

# Genesis 2:7

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[ 0 : 00 ] You know I'm not a medical expert by any stretch of the imagination, but I just want to give you some observations about this subject of health care and then give you some biblical responses.

! I've got three points really this afternoon. And the first point is the reason why I think it's worth thinking about this subject. Because it is, isn't it, that health and health care is a very recent issue. You could say it's a recent obsession in our culture. Good health is a good thing that we should pursue. But as modern people, we want and expect more of it than anyone has ever before. Good health, thankfully, has moved from being for the privileged few to the expectation of the masses. And in fact, we now don't see good health as a privilege, but as a right. In 1976, the World Health Organization said that the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is not a privilege, it's one of the fundamental rights of every human being.

[ 1 : 25 ] As part of that expectation, I think looking around us, there are signs of an obsession with it. There are such things as health freaks, aren't there?

We're really, really into it as a culture. We're into research and health remedies and diets and stem cells and antibiotics. In real terms, the budget for public health care has tripled in this country since the founding of the NHS.

And yet, we can't get enough of it, can we? Now, I'm not saying that's wrong. But it shows us what we think is important and what we aim to achieve with our bodies and with our health.

As a society, our preoccupation for fixing our health, I think is to do with what we think a human body actually is.

If you look on your sheets, there are various passages that I want us to go through. But if you look at the middle passage from Psalm 139, the writer speaks of God's intricate knitting of each human person, of each body.

[ 2 : 36 ] That God, like a master weaver, knitted me together in my mother's womb, the psalmist says. And Psalm 104 speaks of God's spirit giving life to all creatures.

There is a sense, isn't there, where a human being, and any life in this world, is supernaturally given as a gift by God.

But since the 18th century scientific enlightenment in Europe, we don't see ourselves as living beings made by God and gifted with life by him, but as a materialist, mechanised organism.

It is the idea, isn't it, that is kind of ingrained in our society, that a human body is nothing more than molecules. And so in modern science, there is this kind of field called reductionist biology.

If you've not heard about that, don't worry about that. It just means that you can reduce a living thing down to its tiniest building blocks. And since you can do that, you can control the whole thing.

[ 3 : 51 ] Because we can see cells and genes and DNA, we can control our health. The 20th century theologian and scientist Helmut Tielecker, I hope I've said that right, predicted that this would happen.

He said that we would start seeing ourselves as extensions of things around us. He said, instead of man being the measure of things, the things he has made come to determine the lines along which man himself is structured.

So he's saying that in our age of machines, and microchips, and circuitry, and nanotechnology, we have come to view ourselves as extensions of those things that we've created around us.

So we are just like very complicated computers. And if you can control the circuitry, if you can see the molecules, and the genes, and the DNA, if you can fix the parts of the machine, the whole thing will work, and we'll be healthy.

So as moderns, rightly or wrongly, we imagine and demand good health, or even perfect health. We come as consumers to experts with microscopes, with rising expectations.

[ 5 : 18 ] It's amazing, isn't it? You can get a DNA home tester kit now, and order it online. You can get a gene profiling kit on the internet. Our modern obsession has come from a profound technical ability to see and manipulate the building blocks of our bodies.

Someone has called this phenomenon post-humanism, where we think that we've got the power to overcome all the realities of our pain, and of our human condition.

The Guardian last year featured an article on a group of medical experts who believe that medical science has the power to eradicate ageing as a cause of death.

So do you see what's happening there? Science no longer seeks to discover and find out about what God has made. It seeks rather to control.

And our health, we believe, can be controlled with a technological fix. It's our modern skill and ability that spawns a modern obsession, if that's not too strong a word.

[ 6 : 31 ] It is a recent obsession. But secondly, the problem is a relentless problem, isn't it? The Bible's view on our health, on all of this, is of course that despite our great skill and knowledge in medical science, which God has given to us, hasn't he, as a gracious way of reducing pain and suffering, ill health and death are inevitable.

We die not because we didn't collect enough data on ourselves. We die not because we couldn't create enough cures in time.

We die not because the microscopes weren't quite strong enough. We die because God has placed a curse on us as a result of rebellion against him, the creator of life.

