

Spring 2020

Village Link

village
hope

Editor – Tim Prince

Covid-19 - is there any word from the Lord?



By Peter Carruthers,
Executive Director

As I write, two quite contrasting stories are unfolding before me!

On my computer screen is the latest news about the Covid-19 pandemic, along with my ongoing efforts to bring some biblical understanding to the crisis, which I share on our website (villagehope.uk/covid-19-series) and in the article on the next page. Later in this issue of Village Link, some of Village Hope's staff and associates share a little of their experiences of the challenges and blessings of rural church and life under lockdown. Yet, while Covid-19 is the 'big story' at present, through my study window I can see the sun shining and hear the birds singing, as Spring continues its

glorious outburst of scent, sound, colour and new life. Nature has not gone into lockdown, but, like the Lord's faithfulness and mercies, is 'new every morning' (Lamentations 2:22-23) and Spring never fails to drive this point home!

The new life of Spring is also an echo of the resurrection of Jesus and a reminder that the hope of the resurrection to come is not just hope for people, including for us in the midst of Covid-19, but for the earth and the whole of creation. We were to have explored this theme at our annual conference this April. Although, sadly, we had to cancel the conference, I have begun writing on the theme on

our website, starting with an article on Jesus' resurrection appearances and their meaning for the future of Creation (villagehope.uk/resurrection-countryside-and-creation).

As you may have noticed, we have posted much other new content on our website, and plan to continue to do so in the coming months. Let us know if you would like to be alerted by email whenever new articles are uploaded.

Abigail Carruthers picks up the 'Spring' theme in her article, and also with a creation theme, Rachel Woods introduces us to 'Gardening the heart'. Finally, we invite you to find books of the bible in two challenging puzzles!

Never have we published Village Link in such strange circumstances. We had the Spring issue almost ready, but the coronavirus pandemic intervened and the articles we had prepared didn't seem quite so relevant, so we will let you enjoy them later in the year. We do hope that there will be



much in this edition to help and encourage you during these difficult days. Our prayer is that God will use all things to strengthen and equip you

for the remainder of the lockdown period and into the years ahead. It is exciting to see how He is unfolding opportunities for His people that, just a few short months ago, we would never have thought possible. Stay safe and close to Jesus.

Tim Prince

Covid-19 - is there any word from the Lord?

By Peter Carruthers

This was the question King Zedekiah asked the prophet Jeremiah when their nation was in profound crisis (Jeremiah 37:17).

Jeremiah's answer was not a comforting one (Jeremiah 37:17). The crisis will not go away, he said, many will suffer, some, including the king, will die, and the people will go into exile. Like us today, they were 'facing their own mortality' and heading into a 'total recalibration of their existence'.¹

Further, Jeremiah declares, the Lord Himself is behind the crisis; the Babylonians are simply His instrument of judgement. Destruction and exile are the consequence of repeated violations of Israel's covenant with the Lord and repeated refusals to repent (eg see Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Amos 4:6-11).

However, the over-ruling trajectory of Jeremiah's message was one of hope. Judgement was penultimate. For the faithful remnant (Jeremiah 23:3), the 'good figs' (Jeremiah 24), there was a 'hope and a future' (Jeremiah 29:11, 31:28-29; Isaiah 54:7).

Jeremiah faced the truth of their situation head on. But he also saw beyond it. And this combination of sober realism and over-arching hope is at the heart of what I believe the Lord would say to us today.

Pandemic & lockdown

Covid-19 is a highly contagious viral disease of uncertain, and possibly questionable, origins.² It has spread rapidly from its origin in China to nearly every country in the world. It causes anything from no, or mild, symptoms through to death. To date (24 April), according to WHO, there have been 2.6 million confirmed cases and 180,000 deaths (bit.ly/vhwhocv).

To manage the disease, governments across the world have

closed borders and imposed comprehensive lockdown regimes on their citizens. The human, social and economic costs have been phenomenal, but this may only be the beginning. All the indications are that both disease and lockdown, in some form, and their many consequences, will be with us for quite some while. The above 'recalibration of our existence' is well underway!

