong, as Satan had deceived them to do.

So the world is clearly following the ways of Satan at this time, and accordingly is subject to the massive pandemic of sin, a disease that has many similarities with the physical coronavirus, an organism that is microscopically tiny, invisible to the human eye.

When they begin, sins are tiny too, and invisible. They can start as a passing evil or negative thought in our mind, but that can take hold and grow quickly until they turn into actions. A fleeting desire to obtain for ourselves something we set our eyes on can quickly mature into an act of stealing. A thought of dislike can develop into an attitude of hatred which later manifests itself as an act of murder. The virus incubates secretly in our minds until the fact that we have it eventually becomes visible to all.

We're all familiar with the images of the coronavirus that show it as a furry ball covered with prickly spikes or nodules. Those spikes can be compared to the deadly tentacles of sin—like hatred, lust, pride, jealousy, and greed—impulses that latch onto our minds and drag us into evil.

The coronavirus spreads rapidly. It just takes one person to cough or sneeze or touch a few surfaces and it can race like wildfire through a community. And sin is just like that. One person with thoughts of hatred can share them with others and incite them to join in committing all sorts of dastardly deeds.

Just as there is a test for COVID-19, so there is one for sin. You may have taken the COVID test, but have you done the sin test?

The test for sin is to look into the Bible and see how you measure up to the righteousness of God. Just like the nasal swab test for COVID, this test is somewhat unpleasant. Sadly, everyone who takes the spiritual test comes out positive for sin.

So what can we do about the spiritual virus of sin? Washing our hands thoroughly using soap or hand sanitiser is important in fighting COVID-19, and so it is spiritually.

The Bible counsels us to “Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded”.¹² This is a reference to spiritual, or metaphorical, hands and hearts, representing the inner sources of our thoughts and emotions.

We need to wash our spiritual “hands” of sin by using the spiritual sanitiser or soap of God’s cleansing word. Studying the Bible and applying what it says is the way to do that kind of inner or “deep cleaning”. We can be cleaned up by the water of God’s word, as we look at it, think

about it and let it wash around in our minds and purify our hearts.¹³

Quarantine and self-isolation are important in combatting the coronavirus too, and on a spiritual level it’s important to keep away from anyone who would lead us into sin. The Bible warns us about this danger, telling us to avoid certain people and ideas that might lead us astray. We need to be scrupulously careful about the company we keep, and the books, movies, and media we view, because there is a lot of spiritual error in the world around us, and it is contagious.

Another vital measure in combatting the physical virus is the wearing of face masks. The spiritual counterpart here is to take up the “shield of faith”,

which the biblical writer Paul urges us to do in order to “extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one”.¹⁴ He goes on to describe other protective equipment such as “the belt of truth”, “the breastplate of righteousness”, and “the helmet of salvation”,¹⁵ in other words, encouraging us to put on what we could call our full “spiritual PPE gear”.

Paul explains the reason we need this protection: we are struggling “not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms”.¹⁶ Here is another confirmation that Satan holds authority over planet earth at this time.



This African man is wearing personal protective equipment—mask, goggles, face shield, and suit—to prevent the spread of coronavirus. For Christians the “spiritual PPE gear” includes the shield of faith, the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, and the helmet of salvation.



Washing hands, wearing masks, and self-isolating are important, but the ultimate solution the world is looking for is a vaccine. The race is on, with thousands of scientists searching for the elusive vaccine to cure COVID-19.

Thankfully the good news for the world is that the cure for the sin virus has already been found! There is a tested and proven vaccine that is 100% effective. That life-giving vaccine is none other than the blood of Jesus Christ! Jesus is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world”.¹⁷

It is important for vaccines to go through rigorous testing before they can be put into general use. Ultimately they have to be tested in humans to prove their effectiveness. Jesus came as a human and went through severe testing. The scriptures describe him as being “our high priest who has been tested in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin”.¹⁸

In the same way that physical vaccines are injected into us, Jesus enters into our spiritual heart to protect us from sin.¹⁹ The Bible confirms that an inoculation of his

blood is the cure for the virus of sin, stating that “the blood of Jesus the Son purifies us from all sin. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”.²⁰

So God is not currently exercising hands-on control of everything that happens on earth. Rather, he has permitted Satan to have temporary dominion over the planet, and the devil has used this opportunity to deceive all of humanity into thinking it is best that we “do it our way” rather than following God’s ways. But God has a grand purpose behind all of this, and eventually we will all come to realise we can’t successfully “do it ourselves”, but need God’s grace and direction in our lives.²¹ Many Christians have already come to that understanding, and have taken the vaccine to neutralise the sin virus. If you would like to join them, why not visit a Bible-believing church in your neighbourhood next Sunday?

