

THE TRUTH ABOUT AIDS

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Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.” Matthew 9:13

Daniel has a wife and three young children. Daniel often travels far from home in connection with his job and spends nights in different cities. Sometimes when he’s away, Daniel goes to prostitutes or other available women. Then Daniel starts having health problems. Something is wrong. He goes to a doctor. A blood test shows that Daniel has HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Daniel isn’t sure which woman gave him HIV, and he has no idea how many other women he himself has infected.

Daniel doesn’t want anyone to know about his HIV problem—not his employer, not his wife, not his children, not his friends, not anybody. It’s too shameful to tell anyone. So he keeps going to bed with his wife, and he doesn’t change anything or mention a condom. If he did that, his wife would become suspicious and wonder what’s wrong.

Awhile later, Daniel’s wife, Rebekah, suspects something, and she wonders whether she herself might have HIV. But she doesn’t want to get a blood test. It would be embarrassing to ask for the test, and if she is infected, she doesn’t want anyone else to find out. Meanwhile, her youngest child is still nursing, and Rebekah doesn’t know if her baby could get HIV by breastfeeding. She has never heard of a drug that helps protect breastfeeding babies from HIV, and she doesn’t dare to give her child a nutritional substitute for breast milk. In her village all infants are breastfed by their mothers, so any mother who stopped nursing and used a milk substitute might as well carry a sign: “Something is wrong with me.” People would avoid her for fear of getting what she’s got, and Rebekah can’t stand the thought of being despised and isolated. So Rebekah doesn’t get tested, and she keeps nursing her baby.

A few months later, she becomes pregnant with a new baby. Daniel and Rebekah don’t talk about whether their unborn baby might turn out to have HIV, and they don’t discuss

it with anyone else. They don't ask whether anything can be done to make it less likely that the unborn baby will get HIV. Daniel and Rebekah just go on with life as usual.

Not long after the baby is born, Daniel gets so sick that there's no way to pretend everything is fine. Other people find out about his illness. Even then, however, nobody among his friends and relatives actually says much about AIDS. They just avoid Daniel. He can't afford the drugs that sometimes help HIV/AIDS victims to live longer. Eventually Daniel dies, leaving his wife and children without an income.

A few kind people try to help them out, but most people avoid them. Rebekah and her children don't have enough to eat. They get a little food that keeps them alive, but they are undernourished and weakened. Then Rebekah's HIV becomes full-blown AIDS. Without proper nutrition or access to any drugs, she soon dies, leaving behind four young orphans. The two youngest are HIV positive and are doomed to die in childhood. One got the virus nursing, the other got it while still an unborn baby inside her infected mother.

The Need For Truth

The story I've just told is constructed from events that are happening to many different people. AIDS is a deadly killer that strikes down men and women, youth and little children. In the battle against AIDS, one of the most important weapons is truth. We must tell the truth about AIDS. The deadly power of AIDS would vanish if everyone knew the truth, lived by the truth, and told each other the truth.

In the story you just heard, if Daniel had lived by God's truth that sex is a beautiful gift to be enjoyed only in marriage, he never would have caught the disease. Even after he caught the disease, if he had simply told the truth to his wife, Rebekah, and had changed their sex life to protect her, the rest of his family would have been spared. After Rebekah caught the disease, if she had sought the truth about her condition and had known the truth that HIV can sometimes be transmitted by breastfeeding and had not kept nursing her baby to hide the truth about her illness from others, she could have protected her nursing child by getting alternate nutrition.

If people in their village had known the truth that HIV/AIDS cannot spread simply by being near someone, and if they had heeded God's truth about loving the sick and needy, the family would not have been shunned, and people would not be so tempted to hide the truth about having AIDS. If Daniel and Rebekah had known and acted upon the truth that thirty percent of babies born to women with HIV get the disease inside the womb, they could have refrained from having more children.

After the damage is done, though, it's not enough to be reminded of truths we should have heeded. It's not enough to talk about "if" or "should have." We may need to face painful truths about our own sins and mistakes, but above all we need to know if there's any hope in the face of illness and death. As we look at the truth about AIDS, we'll see a number of important things, but the most important truth is that God gives his love and life to people in even the most dreadful situations, if only they trust in Jesus. It's possible to face even something as horrible as AIDS with hope, not despair, when you turn to Jesus.

The chief weapon in the fight against AIDS is the truth. When truth is lacking people die. When truth is made known, believed, and acted upon, people live.

