

Inside Life

Issue 32
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Is the
End Near?

Waiting Room

No Time to Die

God and coronavirus:
Gone missing?



CONTENTS

3 Is the end near?

9 The parable of the dancing bees

10 God and coronavirus: Gone missing?

12 I once was lost, but now...

13 Waiting room

14 No time to die

15 The milk of human kindness

Inside Life

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

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

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Our Cover: This cardboard protest sign was used during the Climate Strike event in Ottawa, Canada on 27 September 2019. People have been displaying signs like this for millennia. They have all proved to be false predictions in the past, but are they right this time?

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Is the end near?

by Rex Morgan

“PANDEMONIUM”, screamed the front page banner headline in the *NZ Herald* of 29 February 2020. The article began: “Panicked shoppers are stocking up for what one labelled ‘the apocalypse’ after news broke that NZ had its first case of coronavirus”.

Since then the COVID-19 pandemic has raged around the globe with the ferocity of a freshly unleashed tiger, causing death and misery on an immense scale. Millions have been infected by the deadly virus, hundreds of thousands have died, businesses have crashed into bankruptcy, unemployment has

surged, and food banks have been unable to keep up with the demand.

In some ways this new global challenge has diverted attention away from the climate change crisis, but global warming remains another looming disaster for humankind. Dire warnings from numerous scientists insist that if urgent action isn’t taken, an increasing number of droughts, intense storms, disastrous floods, extreme heatwaves, and widespread ecosystem collapse will severely impact life on earth.

When I visited my dentist just prior to the lockdown I was stunned to hear him, not a religious man at all, comment that “this could be the end times”—a reference to an expression used several times in the Bible.¹

Are we now living in the biblical “end times”? Reports of armies of locusts in Africa, volcanoes and earthquakes in various places, and other extreme weather events bring to mind apocalyptic biblical writings.

But people have been foretelling the demise of civilisation for centuries. We have all seen the pictures of wild-eyed fanatics holding signs stating THE END IS NEAR, or the more archaic wording, THE END IS NIGH.

A litany of failed predictions

As early as the first and second centuries AD, a number of prophets predicted that Jesus would return imminently, ushering in the end times. In AD365 a bishop named



The challenge of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic has diverted attention away from other global issues such as the climate change crisis, ecosystems collapse, air quality concerns, and the burning of Amazon rainforests (pictured here).

Hilary of Poitiers announced the world would end that year.

As AD 1000 approached, many Christians in Europe predicted the return of Jesus and the end of the world on the first of January. An army of pilgrims sold their belongings and trekked to Jerusalem to await the Messiah. Later, during the great plague of 1348–1352, prophets said the end was at hand and Christ would appear within ten years.

Reformist Hans Hut rounded up 144,000 “elect saints” to prepare for Jesus’ return in 1528. The famous explorer Christopher Columbus wrote *The Book of Prophecies* around AD 1500, including a prediction that the end of the world would occur in 1658.

John Wesley said the end would come in 1836. A New York farmer, William Miller proclaimed Jesus would return on 21 March 1843, based on his study of Old Testament prophecies. When this didn’t

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happen, he predicted a new date of 22 October 1844, and hundreds of followers sold their property and possessions and gathered to meet Jesus. His failure to arrive that evening became known as “The Great Disappointment”.

After 14 years studying Bible prophecy, Edgar Whisenant, a former NASA engineer, announced the return would be on 12 September 1988. He published a book entitled *88 Reasons why the rapture could be in 1988*, which sold 4 million copies.

Later, a Korean prophet encouraged 20,000 Christians to leave school or quit jobs and await the end, which he believed would be at midnight on 20 or 28 October 1992.

More recently, Mark Biltz, Pastor of El Shaddai Ministries, predicted 30 September 2008 as the date of the second coming of Jesus, based on the timing of four lunar eclipses. As recently as last year biblical preacher Greg Sereda published a YouTube video warning the world would end in 2020.²



Belief that the world would come to an end on 21 December 2012 was based on a Mayan prediction recorded on their Long Count calendar more than 2,200 years ago. No natural disaster—giant tidal wave, Earth-wide earthquake or tremendous volcanic eruption—happened.

What a woeful series of false alarms, unfulfilled expectations, and fake news! And the examples listed above are only a small selection of the dates that have been set and failed.

Clearly it is an all too easy and common mistake to conclude that current events portend the end of the world. But does the fact that so many miscalculations have been made mean that the end will never come and Jesus won't return?

