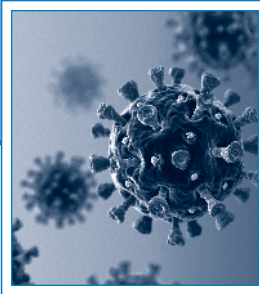


Essays by Gene Shelburne

Volume 3

THE CHRISTIAN
Appeal



COVID 19

“Be happy [‘Count it all joy’ older Bible versions phrase it] when troubles come upon you,” James counseled his Christian readers. “When hard times come for you,” Peter wrote to his flock, “be glad, because these trials will test and refine your faith, smelting it into pure gold.”

In this third series of “virus essays,” Senior Editor Gene Shelburne repeatedly advises us to obey these biblical instructions as we face the stress and challenges the COVID-19 pandemic has set loose worldwide.

In this life, every hardship brings with it a blessing (if we can see it). As the old proverb says, “Every cloud has a silver lining.” Every cross promises a crown. All of us who have faith should also have hope. Hopefully, this virus outbreak will reveal blessings we failed to see in easier times.

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“Be
on your
guard!
Stand firm
in the
faith!

Be courageous!
Be strong!
Do everything
in love.”

***The Apostle Paul**
1 Corinthians 16

COVID19

Cooing and Wooing

I went outdoors and used the weedeater in our backyard on the glorious spring day we enjoyed yesterday. No virus rules were broken. My task let me stay at home, and I was attacking that outburst of fence-row weeds all by myself. The late-afternoon sun was brighter and much warmer than I anticipated, though, so I worked up a good sweat. I was glad when both of my weedeater's batteries ran out of juice, because I had too.

To cool down and to recharge my own batteries, I plopped down on our front-porch swing on the shady side of the house. And soon I discovered that I had chosen a ringside seat to the springtime courtship of at least three pairs of doves.


Stay-at-home virus restrictions had reduced the usual traffic flow on our busy residential street. Only a pickup or two drifted by during that half hour of dove-watching. The loudest vehicle that passed our house was a tiny motorized plastic car driven down the sidewalk by a four-year-old girl as she dragged her six-year-old brother on skates. His skate wheels and her hard-plastic tires rattled and rumbled on the concrete so raucously that all the doves scattered.

But not for long. Soon they fluttered back. Their romancing on that perfect spring day was way too important to be interrupted very long by a

couple of kids. I watched as two of the doves decided to get romantic in the middle of our street. For the longest time they nudged and pecked each other and dined together on tree blossom seeds scattered by the previous night's wind. A second pair spent almost that entire half hour cooing and wooing on a fork high in a cottonwood behind a house across from ours. I don't think I'd ever seen a bird stay that long in the same place on a limb.

Do I have to tell you that I like birds? Always have. So getting to witness those displays of dove love delighted me. At some point during this unexpected entertainment, I told myself, though, that none of it would have been possible had it not been for COVID-19. On a normal Sunday—one that had not been squelched by virus concerns—I would never have spent that hour running that weedeater and therefore needing to rest on that swing. Nor would our street have been quiet enough for those lovebirds to feel comfortable flirting with each other where I could be their audience.

So not everything about novel coronavirus is bad.

For those who can see beyond immediate pain or threat, life has always been that way. "We rejoice in our suffering," the apostle said, because he and his converts could see the good that would come from it. So should we. 

COVID19

Blessed by the Virus

At the height of the coronavirus pandemic—right when stay-at-home measures were the harshest, Steve McLean had the wisdom and foresight to look beyond those bleak days.

In an email Steve wrote that "when life gets back to normal (not if, but when) and we 'pick up where we left off,' we need to consider what activities we shouldn't pick up again." Why? Because, Steve pointed out, some of the things we were doing before the virus struck, "did not really bless us."


He's right, of course. All of us get into some habits and routines that are not productive and some that are downright harmful to us. Steve confessed that during these stay-at-home days he has begun watching way too much TV. When life resumes, he plans to change that. What about you? Will this virus interruption of your life help you break some patterns that were siphoning off your time and energy without your even knowing it?

In my early retirement months when, for the first time in six decades I didn't have to get up to welcome the sun, I found myself wasting far too many hours mindlessly playing computer solitaire. My virus-mandated lifestyle started me spending those same hours writing these columns—an activity

which at least feels far more worthwhile. Hopefully, when the virus rules go away, the solitaire won't return.

If, before the virus came, you were letting work duties crowd your family out of your life, now that you've been forced to spend several weeks shut in with them, will you adjust your post-virus priorities to keep including family in your daily world? If church attendance had become optional at best when life was normal, will being legally barred from the house of the Lord for so many weeks revive your commitment to being on your pew on Sunday mornings?