Do you remember, he says to Adam and Eve, doesn't he, from the dust you are taken and to the dust you will return. And so, death, as some people think today, is not something that we can choose as a kind of lifestyle choice.

It has been imposed on us to highlight the grave situation that we're in with God, our creator, with the God of life himself. But instead of facing that fact, the modern reaction is to try and fix that, isn't it?

[ 8 : 02 ] And our technology gives us the illusion that that is entirely possible. Just look in your sheets to that passage at the top there from Genesis 2.

And I think this couple of verses here gives us a really helpful insight into why we keep doing this.

Because, stepping back a little bit, have you ever asked the question, why must I be healthy?

We know we kind of want to be, don't we? But why? What is it that drives us to good health? And of course, we should do as far as we can do if we've got any sense.

But why? What lies beneath the desire to stay fit and well? Look at that passage. Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.

And the man became a living creature. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden in the east. And there he put the man whom he'd formed. And then, in verse 15, the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and to keep it.

[ 9 : 21 ] What's clear there is that human beings have a profound connection to the earth. We are made of dust. We're made of the same stuff, aren't we, as the earth around us.

We are formed of the dust, Moses says. And he gives us the reason for that. It is that we might work the dust. What Moses shows us here is that the health of our bodies made up of dust is linked with our use as workers of the dust.

We are given bodies made of the earth to have a place as keepers of the earth. We have physical bodies to have a purpose in this physical world.

And so, our health concerns are actually not just about our comfort and about our pleasure and our pain, but more fundamentally those concerns are about our purpose in the world.

bodies of dust given for us for purpose in a world of dust. And we know, don't we, and we feel the fear that as soon as we are separated from the dust of our bodies, we no longer have a place in this world.

[ 10 : 41 ] We do not have it and it does not have us. The writer to the Ecclesiastes in chapter 9, he speaks about the privilege of being in the world of living.

He says, he who has joined with the land of the living has hope. As the saying goes, a living dog is better than a dead lion. But he contrasts that with the dead.

He says, the dead forever have no more share in all that is done under the sun. Thinking about it, might our concern for health actually be a concern about something much more profound?

might it be a concern about our place and our purpose in all that is done under the sun in the world? And as we feel our bodies crumbling, we panic, don't we?

Because we see our influence and our roles and our purpose in that world fleeting away. Health is important because we recognise that health equals usefulness in all kinds of areas of life made of the dust to work the dust in wherever God places us with a purpose.

[ 12 : 02 ] Some of you might sit there and think, actually, you've got it wrong because the real problem with ill health is none of this kind of deep and meaningful stuff. It's just the pain and it's just the suffering that I and others around me feel.

But I do want to get you to think underneath that if you can and to think about the torment that is there in ill health of those plans for your life which have been frustrated by it.

And in a way that is a deeper pain, isn't it? For those who are housebound and for those who are unsteady on their feet when you lack sleep and you have all kinds of issues that is a deeper pain, isn't it?

Of being removed from the world and feeling useless. A modern obsession but it's a relentless problem. But thirdly I want to give you hope here because there is a real hope.

The message of the gospel is that whilst we face up to the reality of the curse there is hope under the curse. There is a real hope.

[ 13 : 20 ] When it comes to poor health the modern typical response is how can I fix this? And some of us actually particularly men we are really bad at asking that question are we.

We don't visit the doctor enough and we need to. But from the Bible's point of view poor health and suffering actually is not the end of our usefulness in the world.

In fact it can be the beginning of real useful purpose in the world under God's grace. You know that famous passage that's on your sheet there from 2 Corinthians 12 where Paul at the end of his letter speaks about an illness.

He calls it a thorn in the flesh doesn't he? And he says three times I pleaded with the Lord about it that it should leave me. He wanted to be healthy and to get rid of this ailment.

But God said to me my grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness. He goes on therefore I'll boast all the more gladly of my weakness so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

[ 14 : 34 ] And just thinking a quick scan through the Bible there are loads of characters aren't there in the Bible who God uses precisely in their weakness and illness to do great things.

Suffering and ill health can actually be an opportunity. B.B. Warfield was a professor of theology at Princeton University in the late 1800s and he has written at great length on the Christian life and about God.

