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A Q&A on coronavirus with an infectious disease specialist

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Recently, we emailed with Scott James—a pediatric infectious disease specialist in Alabama—about coronavirus, increasing fear, and how Christians should respond.

What is COVID-19?

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) is an outbreak of respiratory disease due to a novel coronavirus. The virus itself has been named “SARS-CoV-2” while the term COVID-19 refers to the disease it causes. Initially detected in

Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China, in December 2019, cases of COVID-19 have now been confirmed on every continent except Antarctica.

Symptoms of COVID-19 vary, but fever, fatigue, runny nose, and cough are common. Asymptomatic or extremely mild cases are possible as well. At this point, it appears most people who become infected recover without any special treatment. Severe respiratory disease and even death are also possible, but exact rates are difficult to pin down because the denominator (total number of cases) is unknown due to the high likelihood of undiagnosed/unconfirmed cases within affected communities.

As with any newly emerging infection, we still have much to learn about COVID-19. But healthcare workers are fortunate to be able to glean insights from previous coronavirus outbreaks, as well as a baseline understanding of the importance of public health preparedness. Coronaviruses—so named because of the surface proteins that spike from their surface in a crown-like fashion—are not a new entity. There are several well-established human coronavirus strains that cause self-limited upper respiratory infections (i.e., the common cold). More severe respiratory disease can occur, but is infrequent.

What's notable about COVID-19 is the emergence of a new human pathogen (SARS-CoV-2), which likely arose from animal hosts (though the specific animal reservoir of SARS-CoV-2 has not yet been confirmed). Analogous coronavirus outbreaks have occurred, albeit on a smaller scale, twice in the past 20 years: SARS-CoV, the cause of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), and MERS-CoV, the cause of Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS).

Why do you think people seem to be so fearful about it? Are you, as an infectious disease specialist, concerned?

At this point, the fear of the unknown seems to be a common theme in the responses I'm seeing. Because we are early in the course of the epidemic, there's still a lot we don't know. It's clear that COVID-19 has the potential to reach pandemic proportions, but even in saying that, there are many variables at play that will determine just how severe it gets (e.g., will transmission patterns change as the virus enters new geographic regions, will one of the treatments or vaccines currently under investigation prove effective, etc?).

As an infectious diseases specialist, part of my role is to consider these forward-thinking questions while also doing everything I can to care for the sick and stop the spread of disease here and now. It's a both/and proposition: do what I can to help the problem today while also thinking ahead about how to wisely handle what may be around the corner. One thing that does cause me some concern is the general tendency to focus on the unknowns in a way that stokes panic and fear. This is not helpful and can even lead to unreasonable and counterproductive responses. Instead of fretting over potential catastrophes, pay attention to the opportunities that are right in front of you: take care of yourself, take care of others, and do your part to limit the spread of disease.

How should we be thinking about the potential of a worldwide pandemic?

I would encourage Christians to view potential pandemics through the lenses of preparedness and perspective. Preparedness simply means we will seek to inform ourselves of the situation and to make responsible choices for our own good and for the good of our communities. It means a willingness to listen, take

good advice, and act in a way that demonstrates a desire to be a part of the solution. Preparedness happens at an individual or family level, but it also happens at community, state, national, and even global levels. In a way, our own individual preparedness determines how successful large-scale public health measures will be.

Trusting in God equips us to take the threat seriously without giving into panic or despair. We can grasp the gravity of the situation while knowing that nothing is beyond his reach.

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The other lens through which Christians can view potential pandemics is perspective. By that, I mean a biblical perspective based on the understanding that no matter what threat is on the horizon, God is still in control. Trusting in God equips us to take the threat seriously without giving into panic or despair. We can grasp the gravity of the situation while knowing that nothing is beyond his reach. When the world is struck by fear, Christians have a beautiful opportunity to show where true hope comes from.

Where would you recommend we look for up-to-date information?

I recommend looking to the [World Health Organization](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019) (<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>) and the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html) (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>). They are not

infallible, but both offer reliable information in a user-friendly format. Bear in mind that information evolves quickly in an ongoing outbreak investigation, so it's important to stay up to date.

What should we be doing currently to prepare our families and communities?

The everyday preventative measures that will help you avoid COVID-19 are the basically the same ones that healthcare providers advise every year during flu season:

- Wash your hands frequently. Soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers are also effective at killing viruses.
- Observe good cough and sneeze etiquette. Cover your mouth and nose in the crook of your elbow or with a tissue that should be immediately thrown away.
- Avoid close contact (within about three feet) with people who are sick.
- Be aware of your risk of transmitting infection to others. Please stay home if you feel sick. Contact your medical provider to let them know you're ill, and follow their advice.
- If you are not sick, facemasks are not helpful in preventing infection. If anything, masks cause people to touch their nose and mouth even more as they surreptitiously adjust them. On the other hand, if you are sick, a facemask can be useful in preventing the spread of the disease by containing secretions.
- Follow the advice of your local healthcare agencies. If they recommend temporarily avoiding public places or large gatherings, do your best to comply.

Otherwise, the basic tenets of home preparedness involve having supplies on hand in case the situation warrants staying home for a period of time. Assess and ensure adequate stores of food, water, toiletries, and prescription medicines. It is best to do this ahead of time rather than at the last minute.

At present, unless you have been to an affected area or been in direct contact with someone who has, the risk of infection is still low. As global travel and sustained transmission continue, this risk may increase in the coming weeks. In that event, it will still be important to remember the basic prevention techniques outlined above. Unregulated products promising to prevent and cure COVID-19 will inevitably follow wherever an outbreak occurs—beware of scams and hoaxes playing on people’s fears.

How do you talk to your children about COVID-19?

I keep it simple and straightforward. “An infection is making some people very sick and we’re waiting to see how far it will spread. In the meantime, there are a lot of very compassionate people who are working hard to take care of the sick and help stop the infection. We’re going to love our neighbors by doing our part to stay healthy and not spread the infection. Most importantly, when scary things like this happen, it’s a great time to talk with God and tell him how much we need his help.”

And for my teenagers, I add, “Don’t get your information from memes.”

When you get anxious about something, what do you lean on in Scripture to help you keep your mind on things above?

When I am anxious, I think of the psalmist's words in Psalm 71:12,14–15: “O God, be not far from me; O my God, make haste to help me! . . . I will hope continually and will praise you yet more and more. My mouth will tell of your righteous acts, of your deeds of salvation all the day, for their number is past my knowledge.”

When circumstances are beyond my control, I can unabashedly cry out to God for deliverance. But as I call on him, I want to remember and take comfort in his past faithfulness—his righteous acts and his deeds of salvation. God's perfect track record gives me a rock-solid hope. And not just any hope, but a hope that leads to action and compels me to declare his glory to the nations. During uncertain times like these, that is exactly what the nations need to hear.



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Brent Leatherwood serves as Chief of Staff. In this role, he directs the office of the President and is also responsible for strategic partnerships and media relations. Before coming to the ERLC, he served as the executive director of the Tennessee Republican Party from December 2012 to December 2016, where he managed the ... ***[Read More \(https://erlc.com/multi_author/brent-leatherwood/\)](https://erlc.com/multi_author/brent-leatherwood/)***



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