

AIDS AND THE JUDGMENT OF GOD

The discussion on AIDS, (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), has given rise to various opinions about what God does, and does not do in history, with regard to judgment. There is widespread agreement among Christians that there will be a final judgment, but there is questioning as to whether there are interim divine interventions on communities and individuals. This leaflet sets out to look at Old and New Testament evidence on the subject. In what sense AIDS can be understood in these terms each person must settle for himself, but to know how God acts Scripture is our guide.

GOD'S JUDGMENTS IN OLD TESTAMENT TIMES

Slavery among the people of God was strictly regulated in Old Testament times. The Hebrews had to release a fellow-countryman from such bondage after six years. One of the many social injustices challenged by the prophet Jeremiah was, that immediately after such release, they would take the ex-slave into bondage again. In Chapter 34 vv 8-17, Jeremiah declared that because, in spite of making a solemn covenant with God to release the slaves, they broke their promise, God's judgment would fall upon them. It would take the form of sword, pestilence and famine. God would proclaim 'liberty' to these three dreadful scourges. Ezekiel, in Chapter 38 v 22, prophesied that the enemies of Israel would be judged by pestilence, just as the Jews themselves would be (Chapter 5 v 12).

In a passage of great power, Habakkuk, depicting God's glory, said, (Chapter 3 v 5), 'before him went pestilence, and plague followed close behind.' The action of God was seen in pestilence and plague, as well as in other natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods. In Deuteronomy, Chapter 28, following the promise of great blessing through obedience to God's law, the writer spells out the fruits of disobedience. They include illnesses of various kinds in vv 21, 22, 35 and 59. These passages do not merely teach that cause and effect, sowing and reaping are facts of life. They also teach that God is personally involved in the way things work out. He is not an 'absentee Landlord'.

JUDGMENTS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

It may be remarked that these are Old Testament illustrations. How then does the New Testament regard the Old? Jesus, in the 'Sermon on the Mount' (Matthew, Chapter 5 vv 17-20), said he had not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfil, (uphold) them. His disciples' position in the Kingdom of God would be affected by whether or not they kept to the Law and Prophets and taught others to do the same. To obey the Commandments and teach them would result in being great in the Kingdom, but to break them and to teach others to do so, would result in being least in the Kingdom. Much more searchingly, he moves the scene of human action from the external to the internal; to the realm of thought. That probably explains the behaviour of the condemning crowd in John, Chapter 8 vv 2-11. Moses never required the executioners in a case of adultery to be perfect themselves. But once the teaching of Jesus concerning adulterous *thoughts* was heard, who could throw a stone? From the eldest first, to the youngest they all slunk away. Everyone of them was condemned in this moral area by the standards of the Son of God. But he showed that he was not relaxing those standards when he said to the woman, 'Neither do I condemn you, go and do not sin again.'

It is sometimes claimed that God does not judge individuals by sending ill-health. The Old and New Testaments make plain that he does. In Numbers, Chapter 12 v 10 Miriam experienced this. In 2 Chronicles, Chapter 26 v 20 Uzziah the King was smitten by the Lord for his pride and arrogance. In the New Testament Herod, in Acts, Chapter 12 v 23, died for a similar offence. In John, Chapter 5 v 14 Jesus said to the healed paralytic, 'Sin no more, that nothing worse befall you.' Paul warns the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians Chapter 11 v 30 that dire physical results and even death itself, could arise from eating and drinking the bread and wine in the Holy Communion unworthily.

So far as individuals are concerned, Zechariah was struck dumb temporarily for his unbelief about the conception and birth of John Baptist. Paul was blind for three days at his conversion. Elymas the sorcerer was struck blind for a time in Acts, Chapter 13 v 11 and Ananias and Sapphira paid the ultimate penalty for their deceit, Acts, Chapter 5 vv 5 & 10.

GOD'S JUDGMENTS TODAY

From these references it seems that we may not deny God's judgments in history if we are faithful to his revelation in Scripture. While in Revelation, Chapter 9 v 18 disease on a cosmic scale is forecast in the end-time, there is also, in Romans, Chapter 1 v 27, the stern warning that people may and do receive in their own bodies, the reward of their misdeeds, here and now. Twice in the AIDS debate, in two separate Evangelical publications, it has been written that God does not 'zap' individuals. The Bible witness is, that he sometimes does. We know that he wills all men to be saved, but according to Isaiah Chapter 28 vv 21, 22, judgment is his 'strange' work that he does do.

The passage quoted from Romans, Chapter 1, is part of a section in which Paul is leading us to understand that God has concluded ALL under sin, religious and pagan sinners alike. He illustrates the pagan's sins by listing non-sexual offences and also, by specifying sexual deviancy, men with men and women with women. He refers to the same sins in 1 Corinthians Chapter 6 v 9 and 1 Timothy, Chapter 1 v 10. Jude does likewise in v 7 and Peter also in 2 Peter, Chapter 2 vv 6-8. However, IN EACH CASE other sins are referred to in the same breath. We can no more deny the sinful nature of homosexual practices than we can the other sins of theft, envy and gossip which are listed with them. The wrath of God is revealed against all of them. But in his wisdom, some receive judgment in this life, while others wait their turn in the world to come. Paul makes this point in 1 Timothy, Chapter 5 vv 24, 25. 'The sins of some men are conspicuous, pointing to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. So also good deeds are conspicuous ...'

THE AIDS SITUATION

In approaching the AIDS situation we need to recognise that God in some cases, individuals and communities, here and now - cause and effect are *his* action as much as any other natural law. In the U.K. and the U.S.A. upwards of 85% of AIDS sufferers have been homosexual, often promiscuous, practisers. The other high-risk group is the promiscuous heterosexual one. That some innocent people contract the disease through infected blood transfusions for instance, is a bitter fact of a fallen world, but not one to distract us from specifying the main sources of infection. All medical intervention leading to the relief of suffering is also a mercy of God against the results of the Fall, from which all sickness and death originate. Such intervention is right and proper in the case of AIDS sufferers, however they contracted the disease. The search for a cure is equally right. But to attempt to remove the element of judgment from the widespread epidemic is to close our minds to one of God's ways of speaking to the human race. Worse than that, to advocate precautions instead of repentance and renunciation of immoral behaviour is surely to compound our condemnation. We have been warned.

The good news is, that God has taken responsibility for the sins of the whole world when Jesus went to the cross. One of these passages of Scripture, 1 Corinthians Chapter 6, having listed various sins including the homosexual ones, says of the Christians in that church:-

And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

God is just, and the justifier of all who believe in Jesus Christ.

George Curry

For a careful treatment of the Bible passages referring to the practices mentioned in Romans, Chapter 1, see *Homosexuality and the Church*, Lovelace. Lamp Press 1979. Also *The Church and Homosexuality*, Green, Holloway, Watson. Hodder & Stoughton 1980.