

Biblical Principles of Health



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By Douglas S. Winnail, M.P.H., Ph.D.

*Did Jesus do away with the biblical health laws?
What has modern science discovered about them?
And are they still applicable today?*

About the Author and this Booklet

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The information in this booklet cannot replace a personal, one-on-one relationship with a qualified health professional. However, the Bible is a long-neglected resource for health and nutrition, and Dr. Winnail has dedicated much of his life to educating people about the wisdom it contains. Over the last four decades, he has instructed the students of several colleges and universities on the subjects of health and wellness, providing many of the very insights collected in this work.

It is our hope that this booklet will inspire you to begin including God's word as you make your own decisions about health, diet, and lifestyle.

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Preface

Choices with Consequences: How Do We Approach Health?

Is good health a matter of “luck”? Or can individuals make decisions that can improve the quality of their lives—and even extend their lives?

In the opening chapters of the book of Genesis, we read that God planted many trees in the Garden of Eden for Adam and Eve. He called their attention, however, to *two trees in particular*. They symbolized two very different ways of life (Genesis 2:9), each with the ability to profoundly influence all of human history. We read that God let Adam and Eve *choose* between these two different ways of life (Genesis 2:16–17). Sadly, influenced by Satan, they made a fateful decision that has had *far-reaching* and *long-lasting* consequences. The Tree of Life represented obedience to God and embracing His way of life, outlined in the laws and instructions found in the Bible. The consequence of choosing that option is blessings of every kind. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil pictures humanity’s choice to follow human reasoning apart from God’s guidance. Adam and Eve chose that second tree, rejecting God’s way of life in favor of a path that leads to pain, suffering, and disease—consequences that inevitably result when human beings accept Satan’s deadly influence.

Moses emphasized these same choices to the Israelites before they entered the Promised Land. He said, “I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days” (Deuteronomy 30:19–20). God’s way of life involves obedience to His laws and instructions, but Moses also warned that ignoring or disobeying God’s instructions would re-

sult in suffering and death. Regrettably, the Israelites chose the way that brought negative consequences—including sickness and disease.

Throughout Scripture, we find again and again the same theme of two contrasting ways of life. Ancient King David wrote, “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly... but his delight is in the law of the LORD” (Psalm 1:1–2). King Solomon stated similarly, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:7). Solomon also warned, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death” (Proverbs 14:12). Jesus Christ taught His followers that most people choose the broad way that leads to suffering, while only a few find the narrow way that leads to life (Matthew 7:13–14). As you will discover in this booklet, the Bible and human history bear witness to a fundamental truth regarding physical health: *Human beings have chosen an inadequate approach to health and disease, very different from what God originally intended for us to follow.*

What you are about to read may surprise you. However, when you begin to understand and apply the simple yet powerful Bible-based principles we will discuss, you will embark on a remarkably practical path that may add years to your life, and even life to your years.

Of course, God promises no one continuously perfect health in this life—which is only temporary (Hebrews 9:27; cf. Ecclesiastes



9:10). In fact, many causes of illness and injury in this world are due to the disobedience of *others* and are beyond our control. As the entire world continues to reject more and more of God's way of life, it seems as if even the environment itself is turning against us.

Yet, in the Bible, God provides us with powerful principles with the potential to make a real impact on the quality of our health—and on every aspect of our lives. As you learn more about the biblical approach to health, and put it into practice for yourself, you will be preparing for an exciting and challenging future that soon will change the whole world.

Chapter I

Disease: An Age-Old Curse

Why have sickness and disease been so persistent and pervasive throughout human history?

When we examine how various civilizations have dealt with health and disease, some very important lessons begin to emerge. From a public health standpoint, human history is the story of a *continuing struggle against disease*. Mummies from ancient Egypt and medical texts from the time of the pharaohs reveal that the ancient Egyptians suffered from many of the *same* diseases that currently afflict the modern peoples of Egypt: asthma, cancer, heart disease, varicose veins, epilepsy, blindness, scurvy, hepatitis, bubonic plague, and a host of parasitic diseases.

Though many ancient civilizations had priest-physicians, they *never succeeded* in eliminating the ever-present threat of disease. But why did they fail? Was it because they lacked modern scientific information and technology, or was it because of their basic approach to the subject of health and disease?

Sadly, the picture has changed very little today. Although nations have spent *billions* of dollars and medical science has made enormous strides in identifying the causes of many diseases—even developing “miracle cures” and “magic bullets” to treat formerly fatal illnesses—the tragic effects of sickness and suffering still linger like a dark shadow over our modern world. We “declare war” on cancer, diabetes, and heart disease, yet they remain leading causes of death. Modern medicine has made an immense effort to eradicate malaria—a disease that helped topple the Roman Empire—yet

malaria today is *returning* with a vengeance. Tuberculosis, once thought to be nearly eliminated in developed countries, is again spreading with the movements of people from less-developed parts of the planet. Despite massive efforts against the scourge of AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), the disease continues to ravage nations and destroy lives around the globe. Parasitic diseases continue to afflict millions of people.

Is there something we have failed to see? Is there *another road* we have not taken—one that could lead to a better and healthier future in our struggle to overcome the scourge of disease?

Substances and Superstitions

As we study thousands of years of recorded medical history, a very striking theme begins to emerge—as well as a sharp contrast. Most human societies have followed a similar approach in dealing with the problem of disease. Rather than change the behaviors that led to sickness, people sought to invoke their gods or appease them with superstitious ceremonies, sacrifices, and offerings.

Most ancient civilizations also recorded extensive lists of substances used to treat diseases. Ancient writings contain details of surgical procedures for various pathological conditions, along with *spells* employed by sorcerers to drive away diseases. The knowledge of their medical treatments was usually held as the *exclusive domain* of the priest-physicians—which kept the average person dependent on the priesthood to deal with disease. In the early Americas, this private knowledge was often passed down from father to son within the priesthood. In Egypt, medical knowledge was guarded and transmitted in schools associated with the temples. The Egyptian practice of embalming the dead before burial also gave Egyptian physicians a considerable knowledge of human anatomy. The Greek poet Homer (ca. 850 BC) wrote, “In Egypt the men are more skilled in medicine than any of human kind,” and the Greek historian Herodotus (ca. 450 BC) noted that Egypt was full of physicians and that each physician specialized in treating specific diseases—of the eye, the teeth, the stomach, and other parts of the body.¹

A comparative study of ancient civilizations around the world reveals that in addition to superstitious practices that looked to the gods for healing, such as temple sleep and wearing amulets, nearly all

societies narrowly followed a *treatment-oriented* approach involving drugs and surgery when dealing with disease.

None of these bygone societies succeeded in eliminating the curse of sickness and disease with such a focus, yet that same approach still dominates our health-care systems today—systems that are becoming prohibitively expensive and increasingly overwhelmed as the curse of disease continues to spread around the world. While we should be grateful for the ability of modern medicine to treat disease, is it possible we are *overlooking* another important dimension?

Ancient Israel: Promoting Health and Preventing Disease

History provides a *striking contrast* in the example of a nation that was given a very different approach for dealing with health and disease. The example is that of the Hebrews and the ancient nation of Israel—described primarily in the writings of Moses, though related, additional principles can be found throughout the Bible. In contrast to their neighbors and other civilizations in the ancient world, the inspired, biblical writings of the Hebrews do *not* record extensive lists of drugs and substances, nor do they provide details of surgical procedures for treating diseases. Instead, the Bible provides us with *fundamental principles* that modern medical scientists have come to realize can play powerful roles in *promoting health and preventing disease*.

Various commentators throughout history have acknowledged the intent and benefit of these biblical guidelines. One scholar noted that “most of the [biblical] laws can be clearly seen to tend toward public health... the laws were wonderfully fashioned by God for the general health of the nation.”²

And, in further contrast to surrounding cultures, Hebrew priests did not guard these fundamental principles as their private knowledge. Instead, God told them to disseminate this vital information and make these fundamental principles public knowledge by *teaching* the people *how* they could *avoid* the curse of disease and live healthy lives. Israelite priests were to focus on *education and prevention*, not simply after-the-fact medical treatments. “Unlike their Egyptian predecessors, they avoided actual medical practice and concentrated upon the observance of health rules with regard to food, cleanliness

and quarantine.”³ In fact, as medical historians plainly acknowledge, “Moses recognized the great principle that prevention of disease is usually simpler and invariably more far reaching than the cure of disease.”⁴ Moses has also been called “the greatest sanitary engineer the world has ever seen” and the public health guidelines he recorded in Leviticus “could be summed by the objects of sanitation today—pure food, pure water, pure air, pure bodies and pure dwellings.”⁵

The Bible also records that God revealed His way of life to ancient Israel so that the Hebrews would be lights and examples to the world (see Deuteronomy 4:1–10). God desired that other nations would see the Israelites’ success and want to follow their example. He did not want His laws to be the exclusive possession of Israel—they were meant to be shared with the world so other nations and peoples would be able to enjoy the benefits of this God-given way of life.

The writings of Moses—along with other biblical principles we will discuss—outline a very particular, practical approach to the subject of health and disease. The biblical approach focuses on *education*—the *prevention* of disease and the *active promotion* of health—instead of merely cataloging cures and treatments.

Ancient Health Laws and a Modern Dilemma

The Bible’s laws and instructions about health pose an interesting dilemma for anyone who believes in following biblical teachings. The Bible clearly states that certain foods must not be eaten and that certain behaviors are sinful and an abomination in God’s sight. Yet professing Christian theologians have claimed for centuries that these laws were burdensome restrictions applicable only to the Jews, and that Jesus came to abolish them once and for all. Critics dismiss these ancient laws as outdated, bizarre, sometimes barbaric, and certainly no longer binding upon Christians. Yet, others who read the Bible carefully find it odd that God would command His chosen people to follow these laws and instructions *for their own good* (Deuteronomy 10:13), then send Jesus Christ to somehow dismiss these same laws and instructions as unhelpful and no longer necessary. Anyone with common sense can see that this just does not add up.

Many of the biblical health principles are found within the body of divinely inspired laws and statutes often referred to as the “laws of Moses”—principles that have been the subject of considerable debate

and speculation in theological circles as to their origin and purpose. Some scholars believe that Moses merely collected primitive taboos from neighboring nations to form a code of laws. Others claim that the designations of “clean” (fit for human consumption) and “unclean” (unfit for human consumption) were purely arbitrary, irrational, and unexplainable. Some speculate that unclean animals were imperfect members of their species—yet, if you told that to a pig, you would probably get a well-deserved snort of disgust. Some misguided theologians also assert that the biblical health laws have nothing to do with health, but were merely rituals designed to separate the Israelites from their pagan neighbors, and that only Jews (if anyone) need to observe these laws today. Or they simply assume these laws are relics of temple worship that are obsolete in our day. However, all these attempts to explain—or explain *away*—the biblical health laws are woefully inadequate and totally overlook historical, scientific, and biblical facts and observations that support very different conclusions.

It is quite informative and instructive to read what more objective reference books say about the biblical health laws. *Halley's Bible Handbook* states, “Moses' Law... [including] its Health and Food regulations, was far purer, more rational, humane and democratic than, and showed wisdom far in advance of, anything in ancient legislation, Babylonian, Egyptian or any other.”⁶ *Eerdmans' Handbook to the Bible* states, “Today we are more able to understand and appreciate the sound principles of diet, hygiene and medicine which these laws express.”⁷ Commenting on Leviticus 11, the *Expositor's Bible Commentary* states that “the Levitical laws of cleanness have no known extensive parallel in the surrounding cultures”—so the idea that Moses borrowed primitive taboos does not hold up, because “surrounding cultures exhibit little of this sort of law.”⁸ These are rather amazing statements.

Although some scholars mistakenly assert that God gave the biblical health laws for ritual and ceremonial reasons rather than health, the *Expositor's Bible Commentary* correctly states that the “spiritual and hygienic reasons for the laws may still be affirmed. They are remarkably valuable in the area of public health... [and] protected Israel from bad diet, dangerous vermin, and communicable diseases.... These were rule-of-thumb laws that God gave in His wisdom to a people who could not know the reason for the provision.”⁹ Thus, the claims that these biblical health

laws are outdated, old-fashioned, irrational, and have nothing to do with health are simply nonsense—biblically and scientifically groundless.

