



SESSION 4

# PHYSICAL HEALTH

## HOW SHOULD I LIVE ?

*Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.*  
(Philippians 3:17–21)

### Human lifespan is limited

**A**ccording to the Guinness World Records (at the time of writing) the oldest living person verified by original proof of birth is Misao Okawa, a Japanese woman who turned 115 in 2013.

Many, of course, never reach such an old age before they die, but there does appear to be a natural ceiling to human longevity at around 120 years. After a period of near perfect growth and cell renewal (in humans, between 20 and 35 years of age), ageing is characterised by the declining ability to respond to physical stress,

increasing homeostatic imbalance (ability to maintain physiological and biochemical systems) and increased risk of disease. This currently irreversible series of changes inevitably ends in death.

Many scientists now believe that the ageing process is genetically programmed and results from accumulated damage in our DNA. It may be related to a fall in the level of an enzyme called telomerase. Telomerase repairs DNA sequences called telomeres which are located at the end of chromosomes. We know that telomeres shorten throughout life and that this eventually leads to cell death. Also certain premature ageing syndromes have been associated with telomere shortening. But regardless of the actual mechanism of ageing it is interesting that the Bible itself talks of 120 years as the maximum human life span. Before sending the Flood God said: 'My Spirit will not contend with humans forever, for they are mortal; their days will be a hundred and twenty years' (Genesis 6:3).

There is no clear explanation for the vast lifespans recorded in the early chapters of Genesis. Noah himself is reported to have lived 950 years. However, the biblical genealogical records show that ages dropped progressively over several generations after the Genesis Flood to present levels. Methuselah, the oldest man mentioned in the Bible, was 969 and lived before the Flood (Genesis 5:27). Abraham died at 175 (Genesis 25:7) and Moses 120 (Deuteronomy 34:7). This has led people to speculate that human lifespans fell progressively over time as a part of the curse of the Fall (Genesis 3:17–19), and that this was mediated through accumulated genetic defects. It is interesting that some species on earth, unlike man, do not actually demonstrate ageing in the same way. There are creatures whose mortality stays constant throughout their whole life, like hydra or the hermit crab. Their bodies do not seem to degenerate during their lifetime. And then there are even species whose probability of dying decreases as they grow older, like the red gorgonian (a coral), the netleaf oak and the desert tortoise.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Aging out of bounds: New demographic data show how diversely different species age and biologists cannot explain why. *Max-Planck-Gesellschaft*, December 8 2013. [bit.ly/1u80Qlc](http://bit.ly/1u80Qlc)

Psalms 90, attributed to Moses, suggests that human ageing is an expression of God's wrath on fallen humanity:

*All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan. Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures; yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away... Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.*  
(Psalm 90:10–12)

We are all subject to ageing and should take our mortality seriously in planning how we are to live our lives. It is striking that a life expectancy of 70–80, in healthy societies for those who have survived to adulthood, has not changed that much between Moses' time (about 1500 BC) and the present day. For the period 2005–2010, the worldwide average life expectancy at birth was 68.7 years (66.5 years for males and 71.0 years for females). In the UK it was higher at 79.6 years.<sup>2</sup>

How does this help us? Well, we need to grasp the reality that it is most unlikely that any of us will live beyond 120 years and most of us will probably die between 70 and 90. But this is only an average. It doesn't help us to know what will happen to us personally. Obviously many people die younger than 80 as a result of accidents, violence or disease. All we can say with certainty is that God himself knows, and has set, the length of our life and the day of our death. The psalmist says, 'All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be' (Psalm 139:16).

## The causes of illness

So what are the common causes of illness that affect life expectancy? Many diseases have an inherited element and we may have been 'dealt a poor hand' in the longevity stakes. But it is God who is sovereign even over so-called chance events like the throw of the dice: 'The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord' (Proverbs 16:33).

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2. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. United Nations population prospects revision 2012: Highlights and advance tables. United Nations, 2013 [bit.ly/1j2Ub1c](http://bit.ly/1j2Ub1c)

There are over 6,000 known genetic diseases which vary widely in severity and age of onset. Many cancers also have a genetic element, as does coronary heart disease. Our environment also plays a part. People living in Australia are at greater risk of some forms of skin cancer than those in Lapland. Those in developing countries are far more likely to die of infections than those in the West. Diets have a major impact on health and vary widely between countries and communities. The availability of medical care plays a major role, too. 99% of maternal deaths – almost all of them preventable – occur among the poorest two thirds of the world's population.

