

# OpenTheo

## **Losing Hope? A Discussion on God & the Reality of Suffering | Alister McGrath & Alan Lightman**

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### **The Veritas Forum**

Dr. Alan Lightman, Author and MIT Professor and Physicist, and Dr. Alister McGrath, Oxford Professor of Science and Religion, explore questions of suffering, hope, and the possibility of God through the lenses of their individual worldviews.

### **Transcript**

Welcome to the Veritas Forum. This is the Veritas Forum Podcast. A Place Where Ideas & Beliefs Converge.

What I'm really going to be watching is which one has the resources in their worldview to be tolerant, respectful, and humble toward the people they disagree with. How do we know whether the lives that we're living are meaningful? If energy, light, gravity, and consciousness are in history, don't be surprised if you're going to get an element of this in God. Today we hear from Dr. Alan Lightman, Author and MIT Professor and Physicist, as well as Dr. Alister McGrath, Oxford Professor of Science and Religion.

Together they explore questions of suffering, hope, and the possibility of God through the lenses of their individual worldviews. A talk titled "Losing Hope", a Discussion on God & the Reality of Suffering, moderated by Editor-in-Chief of Comment Magazine and Snyder, presented by the Veritas Forum and the Veritas Forum. What would you like to be doing in the Veritas Forum at Princeton University? I would love for each of you to sort of introduce your background and sort of core beliefs.

What have been the key shaping influences, either experiences, persons and/or institutions in the lens that you find yourself wearing today? Alan, let's start with you. First of all, thank you, Ann, and it's a privilege and pleasure to join this Veritas Forum and to be with Alister McGrath. I was born in Memphis, Tennessee, attended a public high school there, and I had interest in both the science and the arts.

I had two sets of friends, those who relished their math homework and, like, clear crisp

answers to things. And then my art friends who wrote poetry and were part of the literary magazine and love ambiguity. I wanted to relate a couple of experiences that sort of show where I am.

I had a homemade laboratory, and one of the things that I built were pendulums, and I did this by attaching fishing weights to the end of strings. And I read in popular science or some other magazine at the time for a pendulum to make a complete swing was proportional to the square root of the length of the string. And with a stopwatch and a ruler, I verified this wonderful law, and I didn't see any reason to believe in anything supernatural to believe in anything that couldn't be quantified and reduced to these square roots that I was finding.

But then another experience I had years later, gave me a different view of the cosmos. I was lying very late at night I was lying on my back in a boat out in the ocean there was no one near me and I was looking up at the stars it was a very clear night. I had turned the engine off so was quiet.

And after a while I felt like I was falling into infinity. I felt like I was emerging with something much larger than myself that I was connected to the entire cosmos. And I think that you could have connected every one of my hundred billion neurons to a giant computer and read out all of the electrical and chemical impulses.

And it would not have distilled that experience that I had that feeling of connection to the cosmos. And so I consider myself to be a spiritual materialist. I do think that that the universe is made up of atoms and molecules.

And there is no supernatural essence beyond that. But I also feel like we are connected to something larger than ourselves there's some kind of grand order. And that we have these experiences like the kind that I had in the boat looking up at the stars these these transcendent experiences which are not reducible to zeros and ones.

So that's why I call myself a spiritual materialist. So that's my little introduction. Thank you.

Alistair I'd love to hear your sort of as your own but even mapped on a little bit to that because you both share this I think quite rare hybrid both interests and I would say sort of integrity of questions that have assigned to pick a domain and that have a different kind of domain. So I'm not humanists and my culture and send it. And I would just love to hear your echo or your own story vis-a-vis what Alan just shared well thank you and hi I'm I'm an Oxford and it's really good to be with you and actually something Alan said really resonated me very strongly because I remember as a boy, you know looking at the night sky and just being overwhelmed by this and building a little telescope to look at the planets and the moon and just feeling a I could possibly understand this but be there's something so big here you know it's almost if it's a gateway to something I don't

really understand and that made me want to be a scientist because I thought I want to understand this so I specialized in science at high school.

And I was an atheist at that time I took the view that you know if you were into science you couldn't have anything to do with religion. And then I went to Oxford to study chemistry and then I began to really do two things once I encounter incredibly articulate Christians who were able to say look science of faith aren't incompatible you know you've got wrong. But also in our first year chemistry course we did a lot on theoretical chemistry and one of the people we were forced to study and actually it was forced to but it was a pleasure was actually Redine Stein.

And I began to realize Einstein was complex and very very interesting and Einstein seemed to have this idea that there was science and there was religion actually you could hold these together you could do things with them and that was an eye open. So I would describe myself as a scientist who is a believing Christian and it's just aware that actually it's very very hard to give simple answers to last big question because they're so complicated. But nevertheless we can have a go we can we can try and make sense of things.

I did a doctorate in the biological sciences then I switched to theology and tried to figure out how to hold science and religion together which is why I hold this chair rocks for the in these things but I'm really looking forward to our conversations and it's going to be really interesting. You both thank you, you both sort of have embodied even just in what you described lifetimes of sort of seeking and a willingness to, I would say sort of a quest for truth you could say that the capital T or a lower case T. Lifelong learners to put it sort of in lay language and I'm curious. And so far as you might not along to that how you would reflect on what has wound up as you look back on on things that have been immovable convictions you've had or revelations of this is a natural law, or this is a truth, what has proven to be sort of bedrock and poor and immovable.

And then what kinds of questions continue to be very alive for you, how would you, how would you think about that. And then Alistair will start with you. Well, thank, that is a really good question.

