

**A Letter to Agape Baptist Church from the
Senior Pastor Regarding the Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV):**

Written on 30/1/2020

Dear Agapians

Ever since media attention had been given to the global spread of this novel coronavirus that had originated from Wuhan, I have received various messages from different platforms regarding how we should respond during this time. The fake news written with fear-mongering intent must surely be dismissed, but the helpful messages are worth sharing. They include information from governmental sources regarding reliable updates of the situation and the new measures to be taken; insights from trusted health experts regarding good precautions to take; and notes from other Christian organisation/church leaders (especially from Wuhan) that call upon believers all over the world to pray.

Prayer is essential indeed. If you were in the church service last Sunday, you would have heard me mention how in seeking the Lord last Saturday regarding this novel coronavirus, He led me to pray Psalm 5:12 as a blessing for all of us in Agape:

*For you bless the righteous, O Lord;
you cover him with favor as with a shield.*

As God's people, we are specially blessed because of our union with Jesus Christ, the truly righteous One. Through His atoning blood for us, we are covered with His favour as with a shield. His protective cover is powerful to defend us against any work of the Enemy.

Having said that, I see the need to provide further spiritual guidance for all of us in Agape in relation to this novel coronavirus.

Ultimately, it is not how much we know about this virus, but how much we know God that will help us navigate through this season.

So here are 5 truths about God that will help us in Agape to anchor our hearts rightly in response to the novel coronavirus issue:

1. God is sovereign over all illnesses and diseases.

God is in control over all things. The whole universe is upheld by the word of His power (Heb. 1:3) and He works out everything by the counsel of His will (Eph. 1:11). Clearly, this includes illnesses and diseases. In His sovereignty, God is mighty to save us from any illness or disease (Ps. 103:3).

In the Bible, we see God continually working through the fallenness of our world for His glory and the good of His redeemed people. No plague, no illness, no calamity is out of His

hands, or too difficult for Him to put to a stop. We can thus remain confident in this season that even with the spread of this coronavirus that God is redeeming this global situation to work all things for our good (Rom. 8:28) and that nothing, neither death nor life, certainly no virus – however it mutates - will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord (Rom. 8:31).

For all of us who are Christians, this is immensely comforting. It means that no matter how this health crisis unfolds – whether it infects thousands or hundreds of thousands, whether the spread is contained within a few weeks or few months - what we can be certain of is that as God's covenantal people, God has our *good* as part of His sovereign plan. That means God's sovereignty over all things translates into providential care for His people, and that means we can genuinely cast all our anxieties on Him, because He cares for us (1 Pet. 5:7).

Application: *Are you worried that you and your loved ones will contract the novel coronavirus?*

Your first step to take is to remember God's sovereignty. In the light of His sovereignty which is for your good, remind yourself that He is God, and you are not. By all means, take necessary precautions. But God never called you to sovereignly stop every conceivable possibility of you encountering the virus; rather, God called you to simply stop being anxious. Even as you pray for yourself and your loved ones, do so with thanksgiving that our sovereign God already has your good in mind, and knows what you need even before you ask anything (Phil. 4:6; Matt. 6:8).

2. God is to be feared, not the novel coronavirus.

As I have noted above, we must not be anxious. In other words, we must not respond in fear; we must respond in faith. Again and again, the Lord tells us through His word not to be afraid, or to be discouraged; He has promised to never leave us nor forsake us (Deut. 31:8). We need such a faith perspective through every trial or challenge we face, including this one.

Yet, there is something else about 'fear' that is often unsaid in a climate like this. As we take a faith posture, note that the antidote to our fears needs to be drawn from a greater fear – the reverent fear of God Himself. You must not fear the virus, but you must fear God. And unless you truly fear God, you would find that you cannot help but fear the virus that threatens to take away your health or even your physical life. What this means is that:

The fear of the novel coronavirus reveals a heart that does not truly fear God.

Consider what Jesus teaches us in Matthew 10:28: *“And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”*

In context, the 'him' who has power over soul and body is God himself. He is the one to be feared above all. If Jesus were to speak to us today, I believe He would 'provoke' us out of our fears by declaring with authority that we should not fear the coronavirus (not just because He can protect us) but because it can merely "kill the body", but can never kill the soul.

In light of this verse, one commentator wrote this: *"He who fears God, ought to fear nothing except Him: he who does not fear God, fears everything except Him."*

Application: *What is your greatest fear during this season? Is it God Himself?*

Remember that God has full ownership and authority over both your body and soul (Rom. 14:7-8). That is great reason for hope. If there be any ungodly fears in your heart, come before God in prayerful repentance, replacing them with the reverent fear of the Lord.