Learning from Israel's Potential and Failure

But why did God record physical health laws in the Bible, which is a book of religion and not a book of medical science? When God brought the Israelites out of captivity in Egypt, He gave them laws, commandments, and statutes that would enable them to have a relationship with Him and to be blessed above all people on earth (Deuteronomy 7:14). Those laws included fundamental health laws designed to benefit them.

As we will see, Scripture clearly reveals that health is the *result* of learning and obeying the physical laws and principles that God designed to promote health and help prevent disease. In the Bible, sickness and disease are the *result* of turning away from God and ignoring and disobeying these fundamental laws and principles. Any society that understands and obeys these laws is a healthier society.

God plainly told the Israelites, “If you diligently heed the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in His sight, give ear to His commandments and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have brought upon the Egyptians. For I am the LORD who heals you” (Exodus 15:26). This same instruction is repeated in Exodus 23:22–25, where God told Israel that, among other blessings for obedience, “I will take sickness away from the midst of you” (v. 25). Again, in Deuteronomy 7, He told Israel that, “because you listen to these judgments, and keep and do them... the LORD will take away from you all sickness, and will afflict you with none of the terrible diseases of Egypt which you have known, but will lay them on all those who hate you” (Deuteronomy 7:12, 15). While there is certainly an element of active, divine blessing and cursing in these passages, we will see that it would be a grave mistake to assume this is the only element.

The Bible reveals plainly that God gave the Israelites His laws *for their benefit* (Deuteronomy 10:13). They were in no way meant to be a burden (cf. 1 John 5:2–3)—though so many have falsely been told otherwise.

In fact, God wanted *other nations* to learn from Israel's way of life, as well. Among His other purposes for Israel, God wanted their exam-

ple to show the world a *way of life* that actually worked and brought real, measurable benefits. As Moses told them concerning these laws, “Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, ‘surely this is a wise and understanding people’” (Deuteronomy 4:6).

On the other hand, God warned Israel that if they did *not* obey Him, plague, fever, and wasting disease would follow, among numerous other curses (Deuteronomy 28:15–28). And, regrettably, Israel did, indeed, do just that: turn their back on the God who loved them and on the way of life He had delivered to them.

And, just as regrettably, those curses did, indeed, follow.

While many of those curses would be the result of Israel’s spiritual condition and their rejection of their Creator, the inspired words of Scripture indicate that some of the curses they experienced would simply be *the natural effects* of their disobedience—a matter of cause and effect. For instance, through the prophet Jeremiah, God informed Israel, “*Your own wickedness* will correct you, and your backslidings will reprove you” (Jeremiah 2:19). Through Hosea, the Ever-Living One declares, “My people are destroyed for *lack of knowledge*. Because... you have *forgotten the law of your God*, I also will forget your children” (Hosea 4:6). God says that He gave Israel “the great things of My law, but they were considered a strange thing” (Hosea 8:12). How descriptive that is of our modern world.

The results of violating the Creator’s health laws were among the punishing effects that ancient, rebellious Israel experienced. Yet, the lessons of ancient Israel are being repeated by many today. Sadly, many people from all walks of life—including many who consider themselves Christian—view the God-given health laws of the Bible as strange and outdated ideas that are no longer relevant in our modern scientific age. Yet nothing could be further from the truth, as we will see in the chapters that follow.



Chapter 2

Dietary Laws: Do You Really Want to Eat That?

*Why did God prohibit the consumption of certain animals?
Should we follow those same instructions today?*

For many people today, the dietary laws regarding clean and unclean animals are among the most puzzling instructions found in the Bible. For thousands of years, these laws have been a striking mark of identity separating those who follow biblical guidelines from the rest of the world (Leviticus 20:25–26). Yet, for centuries, these same instructions have also been a source of controversy and confusion among various religious groups, even those who claim to get their beliefs from the same book—the Bible.

Perceptive scholars have recognized that these laws express God’s will and represent wise, reasonable, and beneficial measures revealing “God’s care for the health of His people.”¹ Sadly, most people today—including theologians—have little or no understanding of the sound medical reasons behind God’s instructions, because the scientific wisdom behind the biblical dietary laws is seldom taught or explained. Instead, these laws are commonly viewed as antiquated Old Testament regulations for the Jews that are no longer applicable for Christians or the general public. However, as *Eerdmans’ Handbook to the Bible* comments, “The lists of clean and unclean animals in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14... have a significance often ignored. Far from being a catalogue of food taboos based on fad or fancy, these lists emphasize a fact not discovered until late in the last century... that animals carry diseases dangerous to man.”² In fact, the same animals labeled unclean in Scripture *still carry* parasitic diseases that are dangerous to human beings today.

Despite these important scientific facts, many theologians and secular scholars have dismissively referred to the dietary guidelines in Leviticus and Deuteronomy as meaningless, repulsive, arbitrary, irrational ideas that originated in primitive superstitions—not in the mind of God. They have even asked, “What has all this to do with religion?”³

Scripture reveals several important reasons for the dietary laws. In Exodus, we learn that God chose the nation of Israel and set them apart for a special purpose (Exodus 19:5–6), and the dietary laws contributed to that divine purpose: “I am the LORD your God, who has separated you from the peoples. You shall therefore distinguish between clean beasts and unclean.... And you shall be holy to Me, for I the LORD am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be Mine” (Leviticus 20:24–26). Living according to God’s divine laws should have made Israel a model nation—a light and example to the world—as nations saw the blessings they enjoyed, including blessings of good health (Deuteronomy 7:15).

As we will see, not only would the dietary laws contribute to the Israelites’ good health, they would promote wise and efficient management of environmental resources. Understood this way, the distinction between clean and unclean animals plays a role in helping us “tend and keep” the land as good stewards of God’s creation (cf. Genesis 1:28; 2:15). Indeed, to fully grasp the significance of the biblical dietary laws, we must see them in the context of God’s overall purpose for mankind.

Stay on the Grass

Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 are the primary passages in the Bible that describe the dietary laws. These chapters provide very specific information summarized in simple, easy-to-understand principles that could be applied long before the microscope was invented and long before germ theory was proposed. Today, the discoveries of modern science are revealing just how important and practical these laws really are.

Beginning in Leviticus 11, we read that God told Moses and Aaron to inform the Israelites, “These are the animals which you may eat among all the animals that are on the earth: Among the animals, whatever divides the hoof, having cloven hooves *and* chewing the cud—that you may eat” (vv. 1–3). Plant-eating mammals (herbivores) that fit this

description are called *ruminants*. These animals have four-chambered stomachs that convert grasses that are inedible to humans and other animals into nutritious, high-quality protein products (meat and milk) that people can then use for food. Examples of clean animals would be all cattle, sheep, goats, deer, bison, moose, antelope, gazelles, caribou, and giraffes. They are all divided-hoof herbivores that obtain their food by grazing or browsing on grasses and other plants.

From the standpoint of wise environmental management, these guidelines make a lot of sense. Vast areas of the globe are covered by rangelands (savannas, veldts, and pampas), which are often called “marginal lands” because they do not have enough rainfall to support the production of food crops like corn or wheat. “Cattle, sheep and goats have the ability to convert plant carbohydrates and proteins into available nutrients for human use, making otherwise unusable land productive.”⁴

The clean animals that God permitted His model nation to eat—easily discerned by split hooves and cud-chewing—were designed to produce nutritious food in an economical and ecologically sound manner. These guidelines were a key benefit that God wanted the world to see through the example of Israel.

No Pigging Out

The dietary laws regarding cud-chewing beasts also prohibit the consumption of all carnivorous animals for very logical reasons. God created unclean animals, unsuitable for human consumption, for many other purposes. Carnivores, as beasts of prey, play an important role in controlling the populations of other animals. As an example, wolves and mountain lions, which feed on herds of deer, not only control numbers, but also help maintain the herd’s health by culling out older, sick, or infirm animals. That is one reason why we should not eat carnivores—they may eat sick animals and transmit diseases to humans.

The pig or swine is specifically mentioned in Scripture as unclean and unfit to be human food (Leviticus 11:7–8; Deuteronomy 14:8). While some theologians have stated, “We do not know why the swine was forbidden,”⁵ others find numerous reasons related to ecology, economics, nutrition, and public health. In the wild, swine are often nocturnal animals that root for food. Their nighttime feeding habits would keep contact with humans at a minimum. Domesticated pigs,

however, have been used for centuries as scavengers around human settlements. Having an omnivorous animal like the pig around that can put on weight rapidly by eating anything from simple grain to garbage, dead animals, and human waste products—and that can later be slaughtered and used for “food”—seemed like a pretty good arrangement to many peoples.

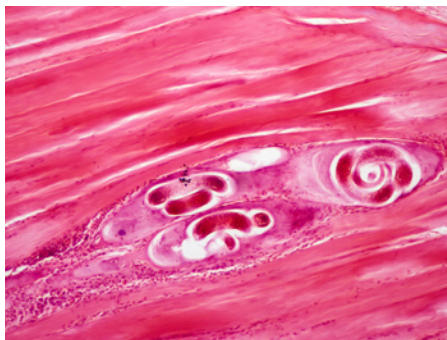
But is it? The similarities between human and pig digestive tracts make them ecological competitors for many of the same types of food, resulting in a great deal of corn and other grains to be diverted to feed hogs in order to satisfy society’s craving for pork, instead of feeding humans themselves more directly—and far more efficiently.⁶

But pigs are not the only animal the Bible warns us to avoid eating. Rabbits and rodents can transmit tularemia (also called rabbit fever, deerfly fever, and tick fever) to humans who come into contact with meat and body fluids from these animals. This bacterial disease is endemic in North America and across Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. It can also be transmitted by ticks or mosquitoes that bite an infected animal and then bite human beings.⁷

Biblical dietary guidelines also prohibit eating bats and monkeys—which have been implicated as the source of the Ebola virus that has emerged with devastating effects in equatorial Africa where both bats and primates are consumed as “bush meat.”⁸ Bats and camels have been implicated in Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). In fact, consuming unclean animals such as bats, pigs, civets, and various other “exotic” but unclean animals, has been implicated in the possible origins of many modern flu epidemics and pandemics of our times, such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Swine Flu, and the coronavirus that gave the world COVID-19. Virologist Michael Lai has noted, “The fact that both SARS and most flu viruses originated in southern China is no surprise,” citing the custom of those in the region to eat such wild animals. Lai highlights that SARS is suspected by some to have moved from animals to humans after first mixing with a human virus that may have been “brewing” in another animal, such as a pig.⁹

Let Us *Not* Eat Worms

Trichinosis, caused by a small parasitic roundworm that gets into muscle tissue, is one of the major diseases transmitted by swine and other unclean animals. It is a global disease infesting approximately



A medical image of pig muscle tissue infested with a trichinosis parasite

11 million people.¹⁰ This is not surprising, considering that pork has long been the most popular meat in the world, only recently surpassed by poultry.¹¹ On average, each American consumes more than 50 pounds (23 kilograms) of pork every year.¹²

Pigs are not alone, however, and *many* carnivorous and omnivorous animals are infected with the para-

site *trichinella spiralis*. In addition to pork, bear and walrus meat have both served as significant sources of infections in humans. The list of unclean animals that transmit this parasite to people in their meat includes squirrels, rats, cats, dogs, rabbits, foxes, panthers, lions, and horses.¹³ It is hardly an accident or coincidence that God prohibited the consumption of these animals.

Tapeworms (*taenia*), which afflict about 100 million people worldwide, are another serious health problem. While beef and fish can contain tapeworms that will colonize the human digestive tract and cause discomfort, the pork tapeworm is much more dangerous. The larva of the pork parasite, once inside the human intestine, can migrate through the tissues to the heart, eyes, and brain—and can eventually cause death.¹⁴ Pork tapeworm infections “are more prevalent in under-developed communities with poor sanitation where people eat raw or undercooked pork... in Latin America, eastern Europe, sub-Saharan Africa and Asia.”¹⁵

Although the general medical advice for avoiding parasitic infections from animals is to adequately cook the meat, the most effective way to avoid these diseases is to avoid eating unclean animals that do not have cloven hooves and do not chew the cud—as God instructed Moses and the Israelites 3,500 years ago. If *this portion alone* of the biblical dietary code were applied today, the global burden of parasitic disease could be dramatically reduced within a generation.

