

# LARGE LETTERS

to the vine church ft. ps jim mcinnes



My good friend Blair (a former Vine church Elder) is the nearest thing I know to an Old Testament prophet or a New Testament John the Baptist. He may not eat locusts and honey—in fact he makes boutique coffee in Pacific Place—but Blair sincerely longs for the return of Jesus, and he studies both the Bible and the age we live in in order to discern what God is saying to the church today. Blair says we are far from ready for Jesus' return. I don't doubt him. His teenage daughter, tongue-in-cheek, gave him a T-shirt for his birthday with the 'The End is Nigh' printed on it. She knows him well.

He wears it with pride.



## covid-19 and the return of jesus: is this the end?

Covid-19 has prompted most Christians to sensibly do what their non-Christian neighbours are doing. We don face masks, wash our hands with vigour, and generally up our game hygienically, while firing off a few prayers for our protection, and hopefully also for the comfort and healing of those who have contracted the virus. We might also worry about the economy and our job security, again like our neighbours. What few of us have probably done is ask whether scripture has anything at all to say about covid-19.

Not in the narrow sense of this specific virus, but more in the general sense of any nasty global event that could wipe out a portion of humanity and overturn whole economies.

An online search turns up articles like 'Coronavirus and Other Modern Plagues in Prophecy,' which as the title suggests draws links between covid-19, the theme of plagues in scripture, and the imminent end of the world. You can find a 'Timeline of the Last Days' online that calculates Jesus' return for 2030, based on some large leaps in logic, the literal reading of biblical passages that are best treated as symbolic, and some fascinating—

There is a good reason why many of us avoid big biblical questions and sweeping Christian assumptions when it comes to global tragedies. That's because such speculation can tread uncomfortably close to fringe Christian views that we would rather not be associated with.

though flawed—numerology. No wonder we run for cover. Most of us cough politely (was that a contagious cough?) when we hear such theories, and rightly so. Sure, the Bible may speak of various trials and tribulations occurring before Jesus returns, but can we really associate covid-19 with those dark biblical prophecies of pestilence and apocalyptic horsemen?

In case you are wondering, Blair is not the type to predict when Jesus will return. He knows scripture too well to make that mistake. What's the alternative then to trying to fix a date for Jesus' return, assuming we want to take seriously the apocalyptic bits of the Bible and not just leave them for the fringe theorists to interpret? How do we answer the question of whether the coronavirus fits in any way into the strange biblical landscape of the end times?

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If we are honest, most of us will admit we have no idea what to do with the strange stuff in Daniel or the book of Revelation (the apocalyptic literature), or with passages of scripture that threaten or prophecy plagues (e.g. Gen 12:17; Exod 7–12; Lev 26:21; Ezek 5:12; Rev 6:8, 9:20, 11:6, chapters 15–16, 18, 21:9, 22:18). In the Exodus God gave Pharaoh something to think about with a succession of plagues. Israel was cursed with plagues when they forgot the covenant. Jesus warned his followers of coming wars, famines, earthquakes, and in some translations 'pestilence, or plagues' as signs that the end was near (Matt 24:7).

But it's John's Revelation that really fascinates and frightens us. He sees seven angels unleash seven plagues on humanity (chapters 8–9 and 15–16), and four terrifying horsemen (chapter 6) who collectively bring war, famine, death and disease, annihilating a quarter of humanity. John gets the prize for the most dramatic use of plagues in prophecy. Does covid-19 fit the bill for Jesus' or John's prediction of plagues? Is the end nigh?

I think the answer is both 'Yes' and 'No'. First, we need to hear a firm 'No' to any attempts to correlate covid-19 (or the Spanish Flu of 1918, or the Black Death of 14th century Europe, and so on) with any specific prophetic passage in an attempt to figure out how close we are to Christ's return. That is not the best way to approach biblical prophecy, especially the apocalyptic bits. We forget that Ezekiel, Jesus and John, and all the other prophets, were speaking into specific contexts, and that although they spoke or wrote of events that had genuine eschatological

significance (meaning they did indeed speak of the end of the world) they also addressed people and events in their own day, weaving together carefully chosen imagery, allusions to Scripture, and reference to current events. For example, New Testament scholar Richard Bauckham explains that in John's Revelation:

*'...descriptions of the plagues of the seven trumpets (8:6–9:21) and the seven bowls (16:1–21)...form a highly schematised literary pattern which itself conveys meaning. Their content suggests, among many other things, the plagues of Egypt which accompanied the exodus, the fall of Jericho and the army of Joshua, the army of locusts depicted in the prophecy of Joel, the Sinai theophany, the contemporary fear of invasion by Parthian cavalry, the earthquakes to which cities of Asia Minor were rather frequently subject, and very possibly the eruption of Vesuvius which had recently terrified the Mediterranean world. John has taken some of his contemporaries' worst experiences and worst fears of wars and natural disasters, blown them up to apocalyptic proportions, and cast them in biblically allusive terms. The point is not to predict a sequence of events. The point is to evoke and to explore the meaning of divine judgment which is impending on the sinful world.'*



All that to say, let's hesitate before we leap to conclusions about covid-19 and Christ's return, especially if those conclusions have anything to do with chronology and date setting. And yet, just like John did, we can legitimately pull together all the plagues in human history if we like, and remind ourselves that in a world marred by sinful human rebellion and great evil we ought to tremble at the thought of coming under divine judgment, and allow for the fact that God may use many means—including some quite disturbing ones—to humble humanity in the hope that hearts will turn to him and away from our many idols. So, 'Yes' in a general sense of surveying the sinful world and the saving plan of God we may appropriately draw a correlation between covid-19 and the second coming of Christ, but only in as much as we recognise all creation groaning in labour pains awaiting the redemption of the children of God (Romans 8). A coronavirus pandemic, the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, the civil war in Syria, the 40 million locusts currently eating their way across East Africa, these are all 'biblical' events in the sense that scripture warns of tribulation before the end and calls the people of God to stand firm in their faith regardless of what unfolds between now and the day when the one who raised Christ from the dead will make all things new. In this sense it is all the end times, between the first and second coming of Jesus.

Do we tremble? Yes. Revelation is intended to make us tremble. I like the way commentator Robert Mounce speaks of those famous four apocalyptic horsemen of Revelation chapter 6. He argues against attempts to specifically designate each of them, and insists instead that we should see the dramatic and terrifying sum total of four creatures sent to cause havoc:

*'Reviewing the various interpretations assigned to the Four Horsemen tends to rob the contemporary reader of the dramatic nature of the vision itself. It is good to place oneself back in one of the seven churches and listen to the visions as they are being read. Instead of discussing the probable significance of each of the four coloured horses those first listeners would undoubtedly have recoiled in terror as war, bloodshed, famine, and death galloped furiously across the stage of their imagination. Visions at best are to be experienced rather than analysed. Those who approach Revelation with a sympathetic imagination are most apt to understand its true meaning.'*

Go ahead, tremble. John wants us to. Don't over analyse the text looking for clues that correspond to twenty-first century events. But do discern the spirit of the age. Do lament the complacency of God's people, as Blair does. Put on a T-shirt that says, 'The End is Nigh' if that's what it takes to make your friends think about what they live for. Stare in horror and wonder as a virus goes on the rampage. But also turn to the living God for hope, as John urged his first-century readers to. See the lion and the lamb, the one enthroned above all who calls all people to worship him. The end may indeed be nigh, and the earth is most certainly groaning, but for the people of God who are faithful to the end the outlook is glorious:

*After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!'*  
(Rev 7:9–10)

Let's get ready for that day.



PASTOR JIM MCINNES