Many of the factors that affect our health are things over which we have no control. However, lifestyle choices are something that we have a lot of control over and many people die early as a result of bad decisions. To put it more bluntly, many people in more wealthy developed countries eat, drink and worry themselves to death, or end up with a disease or injury which changes their lives because of how they have chosen to live.

## The five big killers

While we can never make accurate predictions for any given individual many of the major causes of death in the UK can generally be delayed or treated, to some extent and may even in some cases be avoidable.

Over 50% of people in the UK will now live to 80,<sup>3</sup> but the five biggest killers account for more than 150,000 deaths a year *among under-75s* in England and Wales each year and the Department of Health estimates 30,000 of these deaths, or one in five, are entirely avoidable.<sup>4 5 6</sup> So what are the five big killers in the UK? They are cancer, coronary heart disease, stroke, lung disease and liver disease.

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3. Mortality in England and Wales: Average life span. Office for National Statistics, 17 December 2012 [bit.ly/1meqtYQ](http://bit.ly/1meqtYQ)
  4. Murray CJL et al. UK health performance: Findings of the global burden of disease study 2010. *Lancet* 2013;381 pp. 997–1020 [bit.ly/1ixPega](http://bit.ly/1ixPega)
  5. Mortality statistics: every cause of death in England and Wales. *Guardian*, 14 January 2011 [bit.ly/1uHbYNE](http://bit.ly/1uHbYNE)
  6. What do people die of? Mortality rates and data for every cause of death in 2011 visualised. *Guardian*, 6 November 2012 [bit.ly/1uGXXOb](http://bit.ly/1uGXXOb)

*When Carol was 35 she noticed a lump in her breast and had it looked at by her local GP. A mammogram and biopsy confirmed cancer and surgery showed spread to the glands in her armpit. Carol opted for a mastectomy and breast reconstruction and after a course of chemotherapy was doing well five years later. She was thankful for the treatment but also concerned that it hit her so young. After learning that a number of her aunts and her grandmother had also had breast cancer at an early age she was encouraged to have some genetic testing to see whether she carried a gene that had put her at particularly high risk of catching the disease. This being confirmed she had her daughters tested too. They are now recognised as high risk and are having regular screening to ensure that any cancer is detected early.*

Cancer is the biggest killer, accounting overall for around 140,000 deaths in England and Wales each year. Six in ten people will get cancer at some time in their lives and just over one in three will die from it. There have been good inroads made into improving outcomes for some of the most common cancers. But it is estimated that about a 20% of cancers are linked to smoking, 10% to being overweight or obese and 8% to alcohol.<sup>7</sup> Also, many cancers are detected too late. Although there are national screening programmes for certain cancers, like breast and cervical, public awareness of symptoms and the need to seek help early is still too low. More than three out of five cancers are diagnosed in people aged 65 and over. It is perhaps not surprising that cancer is the number one fear for the British public, ahead of debt, knife crime, Alzheimer's disease and losing a job.

Coronary heart disease accounted for 64,000 deaths in England and Wales in 2011. More than a quarter of these deaths occurred in people who were younger than 75. Smoking, being overweight and

7. All cancers combined key facts. Cancer research UK. [bit.ly/1ISXubg](http://bit.ly/1ISXubg)

having high blood pressure are all key risk factors. But there are also risk factors over which we have no choice at all: family history (non-modifiable), gender, age and lipid (fat) levels (which increasingly appear to be largely inherited). The key is to change that which we can and accept that which we cannot.

Stroke, accounting for 44,000 deaths per year in England and Wales,<sup>8</sup> is the leading cause of disability. More than 150,000 people have a stroke every year in the UK. Some people suffer a 'mini-stroke' (a stroke-like event, but the symptoms pass within 24 hours), and 10–15% of these go on to experience a full stroke within one month. Thankfully, new research suggests the risk could be cut by 80% if they recognise the symptoms and seek immediate treatment. According to the Stroke Association, if all mini-stroke patients received urgent treatment immediately, this could reduce the number of strokes by up to 10,000 per year.<sup>9</sup>

Lung disease kills about 67,000 people a year in England and Wales and is one of the most common causes of emergency admission to hospital. More than three million people in England are currently living with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and asthma. The most important cause of COPD is smoking, but about 15% of cases in some communities are work-related, triggered by exposure to fumes, chemicals and dusts at work.

