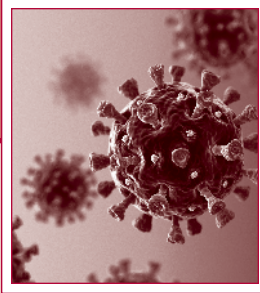


Essays by Gene Shelburne

THE CHRISTIAN
Appeal



COVID 19

If we started cataloging all the lifestyle changes forced on us by the coronavirus pandemic, how long would our list be? That would be a disturbing, distressing inventory for most of us.

On the other hand, if we listed all the Bible verses we've looked at to find hope and strength and comfort in this unsettling time, how long would that list be?

Instead of complaining about schools shutting down and restaurants closing and churches being locked, maybe we should be thanking the Lord that the virus panic has caused us to open our Bibles and increase our prayers.

In this month's series of essays, Senior Editor Gene Shelburne will prompt us to explore various ways the virus crisis can deepen and expand our faith.

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“Wait patiently
for the **Lord**.
Be **brave** and courageous.
Yes, wait patiently
for the **Lord**.”



Psalm 27

COVID19

Reflections on a Virus-restricted Sunday

This is a rare Sunday. Only during a few blizzard-blasted, snow-drift Sundays can I recall a Lord's day when the saints didn't gather to praise God in our little church building. But the present virus restrictions caused us—obedient citizens that we are—to obey the governor and tell all our flock to stay home today.

So we did. No Bible study or worship in our place of worship today. As the governor requested, it's empty. Quiet. Dark. Locked. And, like most of us who usually are there on Sunday morning, it seems odd (depressing?) (unsettling?) not to be in our regular pews.


Being stuck at home, though, didn't keep most of us from hearing Scriptures read and a good sermon delivered. I enjoyed Howie Batson's excellent TV sermon on the Lord's command, "Fear not," and the psalmist's assurance that our changeless God is our refuge and strength and he's always with us. (If I had not wanted to listen to a Baptist, I had access to at least a dozen Church of Christ services on YouTube or live streaming, but Howie's solidly biblical admonitions suited me and cogently addressed the present virus mess.) All of us today need to hear Jesus telling us, "Fear not."

But, like most of us in the C of C, few Sundays during my adult life have passed without communion. And I missed it. You probably did too. Although, when I think about it, this communion-less Lord's day was no different for me than the one I spent in a hospital bed a couple of years ago. Nor was it any more of a spiritual disaster for any of us than the blizzard Sundays I mentioned earlier. We missed the bread and

the cup on those days, but life went on and none of us feared for our souls because we missed them. Today is no different.

In my heritage, though, some of us were taught to fear for our souls if we failed to commune regularly. Weekly visits to the holy Table are as necessary as baptism, we were taught. So, because of that early training, today's locked church doors probably left at least some of our people afraid and desperately wondering what to do. In fact, I heard that some were rummaging around yesterday trying to get communion bread and grape juice. That's fine, if it blesses them. But this might be a good time for us to look more closely at our Bibles and verify that nowhere in God's word does it tell us how often to commune.

Weekly communion was passed down to us by our spiritual ancestors, and it blesses most of us. But the frequency of communion is never addressed in the New Testament. Instead, Jesus says, "As often as you do this, do it in memory of me." Quite likely the apostles and earliest believers remembered him at every meal as they broke bread and shared wine. But no biblical rule exists telling us never to miss a Sunday.

Still, I missed communing with our people today. And that's a huge part of communion. Communing. Doing it with others we love, others who share our love of Jesus. I miss doing that today, and I pray that the virus restrictions soon will be lifted so that we can sing and meditate and commune together. Until then, know that God is still in control of our world, and Jesus loves us still, whether we're in his house or in our own today. 

COVID19

Virus Rules and Closed Churches

"All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer. They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people" (Acts 2:42-47, NLB).

During these difficult days when all public gatherings are outlawed, our congregation is complying, of course. We're trying to be law-abiding citizens. But this doesn't mean that we enjoy being cut off from one another for so long a time.


We like each other. Often when we visit before Bible study or when we stand around and talk after a worship service, when I hear the laughter and the chatter, I jest to someone nearby that it's a shame that our people don't like each other better. (If you've ever belonged to a congregation where people were at odds and angry with others there, you know how blessed we are to have a church full of people who love one another and enjoy times together.)

