

# War on Coronavirus

## **Biblical insights inspired by the current crisis**

Coronaviruses are a family of viruses that cause diseases in mammals and birds. They have been causing problems for a number of decades now. The new version we are currently fighting was first transmitted to humans in Wuhan, China, towards the end of 2019. Since then it has remained in the headlines of all our newspapers and news bulletins. Last month the World Health Organization gave this coronavirus disease the new name COVID-19, and five weeks later declared it a pandemic. Presidents, Prime Ministers and others in authority are now busy closing national borders, events, shops and schools. They are imposing restrictions on our freedom of movement which have never before been used in peacetime. You may still think it is all fake news, you may think the restrictions are too strict, or far too slow and too lax. Like it or not, the world is now at war with this coronavirus! How are you reacting? Are you fearful or frustrated? Is your faith in God strengthening you in this time of worldwide crisis? Perhaps with a little more time on your hands, it may be worthwhile taking some time to consider what the Bible has to say about the spreading of bad things.

God created an interconnected world. The weather can affect our food supply. The unhealthy habits of a mother can affect the health of her child. Social structures affect our capacity to enjoy life. You and I can be a blessing or a burden to those around us. Sickness and disease are nothing new, and neither is their ability to spread from one person to another. Three and a half millennia ago, God gave Moses instructions on how to protect the nation of Israel from contagious diseases. The Lord Jesus and the apostle Paul and John also drew our attention to different types of 'viruses' and encourage us to take them seriously. Here I invite you to consider seven practical insights.

### **1. Moses: 'Be alert, bad things spread'**

In Leviticus chapters 13 and 14 we find clear instructions on how to avoid the spread of leprosy and other infections among the Israelites. Each Israelite was to keep their eyes open and be alert. The fact that they were God's chosen people and that God Himself was their healer (Ps 91, Ex 15:26) would not automatically shield them from all infection or disease. Through Moses God gave them a protocol to follow to stem the spread of bad things among them. If an Israelite or someone in his family thought he or she might be infected, they should not hide, neither panic, but were required to present themselves to the priest. The priest would look carefully at the affected part of the body or garment. If in doubt, the person or object would be placed in isolation for 7 days. If still in doubt, another 7 days. Fourteen days in quarantine. Just like with the coronavirus today.

In recent days, via social media, we have received information to help us distinguish between normal flu symptoms and coronavirus symptoms. We all want to know. We do not like to live with uncertainty. Uncertainty is a fertile ground for fear. When afraid we can be very unkind, even harsh towards 'suspected' virus carriers. Last January, many Dutch from Asiatic background felt jugged and marginalized here in Holland. Because the virus was spreading in China, many in Holland avoided Chinese restaurants! The existence of this biblical protocol convinces me of two things: that being a Christian does not make me immune to

viruses and therefore I too should respect national guidelines, and that I should hold back my natural instinct to blame 'potential' carriers without proper and careful investigation. Since bad things can spread, following the given protocol will be a benefit to us all.

## **2. Moses: 'Be radical, even when it hurts'**

The protocol in the Law of Moses for containing the spread of infectious diseases was radical. If infected, things were destroyed and persons were excluded. If in doubt, first quarantine. Temporal isolation was necessary to confirm if the person or object was clean or not. If the cloth was declared infected, it had to be burnt (Lev 13:52). If the pot was declared infected, it had to be broken (Lev 15:12). If the person was declared infected, he or she was required to be excluded from the community (Lev 13:46). We can imagine that sometimes very expensive pottery and garments were smashed and burnt. This radicalness had a price. Can you imagine the pain when a member of the family was declared 'unclean' and forbidden to return home? Radical action is usually painful. But sometimes it is necessary for the wellbeing of the community. Perhaps a number of the death penalties decreed by God in the Old Testament can also be understood this way, as a radical way to stop the spread of some seriously undesirable behaviour among God's people.

**Quarantine:** The word 'quarantine' includes the word for forty. It means 'forty days', the period that a ship was required to wait outside the port if it was suspected of carrying a plague on board. This practice became common during the Black Death plague epidemic in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries – which wiped out an estimated 30% of Europe's population. Forty days or forty years is frequently used in Scripture to describe a time of testing. Consider the following examples of 'forty days': After forty days, Noah opened the window of the ark and let out a raven (Gen 8:6-7). The Israelites were left without their leader Moses for forty days (Ex 24:18). The 12 spies explored the promised land for forty days (Numbers 13:25). Goliath provoked the Israelites for forty days (1 Sam 17:16). Jonah preached in Nineveh for forty days (Jo 3:4). The Lord Jesus was tempted by Satan in the desert for forty days (Mk 1:13). After his resurrection, He appeared to his doubting followers during forty days (Acts 1:3). If you think you are clean but are required to be in quarantine, do not become too frustrated or negative. The strict separation of possible carriers, for 7, 14 or 40 days or longer, is a necessary act to contain the spread of an infection. You are being asked to pay a price for the wellbeing of the whole community.