Don't Eat the Clean-Up Crew

After dealing with edible land animals, the second major set of divine dietary instructions concerned aquatic creatures. Scripture instructs, “These you may eat of all that are in the water: whatever in the water has fins and scales, whether in the seas or in the rivers—that you may eat.... Whatever in the water does not have fins or scales—that shall be an abomination to you” (Leviticus 11:9, 12).

These divinely ordained biblical guidelines were designed to point people to the safest kinds of fish to eat.

Biblically clean fish generally swim free in bodies of water. Most unclean fish are either bottom-dwellers or predatory scavengers. The prohibition against eating fish that have no scales protects against the consumption of fish that often produce poisonous substances in their bodies. A U.S. Army survival manual comments, “Most poisonous fish have many similar physical characteristics. Generally, they are odd-shaped—box-like or almost round—and have hard skin (often covered with bony plates or spines), tiny mouths, small gills, and small or absent belly fins.”¹⁶ Many sea creatures noted for being venomous (e.g. four sharks, 58 stingrays, 47 catfish, 57 scorpion fish, 15 toadfish) do not have true scales.¹⁷ Eels—nocturnal predatory scavengers that eat “almost any animal food, dead or alive”—would also be considered unclean because they lack scales.¹⁸ Eel blood contains a toxic substance “which can be dangerous” if it comes “into contact with eyes or another mucous membrane.”¹⁹

Shellfish, lacking both fins and scales, are clearly excluded by the biblical dietary laws. But why would lobsters, crabs, crayfish, and shrimp—considered delicacies in much of the world—be prohibited? The answer lies in understanding the role they were designed to play in nature.

Lobsters are nocturnal foragers. They are bottom-dwelling predatory scavengers that eat dead creatures and other bottom-dwelling organisms and debris.²⁰ They are usually caught in lobster pots baited with dead fish. Lobsters have long antennae and tiny hair-like sensors all over their bodies “that can detect specific chemical molecules in the environment (released by decaying organisms), which can help the lobster identify and locate food”—even in the dark. Lobsters have also been observed to bury a dead fish and then dig it up later, at intervals, to eat a bit more of it.²¹



Not all animals were created to be eaten: Certain animals such as pigs, shrimp, and oysters were all created for a very important ecological purpose. They are, in essence, the “garbage collectors” or the “cleanup crew” for land and the bottoms of lakes, rivers, beaches, bays, and oceans. They were not intended to be food for human beings.

Crabs have been called “professional garbage hunters” as they are scavengers that eat almost anything. The crab prefers dead fish but will eat any carrion. Common shrimp live by day in the mud or sandy bottoms of bays and estuaries, but by night become active as predatory scavengers and are “bottom dwelling detritus feeders.”²²

These organisms were all created for a very important ecological purpose. They are, in essence, the “garbage collectors” or the “clean-up crew” for the bottoms of lakes, rivers, bays, and oceans. They were neither designed nor intended to be food for human beings.

Danger on the Half Shell

There are also important and logical reasons why God created clams, oysters, mussels, and scallops, and then labeled them unclean and

inappropriate for human consumption. These creatures are found in lakes, streams, and coastal areas where they perform specialized roles. As stationary filter-feeding mollusks, they pump large amounts of water over their mucus-covered gills, trapping tiny pieces of food (e.g. silt, plant debris, bacteria, viruses) which they then eat. As a result, some consider mussels and similar organisms the sea's ultimate scavengers. *Filter-feeding organisms are the "vacuum cleaners" for aquatic environments. Their role is to purify the water.*

Once you understand the purpose for which God created shellfish, the reason they are considered unclean should become obvious. Most of us would be reluctant to make a meal from the contents of our vacuum cleaner bag, or from the material that collects on our furnace filter or septic tank. This well describes the role of shellfish: "Because [shellfish] feed by filtering the water that washes over the shellfish bed, they can accumulate disease-causing bacteria and viruses that are harmful to people."²³

How serious is the threat of disease from shellfish? The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has stated that "raw oysters, clams and mussels—so savored by gourmets—account for 85 percent of all the illnesses caused by eating seafood."²⁴ Outbreaks of cholera, typhoid, hepatitis A, Norwalk virus, salmonella, and paralytic shellfish poisoning are just some of the health problems frequently linked to the consumption of these mollusks. Perhaps this is why Norwalk virus breaks out from time to time on cruise ships where these mollusks are commonly served. Public health authorities have recommended that pregnant women, the elderly, and "individuals with immune systems weakened by certain diseases (cancer, diabetes, and AIDS) should... avoid eating or handling uncooked shellfish."²⁵ Dangerous and potentially life-threatening consequences can be avoided by understanding and following the biblical dietary laws that prohibit eating marine organisms lacking fins and scales.

From Birds to Bugs

The final groups of organisms covered by the biblical code are birds, insects, and reptiles. Essentially all the unclean fowl are either birds of prey or scavengers, like vultures and seagulls (Leviticus 11:13–19). Carnivorous birds are important in controlling populations of other animals. Their habit of eating the flesh and blood of their prey make

these birds potential agents for transmitting disease. Predatory, fish-eating birds (e.g. eagles) tend to accumulate high levels of toxic chemicals in their bodies. Most of these birds are not important “food” sources for humans.

Reptiles are also among the animals listed as unfit for human food (Leviticus 11:29–30; 42–43). Regarding insects, only those from the locust and grasshopper family are permissible as food (vv. 21–23). These creatures are distinguished by having “strong hind legs for springing”²⁶ and historically have been a food source in the Middle East.

The Skinny on Fat

The laws about clean and unclean animals are not the only biblical instructions that concern diet. Scripture tells us not only what animals are good for food, but what parts of the animal can be eaten and what parts cannot. The Bible plainly states that when we eat meat, we should avoid the consumption of fat and blood: “You shall eat neither fat nor blood” (Leviticus 3:17). Why would these two items be singled out? A closer look, both at the Bible and research, sheds more light.

The “fat” described in the book of Leviticus is the visceral fat around the liver, kidneys, and intestines, and may include visible fat that can be trimmed off of meat (Leviticus 3:3–16). These fats were to be burned on the altar as a sacrifice to God, and they were *forbidden* for human consumption (Leviticus 3:17; 7:23, 25). But why would God instruct us not to eat these fats? Is He against flavorful food? In fact, the very fats listed by name in Leviticus as forbidden are a staple of British cooking—used for savory and sweet puddings and other traditional dishes.

It is surely no coincidence that most modern medical studies indicate that diets that are high in certain kinds of fat, such as some associated with the list in Leviticus, are also associated with weight gain, obesity, heart disease, various kinds of cancer, and other problems.²⁷ And while there is some dispute about the complex details concerning which fats are good and which are bad,²⁸ the Bible’s advice is plain, easy to follow, and has been consistent for more than 3,000 years.

However, not all fat is bad. For instance, the Bible does not forbid the consumption of marbled fat *within* meat that gives it flavor. This “intramuscular” fat is chemically distinct from the fat that God forbids,

and studies suggest it contains several healthy fatty acids not present in the forbidden fats.²⁹ In moderation, milk, cheese, butter, and yogurts can be healthful food sources, which is in harmony with the meal that Abraham and Sarah served when they were visited by their Creator (Genesis 18:6–8). Of course, the Bible does not forbid nuts, seeds, fruits, vegetables, and (clean) fish, all of which can be sources of healthy fats.³⁰ The consistent advice given by various nutrition sources about dietary fats, even when those sources otherwise disagree, involves *moderation*, which is also a biblical principle (Philippians 4:5, *KJV*)—a principle that does not speak well of Western diets, with daily visits to fast-food establishments and their “super-size” approach to sugary sodas, mountains of fries, and fat-drenched, triple-patty burgers. Generally, biblical moderation is not on their menus.

Should We Eat Blood?

The consumption of blood as food is also forbidden by the biblical dietary laws (Leviticus 3:7; 7:26-27). Yet, depending on your culture, it might come as a surprise to learn that animal blood is used in preparing *many* traditional foods—from black pudding in the United Kingdom and blood sausage (*blutwurst*) in Germany and other parts of Europe, to *tiết canh* in Asia, which is a pudding made from the raw blood of animals such as pigs or ducks.

Some in the nutrition industry even advocate for the use of blood as a food, seeing it as a “wasted product” of slaughterhouses³¹—a potential “super food” and another way to profit off of the meat industry.³² However, most advocates make little mention of the health risks involved in making and consuming these blood products. In a report detailing the deaths of a number of people who had eaten *tiết canh* in celebration of Vietnamese Lunar New Year, Dr. Tran Van Ky of the Vietnam Association of Science, Technology, and Food Safety noted the deadly nature of the practice: “The blood carries many diseases from the animals. People eating raw blood from sick pigs can get swine bacteria, worms, and other digestive diseases, while those having blood from sick chicken can be infected with H5N1 or H1N1 viruses.”³³



Blood sausage

While many theologians believe the Old Testament commands about not eating blood were only for the Jews and were done away with by Jesus Christ, first-century apostles were *still* instructing New Testament Christians, including Gentiles, that they should not eat blood (Acts 15:20, 28–29). As Dr. Ky noted, obeying this biblical health principle can mean the difference between life and death.

Sweets and Starches: Applying Moderation and Discernment

When it comes to the consumption of sugars and starches, the story is much the same. Our modern Western diet contains considerable amounts of these ingredients in highly refined forms—essentially stripped of other nutrients such as vitamins, minerals, and fiber—hence the term “empty calories.” Numerous studies have shown that regularly consuming sugar-laden soft drinks and “energy” drinks and sugary foods like breakfast cereals, cookies, candy, cakes, and similar processed foods can lead to serious health problems. Actually, the more readily available these added sugars are in our diets, the greater the risk of weight gain, obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, and other chronic conditions.³⁴

However, many of these diseases and chronic conditions could be avoided by simply following biblical guidelines for the consumption of sugars. In the book of Proverbs, we find the principle of moderation, once again: “Have you found honey? Eat only as much as you need, lest you be filled with it and vomit” (25:16) and “it is not good to eat much honey” (25:27). Long before society realized that the excessive consumption of sugar was harmful to our health, the Bible counseled *moderation* and *self-control*—two vital qualities recommended in other scriptures as well (e.g., 1 Corinthians 9:25; Galatians 5:23).

Starches affect the body in a manner similar to sugar, and many studies have pointed to the dangers of a diet filled with refined starches and simple carbohydrates, as are found in many brands of bread found on grocery-store shelves—dangers including heart disease, diabetes, and various cancers. In contrast, foods and breads that contain *complex* carbohydrates—less refined and using the whole grain, including its fibrous components—have been shown to reduce the risks of the same diseases.³⁵

Is it only a coincidence that God gave Ezekiel a recipe for a multi-grain bread that was made with wheat, barley, beans, lentils, millet,

and spelt (Ezekiel 4:9), and not a “new and improved” bread made with bleached and refined white flour?

These biblical principles about sugars, starches, and sweets serve as guidelines to anyone interested in promoting health and preventing disease. And studies make it clear that we disobey them at our peril.

Proper Use of Alcohol

Many sincere people believe it is wrong and even sinful to drink alcohol. Yet, Paul recommended that Timothy drink a bit of wine for his upset stomach (1 Timothy 5:23), though we do not know the details of the circumstance he was addressing. And we should note that Jesus’ first miracle was turning water into wine at a wedding feast (John 2:1–11). He would not have done this if drinking alcohol were a sin.

In past decades, temperance movements have trumpeted the evils of drinking alcohol, and some religious groups teach abstinence. Nevertheless, medical research has confirmed that consuming moderate amounts of alcohol can have beneficial effects on health for some individuals.³⁶ In some cases, people who use alcohol in healthy moderation have fewer heart attacks than alcohol abusers or total abstainers. Moderate amounts of alcohol may also elevate levels of high-density lipoproteins (HDL) in the blood, which is advantageous to health.³⁷

At the same time, today’s attitude toward alcohol has swung to the other extreme. Drinking to excess has become a norm for many in Western society, leading to inevitable, tragic consequences. But here, too, the Bible provides guidance. God’s word declares drunkenness a sin, and it is condemned throughout Scripture (Proverbs 20:1; Ephesians 5:18; 1 Peter 4:3). Priests were forbidden to drink on the job (Leviticus 10:9) and kings were warned against it (Proverbs 31:4–5), ensuring that their judgment was not affected—just as extra care should be taken by all working in sensitive situations. How much heartache, injury, and even death could be avoided if the biblical instructions concerning moderate use of alcohol were followed?

