

How to Understand and Respond to COVID-19

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1 Kings 8:33-40

“When your people Israel have been defeated by an enemy because they have sinned against you, and when they turn back to you and give praise to your name, praying and making supplication to you in this temple, then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your people Israel and bring them back to the land you gave to their ancestors. When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because your people have sinned against you, and when they pray toward this place and give praise to your name and turn from their sin because you have afflicted them, then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your servants, your people Israel. Teach them the right way to live, and send rain on the land you gave your people for an inheritance. When famine or plague comes to the land, or blight or mildew, locusts or grasshoppers, or when an enemy besieges them in any of their cities, whatever disaster or disease may come, and when a prayer or plea is made by anyone among your people Israel - being aware of the afflictions of their own hearts, and spreading out their hands toward this temple - then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Forgive and act; deal with everyone according to all they do, since you know their hearts (for you alone know every human heart), so that they will fear you all the time they live in the land you gave our ancestors.”

The coronavirus pandemic which began at the end of last year is spreading all over the world. Every day, tens of thousands of people are confirmed infected and thousands are dying. People panic and have no idea what to do, while political leaders are trying their best but are also at a loss of what to do. The biggest fear among people is not knowing how long the pandemic will last. People say that it will take about a year for a vaccine to be developed. How can we cope with the infected population that is growing exponentially until then? In the case that a variant virus appears, the vaccine may become useless, so what will happen then? This pandemic has already been a huge blow to the world economy; small and medium-sized businesses are going bankrupt, while large businesses are starting to lay off employees. People are losing their jobs. Businesses can't even imagine hiring new college graduates as they are furloughing or dismissing their current employees. Social and family life is becoming tough, and we can see hungry people, thieves, and acts of violence on the streets. Humans are headed on a path that has not been trodden. People are afraid of the uncertain future. Amid this global economic crisis, our self-supporting missionaries, who devote themselves wholeheartedly to the work of the Lord, are no exception. Missionaries working as tour guides or running travel agencies and small restaurants are facing difficulties and having to close their businesses or face losses without any income. Our nurse and doctor missionaries working in hospitals are also at risk of getting infected. Venezuelan co-workers who have been in extremely difficult circumstances, suffering from food and medical shortages, have no idea how much worse the situation may become.

Today's passage is a prayer for a disaster facing Israel during Solomon's dedication of the temple. After succeeding to the throne, Solomon followed his father King David's will and built the temple. When the construction work was completed, the Ark of the Covenant was placed

in the Holy of Holies and the temple was dedicated to the Lord. During the dedication of the temple, Solomon prayed to God for the temple and for the people. This passage is about his prayer for when Israel would be defeated in a war or when famine or a plague struck.

People tend to deal with catastrophes, such as famine or plague, as though they are just accidents. We also may think they are bad luck. We try to endure with patience and comfort ourselves, thinking that it will pass. As a result, people do not learn God's lesson through natural disasters. But in times of disaster, we must realize that this is God's disciplinary hand on us and on the sins of this age. We must raise our hands to the Lord, pray in repentance, and ask for his grace and mercy. There is no accident in anything. Even every movement of this invisible virus is under God's sovereign will. God's sovereign will is that, through the disaster, we may repent of our pride and humble ourselves before God and fear him. His ultimate will is that we may always be blessed by becoming those who fear and revere him (1 Ki 8:40, Dt. 6:24). The fear of God is the beginning of knowledge. Those who fear God are the most blessed (Ps 112: 1). So, in the face of this pandemic, what should we believe and what should we repent of? Also, what should we do?

I. What we should believe

First, we should believe in God's love. We don't know all the specific reasons why God has allowed us to suffer from the coronavirus pandemic. But one thing is for sure. It's not because God doesn't love us. Very rarely will one die for the righteous, and while there may be some who may bravely die for the good, no one has such a love as to die for a sinner. However, while we were still sinners, God sent his only-begotten Son to die on the cross for us (Rom 5: 7). This clearly confirmed God's love for us. This love is the most powerful love in the entire universe, and it is an eternal love that remains unchanged even if the sky falls and the earth disappears. The devil tempts us to doubt God's love in times of disaster. Yet in all situations, we must be convinced of God's absolute love by looking at Christ crucified. Through this love, we become more than conquerors even in the face of disasters.

