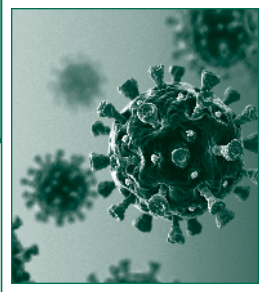


Essays by Gene Shelburne

Volume 2

THE CHRISTIAN
Appeal



COVID 19

My apologies if some of the essays in this issue seem a bit dated. After that first Sunday when our church stayed dark and locked up because of the virus sheltering rules, I started emailing a daily virus column to encourage my flock. As we compile the essays for this issue, I just wrote Virus Column #51. Sadly, our church is still closed and our people still isolated from one another. Yours, too, probably.

Truthfully, though, the disruption of church activities has been much easier for us to handle than the closing of our schools and offices and nursing homes. Funerals without friends are almost unbearable, as are nights in ICU or weeks in nursing homes without a single family member beside our bed.

My main intent in these COVID-19 essays is to help us look less at the virus threats and more at the Lord, who alone can give us the wisdom and strength we need to get through these difficult days. "In all your ways, acknowledge him, and he will direct your steps."

—Gene Shelburne, *Senior Editor*



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“Do not fear,
for I am with **you**.
I **will** strengthen you . . .
I will uphold you with
my righteous **hand**.”



Isaiah 41

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COVID19

The Bigger Picture

Speaking specifically about the panic-producing virus reports that fill every television news hour, Pastor Rick Warren warns all of us, “Not everything you hear is true.” And that holds true whether the information we’re receiving comes from major media news outlets or pulpits or top government sources. One way for us to determine how credible a particular warning may be is to evaluate the report within a known perspective.


As the epidemic started hitting our nation, for example, Dr. Ron Paul suggested that we weigh the daily count of coronavirus deaths against other fatality statistics. When he made these comments, 21,000 people had died from the new virus (the day I wrote this the count topped 51,000). Hence all the panic-driven enactment of life-altering regulations. Why was there no capitol-hill rush to curtail regular seasonal flu, which will kill almost six times as many people?

To drive his point home, Paul cited similar stats. Malaria and suicide will end the lives of more than ten times as many people as his COVID-19 count. Traffic fatalities will snuff out over 300,000 lives, but nobody is crying out for laws banning trucks and autos. And our culture chooses to look the other way instead of curtailing behavior that spreads HIV and AIDS, which will exterminate almost 400,000 humans this year. Compare the coronavirus data to that.

This year alcohol abuse will kill 581,000 people, Dr. Paul tells us, but our bars and liquor stores are still open. Well over a million deaths this year will be at least partially caused by smoking, and cancer will end almost twice that many lives.

To see the total, valid picture—to get a true perspective, we must recognize that a our society has enacted scads of laws to try to control the dangers of alcohol and tobacco. In our country alone we spend billions annually to treat cancer and to try to eliminate it. Whatever endangers us does validly attract our legal attention and our medical dollars. But Dr. Paul’s point seems to be that if we don’t shut down life because of far more deadly threats than COVID-19, why have we let this epidemic cancel most of our regular activities?

In order to make sense of what is happening to us, Dr. Paul suggests that we need to back off and try to see the bigger picture. The new virus-rule makers may be wise and well-informed, and Dr. Paul could be comparing apples to oranges. But we need to hear him when he urges us at least to stop and think before we let fear-mongering eclipse life as we have known it.

“The wisdom that comes from above leads us to be pure, friendly, gentle, sensible, kind, helpful, genuine, and sincere,” James 3:17 tells us. We need that kind of insight right now. 

COVID19

“Death Could Not Keep Its Prey”

Never will there be a good time to swamp hospitals with critically ill patients and to hold thousands of funerals. But the timing of the coronavirus epidemic seems right now to be especially bad because here in the United States it appears to have reached its peak during Holy Week.


