

The real Lord of the Flies: what happened when six boys were shipwrecked for 15 months



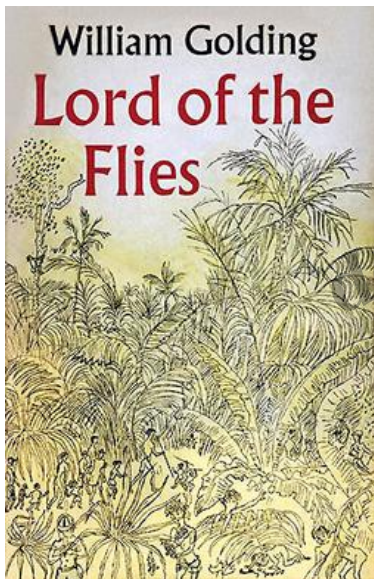
A 1963 film from the 1963 film of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Photograph: Ronald Grant
When a group of schoolboys were marooned on an island in 1965, it turned out very differently from William Golding's bestseller, writes Rutger Bregman

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A brief meditation on human nature

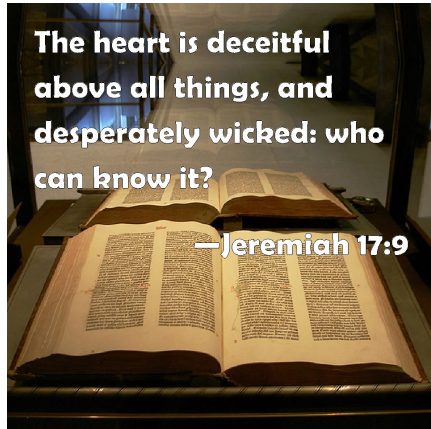
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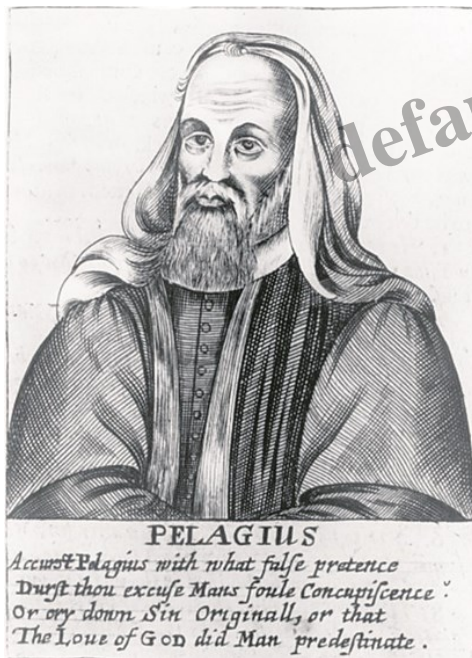
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I know this might not be about local government, but indulge me a little. If Government is about ordering society, and societies are made of individuals, then their innate temperament, good or bad, are worth meditating on. Imagine electing people to high office who never think or write about that, or who couldn't articulate an opinion either way. Yes, [imagine that...](#)

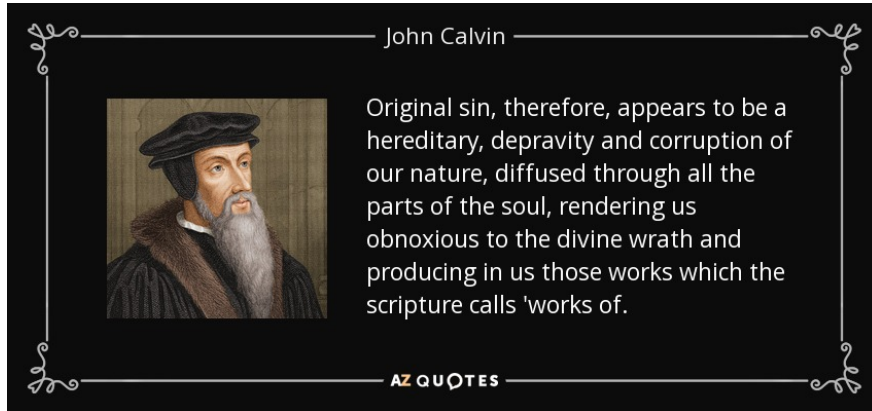
Many moons ago, I read Golding's '[Lord of the Flies](#)' and felt glum afterwards. People at heart are nasty, Golding said. Either as a society or as a species we're only a few missed meals away from barbarism. Isolate people and just watch them forget education, rationality and courtesy, and descend into animals. At that time, this view was consonant with my religious faith. I recalled Jeremiah's lament that all human hearts are 'desperately wicked', and I nodded, regretfully concluding the novel backed the Bible's assessment of human nature.



The first blow to that view came when I read of a 4th century Church heresy called [Pelagianism](#). Poor Pelagius, an ascetic monk, didn't believe in original sin, and felt human beings aren't all that bad after all. They might even have some virtue, if they were allowed to exercise free will. Jesus, Pelagius said, came to set a better example, rather than acting as a propitiatory blood sacrifice to an angry god. Might people, he wondered, instinctively behave decently towards one another without needing a goad (or a god)? His inclination to that view makes more sense when you remember that Pelagius was British.



Of course, Pelagius didn't prevail, because Augustine insisted that people were drenched in Original Sin and were innately horrible, only to be one-upped a millennia later by Calvin who said we inherited a "hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature diffused into all parts of the soul... For our nature is not merely bereft of good, but is so productive of every kind of evil that it cannot be inactive."



But because, perhaps like you, I knew many kind people whose kindness did not spring from religious faith (and worse, know many whose cruelty springs exclusively from it), this dismal view of human nature never quite gelled with the evidence of my own eyes. So I always thought of myself as a [tiny bit Pelagian](#) — a little heresiarch, and that streak of defiance never left me.

And now I read a real-life tale, which I'm astonished I've never heard before, [about a group of adolescents marooned on an island for over a year, Lord-of-the-flies style](#). Except that they looked out for one another, and got along, and all came home safe and well as a result.

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The real Lord of the Flies: what happened when six boys were shipwrecked for 15 months



▲ A still from the 1963 film of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Photograph: Ronald Grant

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So why am I going on about this now?

Because we're living in a peculiar and disturbing time. We could all do with a little affirmation about our ability to *be good*; to look after one another especially while we're going through a trial like a pandemic. I see a lot of human nature in my role as a leader in my community.

So listen to me: *People are, with small exceptions, decent, and want to help one another. Be encouraged.*

This story renews some of my faith in humankind, which three millennia of dogma has tried to tread down. Look around you. Our community is making a valiant effort and enduring enormous sacrifices to

protect vulnerable people. Because it's the right thing to do. Jeremiah was wrong. Calvin was wrong.
And Mr Golding? Shame on you.

Category

1. Uncategorized

Tags

1. Lord of the Flies
2. Human Nature
3. Pelagianism

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