Lockdown has brought out the best and the worst in people, although most would probably feel the balance is towards the former. It has also created contrasts and divisions in society, eg between those who are at home on furlough with time on their hands and those in essential services who face heavier workloads and increased risks of infection.

Covid-19 has accentuated both the benefits and disadvantages of rural life. Rural dwellers, in general, live closer to nature and have better access to outdoors than those living in towns. But they are, on average, older and those who are isolating may feel more isolated. Poorer broadband and increased demand is impacting, for example, home schooling. Farmers are already good self-isolators and have mostly carried on as normal, but some are contending with supply-chain problems and the loss of casual migrant labour. More people are visiting nearby countryside, and there are new rural-urban tensions over access, and, especially, second homes.

Sign, warning and judgement

Christians are deeply divided over whether or not our present crisis is

'God's judgement' (bit.ly/vhcv193). Yet Scripture compels us to accept the possibility that in every calamity is a call to repentance (Luke 13:1-5) and a warning of the final day when God will judge all humanity by the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 17:31).

Similarly, Christians are divided over whether or not Covid-19 is a sign of the 'end times' (Luke 21:11). While we should be wary of attempting to set dates that only the Father knows (Matthew 24:36), there are aspects of the current Covid-19 crisis, along with many other signs, that call for our attention in the light of Scripture. And, whether this is *the* eleventh hour or *an* eleventh hour (bit.ly/pteleventh), the imperatives are the same – understand the times (Luke 12:54-56), watch and pray (Luke 21:36), preach the Gospel (Matthew 24:14) and be ready (Matthew 25:44).

Church & mission

Covid-19 has done what two world wars, the plague of 1665 and the Black Death failed to do, namely closed our churches! But churches have been quick to 'reinvent themselves'. Electronic communications have enabled churches not only to 'meet', but also to reach those on the fringes of church and, to an extent, support the needy, lonely and vulnerable. In the early days of lockdown, the Archbishop of Canterbury reported that ten times as many people were watching church online as previously attended services in church buildings (bit.ly/itvwelby). One of Village Hope's associates recently reported that about five times as many people watch his live-streamed service now than attended his village chapel on Sundays. Many others tell similar stories.

Lockdown has also prompted a surge of neighbourliness and new sense of community,³ and has provided new opportunities for Christians to show the love of Christ in practical ways. Covid-19 has also created an openness

to the Gospel by prompting people to face their own finitude and to ask fundamental questions about God, eternity and salvation.

At some point, however, the novelty of 'cyber-church' will start to wear off; people who do not use the internet and social media are, anyway, excluded. Covid-19 may well have helped 'cast the net on the other side'. But this can only go so far. There will come a time when the crisis stands in the way of the Gospel, and we shall need to pray that the Lord brings it to an end, not for our sakes, but for the advancement of His Kingdom.

The Lord reigns

The foundation of Jeremiah's hope was, first, the absolute sovereignty of the Lord, "who made heaven and earth", who reigns and rules over human affairs and the entire cosmos, and for whom "nothing is too difficult" (Jeremiah 32:17; Psalms 93:1, 96:10, 97:1, 99:1). The same Lord reigns and rules over our present circumstances.

Fear is more 'viral' than the virus - fear of the disease itself, of the loss of money, home, job or loved ones, of the kind of world that might emerge beyond the pandemic, and ultimately of death. But, for those who acknowledge Him, He is a "refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble, therefore, we will not fear" (Psalm 46:1), nor be afraid of the 'deadly pestilence' (Psalm 91:6). He does not always spare us sorrow and suffering, but He does assure us that "whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him" (1 Thessalonians 5:10).

In the wilderness a door of hope

A second theme of hope in Jeremiah's message is that destruction and loss will become the means of renewal and restoration; the 'wilderness' of exile opens a 'door of hope' (Hosea 2:14-23).

Lockdown has been for us a type of 'wilderness', and has opened at least four 'doors of hope' or 'windows of opportunity'. Each calls for our prayers, reflection and response.

First, wilderness is a place of encounter, intimacy with the Lord, and hearing His voice (Hosea 2:14-23; Exodus 34:27-28;

Deuteronomy 29:5; 1 Kings 19:8). Lockdown is an opportunity to take stock and to deepen our relationship with the Lord, and seek His will for our lives and our life together.

