



Family Fun At Post-Christmas Picnic 2019

Dear Friends and Ministry Partners,

March 25, 2020

Greetings from lockdown in South Africa! This was not the original letter I penned about 9 days ago when I jotted down a rough draft update on a legal pad. That original letter was heralding the start of the first seminary class which was set to begin Tuesday March 31st. I also was going to use the occasion to begin some modest fund raising for the seminary. But within 24 hours of penning that update news of the COVID-19 virus quickly took center stage and our lives were greatly distracted as we began preparing for what we were fairly certain would be a lockdown of the country.

So, instead of writing about the beginning of the Berean Bible Institute of Cape Town, I am now updating you on the current virus crisis in Cape Town. Since I have received several US requests for information on our status here on the ground, I decided it would be more prudent to quickly inform you of what is happening in our part of the world as COVID-19 tightens its global grip.

For starters, we are all well by God's good grace and mercy! As it stands now, Debbie is 900 miles away visiting her mother and helping her mother prepare to sell her home and

move. As God's good grace and providence would have it, Debbie is with her mom during this unsettling crisis. Debbie's mom lives on her own and is 140 miles from Debbie's brother. My mother-in-law is quite anxious about all that is going on, so Debbie has been a comfort and had a calming effect as she has read Scripture and prayed with her mom. The only catch here is that last night the president of South Africa announced a state of emergency and a 21-day lockdown. So, instead of returning home next Monday, Debbie will not be able to come home until sometime after April 16th. As a result, I will be the chief domestic custodian of the Christopher domicile juggling domestic duties with virtual ministry and some intensive study as I prepare for a PhD Hebrew exam to be taken in September sometime.

And so, all the Christophers are scattered at the moment. I'm in Cape Town, Debbie is Newcastle Kwa Zulu Natal, our son, Micaiah is in Santa Clarita, California trying to finish his degree at Master's University — albeit off campus now — and our daughter, Janelle, is now in Cincinnati, Ohio. We were planning on leaving Cape Town for Los Angeles on April 30th so we could attend Micaiah's graduation and then go to Janelle's wedding. After which I was going to sit in a Hebrew exegesis modular at Master's Seminary as I seek to sharpen my Hebrew knowledge and skills. But as you can well guess everything has been thrown into reverse and we have our feet firmly planted in mid-air! Since the tickets are already purchased, we will more than likely reschedule the trip once the current crisis begins to subside. At least we will be able to see the kids, visit a couple of churches, and do some things we need to do stateside.

Because Janelle and her fiancé had to cancel their wedding, they ended up getting married in Arkansas on the way to Ohio from LA, as Ohio is not issuing marriage licenses. They contacted me before hand and asked my permission to pursue what was plan C. Under the circumstances, I told them to go ahead and that we could have the celebration next year when Debbie and I are on furlough. This means that Janelle is now Janelle Lindsay Caldwell. Her husband, Nathan, is an aeronautical engineer. He works for a company that subcontracts to AMAZON, which means he has plenty of work these days. We are most thankful that Nathan is a solid believer in Christ and will take good care of our little girl as they build their relationship in the shadow of the cross!

The situation on the ground here in South Africa is very fluid at the moment. As of this-morning (3/24/20), there were about 410 cases of COVID-19 with no reported deaths. But the concern here is that we have a large impoverished population of Africans, many of whom have HIV or TB, so their immune systems are significantly compromised. And once the townships are infected, it will be a calamity of epic proportions given the lack of hygiene and running water. Because the state-run hospitals are already in a pathetic state and poorly run, they simply won't cope, and the death toll will be much greater than in first world countries. Then, when one considers the favorite mode of transport for those living in black townships is what they call a mini-bus taxi, the government had no choice but shut down the country, as these mini-bus taxis are a petri-dish on wheels for COVID-19.

What is even more concerning than the COVID-19 chaos is the economic meltdown that is going to result from this. The South African economy was already hanging from the slenderest of threads prior to the Corona virus, with nearly a month of industrial shutdown it will be fiscally catastrophic. Unemployment was already at 30% and it will now soar to at least 50% if not more as a result of the shutdown. The highly indebted government simply doesn't have the means to save small to medium size businesses. This will result in many businesses closing on Friday never to reopen after the quarantine is over. Thus, the specter of mass civil unrest is a very real threat. And while these are dark days globally, they even darker days for South Africa as we corkscrew our way into the abyss economic forces and political intrigue. Of course, such times provide a fertile soil in which the gospel can be planted!

Ministerially, these are challenging times as well. We met as elders last week to pray and strategize. As it stands now, all ministry is currently canceled but we are live-streaming the Sunday morning message — thanks to our IT guys. And while the Berean Bible Institute was slated to begin this coming Tuesday, we will now have to postpone the first class until the next quarter. This will give me a bit more time to get more admin protocols related to this enterprise completed. This coming Sunday I will be preaching my first official virtual message from the cozy confines of my office as I stare into the camera on my computer with that nagging sense I'm being watched!

And, while this is a summary of our COVID-19 story, I am well aware that each of you reading this has a story as well. Debbie and I look forward to hearing some of your stories when this is all over and we see you stateside! As you pray for the uniqueness of our situation here in South Africa and Cape Town, please know we are praying for all of you as well and pray that God will keep you all healthy and richly bless you as gospel opportunities present themselves!

“Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.” (Jude 24-25)

Yours for the Master's Use

Mark and Debbie Christopher

Prayer Requests:

- For South Africa as a country during this global crisis: I have sense that 26 years of graft, fraud, and corruption by the Marxist government will be exposed in ways that South Africa may never fully recover from. My heart goes out to all those in the townships who will be locked down without a livelihood, without food, without clean running water, and without adequate medical help. It could be the perfect storm to bring South Africa to knees, and hopefully to the truth of the gospel.
- For wisdom and grace in the ministry here at Everglens Baptist Church. Given the unique circumstances, we are vastly limited on what we can do. We pray that this will be a time in which our people deepen the furrow of their faith and commitment. We also pray for opportunities to share the gospel with those few we come in contact with.
- For the Christopher family, which is scattered far and wide and the moment: For Micaiah as he eyes graduation in a few weeks and then needs to find work in the IT sector; Janelle as she and her husband, Nathan, settle into a new life together; Debbie as she continues to minister to her mother over the course of the next 3 or 4 weeks, and that she will be able to come home by the end of April; and for me as I weather the storm by myself — I guess the loneliness of the long distance runner I'm acquainted with will really be put to the test!
- Finally, my Dad was hospitalized with pneumonia three weeks ago. He is at home now, but slowly recovering from his illness. It was discovered that the heart valve replacement he had 5 years ago is deteriorating, so once he has fully recovered from the pneumonia his cardiologist will have to determine what the next step is. My Dad, Richard, is 90 years old but in very good shape otherwise. He was walking 6 miles a day up until the time he became ill. To my knowledge my Dad is not a believer, although I have shared the gospel with him a number times over the years.