For several Sundays now our churches have been empty—doors locked, lights off—while those who are desperate for hymns and homilies have resorted to online worship. If nothing else, streaming sermons and services on Zoom or YouTube at least has made the sidelined pastors and music ministers feel like they have risen to the occasion. But, as I write these words, Palm Sunday is just a day away and, in a normal year, all of us in traditional Christian churches would be gearing up for Good Friday and Easter.

Not this year.

Until virus fears put a lid on all public Christian gatherings, I don’t think I realized how important holy days like Easter had become to me. Eight decades ago I was born into a sect that still clung to Puritan disapproval

of all church holidays. After all, our religious ancestors were convinced, all such “holy days” (holidays) were papist, not biblical. So the churches I grew up in carefully preached Acts 2:38 or Genesis 12 (anything except Jesus’ birth and death) on Christmas and Easter.

I tell you this, not to criticize my heritage, but to help you understand why these holy days became so special to me when we finally outgrew those hang-ups. On all the sixty Easters when I was in the pulpit, I loved preaching about our Lord’s empty tomb and joining other believers in singing the great hymns that celebrate his resurrection. But this year, thanks to the virus pandemic, we won’t get to do that.

On any Sunday when we can’t worship, I miss it. But getting shut out on Easter leaves a hole in my heart. In this way I am like the apostle Paul. Every day, but especially on Easter, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection” (Philippians 3:10). In a time when the virus outbreak fills so many hearts with the fear of death, what Christian truth could bless us more? 

COVID19

Can Anybody Find the Ball?

Until they unexpectedly dissolved in the coronavirus haze, athletics had become America's number one pastime. Back when I had kids in school, sports were high on our list of family activities. I coached first-grade baseball. Through high school, my boys competed in just about every sport, and—yes, I'm their prejudiced dad—they were good.

Back then our schools respected traditional church schedules. Sports events never were booked on Sundays, and in our Bible-belt town, no games were played on prayer-meeting Wednesday nights. But all of that slowly changed. During this past decade I've groused and groaned when I see youth soccer teams kicking the ball on city park ballfields as I drive to church on Sunday mornings. Nothing seems sacred anymore.

Nothing but sports, that is. As a pastor, I have lamented that traveling ball teams in all sorts of sports have emptied many a pew in towns all across the land. But I should go on to confess that when I crash in my recliner after Sunday lunch, my habit has been to click the TV on to watch sports. Before the Kaepernick scandal aligned the NFL with those who flip off the flag, I

spent many a Sunday watching the Cowboys or the Broncos. I replaced them by snoring through PGA golf events.

Then came the virus. In a land addicted to it year round, athletics vanished. Ski resorts closed. No spring practice for school or community sports teams. Or for professional baseballers. No state-level high school championship games this year, and on college level no spring madness. Guys who dare to practice social distancing by losing golf balls out on fairway Number Nine get arrested. NASCAR tracks are silent. The 2020 Olympics torch is out. No bicyclists can race in virus-decimated Europe this spring. The only international competition that wasn't cancelled was dogsled-racing in Iditarod. (Can the new virus bug live in sub-zero temps?)

My reason for this litany of empty sports venues is to wonder out loud what we will come up with to take their place. We've been addicted to athletics. It was our society's drug of choice. Now what? I'm not anti-sports. But I am anti-athletic addiction. If, while the ball can't bounce, we decide to "seek the things that are above," as the Bible commands, what will we find to occupy our minds and our time? *CA*

COVID19

A Donkey for a Doctor

During this virus-sequester time, not a day passes without several news reports of how all of this is impacting our medical professionals. We heard yesterday, for example, that the VA Hospital (where my lady worked in her final nursing years) is begging retired doctors and nurses to return for temporary assignments. Nita seemed more pleased than usual that she let her nurse license expire years ago. Now she's exempt.