If being out and about every day exposed you to various temptations that you knew were questionable at best, maybe these shelter-at-home weeks have protected you from more than the COVID-19. Maybe they have saved you from mistakes you would have regretted forever. If so, when regular life resumes, hopefully you'll be wise enough then to stay away from what could ruin you. Steve is right. Some activities of our pre-virus lives we should not pick up again.

"Set your minds on things above, not on worldly things," the Bible instructs us. How ironic it will be if the virus epidemic helps us do this. 

COVID19

Generational Gobbledygook

During the present avalanche of coronavirus news, one of the most intriguing pieces I've read was a lengthy *Wall Street Journal* article written by a psychiatrist, Dr. Marc Agronin.

All of us think we're talking the same language, the good doctor posits, but, based on his careful observations during the COVID-19 panic, he says we're not. Different generations may spout the same words but intend totally different messages than others saying the same words.


To describe his findings, Agronin coined labels such as "fortyish" and "fiftyish" and "sixtyish" to identify the messages these generations intend to send when they talk about how we should respond to the virus threat. Same words, different content.

In my limited space here, I can't begin to recap everything he said on this virus-related topic. A brief look at what he hears from elderly folks, though, may illustrate his point. Although labeled as the generation most endangered by the virus, we in the gray hair/no hair gang tend to be the least afraid of it. Already we lived through the Great Depression and three major wars and polio and 9/11, and we survived. So we're not as easily panicked by universal fears as are younger folks who lack our experience. A trip to Walmart seems reasonable to us, but not to our grandkids. They hear

"shelter-at-home" as a more stringent requirement than most seniors do.

Dr. Agronin gave examples of different generations using the same virus warnings to send different messages. Realizing that we're doing this may help the old and young in our families appreciate each other's concerns during this life-changing time. If we learn to hear what the varied generations actually mean, Agronin says, "we can better communicate our fears, needs, and strengths to one another." And that, he says, "can go a long way toward relieving so much of the intense stress and tension that we are all feeling in a time of lockdowns and illness."

I doubt that it surprises any of us to know that grandkids don't always understand what grandparents are trying to tell them. And vice versa. But until I was alerted to it by this psychiatrist, I had not factored the generational disparities into our efforts to communicate within our families. All of my life I've been aware that the Depression and the world wars changed the outlook and behavior of my parents (and their parents), but I had not stopped to analyze how my own experiences have changed me.

How does all of this play out as we seriously try to obey Commandment Number Five: "Honor your father and mother"? "That it may be well with you," the Bible adds. Even when virus is loose in the land. 

COVID19

They Can't Be Pleased

It was inevitable. Early in the virus pandemic, voters in at least half the states found fault with their governors and health officials for not putting safety protocols in place soon enough and widely enough. "You're going to let the coronavirus wipe us out," they sneived. And now—just a few weeks later—now that shelter-at-home rules have shut down businesses and schools and stadiums, now that sweeping virus mandates are being enforced in all cities of any size, protesters are swarming in metro streets nationwide, demanding that their world be re-opened.

The first protests appeared to be limited to two or three places. News clips showed mobs in city streets in Michigan, Florida, and California to begin with. Before that week was past, angry masses were howling in the city squares and main streets in virtually every state. Protests broke loose even in Brazil and in Paris, France. "Open our stores!" they demanded. "Let us get back to work!" was just one of dozens of angry sentiments emblazoned on their protest posters.


How much would you want to bet that a large percentage of these upset citizens are the same ones who just a few days before this criticized their leaders for not enacting the same virus rules they now want removed? Some folks just can't be pleased.

As one disgusted friend of mine watched news videos of the obviously contagious protests, he snorted, "If they want to get infected with COVID-19, that's their right."

Others in places around the world—from crowded beaches in Florida and North Carolina to marketplaces in rural Russia and South Africa—didn't protest the virus restrictions. They just ignored them. As did the 100,000 people who attended that funeral in Bangladesh.

What we're seeing here is nothing new, of course. Rules made to protect us can't do us much good if we choose to break them. Laws against dangerous illegal drugs obviously offer little safety to addicts who would rather ingest opioids than to stay sane or alive. Rules forbidding sex outside of marriage could greatly reduce HIV and AIDS in African villages and American cities, but not if we choose to break those rules. No rules can keep us safe if we choose to act like they don't exist. Will this virus pandemic help us learn that?

From the days when our mothers told us, "Look both ways before you cross the street," or "Wash your hands before you eat," somebody has been making rules to keep us safe. But the rules work only if we obey them.

"Do this," the Lord tells us about all his rules. "Do this, and you will live." 