## **3. Jesus: 'In God's kingdom, spreading also happens'**

In describing the kingdom of God (or of heaven), the Lord Jesus said, "It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough" (Lk 13:21). What does yeast or leaven represent in this parable? Jesus himself does not go on to explain this parable. Some optimistic commentators associate the dough with the world and the yeast with the gospel. They propose that this parable illustrates how the gospel will slowly and quietly spread through the whole world. Perhaps a similar idea to that expressed in "you are the salt of the world". Others associate the dough with Christendom, and suggest that the parable illustrates how evil or corruption quietly spreads within Christendom. Whichever interpretation you choose, it is clear that in God's kingdom, *spreading* takes place. And therefore, care is needed. The way we live our lives has an influence on those around us. What are you and I spreading?

In the Old Testament, yeast represented something negative. The Jews were required to eliminate all traces of leaven from their houses before they were to celebrate the Passover (Ex 12:15). Elsewhere in His teaching, the Lord Jesus warned his disciples to "be on guard

against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees". He then explains that this yeast was their "teaching" (Mt 16:6,12). In Luke 12:1 He tells us that the yeast of the Pharisees was "hypocrisy". In Mark 8:15 He refers to the "yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod" but doesn't explain. Probably yeast is here also used to represent bad teaching, hypocrisy, and perhaps Herod's immoral life style (a public disgrace, a corrupting influence in Jewish society). If we connect these explanations of Jesus to his parable about God's kingdom, we could reasonably conclude that bad teaching, hypocrisy and immoral lifestyles can spread like yeast in dough and infect the Christian community. We do well to take our Lord's warning to heart: "be careful... be on guard against yeast". We are to be on guard, because the evil that we allow to come into our homes, our hearts and also our churches will spread. Bad things spread!

#### **4. Paul: 'Bad examples corrupt community life'**

In his letters, the apostle Paul builds on this teaching of the Lord Jesus: twice he writes, "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough". In 1 Corinthians 5 it is used as a warning against ignoring known immoral behaviour by a believer in the church. We all know what happens in a community when wrongdoing is ignored or endorsed. If traffic police no longer issue tickets for speeding or wrong parking, if discovered tax evaders, sexual abusers and house burglars are ignored, society degenerates. The reason for Paul writing this bit of church-protocol was that a Christian in Corinth lived a sexually immoral relationship and the church at Corinth welcomed him into their midst. How could this happen? In order to make immoral behaviour acceptable in the church, the tag 'immoral' has to be replaced with something acceptable like 'alternative'. Then follows teaching on love and inclusiveness. If some in the church still have difficulties accepting or endorsing the immorality, they are reminded that no one is perfect. That the church, like the Lord Jesus, should welcome all sinners. But the apostle Paul is very radical when it comes to persistent 'moral' yeast: "When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord" (5:4-5). He ends with, "Expel the wicked man from among you" (5:12). There may be different ways to do this, but one thing is clear: the leadership of the local church was expected to act.

To contain moral decay, not only the leaders but every member of the church was called to act. "But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat" (5:11). Of course, love and grace should also characterize our Christian way of doing things – even as we try to implement this biblical protocol. But if we turn a blind eye to sinful lifestyles among Christians, such behaviour will become normal among us. Similarly, a person who is suffering the effects of the coronavirus is welcome in a hospital as a *patient*, not as a helper or staff member. If he insists on walking around the hospital as if he were not contagious, he would be expelled! Expelling is awkward and painful - but loving act. It will protect the other patients in the hospital, and may cause the uninformed or stubborn patient to realize the error of his way.

Interestingly, in this protocol we see a clear difference between our relationship with those 'inside' (believers) and those 'outside' (unbelievers). God will judge those 'outside'. The church is asked to judge those 'inside' (5:12-13). If I understand this chapter correctly, the church should warmly welcome every unbeliever regardless of his or her lifestyle but *not* every believer. Unbelievers need new life in Jesus. Endorsement, acceptance or indifference of a Christian who persists in his or her sinful lifestyle will corrupt community life.

## **5. Paul and John: 'Expose and reject bad teaching'**

In Galatians 5 the apostle Paul uses the expression for the second time, "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (5:9). He uses it to encourage the Galatian Christians to defend the Gospel of grace from the inroads of legalistic teachings. Some teachers from Jerusalem were insisting that Christians should be circumcised and be required to follow the ceremonial law given by Moses. Paul argued that salvation was found by trusting Christ alone (5:2-7). If these 'extra conditions' were tolerated, they would defile the Gospel message, and this defilement would spread among the churches like yeast in a batch of dough. It had to be stopped. Paul seeks to do so by publicly confronting Peter, Barnabas and others (Gal 2:11-21), writing this warning letter to the Galatian churches, and by arguing against this teaching at the church in Jerusalem – the source of the deviant teaching (Acts 15). It is clear from these efforts and from his other letters, that for Paul 'sound doctrine' was important. For many today, 'we love Jesus and it feels good' appears to be their only criteria. The study of God's inspired Word requires time and work. Some parts are difficult to understand. Some concepts may remain unclear to us for years (Phil 3:12-16). To benefit from the Bible, we must be convinced that it is God's Word, that He speaks to us through it, that it has authority over our lives (2 Tim 3:15-16).