But, having said that, we're not a New Testament church. Not like that first one in Jerusalem (the one described in the Acts 2 passage above). We don't meet and commune daily like they did. Having admitted that, however, we

once-(or twice, or three times)-a-week Christians still feel isolated and sad whenever some unforeseen disaster like this virus outbreak keeps us apart for weeks at a time.

Although our entire congregation has never been separated for long periods, some of our families have experienced this spiritual loneliness during times of prolonged illness. And almost all our shut-ins live in this kind of lonely world all the time. Maybe our present virus-mandated separation from each other will teach us to look for more ways to reach out to our people who no longer can share in our church's times of worship and fellowship. Being lonely right now may wake us up to the sad fact that these dear people are lonely all the time.

Being virus-segregated for a few weeks may also teach us not to let trivialities cause us to skip our church's regular worship and study times. Just being together actually blesses us more than we may have realized. Being told we can't meet is somewhat like being told we can't eat ice cream or munch on chocolate. Only when blessings get cut off are we likely to realize how much they meant to us.

So—whether it happens next week or next month—pray that our congregation will soon be able to assemble together again, and resolve to make attendance a new priority then. 

COVID19

Driving and Shopping Without Lines

It's Monday. The first Monday since our governor closed eat-in dining facilities and churches and schools. The first Monday since our mayor locked the front door of most of our city's offices and convention venues. The first Monday since nursing homes and hospitals and retirement centers stopped most of us visitors from coming and going.

At mid-morning today I had to drive downtown and then make several other quick stops back on the west side of town, and on this day—unlike any recent Monday I can remember—the almost empty streets made those miles a breeze.

A retired doctor friend of mine popped off during a meeting we attended right before the virus shut-down. “I have occasional fits of road-rage,” he confessed, and then he told us a tale about how a dumb stunt by some driver had riled him a day or so before that. Most of us nodded and, although we didn't confess it, we knew that all of us had been there, done that. But today's traffic-less streets were one blessing I had not expected the virus to bestow on us. I drove from one side of our downtown business district to the other without waiting for a single vehicle or stopping at a single traffic light. I was on my

own private one-way street. It was glorious.

Then, at my ailing wife's bequest, I stopped at Walgreens to pick up a bottle of pills for her. In the middle of what usually would be a busy morning, the parking place nearest to the front door was vacant, just waiting for me. Inside that usually crowded store, I stood behind just one other shopper. Everybody else stayed home. Hey, I could get spoiled to that.

At the post office I had the same experience. Mailing one of my books to a customer and a box of past *Christian Appeal* issues to a nursing home chaplain in south Texas required me to stop by my favorite postal substation. Lines there seldom are as long as they tend to be in the larger branches, but even in this small neighborhood post office sometimes I've had to wait ten or fifteen minutes in their line of customers. Not today. In that virus-emptied facility, today I walked right up to the counter, and the relaxed clerk instantly processed my packages. No wait. No line. I like that.

My point is simple. While much of this virus crisis is scary and tragic, still, if we look for them, even in these bleak days we can find blessings to be thankful for. *CA*

COVID19

It's Got to Be His Fault!

Most of us were still toddlers when we learned to point our fingers at a sibling and mutter, “It's his fault!” or “It's her fault.” He or she is to blame. Certainly not me!

The greater the damage in question, the louder and more caustic our accusations. When Mom's favorite lamp lay in the floor in shattered shards or Dad's prized tool vanished from his workbench, we went into crisis mode to make sure that somebody else in the house got the blame.

It appears to me that the COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed a flurry of blame-placing every bit as childish as any of our own juvenile efforts to dodge accountability.

“It's China's fault,” we hear a gaggle of western world leaders insisting.

“No,” at least one Chinese military chief rebutted. “This latest virus is a secret weapon planted in China by Donald Trump.”

If we didn't know better, we'd think the accuser was a Democrat (after all, some of them blame Trump for everything from

chicken pox to tidal waves).

And here in our own country from both sides of the political aisle we hear ludicrous attempts to blame the other side for our present virus crisis.

Finding somebody else to blame is one of our most basic human traits. It's been happening ever since Adam whined, “That woman you gave me caused me to do it.” Instead of manning up and confessing to God, “I made a bad choice. I did what you told me not to do,” Adam pointed a finger of blame first at God and then at his wife. And we've been employing that strategy ever since.