And what was absolutely bedrock for me is this is a fascinating and very strange universe which I, I don't really understand properly but, but I sense we can make a degree of sense of it, but not complete sense. And one of the questions I'm wrestling with is well you know, how do I fit into this you know I'm here observing this thinking about this. You know, is that significant what what's this all about and trying to, you know, take this core conviction there is this real world that I'm here observing it.

And then at the same time feeling there are things I can't prove things that are very exciting which might be that there's something meaningful here that's not just a question of existing here but actually, we can understand how the universe works we

can also try and figure out what it means and what we mean, and therefore finding a meaningful place in this world so if you like that's a that's a bit more tentative but it's very important because you know we do need more than simply understanding how things work we need to figure out how we fit into this and what we're here to do and that kind of thing I kind of way think we need a stereoscopic vision if you like science helps us to understand how things work and we can also understand what they mean what we mean and much of science really helps us to give those answers although it can help us point in certain directions and we might hold these things together it's a wonderful world but complicated one and somehow we can make some degree of sense of it and figure out what we're meant to be doing within it. Yeah. Thank you.

Alan how would you how would you reflect on that that you know the sorts of either they can be events recurring realities in your own work or in the world sort of perpetual contradictions you run into what kinds of things have tended to return you to questions you've really been asking your whole life So I'm picking up on on something that Altser said I think the the the preciousness of life and the universe is something that strikes me. The fraction of matter in the universe that is in living form is like one grain of sand on the gobi desert. If we assume that the earth is typical of what fraction of life is in the the biosphere on earth and we extrapolate that to the universe as a whole.

It is very, very rare in terms of materiality I mean I said a little bit earlier that I'm a materialist. But what is the what does it mean that life is so rare. Does that connect us to other living things out there in the cosmos there bound to be other living beings out there but but and they probably would would also recognize that life is very, very rare.

And we feel connected not only to other human beings on earth, but to living beings elsewhere in the cosmos that I will never meet. And as living things as this very rare special arrangement of atoms and molecules that makes life. And as a special obligation as as observers of this strange place that we find ourselves in.

With all of these strange events. I also think that meaning is something that that has no universal answer. There's an ecosmic meaning.

I believe that each one of us has to find meaning in our own lives. I used to think that meaning could be attached to only things that lasted a very long time. But I have come to realize both as a scientist and as a student of Buddhism that everything is impermanent that nothing lasts even the plays of Shakespeare and the paintings of Leonardo da Vinci.

Those are not going to last. And so I think for me personally I have to look to the moment for meaning. I think being present in the moment and really appreciating each moment is where meaning lies for me.

One more thing in terms of my core beliefs and if I go into the ethical realm. I think

different cultures have different views of what is ethical and moral behavior. But one rule that seems to be universal the only rule that seems to be universal is the golden rule do unto others as you would have them do unto yourself.

And I found that that has been my guide for moral and ethical behavior. I would love to have you respond a bit to that. Reality is a question when are people going to learn to just deal with reality as a question and that sort of stuck with me.

And so I was curious, also just hearing what Alan just said this this notion meaning doesn't have a universal answer. How do you how do you respond to that or how does that strike you. I think it was made a very good point because there's no single answer to what is meaning we all in effect discover an answer we feel a works for us that's very important but be actually isn't just something we've made up you know we feel that there are reasons for getting to this.

And you know the reality I think I'm thinking about is suffering where I mean that's on our agenda tonight I don't like suffering I don't like it when other people suffering. Obviously one of the questions I'm trying to figure out is how on earth we can find meaning in suffering not simply in terms of providing some kind of rationalization of this but actually saying well look, it's there what we're going to do about it. And can we do something in the situation somewhere if we can find meaning and enact meaning in this situation so for me that's actually really a very important thing I mean from a Christian perspective.

It's very important to me the Christ suffered he wasn't an armchair philosopher who just said you know, hey, you know this is the way things are it's much more. He embraced it you know and in some way you know that that actually is about you know if Christ is who Christians think he is then actually that is saying something very special that in effect. And those words like to suffer and I think that is a very important insight I find very important for example when I pray I had to say now dear God let me just tell you about this thing called suffering because you don't know about effect.

You don't know about this not very nice but I know you're here somewhere and so that's one way I would think about meaning here is to say that why I don't understand why suffering is here. I think I can cope with it because not just understanding it's coping that's a really important point that you will come back to that. But also it helps you figure out what I should be doing to try and engage this this this reality of suffering trying to do I can to make it less than a present the is.

Well on that sort of suffering thing let's let's get into this and we're going to talk about it or I'd like to talk about it in a few different ways in part reflecting each of your own backgrounds professionally but also personally. You know as already mentioned and as we all get millions of emails stating to us. 2020 has been a very memorable year, even if we don't remember every day because time has been so slippery there's been coven

there's been a massive racial reckoning in the West.

Natural disasters, I think a broader awakening to just profound divisions and worldview inside particular polities. And you know whenever this kind of upheaval happens, I think the human the very human question arises of why. But as I've sort of been theme of that question myself this year and heard others have conversations around why even if they don't quite articulate it in that way.

It's occurred to me that there's maybe more than two but at least as I can think of it sort of two distinct pathways inviting us into the question of why there is what I might call sort of the scientific why which is a why often of correlation and causative explanation. And then there's a more existential why, which is one of purpose and moral meaning and perhaps even a sort of a creational order of some who, or, or divine force or whatever have I think some kind of oversight in the Christian tradition you would say sovereignty. So I'm just curious if you could each reflect on these sort of two different flavors of hunger for sense making and meaning making from where, from where you sit so so I'll start with you like how, how do we think scientifically about the course of events in a year like the one that we were ending, and also sort of human agency and that does science speak to that dynamic.

