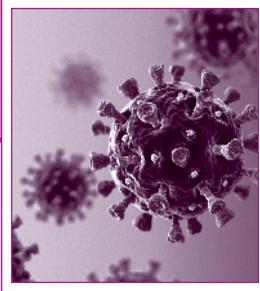


Essays by Gene Shelburne

Volume 4

THE CHRISTIAN
Appeal



COVID19

Several months ago when we began putting together our first issues containing my virus columns, I predicted that after Volume 3 the virus pandemic would be history and, although we still had fifteen more columns in the hopper, we'd decide that enough was enough. Once again, I proved that we really are a non-prophet outfit.

As we prepare this fourth volume of virus columns for publication, virus stats in the sunshine states are mushrooming, hospitals are overflowing, and Baptists can't even buy a happy hour drink in Texas. (I'm counting on our loyal Baptist readers' sense of humor.) Obviously, the challenges of COVID-19 are still turning our lives upside down. More than ever we need to trust in the Lord to get us through this disaster.

—Gene Shelburne, *Senior Editor*

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“Be
strong and
take heart
All you who
hope in
the Lord.”

* Psalm 31

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COVID19

Virus Humor

In the cacophony of moans and groans and howls about the lifestyle disruptions caused by the virus, some sensible folks among us are opting for a wiser way to deal with this tidal wave of frustrations. Instead of wailing or protesting, they're laughing.

For example, did you see the Facebook poster that proclaimed, "It's like being 16 again. Gas is cheap and I'm grounded." Maybe that one wouldn't be funny to you if you weren't born in time to see gasoline selling for \$1.30 a gallon. Or if all your retirement funds are invested in oil.

One fellow who has chosen to chuckle instead of whining about the virus mess is named Michael Knight. This 29-year-old musician tells us, "They said a mask and gloves were enough to go to the grocery store. They lied. Everyone else had clothes on."

During the coronavirus lockdown, how many quips have you seen or heard about TP? Or virus masks? Or social distancing? Or hand washing? Or home schooling? Things we didn't joke about before the pandemic hit us. Amazon is even marketing a book titled "101 Coronavirus Jokes: Laughing Your Way Through Troubled Times."

At the peak of the epidemic, right before Easter, a big-city Baptist church up north posted this slogan on their front-yard sign: "HAD NOT PLANNED ON GIVING UP QUITE THIS MUCH FOR LENT." How

many Baptists do you know who celebrate Lent? Maybe that's part of the humor intended. At least, they found something to laugh about.

One stuck-at-home guy texted, "Found a lady sitting on my couch yesterday. Apparently she's my wife. She seems nice." And lots of jokes, such as the fictitious offer of "coronavirus discounts" on flights to China, have been inspired by the disruption of travel worldwide.

A website called Cartoon Collections has gathered almost a thousand published cartoons with virus as their focus. A lot of them drove home serious truths with dark humor, but I laughed at the one that showed the four former Presidents on Mt. Rushmore with virus masks. And the cartoon of the guy locked in wooden stocks with an "I Coughed in Public" sign hanging around his neck beamed me back to Williamsburg, Virginia, over two decades ago when two of our grandkids were intimidated by the stocks in that colonial village square. We laughed at them then, and now I did again when that virus cartoon reminded me of that long-ago fun time.

"Laughter relaxes our brains," one psychologist insists as she advises us to keep humor alive in our lives during these stressful days. "Always be joyful," the apostle Paul instructs us. That excludes frowns and scowls and furrowed brows, doesn't it? Even while the virus persists. 

COVID19

Blessings in Disguise

When I was a pre-school runt, nobody had ever heard of Ebola or SARS or HIV or COVID-19. The two scourges that terrified most Americans back then—especially those who were parents of young children—were polio and rheumatic fever. On our middle-class block in Corpus Christi, Texas, I was the second kid who came down with rheumatic fever.

I was too young at the time to know all the ways my illness devastated my parents, but I now can see that for them it had to be a frightening disaster, and it hit them right when they were also having to adapt to all the social and economic changes that rocked our nation during World War II. They never let me detect the anxiety that ravaged their souls because I was so sick.