Second, wilderness is a place of testing and trial, of refining and purifying, of confrontation with the devil (Mark 1:13), where the Lord uses adversity to discipline and purify us (Job 23:10; 1 Peter 1:6-7) so that we bear fruit (John 15:1-2; Hebrews 12:3-11). At this time, the Lord is, I believe, calling both individuals, His people as a whole, and especially Christian leaders, to humble themselves, pray, seek His face and repent (1 Chronicles 7:14; James 4:10).

Third, during His forty days in the wilderness, in a recapitulation of Eden and an anticipation of the Age to come, Jesus was close to nature - "with the animals" (Mark 1:13). Nature has not gone into lockdown, and in this time of privation many are waking up both to its joy and beauty and to the way humanity has wasted it. Humanity's abuse of God's creation has played a significant part in the pandemic and part of the above humbling must be to acknowledge this and to do what we can to be better stewards of His earth.

Fourth, Jesus was 'led by the Spirit' into the wilderness and emerged in the 'power of the Spirit' (Luke 4:14). The wilderness prepared Him for three years of ministry, culminating in His death, resurrection and ascension. Other biblical wilderness experiences, such as Elijah's, also point to the preparatory significance of wilderness. Covid-19 will eventually pass, and we need to be prepared in this time for the challenging times ahead.

A new people

The third theme of hope in Jeremiah's message is that, in the Babylonian exile, a new people emerges, no longer centred around Temple and Monarchy,

but around family and community, sabbath and synagogue, with God's word at the centre.

In my article, Exile and Hope, in the Winter 2019 Village Link, I suggested that the demise of 'Christian Britain' should prompt a similar transition for us - from dependence on institutions of church and state, to "communities characterised by radical discipleship, loving fellowship, humble service, and reaching the lost, with close attentiveness to the word of God".

There are signs that Covid-19 is helping speed this transition. Alongside a renewed sense of community in wider society, Christians are discovering how to have fellowship outside of church institutions, buildings and meetings, and there are indications of a new interest in the Bible.

A hope and a future

Both secular commentators and Christian leaders are already imagining a better future beyond Covid-19, with some calling for "radical environmental, social, political and economic change" (bit.ly/rsacv19). As we ponder the Covid-19 crisis, may we see that future from the Lord's perspective and pray and work to bring it about.

Then you will seek me and find me, when you search for me with all your heart (Jeremiah 29:13).

God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him. Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you are also doing (1 Thessalonians 5:9-11).

I have addressed many of the issues above in more depth in my series of articles at villagehope.uk/covid-19-series.

¹ This is how journalist Simon Heffer described our present situation back in March, in a trenchant critique of the Archbishop of Canterbury's initial response to the Coronavirus crisis (bit.ly/dtwelby).

² For accounts of possible role of 'wet markets' and environmental destruction, see bit.ly/gncv19eco & bit.ly/dtcv19eco

³ A recent survey revealed that 40% of people feel a stronger sense of community since the outbreak and 39% feel more in touch with friends and family (bit.ly/rsacv19, bit.ly/rsacv19pics).

NEWS FROM THE VILLAGES...NEWS FROM THE VILLAGES...N

Sam and Ginni Brinkley

Burston Chapel, Norfolk

The chapel may not be hosting services at present but it is being used as a food store by Morrisons to allow them to make local deliveries easier, and as a centre for local volunteers to distribute and cook food for those in greatest need. Meanwhile our services are broadcast on YouTube. Sam has been involved in supporting a family with funeral preparations and keeping in touch with chapel members, and is seeking to make some videos for school assemblies. Ginni continues to work in the hospital with stroke patients (no CV-19 cases at present), and Anna has been busy working with Integrate Youth For Christ and having fun with an online Zoom youth cafe. Dan is home all the time and looking forward to a return to normal routine!



Keith Ives

Braintree Evangelical Church, Essex

Our fellowship continues in good heart and dependent on the grace of our Lord to lead, guard and guide us. At Braintree Evangelical Church we endeavour to function as a fellowship by staying in contact by phone, in fact we have encouraged one another to 'stay in touch'. This helps us to pray for one another with purpose and up to date information. Particular needs or 'emergencies' can trigger a general prayer call to concentrate our prayers for a particular person. This happened from time to time and 'hitherto the Lord has helped us'. At weekends and on Good Friday I released messages on our church's Facebook web site, but not all can receive these.