In Genesis 11 we read that God created the different languages to reduce the connectivity between the workers at Babel. This put an end to their defiant building of their tower. Today the barriers for the spreading of ideas are lower than ever before. Language barriers are reduced by good and easily accessible translators. The walls between Christian denominations are now lower than 50 years ago, allowing for greater exchange of ideas. Before, you would need to access a physical book and go to the trouble of reading it in order to understand and absorb a new doctrine. Today technology allows us to read, listen and follow every wind of doctrine on our TVs and mobile phones. These developments can enrich our Christian lives, but they also make doctrinal quality control more difficult and more urgent. Today false teaching, like the coronavirus, can become pandemic within weeks! May God awaken our concern to judge biblically the preachers we follow online, the speakers at conferences, and what happens in our own churches – including the lyrics of our songs. Just as we must learn to distinguish between a bad flu and the coronavirus, we must also compare everything with the Word of God and learn to distinguish between personal opinions, cultural and denominational customs, and fundamental truths (Phil 3:15). The apostle John also called on his readers to expose and reject bad teaching (2 Jn 8-11). Like the apostles Paul and John, if we are to live the 'sound doctrine' and pass it on to the generation that follows us, we must also take the trouble to expose and reject the bad teachings that come our way.

## **6. Jesus: 'Maybe you are the problem!'**

When going to the supermarket today, one looks at the fellow shoppers with suspicion. Could she be infected? Could he be a carrier? We follow the current guidelines and try to keep 1.5 meters away from other people. But have you stopped to think that maybe *you* could be the dangerous carrier? The Law of Moses contains guidelines on how to be ceremoniously clean. Touching a dead body, for example, would make an Israelite 'unclean' and anyone who touched an unclean thing or person would also become unclean (Numbers 19). Washing hands, clothes and plates became very important. In time, washing of hands became too important. Some teachers of the law complained to Jesus because they saw that some of his disciples were eating with unwashed hands (Mk 7:1-5). Jesus explained, "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean'. For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness,

envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean'" (Mk 7:20-23).

Of course, we are called to be careful with bad influences from outside, "Bad company corrupts good character" (1 Cor 15:33). But our core problem comes from within, it is our own sinful nature. Our hearts are perverse. We ourselves, our own longings, dreams and desires, are the main obstacle to our following Jesus. On another occasion Jesus said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23). Do I recognize and judge my own selfish and sinful longings? Our eyes usually look outwards. It is easier to spot the mistakes and sins of others. But the Lord Jesus encourages us to start with ourselves, "first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Mt 7:5). Maybe not others but you are the problem! Do my lifestyle choices encourage others to follow Jesus and to live holy lives? Does my attitude towards Scripture move others to love, study and submit to God's Word?

## **7. John: 'Be positive, imitate what is good!'**

As an old man, the apostle John wrote a short letter to Gaius, a good friend of his. Gaius was the type who loved the family of God and for a time hosted a church in his home (Rom 16:23). But now he formed part of another local church, a church in which a dominant man named Diotrephes loved to "be first". This leader spoke bad about John and excluded from the church those who opposed his rule (3 Jn 9-10). It would be easy for Gaius to follow his bad example. Sectarianism and exclusivism are contagious. During these last few days supermarkets report an irrational run on basic foods and toilet paper! There is a selfish hoarding of goods. It is easy for us Christians to also follow bad examples. But Gaius resisted that temptation and remained positive and active: loving, serving and financially supporting his brothers and sisters (3 Jn 5). We may see failure around us, but let's not let the brokenness around us determine how we live. Our calling and drive are to be *positive*: to follow Jesus, to live for Him! The apostle John's advice to Gaius is also for us, "Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good" (3 Jn 11). Let's fix our eyes, not on the problems, not on bad examples, but on Jesus! And then, like Gaius, keep doing what is good!

Jonathan's daring and brave initiative and David's killing of Goliath both inspired and energized a whole army (1 Sam 14, 17). The church at Thessalonica first "became imitators" of Paul, Silas and Timothy, and then they became "a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia" (1 Thes 1:6-7). You and I, and our local church, can also be used by God to inspire and energize others. Good things can also spread!

## **Conclusion**

How are you reacting to this coronavirus crisis? Are you fearful or frustrated? How are you reacting to the moral and doctrinal developments within and around you? Remind yourself frequently that our God is Sovereign. No development takes Him by surprise. Yes, we may be called to repent, to change, to be cautious or to take some action. Whatever the danger we face, our life is in His hand: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you" (Is 43:2). As to the church, remember that it is His project, and Christ will continue building it (Mt 16:18) and He will ensure that it will become "holy and blameless" (Eph 5:27). As we close, recall the words of prophet Haggai to the Israelites who faced a big challenge: "Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the LORD, and work. For I am with you, declares the LORD Almighty... And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear" (Hag 2:3-5).

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