My main memory of those troubled times was being bedfast for seven months and being restricted to an experimental diet prescribed by a naturopath my parents somehow got connected with though he practiced in Christoval, hundreds of miles from our home. Did that diet help? Who knows? But, as we're learning during the coronavirus plague, people will try almost anything when even the experts don't know the answers.

One day that I'll never forget is the one when my mother told me with a smile, "You can get out of the bed today. And you can stay up for two hours." Whoopee! I thought. But when my feet hit the floor, I crumpled into

a heap. During seven months in bed, my legs had lost the strength to stand up and I had forgotten how to walk. Although I was five years old, like a baby I had to learn again how to crawl and then how to toddle.

Soon I was able to stand upright again, but some of the damage of those suppine months (such as my curled toes) has never gone away. And in my growing up years, every time I tried a new sport or took on a physical job, I had to undergo medical exams to make sure that I was not about to aggravate some residual heart damage caused by my earlier sickness.

Why am I dumping this now-ancient saga on you? To tell you that few things in my life have blessed me more than that early nightmare. In the years that followed, I reached for goals and strained for excellence I might never have aspired to if I had not been trying to prove that my illness had not impaired me. Mom kept warning me to not to overdo, not realizing that the specter of disability ignited in me a need to try harder.

Let me predict that virus-inflicted fears and wounds and changes may actually turn out to be blessings in disguise. They may force us to improve in ways we never would have envisioned in kinder times. "When troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity," James 1:16 instructs us. Maybe the damage done by this virus pandemic will teach us why. 

COVID19

“Do Not Be Afraid”

Just in case we didn't have enough to worry about during this COVID-19 disaster, today's news headlines a late-breaking story about a beekeeper in Spain. Somehow this fellow had managed to escape his nation's exceptionally deadly coronavirus outbreak, only to be killed by a “murder hornet” that stung him on his eyebrow. Just a few days ago authorities warned us that somebody imported these deadly giant Asian hornets into our country. So now, while we're dodging virus pathogens, we have to watch out for these killer wasps as well.

Before we panic about these newest threats, though, let's be sure to put them into valid perspective. My memory may not be complete (old men's seldom are), but I think it's true that the only things I had to be afraid of when I was two was getting run over by a car if I failed to look both ways before I crossed the street or getting eaten alive by the neighbor's German Shepherd watchdog. Otherwise, life was carefree.

But then in those WWII days down by the Gulf Coast we went into black-out mode to stymie rocket launches from German subs. And while watching for attacks from the ocean, we had to take special precautions to dodge polio germs. Then Brother Brown in our little church died of a brain tumor, so even before I started to school I got introduced to a whole new level

of medical anxieties. Add these to my childhood education about copperheads and rattlesnakes and scorpions and other critters common to our Texas world. Then top off all of this with a decade of terror fed by daily Cold War warnings that our world might end any day in an atomic blast.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. As a kid, I sampled mumps and measles and chicken pox and flu. Now hardly a year passes without a new wave of diseases. TB was one threat we feared during the days of my youth. Then AIDS and SARS and Ebola and a host of other plagues got loose in the land. And, if that's not enough to keep us hunkered down, factor in the damage done by cigarettes and asbestos and pesticides and smog.

Lump all our daily fears together and the current virus scares should lose some of their intimidation. Every morning we step out of bed into a world fraught with dangers and bristling with threats. Always have, always will. And most of us learn to cope quite well in spite of this cornucopia of fears. Add coronavirus to that list and soon we'll be functioning normally even with this latest menace.

The world Jesus came into was far more dangerous than ours. Cures for most diseases were still centuries away, and life expectancy was less than half ours today. Still, Jesus tells us over and over, “Do not be afraid.” 

COVID19

Never Again the Same

It's amazing, isn't it, how totally several weeks of virus shutdown have changed the way we see a lot of things and the way we do them.

Take Sunday mornings, for instance. They had been the same almost every week for the 80-plus years of my life. Then came the virus. Not having gathered with God's people to sing hymns and pray prayers and open God's word for more than three months now, I find myself falling into a new behavior pattern I never dreamed I'd adapt to. Sunday morning at home in my casual clothes, mid-morning cereal after sleeping late on the Lord's day, no exertion or concentration on my part to provide a weekly worship experience for others. Incredible.