Our grandson/doctor is doing his medical residency in a busy city hospital, which has almost become his residence. He's cut off from his family to protect them, and we're guessing that the virus confusion is what caused him to pull a 28-hour shift last week. Recognizing their long hours of work and their forced isolation from their homes, a fellow who owns several large motels in our town has graciously offered free lodging to all medical professionals.

I saw on computer news that one of the doctors who treated coronavirus patients during the first outbreak in China died from the disease. Then, just a few days later, an American doctor also was listed among the virus fatalities. Medical treatment has always placed doctors and nurses at risk, whether they were treating measles or mumps or malaria or meningitis.

Whatever infects their patients may also strike them. So, while what we're seeing now is scary, it is nothing new. Like firefighters and police and other first responders, our medical caretakers know when they choose that career that they are exposing themselves to danger. They do it for us.

Ben Parks laughed when he told me about a receipt they found in his grandfather's papers. During a flu epidemic in the late 1880s, his Albany, Texas, grandfather paid the local sawbones for medical care both during that crisis and from then on. His receipt said: "One burro for any medical care needed."

A lot of our doctors and hospitals right now don't know how (or if) they will be paid, but they're treating us anyway. With their offices closed to all but emergencies and with so many hospitals overflowing with critically ill patients, their world—like ours—is turned on its head, and nobody has a clear enough crystal ball to predict when or how all of this will end.

I do know that most of the doctors and nurses who take care of me are people with strong faith, so I know that they can find strength to face the unknowns and the dangers of this epidemic by trusting in the greatest Healer of all. *CA*

COVID19

An Epidemic of Dishonesty

Shysters and scam artists have always been attracted by the scent of fear. Any threat that scares the masses offers hucksters and frauds an open door. Yesterday, for example, I got an urgent call telling me that gas service at my home would be cut off if I didn't send them payment immediately. Of course, my gas bill was not really delinquent, and any dollars I sent online would have wound up in some place like Madagascar. And this is only one of dozens of scams presently aimed at folks who are already shaken by the coronavirus upheaval.

Every new plague stirs the juices of faith healers and fills their pockets. COVID-19 was still new news when we starting getting offers of all sorts of fake medications. And fake health plans began showing up in our spam email files. The virus was just escaping China, and already it had inspired fraud worldwide. Of course, the resulting stock market crash fueled fear and opened the door for all sorts of cons.

"Crime rates are down dramatically," our local police reported after two weeks of official social distancing barriers. Evidently it's harder to break into homes when the occupants are confined there, rowdiness declines when bars close, and you can't hold

up a bank when its front door is locked. Who could have foreseen this side-effect of coronavirus controls?

What seems to be working in our town, though, certainly isn't working everywhere. Cops in larger cities tell us that metro crooks have cleaned out an alarming number of shops and offices left closed, empty, and unprotected because of the virus rules. It's easier to break into a store if the owner and all his staff are sequestered at home. News photos showed shattered store windows and rummaged shelves where thieves had trashed virus-closed businesses.

Bad boys and bad girls don't need a virus outbreak to make them dishonest, of course. In all places and all times crooks and cheats and liars and scammers will be busy ripping off victims (especially the elderly, sick, and confused—the most vulnerable ones). And when snake-oilers are furloughed from work, they have more time on their hands to ply their lucrative schemes.

Instead of exploiting our virus-ignited fears, this present wave of con-artists would do well to be frightened by the inevitable results of their own behavior. As Proverbs 11:3 warns, "If you are good, you are guided by honesty. People who can't be trusted are destroyed by their own dishonesty." *CA*

COVID19

Saved by the Virus

Every time I open Fox News online, on the first screen I see an update on the number of coronavirus deaths both here at home and worldwide. The rising counts are sobering, even if we pause to take into account how much lower the U.S. fatality rate per capita has been than in most other places around the world. The virus has killed thousands.

But, for others, it has been a life-saver.

Take, for example, the Texas inmates who were scheduled to be executed for murders they committed. Already they had survived their victims by as many as twenty years, which hardly seems just. But now the social distancing virus rules would keep these criminals' own families or the relatives of their victims from being present when their punishment was finally doled out to them, so the state felt compelled to delay their executions. The killer saved killers.