Eric and Karyn Gren

Great Gidding Chapel, Cambridgeshire

We are discovering the world of Facebook services and Zoom prayer meetings! It has been interesting and encouraging to see that other people have watched our services, including people I have worked with, and we pray that they continue to explore what we are doing. We have also been busy keeping in touch with people from our church and looking after the children. Amelia is very keen to spend time with friends rather than her two brothers.

Stephen and Ruth Pugh

Donnington Wood Baptist Church, Shropshire

We are holding an online drop-in video meeting at 11 am each Sunday on Facebook Messenger which church members and others find helpful and pray, sing and chat together. We are finding non-church husbands, wives and teenagers are listening in or joining in with no inhibitions at home! The sermon follows online in the afternoon, and we follow up by phone each week with those without internet. We are so pleased that technology also helps us join with our two members from the Philippines who, after visiting family, are now stuck there. Stephen continues his online ministry worldwide, recently starting a Bible study with three church leaders from America and Africa and India for an hour each week.

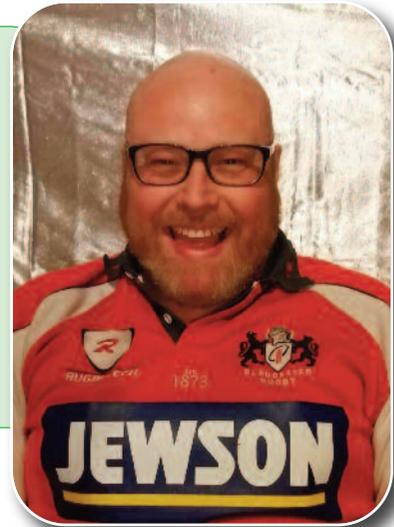


NEWS FROM THE VILLAGES...NEWS FROM THE VILLAGES...

Jonathan Kear

Waiting for village information

Lockdown, self isolation and social distancing have become words we are using daily, that we never imagined we would use at all. One vision for 2020 was to begin to reach the village where we have been living for the past 2 years. It's true to say that life feels like it's on hold, and that has extended to our church vision, but we want this to become our greatest challenge; to reach an unknown village with the love of Jesus, by remote. 1 Corinthians 9: 19 – 23 but specifically (and hopefully not taking it too far out of context) 22b 'by all possible means I might save some.' Just because we are on hold, doesn't mean the vision has to be!



John and Betty Plumb

Southfields Farm, Warwickshire

We are reminding everyone that, as farmers, we work at home all the time. Because of the very wet winter, we have been busy catching up on sowing new crops now that the fields have dried out. Since the lockdown we have found that the countryside is a new attraction for people, with four or five times the number of walkers on the paths around the farm. So we are discovering a new community of people anxious to get outside for a little while during their exercise time. We have spent a considerable amount of time talking with people who were, until recently, complete strangers: Please pray as we seek opportunity to share about Jesus.



John and Viv Schofield

Corsham, Wiltshire

Coronavirus didn't take the Lord by surprise, and our work for Him has not stopped because of it, although we are working differently at present. Because we have Viv's mum living with us, 93 and very vulnerable, we are somewhat in isolation. Largely the work we are doing is via the telephone, and on the internet with Skype and Zoom. We are in daily contact with a number of local elderly people as well as chapel folk, and we have been asked to be in regular touch with some village chapels. I have been asked to do some Sunday services and Bible studies for the chapels via YouTube and Zoom. We are able to spend more time in prayer and Bible study.



Lauren Toomer

Schools Development Worker, Gloucestershire

Our work with the Village Schools Project resumed in January 2020, and we were reaching children through assemblies, classroom courses, and lunchtime or after-school clubs. With village-based volunteers formed together into teams we were seeking to build lasting relationships between school and church communities. My last lesson was March 16th, and by the end of that week, all schools closed their doors as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Now we find ourselves in a strange situation, but in the hope that we will be able to resume our witness in schools I have spent time at home writing new programmes and resources. Where will we be afterwards? For now, my prayer is we will be found available and faithful; just as He remains faithful.