In a recent issue of *Touchstone*, James Kushiner points out that in these virus-convoluted Sundays, we Christians actually have become more like the first-century Christians. At least in one way. They didn't own a single church building. When we're locked out of ours, maybe we're becoming more like them. At least in this way, now we actually are a New Testament church, just as our forefathers boasted.

Some professor up in Yankee-land recently trumpeted a call for all states to outlaw home schooling. His judgment probably is flawed, but his timing definitely was lousy. Never before in America—at least, not in the

past two centuries—has there ever been a time like right now when every student in the land is being schooled at home. I've never been a fan of online education at any level, but during these virus days, that's all there is, and it seems quite likely that because of this present shift, far more education in the days to come will be digital and off-campus.

Working at home also may become the new norm. After being forced to try it for several months, companies such as Twitter have discovered that both they and their employees may be better off using home as their offices. Reduced transportation costs or child-care expenses bless the workers, and reduced office overhead pads company profits. So the virus seems likely to change the way a lot of us earn our pay and do business.

Most of us could easily come up with a long list of changes the virus pandemic has forced upon us. And, while we keep saying that we can't wait to get back to normal, the truth is that many of the new ways we're learning may become the new norm. I doubt my wife will ever buy groceries the way she did before the virus hit. What about you?

The truth is that all of us need to learn new and better ways to do lots of things. Jesus came to teach us to drink “new wine.” He came to change our dirty, worn-out clothes for fresh, clean ones. “Repent (change your ways),” was his first message. The virus may help us do that. 

COVID19

The Latest Virus Count

Numbers don't lie, the proverb assures us. But sometimes they can hide the truth.

Late in April, national news included a upbeat report from Vermont. Officials in the Green Mountain State were rejoicing that for the first time since the coronavirus outbreak, no new cases had been reported on a single day. After six weeks of drastic measures to confine the spread of COVID-19, at last they seemed to be getting a lid on the epidemic in their state. Good news indeed. But it didn't mean that Vermont was virus-free.

As we soon learned locally, though, statistics that measure the virus spread can be quite misleading. With the count of new virus cases spiraling, our non-metro area here in the Texas panhandle made news as a virus hotspot in the U.S. As many folks here began to panic, health officials explained that the rapidly rising count of virus cases did not mean the disease was spreading faster and farther. The spike in new cases was the result of an unprecedented number of virus tests administered by the state at local meat processing plants.

Similar data-based scares now are being seen in many areas. After the report that the virus had killed thousands in nursing homes in New York, the states of Maryland and New Jersey led the nation in requiring coronavirus tests for all nursing home residents and staff. Again the result was predictable:

increased testing increases the number of virus cases reported.

Reports that as many as 70 percent of the inmates in some federal prisons had caught the virus caused most states to ramp up testing for inmates and staff in all their penal facilities. The result may be safer prisons, but an inevitable by-product will be a rise in the total number of reported cases. Again, instead of meaning that the virus has grown worse, the latest data means that testing has expanded.

Years ago a missionary who was back home on furlough came to report at our church. "Because of our work," he assured us, "there are now twelve Christians in Australia." His tally obviously did not include the Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, or any other "Christians" who did not accept his views. He didn't mean to mislead us, but I found his data false and offensive.

The TV journalists who spend so much time citing virus stats don't mean to distort the truth, but too often it still gets lost in what parades as "news" if the reporter or the audience fail to see the total picture. Instead of informing us, the little slice we do see may obscure the truth.

With so many virus numbers being tossed around, most of us need the advice God gave to his prophet Ezekiel. "Pay attention," God told him. "Look carefully with your eyes and listen closely with your ears." 

COVID19

Sick, But Without Symptoms

Not everybody who has caught coronavirus acts like it. Early in the pandemic, medical authorities published a long list of symptoms to watch for: coughing, sneezing, headaches, fever, loss of taste or smell, chills, trouble breathing . . . The list went on and on. And I found myself thinking that anybody with even a mild allergy or a common cold would be mistaken for a COVID-19 carrier. On a normal day somebody might think I had it.

Then, as virus testing became more universal, the medical experts discovered that a lot of people who have the virus have no symptoms. Earlier we had been testing only people who had the symptoms. But now that we're testing every person in meat plants or nursing homes or prisons, hundreds of tests are coming back positive from folks who have no symptoms at all.