But that's not all. Early in April 2020 a federal court ruled that it is legal for virus regulations in the state of Texas to block most abortion services during the coronavirus pandemic. This reversed a lower court's earlier decision that the state could not deny a prospective mother her constitutional right to kill her unborn baby. The latest court reasoned that constitutional rights

can be limited or denied during a time of extreme emergency, so the Texas lid on abortions can stay shut for now.

In their protest of this latest ruling, Planned Parenthood wailed that hundreds of abortions have already been prevented by this Texas virus measure. In other words, the deadly virus has saved hundreds of lives. Do you suppose that this inventory of saved lives should be deducted from death stats in today's new reports?

While we're balancing the life/death books, maybe we should take a close look to see if the virus stay-at-home mandates have reduced the usual number of on-the-job or vehicle accidents where we live. It makes sense that fewer people will die on Los Angeles freeways if the freeways are so empty that their usual layer of smog has vanished. Before we finish counting, we just might discover that the dreaded virus actually has saved more lives that it snuffed out.

All of this does indeed have an ironic twist to it—the fact that a deadly disease has actually kept some of us alive. But the entire subject is dead serious when we recall that God himself made the rules that protect human life. And why did he set such a high value on our survival? Because, the Scriptures tell us, "God made man in his image." *CA*

COVID19

We're Going Home Now


This is a confused time for me. I've been officially retired now for just over five months. Now I can sleep late, mope around the house, and dress like a bum. My 60-hour work week now looks more like a 6-hour gig. I go to my church office just two or three times a week, and then only because I volunteered to tackle certain weekly tasks until our new pastor gets on board.

What I'm saying is that I'm not out tending to pastoral duties from before dawn until way past dark, as I did for sixty-plus years. Now I'm at home most of the time, and I'm still trying to decide what I ought to be doing with all these idle hours. Eventually, I'm sure, I'll get entrenched in some routine, but right now I'm somewhat at loose ends.

What makes all of this even more confusing for me, however, is the way the virus epidemic has re-described life in most neighborhoods. Because virus curbs have shut down non-essential businesses, and because our schools are closed, and because so many folks are being forced to work from their homes, or—like my dentist neighbor—not to work at all, I'm not the only person staying at home all day. I'm not the only guy whose car never leaves the driveway. I'm not the only resident swigging coffee while vegging out on my front-porch swing.

Staying at home suddenly is the new norm. Right when I saw myself as an odd duck because I was domiciled, a host of my younger neighbors are just like me. They're at home all day every day. And, thanks to the virus crisis, many of them are having to learn how to coexist peacefully and productively with a house full of school kids who have no school to go to. When I watch them, I realize that my new assignment may be the easiest one on our block. All I have to do is say, "Yes, dear," when my lady beckons.

Without doubt, this virus epidemic has remodeled life as we knew it, and not all the changes have made it better. But being forced to rediscover quality time at home surely will bless most of us. When God ushered his people into the promised land, he told them to be sure their offspring were familiar with his words. "You shall teach them diligently to your children and speak of them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up," he told them. Home was to be the root of their faith.

I like the Pooh cartoon that showed up right when virus regulations began. Pooh tells Piglet, "We're going home now, because that's the best thing to do." Right on, Pooh. 

COVID19

Are You Still Wobbly?

I like the metaphor my friend Dr. Bill Summerhill used to assure his students and staff at Ascension Academy that they would soon be more comfortable and productive as they shift to online learning during the virus shutdown.

"I remember the day I learned to ride a bike," Dr. Summerhill began. And he told how unsteady he was at first on a two-wheeled vehicle. He started with training wheels on his bicycle. That was a breeze. But when they removed those crutches, Bill couldn't keep the bicycle upright. His dad had to run alongside him to keep him from falling over. If his father turned loose, Bill and his bike toppled.


