

Inter-American Division - Health Week of Prayer 2024

Message Sunday September 15

Proclaiming Freedom by Sharing Wholeness and Serving All

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Key verse Isaiah 61:1 *“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners”.*

Toward the end of his life, John addresses Gaius the elder: “Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.”¹ John implies that physical well-being may influence spirituality, and vice-versa. He had witnessed the activities of Jesus involving the whole person. Perhaps, as John walked on the seashore of Patmos, he relived the indescribable fellowship of an early-morning breakfast of fish and bread prepared by the nail-pierced hands of his Savior. He may further have reminisced, with tender recollection, Jesus’ empathetic attention to detail after raising Jairus’ daughter from the dead, and when He, the Bread of Life, “told them to give her something to eat.”² No doubt he remembered, too, the miraculous feeding of thousands, where Jesus again revealed his concern for people’s physical well-being.

Jesus’ involvement with the whole person is described in the opening paragraphs of *The Ministry of Healing*: “Our Lord Jesus Christ came to this world as the unwearied servant of man’s necessity. He ‘took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses,’ that He might minister to every need of humanity (Matthew 8:17). The burden of wretchedness and sin He came to remove. It was His mission to bring to men complete restoration; He came to give them health and peace and perfection of character.”³ He came to proclaim freedom for the captives: not only the incarcerated but the oppressed, and the captives of sin, illness, addictions, greed and gluttony as outlined in chapters 58 and 61 of the prophet Isaiah.

Jesus, our Pattern Man, spent much time in healing the sick. Matthew reports that “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the Kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.”⁴ Single-handedly, the Great Physician practiced and demonstrated the spirituality of health and blended healing, teaching, praying and preaching. Our Savior pressed on, saying, “...we must do the works of Him Who sent Me.”⁵

¹ III John 2, New International Version

² Mark 5:43, New International Version

³ *The Ministry of Healing*, Ellen G. White, page 17, Pacific Press Publishing Association

⁴ Matthew 4:23, New International Version

⁵ John 9:4, New International Version

The healings performed by Jesus addressed body, mind and spirit. He healed not only physical maladies but addressed the forgiveness of sin and relief from guilt. He affirmed faith and the very approaches that brought the needy one to Him. He advised changes in life values and admonished those healed to turn away from sin.

Jesus emphasized the importance of wholeness. He recognized the vital interaction of body, mind and spirit. It was only toward the latter quarter of the twentieth century that even the World Health Organization emphasized this concept and included that the definition of health be not only the absence of physical disease, but that mental and emotional well-being are essential to wellness. This is an emphasis reflected in the Old Testament: "...fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all His decrees and commands...and so that you may enjoy long life."⁶

Jesus emphasizes this wholeness of purpose required in loving God: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength."⁷ In the latter exhortation, there is a graphic description of all facets of our being and behavior. This is a theme reflected in other places, where Jesus' ministry is recorded (Matthew 22:37; Luke 10:27). The concept of loving and caring for others is connected to this commandment and introduces the importance of social support in wholeness and well-being: "Love your neighbor as yourself."⁸ Modern science is showing that people who practice religious beliefs and also are involved with the welfare of others have enhanced immune function.⁹ Religious involvement and spirituality have been associated with a decrease in cardiovascular disease and hypertension, improved mental health, less depression and anxiety, substance abuse, and suicide.¹⁰

Simply and practically stated, spirituality is "the opening of every part of life to the presence of God."¹¹ This latter working definition encompasses body, soul, heart, mind and strength comprehensively.

Wholeness in Brokenness

At creation, there was perfection and wholeness. Since sin, this perfection has been eroded, and many suffer physically, mentally, spiritually. Job—despite all his mental, physical, emotional and spiritual struggles--"did not sin by charging God (Job 1:22, NIV)." Paul pleaded three times for his particular thorn in the flesh to be removed, but instead of physical healing of

⁶ Deuteronomy 6:2, New International Version

⁷ Mark 12:30, New International Version

⁸ Mark 12:31, New International Version

⁹ Paul S. Mueller, MD; David J. Plevak, MD; Teresa A. Rummans, M.D., Mayo Clinic Proc., 2001; 76:1225-1235