Again, it is not surprising that the biblical instructions about the proper use of alcohol are in harmony with scientific evidence and are still applicable today. The Bible explains that we *may* use alcohol, but we must have the character needed to use it *properly*—and drinking to excess is divinely forbidden.

Did Jesus Abolish the Dietary Laws?

As we have seen, God revealed profound principles that would protect the environment, provide safe, healthful food, and reduce the risk of disease for individuals and societies who would follow these instructions. In fact, in the case of flu viruses and pandemics such as COVID-19 that originate in unclean animals, we see that obeying or disobeying God's health laws in one part of the globe can affect the entire world.

So, if these laws are so logical and beneficial for us, why do so-called "Bible-believing" Christians so often seem to be at the forefront of rejecting them?

Broader theological and doctrinal mistakes aside, many have misunderstood and misinterpreted some biblical passages to their own harm. A closer look at these passages reveals the truth behind some of these mistaken interpretations.

For example, in Mark 7, Jesus explained to critics why His disciples ate without following the Pharisees' ceremonial hand-washing tradition. Some Bible translations add words to Jesus' answer in verse 19, suggesting that He did away with the dietary laws—for example, the *Revised Standard Version* translates this phrase, "Thus he declared all foods clean." However, this translation is misleading and puts words into Jesus' mouth that He *did not say*. Jesus' point was that orally ingested dirt, which is eventually eliminated, does not spiritually defile a person, since it does not enter the "heart" and influence attitudes (vv. 18–23). Dirt passes through the digestive tract and is eliminated. Some translations treat this phrase far more accurately, such as the *International Standard Version*, which reads verse 19 as saying, "Because it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then into the sewer, thereby expelling all foods."

The dietary laws regarding clean and unclean animals are simply not being discussed in this chapter of Mark—nor in Matthew 15:10–20, which discusses the same event but without the misleading translation. In fact, Matthew 15:20 plainly sums up Jesus' teaching: "These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man."

Some will also cite Peter's vision recorded in Acts 10. In that vision, God showed Peter a collection of unclean animals and told him three times to "eat." Peter declined, each time, because he believed

eating those animals would be wrong (vv. 13–16). Remember, this was the same Peter, trained by Christ for three-and-a-half years, who heard Jesus’ statements regarding eating with hands unwashed in the manner of the Pharisees’ man-made traditions—yet he still believed years later that eating meat from unclean animals was wrong. Peter puzzled over the meaning of his vision (Acts 10:17) until three Gentile men came knocking at his door with a request to hear the Gospel explained (vv. 21–27). Peter would not previously have associated with these men who were outside the covenant community, because the Jews considered the Gentiles “unclean.”

When Peter put the pieces of this puzzle together, he concluded: “God has shown me that I should not call any *man* common or unclean” (v. 28). He perceived that God wanted the Gospel to go also to the Gentiles, and that these Gentiles were to come into God’s Church as equal to those coming from a Jewish background. Peter did not conclude here, or anywhere else in the New Testament, that the dietary laws had been abolished. To draw a different conclusion is to interpret Peter’s vision differently than Peter did, himself.

Can We Eat “Every Creature”?

Some theologians try to use 1 Timothy 4:1–5 to suggest that the dietary laws are no longer valid for Christians. Yet, in these verses, the Apostle Paul was discussing false teachers who were promoting the idea that Christians could be “more spiritual” by practicing asceticism and vegetarianism, abstaining from foods that God had made for us to eat. When Paul states that “every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer,” we need to ask: Where in the Bible are any creatures “sanctified” or “set apart” by God for human consumption? The answer is found in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, in the lists of clean animals. And where in the “word of God” would Paul have seen unclean animals “sanctified” or “set apart” by God for human consumption? The answer is—*nowhere*.

Paul was not setting God’s commands aside to declare unclean animals permissible to eat. Quite the contrary: He used the word of God to correct those who were condemning believers for eating meat based on the “commandments and doctrines of *men*”—not based on God’s commandments (Colossians 2:21–22).

To cite these passages as an excuse to get around the biblical dietary laws is to ignore both God's instructions and the public health benefits they bring.

Furthermore, several Old Testament passages that discuss the coming Kingdom of God make no sense if Jesus did away with the dietary laws. For example, Isaiah records a prophecy of Christ's attitude on this subject upon His return: "For behold, the LORD will come with fire and with His chariots, like a whirlwind, to render His anger with fury.... For by fire and by His sword the LORD will judge all flesh.... Those who sanctify themselves and purify themselves, to go to the gardens after an idol in the midst, eating swine's flesh and the abomination and the mouse, shall be consumed together" (Isaiah 66:15-17).

Isaiah is plainly stating that the judgment of God will fall on those who ignore and reject His divinely inspired laws—including the biblical dietary laws of clean and unclean animals.

From Here to Eternity

One of the most regrettable consequences of professing Christianity's aversion to the dietary laws, spawned in the turmoil of the second century AD, is that millions have suffered and died from diseases they contracted by eating food that God never intended them to eat. Somehow, the Bible's plain, simple statement that Satan would deceive the whole world (Revelation 12:9) has been overlooked or conveniently forgotten. This deception has included the belief that simple, practical, rational, and beneficial instructions about diet have been abolished and are no longer valid.

However, this will soon change. When Jesus Christ returns to the earth, there will be a restoration of "all things" (Acts 3:20-21)—and "all things" would include the Creator's biblical dietary laws.



Chapter 3

Exercise: A Body Designed to Move

We are living in what may be the most sedentary era of human history. But our bodies were designed to move. There are benefits when we do, and we pay a price when we do not.

A major aspect of Christ's message was that "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). This is surely pointing to the promise of eternal life, but it also points to an abundant life we can enjoy today. Thousands of people have found that when they embrace the way of life God holds out to them in His word and the teachings of Jesus Christ, they do experience a more abundant life now.

Of course, many believe that they have an "abundant life" now thanks to modern inventions and the luxuries afforded to us in the twenty-first century. This is certainly true to a great extent, but it is not without irony, because we are allowing some of those modern inventions and luxuries to rob us of the *truly* abundant life we could be having, instead.

Couch Potatoes Pay a Big Price

Because of modern society's shift from farming to manufacturing, and from vigorous outdoor activity to indoor leisure such as video games, television viewing, constant smartphone use, and hours daily spent on the Internet, our civilization is perhaps less active than at any other time in human history. This *epidemic of inactivity* has brought a decline in health and increasing rates of chronic diseases.

Many studies show that as people sit more and move less, they face a higher risk of developing various health conditions including

obesity, high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, colon cancer, anxiety, depression, skeletal degeneration, and muscle atrophy.¹ The World Health Organization estimates that 60 to 85 percent of the global population does not get enough physical activity and says that a sedentary lifestyle contributes to 3.2 million preventable deaths a year.² Attention-getting headlines proclaim that lack of exercise is as dangerous as smoking and that teenagers in the United States are now as inactive as 60-year-old adults.³

One result of our modern “sitting disease” is undesirable weight gain and obesity—which goes hand-in-hand with inactivity. In the U.S., more than 30 percent of children and nearly 70 percent of adults are overweight or obese.⁴ Globally, nearly 2 billion adults are overweight or obese—and this figure has more than doubled since 1980.⁵ This has led public health officials to suggest that the world is facing a “pandemic”—a worldwide problem—of diseases related to physical inactivity and obesity.⁶

Children are, perhaps, the most tragic victims of our physically inactive age. Estimates suggest that nearly half do not get enough exercise to develop healthy hearts and lungs, and more than 90 percent have at least one major risk factor for heart disease.⁷ Television viewing, video games, poor parental examples, and the elimination of recess periods from many primary schools have all been linked to the growing problem.⁸

This sad picture—a global epidemic of inactivity linked to an increase in chronic diseases—is hardly the “abundant life” that Jesus envisioned for us.

Designed to Move

Such sedentary lifestyles are in conflict with the Creator’s design of the body. Everything about our human body indicates that it was designed to *move*. And when we don’t use our bodies the way they were meant to be used, we shouldn’t be surprised when they begin breaking down.

Wise King Solomon tells us through the ages, “Like a fitting sparrow, like a flying swallow, so a curse without cause shall not alight” (Proverbs 26:2), and the Apostle Paul mirrors that sage advice when he says, “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap” (Galatians 6:7). The law of cause and

effect cannot be removed from the world, and it applies to our sedentary lifestyles today. If we won't get off the couch and use our bodies the way they were designed to be used, we can continue to expect the deteriorating condition of human health that we see on display in the statistics of our newspapers.

However, most of these diseases associated with our sedentary lifestyle could be prevented, managed, and even reversed if we resolved firmly to embrace our Creator's design, get up, and be more active. Our present flesh-and-blood bodies are *not meant* to live forever (Hebrews 9:27), but if we use them in accordance with their design, we will *maximize* the quality and quantity of the life we can live. Even the aged and infirm who have limited mobility can still experience some benefit from doing what they can.

The Benefits of Activity

Modern research shows that the benefits of physical activity are extremely important to every age group. Physically active children and adolescents have better health, stronger bones and muscles, better sleep and mood, less stress, a stronger immune system, and reduced risk for many diseases.⁹ Physical activity that strengthens muscles and increases aerobic fitness also improves children's thinking ability, working memory, academic performance, and self-confidence.¹⁰ Active children are also less likely to engage in destructive behaviors like smoking and substance abuse.¹¹

Physically active adults have a much lower risk of developing many diseases. They enjoy stronger muscles and bones, stronger immune systems, fewer colds and sick days, lower blood pressure, better weight control, reduced risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke, a more positive mental outlook, and faster healing of injuries.¹² In fact, even for those with a genetic predisposition to obesity, regular exercise seems to lower the impact of that influence by a third.¹³ The lives of physically active people are truly more abundant—as Jesus intended.

There are also benefits for senior citizens who begin to exercise or who remain physically active to the extent they are able. They can maintain muscle mass and bone density, which helps with balance and mobility and can reduce the fear of falls and broken bones—helping them walk faster and climb stairs better.¹⁴ Regular physical

activity also helps them reduce excess weight, manage stress and improve mood, and reduce the risk or effects of diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer.¹⁵ Physically active seniors experience less depression and have less need for expensive medical care. Their life expectancy increases and their overall quality of life improves, which enhances their sense of independence.¹⁶ Regular physical activity even appears to slow the normal aging process.¹⁷ Even those confined to beds or wheelchairs feel better if they are involved in an exercise program.

One of the most intriguing aspects of physical activity is its positive effect on the brain. People maintaining a physically active lifestyle are observed to be more mentally stable, handle stress more effectively, exhibit better mental skills (creativity, memory, math, organization, and logical reasoning), and suffer less depression.¹⁸ This appears to be related to the role of exercise in supplying more oxygen to the brain, as well as faster transmission of nerve impulses and the release of mood-elevating, pain-killing endorphins, which cause the brain to relax naturally.¹⁹

Will We Change Direction?

The closing years of the twentieth century witnessed a major effort to curb this epidemic of inactivity. More and more people began walking, running, swimming, cycling, and enrolling in exercise classes. Corporations began to develop health promotion programs for employees. There was even a proposal that the U.S. government produce warning labels (similar to those found on alcohol and tobacco products) stating, “The Surgeon General has determined that the lack of physical activity is detrimental to your health.”²⁰ Public policy experts now advocate vigorously for changes in established attitudes, habits, and behaviors, so that individuals and society may gain the benefits that regular physical activity can bring.

If we want to experience the abundant life Jesus Christ spoke of, most of us will need to change how we think, what we believe, and how we live our daily lives—including our physical lifestyle.

Changing attitudes and habits is not easy. Established thoughts and behaviors resist being altered. However, change is easier when we clearly see the dangers of continuing old habits, understand the benefits we can gain by adopting new behaviors, and learn what

actions are needed to replace our old practices. This gives us a clear path to follow.

