

HIV in Pregnancy_God is our Judge

Phone rings

Rachel: Hi Kitana; I heard you wanted to see the nurse as soon as possible. What's happening?... Uh-huh...Whoa, slow down just a bit. You say they pricked your finger to do HIV testing at the ante-natal clinic last week, and the results were positive...and you're too ashamed to tell your family that you've got HIV...and your baby's going to die?

Mmm... OK. Let's start from the beginning. They tested you for HIV at the antenatal clinic last week – correct? That's a very common test to do on pregnant mothers. Did they explain what HIV is and how it can affect your baby? Well, let's go over it again, and find out what you can do. You might understand a bit more the second time you hear it. Can you come and see me tomorrow?

Tammy: Hi! Welcome to Women of Hope. I'm Tammy...

Carol: ... and I'm Carol. Thank you for having us again.

Tammy: We just heard Rachel talking on the phone to her patient Kitana. Rachel is a nurse who works at a hospital in Zambia, looking after mothers and babies. Let's listen to how Rachel explained about HIV to Kitana when she visited the hospital next day.

Rachel: I'm so sorry you have HIV, and I know you must be worried. Let me explain more about it and see if I can help. HIV stands for *human immunodeficiency virus*. HIV is a virus – that means it's a kind of tiny germ that causes illness. Coughs and colds are often caused by viruses. But HIV is a *different kind of virus* that your body can never get rid of. If it's *not treated*, it can cause a lot of damage to your body, and it can kill you.

Kitana: What kind of damage?

Rachel: Well, let me explain it like this:

Sometimes we get sick with a common cold; we cough, sneeze, blow our nose a lot, and feel tired. After a few days, we start to get better, often without any medicine. This is because our body has many special white blood cells, part of our immune system, that work a bit like tiny "soldiers". The soldier cells' job is to fight and kill the virus or germs that made us sick. Mostly, the soldiers can fight off the sickness without medicine. Although these white cells are very tiny, I like to think of them as *soldiers*, because they do so much fighting.

However, the HIV virus damages our body by killing the soldiers, the white cells. When a lot of the soldier cells are killed, our body finds it hard to fight off *other* germs that come along. So if someone has HIV for a very long time, without any treatment, the number of soldiers in her body can get very low, and she can get sick very easily. Even a simple illness, like a cough or a cold, can make her sick enough to be in the hospital.

Kitana: Does that mean I'm going to die soon?

Rachel: Please listen to this: even though you cannot *cure* the HIV virus; even though it will always be in your body, it's possible to keep it quiet and stop it killing the white cells. It's possible for you to be well and feel well, and even to increase the number of those good soldiers in your body, so that you can fight sickness better. Having HIV does not mean you're going to die tomorrow!

Kitana: I don't understand. I don't feel sick at all!

Rachel: It's true – you can be infected with HIV for quite a long time without feeling sick. Many pregnant women have no idea that they are infected with HIV. They have not been sick recently, or lost any weight. This is because the HIV has not yet done too much damage to the immune

system. They still have enough soldier cells left in their body to fight the other sicknesses that come along. But I've seen plenty of other people who *have* been sick for a long time before having a HIV test. The HIV virus has already done a *lot of damage* to their immune system and it's much harder to help them get better.

Kitana: How is HIV spread? Can my baby get HIV from me?

Rachel: Yes. HIV can pass between mothers and babies in three main ways: during the pregnancy, during the birth, and during breastfeeding. That's why antenatal clinics want to test *all* the pregnant mothers – so they can help the HIV positive mothers stay healthy, and try to stop the babies getting HIV.

HIV is present in blood and bodily fluids, so it can also pass between other people through having sex, sharing injection needles, as well as other ways, like getting someone else's blood in a wound or stepping on a used injection needle. But do please remember that HIV is *not spread* by shaking hands with someone, by kissing them, by using the same toilet, or by eating from the same dishes.

Kitana: But I'm worried; will my baby die because I have HIV?

Rachel: I don't expect so! You've just been diagnosed with HIV; you're only 3 months pregnant, and you have the rest of your pregnancy to try and prevent your baby from getting HIV. The health worker will probably ask you to have a blood test, so they can find out how many "soldiers" are in your body – this is called a CD4 count. That will help them to know the right kind of medicine to give you. But you *must* remember to take the medicine exactly as your health worker tells you. That will give your baby the *best chance* to be born healthy. And if you have *any* questions at all, make sure to go back and ask at the clinic, so you can understand clearly what they want you to do.