3. God is love, and He commands us to love our neighbours as ourselves.

At the start of 2020, the Lord led me to preach on agape love for our church family. This agape love involves love for Him, and love for others within the church and beyond. This love is radically selfless, and translates into action that blesses God and others.

I believe we have just entered a season where God is calling us right now as a church to put what we have heard in action – to express agape love in deed and in truth (1 Jn. 3:18).

A little history lesson is helpful, lest we lose perspective of what radical agape love for neighbours looks like among Christians. In the early centuries, there were a few major pandemics in the ancient world that had infected and killed millions. During each of these pandemics, government officials and the wealthy would flee the cities for the countryside to escape contact with those who were infected. The Christian community however remained behind, transforming themselves into a great force of caretakers.

On Easter Sunday in 260 AD, Bishop Dionysius of Corinth praised the efforts of the Christians, many of whom had died while caring for others. He said:

Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves, and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbours and cheerfully accepting their pains.

The early Christians' loving dedication for their neighbours as themselves during times of plague and sickness, whether the sick were believers or not, showcased the beauty of the gospel message through agape love for others. These Christ-like actions had a huge social impact, and attracted many outsiders to the faith.

Here's the good news! The same Holy Spirit who had dwelled within these saints leading them to sacrifice themselves courageously in love dwells within each of us too.

Given the grave situation in Wuhan and increasingly, the rest of Hubei province, the expression of neighbourly love from Christians may look very similar to what was displayed in the early centuries in response to the pandemics.

For us in Singapore, at this point, we need to seek the Spirit's guidance on what neighbourly love looks like, and it may differ for each of us. For some, it may just mean going the extra mile to give hand sanitisers and masks to others, while for some others working in healthcare or those working in the frontline, it may actually mean putting oneself at significant risk of infection for the good of others. Even if infection occurs, we must look to God in trust for healing and recovery, so that we may continue to bear fruit in our labour for Him on earth (Phil. 1:21-24). Regardless of your vocation or station in life, let love be the deepest motivation of your heart.

Application: *As a Christian, the question to ask is not, "How can I best avoid this virus during a time like this?" The better question to ask is, "How can I best love others during a time like this?"*

Clearly, God wants us to respond to the spread of the novel coronavirus by faith, and to live by faith at a time like this is to let this faith express itself through love (Gal. 5:6).

4. God's desire for us is to seize the opportunity to spread the gospel.

Even as we continually receive the latest updates on the global spread of the novel coronavirus, we must remember that God's emphasis at this time is not the spread of any virus, but rather, the spread of His gospel (Matt. 28:19-20). As serious as the novel coronavirus is, we must not make the mistake of making it the centre of our life's attention and meditation. We are a gospel-centered church, not a virus-centered church.

Some people say that the current numbers of infection are seriously underreported. It is not my place to make a political statement, but I sense in my heart what is truly underreported is how the gospel is spreading rapidly, and how people in desperation are giving their lives to Jesus. In this crisis, only God knows the actual number of souls that are harvested by the day, by the hour, by the minute.

As we consider the death of Christ on the Cross, we know very well how God had chosen to use the darkest hour of pain and suffering of Christ for the salvation of mankind. In a time like this, we must not see merely with physical eyes, but behold with spiritual eyes what God is doing in drawing lost souls into His kingdom, and join Him in partnership. We stand by faith, knowing that God is good.

Truly, even through the darkest night, His light will shine.

What this means for us is that we should not be drawn into the fear and paranoia of the escalating numbers of the novel coronavirus, but rather walk in wisdom towards outsiders, making the best use of the time (Col. 4:5). At this time when conversation about this virus and the possibility of sickness and death is natural, seize this golden opportunity to talk with your loved ones and friends about your personal faith in God, and the significance of eternal life in Christ that goes beyond this temporal world. Talk about the Christian sacrifice of love, the willingness to risk infection for the good of others – and how it flows from Christ, our Lord and Saviour, who more than risked infection for us.

Christ took on our infection of sin unto death, so that by His stripes we are healed unto life.

For the spread of the novel coronavirus, what is most troubling for governments right now is the occurrence of local human-to-human transmission. In some countries, that has already happened, while others are trying to stop it. For the spread of the gospel however, that is exactly what is needed. What is most powerful is when disciples of Jesus Christ actually become actively engaged in evangelism, such that there is a *genuine community spread*.

There is no reason why carriers of life-giving gospel truths, empowered by the Holy Spirit, should be slower or less effective in impacting others than carriers of any life-threatening virus. As ambassadors for Christ, let us not lose sight of the great commission in a time like this. Let us declare with authority the gracious and merciful welcome of God to all sin-infested souls for healing and cleansing by the blood of Christ in His everlasting kingdom.