Basic motives are also important, if we expect to achieve lasting changes. Most already understand that exercise or a more active lifestyle will improve their physical health or appearance, but that knowledge is insufficient to motivate them to *act*—or, if they *do* begin, to remain motivated enough to continue. We need a deeper and more profound motivation to achieve lasting changes, and our faith in God and desire to please Him with our stewardship of our bodies can help provide such motivation. When reasons of faith are coupled with physical reasons, real change is more likely to occur, because we are motivated by our core beliefs regarding what glorifies God and what does not.

Paul told the Corinthians that “your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit... therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s” (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). Though this passage was written in response to sexual immorality among the Corinthians, it contains a broader principle that should grab our attention. Christians have a responsibility to take care of the body God has given us, to the best of our ability. This can become a powerful motivating factor.

Paul further states that, while spiritual growth is most important, “bodily exercise profits a little” (see 1 Timothy 4:8). Indeed, regular activity or exercise benefits the body in *this life* only. But from another perspective, the *self-discipline* required to exercise becomes part of our character—and character lasts for *eternity*.

Making changes in our lives, even small ones, can often be intimidating. But we need to remember that real Christianity is not a spectator sport. It is a challenging way of life that involves growing and changing, overcoming old attitudes and habits, and replacing harmful behaviors with new ones. But nothing happens until we decide to *begin*.

And the good news about a more physically active lifestyle is that almost *any* amount of regular activity is better than none. Perhaps you’d like to start with 30 minutes of activity a day, but it seems too much. You could consider trying ten minutes three times a day. Instead of a coffee break, perhaps you could take a short walk. You might find that you feel refreshed, and the activity you can add to

your life will burn off calories while strengthening your heart, lungs, bones, and muscles. You might exercise with a friend, or with your pet, or make it a family occasion. Let your children and grandchildren see your example. Invite them to come along—show them the path to follow. Regular physical activity will change your life—how you feel, how you think, and how you look.

Of course, individual circumstances differ, and you should exercise prudence (Proverbs 22:3). Before beginning any exercise program, it would be wise to consult your physician. He or she will likely be very happy to help you discover types of physical activity that will work with you and your particular circumstances.

A New Take on “Walking with Christ”

Of course, Jesus Himself was no stranger to physical activity. Growing up as a carpenter (Mark 6:3), Jesus spent many hours sawing, smoothing planks, drilling holes, and fashioning joints with a hammer and chisel. As a builder “in a land of little wood,” Jesus probably also worked with stone.²¹ This kind of labor in an age without power tools required a *considerable* expenditure of energy. Have you ever shaken hands with a carpenter or builder? Jesus was undoubtedly a strong, well-muscled person with a powerful grip.

To journey across the hill country of Galilee, Jesus often walked. In making the customary three trips to Jerusalem each year to keep the Holy Days (Passover, Pentecost, and the fall Festivals—Leviticus 23; Luke 2:41–42), if He had walked the entire way, Jesus would have walked about 150 miles round-trip on each occasion. Just to keep the Holy Days, Jesus may have walked *in excess of 450 miles* each year. When you consider that He may have walked a mile or more a day during the rest of the year, it is not hard to see that Jesus could easily have walked more than 1,000 miles every year. That is *a lot* of physical activity.

None of us live in first-century Judea, but the idea that your Savior was physically active Himself may add even more motivation to use—to the fullest extent you can—the body that God has given you. Perhaps on your own walks through a park or along a trail, you can call to mind Jesus Christ and His own treks with His disciples through the hill country of Judea. We are even told by the Apostle John that we are to “walk just as He walked” (1 John 2:6)—a state-

ment that clearly refers to His example of righteousness, yet one which may add some spring to our step in our daily outings, as we imagine ourselves “following His steps” in a very different sort of way.



Chapter 4

Contagion: Defeating Infectious Disease

Does the Bible hold important keys for overcoming the global challenge of infectious disease? Can religion play a role in promoting health and preventing illness?

Perceptive world leaders in government and medicine are beginning to realize that more money, medicines, research, and legislation will not win the battle against disease. Health systems in many nations are deteriorating under the strain of burgeoning populations and limited financial resources. New outbreaks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, severely test health care systems as nations struggle to respond. Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland, a former Director-General of the World Health Organization, acknowledged years ago that the goal of “health for all... remains elusive”—an illusion that keeps slipping over the horizon.¹

Perhaps it is time to ask: Why, in the twenty-first century, are we still struggling to win the battle against disease? Have effective solutions been ignored? Are we overlooking powerful tools—provided by God—that could make tremendous inroads against the plague of infectious diseases that afflict and kill millions of people around the world?

A Global Curse

In the early 1900s, infectious diseases were the leading cause of suffering and death in America and Europe. Improved sanitation, along with other medical developments, significantly reduced these plagues on those continents.

Outside the developed world, however, we still see a staggering and sobering picture, as infectious diseases—abetted by poverty—ravage astonishing numbers of people. Preventable and curable illnesses

like malaria, diarrhea, tuberculosis, and respiratory disease kill more than ten million people in less-developed nations every year—with children disproportionately affected.² The number of people who *live with* and *suffer from* these diseases is mind-boggling.

More than 400,000 people die of malaria each year—including 300,000 children under the age of five—mostly in sub-Saharan Africa.³ It is estimated that 3.2 billion people—about 40 percent of the world’s population—are at risk of contracting and dying of malaria.⁴ In developing countries, diarrheal disease—which is as preventable and treatable as malaria—is another leading cause of death and disability in children.⁵ More than 10 million people contract tuberculosis (TB) each year, causing nearly 2 million fatalities annually.⁶ In fact, by some estimates “about one-third of the world’s population has latent TB”—meaning they are infected with the bacteria, but not ill.⁷

In tropical and sub-tropical parts of the world, some 2.5 billion people are at risk from the deadly mosquito-borne dengue fever. More than 50 million cases occur each year, and outbreaks are spreading beyond the tropics.⁸ HIV/AIDS is rapidly becoming the greatest threat to health, economic development, and national stability in many African and Asian countries. Since its emergence, it has claimed more than 35 million lives. Today, nearly 37 million people are HIV-positive and about two million new cases are reported each year.⁹ In developing countries, snail fever (schistosomiasis) affects some 207 million people,¹⁰ while intestinal worm infections plague nearly 2 billion.¹¹ More than 190 million in poor rural areas are at risk for bacterial trachoma, the leading cause of visual impairment and blindness.¹² More than 120 million people are at risk for onchocerciasis (river blindness) and 18 million are infected annually.¹³ Leprosy still disables between one and two million people, with about 200,000 new infections every year.¹⁴

These are truly astronomical numbers of human beings who suffer from the curse of infectious disease. To make matters worse, in recent years this heavy disease burden in developing countries has been compounded by another sobering development. As the citizens of these nations increasingly adopt the behaviors and dietary practices of more developed nations, they are seeing increases in heart disease, cancer, and other pathologies that are prevalent in much of the developed world.¹⁵

Tragically, the heaviest burden of infectious and chronic disease falls on “the bottom billion” who “essentially live on no money,” trapped in an endless cycle of poverty.¹⁶ Many countries in these poorest and least-developed regions are burdened with crushing debt, crumbling infrastructures, and rampant corruption, and are simply unable to deal with such horrendous problems—so their people continue to suffer disproportionately under the global curse of disease. A British colonial physician once wrote that “the great mass of Africa... has carried a more grievous burden of disease than any other region of the world... [and] the present inhabitants of tropical Africa host a wider variety of human parasites than any other people.”¹⁷ In some regions of tropical Africa, 60–90 percent of the population is infected with multiple parasites.

To reduce and eliminate this agonizing burden of disease, we must understand and address the true causes of the problem.

Breaking a Vicious Cycle

For many health professionals, the only solution to the problem of infectious disease is to pour more money into developing medications and establishing clinics to deliver treatments. There is often a desire to kill the invading pathogen or to alleviate suffering by treating symptoms—but too rarely is there a focus on addressing the *underlying causes*. Most infectious diseases that afflict developing countries are associated with poverty—crowded, unsanitary living conditions, lack of clean water, failure to properly dispose of human waste and garbage, and lack of protection against disease-bearing insects (window screens, mosquito nets, repellants, and insecticides). People living in poverty simply do not have access to these health-promoting resources and tools—and cash-strapped governments cannot provide them. Sadly, corrupt leaders often add to the problem, skimming international aid money to enrich themselves.

Ignorance also plays a crucial role. People living in poor rural areas around the globe often do not understand how infectious diseases are transmitted and how easily they can be prevented. Instead of recognizing the true causes of infectious disease (e.g. bacteria, viruses, protozoa, flies, and mosquitoes), sometimes “evil spirits” are blamed. Countless millions do not realize or want to acknowledge that sexual activity and injecting street drugs can transmit HIV/AIDS. Many



swim, bathe, wash clothes, and drink water from streams, lakes, and waterholes contaminated by human and animal waste—which may be the only water available. The consumption of animals and other organisms that transmit disease is also a factor in the spread of serious illnesses. Traveling to and from disease-ridden areas and coming into close contact with sick people and their personal items also facilitate the spread of infectious diseases.

Motivation is a vital factor in promoting health and preventing disease. Many *know* that hands should be washed carefully after urinating or defecating and before preparing or eating food, but they do not *act* on that knowledge. Changing individual behavior is a major challenge in the battle against disease. These fundamental issues must be addressed before the burden of sickness will be lifted and the battle against disease will be won.

A New Perspective

But how can you eliminate disease and the consequences of poverty without money? How do you overcome ignorance? How do you motivate people to think and act differently? These are generally not areas of expertise for medical doctors, health planners, government ministers, or economists—yet finding answers in these areas is essential to lifting the burden of disease.

Accomplishing these tasks without simply throwing money at the problems will require us to rethink our approach. Education ob-

viously must play a major role in banishing ignorance, but how can large numbers of people be helped without building more schools, hiring more teachers, or putting more people on government payrolls? What a person *believes* is another major factor in motivating behavioral change. We might ask, *Is there anyone already in place who is capable of doing this kind of job?*

Believe it or not, religious leaders occupy an ideal position for eliminating ignorance and promoting behaviors that can defeat disease. In many countries, religious leaders have weekly contact with large numbers of people—and usually all age groups. They promote values that influence personal behavior. Many are already paid by a private organization, and many have selflessly provided of their own efforts and resources to supply aid, such as mosquito nets and funding for water wells.

The major problem is that most religious leaders do not fully recognize the powerful potential of their position and have not been fully prepared to function in this vital role of teaching Bible-based principles of disease prevention and health promotion. Most clergy, like many in government and medicine, think the primary role of religion is to comfort the sick and console the bereaved. While these are helpful, they overlook another *God-intended role for religious leaders*—one clearly outlined in the Bible.

Teachable Principles from the Bible

In an earlier chapter, we reviewed the positive impact on human health we would see if everyone obeyed God's commands concerning clean and unclean animals. Choosing not to eat animals that were not designed for human consumption would, all by itself, go a long way toward reducing the damage done by infectious diseases. But the Bible's guidance does not stop there.

Biblical admonitions also tell us to avoid contact with animals that have died or with whatever has touched them (see Leviticus 11:32–40). Porous earthen vessels that had potentially become contaminated were to be destroyed to avoid spreading disease. These biblical regulations are consistent with sound microbiological techniques and are important procedures in fighting infectious disease. It was the priests' job to teach and explain these principles. Priests were to designate as unclean those who had contagious diseases

characterized by skin rashes—such as leprosy, measles, smallpox, and scarlet fever. Such individuals were isolated from others to prevent the spread of disease (see Leviticus 13). These biblical guidelines are the basis of medically sound *quarantine procedures* that have been used for centuries. There is a good reason why “social distancing” and quarantine were early, powerful tools in addressing the coronavirus pandemic of 2020—because the biblical health principle of separating oneself from disease is *effective*.

The Bible’s guidelines include avoiding contact with the personal items of sick people, which can transmit germs (Leviticus 13:47–59). Contaminated items were washed or burned (which destroys microorganisms). Biblical health instructions even applied to dwellings: A house with mold or fungal growth was quarantined until the affected materials were scraped off, replaced, and covered in new plaster—and if a house could not be cleaned, it would be demolished (Leviticus 14:33–48).

This instruction would go a long way to improving the lives of 25 million people in Latin America who are at risk for Chagas disease, which is caused by the bite of a kissing bug that lives in cracks and crevices of impoverished dwellings.¹⁸ One duty of the Levitical priest was to promote health and help prevent disease by functioning as both a *building inspector and a public health educator*.