"Then it just happened," he recalled. "One summer morning I got on my bike and started riding by myself, careening into some garbage cans. But somewhere on that collision course I knew something was different. In that moment I knew, or I felt, that I could ride a bike. From then on it was easy."

My friend's illustration spoke forcefully to me, because I've been there, done that. So have most of us who learned to stay upright on a bicycle. Now, decades later, most of us (even some who

now wobble when we walk) can climb onto a bicycle and peddle away without the slightest concern about how to keep it upright. We've learned that skill forever.

Right now in this crazy, mixed-up, rapidly changing virus age, so full of new challenges daily, we're having to learn a whole gaggle of new ways to cope. Everything from buying toilet paper to booking a doctor appointment requires a new skill-set. Almost nothing works like it used to. If you're like me, more than once in this blitz of changes you have crashed your bike.

But we're learning. While we're doing things in ways we never thought of before the coronavirus hit, we're acquiring new skills. And my friend Bill is right. When this is over, "we will be different. We will be stronger, more capable, and more ready to ride our bikes along roads that will take us far into our future."

My dad died over twenty years ago, so I don't have a tutor to run beside this new bike. But all of us who trust in the Lord do have all the help we need to get through this crisis. "I am with you," he promises. "I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you" (Isaiah 41:10). 

COVID19

One in Christ

We just experienced the strangest Easter in all my days. Never before—even in those early days when the church I grew up in acted like Easter was not happening—never before can I remember us sitting at home in our pj's or casual clothes on Easter Sunday morning. But, thanks to the virus restrictions, we slept late and moseyed around our house with no concern about “getting ready for church.”

My friend and sister in Christ, Rhonda Schuelke, spent the week before Easter at her lake house on Brownwood Lake. Easter morning she emailed me to tell me that she and six others (a legal cadre) would be sharing Easter worship together at the lake. That little band of worshipers, she told me, would include three couples, one each from Methodist, Catholic, and mainline Church of Christ fellowships, along with Rhonda. All of them bowing down together to the same risen Lord.

Rhonda assured me they would be keeping proper social distance according to the legal virus curbs. I doubted it, but I didn't tell her so. I didn't want to pour any cold water on that holy fire, because it thrilled me that we have come to a spiritual place where we can bow down

alongside folks we used to avoid like another kind of plague. Despite our differences in rituals and ecclesiastical mechanics, now we can worship Jesus together.

“One in Christ,” I replied to Rhonda's email with rejoicing in my heart. “One in Christ because of Easter and because of the virus.”

Because of the virus, Easter sermons were available on dozens of sources—YouTube, Zoom, and half a dozen other modern-tech venues. I clicked one button on my TV remote and brought my friend and colleague Dr. Howie Batson, First Baptist's pastor, into our living room. After the marvelous Easter music of Dan Baker, after the technical blending of his virus-separated, online choir singing the “Hallelujah Chorus,” Howie preached a powerful Easter sermon on the angels' invitation for all of us to “come and see” the empty tomb of Jesus.

What message could have been more appropriate for all believers on this Easter morning when the virus epidemic banished us from our churches and bolted their doors? Howie's sermon today was on target. Right now, when each day's virus news raises new alarms, we needed to hear the message of the Easter angels: “Fear not. Have great joy.” *CA*

COVID19

A Messed Up World

“God was punishing them for their degenerate lifestyle,” one prominent television pastor was quick to tell the world after the last major hurricane bashed New Orleans. At the time I doubted his pronouncement of divine judgment, but let me admit that he might have been right. So might a bevy of his colleagues who identify deadly tornadoes and tidal waves and earthquakes and just about every other natural disaster as outpourings of heaven's wrath. But I doubt it.

So I'm equally slow to get on the theological bandwagon of my fellow-pastors who are blaming the COVID-19 pandemic on God.