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ Benjamin C. Maxson, "The Missing Connection," *Dynamic Steward*, October-December 2003, volume 7, number 4

his “brokenness,” he received a special kind of wholeness: “My grace is sufficient for you,” he was told by the Lord, “for My power is made perfect in weakness.”[1] No wonder Paul could say, “For when I am weak, then I am strong.”[2] This encouragement is particularly meaningful to those who, despite faith, prayer, and medical intervention, still suffer with chronic diseases. Paul here reflects the spirituality which opens every part of life to the presence of God; this same spirituality has been seen in various people: Fanny Crosby, who – though blind – wrote of a wonderful assurance and friendship in Jesus; Helen Keller, who overcame the obstacles of blindness and deafness – not through healing – but achieving wholeness in brokenness; Joni Eareckson-Tada, who continues to thank God for her quadriplegia, and sings His praises and reaches out to the disabled. These and so many others reflect wholeness in Christ despite brokenness of body.

Eating and drinking healthfully, exercise, moderation, modesty, etc., do not *of themselves* achieve wholeness. God’s strength is made perfect in weakness. This is providential, so that we cannot boast in our own strength or works; it helps us to remember that physical health, although desirable, is a means to an end, not the end in itself. This is where the Pharisees of Jesus’ day, and their modern-day counterparts, falter and fail.

Christ’s promise, “I have come that they might have life and that they might have it more abundantly (John 10:10) can still be a reality even among the most physically broken. Health is not guaranteed in this life. As important as wellness is, Jesus emphasized an important balance: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.”[3]

God’s Instructions on Health

Early in the Old Testament, God saw fit to give His people instructions on healthful living, including diet, cleansing, and sexual behavior. The Levitical laws were to be preventive and distinctive. Jesus, in His sojourn on earth, healed physical and mental diseases and linked forgiveness of sin with well-being and abundant life, placing emphasis on emotional and mental health as well.

Our Opportunity

As early as 1863, Ellen White counseled the fledgling Seventh-day Adventist Church on healthful living. The outstanding feature of her initial message was the “relation between physical welfare and spiritual health, or holiness.”[4] Throughout her life, she was the channel of information which fashioned the church’s philosophy and emphasis on health. Long before medical evidence emerged on the extreme dangers of smoking, Ellen White spoke out strongly on this and other issues, including the use of alcohol and poisonous medications such as arsenic and mercury-based drugs. The drinking of tea and coffee, and the use of stimulants was very strongly discouraged, as – ultimately – was the use of flesh food. She promoted a lacto-ovo

vegetarian diet as the optimal diet. In addition, the use of fresh, clean water (inside and out), clean air, adequate exercise and rest, temperance, faith, appropriate sunshine exposure, integrity, and social support were strongly encouraged. These principles still form the foundation of our health education and practice. Presently, the health message and initiatives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church are based on Biblical, Spirit of Prophecy, and evidence-based principles.

Time (October 1966) magazine reported the positive outcome of the first Adventist Health Study, describing the results as the “Adventist Advantage.”[5][6] There was a significant reduction in most cancers, and cirrhosis of the liver. Subsequent studies have shown a significant increase in longevity in those living the Adventist lifestyle. The results of meta-analyses have been so compelling that more than \$20 million was allocated by the National Institutes of Health to conduct Adventist Health Study II, with a special emphasis on the differences in malignancies between Adventists and the general population.

Further international attention was focused on the Adventist health emphasis in the November 2005 issue of *National Geographic*, which focused on the “secrets of living longer.”[7]

Currently, the second Adventist Health Study (AHS-2) is being conducted. The first Adventist Health Study took place in California, comparing the health of Seventh-day Adventists and non-Seventh-day Adventists. This showed the advantages alluded to already but significantly prolonged life expectancy of between 7 to 9 years. AHS-2 has enrolled 95,000 participants throughout the USA and Canada and has a special focus on diversity and a sub-study on spirituality and health.

Non-communicable Diseases

There has been much in the world news about non-communicable diseases (NCDs). In September 2011, the United Nations (UN) hosted a high-level meeting to address the global crisis caused by the growth of these mostly preventable diseases. The words of the Secretary General of the UN describe the concern these diseases are generating. “Our collaboration is more than a public health necessity. Non-communicable diseases are a threat to development. NCDs hit the poor and vulnerable particularly hard, and drive them deeper into poverty...” (Website: <http://bit.ly/pzFUWF>) This was after describing the outlook as grim because of the rapidly rising incidence of NCDs in all parts of the world with poorer and emerging economies facing the greatest challenges and increase.