If you keep yourself healthy, take all your medicines properly, and deliver your baby in the hospital where they can help you, there is a very good chance that your baby will not get HIV. Of course, we can't *promise* anything, but there's plenty that *you* can do to help your baby.

Kitana: I don't know how I'm going to tell my husband. What will people say? They'll think I've been unfaithful, and I haven't! Someone else told me she thought her husband would divorce her if she had HIV.

Rachel: Yes, it's very difficult. But you *must* tell him – after all, he might be infected too. Maybe you caught the infection from him. And if *he* is infected, he will need to take the same kind of medicine. It's so important that an infected person doesn't spread it further.

This could be a hard time for your marriage and it would be really good to have some counselling together with your husband. Go back to the antenatal clinic and ask someone there to explain it clearly to your husband – this can be helpful if you feel like you can't tell him the test results. Even when you *do* tell him, it's important for you both to discuss the situation with a health worker who can tell you what you should do next. Your husband will need to have an HIV test too.

If your husband can't support you, it's important to find another support person – maybe your mother, an aunty, or maybe you can find another lady through the HIV clinic at the hospital. You need someone who understands the kinds of things that are going through your mind right now, and can help and support you.

Kitana, you have a lot of things on your mind right now. But one day, *you'll* be the one speaking to the young people, encouraging them to get an HIV test before they get pregnant, and telling them that they can prevent HIV.

Kitana: Thank you sister, I feel a bit better now. Maybe my baby and I will be ok.

Rachel: I want to give you all the help I can. Come back and we can chat again sometime.

Tammy: Wouldn't it be such a shock to find out that you have the HIV virus? Especially when you hear that HIV can be passed from person to person and it can't really be cured.

Carol: Yes, it might feel like you've been told you're going to die. But that's not really so, is it? Rachel told us that it's possible to manage it and stay well, and you can give your baby a good chance to be born healthy...and continue to be healthy.

Tammy: If you find you are HIV positive, don't give up hope, but do go to the hospital or clinic and get help. Follow what they tell you *carefully*, and make sure you have someone who will understand and help you. HIV is serious, but it's not a death sentence. There *is* hope!

We've been talking about what happens when you have tested positive for HIV. Kitana was worried about her health and her baby, but she was also worried that people would judge and condemn her.

Carol: Every community has its rules, doesn't it? Some of them are the laws of the country, and the police will arrest you if you break those laws. But there are other, hidden laws that everybody knows, but they aren't written down. If you break those laws, people will say you're a bad person, and there will be some kind of punishment. Maybe they won't talk to you, or invite you to their house. They might gossip about you. In some countries, they might kill you if you bring shame on the family by breaking those unwritten laws.

Tammy: How do people judge you where *you* live? For example, would people judge you as a bad woman if you got HIV, even though you were a faithful wife? Are there certain clothes that make people say you are a modest woman, and others that say you are not? Do you judge people by what they wear?

Do people accept you if you do your religious duties publicly? Do people condemn you if you are friends with people outside your group...or if you watch certain TV shows?

Do you keep some thoughts to yourself because if you say them, you will be judged? When you have visitors, are there expected ways to behave? If you don't understand or you do things a different way, will people talk about you and think badly about you? (*Producers - adapt the examples for your culture*)

Carol: All groups of people do this, even when they think they're free and accept anything. These unspoken rules are how we know *who we are* as a group. But people can only judge what can be *seen*...what is on the *outside*.

Tammy, do you see my bag here? What do you think is in it?

Tammy: I guess there will be a money purse in there - maybe your blue one or your red one. A handkerchief perhaps? Did you bring some cakes to eat with our tea? I know - some photos of your children!

Carol: But you don't *know* what's in my bag, do you? You can't see. All you can do is *guess*. Only one of those guesses was right - I do have some cakes today (laugh).

That's what it's like when we judge a person's *heart* by what we see. We *guess* what's in a person's heart, but we can't see it. Only God can see what's inside my bag...and what's inside my heart. You can see my *actions*, and you might like them, or not. But you don't know *why* I did that action. When we judge a person's heart, we are trying to take *God's* place as the judge.