Scary Statistics

One important truth about AIDS is that it is a vast and terrible epidemic. At first its awful impact was concentrated on a particular minority of the population: homosexual males. In the early 1980s, when doctors began noticing a strange new disease, they called it GRID, Gay-Related Immune Deficiency, because most people with the disease were homosexual men. Then it was found that drug users caught the disease by sharing needles with each other. There were also a few people who got AIDS through tainted blood transfusions in the time before blood was screened for HIV. But in the early days of AIDS, people who weren't homosexual men or drug users were fairly safe for the most part. That has changed.

Homosexual men are still the highest risk group, but the infection rate among heterosexuals is growing, and many women and children are becoming infected. The three main ways to get AIDS are sexual activity, drug use, and parent to child transmission. You don't get AIDS if somebody sneezes nearby or if you drink from the same glass, because the virus doesn't live in saliva. You don't get AIDS by touching or shaking hands or kissing or using a toilet that was used by an infected person. You don't get AIDS if a mosquito bites an infected person and then bites you, because even though blood carries the virus, HIV dies inside the mosquito. There are many things that won't give you AIDS at all, and we shouldn't have needless fears. But some things are known to transmit AIDS, and we must be alert to them. Unborn children and nursing babies can get it from infected mothers. If you're a youth or adult, you can get HIV/AIDS by sharing a needle with an infected person or by sexual activity with an infected person.

Dr. Richard van Houten has compiled some scary statistics. As recently as 1995, only 8 percent of new infections in Canada were women. Now 24 percent of newly infected Canadians are women--a big change in a short time! (This doesn't mean 24 percent of all Canadian women are infected; it means that of every four newly infected people, roughly

three are men and one is a woman.) It's no longer safe for women to assume that AIDS afflicts only gay men and not women. Despite the growing peril, despite the fact that sex outside marriage is the most common means of transmitting the virus, a majority of unmarried Canadian women say they have had sexual relations.

The AIDS plague is especially terrible in Africa. In 1990 South Africa had an infection rate less than 1 percent; now the rate among pregnant women is estimated at 25 percent. Think of it--one out of every four pregnant women, infected with AIDS. Mother to child transmission of HIV is estimated at about 30 percent, which would mean that about one of every eleven babies being born in South Africa will die of AIDS in childhood. Of the other 10 babies, two would lose their mothers to AIDS.

Other African countries are also gripped by the epidemic. In Zimbabwe 70 percent of deaths among children under age 5 are due to AIDS. In Botswana, if infection rates don't decrease, almost 90 percent of all who are now 15 years old will die of AIDS before they turn fifty. Life expectancy is below 40 years, and may drop below 30 years by 2010. Life expectancy is similarly low in Mozambique, Malawi, and Swaziland.

AIDS has not yet reached that level in Nigeria, which has the largest population in Africa. But that is small comfort. The Nigerian problem is bad and getting worse. In the year 2000, the infection rate surpassed 5 percent.

In Africa the plague is now spreading fastest among young people age 15 to 24, and women catch the infection most easily. It's estimated that of young people age 15-24 worldwide who have AIDS, 60 percent are women. Over 40 million people worldwide are now infected, and another 22 million have already died. Each day 1,800 babies are born infected with AIDS. Each month 42,000 children die of AIDS.

This is a terrible tragedy for individuals, families, and friends. It is also deadly for countries and their social systems. When young people just entering the prime of life are dying by the millions, the economic damage is severe. Just at the point when people are trained and ready to become productive, they're gone. In Zambia the number of school teachers dying of AIDS is equal to about half the number of all new teachers being trained each year. AIDS can ravage education systems and economic systems and make entire political systems less stable than ever. Some nations that once worried about population growth are now worried about not having enough people to do the work and pay the taxes. Meanwhile, political decisions related to AIDS can upset people with different opinions and make the political system less stable.

Killer and Liar

All this horror is the work of a vicious murderer who doesn't want us to know the truth about AIDS. The disease itself can be called a murderer, but the chief murderer is Satan, the prince of darkness and death. How does Satan multiply death? Through lies. As Jesus put it, Satan "was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Satan loves lies and delights in death. He lied to our first parents, Adam and Eve, in order to bring death to the human race. And today he still uses lies to spread death. This is certainly true of AIDS: it is a killer that is most deadly when truth is unknown or ignored.

Satan's lies are horrible, and he uses different lies on different people in different places. He often uses the lie that having sex with anyone you wish is the way to happiness. The truth is otherwise: people are far happier when they refrain from sex as singles and are faithful to their spouse when they are married.