Without doubt, the coronavirus epidemic has left a swath of damage worldwide. Jobs have been lost. Businesses have cratered. Travel has been disrupted. Athletic competition at every level has ground to a halt. Schools have been shuttered. And thousands have died. Surely somebody is to blame.

But even if we could accurately identify the culprit, would that put Mom's lamp back together again? *CA*

COVID19

Thank God for the Rain

An ancient proverb says, “It’s an ill wind that blows no man good.” Even the storms that inflict the greatest damage also water our crops. Life is like that. On almost every level.

A good example of this principle made headlines in our local paper twice this week. My reaction was probably inappropriate, but I chuckled when I saw the report that the execution of a death-row inmate in Texas had been delayed by the outbreak of COVID-19. The same virus that was killing people all over the globe saved this guy’s life. A killer is still alive because of a killer. That struck me as ironic. As funny in a macabre way. Later that same week a second Texas inmate got a similar extension of life because of the virus outbreak.

So . . . Has the virus pandemic been totally bad? If you think so, ask any third-grader who gets to stay home and watch cartoons instead of going to school. If you see only the menace in the virus, talk in confidence to the multitude of folks who are silently jubilant that at least for a few weeks they don’t have to endure mindless, boring, poorly prepared sermons on Sunday morning. Or listen to the millions of American workers who are ecstatic this week because the virus shutdown

is forcing their employers to learn that working from home may be far more efficient than providing expensive office space and making their workers waste hours commuting twice each day.

Don’t hear me wrong. I’m not glad we’ve been hit so hard by the novel coronavirus. It has hurt thousands of people and cratered far too many businesses. But, like every disaster before it, this one has taught us truths and forced life modifications we never would have thought of without it.

Sometimes the only way we can learn and grow is through suffering. The apostle Paul got hit with what he called “a thorn in the flesh.” Nobody has a clue whether he was suffering gut pains, heart pains, arthritis, or something like insomnia or vertigo. Whatever his malady might have been, he wrote later that at first he begged God to take it away. But then he realized that the weakness he endured had helped him to see the power of Christ in a way he never had.

Surely none of us would have asked for or welcomed this virus, but it’s here anyway. So, instead of despairing or moaning, now would be a prime time for us to open our eyes to new, unexpected blessings. *CA*

COVID19

Wasting a Crisis

Somewhere recently I saw a stat on the percentage of our communication that is non-verbal. I don’t recall the exact number they cited, but all of us have recognized this truth all of our lives. When our mothers said something to us, for example, even from the time we were toddlers, all of us quickly looked at our mama’s face to see if she was just ribbing us or if she really meant it. From her words alone, often we couldn’t tell.

I had that experience this week while wading through the swamp of coronavirus news. In one online news source I ran across a report that quoted a remark Rahm Emanuel, former Chicago mayor and, briefly, Obama’s White House chief of staff, made about the current virus epidemic.

“Never allow a crisis to go to waste,” were his words. Actually, it turns out, Emanuel was quoting himself. While he was in Congress representing Illinois, he offered that same memorable piece of advice as he commented on the famous 2008 finance crash. Now he was applying the same wisdom to our virus upheaval.

Not being very familiar with Emanuel, however, and not being able to hear his tone of voice or see his facial expression during either time when he spoke those words, I can’t tell if he’s offering serious, sage counsel to all of us or if he’s harpooning a political foe with a sarcastic dig. I lean toward the first explanation, because he went on to say, “Start planning now for the future.”

Whether Emanuel meant to be wise or catty, his words are loaded with good sense. Right now, when our world is topsyturvy and we’re having to re-think almost everything we’ve taken for granted all our lives, these troubled days may be the perfect time for us to fix some things that haven’t worked well forever. This may be the perfect time to revamp some ineffective practice in your office or your church or your family. Do it. “Don’t waste the crisis.”

Talking about how we Christians deal with our unbelieving neighbors, the apostle Paul got ahead of Rahm Emanuel almost two millennia when he wrote in Colossians 4:5, “Make the most of every opportunity.” *CA*

COVID19

Our Kitchen Is Closed Today

Long ago I lost count of the number of times we bumped into some friends in a restaurant and my lady chuckled while telling them, “Our kitchen is closed today.” But now, during this virus shutdown, it’s the café owners and not the customers who are saying that.


