

November 2009
Is Cancer the Result of Sin?

This past Sunday I completed a series of sermons entitled "A Dialogue with Atheists." The last sermon addressed the question "If God is good, why is there so much suffering in the world?" I responded by naming two different kinds of evil: moral and natural. Moral evil is the evil committed by man against man. Classic examples would be Hitler's genocidal campaign against the Jews or the drunk driver killing an innocent child. Moral evil is the result of Adam's sin and includes all of us because we are complicit in the sin of Adam. This kind of evil exists because God, in making humans in his image, gave them free will so they could genuinely choose good or evil.

Natural evil is the evil naturally found in creation. Earthquakes erupt and cause tall buildings to collapse. Tsunamis overwhelm coastal cities and swallow up anything in their path. Cancer takes residence in a human and devastates the body. Natural evil is also the result of Adam's sin (for which we are complicit). The Bible teaches us that creation has "fallen" as a result of Adam's sin (Gen 3:1, Rom 8:22) and continues to groan in travail, awaiting the redemption that Christ will finally bring.

One perceptive teenager asked the question, "Do people who get cancer get it because of sin?" In one sense, yes, because all evil (moral and natural) is the result of Adam's sin, for which we are all complicit. In other words, none of us are innocent of sin and therefore we are guilty for the evil that it is in the world. This doesn't mean that we "cause" sin, but rather we are sinners who have contributed to the fallenness of creation.

However, having said that, we shouldn't think in terms of a *quid pro quo*. We shouldn't think that a particular sin has led to a particular disease, or, just as bad, we shouldn't blame someone for the cancer in their body. We shouldn't have the mindset toward those who have cancer, Swine Flu, or any other disease, "He deserved that." Diseases happen because we live in a world that is broken. Dysfunctional cells sometimes overwhelm the immune system and multiply in the body. This happens to people who are Christians, Muslims, and atheists.

The fact is, we all deserve God's wrath and judgment for our complicity in humanity's sin. The person who is cancer free is no more innocent than the person with cancer. This is exactly what Jesus was speaking about "*those 18 who dies when the tower in Siolam fell on them. Do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?*" (Luke 13:4) The 18 people who were killed by the collapsing wall were no more guilty for their deaths than all those who were spared. Yet, no one was innocent. That's why Jesus concluded by saying, "*I tell you,...unless you repent, you too will all perish*" (Luke 13:5). The only escape from our dilemma is faith in Christ.

The bottom line is we're all guilty (Rom 3:23). There really are no "innocent" people. The more appropriate question to ask is not "Why do innocent people suffer?" but rather, "Why are guilty people saved?" The man or woman who dies of cancer is no more guilty than the man who lives to be 90 and dies of a stroke. His sin is not a direct cause of his disease. Yet, all of us sin, and therefore, we all are guilty and stand in need of grace.

The good news is that Jesus has come to save sinners and declare those who are guilty to stand blameless before God. God's wrath has been appeased through the death of Jesus. Even those who die early due to earthquakes, cancer, or other diseases have the hope that Christ offers. Christ offers salvation and eternal life to all who confess him as Lord and believe in their heart that God raised him from the death. *Sola Gloria!* To God alone belongs the glory.