The Bible acknowledges that body fluids can transmit disease (Leviticus 15). Contact with human waste materials, nasal discharges, tears, saliva, or soiled towels can spread infectious disease. Trachoma—the result of a bacterial infection and the leading cause of preventable blindness—is spread by contact with soiled hand towels and eye-seeking flies that lay their eggs on human and animal waste.¹⁹ People coming into contact with fluids from a sick person were to wash their hands and clothes in water, bathe, and remain isolated from other people until evening as a precaution against spreading disease (Leviticus 15:11). These were not mere ceremonial laws. The purpose of these sanitary laws was to promote health and prevent disease.

One of the most practical and powerful biblical admonitions states that human waste should be buried away from habitations (Deuteronomy 23:12–14). This prevents waste materials from coming in contact with people, flies, and other organisms that transmit disease, and it preserves the purity of water supplies. Wearing shoes

and not using human waste as fertilizer are also important preventive measures. Many diseases, such as diarrhea, dysentery, hookworm, roundworm, cholera, hepatitis, trachoma, and typhoid, result from contact with human waste.

*Sanitary disposal of human waste and access to clean water are two of the most important ways to prevent disease.*²⁰ God told Israel's religious leaders to promote these instructions that would protect the health of the populace. Tragically, modern religious leaders have failed to grasp the importance of their opportunity to provide biblical instruction that could significantly prevent disease and its spread.

Confusion About Circumcision

Anciently, God instructed Abraham and his descendants, the Israelites, to circumcise their male infants on the eighth day after birth (Genesis 17:12–14; Leviticus 12:3). Interestingly, this instruction harmonizes with scientific studies showing that a baby's blood-clotting mechanism may not be fully developed until the eighth day, making it unwise to do a surgical procedure earlier because of the threat of hemorrhage.²¹ While some well-meaning people consider male circumcision barbaric, medical science shows that the benefits outweigh the risks. Circumcised boys have a reduced risk of urinary infections, circumcised men have lower rates of prostate cancer and cancer of the penis, and women married to circumcised men have lower rates of cervical cancer.²² Studies have concluded that circumcised males are less likely to contract or spread HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases because removing the foreskin eliminates an environment where the virus may reside.²³ While Acts 15 makes it clear that circumcision is no longer a *spiritual* requirement, medical evidence certainly supports the idea that circumcision, as described in the Bible, can help prevent disease and promote health.

The custom of female "circumcision" is a *totally different matter*. This terrible practice is *not* biblical and should not be confused with the biblical circumcision of males, where only the foreskin is removed. Female "circumcision," by contrast, is no act of circumcision at all, but is a horrific act of butchery in which part of a woman's genitalia—not just excess skin tissue—is removed. Female "circumcision" is truly a barbaric mutilation and has nothing to do with biblical circumcision.

Body Piercings and Tattoos, Too?

Although various pagan cultures throughout history have “decorated” the human body with tattoos, cutting, scarring, and inserted ornaments that expand lips and earlobes, these body-altering and deforming practices have in recent decades become a craze in Western nations. While many call these practices “body art,” the serious risks and health consequences of tattooing and exotic piercing are seldom mentioned or considered.

God designed our skin as a barrier against disease-causing organisms. When we pierce that barrier, we create opportunities for bacteria and viruses to gain entrance to the tissues below the skin. Numerous reports warn that tattoos and piercings increase the risk of bacterial skin infections, granulomas, and blood-borne diseases like tetanus, staph, hepatitis, and HIV, as well as allergic reactions to the substances and tools themselves.²⁴ Many have warned especially against getting tattoos or piercings during pregnancy, due to risks of infection and the migration of toxic elements in tattoo pigments to the fetus.²⁵ While tattoos and piercings are relatively inexpensive to acquire, they can be painful and expensive to remove—if they *can* be removed.

God inspired Moses to instruct the children of Israel—a nation that God intended to be a light and example to the world—with the words, “You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor tattoo any marks on you” (Leviticus 19:28). Tattoos and cuttings on the flesh are unhealthful and carry the risk of infectious disease because they break the protective barrier that the skin provides. God made the human body “in His own image” (Genesis 1:27) and condemned these pagan religious customs, which deformed the body.

There is a reason why health professionals warn patients away from tattoos and exotic body piercings—they can be dangerous to your health.

Moral Laws Prevent Infectious Disease

The Bible defines marriage as a union of one man and one woman for life (Matthew 19:4–6) and takes a strong stand against sexual activity outside the confines of biblical marriage, such as adultery, fornication, and homosexuality (Leviticus 18). In sharp contrast to the modern notion that unrestricted sexual activity is liberating, the Bible pointedly states that “whoever commits adultery... lacks understanding” (Prov-

erbs 6:32), and that sexually promiscuous people sin against their own bodies (1 Corinthians 6:9, 16–18; Romans 1:22–27). Past public policies against such behaviors may have had morality in mind, but their effect was to help prevent the spread of *sexually transmitted diseases*—including HIV/AIDS, which has been called the “plague of the twenty-first century.”²⁶ Modern efforts to remove any moral consideration from public policy and to normalize promiscuity are contributing to the spread of epidemic diseases. The old advice that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” has been largely forgotten, but it is still good advice—and is much less expensive in dollars *and* lives. Restricting sexual activity to husband and wife within a faithful monogamous marriage is by far the most effective way to avoid spreading sexually transmitted diseases. This was the biblical message God would have religious leaders convey—but it is a message often ignored today.

Medical studies reveal reasons for the strong biblical warnings against the sexually promiscuous lifestyles that are prevalent today. Numerous reports show that “gay and bisexual men are more severely affected by HIV than any other group,” and that they “are also at increased risk for other STDs, like syphilis, gonorrhea and chlamydia.”²⁷ When the HIV virus gains entrance to the body, it weakens and eventually destroys the body’s immune system, leading to AIDS and making the person subject to other conditions and deadly opportunistic infections: pneumonia, tuberculosis, lymphomas, Kaposi’s sarcoma (cancer of blood vessel walls), shingles, encephalitis, and dementia. Studies also show that the more sexual partners you have, the higher the odds that you will contract HIV, which greatly increases the risks of contracting other infectious diseases and dying at a younger age.²⁸ Since there are no cures for HIV/AIDS, medical sources acknowledge the importance of eliminating dangerous and risky behaviors: Don’t have multiple sexual partners, don’t share needles and syringes (such as used for injecting drugs), don’t have sex with prostitutes, and be aware that tattoo needles might not be sterile.²⁹ This medical advice bears witness to the wisdom of ancient biblical instructions prohibiting high risk behaviors that bring serious consequences—fornication and adultery, homosexuality, and other dangerous activities.

The clear intent of many biblical principles is to *prevent problems before they arise*. Proverbs 22:3 states that “a prudent man foresees evil and hides himself, but the simple pass on and are punished.”

From a public health perspective, most diseases can be prevented—saving lives and money—by taking wise precautions ahead of time.

The Coming Restoration

Scripture explains that Satan has deceived the whole world (Revelation 12:9) and that leaders are often blind to obvious solutions (Isaiah 56:10; Matthew 15:14). Today’s theologians and pastors are mostly oblivious to the role they could play in preventing disease and promoting health by teaching people to differentiate between the clean and the unclean, in both food and behavior (Ezekiel 22:26).

However, the time is coming when the whole world will learn to live by the laws of God—and will benefit from them. The Bible reveals that, while the “whole creation groans” for now (Romans 8:18–23), a “restoration of all things” lies just ahead (Acts 3:19–21). Jesus Christ will return to the earth to establish the Kingdom of God, and God’s law will be proclaimed to the whole world from Jerusalem (Isaiah 2:2–4; 9:6–7). In this coming Kingdom, church and state will be united (Revelation 5:10). Jesus Christ and the saints will teach people to obey the laws and statutes of God (Isaiah 30:20–21), and mankind will experience the wonderful results of changed behavior. The battle against sickness will be won, and disease will begin to disappear (Isaiah 35:5–6; Jeremiah 30:17). While this sounds incredible, it is part of the Gospel—the good news of what the future holds.

Chapter 5

The Mind: Spiritual Dimensions of Mental Health

The Bible contains vital perspectives about mental health that have been overlooked and ignored in medical textbooks. Applying those perspectives could improve the lives of millions.

Health professionals recognize there is more to being healthy than not being sick. Many understand that a good diet, regular exercise, and access to medical care do not guarantee that you will feel great and deal effectively with the challenges of life—which is why the World Health Organization defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”¹ This WHO definition acknowledges that what goes on in the brain and the mind can have a major impact on our physical health.

Textbooks on health education mention that social and psychological factors—being able to function independently, express emotions in an acceptable way, interact effectively with others and feel connected, and manage stress—all contribute to better health. Environmental factors such as growing up in a safe, loving, and supportive family with opportunities for challenge and growth can also help with our psychological health. Even contact with nature has been found to make a difference.²

However, one of the most interesting and surprising developments in recent decades is the recognition that there are important *spiritual* dimensions to health. The concept of “spiritual health” recognizes that beliefs and values can influence behavior and health in very significant ways.³ In fact, hundreds of studies are demonstrating that certain religious beliefs and practices have

positive benefits on physical health.⁴ Even more surprising is that modern scientific discoveries are confirming the validity of ancient biblical instructions that promote health, and demonstrate that negative consequences occur when these spiritual principles are ignored.

A major reason why these recent discoveries are so surprising is that anti-religious attitudes dominate the fields of sociology, psychology, psychiatry, and medicine, and have done so for the last several centuries. Since the mid-1800s, social philosophers have suggested that as societies become more modern and scientific, religion will lose its legitimacy and become obsolete.⁵ Sigmund Freud called religion a childish superstition born out of a desire for “wish fulfillment”—a central thesis of his seminal book, *The Future of an Illusion*. Many clinicians since have agreed.

As a result, few have considered the role of religion in promoting health or preventing disease. However, that biased mindset is becoming obsolete as clear evidence continues to emerge from scientific studies that shed light on why we are experiencing major health and social problems today.

The Increasing Burden of Mental Illness

Millions of people in our modern world struggle every day with mental illness—and that number is growing. The World Health Organization lists mental illnesses as the third-leading cause of disabling conditions in the world—just behind cardiovascular and common infectious diseases.⁶ While clinical depression is ranked eighth in low-income countries, it is ranked first in mid- to high-income countries, along with anxiety disorders—demonstrating that modernization and affluence do not protect against these conditions. In the U.S., mental illness is the third leading cause of hospitalization for young people and adults (aged 18–44), and suicide is the second leading cause of death for young people (aged 10–34)—the tenth leading cause of death overall.⁷ Recent reports indicate that depression and anxiety are increasingly serious problems on college campuses—where in the last few decades depression has doubled and the number of suicides has tripled.⁸

Why are mental illnesses so prevalent and increasing in affluent, developed countries where people have ready access to some of the best health care in the world? Is there *something missing* in our approach to this pervasive problem?

Long ago, Moses told the Israelites that they would be blessed if they obeyed the laws of God, but if they ignored those instructions, one consequence would be that “the LORD will strike you with madness” (Deuteronomy 28:28). So, what biblical instructions and examples have we ignored that may be affecting the mental health of millions of people today? Do the results of modern research provide any clues?

The Value of Contact with Creation

Over the last few centuries, the trend has been for people to move from rural areas into cities. In 1790, only 5 percent of the population of the United States lived in cities, yet today about 80 percent live in urban areas.⁹ If global trends continue, about 68 percent of the world population will live in urban areas by 2050.¹⁰ Such global urbanization is unprecedented in human history.

While life in big cities definitely brings certain advantages, it is also associated with conditions that can have a negative impact on one’s health—especially mental health—if one is not careful.