Well, let's let's talk about COVID since that's what we're going through right now. COVID of course is, is transmitted by a virus, which has a little bit of, of DNA, an RNA and it has been corrupt the DNA of, of ourselves and causes the sickness. DNA is actually a good thing.

Overall, it has been developed this particular molecule emerged as one that that could store information and could produce advanced organisms. So if it weren't for DNA and the, the magical properties of DNA, the ability to store a lot of information, distinguish between different human beings. We wouldn't have advanced life forms who wouldn't have people.

Well, is an inevitable and the DNA was produced over millions of years by lots of random processes, natural selection. It's inevitable that in, in those random processes, it's inevitable that you would produce viruses that also operated with DNA and had developed to attach themselves to other DNA. So this is a case where you have, you start with a good thing and inevitably it leads to certain negative consequences.

And so you probably couldn't have the life that we have without having the negative consequences. This is actually a statement that resonates with a statement that was made by both St. Augustine representing the Christian faith and, and Mamanades representing the Jewish faith that God makes good things and only good things and bad things, the absence of good things. So that seems to have a resonance with, with my sort of scientific explanation of why we inevitably have viruses.

Also, the, the easy transportation of viruses, which is a big part of the pandemic spread is because of our global transportation. That also is basically a good thing because it's related to commerce, communion between different countries and trade, and so on that is another case of where a basically good thing has inevitable consequences which are not so good. Right.

Did you want me to go on and talk about the, the agency or should we stop here and let Alistair talk. Yeah, we'll put a comma here and let Alistair I just so I'm clear though, translating a little what you were saying scientifically Alan. So you're part of one.

One thing you're saying is like part of like even who I am and sort of how my whole like system is why like there's elements to who we are as human beings in our flesh, etc. today that are a result of viruses shifting things over over history. So we are different today than we would have been a virus, certain viruses hadn't happened.

Is that a little bit. Yes, and certainly the, the genetic basis of viruses. Right.

Yeah. So you really can't have one without the other. That's what I'm saying.

Yeah. Alistair, yeah, I'd love to hear you sort of expand on this and feel free to weave in sort of this scientific kind of why question with more of a maybe theological or. Thank you.

Yes. I mean, I, I, I, that's a wonderful thing was I mean, I mean, you know, I heard someone describe viruses as being evil and I thought to myself look, we know we wouldn't be here but one for viruses in the past so it's simple as that and viruses are just viruses they're natural and we have to learn to live with them. I think what's really interesting is the deeper existential questions which have arisen from this and obviously one of them is the problem of suffering which we're going to be engaging with more and due course but there's another one and it's quite deep.

And it's this. It's a very deep fear that we're not in control that in effect, something is happening, which we, you know, high technological culture. Aren't sure how to deal with and you know that and certainly, you know, I kingdom I'm sure in the United States as well.

There was panic at one point where we began to realize this is out of control, you know, we, we can't stop it. And I think that really frightened people because it made us realize that perhaps we had. Perhaps we had got overconfident perhaps we'd fail to realize that actually, this is a fighter, quite a risky world and that we're not quite as in vulnerable as we thought we were maybe we need to do a lot of rethink.

And interestingly, a lot of my friends went back to earlier periods in history and of course, there were massive outbreaks of plague I mean, for example, we all think of Isaac Newton discovering, well, thinking about laws of gravity with the apple fallen. What

we very often forget is the reason he was in his mother's garden watching the apple fall is it had to leave Cambridge because of that break of the plague you know in effect it was well known in those days so I think there's a deeper existential question we almost feel. This is not just about inconvenient, something we've got to deal with it's about actually it's raising questions about, are we actually in control and of course, the unspoken fear I suppose is maybe we'll be able to deal with this far a lot break.

What's next, you know, and I think this is all really quite sober and actually maybe it's good for us to think about these things I think that that's one of the reasons why I'm very excited so good it helps us to think about these questions. And do we need to realize that perhaps we aren't quite the masters of our world that we thought we were now I think might just help us to induce a degree of humility which might be a very good way of thinking about this so there are these deeper questions and I think it's very good to explore them and realize that actually, we have done some wonderful things but actually, we are vulnerable and we have to face up to that raising deep questions and I think it's very good to explore them and realize that actually, we have done some wonderful things but actually, we are vulnerable and we have to face up to that raising deep questions about whether actually we are, we are not quite as secure in our place in this world as we once thought we were. I, you know, it's funny I find scientists to be among the most contagiously curious people that you can meet.

More curious than journalists, which is more my profession and, and yet there is a logic of controls holding and obviously controls and variables and you're hearing my seventh grade science cap speaking. But, Alan, could you reflect a bit on what Alistair was just saying about, I mean, he's bringing up an existential fear that we're not in control and the awareness we've all been sort of shocked into this year, despite all of our technology and modern developments and sense of being on top of the world. But how does the scientific imagination and or decision have room for that question or the possibility that actually there's a whole lot we don't control.

Well, I think Alistair makes an excellent point. And I think, but probably, and I think it exists in the psychological domain, as well as the scientific domain that, that I think that what frightens us most about the pandemic is that it's at least in the early stages we felt like we didn't have much control I mean now with the recent announcements of Pfizer and Moderna, which I have to admit I always had confidence that biologists would come up with with the vaccine, but it does appear that we're getting some control, but we don't know what's coming down the pike, and inevitably there will be more. And I think of this lack of control also and we have these massive hurricanes and tornadoes that kill so many people.