COVID19

Do It, But Not Now

One thing I've been able to do during these shelter-at-home days is to spend a few hours each day editing a chapter or two of my best friend's latest book.

Almost two decades ago, my lifelong sidekick Tom Williams co-authored *In Search of Certainty* with prolific author Josh McDowell. I don't know exactly what brought this now-aging book back into focus, but Josh and Tom decided to update and re-issue it. As Tom began working on it, though, it became obvious that much of the content was outdated, so they began a revision with most of the content brand new. As their work progressed, Tom often mentioned it to me, so I've been aware of this project for several months now.


Then, just as they were ready to submit the revised manuscript in a book proposal to a major publisher, the coronavirus hit. That publishing company, like so many firms across the land, had to suspend their production. Everything was in limbo. Obviously this was not the right time for any author to approach them with a new or revised book, so Tom and Josh wisely put their project on hold.

My friend Tom knows that all of my adult life I have been editing something (including dozens of book manuscripts for an array of publishers). So he has

run by me a lot of the books he has written so that I could do a friend-for-friend edit before a publisher saw them. Since the writing project got high-centered by the virus, he asked me if I would read through this latest manuscript and make suggestions. So I've spent some enjoyable virus-secluded hours massaging words written by two of the best authors on the planet.

I tell you this tale to illustrate what the virus is doing to most of us. Plans we had that seemed to be moving down an inevitable course have been derailed, disrupted, devastated. And, in many cases, this has caused us a lot of regret or grief. But looking back at all of this a year or so from now, we may be able to see that not making the trip, not selling the house, not changing jobs—not doing, or at least delaying, whatever we had intended to do—may have blessed us in ways we could not have foreseen.

Who knows? Josh's and Tom's book may pack more punch because the virus gave them time to run it by an unknown editor like me.

Jesus' brother James seems to have known this principle. "When troubles of any kind come your way," he counsels us, "consider it an opportunity." 

COVID19

Last Sunday's Sermon

Since the virus prevention rules kept us from gathering in our little church last Sunday, my lady and I again went to worship at First Baptist Church via television. And again my friend Pastor Howie Batson blessed us with a fine message from God's word. Basing his thoughts on the first eight verses of Philippians, Howie highlighted eight significant points that can help Christians during this virus crisis.

Space here won't let me repeat all his exhortations, but Howie started off echoing the apostle Paul's words to his favorite church: "I long to see you." Don't we all feel this way during the days when COVID-19 isolates us from each other?


"Stand firm," Paul told his converts, who were also going through hard times. Rome was threatening to kill him and them, just as the virus today is endangering our lives. "Stand firm in the Lord," was an admonition they needed. So do we.

Two of the ladies in the Philippi church were having some sort of spat. "Live in harmony in the Lord," Paul begged them. Right when disaster hangs over our heads, more than ever we who wear Christ's name need to get along with each other instead of fussing and clashing.

"Be anxious about nothing." Howie spent much of his sermon

emphasizing this exhortation of the apostle. Stop worrying, Paul told his people. After all, as Mark Twain quipped, most of the things we worry about never happen. Jesus is blunt when he tells us that each day has enough troubles without us worrying about what might happen tomorrow. I can't think of any Bible truth more vital for us in these unsettling times. So many of us are uptight about things we can't do anything about anyway, so why spend time and energy worrying about them?

Instead of stewing about the complications and uncertainties the coronavirus pandemic has brought into our lives, Philippians 4:6 tells us to pray—to take our concerns to God. If we do that, Paul promises, "the peace of God that surpasses all comprehension" will replace those fears.

Howie concluded his excellent message that Sunday by emphasizing the apostle's wise advice to his troubled readers that, instead of letting their troubles dominate their hearts and minds, they should choose instead to think about things that are true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, and of good repute. In these dark virus-clouded days, we need to follow Paul's advice to dwell on things that are excellent and worthy of praise. If we do this, hearts now plagued by fear can be filled with the peace of God. 

COVID19

“He Touched Me”

When one of our top elected officials called to ask me to lead the invocation at their next meeting, she told me they were going to have a real live meeting. “I’m so tired of virtual meetings with all of us on computer screens,” she confessed. “I need to see my people face to face.” She had no idea how totally I agreed with her, but she shared her plans to make sure that I would not feel intimidated by coming to pray in a room where other live people were present.


No doubt this thoughtful lady was reflecting what one news article called “Zoom fatigue.” I’ve got it too. Several news anchors on our local TV stations have chosen to Zoom their broadcasts from home, and I wonder why. This is their way of social distancing during this pandemic. I understand that, but the quality of their home-based newscasts stinks. If they’re afraid to sit next to a colleague on the studio desk, why don’t they just take a day off and let their partner in front of the real camera be the whole show?