This should not surprise us. Most of us are not experts in bacterial contagion, but in this modern world so rife with scam artists most of us have learned to look beyond the obvious. The deal that appears to save us the most money, the guru who supposedly has all the answers, the smiling investment expert who promises to double our retirement funds far too often turns out to be a charlatan whose sole intent is to clean us out. Does the name Bernie Madoff ring a bell?

Our sleaziest, now-best-known local swindlers smiled most broadly and

chirped the most comforting promises. One ripoff artist told us nightly on TV, "I may not make you rich, but I promise not to make you poor." Some of my dear friends lost lifelong savings to this scoundrel, who appeared so trustworthy and honest and financially wise before he donned his prison garb. It's hard to tell who's sick (or dumb, or misled, or dishonest) just by looking.

I had to learn this truth the hard way. Early in my ministry, one of my deacons I trusted most was cheating on his sweet wife and finally wound up in jail. But when I worked alongside this man, I bragged on him. He was asymptomatic. I've lost count of the fellow-pastors I worked with and admired, only to find out that they were sleeping with their sheep or dipping into their church's coffers. At the time they appeared to be totally decent, committed, capable servants of the Lord. Like so many virus victims today, they were asymptomatic.

Could this be why Jesus warns all of his followers to be "wise as serpents, harmless as doves"? I don't think he means for us to become ogres void of trust in our associates. What he wants is for us to be like smart parents who love their offspring without limit but still know not to believe everything their teenager tells them. The Bible tells us that Jesus "trusted no man, because he knew what was in man." The moral test will show that all of us test positive. 

COVID19

Zoom-bombing Churches

Some people in today's world are really sick. And not with coronavirus. They're sick in their souls. People like the pedophiles who are hacking into church service videos to "Zoom-bomb" worshippers with atrocious child porn.

The first report I saw was from a church in Waco, Texas. During their online worship service, the main message of the day was suddenly blanked out by a shocking display of sick sex involving a juvenile victim. This congregation's pastor told reporters that their church was not the first one in their town to have their Zoom meeting hacked by these sickos.

When this Waco story made world-wide headlines, a raft of other churches revealed that their virtual worship or streamed Bible studies had also been violated by the sudden insertion of appalling child porn on their members' screens. Similar incidents now have been documented in Billings, Montana, in Oakland and San Francisco, and even in the UK.

One of the offended churches has sued Zoom, blaming this relatively new company for failing to provide adequate online security. Zoom has taken quick measures to make their program harder to hack, but their agents also explain that the real problem here may be the public, open-to-all nature of the churches' notices inviting all people to participate in their virtual worship. Most of the hacked churches

had published links that allowed anybody to sign in.

Why would anyone target churches with porn? Possibly because churches were such easy targets. Large corporations spend fortunes on cybersecurity, but these targeted churches, most of them new to the virtual worship world, had little or none. These attacks, however, may have been triggered by something far more vile than that. It's highly possible that the main reasons for them may be ideological. These child porn hackers may view churches as their enemy. After all, who opposes pedophilia and pornography more intensely than those of us who honor Jesus? So pouring a bucket of filth on hundreds of unsuspecting Christians may give these invaders a thrill.

The Waco pastor said that what happened to the child in the uninvited video was so "shocking and distressing" that she could hardly function after seeing it. Hard-core porn is not something most decent, wholesome people have ever seen. We have no idea how evil and sick it can be. So, right when all of us are learning new details daily about the sickness called COVID-19, these targeted believers are also learning now about another sickness that has menaced our world about as long as there have been humans to be infected by it.

Make no mistake. This sickness can kill you. "The wages of sin is death." 

COVID19

Lose It or Love It

Early in the COVID-19 crisis—long before we had any idea how totally the virus pandemic would change our daily lives, my wise friend Tom Williams wrote, "It's a life principle that you don't appreciate what you have until it is lost."

Tom had no way to know that hospital patients and nursing home residents would be left devastatingly lonely because virus restrictions would bar any of their family from entering medical facilities. Always before this, we just took the loving words and hugs of loved ones for granted. Who would ever have predicted that here in America we might be forced to die alone?