It's impossible for any human being to accurately predict the future. Anyone who could do so would make a fortune on the stock market! If the rises and falls of stocks and shares are so notoriously difficult to foretell, how much more so the enigmatic question of when the world will end. No human has the answer, but if there is an all-powerful

God in charge of the universe, that is a different matter. Such a God would have full knowledge of the future in advance.

A book with answers

As it happens, the Christian Bible claims to be inspired by an all-knowing God, and interestingly, it contains prophecies referring to the end of the world. Since no one else can ascertain the answers, it is worth a look at what the Bible says, to weigh up whether it makes sense or not.

So what does the Bible say about this subject? Well, it certainly doesn't support any of the failed dates catalogued above. But it does speak about the "last days" and the "end of the age".

"There will be terrible times in the last days", says one passage describing

conditions at that time. It continues: "People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God".³

Another passage warns: "In the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say: "Where is this 'coming' he [Jesus] promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation".⁴

One day Jesus' disciples asked this very question. "Tell us", they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"⁵



Because King George II rose to his feet during the singing of the "Hallelujah" chorus, it has become customary for all audiences to stand when it is sung.

"And he shall reign..."

Handel's *Messiah* is a majestic work often performed at Christmas time. The completion of the score of this great oratorio in just 24 days is considered to be one of the most incredible achievements in the entire history of music.

One of the most well-known and beloved sections of the work is the "Hallelujah" chorus. Many people recognise the music and can even quote some of the lyrics: "He shall reign for ever and ever..."

The *Messiah's* libretto is taken from Bible passages referring to two separate appearances of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, on the earth. Some of the arias, such as "Behold, a virgin shall conceive", relate to Jesus' first coming. Others, including "The trumpet shall sound", point to events that have not yet happened, but will take place at Jesus' future return.

At the London premiere of *Messiah* in 1743, King George II was reputedly so moved by the magnificence of the masterpiece that he spontaneously rose to his feet during the singing of the "Hallelujah" chorus, capped off by the powerful words "...and he shall reign for ever and ever!" The entire audience, naturally, followed suit. Ever since that day, it has been customary for the audience to stand whenever the "Hallelujah" chorus is sung.

These words certainly don't apply to any human king or government. None of us lives forever! And sadly, humanity's governments have left a woeful trail of mismanagement and corruption down through the centuries. But a government is coming that is foreshadowed by the words and sentiments of the "Hallelujah" chorus. Jesus Christ, at his second coming, is the one who "shall reign for ever and ever".

Peace on earth—when?

At the birth of Jesus Christ, a group of angels sang the immortal words: “Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth and goodwill towards all men” (Luke 2:14). This message is often quoted as a mantra around the Christmas season. But no matter how hard we try, we don’t seem even to be able to achieve peace in many of our families and neighbourhoods, let alone on a global scale! And this gloomy situation prevails even though Jesus has come and gone. Where is the “peace on earth” the angels announced at his coming?

A study of the Bible as a whole reveals that Jesus didn’t come—the first time—to bring peace. In fact, he promised the very opposite would occur. Although it isn’t as well known as the “peace on earth” quote, in fact Jesus said: “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34). Interesting words indeed to be stated by someone known as “the Prince of Peace”! The Bible shows that the reason for Christ’s first coming was not to set up his world-ruling kingdom. If he had been attempting to establish world peace at that time, he has certainly been a failure!

Peace on earth is already available to Christians who follow the teachings of Jesus, resulting in a transcendent God-given peace in their lives (Philippians 4:7). But for humanity as a whole, the good news is that Christ is going to come again, and this time the mission will be to bring peace on earth. Along with numerous other Bible promises, the angelic refrain “peace on earth and good will among men” is a prophetic pronouncement that won’t be fulfilled on a global basis until his second coming.



A fanciful illustration of the angel choir that sang “Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth and goodwill towards all men”.

Jesus answered first with a caution to watch out for “fake news”, warning that many people would come up with false predictions. Then he noted there would be wars and rumours of wars, famines and earthquakes. He mentioned that the Christian gospel would be published all around the world.

Again, these are events that have been taking place for a long time. But then he narrowed down the time frame when he stated: “For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equalled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive”.⁶

It is only in recent years that existential risks (events capable of causing human extinction) have arisen. These threats include destructive biotechnology or nanotechnology, nuclear holocaust, bioterrorism using genetically modified organisms, and global warming.⁷

Jesus didn’t specify any precise date for his return; in fact he emphasised that nobody knows that date.⁸ But he told his followers to be prepared at all times,⁹ and it is certainly possible that he could return in our lifetime.

