

# HIV/AIDS: Is it God's Judgement?



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## Is HIV a punishment or judgment from God?

The short answer, from many people of faith, is "No! Absolutely not!" Yet some people have answered the question "Yes". Indeed, some members of what has come to be known as the radical religious right praise God for the tragic epidemic which is claiming the lives of hundreds of thousands of human beings in every part of the world. Because HIV/AIDS was associated in the first years of the epidemic with the gay male community in the western world, many from the radical religious right have used this pandemic as a weapon to further their own homophobic agendas.

## The idea that HIV/AIDS is a punishment from God is based on three faulty assumptions:

- that homosexual acts are sinful
- that God causes suffering
- and that God punishes sin with disease.

These false assumptions result from a particular way of looking at society, sexuality, and how God works in the world.

**Homophobia**, (the unrealistic fear, hatred, and rejection of lesbians and gay men,) is based on these assumptions and the world view they reflect, and in tragic misunderstanding of the meaning of Christ. It is the responsibility of Christians to overcome this fear and misunderstanding, and to witness to God's love and grace.

## Are Homosexual Acts Sinful?

There are a few passages in the Bible that have been said to condemn homosexual acts. Currently there is much debate about these passages. Some Christians believe these passages condemn all homosexual behaviour. But a growing number of Bible experts are convinced these passages condemn only certain sexual acts that are idolatrous or abusive.

For example, many Bible scholars believe that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19), condemns rape, not homosexuality. Rape is a violent act and irrelevant to loving same-sex relationships.

**Other passages in the Bible**, such as **Ezekiel 16:49-50**, identify the sin of these cities as injustice and idolatry. Likewise, some religious authorities point out that New Testament passages like I Corinthians 6:9 and Romans 1:24-27 deal with sexual behaviour that is unloving and exploitative (such as paedophilia or the temple prostitution common to that era). But even then, the Christian message is one of forgiveness and healing.

Jesus said nothing to condemn homosexuality, but he said a great deal about faith, hope and love. Certain passages of the Bible, around which there is no debate, assure us that everyone has access to God by faith.

## John 3:16 teaches that **whoever believes in Christ will have eternal life.**

Lesbians and gay men who believe in Christ are part of the "whoever" (as stated in John). Not only does the Bible *not condemn* loving same-sex relationships, it has *many positive images and references* to physical intimacy and sexuality. Examples include the stories of Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan, and the book of The Song of Songs.

- Many Christians today believe that sexuality, both heterosexual and homosexual, is a good gift from God.
- Gay men and lesbians need to remember and to know in their hearts that sex is good.
- People of faith are called to celebrate and affirm the inherent goodness of sex.

## Does God Cause Suffering?

### Why do people suffer?

All religions have had to address these questions. The world is full of human suffering caused by hunger, disease, poverty, and multiple forms of oppression and injustice. If these things are happening, does this mean they are God's will and, therefore, God wills us to suffer?

**Evil is a very real force in this world**, a force not of God's making (Mark 1:32-24). And HIV/AIDS is certainly a devastating evil not of God's will. It is not just desserts for gay men, hemophiliacs, babies born with HIV, IV drug users, or any other person living with HIV/AIDS. Jesus never punished people with sickness, Jesus healed. HIV/AIDS is a tragedy. And God suffers with all who are victimized by it or who lose loved ones because of it.

**Bad things happen.**

We suffer many times through no fault of our own, because the world can be an unfair, unjust place. God does not create chaos or injustice. God brings order out of chaos, and demands justice where there is injustice. God does not cause tragedy, but God does respond to suffering with healing. God heals sometimes through physical restoration, and other times with grace sufficient to grow in the midst of suffering, even in the face of death (I Corinthians 12:9).

**An example of God's healing grace**

is well described by a woman with a friend who died from the complications of AIDS: "As a child, he had been abused and abandoned by his mother. But as an adult, in his last months, his mother came to live with him, nursing him around the clock. In their times together, old wounds were healed, forgiveness was shared, and faith grew. My friend received a healing gift of family and love he had never known."

**Even when the injustice of tragedy invades our lives,**

God's passionate love and bring good in the form of healing and growth. We can find God's healing touch in our tears of sadness and our screams of anger. We can find God's healing touch in the words of love and comfort shared by others. More than anything, we can find God's healing touch through that inner peace that comes from God's presence and promises. We know that in everything God works for good with those who love God (Romans 8:28).