B.B. Warfield is an outstanding writer with an outstanding contribution to Christian thought. But what is less known about B.B. Warfield was that for 40 years he spent most of his time caring for his ill wife Annie.

Annie developed a debilitating condition after what was really a nervous breakdown and it was said that he was never out of her presence for more than a couple of hours at a time.

She needed constant attention and constant care. One biographer reflects on his life and writes Warfield's remarkable literary output is no doubt in large measure due to the frail condition of his wife and his amazing devotion to her.

[ 15 : 59 ] Mrs. Warfield was a brilliant woman and Dr. Warfield would read to her for several hours each day. And in the mysterious providence of God it was the nature of his wife's illness and his devotion to her that ironically provided the greatest impetus for his massive literary output.

The simple lesson of his life and Annie Warfield's life is that bad health, whether it's you or it's someone close to you, bad health doesn't mean you are not useful.

while you're still on this earth, a thorn in the flesh, under God's grace, it doesn't mean that you are past it, on the contrary, you can pray, you can write, you can make phone calls, you can support the church, you can encourage, you can do much under God's grace.

you hear the super health conscious then you quote the Bible and they don't know they're quoting it but they say my body is a temple as they flex their muscles.

But it's worth asking isn't it, who do we think are the people with bodies that are temples around us? Is it only the young and the athletic?

[ 17 : 29 ] Is it only the Brad Pitts of the world? It's interesting that Paul uses that phrase in the passage in 1 Corinthians not to talk about those who go to the gym and drink protein shakes but actually to the sexually pure.

The quote there from 1 Corinthians 6 on your sheets, don't you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you are bought with a price, so glorify God in your body.

What he's doing there, he's flipping our vision of what a good body is like and what it's for. He is saying that you can be a person whose body is in a wheelchair with bad eyesight and a dodgy hip and brittle bones and if you seek to live for God in purity and in faith and in love, your body is more temple-like for God's Holy Spirit than an athletic Adonis who sleeps around and doesn't love God. Do we honestly think that God only loves and uses healthy, beautiful people? Sometimes I think we do believe that.

Our purpose and place in the world, yes, if we're realistic, it can be restricted with our plans for what we want to do in a crumbling body, but it can be increased under God's grace in the very place of weakness.

[ 19 : 10 ] Charlotte Elliot lived in the late 1700s, early 1800s. She suffered as well from serious illness. She was bedridden from around the age 33 to when she died at age 82.

She was converted in a convalescent home. Up until that point she struggled over whether God could use her and accept her because of her illness.

She knew she couldn't work and do things to impress God enough. One day she was visited by a preacher who explained to her, you have nothing of merit to bring to God.

You must come as you are, the preacher said. Charlotte did. Later in her life she writes really movingly of God's help with her physical and emotional struggles.

She battled though with feeling useless in that. The story goes that years after becoming a Christian, Charlotte's brother was raising funds for a school for daughters of clergymen.

[ 20 : 16 ] Unable to help with the project, Charlotte again felt that same discouragement. But as she pondered her situation, she remembered the words of the visiting preacher who met her that day, come as you are, just as you are.

She wrote a song about that, that famous hymn, it goes, just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me, and that thou biddest me come to thee.

O Lamb of God, I come, I come. It wasn't planned by her, but that hymn would be used greatly by God. Dora Wordsworth, the daughter of William Wordsworth, had it read to her on her deathbed.

Sir Henry Norman, an official in British controlled Columbia, was saved through that hymn in a meeting. Billy Graham used it in his invitation services and mission trips.

And in a wonderful twist of irony, Charlotte learned that copies of the hymn had been being sold and the money donated for her brother's school. The very project she thought she couldn't help with.

[ 21 : 31 ] And after her death, more than a thousand letters were found among her papers, written by people telling her how her hymn had touched their lives. The point is, isn't it, bad health doesn't mean you can't be useful.

people. And under God's grace, it may be the very means that he uses you most. Whether you're old or whether you're young, you should want to be well and healthy, I'm not denying that, and get care if and when you need it.

But when that is not a possibility, we are not in despair when our modern expectations are dashed. And we don't kid ourselves that our technology can fix it all.

But even better than that, we have a great hope that we can be useful to God. And that God's grace is sufficient. For his power is made perfect in weakness.

Let's pray together.