Liver disease is the only major UK cause of death still increasing year-on-year and has risen 25% in less than a decade.<sup>10</sup> It accounts for about 7,000 deaths per year in England and Wales. Two of the major causes of liver disease – obesity and harmful drinking – are preventable. The third cause, undiagnosed infection, can also be preventable if it is sexually transmitted or due to injecting drugs. More than a third of men and over a quarter of women regularly exceed the government recommended level of alcohol intake – 21 units of alcohol a week for men and 14 units for women with two

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8. Margaret Thatcher dead: Strokes kill 45,000 people per year. *Huffington Post*, 8 April 2013 [huff.to/1o1sdWt](http://huff.to/1o1sdWt)

9. After a mini-stroke, immediate treatment can cut stroke risk by 80%. Stroke association [bit.ly/1vZQkF3](http://bit.ly/1vZQkF3)

10. Liver disease deaths reach record levels in England. *BBC News*, 22 March 2012 [bbc.in/1o1sg4L](http://bbc.in/1o1sg4L)

alcohol-free days per week. There are two units in a standard can of lager, beer or cider and two units in a 175ml glass of wine.<sup>11</sup> Liver disease kills as many people as diabetes and road deaths combined.<sup>12</sup>

Deaths from other causes are far less common. In 2009, there were 6,000 deaths from Alzheimer's, 5,000 from diabetes, 5,000 from Parkinson's disease, 3,000 from kidney failure and 2,000 from road accidents.

## Improving our chances

Since it is the biggest killer, what can we do to lessen our chances of developing cancer? Cancer Research UK estimates that more than four in ten cancer cases could be prevented by lifestyle changes, such as not smoking, keeping a healthy body weight, cutting back on alcohol, eating a healthy balanced diet, keeping active, avoiding certain infections (like the sexually transmitted Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)), staying safe in the sun and avoiding occupational hazards like chemicals in the workplace.<sup>13</sup> The world famous US Mayo Clinic<sup>14</sup> in Rochester, Minnesota, gives a similar list of seven tips to lower your cancer risk as follows:<sup>15</sup>

- ❑ Don't use tobacco
- ❑ Eat a healthy diet (plenty of fruit and vegetables, low fat, moderate alcohol)
- ❑ Maintain a healthy weight and be physically active
- ❑ Protect yourself from the sun
- ❑ Get immunised (especially if at risk for hepatitis B and HPV)
- ❑ Avoid risky behaviours (such as unsafe sex and sharing needles)
- ❑ Get regular medical care including cancer screening

For Christians who don't smoke, don't have sex outside marriage, don't drink to excess and use sunscreen (!) this could arguably be pruned down to eating a healthy diet, maintaining a healthy weight and staying

11. Recommended safe limits of alcohol. *Patient.co.uk* [bit.ly/1xO2e57](http://bit.ly/1xO2e57)

12. Facts about liver disease. British Liver Trust [bit.ly/1rjbWxq](http://bit.ly/1rjbWxq)

13. Can cancer be prevented? Cancer Research UK [bit.ly/1mph0vf](http://bit.ly/1mph0vf)

14. [www.mayoclinic.org](http://www.mayoclinic.org)

15. Cancer prevention: 7 tips to reduce your risk. Mayo Clinic [mayoclinic.in/Zg9BGk](http://mayoclinic.in/Zg9BGk)

physically active. But, having said that, some Christians do engage in sexually immoral behaviour, smoke, drink to excess, or do all three, both before and *after* conversion. It is a sobering thought however, that poor diet, obesity and physical inactivity are major reasons for premature deaths among Christians in the UK today. They are also major contributors to diabetes, accidents (especially injuries from falls) and spine and joint problems. When we consider individual diseases, as above, we need to remember that some risk factors contribute to a whole variety of different diseases.

Smoking kills 100,000 people a year in the UK mainly through coronary heart disease, strokes, lung disease and various forms of cancer.<sup>16</sup> Alcohol-related liver disease kills about 6,000 people a year but the total number of alcohol-related deaths is around 24,000 if we add in alcohol-related deaths from accidents, violence, suicide, hypertension, stroke, coronary heart disease and cancers of the breast and gastrointestinal tract.<sup>17</sup>

*Bill started smoking 20 cigarettes a day in his late teens and later increased it to 40. He had noticed that his exercise tolerance was decreasing but was finally brought to his senses at the age of 46 when he woke up in the early hours of the morning with crushing pain in his chest. His wife called the ambulance and he was rushed to hospital where an ECG and blood tests showed changes consistent with a small heart attack. He made a good recovery but realised that the outcome could well have been different and that his decision to smoke could have left his wife a widow and his children without a father. Giving up the cigarettes was not easy but his GP's sober warning about what might be around the corner if he continued was eventually incentive enough.*

16. Smoking – The facts. *Patient.co.uk* [www.patient.co.uk/health/smoking-the-facts](http://www.patient.co.uk/health/smoking-the-facts)

17. Alcohol 'could kill 210,000 in next 20 years'. *NHS Choices*, 20 February 2012 [bit.ly/1t50eHA](http://bit.ly/1t50eHA)

It is estimated that there are around 35,000 obesity-related deaths in England each year.<sup>18</sup> This accounts for one in every 16 deaths. Obesity is a risk factor for high blood pressure (hypertension), heart disease, infertility, many types of cancer, stroke, type 2 diabetes, asthma, osteoarthritis, back pain, depression, liver and kidney disease, and sleep apnoea.

