

March 18, 2020

To all the members of First Baptist Church:

I am writing to update you on what is going on with our current ministry schedule and future meeting plans in light of the recent pandemic outbreak of COVID-19. As many of you are aware, the statistics of people being infected with the virus around the world are changing on a week by week basis. This has caused government officials, businesses, school systems, sports teams, and churches to take drastic measures to assure safety and protection of more people being infected. One term that we have become very familiar with in these days is **Social Distancing**. From the National *and* State level, citizens of the United States have been called upon to heed Social Distancing in order to help prevent the spread of the virus. Social distancing is a public health measure that's implemented during highly contagious outbreaks, according to a fact sheet [<https://nationalpost.com/news/world/covid-19-what-is-social-distancing-and-how-to-do-it-properly>] by the public health department in Santa Clara County, California. It often involves health officials restricting large public gatherings, such as music festivals; closing certain buildings, such as schools and libraries; and cancelling events in order to slow the spread of a disease.

As a pastoral leadership team, we discussed the need to honor God by protecting our members and well as our surrounding community by choosing *not* to gather as a church in the immediate future. In the short term, we have suspended all church-sponsored Bible studies, ministries, and Sunday gatherings until **Monday, March 30<sup>th</sup>**. Until further notice, the church staff will be working regularly scheduled office hours and are available to answer questions and serve you as needs arise. If you find yourself in a difficult circumstance or are isolated from any human interactions, please let us know how we can help you. We don't want you to face these hardships alone. If you are willing to help our pastoral ministry team with various physical or financial needs that arise in our church body, please let us know your willingness and availability to do so by contacting the church office. I hope **Titus 3:14** would be a timely meditation for each of us,

*"And let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful."*

As for the next two Sundays (**March 22<sup>nd</sup>** and **March 29<sup>th</sup>**), we are planning to record a video devotional teaching from the Scriptures in hopes to encourage you and your families during this unique and difficult time of being separated as a church body. We by no means intend these videos to be a venue that *replaces* our Sunday church gathering, but simply as a temporary means of encouraging you through the modern technology we have in our ministry. As for

future Sundays in April and May, we will continue waiting and listening to hear to what the authorities are informing us to do to remain safe with large gatherings. Once we learn new information, we will inform you on what Sundays and our weekly church ministries will look like at First Baptist in the coming months.

Also, I want to encourage you to continue being faithful in your stewardship of giving to our local church. With the hindrance of not gathering on Sundays, this will inevitably affect the way we normally receive your financial contributions to the church budget. If you are financially able, please continue giving by mailing your check to the church office, or you can stop by in person and hand deliver it to us. Additionally, we are in process of implementing an online giving option from the church website, ***so please check the website periodically for that online giving option.***

I'm reminded of the powerful witness among the Macedonian believers that the Apostle Paul highlighted as an example for the Corinthians to take notice of in times of suffering. Even though they were financially hurting, and facing persecution from a hostile world, they continued to give in a way that commended their love for Jesus Christ that also met the needs of others. **2 Corinthians 8:1-5** says,

*"We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us."*

Finally, brothers and sisters, I want to encourage you with a word of hope! We are living in a day and time where the hope of the gospel can shine more brightly than we may have ever realized. The good news of Jesus Christ and the hope of eternal life with him becomes more desirable when our sin and sufferings becomes more unbearable on our own. Any time mankind's mortality is brought to our attention in light of eternity, we are humbled of our need for God's grace and mercy on a daily basis. Therefore, Moses exhorts us to pray according to **Psalm 90:12**,

*"So teach us to number our days  
that we may get a heart of wisdom."*

In these recent days, all of us have faced the reality that “our plans” are not 100% guaranteed. Church gatherings have been suspended. Businesses and food establishments are closing their shops. Vacations have been postponed. Spring break plans are being redirected. Sports games have been canceled. And this doesn’t include the plethora of other events that people usually have no problem planning for: weddings, birthdays, anniversaries, missions’ trips, conferences, retreats, family gatherings, and so much more.

Therefore, we are reminded of James’ sobering words to our tendency to become prideful of our plans,

*“Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”— yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.” -James 4:13-17*

Beloved, our world might be in turmoil, but our God is reigning confidently in the heavens, as He does all that He pleases in our lives on the earth (**Psalm 115:2-3**). It’s OK to admit that we may not be able to fully comprehend the goodness of God’s character and His control over this virus. God is sovereign and all-wise, and therefore His plans and purposes are beyond our human comprehension (see **Isaiah 55:8-9; Romans 11:33-36**). Instead of questioning or doubting His goodness, we should humble ourselves and wait upon Him patiently in prayer (see **Psalm 37 & Psalm 73**). But no matter what happens, whether the virus goes away in a few weeks and life returns to normal or the virus gets worse and our lives are turned upside down for months, we can rest confidently in this: **God has already loved us in Christ beyond what we could ever deserve**. God has shown His supreme love towards sinners like you and me by sending His Son to die in our place for our sins, and He has graciously adopted us as sons and daughters into His kingdom. Therefore, we can rely fully and completely on Him! If the worst thing the world ever saw (Christ’s crucifixion) became the greatest gift of God’s grace for us (redemption), we can trust that He will give us what we need when we need it to endure this suffering with hope and joy in Him (see **Romans 8:28-32**).

This virus is affecting many lives from the inside out, both from health conditions but also economic and even spiritual levels. But what about our God? He knows our weak frame, and He shows compassion on His children (**Psalm 103:13-14**). Though we might lose sleep and become weighed down with anxiety, our God He never sleeps (**Psalm 121:4**) because He never gets tired or weary (**Isaiah 40:28**). He gives strength to the faint (**Isaiah 40:29**), and wisdom in times

of trial (**James 1:5**), so continue to approach His throne of grace *BOLDLY* in your time of need (**Hebrews 4:16**). All that we have comes from God (**John 3:27; 1 Corinthians 4:7**). And God gives and He takes away (**Job 1:21**). He knows and ordains our days (**Job 14:5; Psalm 139:16**), and numbers the hairs on our head (**Matthew 10:30**). He is our rock and refuge in times of trouble (**Psalm 46:1**). He is our light in the darkness when we are tempted to be afraid (**Psalm 27:1**). People can become anxious over the future and restless at night losing sleep, especially when they think everything depends *on them*. But our God gives rest to those that believe in Him and trust in His ability to provide (**Psalm 127:1-2**). God can be trusted because His character never changes (**Psalm 102:27**). God never lies (**Titus 1:2**), and He preserves the faith of all those He calls to Himself (**1 Peter 1:5; Jude 1, 24-25**). Therefore, we may all learn to trust that whatever God gives and allows in our lives, *even suffering*, comes from His sovereign hand to bring Him glory and do us good in the end (**Job 2:9-10; 1 Peter 4:19**).

May each of us look up to Him and preach His truth to ourselves when our souls are downcast (**Psalm 42:5**). God frustrates even the plans of the *nations*, and always accomplishes His good and perfect plans throughout *all generations* (**Psalm 33:10-11**). Remain hopeful in God, beloved. His promise to always love His own remains true, even when circumstances around you seem hopeless in the moment:

*“Though the fig tree should not blossom,  
nor fruit be on the vines,  
the produce of the olive fail  
and the fields yield no food,  
the flock be cut off from the fold  
and there be no herd in the stalls,  
18 yet I will rejoice in the Lord;  
I will take joy in the God of my salvation.” -Habakkuk 3:17-18*

Your brother in Christ,

*Blake Boylston*

**Senior Pastor**

**First Baptist Church Fort Smith**