It's mother nature really a friendly mother, you know, throughout history we've had this sense that mother nature this loving entity that will take care of us. But yet mother nature creates hurricanes and volcanoes and other things. And it's very frightening to



think that mother nature actually has no purpose that there's not a two way conversation there with other nature that is a one way conversation and mother nature really is just is it just is what it is.

And the world is what it is, and we would like to think that there is someone taking care of us or looking over us or protecting us. Scientists would like to think that they will ultimately be able to control everything. And I think that we're learning that that none of those things are true.

I do like what Alistair said that that a dose of humility is a good thing. And so it might not be so bad if we get knocked back a notch or two every once in a while by mother nature. And then we're going to see of ourselves as as privileged visitors in this strange cosma.

Yeah. Alistair do you have anything to add to that that was a profound point about the one way versus two way street with mother nature. I'm very much like everyone's emphasis on humility I thought that was really helpful because we have been a little bit arrogant in the past you know we understand nature.

And very often, you know, understanding something is a preview to controlling it you understand how it works. And that means you take control. And I think we're being reminded that we weren't we asked able to control things quite as much as we thought we could.

And also I mean I'm very old fashioned I loved science simply because it helped us to understand things that's good enough for me. I mean the actual ability to do things with it came afterwards and I sometimes wonder you know, have we in effect lost sight of an original vision which is the sheer delight of understanding our world, which so often becomes let's understand it because then we can take charge. And make a do what we want to accept it seems to have gone a bit wrong here.

Yeah. No, I mean among other things even just be into all you college students out there. It'll be very interesting to see how important institutions that form people of a variety of disciplines for future careers, et cetera.

And learn almost how to do more what jazz does which is sort of learn how to create in the midst of great unknown. And I'm just something I'm sort of watching to see as we have become more aware of how little we can master and post strings of the year. So, moving into this like really getting into, you know, the most sort of serious subject of the night and of the year suffering broadly understood.

So, just curious thinking about each of you both as, as people who, who are deeply humanistic and really honor the sciences and have an appreciation for for mystery and in your case, I'll stir a faith. You know, I think the older people get they say, you know, you can suffer your way to wisdom in many different ways and obviously at different life

stages. And there's a CS Lewis who probably many of you watching would be familiar with.

And so, it's famously said you know he wrote two very different books about technically the same subject, and one was the problem of pain which he wrote as a scholar. And the other was a group observed as a widower, which he wrote after his wife died. That's the one he was when he was when he was with it.

And the first was very every day and detached and it's a wonderful philosophical volume. And so, you know, the second was very personal and searing, and at times not incoherent but just very raw. And you can tell you could sort of just see the cost of love lost.

And so, you know, just using that as sort of an example. When this when a society is healthy and well functioning society can ideally be shared at least somewhat. And so, I think the context of our sort of present comments at least in the US and I think the UK probably has its own past year.

A lot of people feel sort of splitting a part of the scenes and then at coven's own sort of discriminatory cast. It's, it's killing some more than others. Some people in certain demographics are getting more than those, etc.

And nothing of just the isolating effects of social distancing. We see this sort of like panoply of human pain that's really uneven. And I just, and we're divided from each other's experiences and all of this.

So I, I give that as a runway to ask each of you how you think about suffering. And in this year, the very uneven experience of suffering. And how do you think about that in the context of this notion of control and then sort of moving into this context of, you know, the age old question of the Odyssey, how does a good God allows suffering.

Alister, why don't we start with you just this relationship between unequal suffering and a God overseeing it. And then we have a question. So this is just the beginnings of an answer to the first part.

And I mean, I don't like suffering. I don't like it when other people suffer but suffering is there. And you know, we've got to face up to this brute reality it is there and the question is not simply how we can make sense of it which we can do of course the biological level or theological level.

And how do we cope with this. And even more than that, can we actually not just cope with this but grow through this right. This is, I think for me, one of the really interesting questions that emerged from covered because the question I find my, myself asking me is, how can I become a better person as a result of this now that to me is a very important challenge and you've raised, I think a very good question which is covered has

exposed inequality for like it's a lens which has really shown us that there are certain groups people those who live very tightly and closely together.

Those who have access to health care who actually really are feeling the pain a lot more than others. So if you like our our structures have made this worse. And that's a very unsettling thought.

But of course you want me to talk a bit about how I bring garden to this because I think that's that's really the big item on the agenda and I think what I would say is this that obviously we could talk with this and purely philosophical terms and all powerful all loving God but I'm kind of a suspicious of these philosophical absolutizations going very often they're very abstract and what I want to say is really, from a Christian perspective it's almost if you're focusing on Christ and saying look, he suffered he really went through it. And actually we can take hope from that a certain sense in which the other Christians for example suffered quite a lot had a rough deal but they saw Christ as someone who would stay with them during their suffering. And so for me, I mean I have a talk about the intellectual side of things but it's it's that's part of it but it's not the only thing it's a sense that you are not alone in suffering that in effect you are walking if you like to quote from a tree from with a God who is present with you even when you walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

And that's not about evading big issues is about saying I'm not on my own because I'm being accompanied and comforted. I can begin to do things I can become, I can be an agent who tries to do something to help those who are suffering and perhaps also make this world a better place. There's a theoretical question here and I'm sure we'll come back to that but there's also a question about how we rise to the challenge that we are being confronted with this.