Until the virus restrictions forced them to lock their dining room doors, I didn’t realize how often we slipped off to some nearby eating establishment to get our daily nutrition. We ate out at least once a day every day. Now that we can’t get into any of them, I am finding out how much I enjoyed my frequent visits to McDonalds or Taco Villa or The Bagel Shop or IHOP.

Now that we’re forced to dine at home, I miss eating out. Maybe more than I miss their cuisine, I miss the people we often saw there—both fellow-customers and regular staff. Several of the ladies at “my” McDonalds know me so well that they often handed me my breakfast order before I spoke a single word to them.

Not being able to join family and friends for breakfast or lunch or dinner, I suddenly realize how much of our regular socializing

was done while we were breaking bread at Dairy Queen or Hoffbrau or Cheddars. Because of the virus, I’m not hungry. I’m lonely.

Don’t get me wrong. My wife is a talented cook who constantly amazes me with her ability to plan our menus for multiple days ahead and to prepare tasty meals every few hours every day. She makes it look easy, and I never hear her complain about her kitchen workload. But her cooking tasks have quadrupled since the virus made it impossible for us to eat out. And our social life has been almost wiped out. Talking to a buddy on a cell phone is just not the same as chatting with each other while sharing coffee or french fries at the same table.

At the end of Acts 1, the first description of the early church tells us that those brand new believers met together every day not just to pray together but also to break bread. Current virus protocols are keeping us from doing that. When this crisis is over and the doors of our favorite restaurants are open again, we need to remember to thank the Lord every time we get to walk through them. 

COVID19

No Visitors Allowed

A late phone call last night alerted me to the fact that a longtime friend and colleague had gone to the hospital ER with heart concerns. In a normal time in a normal world I would have instantly climbed into my RAV4 and buzzed over to that hospital both to check on his condition and to offer what pastoral support I could to his family. But not last night. I knew that current virus restrictions don’t allow even a single visitor in the ER treatment areas. So I sat at home and felt anxious and uninformed and useless.


All that day my pastoral instincts had felt quashed by similar visitation limits in our hospice units. From the very first days of hospice care in our town, I have hurried to the bedside of dying parishioners. Being with them and their loved ones in those final hours has always seemed to be one of the most important roles I can fill as their pastor. But yesterday a longtime member of my flock lay dying in a hospice bed, and I knew that if I showed up there, I would simply displace the one family member allowed to stay beside her. So I sat at home, frustrated.

My comments thus far are not criticisms of the hospitals or hospices involved. Their rules for visitors right now are valid. They make sense in a world where our sickest people need to be isolated and shielded from all possible virus exposures. But the same

guidelines that protect our most vulnerable patients from contamination also cut them off from most of our traditional sources of encouragement and support.

If you’re a mother, for instance, and your son or daughter lies critically ill in a hospital, how do you feel, for instance, if you can’t even hold your child’s hand because the single visitor allowed in their ICU room must be their spouse? Or what if you are a spouse, and when your husband or wife gets gravely injured in a car wreck, virus-visitor rules prevent you from even seeing your wounded loved one, much less kissing or hugging them and letting them know you are “there” for them?

Our hospital staffs are even more troubled by these new rules than the rest of us are. Why? Because all of us are suddenly being reminded of just how precious and powerful the presence of family and friends can be when we’re hurting the most.

While we can’t visit our ailing family members and friends right now, this may be a good time for us to remember the biblical instruction for us to pray for our fellow-believers who are caught in a health crisis. We can’t be there beside them in person, but the Scriptures assure us in James 5 that “the earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.” 

COVID19

When Mama Stays Home

Those of us who arrived on this planet by 1940 remember a style of home life as different from our 2020 lifestyle as Mars is from Venus.

When I was a kid, in all but a few houses on every block in our little town, mama was at home with her brood. Although WWII forced women to replace our previously male work force, when the soldiers came home, most of their wives became full-time homemakers again.

