

God's Child in Health and Sickness

Talk #1

A body to nurture

Every medicine cabinet has a story to tell. Every bottle of liquid, every package of tablets and all those unfinished and largely out-of-date medications tell you something about you, your health, and the health of your family.

I wonder what your medicine cabinet could tell us about you? What medications do you take? What supplements, be they vitamins, minerals, fish oils or any other health product do you take? And going beyond your medicine cabinet, what tests have you undergone, and what were the results? How's your blood pressure, your cholesterol, your blood sugar levels? Have you kept up to date with your health screening: your skin checks, cancer checks, mental health checks, dental checks, and so forth? And then what's your diet like? Your exercise regime? What health apps do you have on your phone? And are you one of those who wears a Fitbit?

And how about the health of your family? Of your husband (if you're married), your children, your parents or others who are close to you?

On average, people live longer than in years past. Life expectancy for boys born in Australia in the late 1800s was about 47 years, and for girls, it was 51 years. Compare that to today, where a boy born in Australia today is expected to live until about 82 years of age, and a girl to 85! That's an increase of 35 years to the average lifespan. Antibiotics, anaesthetics, immunisations, chemotherapies and germ theory have all played a part. As have all those tests, medical imaging and screening, diets, exercising and other healthy living practices - and

perhaps even your Fitbit. And that's good. And we should be pleased and thankful for these things.

But for all these medical advancements, our approach to both health and sickness, and also the relationship many of us have with our bodies, is a troubled one. Many of the same people who are obsessed with their health and fitness are dissatisfied and discouraged about their own bodies: with their ongoing health concerns, with their physical appearance, and with the bodily changes they experience as they get older. This is something that leaves people anxious, frustrated, and at times even ashamed of their own health and their own bodies.

As Christians, we too, can have an uneasy relationship with our bodies. On the one hand, we believe that our bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit. We know that not just our souls, but also our bodies were bought at a price and that we must therefore glorify God in our bodies. That's what we learn, for example, in 1 Corinthians 6; and that's what we confess in Lord's Day 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism. And therefore we need to take care of them. But on

the other hand, however, we are warned not to make our bodies into an idol. This is a real and ever-present danger, not just for the Kim Kardashians of this world who are obsessed with beauty and their outward appearance, but also with those of us whose lives revolve around matters of health and nutrition. There is the danger that our bodies, as well as the bodies of our children, become our personal project, something for us to control and manage. There is the danger that we become consumed with matters to do with health and well-being to the point that our entire life revolves around diet, exercise, health supplements, and a multitude of other things. With all the medical resources at our disposal, with the tests we can do, with all the health advice and all the information available to us, we begin to see our

health as something that we can - or at least *want to* - control. This can then become a regime for our lives where we become consumed with matters surrounding our bodies and our health, with little regard for how we are to use the health that God has given us in our services towards him or our neighbour.

And that in turn can lead to feelings of blame and of guilt when things don't go as expected. Whereas in John 9:2, Jesus' disciples asked, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" the question more people would ask today is, "what went wrong?" And, "Whose fault was it?" Was it your diet? Was it your lifestyle? Were you too busy, too preoccupied to pick up the warning signs that something wasn't right? Was it because you didn't go in and do that medical test? Was it because you *did* get that test done or take the medication you had been prescribed? Was it your doctor's or your health practitioner's fault? Did they make a wrong diagnosis? Did they fail to get you to take a test that could have saved you from being so sick?

And for those of you who are mothers, the burden this question places upon you affects not just your own health but also the health of your child. Was there something wrong with your body or with what you were taking that caused your child to be born the way that they were? Should you have pushed harder to get your child tested for autism or something else when your child went to school and wasn't developing at the same rate and in the same way as their peers?

And that in turn can add to our anxiety. As we monitor our health and the health of our family members, there is the danger that we become overly anxious about what might be wrong or what might go wrong in the future. And when it comes to being anxious about our health, at times, the huge range of medical and other tests, as well as the options that doctors

and other health practitioners offer, do not always help. There is a good and meaningful place for both regular check-ups and health screenings as well as for certain genetic and other testing. However, these same things can also cause us to turn our attention away from our heavenly father and become overly anxious as we weigh up possible abnormalities or the probabilities of getting a certain illness sometime in the future. As an example of this, Bob Cutillo, in his book "Pursuing Health In An Anxious Age", told the story about an older couple who expecting a child. Making their way to the doctor's office they were happy and excited, with their biggest question being whether they were expecting a boy or a girl. Although the ultrasound saw nothing wrong, on account of the new mother's, the doctor recommended further tests and screening to make sure that everything really was well and also to rule out things such as a cleft lip, heart defects, spina bifida and Down Syndrome. The discussion with the doctor left them worried and afraid. What tests should they do? And what if they found out something was wrong? Bob Cutillo wrote,