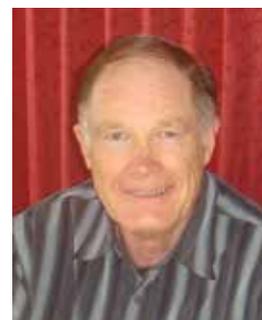
As the world continues to fight the deadly coronavirus, it is important to be alert and aware of our personal fight against the virus of sin, the greatest pandemic the world has ever seen. Thankfully we have the sure solution—we can take the

life-saving vaccine of the blood of Jesus Christ into our lives, thereby overpowering sin.

What’s more, by God’s grace we can look forward to a future time when God promises total elimination of the sin virus from all lives forever. The closing chapters of the Bible show that a time is coming when God “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”.²²

NOTES

- ¹ Oxford English Dictionary (<https://www.lexico.com/definition/sin>).
- ² Romans 3:23.
- ³ Romans 5:12.
- ⁴ Isaiah 14:12–14; Ezekiel 28:13–17.
- ⁵ Revelation 12:7–9.
- ⁶ 2 Corinthians 4:3–4.
- ⁷ Ephesians 2:2.
- ⁸ John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11.
- ⁹ 2 Timothy 2:26.
- ¹⁰ 1 John 5:19.
- ¹¹ Revelation 12:9.
- ¹² James 4:8.
- ¹³ Ephesians 5:26.
- ¹⁴ Ephesians 6:16.
- ¹⁵ Ephesians 6:10–17.
- ¹⁶ Ephesians 6:12.
- ¹⁷ John 1:29.
- ¹⁸ Hebrews 4:15.
- ¹⁹ Ephesians 3:17; 2 Corinthians 13:5.
- ²⁰ John 1:7–9.
- ²¹ Romans 11:32.
- ²² Revelation 21:4.



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Why is there power in love?

by Richard Fowler

The world watched when Prince Harry and Megan Markle were married at Windsor in 2018. It was fairy-tale-like all over. Maybe you, like me, were mesmerised by this marriage. But why?

Well, it's hard to put your finger on. But there is something powerful, almost poetic, when you see two young people in love, committing themselves to one another. Then throw in a prince, a horse and carriage and some royalty, and you have quite the formula.

But there is another reason why this force of love—in any form or shape it takes—is so powerful. And so essential to our very being.

The answer was contained within the Bishop's fiery message that day. The break-out star, Michael Curry, president of the US Episcopal Church, lit up St George's Chapel with some wisdom for us all. "There's power in love", he said. "There is a certain sense in which when you are loved, and you know it...when you love, and you show

it, it actually feels right. There's something right about it. And there is a reason for it. And the reason has to do with the source. We were made by a power of love. And our lives were meant, and are meant to be lived in that love. That's why we are here. Ultimately the source of love is God himself. The source of all of our lives."

When you and I love, we align ourselves with the source of life—God. We are living out our true image, we are seeking something higher, something bigger than ourselves. A new way of thinking

and acting, a better way that brings better results. But more than that.

When we discover the godly kind of love, not a cheap, sentimentalised version that is often masqueraded on reality TV programmes, then something profound can happen. Martin Luther King Jr put it this way: "We must discover the power of love, the power, the redemptive power of love. And when we discover that we will be able to make of this old world a new world. We will be able to make men better. Love is the only way".



The Most Reverend Michael Curry, primate of the Episcopal Church, preached during the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle in St George's Chapel at Windsor Castle on 19 May 2018.

It's in my hands



by Barry Robinson

I've never paid so much attention to my hands as I have done since the COVID-19 crisis started. Washing them for 20 seconds while singing "Happy Birthday" twice, and before social distancing came in, politely declining to shake hands.