It is important to note that the biblical references to the time of his second coming use the words “end of the age” rather than “end of the world”. The Greek word used in the original manuscript is “aion”, which means “age, epoch, generation, or era”. Jesus’ return to earth will bring an end to a certain age or period—the age in which mankind has been free to rule over the planet—but not an end to the world as a whole.

In the initial setting for these remarks, Jesus was speaking of events that would precede the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the armies of Rome. This occurred in AD70, accurately foretold by Jesus as due to occur in that generation.¹⁰ For his Jewish listeners, this was

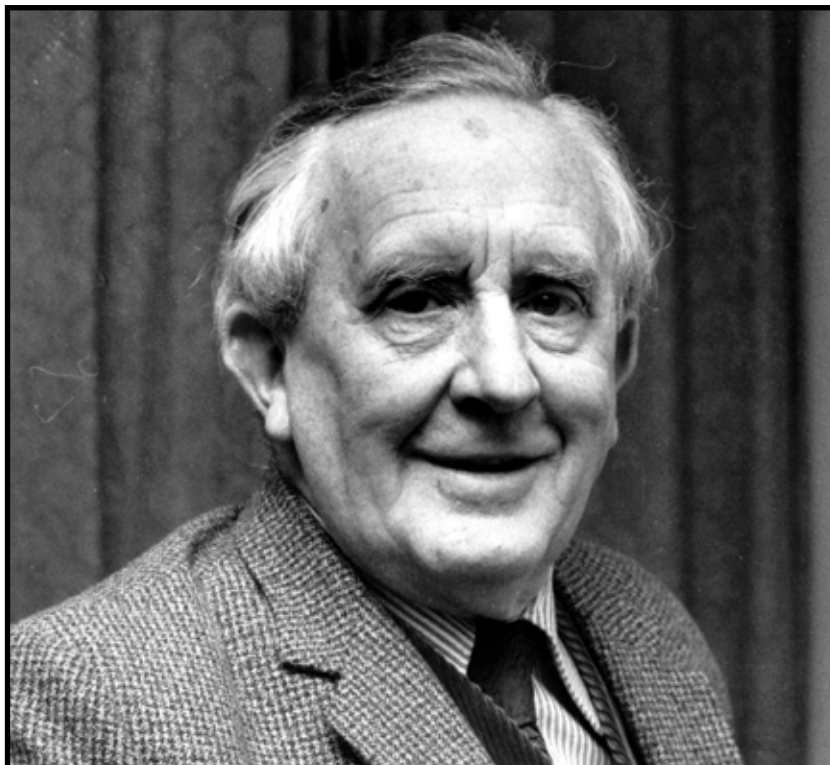
certainly the end of an “age” or era, as the opportunity for free religious practice in Judea was suddenly stripped away from them. But the predictions also point forward to Jesus’ return at the end of the age of mankind’s rule on earth. Many Bible prophecies can be shown to have a dual fulfilment, pertaining to events that are now historical, but also foreshadowing events yet future.

Although it does talk of the end of the age, the Bible nowhere states that the end of the world is near. In fact, it affirms that God is going to ensure the end of the world doesn’t happen at all! Rather, when conditions have deteriorated to the stage where it looks like the end is near, Jesus will return in power and glory to save us from destroying ourselves and to finally bring the solution to the problems caused by self-seeking, deeply flawed human beings.¹¹

A dramatically different return

The first time he came, much to the dismay of his followers, Jesus didn’t make any attempt to overthrow the government of the day. His Jewish compatriots were smarting under the heel of the Roman Empire, but he didn’t seek to redress that. He simply carried out a modest and unpretentious teaching operation, in a localised region of the world. When he was captured by the Roman authorities and falsely accused of sedition, he didn’t speak up strongly in his own defence, or rally his supporters for a rebellion. He meekly allowed himself to be brutally beaten, humiliated, and crucified, without any resistance.

But according to the Bible, the next time Jesus comes will be dramatically different. This time he will make a spectacular entrance, described in symbolic language as shining brilliantly astride a stunning white stallion galloping across the heavens with an entourage of dazzling angels, clearly indicating that no one on earth will miss his arrival.¹² Hundreds of Bible predictions provide



J.R.R. Tolkien, author of The Lord of the Rings. The third book in the trilogy, The Return of the King, contains some parallels to Christian spirituality.

The return of the king

The 2003 fantasy film *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, directed by Peter Jackson, was one of the most critically acclaimed films and greatest box-office successes of all time. It won all eleven Academy Awards it was nominated for, putting it in a tie with *Titanic* and *Ben-Hur* for the most Academy Awards ever won. It also won the Academy Award for Best Picture, the only time to date that a fantasy film has done so.

