

Where to begin? My COVID-19 journey

I keep asking myself this question when I think on how to describe my COVID-19 journey. I have lots of tears these days. My tears are out of such humble gratitude for my Lord and Savior, my wife and kids, our family, my AFC family, prayer warriors across the nation, and so much more. I feel so unworthy. Yet at the same time, I feel so fulfilled in God's place in my life that has brought such a real peace to me for the last couple of weeks. An experience like this is a good pride killer. Here we go...

It will be impossible to express all the many God moments that happened throughout this journey, but as I begin, I cannot help but start at the journey to 86th street. By the time Ashley called 911, I was unable to do anything. I coughed nonstop, could not move, and could not keep any oxygen within me. I began to experience what would define the next couple days, being able to hear all that was happening about me and around me, but having no way to participate in any of it. It had gotten so bad, by the time I arrived at 86th street, they did everything for me. I couldn't move, clean, talk, or do anything. I could just observe what was happening around me and to me. I could hardly hear at times over the machines breathing for me. I can still feel the warmth of the nurses as they did everything for me. Even when three of them would sponge bath me and I could offer no assistance. I could go deeper into this but understanding what it means to have no capacity to function, relying on everyone else, was a wake-up call. A wake-up call and an immediate sense of empathy for those that spend most their days in this way and for those that care for them. It has challenged me.

I felt helpless but at the same time, felt so full in Christ. Never did this unexplainable peace leave me, as nurses sat by my side to attend to everything. I cannot even begin to list the medications, treatments, and

such that were happening to just barely keep me alive, but it was what I heard nurses talking about that I could not believe. I could not talk or share and yet they knew. I can remember one nurse turning to the other during one of my treatments and saying, “look at all this church did during COVID.” I remember a nurse leaving her husband’s number who is a part-time pastor, and she said if you could give him a call sometime. He needs encouragement and ideas like this. Nurse after nurse would come in and say that your church really knows how to pray. Anderson First Church (AFC) and beyond, that was you! Being a testimony when I could not even utter two words or lift my hands.

Back to Sunday. I remember the infectious doctor coming in. I could sense him when he opened the door. It was as if evil had entered the room (not him but the presence around him) and was surrounding me but not touching me. I felt this light all around me that never left. This peace that continued to be my guiding light. He began to tell me that my condition had worsened and my window for any of the treatment, per the government’s data had passed. He said they would have to take a different route. This was at 8:30 am. I can remember the head doctor came in and said that I was the worst they had there, and that I needed it and the infectious disease doctor going back and saying that’s exactly why he cannot get it. He is too far gone for these meds and treatments to work. He then brought in the pulmonology team to get consent and prepare me for the ventilator. He said I would spend anywhere from 4 to 6 weeks on the vent. Unbeknownst to me, you had begun a prayer time for me at 9 am that morning. I was in and out of confusion after that. Things were going down so fast as they prepared to put me on the vent. I remember the head floor doctor coming in and saying there is just something different at work here. This is my floor, and I am going to make the final call. I am going to push these treatments through.

I have never sensed such forces of good and evil at work. The next day, the nurses told me there was a battle of the doctors going on all

morning, and this sweet, head, female doctor would not concede. She wouldn't because there was an Anderson church, and a Killeen church, and a Nacogdoches church, the Nazarene church, Nazarene Bible College, and God's people all over the US, and even the world, that were praying. Sunday at Noon the charge nurse took my nurse's spot, the ICU Doctor came in, and said we are taking a risk and starting the first of three different kinds of new treatments. The vent had been avoided for a time. I was in shock and unable to respond. All I could do was release tears for the next hour. I still cannot believe that you all were praying as this was happening.

The next day, there was more drama, as they could not find a match for the plasma treatment that was key to it as well. That is a whole different story, and God moved. The turn-around began. I remember being tied back in a chair, because I could not sit up without falling forward in a slump, not sure how I got there, but remembering new nurses... a Nazarene who had spent the weekend at Shiloh Park talking about AFC. In her words, a really neat church that I have been cyber stalking and watching. Then she said, this guy is different. From here, they discovered other problems brought on by COVID, and the enemy continued to push. Never did I even feel Him come onto me in a way that he had any control. The peace and assurance in my soul just continued to rest deep. I could see over and over again the enemy wield these weapons, but they would break before they hit. I am sure you will get tired of hearing all the details of the days following Sunday, and the many battles that still bring tears to my eyes, of a great reminder of how much the Lord loves us, but how much the enemy hates us. Even in the face of death, we will not give into fear of him. He has no right over us and that is going to be our life song as a people. He may take our breath, but he will never take our life. NEVER! We are the Lord's.