All this got me thinking: "Where did the custom of shaking hands come from in the first place?"

A popular theory suggests that extending empty hands shows that you aren't holding any weapons and that shaking hands would loosen any weapon concealed in a person's sleeves. Another theory is that the handshake was a symbol of good faith, friendship, and trust between people.

The earliest depiction of the handshake is from the 9th century BC when Assyrian King Shalmaneser III is shown shaking hands with a Babylonian king as they formed an alliance. In Ancient Greece, the joining together of right hands is shown on funeral art where dead

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people shake hands with a family member signifying a final farewell and an eternal bond. This form of handshake is also seen on ancient coins showing the bond between two cities. The English Quakers of the 17th century AD added another dimension: for them handshaking was their way of showing equality between people, rather than the stuffy bowing and curtsying of the formally structured society in which they lived.¹

I found all this history fascinating, but what really grabbed my attention is the word for "beloved friend" from the Old Testament of the Bible. Written originally in Hebrew, the word *yedid* means literally "two hands", suggesting two friends walking together while holding hands. In that culture how was friendship shown? By clasping and shaking hands. When you shake hands, no one has the upper hand. You are both equal and so true friendship can exist.²

It has taken something as dramatic and overwhelming as the coronavirus pandemic to make me realise that there really is no substitute for shaking hands. All the innovative ways we've come up with to replace it during this crisis, like bumping shoulders

or touching feet, never quite convey that feeling of warmth and friendship summed up in a handshake.

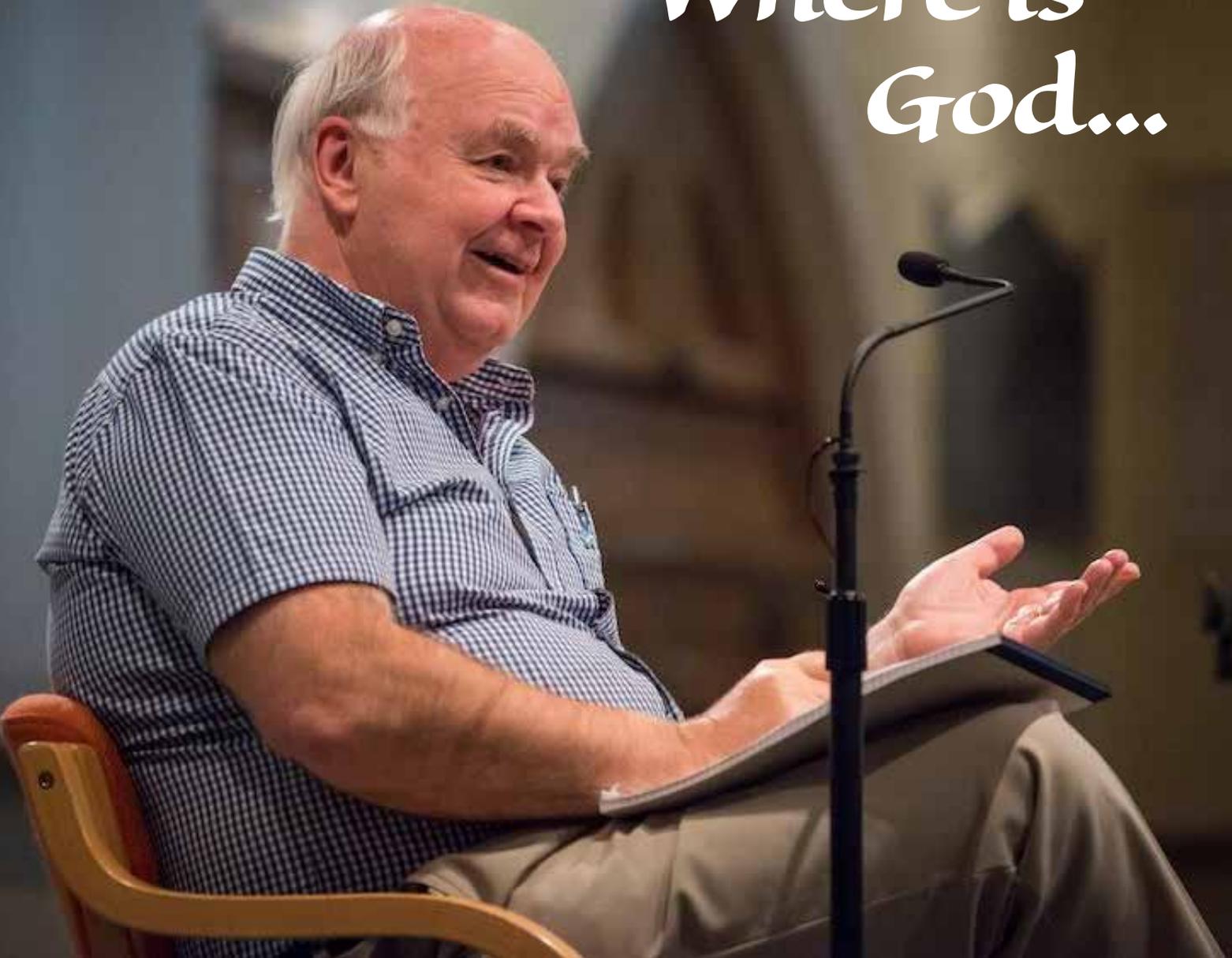
With social distancing and self-isolation, we may not be able to shake anyone's hand at the moment, but thankfully we are seeing many acts of kindness where people are figuratively holding hands with one another. This is very much in keeping with the spirit of another person from history, a Galilean preacher by the name of Jesus, who stressed the importance of giving the hungry something to eat, of giving the thirsty something to drink, and of caring for those who are ill.³