Although the movie didn’t focus at all on this aspect, it is interesting to note that J.R.R. Tolkien, author of the epic book on which the movie was based, was a Christian, and Christian themes often play in the background of his writings about Middle Earth. There are certainly spiritual parallels to be noted in *The Return of the King*. The most significant of these is that Jesus Christ, who came to earth 2000 years ago, has promised to return as a conquering King.

The first time Jesus came as a meek “lamb to be slaughtered”. But his second coming will be in spectacular style, depicted in the Bible as thundering across the heavens on a white horse accompanied by a dazzling army of angels with special effects that will make Peter Jackson’s work seem like a kindergarten play.

It is then that Christ will take up his rightful place of reigning over the world as “King of Kings and Lord of Lords”. Christians look forward eagerly to this time when the troubles of the world will be put to rest at last and the world will be at peace.

This won’t just be the return of a fictional king to rule over Middle Earth. It will be the return of the real King to rule the world.

descriptions of this momentous event. They explain it will bring an end to war, using the poetic image of “swords being beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks”.¹³ Then will follow an unprecedented time of global prosperity, with health, education, security, justice, and international harmony achieving heights never attained before.¹⁴

For thousands of years mankind has dreamt of world peace and happiness for all, but this has consistently eluded us. There has hardly been a single decade in all of history when there hasn't been a war going on somewhere. The scourges of drought, crime, drugs, corruption, and poverty have devastated nations and shattered millions of lives. Mankind seems powerless to bring a halt to the unremitting advance of these serious ills.

Thousands of years of human history have demonstrated that if we want to achieve lasting peace and prosperity for everybody on planet Earth, we surely could do with help from beyond ourselves. Thankfully, there is a source of such help. Jesus has promised to return to Earth and deliver a new administration of love, joy, and peace.

So, is it true that “the end is nigh”? It depends on what you mean by “the end”. If you mean the end of the world, thankfully the Bible shows



Mankind seems powerless to bring a halt to the unremitting advance of drought, crime, drugs, corruption and poverty that have devastated nations and shattered millions of lives.

the answer is no. But the Bible does predict the end of the age, the conclusion of the period of human dominion over planet Earth, and the beginning of a new era when Jesus Christ will return in glory to rule over all nations, to finally show us how things should be done. We don't know precisely when this will take place, but for the sake of humanity and the planet we have so greedily abused and ill-treated, it can't happen soon enough!

NOTES

- ¹ The expressions “the end of the age” (also translated “the end of the world”), and “the last days” occur in several places, e.g. Matthew 24:3; 1 Corinthians 10:11; Acts 2:17; 2 Timothy 3:1.
- ² <https://www.keepthefait.co.uk/2020/01/30/why-preacher-fears-end-of-world-in-2020-after-prophecies-fulfilled/>
- ³ 2 Timothy 3:1–4.
- ⁴ 2 Peter 3:3–4.
- ⁵ Matthew 24:3.

- ⁶ Matthew 24:21–22.
- ⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_catastrophic_risk (accessed 1 May 2020).
- ⁸ Matthew 24:36, 42.
- ⁹ Matthew 24:42–44.
- ¹⁰ Matthew 24:34.
- ¹¹ Matthew 24:30.
- ¹² Revelation 19:11–16.
- ¹³ Isaiah 2:4.
- ¹⁴ Isaiah 9:7.



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The parable of the dancing bees



by Ian Woodley

The week had worn me out. I had been asked to mediate in a particular office dispute that had, unfortunately, not gone well. The whole sordid saga was now sliding into formal disciplinary processes. Glad that my role in it was all over, I felt completely drained.

That's when the two lavender shrubs caught my attention. These two plants, roughly a metre tall and two metres wide, were literally a hive of activity. Drawing near, I could see bees moving around the lavender, collecting pollen. I tried to count how many there were, but due to the insects' constant movement, I gave up. I guess there were around 100 bees, mainly of the bumblebee variety.

How could so many bees, all with the one urgent aim of collecting

pollen from the same two shrubs, manage to continue their task in such harmony? I drew nearer to the plants. Something about the quiet buzzing hum indicated that I had nothing to fear from their powerful stings, even though such a sting taught me to be very wary of bees as a young lad.

Their movement was almost hypnotic. The bees appeared to be performing some kind of dance, gracefully moving from one flower to the next. I marvelled how they didn't appear to collide mid-air and it was therapeutic to find that there was no squabbling going on. Somehow, the bees all managed to stay out of each other's way. They carried on, collecting pollen, seemingly unaware of my presence. Their harmony was infectious: I watched them for the next five minutes, feeling the stress of the day drifting away.