If you were around back then, you know at least part of the reasons why both parents in a house didn't need a job. Since only one mate worked, most families really needed just one car. That saved dollars. Only the richest folks in our town had huge houses back then, and the mansions they did have were smaller than many of our regular homes today. Factor that into one-paycheck family budgets. And most of us back then lived simple lives on Depression-learned budgets, so we got along quite well without double incomes. Little did I realize when I was growing up how fortunate we were to have our mother at home to organize our world.

Thanks to the coronavirus restrictions, offices across the land are closed now and millions of mamas (and daddies) are at home with their

kids. One colleague in a usually busy metro area emailed me today. "I am currently sitting next to my soon-to-be two year old as she watches Mickey Mouse racers," he wrote to me. And he went on to tell me that his talented wife, a school counselor who would usually be at work, was conferencing with her co-workers while sitting on her bed. Their older kids had turned their den into a PE gym and a makeshift band hall. Thanks to the virus, their little family are enjoying life together today, a lot like we used to.

I'm glad my wife and I live in a fine home. I'm glad we have quality vehicles to drive (two of them still, although my retirement makes one of them unnecessary). I am addicted to my cell phone and cable TV and all the other expensive tech gadgets unheard of back in 1940. So I'm not ready to go back to a one-income lifestyle. But I do hope that this brief retreat to a more affordable existence when families can actually live together in our homes may help us to hear Jesus when he warns us that life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions.

Only by downsizing their budgets will American families be able to enjoy quality time together in their homes again. *CA*

COVID19

Are You Sure About That?

Did you see that news report about the large-church pastor who was apologizing for defying the national virus restrictions? On the first Sunday when all public meetings of more than ten people were banned, this man of God interpreted the new rules as a political effort to oppose faith and outlaw worship. "We serve God and not man," was his first (and quite biblical) reaction when he refused to shut down his congregation's large Lord's day assembly. An avalanche of criticism from solid believers (including dozens of fellow pastors) helped him see that his decision not to obey the law in this instance was not wise. It actually tarnished the church instead of glorifying God. So this pastor said in a nationwide apology, "I'm sorry."

But pastors were not the only professionals in the land who came up with differing assessments of the dangers posed by this new virus and what we should do to protect ourselves from its deadly invasion. On the same day I read lengthy, scholarly analyses of COVID-19 written by two top doctors who were telling us what we need to do to end this epidemic.

The first medical expert was not being flippant when he said he thought we were over-reacting.

He shared extensive data to show that this virus, like others before it, would soon stop spreading. Thousands of us have had mild symptoms of coronavirus without being tested or diagnosed, so we now have antibodies, the doctor suggested. Consequently, he believes the now-scary virus will be self-limiting without us endlessly emptying churches or schools or ballparks.

His colleague rang a very different bell, however. In a lengthy paper loaded with graphs and charts to substantiate the statistics that he cited, this high-ranking doctor predicted that the pandemic is just getting started. He advised national leaders and state governors to enact even more stringent measures to isolate us and to intensify treatment protocols.

Obviously, both men can't be right. Three months from now will one of them need to apologize to the nation for misleading us in such a critical time?

The universal truth reflected in all of this is that all of us are wrong part of the time. Even those who are wisest and best informed. So all of us (parents, teachers, church leaders, bosses, etc.) at times need to be honest and humble enough to admit our errors and to say, "I'm sorry." *CA*

COVID19

Laughing Instead of Crying

I'll have mercy and not inflict it on you, but even before our first Lord's day of cancelled worship services, my preacher/brother Curtis was inspired (?) to pen an elaborate poetic spoof that he called "Ode to TP." He even posted it in a fancy poster format that featured (you guessed it!) a commode.

A day later he emailed us siblings a link to a western singer who was plunking his guitar and doing some fancy cowboy footwork while he croaked a clever ballad that lamented the empty toilet paper shelves. It was hilarious. And true.

Before this virus upheaval, how often did you hear anybody discussing TP? Or even calling it that? "Last night our house got TP'd," my buddy Tom Williams quipped in one post. "Today it appraised for \$875,000."


No matter what happens in our world—virus related or not—Tom always entertains me with a barrage of puns, and we snicker together. While politely seeking my permission to share these virus columns with his church, Tom asked me, "Will it add to the coronavirus scare if your latest columns go viral?"

To appreciate one pun he dropped on me this week, it helps to know that Tom is not only a book author and book editor but

also a talented professional artist and book cover designer. He brightened my virus seclusion by telling me, "Yesterday I got so bored from isolation that I began talking to a little spider. He seemed nice. He's a web designer."