All of our lives all of us in Bible-belt communities have seen Sunday church as an immutable, permanent part of life. In recent times a majority of our neighbors have come to view those weekly services as optional at best and, for many, as something to stay away from. For a lot of folks, though, this suddenly changed when we were told that church doors were locked, that public assemblies now were illegal. Only when we lost them did Bible study and worship appear precious to us again.

Having begun every school day for forty years in a public high school classroom, I know that a few exceptional students do look forward to their classes. But the majority

go to school because they have to. Until they are told they can't. Until schools across the land are shuttered. Then by far the majority of students began to yearn for the scholastic experiences they had wanted to escape. Now they miss their classmates, their best teachers, their sports events—everything lumped into what we call "school." To learn to love it, they had to lose it.

I could go on citing illustrations of things we have missed acutely because they have been forbidden or constrained: breakfast at McDonalds, symphony concerts, live city council meetings, going to work, vacation trips, handshakes, funeral services for friends . . .

Tom got it right. We seldom appreciate what we have until it's gone.

We're like the two men in Luke's last chapter, the pair who shared their shock and grief as they meandered toward Emmaus. All their hopes had been kindled by dreams of the future kingdom of the new Messiah, but to their astonishment, they had watched him die. "We had hoped," they mourned. It never had occurred to them that Jesus might not sit on a throne and lead victorious armies against Rome. Only when he was dead did they realize how crucial that dream had become for them. But—if you know their story—you know that their eyes were opened. I suspect that ours will be, too. 

COVID19

A Lesson We Can Learn

“Is your mother okay?” I asked in an email to one of my former students. From downstate he replied that she is fine, as far as he knows. But I wondered if he really knows. My student was born in Africa in Burundi. Before he was old enough to go to school, his family fled to a refugee camp in Rwanda to escape the Hutsi-Tutsi genocide. Before he was ten, his father saved the family from an attack that wiped out that camp. After several years of deadly danger, they wound up in our Texas town, part of our huge refugee community.

My concern for this young man’s mother was based on the local news reports we see every night. Failing health keeps her husband from working, so this lady supports their family by working at a large meat-packing plant. State-conducted virus tests at that plant have come back positive for a shocking number of employees. In my email to her son, I was trying to find out if she might be one of the infected workers.

Early in the COVID-19 outbreak, owners of another meat-packing company in a mid-western state explained that their high number of virus cases could be explained because so many of their employees are immigrants. Naive news reporters heard this as racist and bigoted, and said so. Company executives explained that they are grateful for their foreign workers and were not being critical of them. “We can’t fight

this virus by finger-pointing,” they acknowledged.

Instead of criticizing their sick employees, those bosses were stating a reality. People growing up in African or Amazon forest villages do not grow up in homes where they learn and practice the medical and sanitation regimens common in middle-class America. Add to that the fact that my student’s mother speaks almost no English, so she and others like her may not comprehend their company’s instructions about how to avoid the virus. To recognize this is not to be prejudiced. Instead, it is an expression of concern about the vulnerability of thousands of workers like her.

Here in the Texas panhandle our virus numbers spiked right when they were flattening or declining elsewhere. The reason is simple. We supply a high percentage of the meat consumed by the rest of our nation, and literally thousands of the meat plant workers have caught the virus. They run a huge risk so that the rest of us can eat well.

One positive effect of the coronavirus pandemic may be that it causes us to become more aware of how many people—not just in meat plants—risk life and limb daily so that you and I can eat, sleep, drink, drive, and otherwise go about our normal lives. The virus may bless us if it teaches us to say, “Thank you, Lord,” for all the people we mindlessly depend on. 

COVID19

Coming Clean

“We were wrong,” the Centers for Disease Control told the nation. From the first days of the coronavirus outbreak, these top medical experts repeatedly warned us to sterilize any surfaces anybody else might have touched. In stores across the land, Lysol spray and handwipes vanished as frightened citizens heeded the CDC’s instructions about how to avoid catching COVID-19.

“Swab all surfaces with bacteria-killing chemicals,” our nation’s top health protectors told us. Door knobs, table tops, handrails, FedEx packages, checkout counters, takeout food containers . . . The list was endless. If anybody touched it, sterilize it. Washing hands long and often wasn’t enough. We also had to wash anything a hand might have touched.