Communicable diseases are still a major problem, and this is illustrated by conditions such as tuberculosis, HIV and AIDS, Malaria, and gastroenteritis still claiming millions of lives each year. While the spotlight was on these infectious diseases, the NCDs increased alarmingly and are a major cause of preventable death globally and contributors to poverty and loss of productivity.

The NCDs include mainly heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes, and chronic respiratory diseases, affecting all people and communities¹⁹. The main risk factors are similar globally:

Tobacco use

Foods high in saturated and trans fats

Excessive salt intake

Alcohol

Excessive sugar intake – especially in sweetened drinks

Physical inactivity

Obesity

Many billions are at risk!

Tobacco is smoked or chewed by more than 1 billion people daily, fueled by their addiction to nicotine. At least 5 million people die each year from tobacco-related deaths. These diseases are preventable if tobacco use and tobacco smoke (including secondhand smoke) are avoided. Although tobacco use has decreased in many high-income countries, there is an alarming increase of use in many low- and middle-income countries and adolescents remain a prime target of the tobacco industry and now the vaping habit. In order to reduce the number of tobacco-related deaths and NCDs, not only does the rate of smoking initiation need to be decreased but active stop-smoking strategies must be embraced and implemented. Remember the time when our Church was so actively at the forefront of this kind of initiative? We can make the difference yet again if we choose to!

It is estimated that the consumption of foods high in saturated fats and trans fats, salt, and sugar is the cause of 40% of all deaths annually from NCDs (a figure that approximates 14 million). Many studies have shown the negative effects of these foodstuffs. The Adventist Health Studies have been pioneering in showing the benefits of a plant-based diet, low in saturated fats, with a variety of grains, vegetables, fruits, and some nuts (a small handful daily).

Alcohol consumption is the third leading cause of preventable death. It contributes to the causation of various cancers and there is no safe level of consumption to prevent this particular danger. 60% of deaths related to alcohol consumption are through NCDs.

Physical inactivity is related to the current pandemic of obesity and also type 2 diabetes. Regular exercise leads to better heart health, improved weight management, prevention and improvement of type 2 diabetes, and a decrease in some cancers (breast and colon).

NCDs are a major global threat and concerted action and leadership at all levels are needed to curb this destructive scourge of illness. Many of the NCDs are totally preventable. Those at risk can be readily identified. This is a golden opportunity for each Church congregation to be a community health center and each church member a health promoter – it will make the difference to this broken world in which we live. It is time to turn our dream of change into a reality, by God’s grace!

This year, the Inter-American Division is focusing on its health reform movement but emphasizing delivering health services to the community. Our health services are easily summarized using the acronym D.R.E.A.M :

D: Early DETECTION of diseases,

R: RESTORATION of Health,

E: EDUCATION and EMPOWERMENT,

A: ASSISTANCE & ACCOMPANIMENT (health companionship),

M: MAINTENANCE (lifestyle).

The amazing and robust Health Message of the Seventh-day Adventist Church was given to us in 1863 because our work was not yet finished. It still is not done – there is much, much more to be done both inside and outside of the Church. I appeal to each one to personally recommit to wholistic healthy living and to sharing this wonderful message which points to the love, grace and free salvation available in and through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

More important than living a few years longer is the injunction to do “the works of Him Who sent Me [Jesus],”²⁰ God has given us, through varied sources, consistent guidance on how we can be healthy, happy and holy. The health and wellness are to be channeled into His service as conduits of His grace to a broken world, with no strings attached. The benefits accrue to the servant and those served. We are, indeed, blessed to live in a time when science continues and confirms the instructions given. History and the universe will judge us on how we apply the knowledge and share the benefits. May each of us live and share this amazing DREAM and opportunity!

“Have faith in the Lord your God, and you will be upheld; have faith in His prophets and you will be successful.”²¹ Maranatha.

[1] II Corinthians 12:9, New International Version

[2] II Corinthians 12:10, New International Version

[3] Matthew 10:38, New International Version

[4] D.E. Robinson, *The Story of Our Health Message*, Southern Publishing Association, 1965

[5] *Time* magazine, October 28, 1966

[6] Gary E. Fraser, *Diet, Life Expectancy, and Chronic Disease: Studies of Seventh-day Adventists and Other Vegetarians*, Oxford University Press, 2003

[7] Dan Buettner, *The Secrets of Long Life*, *National Geographic*, November 2005

¹⁹ www.thelancet.com Vol. 377 April 23, 2011

²⁰ John 9:4

²¹ 2 Chronicles 20:20, New International Version

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