And for me actually that's a really interesting question is not just about knowledge of why this here it's about wisdom which is a different kind of knowledge about how we act wisely to cry and learn from this and try to affect ask what has been exposed about us as people and about our society that we might pay attention to I think that's a very interesting question which I think is going to go away. That's just the beginnings of an answer to a very good question. Alan, how do we rise to the challenge of COVID in particular.

First of all, I think that, of course, the suffering is terrible. But one can look at some positive aspects of the suffering. And one of them is that it has, as Altra said, it has shined a light on the inequalities, the gender inequality because women are suffering more whether they get the virus or not they're suffering economically more than men.

And racial inequalities. We're more attuned to these inequalities now because of COVID and that's a positive thing because it means that we might begin to address them with greater vigor. And I think that there's a bonding that occurs that we're all suffering in

some kind of a way, even those who don't have COVID we're suffering economically and sort of psychically.

And there's a bonding that occurs between people who are going through the same experience like like members of the same football team or soldiers who who fight together and in a battle. There's a bonding that occurs, but there's something else that's that's more subtle, which I think is also a positive outcome and that is that the the COVID has forced us to slow down. And even those of us who are still working remotely and the students who are taking their classes remotely.

We, we, we, our lives lives are slower now. And I think that the slowness gives us a rare opportunity to stop and think about who we are and what our values are and what's important to us. I mean, since the Industrial Revolution, life has been speeding up and speeding up and speeding up.

In the 1830s with the telegraph, the speed of communication was was three bits per second and then when the internet first came out in the 1980s, it was 1000 bits per second. And now it's a billion bits per second. We're just, we've just been rushing around so fast that we haven't had time to think about where we're going and what our values and not only as an individual individuals but as a country as a whole.

And I think that that being forced to slow down, which the pandemic has done is one of the, the few silver linings. The last question was, of course, very, very difficult question is, is, is how can a compassion and God permit suffering. And I'll just say a few words about that it's, it's, it's a really difficult question.

Of course, it depends partly on what your definition of God is. But, but I don't think I do not view God at God is a controller. And, and Genesis 26, God says to Isaiah.

When you, when you settle in your new land be with you. God doesn't say, I will take care of you, I'll prevent suffering. God says, I will be with you.

And the way that I interpret that is, is that God gives us the strength to deal with whatever comes our way. I mean, that's how we rise to the most dignified and majestic level that we can be is to have the strength to deal with adversity. And even the Buddhist say that every experience, including adverse experiences or opportunities for growth and learning.

So, I don't mean to at all minimize the terrible suffering that we have gone through. But I think that as Ann suggested in his Alistair said, I agree that it does offer us some opportunities for growth. And there's a Old Testament scholar who you both may know of Walter Bruegerman and he's been controversial in some circles and I quote him here and I just may upset.

He died hard like Calvinist Christians watching, I may upset you by saying this, forgive

me but some said something about this year. He said something about this year. To your point about the link machine control and humility and this notion of slowness slowing down and use a Jesuit who wants that slow is real, which I've been reflecting on this year.

That especially I think in Western and post enlightenment post industrial societies. The Christian world in particular has really emphasized a God of control with a particularly kind of Western, maybe even super scientific understanding of what control what that control means and you know, we sovereignty is a mystery really adding the sense of God's control can be a mystery, but Bruegerman says, it would be really nice if we sort of revisited the idea that was much more sort of intrinsic to the Hebrew Bible Hebrew scriptures of God really being a God of sort of that our relationship with God is one of the relationship of fidelity. So it's like a very different optic than thinking about control.

So I'm just planting that up there's something you both prompted. But just to wrap up our time before we turn to questions. You both have sort of invoke this notion of humility.

And I think recognizing that no one of us, of course, has all the answers in some ways, probably more often than not. This is maybe a time to just crystallize our questions that are being revealed to us as we look at our society and and ourselves in a more clear way. And when I hear the phrase we are not alone.

I do think of human solidarity. And I'm just curious, I guess, it's two part question here is there a relationship. So, I think that there's a difference in the sense that we are not necessarily between human solidarity and the existence of God or God of love.

First question, you can pick one of these you want to answer. And then the second more practically just what can solidarity look like as we head into a winter most of us being more distanced being as distance as we were back in March and April, physically from each other, especially as I think about these students, you know, what are creative ways in which solidarity might yet be possible. So you can pick either one of those.

Whoever wants to go first, Alister. I'll have a go. I think one of the things I've noticed about the COVID crisis is that as here, I'm seeing people on small screens.

I'm not actually seeing them in the flesh. Why I've noticed is how much human relationality depends actually on being able to be present with, to touch, to kind of hear somebody's voice face to face. And it's really brought home to me actually how important relationships are.

And of course, again, you're a Christian, you know, this idea of a relationship with God, not just knowing about but somehow, even though it was a very difficult idea to express knowing and being known by it's just so important. And it's all about really feeling that

we aren't on our own that there are others around us, but it's also something bigger. And for me, as a Christian, it's in effect being able to say there is some personal reality behind the universe, even though I know, sometimes difficult to put that into words, but that actually, in one sense, it energizes me because one of the things that I didn't mention earlier, which I think is just worth mentioning here briefly, is that one of the things that suffering does is it causes us to doubt whether there's a coherence to the world does is there no meaning, or is there actually a meaning that's difficult to discern and I think that's a very important point because it is in talking to other people that very often we help to find our way to these answers.