**Is Sin Punished With Disease?****Is God punishing gay men and lesbians with HIV/AIDS?**

These are the kinds of questions that have been asked for centuries before HIV/AIDS became an issue. Each time some mysterious malady or disaster befalls an identified community, there have always been some who claim that God has caused the disaster as a judgment against the affected people.

If indeed HIV/AIDS is a plague sent by God into the lesbian and gay community, there are some flaws in the plan. There is the matter of all the other people who are *not* lesbian or gay who are infected and affected. For example, what is the explanation for the decimation caused by HIV/AIDS in Central Africa, where transmission is primarily *heterosexual*?

Clearly there is no justification for suggesting that God has unfavourably judged the lesbian and gay community, nor that God has created HIV/AIDS as a punishment. Are all women with breast cancer victims of God's wrath? Are people of African descent being punished with sickle cell anaemia? Have Jews done anything to deserve Tay-Sachs disease?

**It is known HIV/AIDS is disproportionately affecting communities of colors in the United States.**

Does this mean that God has made a judgment against people of colors? Most people would answer these questions with a resounding "No!" People had similar questions during the time of Jesus Christ. Then, as now, many assumed that suffering is a direct result of sin. But Christ challenged that assumption.

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, was it his sin or that of his parents that caused him to be blind?" "Neither," answered

Jesus, "it was no sin either of this man or of his parents. Rather it was to let God's work show forth in him". (John 9:13).

Jesus then reached out to heal the blind man. Christians, too, must reject the idea that HIV/AIDS, or any other illness, is punishment for sin.

**People of faith, like Jesus Christ, must reach out with a healing touch.**

Rather than being understood as God's retribution, suffering becomes an occasion for God's love to be demonstrated. When Christians reach out and touch those with HIV or AIDS, they can transform suffering into a living example of God's love.

**What Is the Responsibility of People of Faith?**

While today's culture often focuses on sin and evil as an individual matter, the Bible speaks frequently of sin as something in which human beings are involved as a group. Similarly, evil happens in groups, in structures, and in forces beyond the individual. A faithful response to HIV/AIDS, then, must be a group response, as well as an individual one.

If loving homosexual acts are not evil, and God does not cause suffering or punish lesbians and gay men with HIV/AIDS, then what keeps people, particularly gay men and lesbians, from responding faithfully?

**One answer is *homophobia*,** unrealistic fear, hatred, rejection of lesbians and gay men.

Homophobia affects lesbians and gay men when they believe that there is something wrong with their own sexuality. They question the validity of who they are and give in to self-hatred. The resulting low self-esteem has caused some to abandon safe sex practices. In the case of lesbian and gay youth, this low self-esteem, learned from the homophobia of the dominant culture, sometimes prevents them from adopting safe sex practices from the beginning of their sex lives.

Combined with the feeling of invulnerability to disease, common among young people, it is no wonder that the HIV infection rates among youth are among the fastest growing of any population. People are taught homophobia from a young age through such things as queer jokes, and a lack of positive role models. Facing the fear of one's own sexuality and identity is the first step toward ending the paralysis which affects much of the lesbian and gay community.

**Freedom from homophobia is an important first step toward the prevention and elimination of this tragic disease.**

Jesus said, "The Truth shall set you free", (John 8:32), and yet people too often deny the truth, or avoid learning about HIV/AIDS because of fear. It is the responsibility of all people of faith to educate themselves and all who can be reached. Many people have fears about the risks of contracting HIV/AIDS; that fear can be overcome with facts. With the facts about how HIV is transmitted, people of faith can remain sex-positive while remaining HIV-negative.

Following the example of Jesus, people of faith are called to eat with people with HIV and AIDS, and to share their home with them (Matthew 25:6); to touch people with HIV and AIDS and give them intimacy (Matthew 8:2-4); and to heal people with HIV and AIDS (Luke 17:11-19).

A faithful, intimate presence in the lives of those with HIV/AIDS, witnessing to them of Jesus healing touch, is one of the most important responsibilities of all people of faith.

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**Is HIV or AIDS a punishment or judgement from God?**

**In the minds and hearts of many people of faith, the answer is clearly, "No! Absolutely not!"**

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This pandemic is a tragedy. It does, however, present people of faith with the opportunity to be faithful witnesses to God's love and healing grace, even in the face of suffering, death, and grief.

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**For more information:**

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