So, on another front. The home-front. I cannot start typing without crying. The prayers, the gifts, the food, the love was so evident. My wife, who many of you know, but have gotten to know more through this, leads with unending strength. She took care of our children alone in quarantine, with love and courage as my oldest dealt with her Dad dying. She kept normalcy in the home with prayer and faith at the center. Yet, one of the first times I could facetime her, she talked about all those in the church that were sick, facing difficulties, and how relentless she had been praying for them, and how her heart was burdened for you. This is in the midst of all that was happening, her love was still pouring out in prayer for many of you. I could not ask for a better partner to grow old with, to raise my current and future children with, and to serve the Lord with. She is a quiet, shy (she hides that), yet bold warrior for the kingdom. I witnessed her lead our family with courage and faith through our journey with Charlotte as she poured her life into others through her Facebook posts, and now I've seen it again. I know that as strong as she has been and still is, her mind and heart are weary, and eventually, she will have the chance to process and rest. Oh, and turning 40 doesn't help.

My wife will read this letter for the first time with you. I never lost hope, but when they first told me that the ventilator was impending and all that it could mean, I thought about my 5 girls. I thought about those precious ladies that God had created for me to love, raise, invest in, and I began to weep. It was so bad that it took them an hour to level me out with two shots, two additional treatments, and lots of love. It sent me on a tailspin that scared the nurses, because I couldn't even communicate why I was upset or what was happening. It had nothing to do with faith, but everything to do with the gifts that God had given and entrusted me with. Church, we are entrusted with people, and what a gift that is, that is like no other.

When I arrived home and got settled in bed, Ashley pulled out a notebook with your names on it. She began to say the name and how that person had prayed in my yard on a Sunday, then she listed off a name, and how they brought a meal, the names of colleges like NBC that were praying for me, and it went on. She read, and I wept. She listed each person that dropped food, bleach, stuff for the girls to do, and so on. She then talked to me about the ladies that thought to think about Janae and what she must have been going through. It wasn't a program or a pastor, it was God's people who knew Janae would understand what was happening. You ladies gave a prayer bowl, signs that reminded them who they were, brought activities that kept their minds busy, and for that I cannot even begin to express my gratitude. I do not even know how I will ever show the deep sincere humble appreciation I feel.

My very being is just crying out in thankfulness in a way I have never been before. All I know is the enemy did not have his way, and he will not have his way. I will approach fatherhood differently, preach differently, teach differently, lead more passionately, and call forward, us, as a people, with a sincerity that I have never lead from before. So that is what I know how to do in order to repay my debt to each of you on that list. Thank you for loving my girls when I could not. The way you have loved them will always be interweaved in the threads of the Dagostino story. You lived out the church of ACTS!

The prayers, the prayers, the prayers! Prayer changes things! Prayer moves mountains! I am living proof of it, and I am undeserving. We are moving to become a house of prayer. In fact, my nurses and doctors believe that AFC prays differently. AFC, your story and the Dagostino story are knit together stronger than ever. The future of AFC is so bright and everyone around us can see that. I believe that our great and gracious God is going to take every bit of this and use it for GOOD! Major life changing good! I feel closer to you all than ever. I feel bound

to you in a way that words have a hard time expressing. Even though I have not been present, I feel like I could see your prayers surrounding me as I was being prepped to go on a ventilator. I can feel your prayers opening my voice back up, and I know that this is us together in the spirit world. I love you!

How do I end? Thank you! From the depths of a physical heart that needs some work, but from a spiritual heart that is fuller than ever, I say thank you to all the prayer warriors! Thank you for allowing your example to be evident in my family, in a huge hospital, and for being known by your deeds to thousands across the land. We as Christians should be known by our deeds. Deeds that glorify Christ, allow His kingdom to be seen in tangible ways. The Kingdom of God has been seen in tangible ways through your willingness to pray and be there for a pastor.

The final takeaway. I will always be ever thankful to the Lord for His healing. This will be a moment in time that will be ever present in my heart. I am thankful this thanksgiving for the power of the Lord coming and moving in my family, body, hospital room, and heart. Next Thanksgiving, I will be thankful for the same and for many other reasons. We have much to be grateful for this thanksgiving season, even in the midst of what is all around us. Let us keep our Lord and Savior at the forefront of this season.

Blessings to each one of you,

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