God says that sex is for marriage and marriage is for life. The Lord calls us to abstain from sex outside marriage for our own good. Satan the liar comes along and says, "You're not made in God's image. You're nothing but an animal. And animals have urges. So follow your urges. You can't help it." But the Bible says that God won't let you be tempted beyond what you can bear but will provide a way out (1 Corinthians 10:13). Who should we believe, Satan the liar, or God who cannot lie? You can live as God commands if you ask God for the strength to do so.

Many officials want to battle the AIDS epidemic by passing out condoms to almost everybody and giving free needles to drug users. Such measures may help reduce the risk of AIDS for people with sinful lifestyles, and I hope some lives are spared. But I'm afraid the overall effect may be to spread Satan's lie. The condom and the needle proclaim, "You people are just animals. You can't be expected to do anything right, so don't even try. Here's a way to improve your chances of survival while doing wrong." God offers much more. He calls you to a higher, better way of life. God says you can be different, and he gives you the power to change. Condoms may provide some protection if they are used right and don't break, but wouldn't it be better to treat sex as a lovely gift from God and to see ourselves and each other as image-bearers of God?

Lies are Satan's specialty. In some parts of the world, Satan spreads the lie that not having sex can make you crazy, because it is a natural drive that must be released. The truth is that people who control their desires are some of the sanest, most sensible people around.

In some places, people are fooled into thinking that if you don't have sex before marriage, it may stunt your ability to produce children later on. The truth is the exact

opposite: sex with various partners before marriage can give you diseases that make you sterile and unable to have children.

An especially deadly lie in some areas is that if you have AIDS, you can get rid of it by having sex with a virgin. The truth is that doing such a wicked thing cures nobody but only infects another person and sentences her to death.

Another lie of Satan is that drugs can cure your problems and make you feel good. The truth is that drugs cause all sorts of problems and make you feel worse in the long run—and if you share needles in doing drugs, you can get AIDS and die.

Still another lie that Satan uses in certain cultures is that AIDS can infect you by someone else's witchcraft. But that's a lie. When Satan wants to spread AIDS, he doesn't look for a witch doctor or a shaman or a mighty curse. He looks for ways to get people to make choices that go against God's design. AIDS is not spread by hexes but through certain bodily fluids, mainly blood and semen.

Satan uses lies to infect people with AIDS, and once they get infected, he uses lies to keep them from the truth. Many who are infected don't even know it. In the United States the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently conducted a major study of gay and bisexual men. Among the findings, it turned out that 77 percent of infected men were not aware of their HIV status. They had not been tested recently—some had never been tested—and they didn't see themselves as high-risk. They did not know the truth about their condition.

Other people, even after blood testing shows infection, simply won't believe it. They still feel healthy most of the time and can go about normal activities for years. They take no measures to preserve their own health as much as possible, and they take no precautions to protect others.

Others may face the fact that they are infected, and they may take all the right medical steps and behave toward others in the most responsible way, but even then, Satan's arsenal of lies has another weapon of deception. If you get HIV/AIDS, Satan may whisper, "You're a stinking sinner, and that's all you are. Now you're getting what you deserve. You're beyond hope. God hates you. Other people will hate you if they find out. You might as well hate yourself. There's no way out of this. Death is coming. There's no way to avoid dying, and there is no hope for you after death. You're doomed to a future without love, without peace, without happiness." The name Satan means "accuser and accusations are some of his deadliest lies.

Not everything Satan says is a complete lie, of course. He has to use just enough of the truth to make his lies convincing. It's true that you and I are sinners, and it's true that sin deserves death. But it's not true that you're nothing but a sinner. You are also a precious person created in God's image. It's true that each of us offends God by our sin, but it's not true that God hates you or that you can never be loved again. Jesus has loved and transformed thieves, prostitutes, and killers, so why can't he love you and me? It's true that AIDS is a horrible disease and that if you're infected, there are tough times ahead. But it's not true that you have no possibility of a happy future. You can have the brightest future imaginable if you trust in Jesus Christ and have eternal life through him. Satan sprinkles his lies with a bit of truth here and there, but Jesus Christ is the truth (John 14:6), and Jesus says, "Whoever comes to me, I will never drive away" (John 6:37).

Healer and Friend

If you're sick with sin and sick with AIDS, you're exactly the kind of person Jesus came to save. When Jesus was at a party befriending sinners despised by others, he said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17). So if you're guilty of sin and are terribly sick, don't despair. Instead, be glad that Jesus wants to be your friend and help you.