The hope of Spring

By Abigail Carruthers

Spring is well under way! And isn't the weather beautiful? Many of us may be blessed to have a little more time on our hands at the moment. What better way to enjoy it than to spend time out in God's creation? Even if it is a short walk, or a trip to the supermarket, you are bound to see carpets of yellow - daffodils, celandines, and dandelions.

I find great joy at the moment in watching the seedlings I have planted grow a little more (or a lot more) each day. One moment there's a pot of soil, and the next moment, a little bit of green, and a shoot comes up, spreading its first leaves in the sunlight. Prompted by this, I thought about what the Bible says about seeds and growth, and the parable of the sower came to mind:

"The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop." (Luke 8:14-15)

'Life's worries' are, understandably, at the front of our minds at the moment. However, know that God is in control. Take time to read His word and bear fruit, in order to be in a position to bless and help those around us who are in need.

As we take time to observe the details of nature, we can see many more changes happening. Gone are the dark mornings and evenings. Pink cherry blossom adorns gardens, white blackthorn flowers bloom in hedgerows, bluebells carpet the woods, new lambs scamper in the fields, birds are gathering material for nests and bats have woken up and are flying in the evenings!

There is much to be thankful for. Noticeably, more people are outdoors, walking and cycling; it even feels like a holiday at times. What a blessing that, although these are difficult days, we are enjoying such a beautiful Spring, and can see the beauty of our God reflected in it.



Gardening the heart

By Rachel Woods

Gardens play a prominent role in the story of creation and redemption. The Bible begins in a garden and ends in a 'garden city'. And two of the pivotal events in Jesus' redemptive journey of obedience to the cross and resurrection took place in gardens - in Gethsemane and the garden of the empty tomb.

God is Himself a gardener, 'tending the earth and watering it' (Psalm 65). In Genesis 2, we see Him planting a garden, designed for both productivity and beauty (Genesis 2:9). God created Adam out of clay, yet in His own image and as a creative being, and placed him in the garden to tend and protect it (Genesis 2:15) and met with him personally there.

For many today, their closest encounter with Creation might be a wildlife or gardening TV programme, a sunset or sunrise seen from the car window, or a supermarket fruit and vegetable section. But without physical engagement with God's creation and an understanding of how God speaks through it, we risk losing sight of God's redemptive narrative through Jesus Christ calling to us through every living thing. Gardens provide essential contexts to remedy this.

Recognising the urgent need for people to reconnect with God in Creation, many churches are designating outdoor reflective spaces in their church yards or gardens, and gardens are increasingly being recognised as effective settings for contemplation, prayer and community outreach.

Since 2015, Gardening the Heart (formerly Parable Garden) has encouraged and resourced people of all ages to engage with Creation, seasons, gardening and creativity in everyday life as tools for discipleship, spirituality and well-being, at home, and in schools,



local churches and the wider community.

Seasonal Quiet Days in gardens, in both rural and urban settings, and often linked to local churches, have drawn adults from many different backgrounds. These days combine scriptural input, silence, outdoor reflection whether sitting or walking, opportunity for creative expression and optional sharing of insights at the end. Feedback from participants reveals the impact of these days.

'I loved being in my Father's garden - free to feel the grass beneath my feet, smell the apple blossom... And how well the Father tends the garden - at just the right time and in every season.'

'Amazing concept to explore the links between gardening/horticulture and the Christian faith.'

A recent series of seasonal outdoor reflections for young mums on the theme of caring for the vine, evidences the deeper understanding that

practical reflection yields:

'It has been enlightening and encouraging to go deeper as we have learnt together and seen how the vine grows. It makes Jesus' words more meaningful and adds a depth to them.'

Nurturing spirituality through creative exploration of the parables, as well as cultivation garden design, has been part of Gardening the Heart's work with primary schools. Gardening offers accessible language and a spiritual framework to help children grow their theological understanding of the Kingdom of God and to develop spiritual literacy. The creative approaches that these resources offer continue to be used effectively by several schools in Oxfordshire and North Yorkshire and have been endorsed by SIAMS inspectors.