Yes, I know this kind of humor is a bit daffy, but I think you'll agree with me that, in a time like this, chuckling beats whining or moaning hands down.

One of the books that blessed me most in the early years of my ministry was Elton Trueblood's *The Humor of Christ*. In a scholarly examination of the Gospels, Trueblood identified six or seven instances when the words of Jesus make sense only if the Lord is grinning or poking fun at those who were questioning him. It let me see Jesus in a way I had never imagined before that.

And, come to think of it, life in general—and especially life contorted by a trial like this virus outbreak—makes sense only if we can laugh at our own ludicrous attempts to fix what's broken. "Don't be impressed with your own wisdom," Proverbs 3:7 warns us. Learn instead to laugh at yourself and at the unsolvable problems we sometimes face. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart," that ancient wiseman counsels, "and don't depend on your own understanding." 

COVID19

The Faith We Forgot

If you know who Vin Scully is, then you likely won't have to worry about the draft. This legendary baseball broadcaster is now 92 years old. He spent well over half of those years broadcasting the games of the Brooklyn (and then Los Angeles) Dodgers. In a Fox News interview, Scully predicted that the present virus crisis may help a lot of Americans to rediscover their faith.


I hope he's right. He cited the revival of faith in our country during World War II. Pearl Harbor totally disrupted life as we had known it. Sugar and tires had to be rationed. Highway speed limits helped save gasoline nationwide. Female homemakers began making bombs and machine guns instead. And, in that terrible time when a new death toll was reported almost every day, three out of every four Americans became active members of some church. Death and fear turned us back to faith.

We saw a similar but shorter-lived response right after 9/11. Even a few of our TV journalists stopped deriding faith and embraced it themselves while the smoke of the trade towers still hung over Manhattan. I wasn't alive to see it, but history tells us that we had a similar reaction to the stock

market crash that preceded the Great Depression. Thousands of people who had become too busy working or playing were led by the crisis back to a pew.

What does all of this tell us? That faith is the only viable option when a worldwide disaster surprises us and all of us in the nation realize that, despite everything we do to quell it, the danger of the moment is beyond our control. When doom threatens the land, our only other available response besides faith is despair.

Scully's prediction is hard to verify right now since most of our pews are currently behind locked doors. But church attendance and public worship are only our most visible expression of faith. Only God knows how many of our neighbors who usually spent Sunday morning on a golf course or sleeping in have for the first time in a decade opened their Bibles or bowed their heads, looking for help when they feel helpless as the coronavirus spreads.

I can't think of a better time for us to re-read the 91st Psalm. "Because you have made the Lord your dwelling," this psalm assures us, "no evil will befall you, no plague will approach your tent." 

COVID19

Sorry . . . We're Closed

Empy offices. Dark stores. Locked churches. Closed schools. Grounded airliners. Cancelled concerts. It's nationwide. And all because of a tiny viral bug we can't even see.


Have you soaked up sun on the beaches of Hawaii? A lot of us have. Right now we tourists are unwelcome on the islands. Times Square and Broadway theaters and sites like the Statue of Liberty have been favorite destinations for most of us. Not this week. Or this month. Or maybe even this year. Baseball stadiums in Dallas and Los Angeles and Seattle and other cities all across the U.S. today sit empty. No players. No fans. All because of the coronavirus invasion.

Here in the Texas panhandle we learned this week that our famous Palo Duro Canyon musical *Texas* had to be cancelled this summer. Cast selection and prep time have to happen during the months of spring, but that's not possible this year. For the first time in over half a century, the stage in the canyon will be dark and quiet this season. All of us who have loved this grand show hope the virus doesn't kill it permanently.

Last year Amarillo opened the most successful semi-pro

baseball venue in the nation. Fans overflowed the Sod Poodles' new stadium night after night all summer long. Opening day this year came right when the virus arrived, however. Responsible caution delayed that first game. Weeks later we're still waiting. The crack of the bat and swirl of the stadium organ have not yet been heard this season.

Obviously, my remarks so far have focused on the new virus' impact close to my own home. I don't know enough to comment intelligently about how it is disrupting daily life in Italy or China or Bangladesh. But all of us who for the first time in our lives are seeing travel restrictions between many of our fifty states are feeling the curse of the virus.