Here is how I cope with suffering does that help you. And for me, the idea of walking through a difficult yet beautiful world in the presence of someone who knows me and who I know actually is very, very powerful in terms of energizing me and make me want to do something about things that I think that's helpful to the creation of human solidarity as well but it's not more to be said, I want to hear what Alan's going to say because he said some very interesting things. Go ahead.

Well, I want to, first of all, I agree with what Alexer said there's no substitute for in person contact, but I wanted to say what's happened to me in the last few months. And my relative isolation is that I have reached out to friends that haven't seen in many years over zoom. And it has made me feel even though it's, you know, a poor substitute for in person conversation or touching.

It's a lot better than nothing. And I think that if COVID had not occurred, I would not have reached out to these friends. I'm 71 years old is very possible that that that they and I would reach the end of our lives without ever seeing each other again.

And yet because of the feeling of being isolated of needing this human connection. I have reached out to them. Of course they were shocked to hear from me but delighted and set up zoom calls with quite a number of my friends that I haven't seen in some cases decades and reestablished some kind of contact.

And I think that's a wonderful thing, not because I did it but just in its own right it's a wonderful thing. And so I do think that there's something. beneficial about going through this experience that we're all going through.

We've listed a number of things that it's highlighted inequalities between races and genders. It slowed down things so it gives us gives us the time to think. made us want to reach out and whatever means are available even if it's zoom to touch other people it sort of is.

Is restating and re establishing for us the importance of human contact. Well on that note, thank you both I'm going to turn to a form of virtual contact with our audience we have some great questions that have come in here. And I'm going to start with this one.

I'm getting this is a little bit more getting into the theological side of things. How can a Christian be sure that the divine exists and that his or her faith isn't just an elaborate form of self deception. Hollister I'm going to pick that one to you and then Alan if you just want to reflect honestly on that that would be great.

Well I think this is a great question so let's begin by thanking the anonymous question. How can I be sure we can't be sure about any beliefs that really matter I can't be sure there is a God. When I was an atheist I thought I could be sure there is no God but then realized actually it's not that simple and for me the dilemma we face as human beings is that really important beliefs about justice about identity about what are moral values are you can prove these are right you have to learn to live with uncertainty and the wisdom is about realizing that you have to in effect say I cannot prove this is right.

I hear the reasons why I think it's right but I can't prove it I'm going to embrace this way of living and thinking and see what it takes me. So to the answer to the question can I be sure no, but there's a deeper question can any of us be sure about the really big beliefs in life and we can't. I think that's one of the reasons why I'm a great fan of the opposite philosopher as I bow then he says look we cannot prove beliefs that really matter.

So we draw from that conclusion we ought to treat other people with respect because it means that in effect, you know we because we can't treat them as idiots they've arrived these ideas we assume by good processes we have to treat people with respect that's very important. So I'm saying to the question is that I'm being absolutely honest I cannot prove there is a God I cannot prove that Christianity is right. But when I was an atheist I could not prove that was right either we have to make a step of faith in embracing any worldview and that is that's just the way things are and I think that I'm quite old now that that's one of the few pieces of wisdom I gathered in the books of life I think.

Thank you Alan. Well I would like to say something to compliment what Alistair said and I think that he stated it beautifully. The just as we cannot prove the existence of God that we have to accept God or reject God as a matter of faith.

And so can't prove the central doctrine of science, which is that the universe is a lawful place. And that the Newton's laws of motion that we find here that they apply everywhere and at every time in the universe we can't prove that. All the theories that we have in science that have worked so well in the past we can't be sure that tomorrow there won't be an experiment that will contradict one of those theories.

And so every scientist and this is something that I did as a graduate student in physics. You just accept the central doctrine of science is a matter of faith and that central doctrine is that the universe is a lawful place, a rational place, but you have to take that doctrine as a matter of faith. It cannot be proven and I find it very interesting that that these, some of these very deep questions like does God exist or is the universe

completely lawful.

Are questions that we have to that we cannot answer that we have to come to an understanding of as a matter of faith. So this somewhat following off that although this question presumes, it's the most popular one so I am going to ask it, it presumes that this has been a very rigorous debate which I'm not sure it has been a debate per se more of just a rich discussion but this is to both of you, what is the one argument or perspective on the other side that you find the most persuasive and compelling and why. So we might translate that in the contours of this discussion as a perspective that maybe comes from priors that you don't yourself share but somehow the way they were expressed tonight you found yourself sort of either curious about or are you going to have something to.

I have everyone if you want to take a whack at that. Well it's hard to answer that because we didn't really have a debate and I don't think that there were, there were definitely two opposing sides here. We probably agreed on too much for an interesting conversation.

Well let me look at one question so I think might lie behind this and I guess the question perhaps feels that I as a Christian ought to engage more with the question of you know why is there suffering there anyway surely this world could be made in a different way so there isn't suffering so I think that the question behind the question I think it does require an answer I think let me get let me begin to open something I think it just is interesting and when I was when I was much younger to think look the suffering in this world, therefore there is a problem. David Hume who makes this point in one of his dialogues would say look there has to be a better universe which in effect means we look at this one and say well hey it's it's lousy you know who made this sort of thing and I think my concern here is we just don't have the comparator we don't have a pen here this is this one that doesn't work now it doesn't work it's because it's lousy but I got a pair that does work and I can compare the panel doesn't work the panel does work but Hume seems to be assuming that actually there we know there is a better possibility and therefore wonder why we don't have it here I think I'm just very suspicious about the thing that really puzzles me and again this may be the question behind the question is why do I feel that suffering isn't just kind of way a bit anomalous actually it's wrong it's unjust and something much deeper it's a deeper reaction that I wonder what does that come from within my worldview how do I explain I think I could you know this is deep sense that it's not meant to be like this and I need to help do something about it but I often think that the whole debate about suffering and God rest on a whole lot of very questionable assumptions where we think we know something and in fact we don't really so that that may be part of the problem here this is a very good question what am I about to ask from an anonymous person in the audience if you could solve the problem of pain would you Alistair I will ask you to take a look at how I am on the most person and the answer is I would love it if we could solve prey pain here's here's the deeper part