Tammy: Let me ask *you* - when you wash a teacup, do you wash just the outside or the inside? I would wash both. If I came to visit you, I'm sure you would wash the inside of the cup *and* the outside.

The Lord Jesus Christ taught us about judging, when he was here on earth. He warned the people to be careful of some of the religious experts. They knew the laws God had given through the prophet Moses, hundreds of years before, and they tried hard to obey them. And that was good.

They also tried to make everybody else think about the laws in exactly the same way, and obey them too.

But the teacher, Jesus, said that some of these leaders only obeyed the law so that *other people* would think they were holy. Inside, in their *hearts* and their *thoughts*, they were quite different. Jesus spoke to these leaders directly, and said, 'You clean the outside of your cup and plate, while the inside is full of the things you have got by being violent and selfish. You fools! Didn't God make the inside as well as the outside? Why don't you give what's in your cups and plates to the poor, then everything will be clean in God's sight.' (Luke 11: 39-41)

Do you see what he meant? They were like a housewife who only washes the outside of the cup, but leaves the inside dirty. Her visitors might think the cup was clean and the hostess was good, but the dirt inside could make them sick.

Carol: And Jesus talked about the law experts' *clothes* too. He said, 'They do everything so that people will see them. Look, they wear straps with verses from the scriptures on them, strapped to their foreheads and arms. See how big they are! Notice how long the tassels on their cloaks are, as signs of devotion to God!' And Jesus talked about their religious acts. Some of them said long prayers out in the street; they had reserved seats in the house of worship and wore special prayer shawls, so everyone thought they were very religious. But in business, they only cared about making money. Jesus said, 'How terrible for you, teachers of the law. You hypocrites! You take advantage of widows and rob them of their homes, and then make a show of saying long prayers! Because of this your punishment will be all the worse.' (Matt 23:14 GNB, Luke 11)

Can you see what the Lord Jesus was saying? God cares about what we are like on the *inside*, what we do and think when *no-one else* is looking. But *God* is looking. He sees, and he is the only one who can *really* judge. What does he see when he looks into *my* heart? What does he see in yours?

Tammy: So how do we make sure we do what is right, if it's not enough to keep the rules, the outside of our lives? We've mentioned Kate before; she's a woman who went across the world to help a war-torn country. She was setting up an aid organization, so she often had to travel alone. This offended people in that country. To them, only an immoral woman would travel without a chaperone. They thought that if a woman were left alone, she would sin against God. Kate's friend felt that she needed to judge Kate, and warn her...she judged by what she could see. She said 'You are an unclean woman because you travel alone.'

This was a hard thing for Kate. She could have said, 'I don't do anything wrong when I travel: how dare you accuse me?' But she understood why her friend judged her. So Kate said, 'Everywhere I travel, *God* is with me always. Before Jesus died, and rose again, and went back to heaven, he promised his followers a gift. He said that he would send the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the living God, to be with them always. God is spirit and truth.'

'The Spirit of God is with me to teach me and guide me, to help me to obey God. The Holy Spirit helps me to understand God's holy word, the Bible, so I can know what is God's will. If I travel with a chaperone, they can see what I do, what I say...but they cannot see my heart. The Holy Spirit of God is my chaperone. I'm a follower of the Lord Jesus, I want to live my life to please God. I know he sees me always, what I do and what I feel and think. I *try to do good*, not because *people* are watching, but because *God* is watching.'

Carol: I know that Kate tried very hard to keep the rules in that country. She dressed very modestly, she acted as a good woman was expected to act, as much as possible. But she never forgot whom she was *really* trying to please. What do you think about that? Are you just keeping the *outside* of your life clean, afraid that other people will judge you? Or are you living each day with the Holy Spirit of God as your guide...living to please God?

Tammy: That's something we should all think about. Who are we really trying to please?

It's time for us to go now. We would love to hear from you.

Carol: May God bless you, my friend, and show you how much he loves you. May he help you with the problems you have, and encourage you to follow him each day.

Kate's story adapted with permission from 'In the Land of Blue Burqas' by Kate McCord; Moody Publishers, Chicago, 2012.

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