I realize that any serious Bible reader can put a finger on the hail and locusts and anthrax in the Egyptian plagues and say correctly, “God did it.” They can accurately remind us that God rained fiery brimstone on Sodom to stop their sodomizing, or that he flattened pagan Jericho with one mighty shake. God can wipe out any delinquent he chooses to punish. The Bible tells us he has done that on numerous occasions, and he is still the same God we read about in the good Book. If we get bad enough, he is more than able to send a flood or a wave of locusts to clean up the mess we're making.

But I'm slow to blame the Almighty

every time my water heater leaks or my apricot tree shrivels up or I catch the flu. I live in a fallen world—a world we ignorant humans messed up almost from Day One. Most of the troubles we suffer are our fault. God gave us paradise and we humans turned it into hell on earth.

If I feel the need to give somebody credit for all the virus deaths in New York or for the massive job layoffs in Seattle, who should it be? God? Or whatever political party I want to trash today? Or maybe the Chinese peasants who ate virus-infected bat meat they bought in that Wuhan water market over two years ago? Instead of divine retribution, perhaps we can trace this present disruption of our lives to human ignorance. All of us have plenty of that.

When all is said and done, why do we need to blame anybody? We live in a fallen world, a world rife with diseases and dangers of a jillion kinds, and nobody really needs to be singled out as the one who unleashed the present carnage. Instead of branding God as the virus-sender, in these troubled times we would be much wiser to reach out to him as the One who can help us get through it all. As the psalmist taught us to sing: “God is our shelter and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble” (46:1). *CA*

COVID19

Stay Open But Stay Safe


For the first time since shelter-in-place rules became the law of our state, I stopped by my favorite post office branch to mail a couple of my books to a lifelong acquaintance in Fort Worth. Since I'm a frequent customer of that little mail facility, the ladies behind the counter have become my friends. So, in a world where "non-essential stores" are closed and virus masks are worn by staff and customers in the businesses still open, I had been wondering what measures the post office was taking to protect the gals who for years have taken such good care of me.

If you've gone inside a post office in recent days, you know what I saw in this one. The three-clerk counter now is cut off from the customer waiting area by a thick clear plastic drape, ceiling to floor. Through a small rectangular opening at counter level, a traditional plastic mail tray has been inserted, half of it sticking out on the customer side and the other half open to the clerk behind the plastic shield. When I dropped my package into the tray, the clerk slid the tray inside where she could retrieve the parcel and put it on her scale. She and I played the sliding tray game at least two more times as I deposited cash in the tray to pay the postage and she used it to give me a receipt for the transaction.

That was a first-time experience for me. Never before had I been the least

bit worried about being contaminated by a post office clerk or, for that matter, about her catching some bug from me. But in this virus-threatened world, I was glad to see that the USPS managers were ahead of the curve in providing protection for their loyal staff. Almost overnight, it seemed, they had come up with an effective way to keep their people safe and to keep the mail moving.

Not just in post offices, of course, but in every essential business, this has been the challenge during the coronavirus scourge—to stay open but also to stay safe. Doing that is not simple. The girl who accepted my cash and handed me my take-out order at Canes took at least two chances that I might give her the virus, and I doubled it when I took my change and my chicken order from her hand. But we did it, and I didn't detect that either of us was afraid of the other. Some of the experts tell us we should have been.

Dealing with danger is a daily experience, virus or no virus. From the time our mothers warned, "Look both ways before you cross the street," we've been aware that dangers lurk in our world. Everywhere. All the time. And in such a world we have to learn to live without disabling fear. After reminding us that God takes care even of seemingly useless birds, Jesus assures us, "Don't be afraid, you are more valuable to God than a whole flock of sparrows." 

COVID19

Making It Harder to Die


Long ago I lost count of the obituaries I've read that told me the deceased person died "surrounded by family and friends." That seemed to be a fact worth sharing, even if it cost a hundred bucks to add that line in a newspaper obituary. None of us want to die alone.