Right after I led that invocation, those of us in the courtroom pledged allegiance to the flag. I like that. But since one of the elected officials was participating via Zoom, her recitation of the pledge quite loudly trailed ours by three or four words. It was

an unforeseen disruption of what, for everybody except Colin Kaepernick, is usually a heartfelt, serious moment. One more reason for me to avoid Zoom.

I realize that the sentiments I just expressed convey only one message: that I’m an over-the-hill old man. Skype and Zoom and Facebook and Hangouts are the chosen media of my grandkids, just as party lines and handwritten letters and battery-powered radios were my grandparents’ way to connect with their world. No doubt my lack of enthusiasm for all the virus-instigated virtual conflabs just makes me come off as a grumpy Neanderthal. But I suspect that most of my generation share this reaction.

All serious Bible readers know how often those people touched each other. “Laying on hands”—touching—conveyed compassion and healing in special ways. It still does. Now that we can’t shake hands, now that the virus rules bar pastors and chaplains from hospital bedsides, now that safety is defined as six feet apart and Zoom has replaced hugging, we have been robbed of one of humanity’s primary ways to express care for one another.

When Thomas doubted the resurrection, Jesus told him, “Reach out your hand and touch me.” A virtual touch could never have communicated the same thing. 

COVID19

Our New Teacher

Every major crisis reveals weaknesses or problems we have ignored until then. The coronavirus pandemic is no different. Before the virus struck our country, only a few Americans voiced any concern about our growing dependence on China to produce and distribute medications for all of us. As we watched China almost shutting down because of the epidemic and being cut off by the virus from the rest of the world, however, suddenly we began hearing top leaders in almost every field warning us that we need to bring pharmacy manufacturing back to our side of the water. The virus is teaching us what could happen to us if China suddenly became our enemy. We’d be left without pills.


Before the virus shutdown, did you hear anyone in your community expressing even the slightest concern that a lot of our public school students live in homes that can’t afford internet connection? I didn’t. But now all class work must be online, so this formerly invisible reality of poverty has suddenly become a public priority. How do we teach kids online if they can’t get online? It’s another virus-generated awareness.

For several years now my high school teacher daughter has helped distribute Backpack meals to students and school staff who otherwise would be hungry. But how can a school-based program get food to the needy when the school is locked up? Before COVID-19 came to town, nobody had foreseen

such a dilemma, but we see it now.

All sorts of questions have popped up because the pandemic has disrupted supply lines from so many countries. Where do your tomatoes and bananas and fresh fish come from? What nations have taken over the production of almost all steel or cell phones or computer chips or eyeglass lenses? If supply lines for these products get blocked by virus-control measures, then what? Of course, the companies who sell us these products pad their profits by having them built and packaged overseas. But what profit will they make if they can’t get them anymore? Perhaps the virus will reveal the lack of long-term wisdom in relying on foreign-produced goods.

Those of us who were around during WW II know that it revealed all sorts of shortages and caused countless companies to ramp up production. The result was a new abundance in the years that followed. That horrid 9/11 attack waked us up to lax air travel security. Most of us have flown safely for the past two decades because of it. In the same way, this virus crisis will surely enhance our medical techniques and responses in ways we never imagined before it.

An old proverb says, “It’s an ill wind that blows no man good.” Every tragedy teaches us something. Paul said, “I didn’t like being sick, but guess what? It taught me to trust more in the strength of Christ and not in my own.” What is this virus plague teaching you? 

COVID19

Come If You Can

“Right now we have only one coronavirus case in Runnels County,” my colleague Max Pratt told me as we talked on our cell phones earlier this week. This explains why his little congregation in the West Texas town of Ballinger decided to worship together the past Sunday morning for the first time in more than a month.


“Worship together” may be a less-than-accurate way to describe what they did. Max says only 16 members showed up while the rest stayed home. He wasn’t complaining or casting blame. The leaders of that church had told their people to attend that service only if they felt safe in doing so. Since their average age is 70-plus, most of them felt it wise to keep sheltering at home, even if virus cases in their little town are almost unknown.

In this first public gathering after our governor relaxed his COVID-19 shutdown, Max’s flock were careful to comply with the new regulations. His 16 worshipers spread out all over their pews, more than six feet apart. All of them wore masks. When they said the final amen, Max dismissed them row by row, starting at the back, thus avoiding the usual center-aisle cluster of folks hugging and laughing together. Social distancing was still the norm for them that day.

Nothing I’ve told you so far should surprise you. Now that the virus shutdown in our state is expiring, most

of us in church leadership have been studying the new regulations for public worship. And, except for a few free-spirited pastors who come off sounding like irresponsible nuts, most of us see the wisdom of following protocols that keep our people safe. As much as we miss getting to be with them, still we’re committed to protecting them. And, in a town like ours which has a scary, still-rising inventory of COVID-19 cases, we honor our mayor’s advice not to rush the reopening of our schools, churches, stores, and offices. Better later than never.