In addition to the crowding, congestion, noise, pollution, and stress of urban life, studies reveal that “city dwellers have a 20 percent higher risk of anxiety disorders and a 40 percent higher risk of mood disorders compared to people in rural areas. People born and raised in cities are twice as likely to develop schizophrenia.”¹¹ It is no coincidence that we see a dramatic rise in serious mental health



issues that coincides with the movement of millions of people from rural to urban areas. Modern research is beginning to link declining mental health with the loss of contact with nature. Dr. Mardie Townsend, an honorary professor at the School of Health and Social Development at Deakin University in Australia, observes, “There is mounting evidence that contact with nature has significant positive impacts on mental health” and “the growing disconnection with our natural environment is exacerbating the escalating rates of mental illness.”¹² Her observations are backed up by literally hundreds of recent studies that document the consequences of what is termed “nature deprivation” or “nature deficit disorders” that are fostered not only by urban environments, but by hours spent looking at the screens of electronic devices—cell phones, tablets, and computers.¹³

One early study connecting nature with health compared the post-surgical responses of hospital patients who could see trees out their windows with patients who saw only a wall. The patients who had a view of nature had better recovery experiences.¹⁴ More recent studies indicate that not only viewing nature, but viewing pictures of nature (e.g., mountains, trees, waterfalls, and pastures), and even listening to sounds of nature (e.g., waves, rain, and sounds of birds and animals) have similar positive effects on the mind and body.¹⁵

Going for a walk in a natural area or spending time in a natural environment has been shown to reduce muscle tension and stress; lower blood pressure, heart rate, and cholesterol levels; relieve depression and improve mood; reduce risk of mental illness; and increase longevity.¹⁶ Going for a walk along a busy urban street does not have the same positive effects. Researchers report, “The range of specific health outcomes tied to nature is startling,” and its benefits include reducing depression and anxiety disorders, diabetes, infectious disease, cancer, cardiovascular disease, attention-deficit disorders, and more.¹⁷

The health benefits of contact with nature come from many factors. Plants give off phytoncides—antimicrobial organic compounds that reduce blood pressure and stimulate the immune system. Air in the forest and near running water contains negative ions that reduce depression and stimulate the immune system. Sights and sounds of nature depress the sympathetic nervous system (our fight-or-flight mechanism) and stimulate the parasympathetic

nervous system (our rest-and-digest mechanism), which helps to restore attention and aid healing. Contact with nature elevates levels of DHEA (a hormone with anti-diabetic, anti-obesity, anti-depression, and heart-protective properties), helps control blood sugar, stimulates the immune system to produce anti-cancer cells, and reduces levels of proteins that have been linked with diabetes, depression, and cardiovascular disease.¹⁸

Studies have also revealed that children gain multiple benefits from spending time outdoors in contact with nature—benefits such as improved memory, learning, and decision-making skills; higher levels of resilience and self-worth; less depression and anxiety; and improvement in neuro-behavioral disorders (ADD and ADHD).¹⁹ One large study reported that people living in “green” neighborhoods had 20 percent less disease than people living in “less green” surroundings.²⁰

The conclusions of those who study the connection between nature and health all point in the same direction. Contact with nature is good for us as human beings, and the growing disconnect from natural environments that has accompanied the migration to cities has led to increasing rates of mental illness—a situation that needs to be changed “as a matter of urgency.”²¹ Evidence continues to mount that “humans depend on nature not just for material requirements such as water, food and shelter, but also for their emotional, psychological and spiritual needs.”²² Spending time in natural environments and even viewing nature is increasingly seen as “a major health determinant... [that may] constitute a powerful, inexpensive public health intervention”²³ for preventing mental illness and promoting more vibrant health for millions of people.²⁴

But how do these discoveries about nature and mental health relate to what we find in the Bible? Modern research indicates that biblical passages are not just quaint little bedtime stories—instead they offer perspectives that make a real impact on human health. Genesis 2:7–19 reveals that God did not place Adam and Eve in an air-conditioned high-rise apartment building in a major urban setting, but in a natural environment—a garden with trees, vegetation, animals, and running water. In Psalm 23, David associates spending time in green pastures beside still waters with being refreshed.

The Role of Religion

Research has confirmed that religious belief, far from being a cause or a form of mental illness as some secular critics have claimed, can help protect against mental disorders and promote mental health. As we have already seen, the population shift from rural to urban centers in recent centuries has been accompanied by an increase in mental disorders, while during this same period there has been a shift away from religious commitment—especially in recent decades.²⁵ This same period has witnessed a shift from a more “socio-centric” society to a more “ego-centric or individualistic” society that has also been “accompanied by an increase in common mental disorders.”²⁶

Religion appears to counter these negative trends by offering hope, social support, and a sense of belonging that is “good for our psychological and physical health.”²⁷ The move away from organized religion (which emphasizes social connectedness in congregations) has produced a “growing phenomenon of loneliness” that experts describe as a “global epidemic” that may contribute to “as many deaths as obesity.”²⁸ In the U.S., more than 25 percent of the population lives alone, and this social isolation more than doubles the risk of premature mortality. However, obeying biblical admonitions to assemble with other believers—such as in Hebrews 10:24–25 where we are told not to forsake “the assembling of ourselves together” and the commands in Leviticus 23 to meet regularly in “holy convocation” on every weekly Sabbath and annual Holy Day—not only enhances individuals’ *spiritual* health, but can also promote better *mental* health and help to ward off mental illness.

Serious mental depression is characterized by the tendency to withdraw from social contact and be alone, and to entertain thoughts of suicide. However, many studies document the significant role of religion in dealing with depression. Research shows that spiritually augmented behavioral therapy can help reduce hopelessness and despair, while depressed patients with strong religious faith recovered 70 percent faster than those with less strong faith and depressed patients with religious affiliations made fewer attempts at suicide.²⁹ The connection between an increase in suicide and a decrease in religious sentiment was noticed more than a century ago, while more recent studies find a connection between higher suicide rates in less religious European countries than in more religious America.³⁰ Studies also show that highly religious adults—who pray daily and

attend religious services regularly—are happier, more engaged with family, and more likely to help others.

The Christian values of gratitude, thankfulness, forgiveness, and concern for others have long been recognized to contribute to better social relationships.³¹ Modern research confirms that exhibiting an attitude of gratitude and thankfulness can bring a person multiple health-related benefits. Studies in the field of positive psychology document that grateful people take better care of themselves, exercise more regularly, have healthier diets, cope with stress better, are more optimistic, have stronger immune systems, and have lower rates of heart disease and cancer.³² Grateful teenagers who appreciate what they have are happier, more positive and optimistic, and more well-behaved. They get higher grades, have more friends, sleep better and longer, are less depressed, have stronger immune systems, and exhibit overall better health.³³

Meaning and Purpose

Studying 4,500 adults, the Harvard School of Public Health found that people deal better with aging if they have *purpose* in their lives.³⁴ They found that people living with a purpose maintained more muscle strength, could walk faster, engaged in healthier behaviors, slept better, felt better, and lived longer than individuals who had little or no purpose in their lives. The study revealed that people who kept a more positive and purposeful mental perspective obtained physiological advantages that contributed to better health. Another account of the same study concluded that having a purpose in life—a reason to get up in the morning—provides a sense of psychological well-being that has benefits for a person’s physical and mental health.³⁵

Discovering a purpose in life is also recognized as a basis for addiction recovery programs. Research indicates that people who develop addictions to alcohol, drugs, and other destructive behaviors appear to suffer from a deeper “spiritual malady.” Their lives are empty, unfulfilling, and unhappy. Seeing no meaning or purpose in life, and no reason to live, they often try to fill the void with chemical substances that provide a temporary high—which only brings more pain that eventually destroys their mental and physical health. Many rehabilitation programs have demonstrated that rekindling a sense of purpose is a key to recovery from addiction.³⁶ Clinical psychologist

and addiction counselor Dr. Stanton Peele has challenged existing treatment ideas that addictions are a disease caused by abnormal neurochemistry and a malfunctioning brain. He believes that many addictions result from a lack of purpose and meaning in a person's life³⁷—and many recovering addicts would agree with his assessment.

Finding a meaning and purpose in life is not usually considered to fall in the realm of medicine and is usually assumed to be the domain of philosophy and religion. Psychiatry and psychology may be helpful, but even those fields are limited to what can be seen and studied at the physical level. Spiritual concepts are beyond their scope, and are often considered to be merely matters of speculation. However, mental health specialists recognize that *life purpose* plays a central role in guiding our decisions, influencing our behavior, setting goals and directions for our life, and giving meaning to all we do. Some people derive a sense of “meaning” through the vocations they choose or the responsibilities they carry, but such purposes are dependent on our circumstances and perceptions, temporary and faulty though they may be. Only the inspired word of God can provide us with the transcendent, true, and *eternal* life purpose He has given us.

If you are interested in learning more about this vital dimension of life, request our informative free resource *What Is the Meaning of Life?*, available from any of the Regional Offices listed at the back of this booklet.

Putting It All Together

Modern research has demonstrated that religious people who live by biblical guidelines have happier and healthier lives, experience less anxiety and depression, cope better with stress and difficult situations, are more optimistic, have more hope, and feel a greater sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. Results like these demonstrate that God teaches more than a mere set of beliefs in His word—He provides a *way of life*. A biblical worldview provides a perspective on life that is not merely informative and reassuring—it improves our lives (cf. John 10:10). That perspective on Scripture is tragically missing in our modern, secular, high-tech world. For your sake, don't let it be missing from your life.

Chapter 6

Healing: A God of Miracles

In addition to providing laws and principles of good health, is it also possible that God will supernaturally intervene on our behalf? What does the Bible reveal?

We are living in an age that promotes secularism and skepticism. Critics with a bias against the supernatural assert that God does not exist, that the Bible is only a book of myths and legends, that miracles cannot happen, and that beliefs in supernatural miracles are more common among “ignorant and barbarous nations”¹ or among “the uncivilized and uneducated.”² These perspectives, however—though they are given a high profile today by the media, educational establishment, and even some theologians—are directly contrary to what most people believe. Studies have shown that nearly 80 percent of Americans believe in God or a higher power³ and that 71 percent of Americans believe that the Bible is inspired by God.⁴ As for miracles, 51 percent of Americans believe that the miracles recorded in the Bible actually happened, 67 percent believe miracles can happen today, and nearly 40 percent say they have experienced miracles in their lives.⁵ Even more interesting is that about 74 percent of U.S. physicians believe that miracles happen today—and 55 percent say they have seen patients whose healing appeared to be miraculous.⁶

When we consider that skeptics’ ideas about the existence of a supernatural God and the validity of biblical miracles are so out of touch with the beliefs and experiences of millions of people—and even the views and experiences of many medical doctors—the time has come to consider what the Bible actually reveals on the important subjects of healing and miracles. Indeed, the clear statements of Scripture,

the facts of history, and the experience of millions—including medical doctors—all reveal that miracles *do* happen. While God has given us clear instructions about how to promote and maintain our best health, we can *still* face a health challenge—and when we do, we can come to Him for miraculous healing.

What Is a Miracle?

But what exactly is a miracle? A “miracle” can be defined as “a special act of God that interrupts the natural course of events.... A miracle may look like any unusual occurrence, but it has a supernatural cause. It is performed with divine power according to the divine mind, for a divine purpose, in order to authenticate a divine message or purpose.”⁷ A miracle can also be defined as “an event or effect in the physical world deviating from the known laws of nature, or transcending our knowledge of these laws; an extra-ordinary, anomalous, or abnormal event brought about by super-human agency.”⁸ A God who created the universe can certainly act within His universe in miraculous ways. To prove that miracles cannot happen, one would need to prove that God does not exist.

The Bible describes dozens of miraculous events in both the Old and New Testaments. In fact, “central claims of Christianity are dependent on the apologetic value of miracles”—the fact that the miracles described in the Bible actually occurred.⁹ Miracles demonstrate the power of a supernatural God. If the miracles documented in Scripture never happened, the Bible cannot be trusted—which is the argument advanced by many secular critics. Yet, many of the authors of the biblical accounts of miracles claim to be eyewitnesses of those events (2 Peter 1:16)—and many of those same eyewitnesses died for their conviction that they spoke the truth.

Like no other book ever written, the Bible gives us a glimpse of how *miraculous, supernatural intervention* can play a role in health, healing, and disease. Scripture reveals that God is a Being of love and compassion (1 John 4:8; Psalm 86:5; Matthew 9:36), whose qualities are evident in many miracles recorded in the Bible. Consider that God miraculously enabled Sarah to conceive a child in her old age to fulfill His promises to Abraham (Genesis 17:15–19; 18:10–15). He miraculously fed the Israelites for 40 years in the wilderness after they left Egypt (Exodus 16:12–15, 32–35). He miraculously provided food for Elijah and through him raised a widow’s son from the dead (1 Kings

17). He healed Hezekiah and gave him 15 more years to live after the king's earnest prayers to God (2 Kings 20:1–6).