Then came that incredible news report. “We were wrong,” CDC told all of us. And they explained that careful studies of this new virus now showed that while it can be passed from person to person, COVID-19 is seldom if ever caught by touching a surface a virus-carrier has touched. All the rigamarole of sterile washing was unnecessary. It was based on hooley.

My hat is off to all the stores and schools and transit authorities and churches that spent hours of manpower and a fortune on supplies to wash off virus germs. Include my lady in that group. In her working days, she was a

nurse. A good one. She worked beside surgeons and helped run operating rooms in major hospitals, so she was hyper-conscious of the protocols for sanitizing and sterilizing people and buildings and instruments. So during this pandemic she was doing far more than most to obey the CDC mandates for germ-swabbing.

Instead of being critical of CDC for the major mistake they made, I praise them for having the guts to admit it publicly. When was the last time you heard bureaucrats in a top government agency confess that they fouled up? Instead, coverups usually are the name of the game. The few news reports we hear today about anything besides the virus tell us about efforts to uncover coverups by every federal agency from the FBI to IRS or DOD. What a refreshing departure from the norm: government officials admitting, “We were wrong.”

All Christians are taught this at the first-grade level of our faith. “If we confess our sins,” John wrote, then Jesus will cleanse us with his blood. “Confess your sins to each other,” James advised his readers. If you do, he promised, then you’ll be healed of the damage those sins have done to you. Few things are healthier than a man telling his wife, “I’m sorry,” or a three-year-old telling her parents, “I lied,” as she owns up to some misdeed. All of us who come to God through Christ begin by saying along with the CDC, “We were wrong.” 

COVID19

Some Laugh, Some Cry

Have you noticed that what seems hilarious to most of us often is horrifying to the person we're laughing at? We guffaw while they gulp. During the virus pandemic, we've been entertained with several examples of this—some of them downright humiliating to the chief performer in the unintended comedy.

Can you imagine how panicked and chagrined that television news anchor must have been? Like so many others during the coronavirus shutdown, his TV station was broadcasting the news from his bedroom. While he was updating their audience on local events, his secret lover stupidly wandered into the video behind him. All of his viewers got a clear view of her—all of her—sans clothing. While the world laughed at this exposure, I doubt he found it very funny.

Not nearly so embarrassing but still professionally devastating were the on-the-air screams heard while a Florida reporter was broadcasting the news from her home. Evidently her two-year-old threw a tantrum while the microphone was open. All of her hearers who have raised kids saw the humor in that, but I'm pretty sure that nobody in her house did.

Then there was the U.S. Supreme Court justice who amused the nation by going to the john while the audio of a court discussion was being aired. The sudden sound of a commode flushing delighted those who happened to be listening. When the offending justice was told that the nation had heard that

easily identifiable sound, I can imagine the judge's reaction. Can't you?

Some of the virus humor is on purpose, of course. One of my brothers emailed the rest of us the link to the hilarious and timely video "Monk in Quarantine" starring Tony Shalhoub, reprising his famously germophobic TV series character Adrian Monk. How would Monk handle the present COVID-19 mess? At the end of the funny video, Shalhoub reveals that, early in the pandemic, he and his wife really did catch the virus and both recovered. Shalhoub (and Monk) chose to laugh at this not-so-funny experience. We got to laugh with him.

Most popular comic strips get drawn several weeks before they are published, so they're a lot like my present virus columns. Right now as in *The Christian Appeal* we are publishing these columns, several weeks (even months) have passed since I penned them. My point is that virus jests in Dagwood/Zits/Dennis the Menace can't be next-day laughs, but that won't keep them from being funny. All of us likely will be chuckling about some of this virus mess years from now. And that's healthy. We're blessed if we can see what is ridiculous or ludicrous even when we're uncertain or scared.

The wise man noted in Proverbs 14 that right when hearts are heavy and troubled, people use laughter to hide their pain. During these virus-threatened days, I hope it works for you. 