These simple acts of kindness and compassion mean so much to people. If I claim to be a follower of this Galilean preacher, then I know that these things must begin with me. It's in my hands.

NOTES

- ¹ "What are the origins of handshake? Learn the interesting history behind handshake", Facts catalogue, 28 May 2017, <https://factsc.com/history-behind-handshake/>
- ² "The meaning of the number fourteen", Rabbi Dr Hillel ben David (Greg Killian), <https://www.betemunah.org/fourteen.html>
- ³ Matthew 25:34–36, New International Version.

Where is God...



in a coronavirus world?

John C Lennox, Professor of Mathematics at Oxford University, internationally renowned speaker and author of several books on the interface of science, philosophy, and religion, discusses a topic being widely debated by today's Christian community. From his recently published book, *Where is God in a Coronavirus World?*, the following has been extracted, to give an overview of his thoughts on this important and timely subject.

10

In the past, in times of national disaster in the West, people have flocked into churches and national leaders have made calls for prayer. Such occurrences are rare today.

Nowadays, fewer and fewer people have any God-dimension whatsoever in their lives. Since all over the world churches are being closed in order to limit the spread of the virus, many are asking where God is—that is, if he is there at all. Is he in inaccessible self-quarantine?

Where, or from whom, can we get real solace or hope?

Coronavirus confronts us all with the problem of pain and suffering. This, for most of us, is one of life's hardest problems. Experience rightly makes us suspicious of simplistic answers and facile attempts to come to terms with it.

We each need to make sense of coronavirus in three different ways: intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. All are important—and

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together they present a formidable challenge to anyone.

A worldview

I have a worldview. I am a Christian, and I shall therefore try to make clear why I think that Christianity has something to say about the issue of natural disasters like coronavirus, something that is not to be found elsewhere.

Your worldview will make a difference to how you react to disasters like the coronavirus pandemic, and to earthquakes or tsunamis. For example, many theists responded to the earthquakes in Christchurch, New Zealand by affirming their faith in God in the words of Psalm 46:

God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear,
though the earth give way and
the mountains fall into the heart
of the sea, though its waters roar
and foam and the mountains
quake with their surging.¹

Other theists say that pandemics, earthquakes and tsunamis are a direct judgment of God—as indeed people of various religions suggested in the case of the earthquakes and tsunamis in Japan (in 2011) and

New Zealand (in 2016). This is a very crude response that causes a lot of unnecessary hurt.

According to the Bible, it is not true that if someone suffers some severe illness or accident, we should conclude that he or she has secretly been guilty of serious sins. Popular thought has often imagined that this must be the Bible's standpoint. But the whole book of Job in the Old Testament is a protest against that idea. Job's pain and suffering are caused by a mixture of natural and moral evil. Jesus, likewise, explicitly denied that suffering was necessarily connected with personal wrongdoing.²

All this said, it is clearly a part of Christian teaching that although not all disaster and disease is a judgment of God (as in the case of Job), nevertheless some is.