"How quickly the power to control an unpredictable future and the great possibilities to maximise health can transform joy and hope into calculation and concern. Whether in preparation for childbirth, making preventative health choices, or considering treatment options for cancer or end-of-life decisions, worry has become one of the marks of modern health care."¹

And then there is something else too that can lead to an uneasy relationship with our bodies. And that is that we know that life in this present body is not all that there is. 2 Corinthians 5:1 describes our present bodies as "our earthly tent" and we are promised that

¹ Bob Cutillo *Pursuing health in an anxious age*, Crossway Books, 2016, p21.

"if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

Sometimes, especially at times of serious illness and death, the body is described as a shell, and at times we might even speak with longing for the day that will be free from them. And when a person is buried, we might say that it's the body that's buried, whereas the *person* whom we loved is in heaven. And then, at times, we might even speak and act as though the body was dispensable because ultimately, what God cares about, is the salvation of our souls.

But that's not entirely true. We should not think, and we should not speak, as though the real you is your soul, whereas your body is not so important that it is just a shell, a temporary house for your soul. And therefore we should not have low thoughts of our bodies, but rather see them as God sees them, as bodies that are fearfully and wonderfully made, as bodies that have been redeemed, as bodies that belong to God, and as bodies with which we live for God and to the praise of his glory.

But how, then should we view our bodies? And what is our body, and what is our health really for?

To work towards a biblical perspective of health, sickness and the human body, we need to start at the beginning, at the time when we were created. In Genesis 1 we learn that God made the man and the woman in his own image, but then in chapter 2 we learn just how he did this. And with respect to man Genesis 2:7 says,

"And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being."

And then, from the man, God created the woman, who was bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh. But what I want you to notice here is *how* the Lord made the man. He first made the man's body, and then he breathed into him the breath of life. It is in this way that God made the man and the woman as unique beings in all his creation. They were not like the animals, who have a body, but in whom the LORD did not breathe the breath of life and so did not have a soul. They were also not like the angels, who had no physical body. Further, in Genesis 1:27, we learn that God created man in his own image:

"in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."

It was, therefore, as physical flesh-and-blood people that the man and the woman were made in God's image and called to live before him in true righteousness and holiness. What this means is that your body is not incidental to who you are. As Sam Allberry put it in his book "What God has to say about our bodies", you do not simply *have* a body; you *are* a body.

And God gave you that body for a purpose. When God created the man and the woman, he said to them in Genesis 1:28,

"Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

And in addition to this, Genesis 2:15 says that

"The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it."

This then teaches us something about the purpose for which God created the man and the woman in a general sense, and it also teaches us about the purpose of our *bodies*. We were created to live for God and to serve him in the world that he has made. And our bodies were made perfectly, and both the man and the woman were able to perfectly do that which the LORD God had commanded them.

But then came the Fall into sin. And with the Fall into sin, the body suffered its consequences. Pain in childbirth, hard work that would result in aching bodies, sickness, accidents, abuse, aging and ultimately death. As God told Adam in Genesis 3:19,

"In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return."

The human body, into which the Lord himself had breathed the breath of life had become what Romans 7:24 calls a "body of death." Our bodies have become broken. They are now "jars of clay", as Paul described them in 2 Corinthians 4:7. They are weak and fragile. We bear in our own bodies the effects of the Fall. In her excellent book *Broken Beauty: Reflections of a soul refined by cancer*, Helena Bolhuis gave a very real and raw account of the effects that breast cancer had on her body. Reflecting on what was happening to her she wrote,

"Quite frankly, I struggled. I struggled with seeing my body, once created as a work of art by my Creator, being subjected to deforming attacks. It was akin to the devil marring God's perfect creation. Rebellious cancer cells were trying to destroy the body God had created beautiful." ²

This gives a very real context to what Paul calls "the sufferings of this present time" in Romans 8:18, and why "we groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body." (Romans 8:23)

There is another consequence of the Fall into sin that we also need to think about with respect to our bodies. In the beginning, God created us so that, as embodied people created in his image, we would reflect him in our lives and in our behaviour, where we might live to the

² Helena Bolhuis *Broken Beauty: Reflections of a soul refined by cancer*, Wipf & Stock, 2020, p162.

praise of his glory. But now, in our fallen state, we use our bodies for sin. Romans 3 describes how fallen people no longer use their bodies for the praise of God, but for sin. Romans 3:13-16,

“Their throat is an open tomb; With their tongues they have practised deceit”; “The poison of asps is under their lips”; ¹⁴ “Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.”