Eugene Peterson, a spiritual writer who passed away in 2018, once paraphrased a biblical sentiment as: "How wonderful, how beautiful, when brothers and sisters get along!"¹

I like that idea: that such harmony is beautiful. Maybe that's why the dancing bees helped soothe away my stress. I was watching beauty in action.

That day, I learned a great lesson from creation, from the parable of the dancing bees. We can all achieve our aims in life without resorting to warfare with others. It requires some effort, co-ordination, and a large slice of compromise, but if the bees can do it, then surely so can we. And in the process, we may just create a little more beauty in the world.

NOTE

¹ Psalm 133:1 *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language.*

God and coronavirus: Gone missing?



by Rusty Wright

How could a loving, just, powerful God allow a tragedy like the coronavirus pandemic? Doesn't he care that innocent people are suffering and dying? It seems unjust. If God exists, isn't he strong enough to stop this madness?

Two young brothers were always getting into trouble. Their parents invited the pastor over, hoping a dose of religion could get them to shape up. The minister began by addressing the younger brother in the living room, while the older remained upstairs.

"Where is God?" the pastor asked the younger one. Petrified, the boy remained silent.

"Where is God?" the minister asked again, more firmly. Still no response.

"Where is God?" he asked a third time, even more resolutely.

Scared to death, the boy ran upstairs and shouted to his older brother: "We're in big trouble. God's missin', and they think we did it!"

Where is God?

Where is God? If you or your loved ones have experienced illness, job loss, unrelenting anxiety, or even death, such a question is not surprising. I've asked it myself in the past, wondering if God existed, angry with him if he did.

Sigmund Freud called religion an illusion that humans invent to satisfy their security needs. To him, a benevolent, all-powerful God seemed incongruent with natural disasters and human evil. My graduate work focused on understanding Freud's disappointment about the biblical God and anger with believers.

The biblical documents portray God as sovereign but as giving us freedom to follow or to disobey him. Humans are not robots but free moral agents. Oxford scholar C.S. Lewis estimated that 80 percent of human

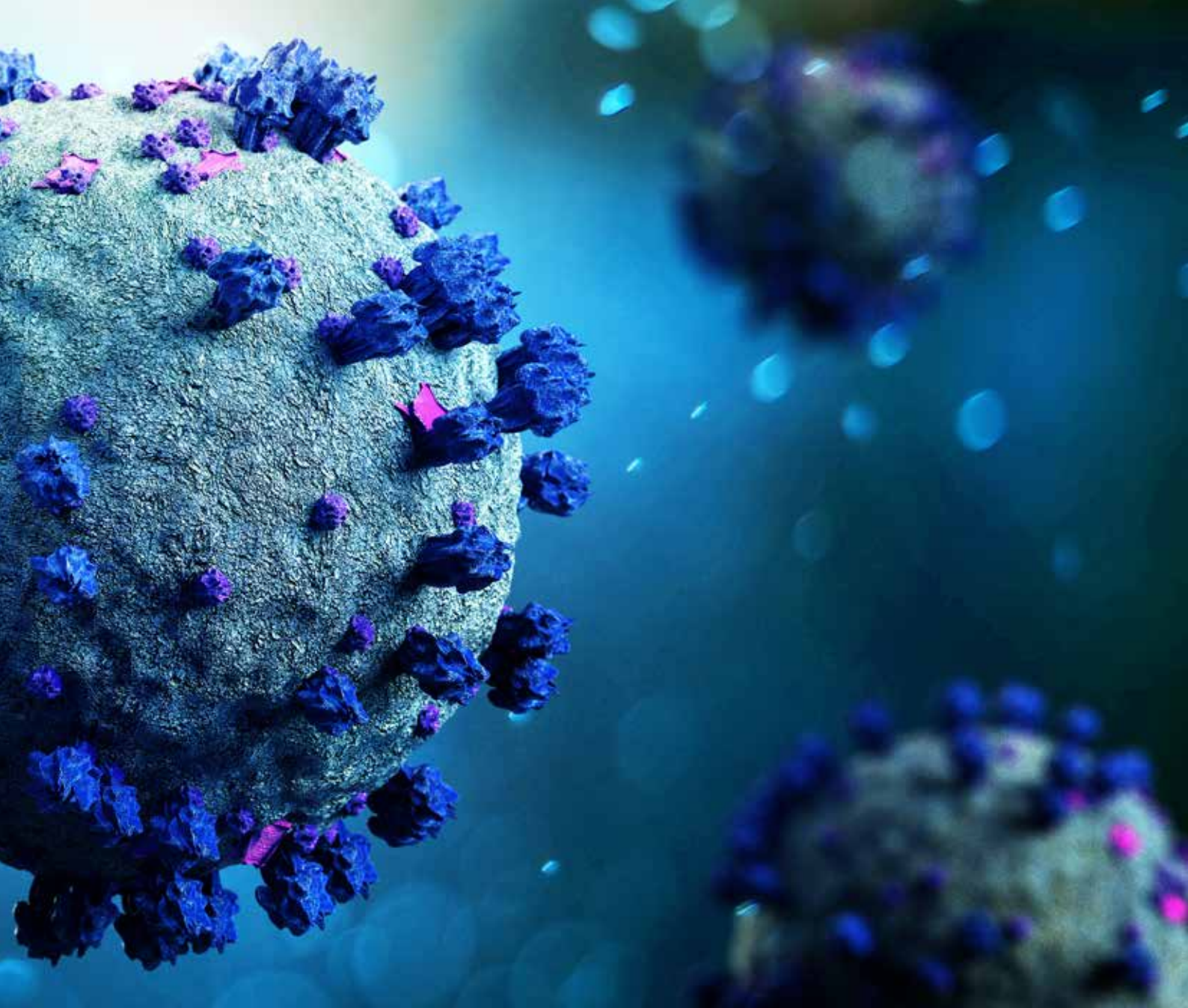
suffering stems from human choice. He called pain God's "megaphone" that alerts us to our need for him: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains".