But God is not taken aback by the coronavirus; he can work for good even in the evil of it, and his plans will not be thwarted by it, although in situations like the present crisis it can be very hard for us to take this on board. At the same time, we are responsible for our own responses to the crisis and to each other—for he has given us that freedom.

We live in a world where things go wrong, and where humans are able to choose to do wrong (or right). A Christian, then, is not a person who has solved the problem of suffering, but one who has come to love and trust the God who has suffered for them.

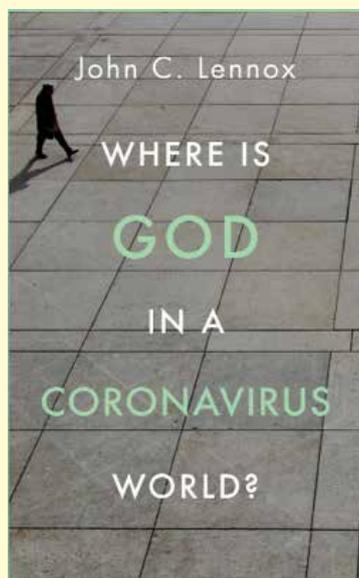
So how should Christians respond to the pandemic? There are several different levels on which to answer this question.

First, on the practical level, we would be wise to take heed of the best medical advice of the day. Interestingly, in ancient biblical times, the Israelites were also instructed about the need for quarantine to prevent the spread of infectious illnesses. The Old Testament book of Leviticus even prescribed seven days' isolation for some diseases, and an indefinite period for others. We also know something about how the Christian community responded to them.

In a recent article entitled "Christianity Has Been Handling Epidemics for 2000 Years", Lyman Stone, a research fellow at the Institute for Family Studies and an advisor at the consulting firm Demographic Intelligence, wrote this:

WHERE IS GOD IN A CORONAVIRUS WORLD?

by John C. Lennox



“No voice in the Western world is clearer and wiser than that of John Lennox. For all who want to pause to think, this is the book to read.”

Os Guinness, Author, Unspeakable and Fool's Talk

“A timely reminder of eternal truths. Writing with warmth, care, and insight, John Lennox addresses some of the questions and fears many of us are wrestling with right now.”

Michael Ramsden, President, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries (RZIM)

Published by The Good Book Company, April 2020, P/b 64pp,
ISBN 9781784985691. Available from www.thegoodbook.co.uk.
Cover design, André Parker.

Shots

Historians have suggested that the terrible Antonine Plague of the 2nd century, which might have killed off a quarter of the Roman Empire, led to the spread of Christianity, as Christians cared for the sick and offered a spiritual model whereby plagues were not the work of angry and capricious deities but the product of a broken Creation in revolt against a loving God.

The coronavirus and all the plagues that have ravaged the world will be no more. The crown of righteousness that will be given to those who love the Lord Jesus will never perish or fade. Peace in a pandemic? Only Jesus can give that. The issue for all of us is this: will we trust him to do so?

Do I think I have answered all the questions that this crisis has raised? No, I don't. Far from it. I am personally left with many ragged edges and issues on which I would like to have more clarity. One day I shall have it: "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known".³

In the meantime, I shall follow the advice of the great 19th-century preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon: "God is too good to be unkind and He is too wise to be mistaken. And when we cannot trace His hand, we must trust His heart".

NOTES

¹ Psalm 46:1-3.

² Luke 13:1-5.

³ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

The excerpts from the book Where is God in a Coronavirus World? have been made possible by the gracious permission of both the publisher and author. If you would like to read the book in its entirety, it can be purchased as either a printed copy or a digital download at: www.thegoodbook.co.uk.

Some say killing a person changes you. Here's how shooting a man dead changed this writer, who has withheld his name.

In films and on TV people die quickly, quietly, and immediately after being shot. In real life it is different. A heart shot or brain shot will kill quickly, but in the heat of battle, firing an accurate shot is very difficult.

