

AIDS AND THE WRATH OF GOD

INTERVIEWER: Well, Bishop, what do you think about AIDS? Is it the judgement of God?

BISHOP: No! The God I believe in is a loving God. He would never be so vindictive as to make people suffer such a dreadful disease. AIDS is just one of those things.

How often have you heard that conversation, or something like it, during the recent scare? It's sad that so many religious spokesmen speak this way. They are telling only half the truth, because such teaching firstly implicitly suggests that God is helpless in his own world, watching miserably whilst things that are totally against his will simply happen. Whereas the Bible says "The Lord works out everything for his own ends — even the wicked for a day of disaster." (Prov. ch. 16 v.4). Secondly, it ignores the Biblical teaching on sickness and suffering, which can cast much light for us on the Lord's way of working in the world.

In fact, AIDS, and other disasters like it, do not show the judgement of God. But they do show the wrath of God, and strangely enough, the mercy of God.

The Bible teaches that sickness, like all other sorrows, came into the world through sin. Romans ch. 1 tells in more detail why there is suffering in the world — because men refused to acknowledge God, he literally gave them up - he let them get on with what they wanted to do, without interfering, so that they would experience some of the consequences of their sin. This is the wrath of God — that we experience now some of

the results of our sin. And why? — so that we might be led to repentance, accept God's loving forgiveness and life, and avoid the far worse suffering of eternal punishment at the last judgement. In this way, suffering is the mercy of God, for God could justly destroy the human race for its wickedness at any time.

Much suffering only reflects sin in a general way: for example, the paralysed man Jesus healed shows no evidence that his problem was the direct result of some sin, yet Jesus says to him "stop your life of sinning, or something worse may happen to you." In some cases, however, like AIDS, there is a much closer link with sin. The fulfilment of Rom. ch. 1 v.27 in our current epidemic is quite remarkable, and to deny that it has anything to do with the hand of God flies in the face of Scripture, and robs us of the opportunity to call our culture to repentance.

Note that I am not saying that God creates evil — God cannot do wrong — but neither can one say that these things are simply "natural" consequences, or else the wrath of God, the living and just, is reduced to a law of nature. No, he allows evil to seem to prosper for his own purposes, just as when Satan asked for permission to hurt Job. God complied, but only at last to glorify his name more than before in Job's life.

Neither can we say that AIDS is a punishment, for like all the results of sin, it hurts others as well as the sinner: the recipient of an infected blood transfusion or the wife of a promiscuous husband have clearly been caught up in the results of someone else's sin, though remember they are not "innocent" victims, since none of us is innocent except by God's

forgiveness in Christ, This is important practically in how we think and act with regards to AIDS victims, of whom we may all, perhaps, see many in future years.

The AIDS sufferer is just as eligible to receive God's forgiving mercy as any other sinner, and, because of the horror of his condition and the probable rejection by society, far more worthy of our compassion and love.

We must not judge, but rather be grateful to God that in his mercy he has spared us such suffering. I also believe God would have us learn to minister healing to such people, as Jesus did.

If AIDS has a purpose, it is not simply to cause homosexuals and drug addicts to repent, as some of the strident "Moral Majority" in the USA have stated. Rather it is to lead us all to repent of the evils we have allowed to prosper in our society. Jesus himself taught about this in Luke ch.13, where he shows us that bad things happen to others to warn us to repent, or we shall all likewise perish.

So, let us not push our thinking about AIDS into a corner. It should not be an embarrassment to us, neither should we be afraid to assert that God has his hand on the situation. For AIDS shows us that God is not silent when sin is rampant. But more, it shows us that the Lord "takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live." (Ezek. ch.33 v.11). ***

JCG