Coronavirus origins?

Did coronavirus originate from human mistakes? The jury's still out. Did human action contribute to its spread? Little doubt. Could the pandemic's pain produce any benefits in individual lives?

In hindsight—and as a former sceptic—I'm glad God has used pain in my own life.

As a teenager, I nearly was expelled from secondary school for some problems I helped create. In my hurt



and anger I wondered: “Why would God allow this to happen?” I was mad at him! In retrospect, I realise I was blaming him for my own bad choices. My personal anguish kept me from seeing that. But over time, my failures helped me recognise my need for a relationship with God, which I discovered as a university student. That has made all the difference.

This response about God and suffering does not answer all concerns (because the biblical God sometimes does intervene to thwart human misdeeds or natural peril), but it suggests that the problem of evil is not as great an intellectual obstacle to faith as some imagine.

Issue 32

Pain’s emotional barrier

Pain’s emotional barrier to faith, however, remains formidable. When I see God, items on my long list of questions for him will include a heart-breaking and unwanted divorce, betrayal by trusted co-workers, my second wife’s cancer death, and all sorts of disappointing human behaviour and natural disasters.

Yet in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, I’ve seen enough to believe that, as one of his early followers wrote: “God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love [him]”.¹

Not satisfied with these brief responses to some profound

questions? I don’t blame you. As mentioned, I once was quite sceptical about faith matters and did not accept these ideas right away. It took time, interaction, reflection, and analysis. But exposure to this reasoning was a necessary start. Maybe this can get you thinking.

Stay safe. And inquisitive.

NOTE

¹ Romans 8:28 (NLT)

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I once was lost, but now...

by Richard Fowler

Did you hear the story of the man who left his \$400,000 violin on the train?¹

To his great relief, musician Stephen Morris's 310-year-old violin was returned to him after he was contacted by a member of the public. Later he gave an interview on BBC news. To my surprise, he played a tune. The irony was not lost on me when he began to play.

The tune was the famous "Amazing Grace". As he played, I mouthed the words: "I once was lost but now I'm found..." An apt choice for such a story. But not just for this story.

This stirring, spiritual song has been the anthem for so many throughout history. Since it was written in 1772 by John Newton, these words have been the emotional echo of hearts from protestors in the Civil Rights movement, to the day Nelson Mandela walked free from prison. It was sung when the Berlin Wall came down, and after 11 September 2001, to comfort a mourning world. Its words have been the source of comfort and strength for so many who at times felt lost and needed a spiritual idea to help them find their way.

This summer, as I drove through a humble Buckinghamshire town called Olney, I was shocked to read on its welcome sign: "Welcome to Olney, the home of Amazing Grace". It was hard to imagine this insignificant town was the birth of words that would be sung the world over.

Written by a man who was himself once lost.