Body mass index (BMI) can be easily worked out from height and weight using an online calculator – just google ‘BMI’! The normal range is 18.5–25 with 25–30 being overweight and over 30 being obese. For example, a 183cm (six foot) tall, 35 year old man weighing 80kg (12.5 stone) would have a BMI of 24, just at the upper range of normal.

Weight is determined by our calorie balance – calories eaten verses calories burned – but it is much easier to cut 500 calories from our daily diet than to burn an extra 500 calories every day. Two studies may explain why many people who begin exercise programmes often lose little to no weight in the long run. The first, published in the scientific journal *PLoS One*, compared the daily energy expenditures of Westerners and the Hadza, a population of hunter-gatherers living in northern Tanzania.<sup>19</sup> Amazingly it found no difference. The second study, in *Obesity Reviews*, found that when people exercise but keep their energy intake constant, their resting metabolic rate actually goes down.<sup>20</sup> The body resists weight loss by changing its ‘idle speed’. In fact this is true of dieting alone too! These studies suggest two things: exercise programmes may not lead to as much calorie burn as we might think, and many people start eating more when they exercise, and may eat too much.<sup>21</sup>

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18. Complications of obesity. NHS Choices [bit.ly/1uGi6qE](http://bit.ly/1uGi6qE)

19. Pontzer H et al. Hunter-gatherer energetics and human obesity. *PLoS ONE* 2012;7(7) [bit.ly/1oUzt1k](http://bit.ly/1oUzt1k)

20. Schwartz A and Doucet E. Relative changes in resting energy expenditure during weight loss: a systematic review. *Obesity Reviews* 2010;11 pp. 531–437

21. Is dieting or exercise better for losing weight? *Tufts Now*, January 31 2013 [bit.ly/1w2bzF4](http://bit.ly/1w2bzF4)

*Geoff had represented his school in cross-country when he was 16 and later ran for the local harriers when he was at university. But marriage, children and a sedentary job changed all that and his body shape began to change. When his wife and teenage children teased him about getting fat he said he could still easily run around the block. When they fell about laughing he found some trainers and went for a two mile run. Finding himself waddling and completely out of breath after a mile he decided something had to be done. He reduced his diet and revised his work travelling schedule so that he was forced to walk at least two miles a day. Over the next few years he lost the extra ten kilograms he had put on and even ran a couple of half marathons. Now he feels much better, seems to keep illness more regularly at bay and is grateful for his family's rebuke. He looks at friends carrying 20kg more and realises how easily he could have followed them.*

Although diet may be more important than exercise for weight loss, as these two studies show, exercise does contribute to weight loss and there are also many other benefits of exercise: less stress and anxiety, improved mood and less risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes and some cancers. In 2012, a study in *The Lancet*, a leading medical journal, suggested that, worldwide, inactivity is killing as many people as smoking.<sup>22</sup> That equates to about one in ten deaths from diseases such as heart disease, diabetes and breast and colon cancer. It is recommended that adults do 150 minutes of moderate exercise, such as brisk walking, cycling or gardening, each week. It also found that people in higher-income countries were the least active, with those in the UK among the worst, as nearly two thirds of adults were judged not to be doing enough.

These are the medical facts, but how does the Bible help us think and act with regard to personal health?

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22. Inactivity 'killing as many as smoking'. *BBC News*, 18 July 2012 [bbc.in/1nOYfRM](http://bbc.in/1nOYfRM)

## Biblical basics

We need to acknowledge first of all that we are mortal. We're all going to die, almost certainly of a disease or an accident – unless Jesus returns first! The apostle Paul reminds us that 'outwardly we are wasting away' and are clothed with an 'earthly tent' in which 'we groan and are burdened' (2 Corinthians 4:16–5:4). So we shouldn't be surprised when we or our loved ones eventually develop some serious illness. It is part of living in a fallen world. Rather we should expect it. It's part of the human journey. It is amazing how many people are genuinely shocked to find they have developed a serious illness, as though it was something they thought was never going to happen to them, or at least 'not yet'.