¹⁵ “Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶ Destruction and misery are in their ways.”

No wonder Paul cried out in Romans 7:24,

"O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

But we also know that this is not where God would leave it. We also know that God was determined to save not just our souls but also our bodies. And he did that by sending his Son, Jesus Christ, to be born in the flesh with a physical, human body. "The Word became flesh", John 1:14 says, "and dwelt among us." Jesus Christ entered this world by taking on the flesh and blood of his mother Mary and was like his brothers in every respect, yet without sin. He did not simply appear as a man; he *became* a man. And it was in his body that he grew up, he lived, and he ministered. He had come, Luke 4:18-19 says,

"to preach the gospel to the poor, to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to preach the acceptable year of the LORD."

And it was in order to demonstrate that he had come to redeem not just our souls but also our bodies that our Lord Jesus performed miracles of healing, miracles of feeding, and even of raising the dead back to life. But it was not just a temporary relief of suffering that God had intended for us, and so our Lord Jesus

"bore our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness - by whose stripes you were healed." (1 Peter 2:24)

And, as we confess this in Lord's Day 15 of the Heidelberg Catechism,

"During all the time he lived on earth, but especially at the end, Christ bore in body and soul the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race. Thus, by his suffering, as the only atoning sacrifice, he has redeemed our body and soul from everlasting damnation and obtained for us the grace of God, righteousness, and eternal life."

Notice that it is not just our souls that Christ died for, but also our *bodies*. Your bodies are not incidental to who you are; your bodies are very much a part of who you are. And now you belong to Christ, not just with your souls, but also with your bodies, since they have been redeemed to live for him.

And that's what 1 Corinthians 6 emphasises also. 1 Corinthians 6:13,

"Now the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body."

Verse 15,

"do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?"

And verse 19-20,

Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit *who is* in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? ²⁰ For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body*."

* NKJV adds "and in your spirit, which are God's".

In Christ, therefore, your body is of infinite value. Your body is not your own, but it belongs to Christ. This, then, defines who we are and how we live and how we both view and treat our bodies. It is of great importance, therefore, that we take good care of our bodies, that we nurture them, making use of the means that God has given us. We may not abuse our bodies; we must, rather, take good care of them with respect to diet, exercise, hygiene, work and rest. And we also take good care of them by making use of medication, medical tests, and even the medical intervention that is available for the healing and the good of our bodies.

But do these things, however, in the conscious awareness that you are not your own, but that your body belongs to Jesus Christ. Your body is not your project. Your health is not something that is your right, nor is it something for you to control. Your body, rather, is the Lord's and your health is a gift from the Lord - and a gift that is given to each of us in differing measures. And your health, therefore, is not something to be held onto for health's sake, but instead, your health is something to be *nurtured*.

And it is to be nurtured for a purpose. Your body does not exist for your purpose or for your glory but for *God's* purpose and for his glory. And so also when it comes to the care of the body, we do not nurture our bodies for our bodies' sake, but so that we might better serve God in the body.

And that should also be seen in the story of your medicine cabinet. That should also be evident in how you think about and how you act upon your health and well-being. Your body is the Lord's; not only has he created your body, but he has also redeemed it. Indeed, the body of our precious Saviour Jesus Christ was broken so that your broken body might be

healed. Therefore glorify God in your bodies. At the same time, however, this present body is not all there is; we do not idolise our bodies nor concern ourselves with diet, exercise and the like simply for the body's sake. Rather, we remember the purpose God gave us a body, and that was to use it to serve him and our neighbour. And what's more, as we serve him, and as our bodies break down, we do not grieve as those who have no future. For this present body is not all there is. Rather, whereas the present body is wasting away, God is preparing a new body that will never decay!

And that's why we also should not worry too much about the body. "Do not be anxious", Christ said in Matthew 6.

"Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?"

And in Luke 12:25–26, this time from the ESV,

And which of you, by being anxious, can add a single hour to his span of life? ²⁶ If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest?

Since you have been redeemed by God, since Christ gave his own body for your body, and since your body now belongs to him, you can trust him with your body and with your health, also.

So how are you going with all of that? How do you view your body, and how do you think about your health and well-being? Do not be overly anxious, nor focus on your health for health's sake. Your body is not your own, nor is your health something that you can control.

But rather nurture your body in the fear of the Lord. Seek to serve him in and with your body, and in health as well as in sickness. Do this, even as you look forward to the new body and the life that is to come. Thank you.