of my answer but what would the price tag be because my concern is that you were all very familiar with the law of unintended consequences and you do something and then realize that in doing that you mess a whole lot of other things up and things are worse than they were and what I'm worried about is that you know I would love to be able to abolish pain it would make life a lot easier admittedly there would be difficulties like if you have if you have no pains sensation you are very vulnerable to all kinds of things but my feeling is that it would be lovely if we had a world without pain but I fear to think what the price tag would be and that is a real concern to me so it's not an easy answer to give and I personally would much prefer it if there wasn't pain but what I wonder is always to be talking about the world in which there are relative degrees of pain and actually maybe in western culture we're experiencing a lot less pain than others do in the third emerging world and I think that if I put like this it sounds a very silly answer I know but I think it might be selfish of me to want to do that because I think an awful lot of people are much more badly affected by this than me and to get rid of pain properly we are looking not at some kind of tinkering with human mechanisms we're talking about making this world a more just place and that's a much bigger and much more uncomfortable agenda which isn't going to go away Ellen how would you think about that the erasure of the problem of pain? Well I like what Alistair said that depends on what the price tag is I mean you can take a lot of morphine and knock yourself out and kill all your pain but then you don't have any awareness you're not really living in the world the price tag is an important consideration but I wanted to make another comments related to that it's not exactly the same and this is something that I've always wondered about and that is if we look at all of the great art that has been created and music and painting and novel writing most of it has come out from people who were suffering in some way great art seems to come out of sadness more than joy I don't know exactly why that is I don't have an answer to that but but somehow and I'm not speaking necessarily a physical suffering emotional suffering there are many ways to be said but somehow the experience of suffering and sadness and we bring something deep out of us that can be a creative force it's not all negative and we've seen that creative force and some of the responses to COVID very near the beginning of COVID I think it was in March the Toronto Symphony Orchestra had a performance that was like 25 musicians who were all sequestered in their own homes but they played together and they played their part for some symphony or some I can't remember that I think it was symphony and there was a central computer and a technician that combined all the individual and made this really breathtaking symphony that was there've been other creative things that have come out of the COVID experience so I don't have an answer I don't know why but it does seem to be the case that that creative activity often comes out of suffering and sadness This question comes in from a Roger who asks if meaning is derived from humans what basis is used ultimate meaning must have a transcendent agent right otherwise good and bad can be upside down I'm Alister we'll go with you again Roger that's a very good question I think my view is that I could easily make up a worldview which I liked which I thought was right which in effect resonated everything I wanted to be into but I would have this

deep fear it's a bit like Freud and wish fulfillment that somehow I'd simply in effect developed a worldview a theory of meaning that orbited around me as an individual and I think initially I did that I mean I was really quite arrogant as a teenager and then I began to realize there are two things here number one I cannot make myself the center of the universe and there's a bigger perspective and in fact that's one of the reasons why for me believing a goal that helps you decent yourself is saying look you aren't wake up to this fact you need to realize you are part of something much bigger than yourself and you cannot determine meaning simply by how it affects you and what you want is it you have to ask how do I fit into a bigger picture in which I have responsibility so for me we end up using the language of transcendence which I could easily extrapolate to God but I'd certainly want to say that meaning is about realizing that there is something beyond me it's not something I've invented it's something I've if you like discovered and embraced even if it's costly so that's how I begin to respond to that I think it's a very perceptive question if I might say so because my own view and again I must make clear there's just a way I see it I may not be right is that it is very difficult to construct a theory of meaning which is not self centered unless you have a reference point beyond you something that's transcendent God does a job very well but you know that there may be other possibilities as well but but for me God does that job so I'm going to we have a few questions that have come in that turn us they're a little more personal to each of you so I'm going to risk that not knowing you either until tonight but I think they're both sort of honoring each of your own sort of journey is an ongoing journey as human being so this first one is to you Alan Dr. Lightman how can you be so sure that your experience on the boat was something that could not be measured Well that's a very good question that you could it really comes down to the question of consciousness I mean that's you know how do we measure consciousness and consciousness is one of the greatest mysteries in both neuroscience and philosophy that that even though we biologists and I agree with this think that the brain is all material that it's made up of neurons that have connections and have chemical contact with each other and then there's electrical currents that go through individual neurons So we think of the brain as a material thing and yet the experience of consciousness is something so very generous so unique so overpowering that no one has ever been able to understand it in terms of just the operations of neurons even if we think that somehow it originates with with with neurons So this haven't been able to understand qualitatively what consciousness is what what Iness is what ego is and so that's why I say that that I don't think that that the experience of looking up at the stars and feeling connected to them and be reduced to just the electrical and chemical flows between neurons because we don't understand what consciousness is and that there's a philosopher I can't remember Colin McGinn who wrote a book the mysterious flame in which he says that there's no way that we will ever be able to understand what consciousness is because we can't get outside of our minds to understand what's happening we are intrinsically trapped within fundamentally trapped within our own three pounds of neurons And I think that's a really interesting question that we've been talking about in the last century answer but it's a great

question and I do like very much that we call this human are instead of Q&A because a lot of the really deep questions don't have answers and in my experience of having lived in both the world of science and the world of the arts I realized that we have to have both kinds of questions questions with answers and questions without answers that both kinds of questions are part of what I'll start this one is for you. How did you come to Christ from atheism to believing? Obviously, I was going through a process of thinking and you know, beginning to realize that I thought atheism was factually correct that it was evidentially certain and then beginning to realize it was not that simple beginning to realize that actually I'm not a very intelligent people who took a Christian perspective and a whole series of things but I'll tell you what the tipping point was.