Medicine is a great gift and has made great advances, but all medicine is limited. All it really can offer is a few more years of better quality. It can delay death by treating some diseases and relieving others, but it cannot make us immortal.

Now there is another important biblical principle: We need also to remember that our bodies are gifts from God and temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). This should lead us to treat them with respect, look after them carefully and use them in ways that are 'holy and honourable' (1 Thessalonians 4:4). In so doing, we may well also be lessening our chances of getting certain diseases.

## Alcohol and drugs in the Bible

There are many warnings in Scripture about not abusing our bodies. The Bible contains no references to mind-altering substances which are now classified as harmful and illegal drugs, and the authors had no knowledge of tobacco. However the Bible does have a huge amount to say about alcohol – and the principles can be applied in these other areas too.

In the Old Testament we have salutary tales about Noah and Lot getting drunk and doing things they would later regret (Genesis 9:20–27, 19:30–38). If we drink too much alcohol we lose control of our

judgment. Later there is the incident of the man who forfeits his life for being 'a profligate and a drunkard' (Deuteronomy 21:18–21). The Wisdom literature features vivid descriptions of the clinical effects of alcohol with warnings about its misuse. Proverbs 23:29–33 gives a stunningly accurate description of the clinical features of alcohol intoxication, including red eyes, injury with bruising, hallucinations, memory loss and addiction. Psalm 104:15 says that wine 'gladdens human hearts', a reminder that alcohol exaggerates our feelings – it does indeed gladden the heart of a cheerful person but also aggravates the depression of a sad one!

*Moyna did not consider herself to be a heavy drinker but regularly enjoyed a glass or two of wine a night and not infrequently was hung over on Sunday mornings after a Saturday night out. One night she took a corner too fast and rolled the car with three friends on board. The car was a write off but thankfully only one of her friends suffered minor injuries. However the police were called and she ended up being confirmed over the limit and losing her driving licence for a year. Shortly afterwards a routine visit to her GP and subsequent tests revealed abnormal liver function. Moyna tried to regulate her alcohol intake but realised that she was unable to and eventually decided to give up drinking altogether. Although he did not have a drinking problem himself, her husband decided also to abstain from all alcohol so as to minimise any temptation for her.*

We see similar warnings in the New Testament. The apostle Paul exhorts the Ephesians, 'Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit' (Ephesians 5:18). Peter similarly lists 'drunkenness, orgies, carousing' among the things 'pagans choose to do' (1 Peter 4:3). Then there is the sober warning that along with other groups, 'drunkards' will not 'inherit the kingdom of God' (1 Corinthians 6:10).

And yet the Bible does not prohibit alcohol altogether. In fact the Bible also sees wine as a gift that is used in honour of God in Jewish festivals and as a symbol of the coming kingdom. Jesus himself was even accused of being a ‘winebibber’ (Matthew 11:19, KJV) or drunkard. Jesus’ first miracle involved turning water into (rather a lot of) wine at Cana (John 2:1–11). Other passages in the Gospels record Jesus drinking with the socially undesirable, but as he never sinned, we know he was not a ‘drunkard’ like some of them were (Matthew 11:18–19; Luke 5:29–30, 7:33–34). Yet neither was the Son of God a teetotaler. At the Last Supper, Jesus took a cup of wine and gave it a new covenantal meaning as a symbol of his redeeming blood. Whether the Communion wine is alcoholic or non-alcoholic, almost all Christians celebrate that redemption regularly (Matthew 26:27–29; Mark 14:23–25; Luke 22:17–20; 1 Corinthians 11:23–34). Paul advised Timothy to ‘Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses’ (1 Timothy 5:23). Notice, though, he says ‘a little wine’! Admittedly, this was at a time when water for drinking was often harmfully laden with infective agents, and alcoholic drinks were nowhere near as strong as they are today.

So it is not wrong for Christians to drink alcohol, but it is always wrong to become drunk, or to drink to the point where we lose control of our faculties or start to damage our health. Some Christians may choose not to drink at all, perhaps because of a past alcohol problem or to avoid being a stumbling-block to others: ‘Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling-block to the weak’ (1 Corinthians 8:1–13).

What about smoking? Tobacco was unknown in biblical times, but while alcohol can be consumed so moderately that it is not harmful (and may even be beneficial), we now know beyond a shadow of a doubt that every cigarette does damage. Before this was known, it was regarded as almost normal in some quarters for Christians, including some famous Christian leaders, to smoke. But in view of what we now know, it is hard to see how this activity can be considered consistent with good stewardship of one’s body.