It was summer 1964, in Borneo, at one of the forward bases. We heard gunshots at around 12:30am. The bullets hit the sandbags and whistled over the compound. The sentries returned fire, not knowing where to aim. In the jungle the darkness is thick and black. In the trenches you

can't even see the man next to you. The compound was on a hill with vegetation cut back to give a clear field of fire for 100 yards. But once the enemy had fired, they moved quickly to a new position, so not even the gun flash would show you where to aim.

By the time we were in the trenches the officer of the day had fired a flare, giving us a couple of minutes of light to look downhill at the thick, dark treeline. Nothing moved. But we knew they were there. We could only wait, peering into the blackness illuminated at random intervals by a flare. Between flares a shot or two would be fired but by 2am it had gone completely quiet. You strain eyes and ears to see and hear but...



in the dark

nothing. If you are not careful your imagination plays tricks on you and you see movement that is not there.

Just before 3am, another flare went up and, as it did, we again looked for danger. Suddenly, bullets whistled past me just yards away. Then I heard the GPMG (General Purpose Machine Gun, which can fire a thousand rounds in a minute) cracking off a burst, and I wondered what they were shooting at. Discipline kicked in and I fired my own submachine gun. Immediately after I held down the trigger, ten or twelve bullets exploded into an enemy's body. For a moment he disappeared but then, in the dying light of the flare, I saw his boots maybe a yard or two away. The

bullets had thrown him on his back and for a second there was silence. Then a groan of pain, a gasp for breath.

Another flare shows the enemy stretched out, his boots facing us, his weapon a few feet away from his outstretched arm. For about 45 minutes, we listen to his groans of pain, his gasps for breath, the gaps between them getting longer. No one leaves the trench to investigate and the night goes quiet.

It is a long wait for the dawn as I fight the urge to be sick in the darkness. Dawn comes and we cautiously check the ground in front of us. A patrol goes down to the treeline very carefully and disappears into the trees. About fifteen or twenty minutes later they emerge, giving the all clear.

We climb out of the trench and examine the dead body. We count eight bullet holes across his ribcage and stomach. With instant medical attention in a first-class hospital he may have survived but that wasn't available here. He died slowly and painfully, and the groans stay in my head for a long time. At the bottom of the slope, just in front of the treeline, another enemy lies dead, his head removed from his body as neatly as if done by a skilled surgeon. He had been kneeling in the arc of fire from the GPMG.

We all try to act casually and calmly as if this is an everyday occurrence.

As soon as I can I slip away to the latrine, brushing off congratulations from my fellow soldiers. I'm briefly sick and then dry heave for several minutes as the enormity of what I have done hits me hard. A long-serving sergeant, who has seen action elsewhere, has seen me leave for the latrine. He comes and pats me on the back, says quiet words of encouragement, but does not attempt to make me stop heaving. He is calm and understanding, having experienced what I now was experiencing. He tells me this is what I was trained for, praises my reaction and discipline, tells me to get something to eat and drink in the cookhouse, then quietly leaves.

I asked myself some deep, searching questions. What will happen to those two dead enemies? What will happen to me at the end of my life? I found myself wondering, is there a God?

It was 10 long years before the urge to know God overwhelmed me. This led me on another journey, another kind of training. I started studying the Bible, and going to church became a vital part of my life. I came to understand Christianity and began to experience a peace of mind that I had not experienced before, even finding peace with my Borneo experiences. I came to find answers to the questions I had asked myself all those years ago. Sometimes it takes a crisis in our lives to make us face up to and ask the tough questions. I found the answers by seeking God and starting a relationship with him. I found God was ready for me. And I believe, when the time is right, he will be ready for you too.



The benefits of s-l-o-w

by Richard Fowler

A song is playing right now in Germany. In stark contrast to our fast-paced way of life, this piece of music is expected to have a duration of 639 years!

Entitled “As slow as possible”, fans of this musical adagio on steroids flocked on 5 September 2020 to the



This organ tucked away in St Burchardi Abbey Church, Halberstadt, Germany, is in the process of playing John Cage’s “As slow as possible,” a piece of music that will last for 639 years if played continuously.

small church where it’s being played to witness its first chord change in seven years. Starting 19 years ago, this is the world’s longest and slowest piece of music. If you’re interested in the next chord change, it will sound on 5 February 2022.

