

Dear Brothers and Sisters of Salem Covenant Church,

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We pray this blessing upon you from the heart. It is one that the Apostle Paul frequently offered when writing those he could not meet with in person. His letter to the Philippians is a great example, one he wrote while confined in prison. We commend the letter to you, encouraging you to reflect on Paul's attitude and teaching as he endured and served and chose to keep on rejoicing in Christ at a time in which his freedom was drastically restricted. As in our day, some thought the limits placed on him meant his ministry was curtailed. Not so, Paul responded, "I want you to know that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel."

There is no question that our freedom has been drastically restricted. Yet, like Paul, we can resoundingly proclaim that the gospel is not constrained but is being boldly proclaimed. Salem's ministry continues moving forward not only as a blessing to us but to people in places beyond where we'd imagined. That doesn't mean, of course, that either Paul or we are happy about the situation we are in. But we can still rejoice and trust that God is with us and working his purpose out. As Paul felt in thinking of the Philippians, we long to be with you, singing, laughing, crying, and worshiping with you in person. Yet, like Paul, we thank God that God's work is moving forward with strength and vitality.

Thank you for your part in the vitality and fruitfulness we are experiencing. The strong support of our congregation is truly remarkable and is a blessing to all in our congregation and to many beyond. Thank you for your prayers, your encouraging notes, emails, and phone calls to one another and our staff. Thank you for watching and participating in Salem's online offerings. Thank you for your generous financial support. Thanks to God and to you, we are able to continue our ministry, and even expand it in some ways, making adjustments that enable us to more effectively accomplish it now and into the future.

In time, we will gather again in our church building. In the meantime and even when that time comes, thank you for doing all you can to help Salem continue our mission to Inspire and equip all generations to Connect, Grow, and Go as disciples of Jesus Christ – celebrating God's love and sharing it with joy. Looking ahead, we are planning toward how we will re-engage in being together in physical, not just virtual, form in the months to come. As we do, three words are at the forefront of our thinking: Mission, Safety, Stages.

- **Mission** – whatever our situation, no matter the obstacles, whether together physically or not, whatever our limitations and opportunities, we will continue to give ourselves fully to accomplishing our God-given mission.
- **Safety** – through persistent effort and sacrifice, continual monitoring of the frequently updated medical information available, and ongoing flexibility and decision making, we will guard the safety and well-being of our congregation and neighbors.
- **Stages** – we will re-engage in gathering together physically in our church building in stages—from our current stage of no physical gatherings to, step by step, as we follow the best medical guidelines available, a time when we will have no restrictions at all on gatherings.

Our church leadership is currently developing this staged process toward full re-engagement in physical gatherings. It is and will continue to be a work in progress. For now, through June, here is the plan:

- Gatherings of ten or less people will be considered on a case-by-case basis. Participants will be asked to wear masks and follow guidelines for personal hygiene. Areas used will be thoroughly cleaned after use. Each experience will be reviewed so that we can learn as we go, make adjustments, and determine best practices for building use.
- Our staff is being asked to continue working from home except when necessary.
- Those who are comfortable gathering for worship parties in groups of ten or less, centered around our online worship services and preferably outdoors, are welcome to do so. Please be aware, however, that if you sing along, doing so significantly increases the danger of breathing the virus in and out. If you sing, a physical distance of at least nine to fifteen feet is recommended.

As we look ahead, we are including a survey that is also available online at <https://forms.gle/PCj34xGAgub8EoFM6> and by using the link on Salem's website at <https://saalem-covenant.church/update/congregational-survey/>. Your responses can help us get a sense of our congregation's expectations, concerns, and hopes as we make decisions. We invite you to either fill it out online or to mail the one enclosed to our church office.

More details will be available soon as we continue forward. Like us, you may long to gather physically with others in our congregation. The Scriptures tell us that God created us with that need and desire. Yet, the Scriptures also tell us that God created us to love one another and our neighbors, even when doing so means we don't get what we feel we need and desire. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers and we take that responsibility seriously. Thank you for remaining united and supportive as we do our best to love one another and our neighbors. We will not get every decision right, but we promise that our Leadership Team and staff are doing and will do our very best to help us fulfill our mission, care for the safety and well-being of our congregation and neighbors and, in the same way that the Israelites made their way through the wilderness, make our way in stages through this experience, striving to trust and serve God every step of the way.

In closing, we understand that these are difficult times for many, in myriad ways including financial. Please, let us know if you are in need. We would love to come alongside you to pray, listen, offer counsel, and offer financial assistance. In particular, if you are facing financial challenges, please call or email Pastor Alice Johnson ([ajohnson@saalem-covenant.church](mailto:ajohnson@saalem-covenant.church)) to inquire about Salem's Benevolent Fund which is supported by our members to provide assistance to those in our congregation in need.

We continue with you in prayer, faith, hope, and love. Grace and peace,

Mark Pattie, Senior Pastor

Karla Walker, Church Chair