However, we need to be careful not to judge those who have not yet been able to stop. Nicotine is powerfully addictive and those who fall under its spell, and that of other drugs, may well need prayer, support and professional help in order to break free.

## Overeating in the Bible

Obesity is perhaps much more of a challenge to us than it was to those in biblical times. With changes in work and lifestyle, people exercise less, and with national changes in the sort of food we eat, we tend to consume more calories than we burn off. The Bible was written in times of hard physical work, to people who ate a 'Mediterranean diet'.<sup>23</sup> However there were some striking examples of people who were very overweight and whose weight may have contributed to their deaths. Eli the priest died when, hearing the news of his sons' deaths at war, he fell backwards and broke his neck 'for he was an old man, and he was heavy' (1 Samuel 4:18).

Eglon, king of Moab, died from a penetrating injury after being stabbed by Ehud the Israelite judge. We are told he was 'a very fat man' and we are given a very graphic description of his death: 'Ehud reached with his left hand, drew the sword from his right thigh and plunged it into the king's belly. Even the handle sank in after the blade, and his bowels discharged. Ehud did not pull the sword out, and the fat closed in over it' (Judges 3:17–22). Eglon's gross obesity and slow manoeuvrability might conceivably have made him an easier military target.

But it can be dangerous to draw Christian principles purely from Bible narrative, interesting those these cases are. We need to look at the Bible's more general teaching. The book of Proverbs gives wise advice to those given to gluttony (Proverbs 23:1–3, 20–21): 'Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat, for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags.' It also warns those with a sweet tooth to 'eat just enough'

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23. The principal aspects of a Mediterranean diet include proportionally high consumption of olive oil, legumes, unrefined cereals, fruits, and vegetables, moderate to high consumption of fish, moderate consumption of dairy products (mostly as cheese and yogurt), moderate wine consumption, and low consumption of meat and meat products.

(Proverbs 25:16) and states that ‘a companion of gluttons disgraces his father’ (Proverbs 28:7).

The apostle Paul remarks on the propensity of the inhabitants of Crete to be ‘liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons’ and exhorts Titus to rebuke them and urge them to ‘be sound in the faith’ (Titus 1:12, 13). He similarly warns the Philippians: ‘Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame’ (Philippians 3:18–19).

So far we have focused largely on drugs and diet. But we need to remember that sexual health and mental health are also important contributors to wellbeing. They can have profound effects on eating and drinking behaviour. The present explosion in the number of cases of sexually transmitted infections is a graphic warning of the consequences of unhealthy lifestyle choices. How many people drink too much or eat too much in order to comfort themselves in anxiety, in depression or over some sexual sin?

## Rest and devotional times

Christians, because of a strong desire to serve, may also neglect their need for proper rest and make themselves more vulnerable to illness through overwork or lack of sleep. Jesus was not legalistic about the Sabbath but rather recognised its true purpose. He realised that it was important to withdraw and rest, even in the face of pressing need. Burnout can be a major problem for Christians because we are motivated by a strong sense of responsibility and are aware of the vast amount of unmet need. But we also need to schedule time for relaxation and recuperation. How we spend it will depend on our own personality and makeup. We may be alone or with others, doing a vigorous activity or a sedentary one – the important thing is that we take time out altogether from work and ministry at regular intervals.

The story is told of two men who chopped wood. One stopped for regular rests every hour while the other just kept chopping all day long. At the end of the day the one who rested had a far larger pile

of chopped wood. The other was surprised until he learned that while resting, the other had also been sharpening his axe. Recognising the need for rest is like sharpening the axe.

Jesus said, 'Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light' (Matthew 11:29–30). Jesus also guarded his devotional life. He spent time in prayer, especially during periods of intense activity. He prayed regularly and especially before each important decision. And he withdrew from his ministry to pray after periods of exhausting ministry. In Luke 5:15–16 we find a good prescription for busy Christians in the example of Jesus: '...crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed'. The more he worked the more he prayed. He was 'too busy not to pray'. Perhaps God creates the delays and stoppages in our busy lives; the red lights, and traffic jams, the queues and holdups so that we might have the opportunity to pray more.

Similarly Jesus was immersed in the word of God – so much so that when the devil challenged him in the wilderness he could answer with three quotes from the book of Deuteronomy; a book that many of us could not easily find, let alone quote from. Do we regularly feed on God's word? Do we make it one of our first priorities? Jesus did.