COVID19

"Everything Is Meaningless"

Although Bible scholars can't agree on who he was, the writer of Ecclesiastes was a powerful persuader. Before he got past his second verse, he had already convinced his most thoughtful readers to put down the book—not to waste their time reading his manuscript. "Utterly meaningless," he ranted. "Everything is utterly meaningless!" "Okay," a lot of the students of this "Teacher" have agreed. "So why waste time reading this?"

I'm not a Hebrew scholar, but a fellow who is recently shined some new light on this for me. He explained that the word translated "meaningless" in the NIV, or "vanity" in the KJV, doesn't mean absurd or senseless or without benefit, as we usually use those terms. He says the Hebrew word used here often refers to vapor or fog or mist—something temporary. Something that soon evaporates and vanishes. And this Bible writer is telling us that everything in this world is like that. Nothing lasts.

Later in his short book this famous Old Testament Teacher describes various activities or aspects of life as "a chasing after the wind." Nine times he uses that phrase. We understand this metaphor, and it correlates perfectly with the early reference to fog or mist. How long does a gust of wind stay in one place? That's what everything in this world is like, Ecclesiastes is telling us.

If we didn't learn it from this seldom studied Bible book, all of us should be waking up to this basic life-truth as the virus pandemic sweeps across our world. This "wind" has swept away almost every facet of life that we mistakenly thought to be permanent. Who could have predicted that schools around the world would shut down? What tenured worker imagined even for a moment that their office or store or plant would suddenly close—that without warning they would have to work from home, or maybe not work at all? Jobs and schools vanished like a breeze. Here one minute, gone the next. Even the most permanent parts of our world turned out to be a vapor that, as James tells us, "appeared for a little while and then vanished away." I wonder if he had been reading Ecclesiastes right before he said that.

Almost all of us have our own personal lists of what we miss most of all now that COVID-19 has taken away life as we knew it. Hopefully, instead of just sitting around moaning about what we've lost, we are following the path of the Ecclesiastes Teacher. Instead of basing his hopes and happiness and personal worth on ephemeral things that are sure to vanish, he learned to trust in the Eternal, to "fear God and keep his commandments" (12:13). The coronavirus will turn out to be a blessing if it teaches us this lesson. 

COVID19

Finding a Better Way

I've attended enough school graduations to last a lifetime. Not only four of my own (none of which I really enjoyed), but my lady and I have so many kids and grandkids that in the last five decades we've seldom missed a spring without having to sit through at least one of these usually boring ceremonies.

Don't get me wrong. I could not be prouder of my offspring and their progeny for their academic excellence. But, with the exception of grandson Nick's medical school graduation, every commencement exercise I can remember forced us to sit and listen to the droning of hundreds of names when we only wanted to hear one. And with each passing year it seems that the air horn tooting and hooligan hollering by the graduates' uncouth kin have grown worse. Because I love my grandchildren, I have endured these scholastic demonstrations of ignorance, but I've never enjoyed them. I always exit the arenas wondering why all these highly educated school leaders can't figure out a more uplifting, efficient way to hand out diplomas.

This year they did. Thanks to the coronavirus shutdown, none of our local high schools could assemble thousands of parents to hoop and holler in the civic center. Nobody had to sit and listen to hundreds of names of students they don't know. Instead, the presentation of diplomas was done

virtually (digitally, online), and ceremonies that have always taken three hours-plus per school now only took three hours for all four high schools.

So, one more time, the virus pandemic has forced us to find a new and possibly better way to do something that (in my opinion, at least) has needed improvement for decades.

Have you noticed how easy it is for us to get stuck in a rut and to keep on plodding down some less-than-efficient path because it's somehow easier to work harder and to produce less than it is to change how we do it?

Why are we humans so resistant to change? Our habits often put a lid on our productivity. Our routines that started off streamlining our labor can keep us from trying improved procedures. And it usually takes a life crisis—something like the COVID-19 onset—to jar us out of our comfort zones and make us come up with better ways. Most of us are like the guys who fussed at Jesus and insisted, "The old is better." That might be true for wine and music, but most of us don't say that in a pharmacy or on an airplane or at a computer keyboard.

Although we resist it, the name of the game for Christians is change. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation," the Scriptures tell us. "The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Nobody who comes to Jesus stays the same. 