Today in China many Christians don’t dare go to church. Not because of virus fears. If they go, they risk prison and even death. Does our temporary ban of worship instill in us greater empathy for believers in non-Christian nations who face death penalties if they gather to praise the Lord? Before the virus closed our churches, some of us—even some who are regular church attenders—got up on Sunday mornings wishing we didn’t have to go endure one more boring sermon, one more hour of off-key or ear-splitting music. Now we can hardly wait to attend again.

The apostle who warned his readers not to “forsake the assembling of themselves together” knew that believers need to be together. Thanks to the virus, now we know it too. 

COVID19

What Are You Tired Of?

A few columns ago I mentioned what recent news reports called “Zoom fatigue.” It was a clever way to describe how weary many of us are of seeing government officials and sports stars and news anchors talking to us from their bedrooms. (I bet that bedroom-broadcasting news guy whose half-naked secret lover unwittingly wandered into the Zoom picture behind him really has Zoom fatigue today.)


As I pondered this new expression inspired by way too much Zooming, I came up with quite a list of things most of us are getting tired of during this longer-than-expected virus shutdown. At the top of my list I wrote “home.” With schools and hair salons and dental offices and bank lobbies closed, who can begin to estimate how many of us are either working at home or, even worse, stuck there idle. Most of us who would have given anything for a day off, now would give anything for a day back at work. We’re suffering “home fatigue.”

I never have watched much daytime TV, and the virus lockup hasn’t changed that. I usually try to see the supertime or 10 o’clock news, but my need to see them is rapidly waning because 90 percent of the TV news anymore is about COVID-19. Evidently nothing else newsworthy is going on right now, and I’m fed up with hearing politicians bash

each other for whatever they’re doing (or not doing) about the virus. Include me in the gang who have “virus news fatigue.”

Some folks can’t wait to hear the latest scare tale. Not me. Ever since coronavirus invaded our land, we’ve been fed a daily diet of emails and texts and news blurbs warning us about what’s coming next. Somehow I missed the early TP shortage alarms. The shelves were empty before I knew they were going to be. But all it takes is one day of headlines about a “coming meat shortage” to make the chicken and pork and beef counters look as bare as the hand-wipe shelves. Evidently people who are afraid can be more easily freaked out. So in addition to suffering Zoom fatigue, I’m tired of the waves of consumer hysteria.

It wouldn’t surprise me in the least if your list of things that bug you during this virus-confinement era included these columns I’m writing. Sorry about that. Dumping my virus-incited irritations and concerns on you is one way for me to stay sane during these stressful days. Thanks for being my cheap shrink.

Jesus tells us, “Come unto me, all you who are weary.” All of us suffering fatigue (the Zoom kind, and otherwise) during these virus-impacted days should accept that invitation. 

COVID19

The Willie Nelson Look

It's been almost four months now since the virus forced nail techs and hairdressers to lock their salon doors. One look at what the Bible calls my "hoary head" will confirm the effect of coronavirus on hair. Like most of my colleagues, I'm beginning to look shaggy.

Almost four decades ago—right before my lady and I helped lead a batch of students on a 35-day trek through Europe—I made the mistake of growing a beard, which even then was gray. By the time we returned home, I looked like Gabby Hayes.

As several of my clan dined together last Sunday, I told them I thought I would soon look like Willie Nelson. "Why don't you aim at an Einstein look instead?" my wise daughter suggested. I doubt that I possess the musical talent or the IQ to imitate either man. But my urgent need for a haircut will soon make me fit in with the homeless dudes who roam downtown.


Hair care is just one of a dozen indulgences we take for granted in non-virus days. My stylist Rocky Diaz has been a friend (and has cut my hair) most of his adult life. I tied the marital knot for him and his wife, and he still seems to like me. I desperately need a date with his scissors.

Back in biblical days long hair could be a sign of special devotion. Heroes like Samuel and Samson and John the Baptist took lifelong vows never to cut their hair.

Most Jews who took a Nazirite vow (as the apostle Paul once did) promised not to shear their locks or shave before some specified day such as Passover or Pentecost. They didn't blame their outlandish manes on virus. I've often wondered if any of the Bible heroes like Abraham or Isaiah were as bald as Yul Brynner, and, if they were, how that affected their compliance with such vows.

If you know the Bible stories, though, you know that only cutting his hair once a year helped to make Absalom an ego-maniac and eventually cost him his life. And Samson's only haircut also turned out to be fatal. One story says cut it. The other says don't. So, should I be losing sleep because virus controls have my cranial fuzz out of control?