Application: *How are you talking about this novel coronavirus issue with others? Are you making use of this opportunity to share how your Christian faith shapes the way you look at this issue, and also share the gospel with others?*

Let your speech be filled with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how to answer each person rightly, redeeming this time for good (Col. 4:6; Eph. 5:16).

5. God intends for us to arise in prayer.

This is a season for God's church to arise in prayer. In Scripture, we are called to persevere in making supplications and intercessions for all people as well as for fellow believers (1 Tim. 2:1; Eph. 6:18). As we face this global health challenge, the church must respond in prayer, for our prayerfulness is a mark of our humble dependence on God's grace and mercy.

We must pray individually, and also together with others in church – for our nation, for governments, for healthcare/frontline personnel, also for those in distant lands (Wuhan, Hubei province etc.) and those severely afflicted by this coronavirus.

In the book of Revelation, we see a picture of how the prayers of the saints are received in heaven above. Like the smoke of incense, all our prayers during this season will rise before God's heavenly throne (Rev. 8:4). In our weakness, let us lean on the Spirit's guidance to

intercede for us in prayer (Rom. 8:26). Let us come before God in confidence, knowing that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us (1 Jn. 5:14).

As we pray, let us take heart that we serve a mighty God who declares that He will fight for us; we only have to be still (Exo. 14:14). And in knowing so, let the peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard all our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7).

Application: *Has the spread of this novel coronavirus led you to much prayer?*

God is calling you individually to prayer, and our church as a spiritual family to intercessory prayer for those in positions of influence, and also those in danger or in need.

Further instructions to husbands/fathers - *If you are the head of your household, provide spiritual covering for your family daily. Pray Ps.5:12 over them. Call them together and pray for the Lord to keep watch over their going out and coming in (Ps. 121:8). If you have young children who are trying to make sense of this situation, pray for their hearts to truly know Christ, that their hearts may find comfort in gaining eternal life (Jn. 17:3) during this season.*

Further instructions to cell group leaders – *If you are leading a cell group, provide spiritual covering for your cell group. Pray Ps. 5:12 over them. Pray specifically for the safety and health of your members in your gatherings. In your time together, declare in prayer that the Lord is their light and their salvation; declare the Lord as the stronghold of their lives (Ps. 27:1-2).*

In a season like this, we are especially reminded that we do not know exactly what tomorrow may bring, but what we do know is this – we know with certainty that our God will remain faithful to His people (2 Thess. 3:3) .

As we anchor our hearts in God’s truths, may each of us respond in love and faith, resting in the blessed assurance that His purposes for us will not be thwarted, but will be most gloriously fulfilled in Christ, our Lord.

Remember these words, church!

“...if God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31)

**Lovingly in Christ,
Pastor GL**

**Senior Pastor,
Agape Baptist Church**

Specific Prayer Pointers using A.C.T.S

Adoration

- Exalt God as a God who is sovereign over all things, including illnesses and diseases.
- Exalt God as your Heavenly Father who shows providential care to His beloved children.
- Exalt God as the mighty Saviour who is able to deliver people from disease to health, and also from spiritual darkness into light.

Confession

- Confess the fears of your heart – what you find yourself fearful of because of the spread of this novel coronavirus, instead of the reverent fear of God.
- Confess any judgmental attitudes towards the people in Wuhan, or infected/suspected individuals whom you consider irresponsible in their actions, or towards any authorities whose actions you disagree with.
- Confess any over-emphasis on the spread of the virus more than an emphasis on the spread of the gospel.

Thanksgiving

- Thank God for your salvation, for the promise that He who began the good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.
- Thank God for His plan to redeem sin and suffering for good – that even with this spread of the coronavirus, He is working all things together for the good of His people.
- Thank God for all the measures taken thus far across the world to contain the spread of this novel coronavirus.

Supplication

- Pray for God's protective cover of favour as with a shield for yourself, your loved ones, your colleagues/schoolmates, the Pek Kio community, and everyone in Agape (especially the vulnerable - elderly/sickly/young children).
- Pray for national/international leaders in government to respond with wisdom to this crisis.
- Pray for researchers to be able to produce a vaccine for this virus.
- Pray for comfort for those who are mourning, healing for the infected, safety for the quarantined/isolated across the world (especially in Wuhan, rest of Hubei province)
- Pray for courage, strength and protection for those in health care/any kind of frontline work which entails significant risks of infection.
- Pray for Agape, churches in Singapore, and churches across the world (especially in those severely afflicted cities) to arise in faith and love to help those in need sacrificially, and to proclaim the gospel boldly.