Second, we should not think that this disaster is only for the wicked. God may discipline certain people through illness. However, this pandemic is not only for the unbelievers; this plague strikes believers too. Believers and unbelievers alike suffer and die from infection. People are getting sick and dying, not because they are more sinful. In Jesus's time, the tower of Siloam collapsed, killing eighteen people. Some thought that the dead were more sinful than the others. But Jesus said, "I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish" (Lk 13:5). We must have compassion on those who are suffering from the plague. Most importantly, we must first look at our own sins and repent.

II. What we should repent of

First, we should repent of the pride of this age that has risen against God. Modern society has developed amazing technology and science. We are advancing toward an AI era of science and technology, even in the field of genetic manipulation and cloning that treads into God's territory. As the prophet Daniel foretold, many people quickly come and go to increase knowledge (Dan 12: 4). In the past, people rarely left their villages. Most of them lived within 50 miles of their birthplace and very few went to other countries. However, in modern times, the aviation industry has developed, allowing us to travel from country to country very quickly

and easily. But who knew this technological advancement would accelerate the disaster? Viral diseases of the past were limited to one region or city, yet they are now spreading very quickly around the world. Viruses do not need a passport or a visa. They spread like wildfire through the aviation and transport networks. God is warning humans who have boasted in their modern civilization. We must acknowledge the sin of the pride in this generation as our own, and repent.

Second, we should repent of our lack of love and thankfulness. The social distancing measures have increased the amount of time we spend with our families. Through this, we realize that we have lacked love for our family members. Our family is the most precious community God has given to each of us. The great strength of our community is the house church ministry. So even in this difficult time of social distancing, we can still worship at our homes. Most of the parents in our community are either missionaries or shepherds. We can gather together with our families to read the Bible and pray every evening. Parents can have a meaningful time talking with their children, sharing their concerns and thanksgiving topics, and thus become united. Also, we realize how precious our spiritual fellowship is with members of the church by not being able to meet them. Coworkers and friends of faith who encourage and comfort one another are our true spiritual families. We must repent for having taken their coworking and love for granted, and not loving one another with our hearts. Further, we should repent for having taken for granted the small things we've enjoyed: eating together, shaking hands, hugging, using public transportation, gatherings at church or school, clean air and water, and daily necessities and foods that we could easily buy at the store. Indeed, when God gives us these blessings, we receive them. When he opens his hand, we are satisfied with good things. When God hides his face, we are terrified. When he takes away our breath, we will die and return to the dust (Ps 104: 28,29). Everything, including our breath and life, is God's gift.

Third, we should restore in us God's heart for the salvation of the world. Occasionally, I have been seeing the coronavirus infection statistics with the confirmed cases and the dead in each country. All the countries in this world appear on one table. Looking at the table, I find that humanity is one. I find that divisions like nationalism are nothing in the face of a global catastrophe. Everyone is helpless before a viral attack. The virus does not discriminate according to social status, class, age or gender. Both the diseased and the deceased are indicated by numbers only. All the people on the planet are one big family. We affect one another. Every single person is equal to the others, and entire humanity is a community that should love and help each other, peacefully coexisting on the planet. All of us are God's creation to be saved. I pray that we can widen our narrow hearts and repent of our individual and collective selfishness, and learn God's heart for the whole world.