The truth is that I am far more concerned about the lost income and financial challenges our cosmetologists face during this pandemic than I am about how I look with unshorn hair. Without my monthly hair trim, I may look like I'm crazy or wild, but I still have food and a roof over my head. What about these talented people we depend on during safe times? Will they?

I like Ezekiel's description of godly men and women. They "give food to the hungry and clothes to the needy," the prophet said. "They help the poor" (18:16-17). Does your virus-idled hair stylist still need the dollars you usually pay? Who else might be hungry without your aid? 

COVID19

Culling the Herd

Not everybody on the planet was outraged by the Nazi passion to refine society by getting rid of those with low IQs and questionable DNA. Two decades before Hitler pressed these strategies to refine Germany's Aryan society, leaders in the struggling new nation of Israel were refusing for the same reasons to accept low-income or health-impaired Jewish settlers. Does it surprise you to know that Hitler's later victims and his vicious exterminators were following the same playbook?

Now, in a generation that is choosing to replace God with secular humanism, we see these same survival-of-the-fittest proposals surfacing again, but this time right here at home.


Did you hear that California city planning commissioner's ideas about using the coronavirus to cull the herd? Just let this epidemic get rid of sick, old, and homeless people, he proposed. Instead of trying to protect them from COVID-19, he said, just let people with weak immune systems meet their natural end during this epidemic. After all, he reasoned, impaired people like this are a drain on our society. It will be a blessing to be rid of them.

The city council in Antioch, California, promptly dismissed Ken Turnage II when he voiced these sentiments. But I think it might surprise them to know how many of their residents share his views. If you doubt this, listen to the insider chatter of

pro-abortionists as they praise themselves for sparing us the trouble and cost of caring for potentially defective babies. "We're blessing our land," they boast, "when we reduce the number of kids with Down Syndrome and cerebral palsy and spinal bifida (and their list could go on and on)." Hitler would be proud of them.

Special concern and care for the very young, the very old, and the helpless rank at the very top of the Bible's instructions to believers. When we stop and think about it, we can see that this priority is one of the main concepts that set believers apart from most who choose to leave God out of their world. We protect the very people they think we should eliminate.

"Honor older people," is one of God's earliest commandments (Leviticus 19:32). Our Bibles are loaded with instructions for us to do that. Giving them special protection from this deadly virus is one way we can do it. "Children are a gift of the Lord," Psalm 127:3 tells us, and all through the Bible we are told to treat them as such.

Godless societies consider the very old and the very young to be at best expendable, and in many cases prime targets for removal. Perhaps this unforeseen virus crisis will wake us up and cause us to pay closer attention to laws and policies aimed at thinning the helpless from our ranks. 

COVID19

Show Us the Way

Today in Texas is “reopening day” for many stores and restaurants. For many, this relaxation of the governor’s virus shutdown rules is a cause for rejoicing. We can hardly wait for life to get back to some kind of normal. But business owners like Victor Leal are warning us not to expect that any time soon.

Victor had hoped to be able to reopen the doors of his popular Mexican food café today. It would be legal, but it’s not going to happen. Not today. Why? Because quite a few of his pre-virus staff have moved on to earn a living at other jobs while the virus kept their café closed. And many of his remaining workers who were aware of the still-spiking number of new coronavirus cases in our town were hesitant to start interacting with possibly infected customers. So for now Victor has wisely shelved any plans to open his café’s doors.


No doubt all across the state dozens of business owners will follow suit. Some, because of fear for their own well-being. Some, because of wise care and caution for their staff and customers. And others, because of the potentially ruinous legal ramifications if anybody does contract COVID-19 on their premises. It’s legal to open now, but it may not be smart yet.

Churches face many of the same questions. Yesterday one of our town’s largest churches shared with me the pageful of instructions they will be sending to their members before they resume Sunday morning worship. It’s a serious attempt to conform to the long list of complicated restrictions the state has issued for church gatherings and similar public assemblies. In effect it bans the kind of friendliness and closeness and fun a lot of us expect at church.

To get through this back-to-normal stage of the coronavirus crisis, churches and schools and businesses are going to need access to Solomon. We’re dealing with complicated issues none of us have faced before.

Unfortunately, Solomon is not available, but the Lord is. For several years now, our dear friend Annelle Campbell has ended her prayers by asking God, “Show me the way.” And she points her friends to the 143rd Psalm:

*Let the morning bring me word
of your unfailing love,
For I have put my trust in you.
Show me the way I should go.*

Can you think of a more appropriate prayer for us to be offering right now? 