In our instant, short-attention, hyper-information world, this song reminds us we can still go slow in such fanaticism. And maybe this is for the better.

This year most of us have experienced the forced blessing of having to slow down: the pandemic made sure of that. The results? More time to think, more time with family, more time to look and listen. More emotional availability for others. And for some, even a time to re-evaluate their lives. I am trying to hold on to the new-found art of slow. It’s an art that I think, if practised more, would be an antidote to an increasingly common problem.

One of the realities of an instant world, made possible by technology, is our immediate consumption of real-world, real-time videos, tweets, and news about events that have happened hours, sometimes even minutes ago. We have a sense of omnipotence, a god-like feeling that comes with knowing immediately what is happening on the other side of the world. I like, and even make an effort, to be well-informed. But this instant information, much of it short, diluted snippets, encourages us to be quick to judge.

Recently, due to the ubiquitous phone camera, we have been transported into the chaos of controversial deaths, arrest, protests, riots, and non-social distancing events in the UK, the US, and Australia. In so many cases we become the public jury, the armchair arbiters, to such events. But often our judgments—our outrage—becomes part of the problem.

And if we are honest with ourselves, we seldom have the facts that tell us the true nature and picture of an incident consumed only through the lens of a phone. The consequence is that the narrative of a situation becomes more influential than the facts (facts are by nature time-honoured). This immediate judgment, often being acted upon in the form of public outrage, tweeter rants, Facebook feuds, and even protests and riots, is putting strain on community cohesion.

In such an instant-viewing world, it is good from time to time to remember to tame our judgment, slowing it down enough for the facts to emerge. As the biblical wisdom puts it: “My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry”.¹

Like the slowest song in the world, holding off changing our tune may help our relationships.

NOTES

¹ James 1:19 (New International Version)

Share your smile

by Barry Robinson

On one of my brief forays out of the house to get some food, I was rushing around the local Tesco Express to buy what I needed as quickly as possible, so I could get in and out without meeting too many people in the aisles.

This coronavirus has made us do some strange things. All was going well until at the self-checkout I heard the mechanical voice say, “Unexpected item in the bagging area—assistance required”, and over came the checkout assistant to sort me out. As I stepped back the required two metres, he smiled at me and automatically I just smiled back. When I arrived home and thought about that little episode, it reminded me of a poem attributed to Spike Milligan called “Infectious Smiles”. Here’s the first verse:

Smiling is infectious,
you catch it like the flu,

When someone smiled at me today,
I started smiling too.

Perhaps an epidemic of smiles like this was on the mind of Robertino Rodriguez, a respiratory therapist from San Diego. He recognised that for those COVID-19

sufferers who are taken into hospital, it can be a scary experience, especially as family or friends cannot accompany them. The situation is made worse when the only people the patient sees are the medical team, and they are covered from head-to-toe in protective gear that conceals most of their faces. And so, Robertino did something different and quite extraordinary. He said: “I felt bad for my patients in ER when I would come in the room with my face covered in Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), because a re-assuring smile makes a big difference to a scared patient. So...I made a giant laminated badge for my PPE so my patients can see a reassuring and comforting smile”.

Robertino attached a photo of himself wearing a suit and tie and a beaming smile to his PPE to remind his patients that there is a compassionate human being under all that gear. He went on to say: “One thing health care workers do to make our patients feel at ease is to reassure them with our smiles but now that we have to wear masks, we are unable to do this...A smile goes a long way in comforting a scared patient—bringing some brightness in these dark times”.

Robertino’s Instagram post went viral, and soon after, other doctors and nurses were attaching pictures of themselves smiling on their hospital garb, in a movement he calls “share your smile”. As the medical world was becoming infected by his smile, Robertino said: “People love seeing that you went that extra mile to show them that you care”.¹

That phrase “go the extra mile” comes from the lips of Jesus Christ in the ancient writings of the Bible,² and means making a special effort to go above and beyond what is required. Whether Robertino realised it or not, going above and beyond what was required of him as he shared his smile is showing Christian compassion at its best. It’s an example I intend to follow. I hope to infect the world with my smile.

NOTES

¹ For Robertino Rodriguez’s story see https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/medical-workers-pics-smiling-covid-19-patients_1_5e8f725bc5b6b371812da523.

² Matthew 5:41.

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