The simple but wise words of the sweet Christian lady I buried this week seem to be a perfect response to all these virus closings. If she had heard us rehearsing our shock and dismay at these sudden eclipses of things we have always taken for granted, she would have told us (just as she often told her family), "This too shall pass." And our Lord, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, would say Amen. 

COVID19

Smile Now at the Camera

When I served on the committee that interviews prospective Bivins Scholars, some of the candidates who were working or going to school hundreds of miles away had to do their interviews on Skype. I hated it. Scholarship applicants who sat across the table from us connected with us in a way that seldom happened in the digital format. Sitting across the table, non-verbally they communicated to us their nervousness or humor or maybe the intensity of their commitment to ministry. Online interviews weren't just second-best. They were way down near the bottom of my list.


And now—could you ever have predicted it?—thanks to the virus, the bulk of our business negotiations and school teaching and hamburger ordering has to happen online.

It's not all bad, of course. Even before the virus restrictions cut us off from one another, my musician/brother Curtis had made plans to have a group of top instrumentalists in Nashville record accompaniment for songs he'll croon on his latest CD. He and his producer were in tiny Muleshoe, Texas. The guitar guy, the keyboarder, and the other talented players were in Tennessee. And together they blended voices and instruments to produce several fine cuts for the new CD. Amazing.

I don't mean to be negative, but not all the latest electronic communication works that well. Some of our local news anchors

have decided to (at least, ostensibly) obey the stay-at-home virus mandates of our mayor and our governor, so they are broadcasting the news by talking to their home computers. Most of the time they're hard to hear, they look like they've already caught the virus, and without their usual teleprompter they look down at their notes instead of addressing their audience and their camera. Legal? Yes. An improvement? No way.

Ditto for the live stream and Facebook preaching I'm hearing during the virus quarantine. A few of us pastors were equipped by God to be movie stars. But just a few. As a devotional magazine editor/publisher, I learned six decades ago that some of our most powerful pulpiteers were lousy writers. Writing was not their gift. Now that the virus epidemic has closed our churches, we're finding out that a lot of the pastors who bless us when we sit in their pews are hard to listen to online. (Or maybe it's just me—an old codger born way to soon to get very excited about impersonal, digital worship and sermons.)

Paul and Peter never had to smile for the camera. But they did have to find a way to communicate with their converts across many miles and from behind bars. So they, too, wrote "virus columns" that we call epistles—God's inspired words sent to his people during difficult, scary times. 

COVID19

You Can't Do That Anymore

What are you missing the most now that coronavirus restrictions have shut down life as you knew it?

My wife showed me her damaged fingernails last night. I could tell that not getting to visit her longtime nail tech may top the list of what she is missing in these epidemic days.

Today as I prepared instant oatmeal for breakfast, I realized that it's been almost a month since I chomped down on a tasty McDonalds sausage biscuit (and got to exchange banter with friends who also start their day there). I'm still well-fed, I assure you, but I miss that morning routine.

All of that is minor stuff, I know. Life goes on just fine while those activities are on hold. But I wonder how I'd be reacting right now if a store my family had opened every business day for several generations suddenly was shuttered. Or how I could cope with the virtual shutdown of air travel if, like my military lawyer son, I was supposed to show up for trials in two or three states every week, but now few planes are flying and lots of the states want to quarantine us when we get there. A lot of us thought air travel had become a hassle to avoid until most of the flights were grounded. Now we miss it.