The New Testament describes more than three dozen miracles performed by Jesus Christ—nearly *a third* of the gospel of Mark is devoted to His miracles. In addition to turning water into wine (John 2:1–11), calming a storm (Mark 4:37–41), and walking on water (Mark 6:48–51), Jesus healed sicknesses and infirmities (Matthew 8:1–17), cast out demons (Matthew 9:32–33; Mark 1:23–26), restored sight to the blind (Matthew 9:27–31; Mark 8:22–26), and supernaturally fed several thousand people on two occasions (Mark 6:35–44; 8:1–9).

A Healing, Life-Giving Ministry

According to Scripture, Jesus raised at least three individuals from the dead: a Jewish leader's daughter (Mark 5:22–24, 35–43), a widow's son (Luke 7:11–17), and His friend Lazarus (John 11:1–44). Of course, God's word records that Jesus foretold His own death and revealed that He would be resurrected after three days (Matthew 17:22–23). That same historical record notes that Jesus was *seen alive* during a 40-day period between His resurrection and His ascension (Acts 1:3) by the disciples (Luke 24) and others, including 500 people—most of whom Paul said were still alive when he wrote his epistle (1 Corinthians 15:1–9). Many sources confirm the biblical and historical evidence for this major miraculous event.¹⁰

The Bible records that Jesus commissioned His disciples to *carry on* this same kind of ministry—to preach the Gospel of the coming Kingdom of God (Mark 1:14–15; 16:15) and to “heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give” (Matthew 10:5–8; Mark 16:15–18). Jesus also told His disciples that they would do *even greater* works than He had done (John 14:12).

Thus, we read in the book of Acts that Peter and John healed a crippled man, to the amazement of onlookers (Acts 3:1–10). The Apostles performed many “signs and wonders” that drew people from all around Jerusalem who brought their sick and saw them miraculously healed (Acts 5:12–16), and Stephen did great wonders among the people in Jerusalem (Acts 6:8), which engendered persecution by jealous religious authorities. Philip brought joy to the people of Samaria by performing miraculous healings and casting out demons (Acts 8:5–8). Saul—who became Paul—was stricken with blindness by God on his way to Damas-

cus, then healed and converted (Acts 9:1–22). Peter healed a paralyzed man in Lydda and raised a woman named Dorcas from the dead in Joppa, a miracle that became widely known (Acts 9:32–42). Paul cast out a demon in Cyprus (Acts 13:6–12), then healed a crippled man in Lystra (Acts 14:8–12) and later brought a boy back to life who had fallen to his death in Troas (Acts 20:8–12). The biblical record is replete with example after example of Jesus Christ and His disciples miraculously healing the sick and suffering through God’s divine power.

Divine Healing

But what do all these historical miracles have to do with Christians *today*?

The Bible promises us that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8) and reminds us that God says, “I am the LORD, I do not change” (Malachi 3:6). The God who healed those seeking Him centuries ago is the same God who rules in Heaven today.

God inspired King David to write, “Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgives all your iniquities, *who heals all your diseases*” (Psalm 103:2–3). While many acknowledge that God forgives sins, many seem not to believe that God *also* offers to *heal all our diseases*. One of His divine names is “The LORD Who Heals You,” a title He takes on Himself in Exodus 15:26: “If you diligently heed the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in His sight, give ear to His commandments and keep His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have brought on the Egyptians. *For I am the LORD who heals you.*”

As we have shown in this work, the biblical approach to health involves learning to follow the instructions God has revealed in Scripture. And disobeying His laws not only represents sin (1 John 3:4, *King James Version*), but also often has physical consequences for our lives and health.

Though many seem to understand that Jesus’ sacrifice was intended to make possible the forgiveness of sins, many do *not* connect His sacrifice to physical healing. Yet the Bible makes plain that “by His stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:4–5; 1 Peter 2:24). It is certainly *not* true that every sickness, disease, or injury is due to an individual’s sin—Christ made this plain to His own disciples (John 9:1–3; cf. Luke 13:1–5), and the Creator told Moses that He Himself “makes the mute, the deaf,

the seeing, or the blind” (Exodus 4:11). However, some sickness, disease, and injury *is* due to sin, as we have demonstrated thoroughly in previous chapters. In either case, God offers the possibility of divine healing.

The Apostle James advises Christians, “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” (James 5:14–16). James clearly encouraged his fellow Christians to reach out to God for healing by calling the elders of God’s Church—an admonition that continues to be valid today. That admonition includes instruction to “confess your trespasses to one another” (v. 16), implying a responsibility on our part to identify and change anything we may be doing that is contributing to the problem.

This does not mean that a Christian cannot consult a doctor, or that seeking medical help and advice demonstrates a lack of faith. Not at all. While human knowledge is always spotty and imperfect, we are blessed in modern times to have a *vast* amount of knowledge concerning how the body works. But regardless of other actions we may take, these verses *do* tell us that a Christian should seek healing from God and should do so through His appointed ministry.

And what if the elders are far away? From the Church’s earliest days, the ministry made arrangements to send cloths, anointed with oil, when a personal visit to a sick or afflicted person was not feasible (Acts 19:11–12). The true Church of God, founded by Jesus Christ, continues this biblical practice.

Faith and Perspective

The Bible indicates that healings often come to people with great faith (e.g., Matthew 8:5–10), yet this is not always the case. Sometimes God chooses to allow the faithful to bear a burden of infirmity for the sake of His larger purposes, and sometimes, in His mercy, He intervenes even for those whose faith is small.

Lazarus had been dead for four days, and thus was certainly *not* exercising faith when Jesus raised him to life again (John 11:37–44; cf. Ecclesiastes 9:10). The Apostle Paul certainly had a deep faith in God’s

ability to miraculously heal (Acts 19:11–12)—even to resurrect (Acts 20:9–12). Yet he tells us that, although he “pleaded with the Lord three times” to heal him of an affliction, he came to understand that it was not God’s purpose to heal him at that time (2 Corinthians 12:7–10). Instead, God was looking to produce more important spiritual fruit in Paul’s life (vv. 9–10).

Still, if we keep in mind that God’s vision is larger than ours and that we are to seek *His* will and not our own (Matthew 26:42), then we will beseech Him for intervention when we suffer from sickness or infirmity.

Jesus instructed His disciples, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened” (Matthew 7:7–8). Jesus also said that “whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you” (John 16:23), and we are admonished to “ask in faith” (James 1:6)—knowing that God will answer in His time and in His way, and that “all things work together for good to those who love God” (Romans 8:28; see also 1 Corinthians 10:13). How can we know that He hears our requests? The Apostle John tells us, saying it is “because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight” (1 John 3:22). That would mean repenting of breaking His laws—including His laws and principles of good health.

Scripture makes it clear that the God of the Bible is a supernatural, miracle-working God, and the miracles recorded and preserved in the Bible demonstrate His power and compassion as our loving Father—a Father who desires to act in the lives of those who love Him (2 Chronicles 16:9).

For more perspective and inspiring details from your Bible about healing, as well as information about how you can receive the healing He provides, read our free booklet *Does God Heal Today?* You can request it from the Regional Office nearest you, listed in the back of this booklet, or read it online at *TomorrowsWorld.org*.

Conclusion

A Way of Life That Works

Will you make the right choices that promote physical and spiritual health?

In the biblical account of the two trees (Genesis 2:8–9; 3:1–7), we saw that God did not *force* Adam and Eve to accept His divinely revealed instructions. They chose to use human reasoning, separate from God’s directions. To win the age-old battle against disease, each of us must make our own choices today. Will we obey God, or do we think we have a better way (Deuteronomy 30:15–20; Matthew 7:14)? Will we choose wisely by considering the evidence (1 Thessalonians 5:21) and learning the lessons of history?

We have seen that sickness and disease have plagued human beings through the ages and that civilizations, both ancient and modern, have struggled to cope with the toll in human suffering caused by ill health and infirmities. History records that most cultures have employed a common approach to this age-long battle with disease in our midst—an “after-the-fact” approach that relies on drugs, surgery, spells and enchantments, and entreating the gods with sacrificial offerings—even self-mutilation and human sacrifice. While modern medical science has made incredible strides in diagnosing and treating disease through medicines, therapies, and surgeries, we still face skyrocketing costs, new diseases, and the reemergence of old diseases.

The Bible, however, shows us a different way—through the example of a people with an approach using values and education to *prevent* disease rather than relying exclusively on treatments to mitigate disease once it has appeared. In striking contrast to other ancient civilizations, God gave the ancient Hebrews a set of laws and statutes

that would set them apart from other nations and make them a light and example of a better way of life that promotes health and prevents disease. Unlike other nations' priest-physicians who guarded their techniques as mysteries and secrets, the priests of ancient Israel were instructed to proclaim this valuable information as public knowledge. The biblical health laws were an important part of the Hebrew Scriptures and the religion and way of life of the Israelites.

Divine Laws from the Divine Lawgiver

History confirms that the biblical health laws were unique and without parallel in the ancient world. These guidelines were simple yet comprehensive, and addressed a wide range of personal and public health issues—principles that were clearly ahead of their time. There was really no way to fully understand the reasons for these laws until the invention of the microscope, the discovery of bacteria, and the pioneering work of pathologists in recent centuries—advances that have proven these ancient biblical laws to be scientifically valid today.

What our modern world has lost sight of, and what the ancient pagan world never understood, is that God is the author of the biblical health laws. The Bible reveals that God does not change (Malachi 3:6)—which means that His *fundamental laws* do not change. The laws of biology did not suddenly change or stop operating when Jesus was crucified. The same factors that caused or prevented disease in the days of Moses still operate today—and the health laws that God gave to Moses also remain just as effective.

So, do not be misled by the arguments of those who claim that the biblical health laws are antiquated, outdated, and no longer applicable in our modern world. *Jesus Christ did not come to abolish the laws of God* (Matthew 5:17). They are a product of the mind of our Creator and Designer. They reflect God's will and are part of His plan for humanity. If you encounter priests, preachers, or professors who tell you otherwise, they simply do not know what they are talking about (Isaiah 8:20).

An Awesome Purpose

God is preparing a people to assist Jesus Christ in changing the course of human history. The coming government of God will eliminate the plague of disease and will promote a way of life that leads not only to physical, mental, and spiritual health, but also to eternal life.

If we will submit our lives to God, seeking to live His way of life under Jesus Christ—including taking care of the body He has given us—we will receive a reward that includes reigning with Christ when He returns to establish the Kingdom of God to rule on the earth (Revelation 5:10). The saints who rule with Christ will function as teachers (Isaiah 30:20–21) who will explain the laws of God—including these important biblical principles of health—to all of humanity. Because of these efforts, “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9).

As you begin to grasp the scope of God’s plan for humanity, you will see that there are powerful and exciting reasons for learning to live by the biblical principles of health inspired by our Creator.

The biblical health laws and principles are fundamental keys, revealed by the Designer of humanity, to promote health and prevent disease. They are part of a way of life to which God is calling a relative few in this present age—to repent not just of poor health choices, but of poor spiritual choices, and to turn fully to God through repentance from sin, baptism, and receiving of God’s Holy Spirit. If you feel that God may be calling you to repentance and baptism, and you would like to know more about God’s ways, please contact the Regional Office nearest you, listed at the *TomorrowsWorld.org* website and in the back of our printed booklets. One of our representatives will be happy to talk to you, at a time and in a place convenient to you. Our representatives have for many years lived by the physical and spiritual precepts found in the Bible and will be happy to discuss any questions you may have.

When properly understood, explained, and applied, God’s way of life has the potential of being a wonderful blessing for every human being who has ever lived. The Bible clearly reveals that when Jesus Christ returns to establish the Kingdom of God on planet Earth, the laws of God—including the biblical health laws—will be proclaimed to the world from Jerusalem (Isaiah 2:2–4). As human beings around the globe learn to live by these simple yet vitally important laws, their health will improve—and the age-old curse of disease will begin to disappear (Isaiah 35:5–7).

But we don’t have to wait. We can embrace that way of life now—experiencing its benefits and learning how to teach them—by applying these living laws in our lives today.

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