John Newton was a slave trader. On one sea journey in 1748, he encountered such a violent storm that it threatened to sink his ship. It was in this moment, lost and powerless, that he cried out to God to save him. That night, after

the storm had passed, he sensed that there was a God who hears and answers prayers, who could save even the worst of men. Later, Newton changed from his lifestyle of profiting from the suffering of others to serving others—this man who was once lost was now found.

This is the grace the song speaks of—receiving an undeserved fresh start and new beginning—leading to a transformed life.

Maybe you feel lost in life right now, in need of a transformation. Maybe life has been cruel to you, or you've been cruel to others. Life may not make sense for you at the moment; you may not see a way forward. If so, I invite you to read the words of this song and see if it can help you find a way forward.

Amazing grace,
how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now am found
Was blind but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart
to fear
And grace, my fears relieved
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.

Through many dangers,
toils and snares
We have already come.
'Twas grace that brought us safe
thus far
And grace will lead us home.

NOTE

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-london-50280238/musician-stephen-morris-shock-as-lost-250000-violin-returned>

Richard Fowler is editorial assistant at *Because Blog*. You can write to him at info@because.uk.com.

Waiting room

by James Henderson

Thank you for your patience. You are number 18 waiting to speak to a receptionist. The current wait time is 20 minutes, 15 seconds.”

Don't you hate that kind of message? You need to see a doctor, you've left calling the surgery to the very last moment, and, now, you're left hanging on at the end of the phone only to find out, when you do eventually get through, that there are no appointments left for the day. And, so, you decide to try again the next morning.

It's frustrating to wait.

We've all heard alarming stories about people waiting to be seen at a hospital A&E. The pensioner dumped for hours on a gurney in a lonely corridor, the ambulance arriving six

hours after the emergency call was made, the child neglected when she needed emergency treatment. They may be exceptions, but they grab our attention, and we don't want it to happen to us or to our nearest and dearest.

I read a story once about a man who was beaten up by thieves and left by the side of the road to die. It's the story that was the inspiration behind the Good Samaritan movement, and it was told by Jesus Christ. Two people who had the power to help him saw him lying there, and they made a decision to walk on by and do nothing, not even to call for help later. Perhaps they were afraid for their own safety—had the robbers really gone? Or, were they prejudiced in some way? Or just too selfish to get involved? What happened next was unexpected. A foreigner, a transient worker perhaps, an immigrant if you wish,

was passing by, saw the wounded man, and bandaged him up. The stranger then transported him to a hotel for rest and recuperation, and he even paid the bill! Quite a story. The victim, though, had to wait unattended, probably for hours, until someone chose to help him.

It makes you think, doesn't it? At least it does me. Are there people I could help, but don't? I'm too distracted. I don't care enough. Life is too busy anyway. Let someone else do it. It may just be a little thing like a get-well card, flowers to say you care, an encouraging telephone call, a smile, an anonymous gift, but I can't be bothered. Or something bigger, but will I make the effort?

Let's grab the chance to help others when we can. Perhaps there's a little room for improvement.

What are you waiting for?



No time to die

by Barry Robinson

Who is your favourite Bond? Like Doctor Who, there have been so many of them, it's getting difficult to choose. Everyone has an opinion, but for me Sean Connery is the quintessential Bond that everyone else has to live up to. He was suave, balancing wry humour and effortless charm with physical prowess and a dynamic magnetism.

Critics have argued that the current Bond, Daniel Craig, is the one who stays true to Ian Fleming's original intent and is the one Fleming himself would have chosen. This may not make him the world's favourite Bond, but maybe it makes him the best. We have, perhaps, only one more film with Craig as Bond in order to make up our minds, as the latest Bond film to be released—*No Time to Die*—is reportedly his last in the role.

No Time to Die is an intriguing title for a film. After all, is there ever a right time to die? That's a question the followers of another hero of mine, Jesus Christ, must have considered when they saw hardened Roman soldiers nail him to a cross. They must have felt that this was no time for their revolutionary leader to die.

There had been other revolutionary zealots before Jesus, like Judas of Galilee who led Jewish resistance to a Roman census for tax purposes in AD6. They had come to nothing, and now there was high expectation that Jesus of Nazareth would be the one who would defeat the Roman occupiers and establish the long-awaited kingdom of God. But instead of defeating Rome, Rome killed what appeared to be just another potential messiah.

Surely this was no time to die if Jesus of Nazareth really was the Messiah Israel had longed for.



His closest followers were distraught and depressed, and giving up on yet another charismatic leader's failed attempt to rescue them, they returned to their former lives. It was all over, or was it? Something happened that changed those early followers of Jesus from being defeated and dejected into people who would boldly claim that Jesus of Nazareth is in fact God's Messiah. But why would they do that, especially when it risked and eventually cost their lives? What made it different this time?