COVID19

Counting the Dead

Nowadays every newscast includes an update on the number of deaths caused by the virus. Thousands of workers in meat and poultry processing plants tested positive, and on the day when I write this they tell us that twenty of them have died. But that sad number pales compared to the 4,800-plus killed by COVID-19 in New York nursing homes.


This week for the first time during this virus upheaval I got the news that someone I personally know died because of the virus. Marshall Baldwin was a college mate of mine—a life-long friend. Back in the days when we thought we wanted to become engineers, morning after morning Marshall and I and a couple of other buddies swigged coffee as we cranked up our slide rules and struggled with trigonometry homework. When I got the news of his passing, the fatal nature of the present virus suddenly became more real to me. Coronavirus really will kill you.

But to put all of this into perspective, perhaps I should report that just during the days since the first shelter-in-place rules were enacted, death has claimed half a dozen other good friends of mine who were virus-free. I led private graveside services for three of them. Death was a daily reality for all of us long before the coronavirus escaped from China, and it will be long after vaccines and antibodies put a lid on this disaster. Recognizing this won’t

make death more pleasant or welcome, but it might keep us from panicking because of virus dangers.

Fox News’ daily tally of coronavirus deaths sets the worldwide number today at 258,256 (and this ignores reports that several countries have under-reported drastically). What that alarming figure does not include, though, is how many of those virus victims might have died anyway. The most vulnerable virus patients, we are told, are those who have other health concerns. Many of them would have died, virus or no virus. Elderly people face the greatest virus danger, we are warned. Have you noticed that we old folks are the most likely to die regardless?

Another precious friend died this week. Leukemia claimed her, not the virus. She and her family before her have been special to me all of my life. I grieve that she’s gone. But her dear sister tells me she is thanking God that her sibling’s horrid pain is over. She sees death in this case as a blessing, just as I did when it ended my mother’s ordeal with a malignant brain tumor.

Perspective is what we need. “For me to live is Christ,” Paul said, “but to die is gain.” From the day we take our first breath, death for each of us is inevitable. Instead of causing us to despair, however, threats such as this present virus can teach us not to “rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead” (2 Corinthians 1:9). 

COVID19

Killed by the Virus

A father of nine is dead today, and I guess we can blame it on the coronavirus. This guy was perfectly healthy. If he had been tested for the virus, the test would have come back negative. But the virus still killed him.

The dead man was a security guard at a Family Dollar store in Flint, Michigan. He was doing his job when he told a female customer that state law required her to wear a virus mask. She (or one of her kinfolks with her) shot and killed him.

On the same day, right here in my own town, uncontrolled anger almost cost another man his life. Out riding his bicycle in a safe neighborhood, this man pedaled past a couple who were fussing, the police report said. As he rode past them, the bike rider offered them some sort of advice (we have no idea what), and then he and the man exchanged words.


What the bike rider said to this already unhappy guy must have ticked him off. When he and the woman got into their cars to drive away, this enraged man targeted the bicyclist who was still on the parking lot. The angry arguer drove his SUV into the adviser. Thankfully, the victim's injuries were not fatal.