I'll just try and explain it. I'll just try and explain something like this. Well, look, I'm here in space time.

And if there's a God he's up in heaven, wherever that is. And so what, you know, I mean, I mean, it makes no difference to me at all. And so there was a massive relevance question if you like here for me.

And people explained me about this idea of the incarnation. In other words, that Christ is, in effect, not simply a good religious teacher but actually is God entered into our human history in human form. And suddenly realized that that was a game changer because that meant that God had entered into human history in human form, and that that in effect meant he was in space and time he journeyed with me, not as someone who viewed it from a farm.

And for me that was really transformative now actually it's very relevant to our discussion tonight because, as I was just saying, you know, if that is so, and obviously it's a Christian belief it's very important Christian belief but I can prove that it's right. Then immediately it says well Christ suffered. And that means that God knows what that is like and that's a very big psychological thing because it means you know, God knows what I'm going through and actually that makes it easier to pray makes it easier to journey when you know there's someone who has a sympathetic in the proper sense of the word who has suffered with who's been alongside that.

So that was the game changer for me now this is a lot more to happen that actually was was really quite important point which, if you like tip to me a little bit. Thank you. How do you respond in this comes from a Gordon, thank you Gordon for this question.

How do you respond in person, practically spiritually to those who are experiencing a crisis of suffering. And that's a very big question and probably would depend on the particular suffering but then if you guys have some principles you would follow that could be helpful. Alan would you like to.

Well, yeah. Are we talking about physical suffering or emotional suffering. Probably both

but why don't we go with emotional.

Yeah. Well it's. It's related.

I mean it's part of the bigger question how do you empathize with other people. And I think you listen to them. And you try to put yourself in their shoes.

And maybe from that comes. Understanding, but just the phrasing of the question that the person who posed the question suggest to me that that person has compassion you know cares about the suffering of other people. And I think.

Caring and listening. Is is my recipe. I know that's terribly simple but.

I don't really think I have much more to offer than that caring and listening. I was sure I'm guessing you might not have more to offer than that foundation. On basically has articulated some of the key things I mean when you are going through suffering whether it's physical or emotional.

You very often feel very alone you're on your own. And actually you know having somebody who walks with you through that. It helps if they've been through it I want to make a point clear but you don't have to it just know you recognize there's an issue here and almost you know as an act of human solidarity you're saying, I want to try and help you in some way I can walk you for a while maybe try and help them I have to withdraw I'm afraid but it's it's it's this sense that you know there's something affects all of us it's a recognition of the human situation we do suffer physically.

We do suffer emotionally and actually what helps me what helps others get through this is knowing you aren't on your own. However we do that and I know it sounds a bit glib and probably a bit superficial but actually very often people are looking for a lifeline in these situations just just some recognition that that that they matter to somebody. And actually that can very often be the tipping point to help them move on to the next phase.

Like Alan you know I don't think this we can make a massive difference in terms of what we do really but nevertheless we can show that it's a real concern here. And sometimes you know it does help to share experiences you've been through just to say that you aren't on your own it's all right. And so that to me is something that's really very important and again COVID really has, has meant we know a lot of people like this who are very, very difficult and the real problem but covert is because of social isolation.

People don't have anyone to talk to it's a real problem. So I think that is that's it. There's a general problem accentuated by I think the COVID crisis.

This question and we may wrap up with this. This question is sort of a cousin to what I just asked. And this person said asks.

I'm a Christian but it felt and feel immense psychological suffering. What would you say to a Christian who's in pain mostly for mental health reasons. I want to give a pause but I do either one of you want to.

Well, I'll come in here and I'll maybe supplement this I would want to say that actually, there are more people in the situation than you might think you're not on your own. This is actually a very widespread problem and so a lot worse now than it was a year ago. You need to in fact say look I'm not on my own I know it's difficult to meet people.

I know it's difficult to have those deep conversations but there are people there and there are others going through what you are going through. So really I'd want to say look try and hang in there, because hopefully we'll start talking about these things again. That may not solve the problems but it means we can share these things more than might otherwise be the case that's that's just if you like a sort of promissory note you know that sort of very quick intervention but you know it doesn't need to be said.

It's much worse for somebody in that situation now than it was earlier, hopefully won't be there all that much longer but I do very much appreciate what the issue is. And did you want to have anything to add there. Well I'm not sure that the, the, the, the relationship between us during this period.

I don't think that it is specific to being a Christian person. That's what I would say that that whatever our faith is or even lack of faith. That that we're all suffering in some way or another to different degrees but but we're all affected by this.

And I think that that despite all of the bad aspects of that that it does establish a bond between us. We're all on the same football team or something like that that we're all that we have something that we it's another thing that we share that human beings share. We're sharing something here.

We're all affected. And I think that that sharing helps strengthen the bond bonds between us whatever our faith. If you like this and you want to hear more like share review and subscribe to this podcast.

And from all of us here at the Veritas Forum. Thank you.

[Music]