III. What we should do

First, we should maintain our faith in God and be thankful. Colossians 3:15 says, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful." We must keep our peace of mind even in the midst of disaster. Of course, it is difficult to stay peaceful and calm in a situation where you are forced to close your business, your income is cut off, and your daily bills, living expenses, and education costs for your children are still waiting to be paid. For the missionaries and co-workers in the Third World countries who are suffering from poor public services, such as water, electricity, and medical

care, it is difficult for them to keep their peace of mind. For the nurses and doctors who are struggling to save patients dying of the virus, it is also difficult for them to keep their peace of mind. Nonetheless, the essential reason why we can enjoy peace is because of God. God is omniscient. He knows everything. God is Almighty. He can do everything and anything. Our God is good. All the motives and purposes for everything he does are good. Moreover, he loves us. He is our Father who loved us to the point that he gave his only Son. He is the captain of the ship we are sailing on. We don't know everything and we don't need to know everything. The future is uncertain, but our God is not uncertain. We don't know what tomorrow will bring, but we do know who brings tomorrow. We must repent for putting our trust in the visible things of the world and put our trust in God who reigns sovereign above all. Then, his peace will reign in our hearts and we can be thankful even as we live in these dark times.

Second, we should serve those who are going through difficulties. We must repent of our selfish lifestyles and serve those in need. There are many self-supporting missionaries who have lost their jobs. In this time, we believe in God who feeds the crows in the sky and clothes the lilies in the field. Yet, we must also remember that God works and provides through the hands of his people. I pray that we can pray for those who are struggling and serve them mindfully. To this end, the UBF World Mission Headquarters, the Korea Headquarters, and local chapters are working together to identify missionaries and shepherds who have suffered financial difficulties. Some relief donations have already been collected and delivered. We want to do our best to take care of them and serve them in this time. Further, we should serve our non-believing relatives and neighbors. Believers have hope in the midst of disaster. We trust in God. We know that we have a better home. But during these days of disaster, there are those who become really anxious, afraid and desperate. They are the unbelievers. As they put all their hope in this world, they are very anxious and afraid. So, this is a great opportunity that we, as Christians, can show our faith and true love for them. We believe that when we serve others with the true love of Christ, they too will receive the gospel and see the kingdom of God.

Third, we should pray for the advancement of the gospel. God's work does not weaken just because we can't physically move around as much. Apostle Paul said that even though he was chained, the word of God was not chained (2 Tim 2:9). He said that his being in prison actually served to advance the gospel (Php 1:12). This time of crisis is an opportunity for us to meditate deeply on the Bible. In order for God to work, the Word must first gain power within us. I personally have picked up my old Bible memory cards, and have been reciting them again. I am enjoying heavenly joy through the Word. The Psalmist said, "If your law had not been my pleasure, I would have perished in my affliction" (Ps 119: 92). Also, we can still study the Word with our co-workers and Bible students through the internet, via video chats and social media. Amid the current difficulties of social distancing, many UBF chapters are worshiping online. We know that worshiping together at church on Sunday is a great blessing, so we will restore our worship services once this crisis improves. But God is also actively working through online worship. One of the major chapters in the U.S. finds their Sunday worship live-streaming views have been higher than their average congregation number. House churches that struggled alone and those who could not attend the service for other reasons can worship together online. We have also heard that in other regions, the number of online worshipers has increased. In areas with poor internet access, they record messages and connect together at the same time to worship. Many co-workers are faithfully doing 1:1

Bible studies and group Bible studies using video chat programs like Zoom or Hangouts. We pray that in this time of crisis, we may not be confined in our own bubbles by social distancing, but rather advance the gospel by actively inviting students to Bible study, helping those who are struggling with anxiety, sadness, and fear.

Fourth, we should intercede for others. We must repent for having neglected our prayer time, and pray like interceding priests. Spiritual leaders and servants should particularly take time to pray for their students, their neighbors, and for their political leaders. In this time of physical isolation, we should come to God and be united in prayer all the more. Prayer requires time. Prayer that takes time is sincere prayer and that is the kind of prayer that comes from our heart. Currently, the HQ World Mission Department is organizing a 24-hour intercession prayer campaign. May we intercede regularly for about an hour a day. The devil is most afraid of those who get on their knees, however weak they may be. Prayer keeps us awake spiritually. A global disaster is a sign that the time of the Lord's coming is getting nearer. Therefore, we must stay spiritually awake. The only way we can remain awake is through constant prayer.

As we come to God in repentance and prayer, God will surely help us and he will turn this disastrous pandemic into a great opportunity to advance the gospel. Furthermore, God will surely restore us to become people and nations that fear God. May God be glorified through all this. Amen!

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