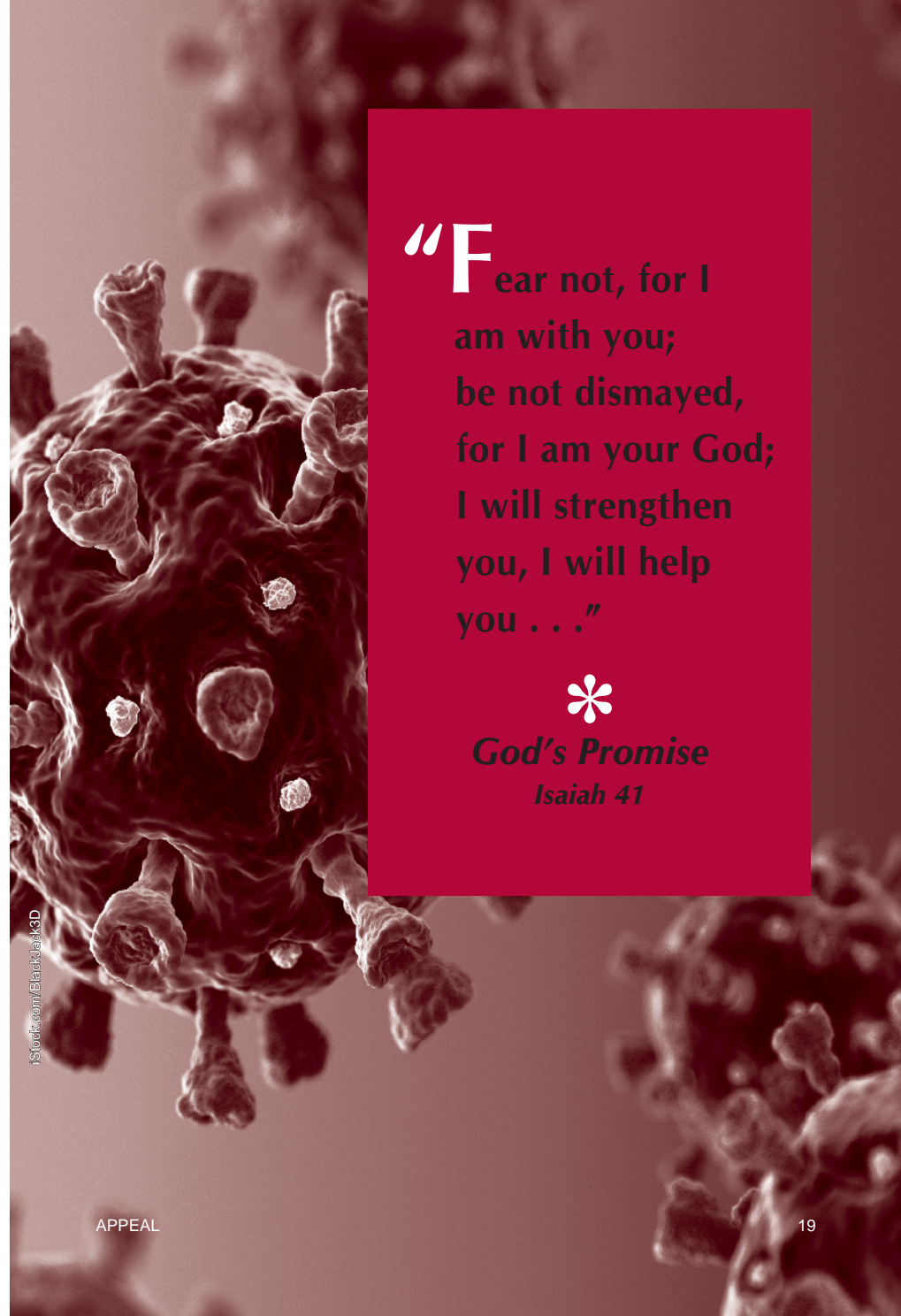
What do you miss most during these stay-at-home days? Golf

course time with your best buddies? Your early morning workout at the gym? Doing face-to-face banking with a friendly teller? Your Saturday morning Bible study? Or greeting your students in the classroom every school day? Most of us probably don't realize how totally we are addicted to the ruts we trudge in until somebody says, "You can't go there or do that anymore."

Early in the virus crisis, even before the more stringent social limits were put in place, my lifelong friend Tom Williams emailed me a short but quite insightful reflection on all of this. He said, "It's a life principle that you don't appreciate what you have until it is lost."

Adam didn't know how good he had it in Eden until he got evicted. Job didn't know how much his ranch and his bank account and his kids blessed him until, almost overnight, they were gone. The prodigal son in Jesus' famous tale was unaware of how good a life his daddy provided him until he had to eat supper from a pig trough.

When the virus rules finally relax (I assure you they will), every time you get to walk through a door that now is shut, every time you again get to do something that the virus now makes illegal, take time to say, "Thank You, Lord," for the ordinary activities that until now you have just taken for granted. *CA*



“Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you . . .”



God's Promise
Isaiah 41

Limited Time Offer

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