But that is what is happening to countless homeless people in states like New York and California as coronavirus invades their tent cities. Nameless people are dying with no friends or family nearby to comfort them or to bury them. One news report showed dozens being interred in a mass grave anonymously, or at least without any relatives claiming their bodies or planning any kind of funeral. These people literally died just as they chose to live. Alone.

But lonely deaths are not limited to tent dwellers. In the difficult days since virus safety rules began requiring isolation, one member of my church and several other friends have died almost alone. In hospice facilities where in normal times family members and close friends would have clustered at the bedside of their loved one, the number of visitors allowed has been limited to one or two at the most. Even my presence as a pastor has been precluded (if I show up, a relative has to leave). So people I loved died without hearing my prayers.

Just this morning I learned that another dear friend has been placed in hospice care. Already I was sad that my visits to him in his care facility have been limited by the necessary virus precautions, but today this news distresses me more. My friend is dying almost alone. In a normal world I would rush to his bedside. Even if he's already in a last-days coma, still, if I could, I would tell him how much he means to me and I would wish him well on the exciting journey before him. But, thanks to the virus epidemic, I won't get to tell him good-bye.

All of us who are disciples of Jesus remember that he said, "I am the resurrection and the life." And we believe his promise that if any who trust him die, they will live again. I'm sure that all of my friends who have died in recent days believed that, and so does the dear man who is dying today. Our virus fears and protective regulations in no way limit or blot out our faith in the risen Lord and our hope of eternity in heaven. But in our final hours they do cut us off from the people who have blessed us most here on earth.

Somehow it seems ironic that, in order to keep from dying, we have made it harder to die. 

COVID19

Stores Closed, Sales Up

Last weekend as I drove home from my church office, I came to a street corner where traffic unexpectedly was almost blocked. As I inched down the road past the mess, I could see that the jam was not because of road construction or a rush-hour accident. The right lane was blocked by a lengthy line of cars waiting at the drive-by window of a normally fairly quiet liquor store. Evidently folks stuck at home during the virus scare thought they needed a potion to assuage their fears. And, of course, if you're working at home, the boss won't know if you've been hitting the bottle and you're a bit tipsy.

It turns out that booze is not the only product flying off the shelves during this pandemic. Bible sales are up, we're told. Way up. Is that because lots of us are so frightened by COVID-19 that we need to plug back into faith and seek the help of God? I hope so.

It doesn't surprise me in the least that gasoline sales have plummeted. Right here in town I usually need a tank a week. It appears now that the present tank will last me a month or more. But I was surprised to see that one high-demand item during these stay-at-home days is pajamas. Especially pajama bottoms, the online stores report. Does that tell us anything about how many folks who work

at home never bother to get dressed? "Having a pajama day" may take on a whole new meaning if we stay virus-shuttered much longer.

Grocery store owners say it has been a real challenge to stock adequate supplies of many basic food items. Part of the problem can be explained by virus disruptions in the supply chain, all the way from chicken and pork farms and dairies to the Interstate trucks that haul the groceries to us. I had not foreseen this. Nor had I factored in the obvious reality that thousands of people working and schooling and sheltering at home now have to buy food they used to get at IHOP or Olive Garden.

Thanks to the virus, a lot of our buying habits changed overnight. Given the constant bombardment of televised instructions about hand washing, surely none of us thought it odd that hand-cleaner shelves so often are empty now. That makes sense. But has anybody come up yet with a sensible explanation of the panic run on TP?

Evidently scare tales are more likely to be swallowed by people who are already scared. Could that be one reason Jesus warns us not to worry? If we take care of today, Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount, tomorrow will take care of itself. And that's true, even if a virus is loose in the land. *CA*

COVID19

Who's That Masked Man?

To give my always-busy cook a breather, yesterday I pulled into the drive-through line of one of our favorite fast-food suppliers. I was pleasantly surprised at the efficient way they processed my order. It actually was "fast" food.