Jesus' enemies labeled him "a friend . . . of sinners" (Luke 7:34). They meant it as an insult, but for all of us who know ourselves to be sinners, it's wonderful to know that Jesus is the friend of sinners. For all who are sick, it's good news to hear the truth that Jesus came to heal the sick, not to hang around with people proud of their healthy bodies and healthy souls. The ultimate truth about AIDS, then, is that this is the very kind of thing that Jesus came to deal with. Jesus is the ultimate healer and friend.

The Bible says, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work" (1 John 3:8). Sin is the devil's work. Death is the devil's work. AIDS is the devil's work. But Jesus appeared to destroy the devil's work. The lies of Satan cannot defeat the truth of Jesus. The sins prompted by Satan cannot surpass the grace of Jesus. The fear and hatred that come from Satan cannot cancel the love of Jesus. The sickness and death spread by Satan cannot stop the resurrection power of Jesus.

If the world chooses to face the AIDS plague without God and without Christ, the problem will get worse. Those who are not children of God through faith in Jesus are part of a realm run by Satan. As the Bible puts it, "The whole world is under the control of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). Worldly powers cannot free themselves from Satan's grip or refute his lies or defeat death. The world as a whole can't shake itself loose from Satan, and you and I as individuals can't deal with Satan on our own. We cannot outthink Satan

or overpower him. But if we trust in the Lord and in his mighty power and fight with his weapons, we shall know the truth, and the truth shall set us free.

The truth is that Jesus suffered and poured out his blood on the cross in order to pay for our guilt and set us free from our shame. He rose from the dead to give eternal life and joy to dying people. So it would be in the spirit of antichrist to hammer AIDS victims with guilt and shame without proclaiming the saving love of Jesus Christ. It would also be the worst kind of folly for people with AIDS to reject Jesus love' and to enter eternity without him. It's not just a question of health or sickness, life or death. It's a question of heaven or hell.

Whether or not we have AIDS, all of us will die of something at some point, and then we must enter eternity. The God of love calls you to share eternity with him. But if you don't want the Lord Jesus in this life, you will not have him in the life to come. The only alternative to eternal joy with Christ is unending hell without him. So I appeal to you with my whole heart, and I tell you on the authority of the living God: Turn away from sin, and turn to Jesus. Accept his love. Trust his promises. Obey his commands. Ask him to wash you clean by his blood, and to give you fresh power by his Holy Spirit. Follow the Lord on the path of life. Look forward to enjoying God's friendship and pleasures in his new creation. Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.

For further study:

Richard van Houten, "HIV/AIDS: An Overview" <http://www.gospelcom.net/rec/Focus2-1overview.html>

Eugene Rubingh, "Theological and Ethical Reflections on HIV/AIDS in Africa," <http://www.gospelcom.net/rec/Focus2-1rubingh.html>

Both articles listed here are in REC Focus, March, 2002.

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*** (If you are interested in encouraging your congregation to participate in Reach 4 Life by providing financial resources you may want to incorporate the following into the sermon, either at the point of the asterisks or at some other point in the sermon. The following material is provided by International Bible Society/Reach 4 Life. It is included here with their consent.)

Young people around the globe need to be set free by God's truth. When they know the truth they can choose for God and life not Satan and death. But how will young people today know the truth? For many it can come through a specially designed New Testament called Reach 4 Life. The New Testament developed by the International Bible Society has an opening section called, "Suicidal Sex." It tells the truth about sexual purity, abstinence and HIV/AIDS. It also includes a section called, "the Spiritual Revolution" which leads young people to discover the truth in a relationship with Jesus Christ. It also contains 40 Bible Studies to disciple a young person in their walk with Jesus. This is a tool that tells the truth about HIV and the truth about having a relationship with God.

In South Africa today over 12 million youth are at risk – and if the infection rate there continues to rise over 3 million of these will get infected and die. But we can spread the truth and be part of the solution.

The Reach 4 Life book is being distributed across South Africa through International Bible Society and its partner ministries. As a church, we can help. Each Reach 4 Life New Testament costs \$2.50. So \$25 provides 10 New Testaments, \$50 provides 20 and \$100 provides 40 the average size of a class in South Africa. An average school has 1000 students so for \$2500 we could provide Reach 4 Life New Testaments for an entire school.

The truth will always set people free – free from Satan’s lies and free to choose life in Jesus.