Their own eyewitness testimony is that they saw Jesus alive after his crucifixion, literally raised from the dead, and Jesus himself explained that this was his time to die so he could free them from a greater oppression than Roman occupation: our own death and separation from a God who loves us.

Did Jesus of Nazareth rise from the dead, and is he alive today? If not, there needs to be another plausible explanation for why the fledgling Jesus movement didn't just die out and why millions of people continue to believe he is the risen Saviour. James Bond, whether he is portrayed by Connery or Craig, completes his mission by escaping death. The claim of the worldwide Christian movement is that Jesus Christ completed his mission by dying and coming back to life again. Next Sunday at a nearby church might be a good time to investigate that claim so you can make up your own mind.

The milk of human kindness

by Peter Mill

An unusual post popped up on my *LinkedIn* feed last week. It was from the husband of a National Health Service (NHS) nurse. A thank you note actually to, of all things, his local Aldi store. His wife had popped into the shop on her way to work that morning.

On seeing her uniform and badge, staff took her straight to the front of the queue outside the shop. Then, when she had loaded her trolley, she was shown to the front of the checkout queue. At which point, the store manager came over to speak to her. He told her that next time she wanted anything, even as early as 6am, she should knock on the window and if there wasn't a till open, they would open one up for her and that way she would never be held up buying food.

This post has gone viral, with almost 49,000 likes and 876 comments. In the middle of our Coronavirus crisis, stories like this are the tip of the iceberg. People everywhere are falling over themselves to be kind to our front-line NHS staff: free applause, free fruit and vegetables, even free cars. But these acts of kindness from the public and businesses pale into insignificance compared to the sacrifice shown by the NHS heroes who are literally putting their lives on the line.

Why do they do it? You might say they have to, it's their job. But that doesn't explain why 20,000 NHS medics who are already retired have applied to come back and help our hospitals get ready for the peak of the pandemic. What motive, other than altruism—the selfless concern for the wellbeing of others—could they possibly have to risk their lives in the face of this deadly virus? But if that is the case, where then, does

this sense of going over and above the line of duty come from? Is human kindness a result of homo sapiens being genetically wired to repeat certain behaviours that have proved beneficial to the species? Or is it, as Stephen Jay Gould suggests, an evolutionary by-product, some kind of genetic accident?

The title of this article comes from “the Scottish play”, *Macbeth*, by William Shakespeare. On the face of it, the phrase, “the milk of human kindness”, seems to indicate that kindness is a good thing. After all,



milk is good, right? Yet when William Shakespeare makes Lady Macbeth speak those words, it turns out she is actually bemoaning the fact that her husband has too much kindness; so much so that it has made him “too soft” to kill his rivals! William Shakespeare was no geneticist, but he did have a gift for observing human behaviour.

And then there's that line from the famous Randy Newman song: “Human kindness is overflowing, and I think it's gonna rain today”. A very catchy tune; perhaps that's why the song has been covered by so many artists. As I hum that tune and sing that line to myself, I could be mistaken for thinking the writer is saying that kindness is a universal trait. Except when you scratch the surface, you realise this is a rather sarcastic song about a beggar on

the streets experiencing anything but kindness from his fellow human beings.

So from these two examples, we can see that if human kindness springs from our genes, like the gene that makes brussels sprouts taste bitter, not everyone has it. Or if everyone does have this mythical “kindness gene”, they are able to control it, turning it on or off at will. Richard Dawkins, in his book *The Selfish Gene*, puts it another way: our genes “instruct us to be selfish”. If we are “born selfish”, how can we break free from this selfishness?

Christians (like me) have a simpler, yet in many ways more profound, explanation for the origin of human kindness. It doesn't come from within, its source is outside us. We believe kindness comes from God; he is the origin of goodness, of love. In the Bible we can read a radical statement that takes this thought further: “We love because He first loved us”.¹ In other words, we are only able to love because God invented this thing called love. What this means is that, not only is there no love without God, but without God loving us, we would not be able to show kindness to others. Humans have the capacity to love, to show compassion, because we are made in the image of God.

I find this concept exciting. What this tells me is that love, goodness, kindness—whatever you want to call it—isn't a gift that some people have and others don't. It is available to everybody. It is up to us whether we want to use it or not.

Those front-line workers in our NHS and other emergency services are a wonderful example of the magic that happens when love is in action.

NOTE

¹ 1 John 4:19

Peter Mill writes from the UK.

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