To find out more, visit Rachel's website at parable-garden.org and order her booklet, 'Into the Garden' (£136) from Grove Books (grovebooks.co.uk).

Lockdown puzzles

Beat the lockdown blues with these two biblical boredom busters

Here are two puzzles that both have books of the Bible as their answers. One is very old and the other is right up-to-date! Let us know the answers and we'll publish the names of the first three people to get the lists correct.

This puzzle is an old favourite that has been used to challenge Christians for years. Can you find 30 books of the Bible in this paragraph?

There are 30 books of the Bible in this paragraph. Can you find them? This is a most remarkable puzzle. It was found by a gentleman in an airplane seat pocket, on a flight from Los Angeles to Honolulu, keeping him occupied for hours. He enjoyed it so much, he passed it on to some friends. One friend from Illinois worked on this while fishing from his john boat. Another friend studied it while playing his banjo. Elaine Taylor, a columnist friend, was so intrigued by it she mentioned it in her weekly newspaper column. Another friend judges the job of solving this puzzle so involving, she brews a cup of tea to help her nerves. There will be some names that are really easy to spot. That's a fact. Some people, however, will soon find themselves in a jam, especially since the book names are not necessarily capitalized. Truthfully, from answers we get, we are forced to admit it usually takes a minister or a scholar to see some of them at the worst. Research has shown that something in our genes is responsible for the difficulty we have in seeing the books in this paragraph. During a recent fund raising event, which featured this puzzle, the Alpha Delta Phi lemonade booth set a new record. The local paper, The Chronicle, surveyed over 200 patrons who reported that this puzzle was one of the most difficult they had ever seen. As Daniel Humana humbly puts it, "The books are all right here in plain view hidden from sight." Those able to find all of them will hear great lamentations from those who have to be shown. One revelation that may help is that books like Timothy and Samuel may occur without their numbers. Also, keep in mind, that punctuation and spaces in the middle are normal. A chipper attitude will help you compete really well against those who claim to know the answers. Remember, there is no need for a mad exodus; there really are 30 books of the Bible lurking somewhere in this paragraph waiting to be found. God bless.

Giving to Village Hope

Hitherto, we have offered Village Link free of charge, and we would like to continue to do so. However, as we are sure you will understand, publishing Village Link incurs costs of printing and postage, as well as appreciable staff time.

Please will you consider giving towards the costs of producing this magazine and towards the wider work of Village Hope. You can give by cheque or via BACS using the enclosed form. If you

are a tax payer and you complete the Gift Aid declaration this will enable us to claim an additional 25p for every £1 you donate.

One-off or occasional gifts are much appreciated, but please consider becoming a 'Village Hope Seed Sower'. Seed Sowers share in our ministry through regular giving, and this will enable us to extend Village Hope's work of mobilising prayer, advancing understanding and supporting and strengthening churches in rural Britain.

Join our mailing list to receive future issues of Village Link. Just contact us at the address below, email us at info@villagehope.org.uk, or call 01432 850071 giving us your name, address, and email and we will send you a welcome pack.

This puzzle uses emojis to spell out the names of 14 books of the Bible.

Example: "👁️👁️" a' is Eyes Eye A (Isaiah)

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About Village Hope

Village Hope is a Christian charity with a remit for churches and communities in rural Britain. Our charitable purpose is "to proclaim and live out the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the villages of Britain, in order to establish effective Christian witness, and to encourage and enable Bible teaching, prayer, worship and evangelism in village churches". We believe that the Gospel of Jesus Christ offers hope to all humanity, for this life and the life to come, and that the Bible both sets forth the way of salvation through faith in Jesus and offers a way to live and a coherent vision and timeless values for society. Village Hope is a member of the Evangelical Alliance, and its staff and trustees affirm the Alliance's Basis of Faith.

We also believe that Christians, especially those who live in rural areas, have a special privilege and responsibility as stewards of God's creation to celebrate and care for His land and His earth, which He created and sustains. Our objective is to encourage, strengthen, support and resource those who seek to live a Christian life, serve their communities, and witness to the hope of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Britain's villages.