## **Keeping it all in perspective**

The main emphasis of this chapter has been on the importance of taking a healthy interest in our physical health. But there is an opposite danger – that of being health and fitness obsessed. For some, including Christians, maintaining health and fitness can become a god in itself and lead to an over-occupation with one's body and longevity that is spiritually very unhealthy. We need therefore to keep health in an eternal perspective. The Bible says that all people 'are destined to die once and after that to face judgment' (Hebrews 9:27) and then to end up in one of two destinations for all eternity (Revelation 20:11–15). That is something that wonderfully focuses the mind about priorities on earth!

So let's not be scared of cancer. If it happens, it happens. Instead let's grasp the fact that there is actually something far worse than cancer. As Jesus said, 'I will show you whom you should fear: fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him' (Luke 12:5).

Salvation – knowing, enjoying and glorifying God in his worldwide family forever – is infinitely more important than good health in this life and we should always comfort ourselves with this thought. The wonderful truth is that 'Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many' and that 'he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him' (Hebrews 9:28). Our destiny is not to live on in these bodies we have now, but to receive bodies like that of Jesus after the resurrection in order to live in a 'New Jerusalem' where there will be 'no more death or mourning or crying or pain' (Philippians 3:21; Revelation 21:1–4). This life is only a shadow of what is to come, and the life that follows is infinitely more important. Therefore, we must avoid giving personal health too high a place in our lives. Health is a blessing but it is possible to make an idol of health and to put it before God himself.

There is no doubt that physical exercise is good for us. The apostle Paul uses athletes as examples of people who demonstrate self-discipline. But he does it primarily to emphasise the importance of spiritual fitness:

*Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.*  
(1 Corinthians 9:24–25)

In counselling his protégé Timothy, Paul exhorts him: 'train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come' (1 Timothy 4:7–8). Physical training is of 'some value', but what good is a sleek and trim body with rippling biceps and tight

abs if the person who owns it is ultimately destined for hell? As Jesus warned, 'What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?' (Luke 9:25).

## Why guard our health?

There are many good reasons to care for our personal health. It may mean that we live longer in better health and can therefore be more help to and less dependent on our relatives, loved ones and members of the community. How much welfare dependency, early bereavement or time lost from work, is the result of poor lifestyle choices? How many families have been deprived of a bread-winner, parent, child or spouse when it could have been avoided? How much of the load the health service strains under is due to poor lifestyle choices? It may well mean that our own earthly lives involve less physical suffering through being able to avoid illness for longer and living a greater proportion of our lives disease free.

Perhaps above all, taking care of our bodies is a strong witness that we consider them to be gifts of a good creator that should be treasured, and that we look forward to the resurrection of our bodies on the day of judgment. When the apostle Peter spoke of the end times and the judgment, he asked his readers: 'Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be?' He went on to answer his own question:

*You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming... So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.*

(2 Peter 3:11–12, 14)

Caring for our bodies is surely part of living 'holy and godly lives' and making 'every effort to be found spotless'. For 'in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells' (2 Peter 3:10–14).


**FURTHER READING**

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- ❑ Daly M. Facing the obesity epidemic. *Triple Helix* 2004; Autumn pp. 10–11 [bit.ly/1oyHDfC](http://bit.ly/1oyHDfC)
- ❑ Dixon P. The truth about drugs. *Nucleus* 1999; Autumn pp. 26–32. [bit.ly/ZrOp2P](http://bit.ly/ZrOp2P)
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- ❑ Leach M, Leach S. Addiction: Helping others and ourselves. *Nucleus* 2000; Winter pp. 23–29 [bit.ly/ZrOp2N](http://bit.ly/ZrOp2N)
- ❑ Roach J. Banning smoking: A welcome proposal. *Triple Helix* 2005; Winter pp. 3 [bit.ly/ZrOp2O](http://bit.ly/ZrOp2O)
- ❑ Short D. Beating burnout. *Triple Helix* 2001; Summer pp. 10–11 [bit.ly/1oyHDfD](http://bit.ly/1oyHDfD)
- ❑ Vere D. Dependence and addiction. *CMF Files* 8, 1999 [bit.ly/1oyHDfE](http://bit.ly/1oyHDfE)
- ❑ Watts D. Drugs and alcohol: Why should we care? *Triple Helix* 2010; Easter pp. 10–11 [bit.ly/1oyHDfB](http://bit.ly/1oyHDfB)



# THE HUMAN JOURNEY

THINKING BIBLICALLY ABOUT HEALTH

## PHYSICAL HEALTH

### HOW SHOULD I LIVE?

#### SESSION AIM

To understand factors which affect physical health, and explore biblical principles about how we should view our bodies.