COVID19

Not for Sissies

"Growing old is not for sissies," an over-used proverb wails. It may be trite, but it's also true. And the virus spread has punctuated it with exclamation marks. From the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic we have been warned that those of us in the over-65 gang are the most vulnerable. Latest reports from Italy (a coronavirus hotspot) tell us that the average age of those who died from the virus was 80, and 96 percent of them had pre-existing health problems. As in similar reports from our own land, nothing was said about how many of the victims would have died before long, virus or no virus.

Not only do gray-haired citizens who catch COVID-19 face greater danger than youthful victims, but in places like New York and New Jersey the virus rules greatly increased their risk. Hospital beds were freed up by consigning older virus patients to nursing homes, and literally thousands of innocent residents in those care facilities were exposed and died. I'd like to think this carnage was not the intent of those who crafted the rules that transformed nursing homes into mortuaries. Better that they were ignorant than evil. But in today's non-Christian, secular culture, who knows for sure?

Touchstone magazine's editor James Kushiner tells us in his blog that he hears more and more comments to the effect that the virus' impact won't

be too bad because its main target will be the elderly. "Slowly, ever so slowly, respect for the aged has faded," he laments. During the virus crisis—during it, not because of it—half a dozen states have passed new laws legalizing euthanasia or assisted suicide. Obviously most of the people affected by these laws will be old. In a time when, as Kushiner says, "killing children in the womb" and "culling the herd of undesirable" are considered by many to be wise, progressive social strategies, it is increasingly dangerous to grow old.

Moses emphasized two rules for his people when the Hebrew nation was in its earliest days. "Fear God," was obviously the top requirement, but in Leviticus 19:32, "Show respect for the elderly," is ranked right beside it. The Bible describes a godless, ruthless nation as one "that shows no respect for the old" (Deuteronomy 28:50). Some of the policies for dealing with our current virus dangers and the more candid confessions of the reasoning behind them may show us how quickly the U.S. is morphing into that kind of nation.

If you are a faithful follower of Christ, look at what your church is doing to extend special love and care to your older members during these difficult days. And thank the Lord that you can take part in that ministry even after the virus crisis is history. 

COVID19

Saying Goodbye Alone

Whoever dreamed that any of us would bury a father or a mate or a sibling without a funeral? Early in the virus shutdown I stood beside graves with four families who were saying goodbye to loved ones without the usual host of friends and relatives there to comfort them. Most of them said at the time that they hoped to hold services to pay proper tribute to the departed whenever virus restrictions eased enough to allow it.

In the past week I've talked at length to two families who intend to hold elaborate funerals for special family members in the months ahead. But who knows when? And I know from past experience that the longer the delay, the less likely it will be that these memorial services help these good people deal with their grief. So far, however, we have not developed a different way to express and calm our sorrow.

Besides the four people I recently helped to bury, half a dozen longtime friends have died, and during this virus disruption I couldn't hug their kin or share their tears. Not only is COVID-19 killing us. It's also making it harder for us to deal with death.

This is a first-ever experience for all of us now, but not for humanity. Back in the 1920s (when my parents would have been kids), a typhoid epidemic and cholera outbreak killed so many that the dead had to share

coffins. Early in the coronavirus outbreak, I read about some New York mortuaries that had to bring in refrigerated trucks to handle the overflow of bodies. But I'm unaware of any shared coffins.

In 1961 when my brother and his wife began their 20 years of mission work in Malawi, anti-malaria drugs were available. But I read recently that, before those drugs, the earliest missionaries knew when they set foot in Malawi that their average expected survival would be two years. Malaria was sure to kill them, but they went anyway. One burial site holds the bodies of several of those godly men who did not let death keep them from telling others about Jesus. It's unlikely that any of their stateside relatives got to help bury them. So private, unattendable burials are not as new as we virus-restricted modern folks might think.

Death is seldom easy to deal with—virus or no virus, and all of us cope with it in different ways. Funeral traditions vary according to the ethnic group or religion or geographic area we belong to, but even traditions we think we disdain may actually help us to work through our times of loss and sorrow. And even something as disrupting as the present pandemic will never take away the greatest grief-aid of all: our faith in the One who conquered death. 

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“Pace I
leave with you;
my peace
I give to you . . .
Do not let your
hearts be troubled . . .”



Jesus
John 14

Last Chance!

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