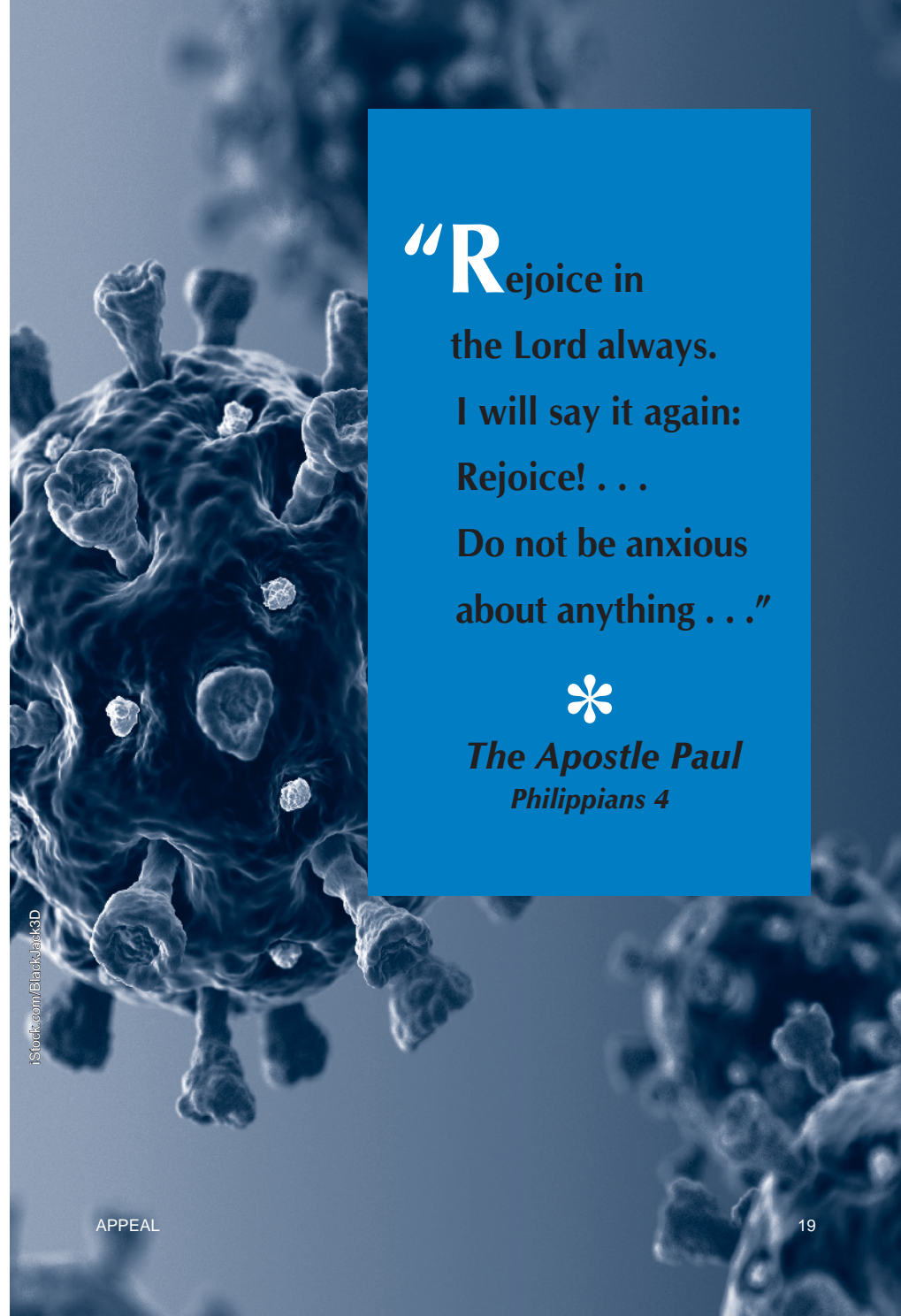
No charges had been filed and the incident was still being investigated when I saw this police report. But, as I read it, I had to wonder how much the present virus stress had to do with unleashing this mindless level of frustration and fury. Was the SUV

driver out of work because of the virus shutdown? Were he and the woman fussing because they had been stuck at home for six weeks with a brat or two and now were stretched to the breaking point? Were they about to be evicted or lose a car because the virus had stopped their paychecks?

Obviously, I have no way to know if this couples' anger had been fueled by any of these possibilities, but I do know that thousands of other couples all across America are having to deal right now with these and similar stress-builders because the virus has disrupted life as we knew it. And rising stress levels often light the fuse of our tempers.

In Galatians 5, the apostle Paul included "outbursts of anger" in his list of attributes of what he called "the sinful nature." In contrast to that, he included gentleness and self-control when he listed "the fruit of the Spirit." Those who belong to Jesus, he said, those who intend to "live by the Holy Spirit" instead of by the flesh, should nail our bitterness and rage to the cross.

Instead of letting our virus-ignited tempers flare, the Bible tells us to "be kind and tender-hearted to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:30). The psalmist counsels people who face stressful times like this virus mess. "Refrain from anger and abandon wrath. Do not fret," he tells us. "It can only bring harm" (37:8). 



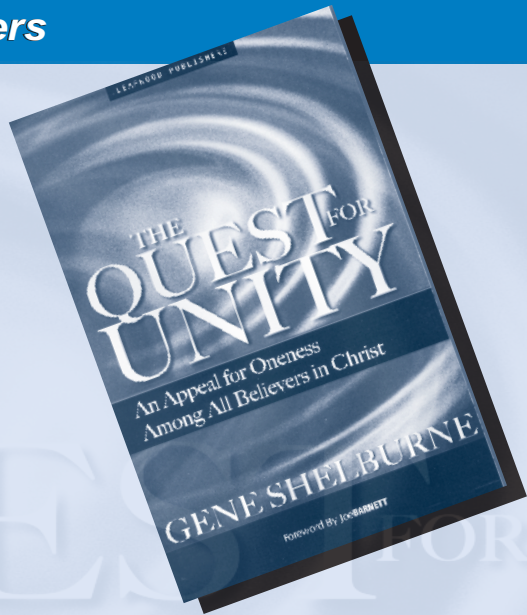
“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! . . . Do not be anxious about anything . . .”



The Apostle Paul
Philippians 4

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