But I did encounter one problem. When I drove up to Window #1 (the one where they take our money), the sharp gal at the cash drawer said something to me. I'm a deaf old man, and this soft-spoken lass was wearing a virus mask, so I didn't understand a word she said to me. "Huh?" I replied. "I can't hear you." She told me again. I think. Still I could not decipher even one word. I handed her a twenty-dollar bill and she smiled and gave me my change. But our mask-muffled conversation during that transaction was lost to me.

Masks. Through the years they have had lots of connotations. If you can remember the masked man and Tonto, you won't have to worry about the draft. We older folks know that the Lone Ranger wore a mask because he was the good guy, not because he was a crook. Long before the coronavirus outbreak, hoodies and masks became the costume of choice for hoods who hold up banks and convenience stores. Of course, the masks seldom work. Almost always we catch the bad boys anyway.

But thanks to COVID-19, today half the people in America are wearing

masks, and half of those without them are fuming because they can't get one. On a quick visit to Google you can find hundreds of posts telling you how to make (or how not to make) your own mask at home.

It's beyond my octogenarian digital expertise, but I saw on the news that some computer guru has figured out how to produce medical-quality virus masks by pushing a few keys on his computer.

In almost every town—mine included—public-spirited owners of a wide array of businesses that had never thought of making or selling a mask have quickly adapted their equipment and raw materials to manufacture them. Last night's newscast told of some generous donor providing much-needed masks to our local hospitals, and this is happening nationwide. And some of the newscasters were wearing masks, which made their reports unintelligible.

I predict that masks will vanish almost as quickly as they appeared, and I'll be glad when they're gone. A huge part of our communication consists of what we see and not just what we hear. How can I tell if you're sticking out your tongue at me if you're hiding behind a mask? And how can I tell if you're glad or sad if I can't see your expression?

Proverbs 15:30 says, "Smiling faces make you happy." I'm ready to see them again. *CA*

COVID19

Numbers We Can Trust

Statistics. We're getting buried in them. How many virus cases in our county, our state, our nation. How many deaths because of COVID-19 (the count rises daily). How many more will die next week, next month, etc. How many people are unemployed because of the virus. The virus data heaps up and changes by the hour.

How much of it can we trust? If we can believe anything the media tells us nowadays, China tried to hide the Wuhan epidemic and then falsified data about how many caught the virus and how many died. Their late reports double the early numbers. Who knows how much of our data much closer to home is being massaged to let states tap into various disaster funds or to let them relax shelter-at-home rules sooner than the rest of us?

In this robo-call age, can we trust anybody? A Fox News headline in mid-April told us, "Chile counts people who have died from coronavirus as 'recovered' because they can't infect anyone else." So they have an impressive recovery rate. (So did LBJ have winning totals when they counted votes by dead people in Hidalgo County.) An old proverb used to say, "Numbers don't lie." Really?

Even those who are trying to be honest may still mislead us with data they put out. Anyone reporting the

number of cases of coronavirus in a certain locale is wrong. What they're actually counting are the number of people who have tested positive for the disease. By far the larger percentage of the population in any specified area have not been tested, and new studies show that at least 25 percent of those with the virus are asymptomatic, so we really have no idea how many have caught the bug.

Accurate counts can still be deceptive unless we know what percentage of the population caught the virus in the states or countries we're comparing. New York's virus victim tally sounds atrocious, for example, until we stop and realize how many millions of people live there. We have some tiny towns in Texas who have minuscule numbers but a higher rate of infection.

One number all of us can agree on: the number of Sundays our churches have been closed. Since my little church is a non-prophet organization, nobody among us can predict how many more weeks will pass before our doors can be unlocked and our lights turned back on. But as these lonely Lord's days slip by, all of us are counting them, because we believe the numbers Jesus gave us when he promised that he would be present where two or three are gathered in his name. *CA*



"God is our
refuge and
strength,
an ever-present
help in time
of trouble."



God's Promise
Psalm 41

Limited Time Offer

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