#### ICEBREAKER

Have you ever made an effort to get fit? What did you have to change about your lifestyle? Was it easy?

#### WATCH THE DVD



#### ▶ PHYSICAL HEALTH: HOW SHOULD I LIVE?

Opening verses: Philippians 3:17–21

## DVD KEY POINTS

Most people don't live longer than 70–90 years. Environment and availability of medical care can affect how long we live. We can't always control these, but we do have a lot of control over our lifestyle choices.

**The five big killers**

- Cancer
- Coronary heart disease
- Stroke
- Lung disease
- Liver disease

**Improving our health**

- Eat a healthy diet
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Stay physically active

**A biblical perspective**

- We are mortal (2 Corinthians 4:16–5:4)
- Illness is part of living in a fallen world (Genesis 3)
- We should treat our bodies with respect (1 Corinthians 6:19–20)

**Alcohol in the Bible**

There are warnings about alcohol in the Old Testament (Noah and Lot, Genesis 9:20–23, 19:30–38) and the New Testament (Ephesians 5:18).

The Bible doesn't prohibit drinking alcohol, but does prohibit getting drunk.

**Obesity**

Obesity was not a major problem in the past, but Proverbs gives warnings about overeating (Proverbs 25:16, 28:7).

**Summary**

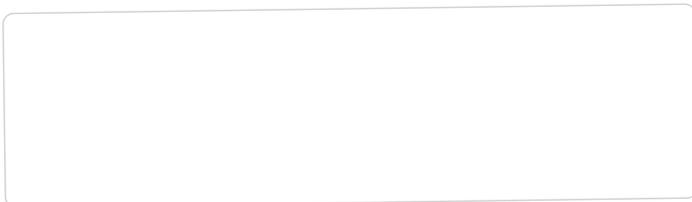
Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. We must keep health in an eternal perspective. This life is only a shadow of what is to come, and the life that follows is infinitely more important.

EXPLORE

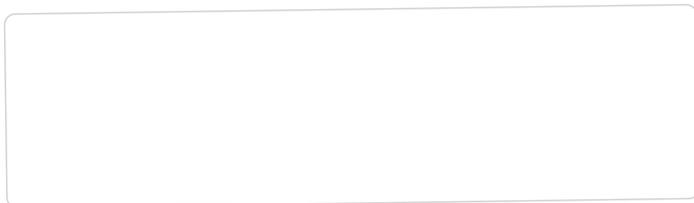
Key passages: 1 Thessalonians 5:4–8;  
1 Corinthians 6:19–20; 8:1–13; Philippians 3:17–21

Use these, and any other relevant passages you can think of, to help you discuss the following questions.

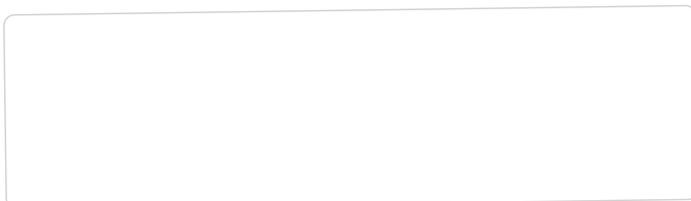
**1** What views of the body and physical fitness are common in society? What is good and bad about these?



**2** How much should Christians care about a body which is 'wasting away' (2 Corinthians 4:16). Why?



**3** *'We shouldn't be surprised when we or our loved ones eventually develop some serious illness.'* What comfort does Scripture offer us in the face of this possibility? How could you encourage a loved one who became seriously ill?



4

What guidelines can we take from Scripture about:

A. Recreational drugs

B. Drinking alcohol

C. Smoking

D. Overeating

## THE HUMAN JOURNEY

### GO FURTHER

- What changes could you make to your lifestyle and diet to help improve your physical health?
- Think of ways you can encourage others to take their physical health more seriously. Perhaps you could be starting an exercise class at church, or run a healthy eating event.

### PRAY

Pray together or in smaller groups about what you've learned in this session. You may like to use these points as a guide:

- Thank God that he has given each one of us a unique set of gifts and physical abilities.
- Pray for the strength and courage to be good stewards of our bodies so that we can use our gifts and abilities well.
- Pray for those who are stuck in physical addictions, that they would know the hope and healing of God in their lives.

## GLOSSARY

- **Body Mass Index:** A measure to determine if someone is a healthy weight for their height.
- **Obesity:** The condition of being very overweight, usually defined as having a Body Mass Index (BMI) in excess of 30.

To continue thinking about the topics raised in this session read chapter four of *The Human Journey* book: Physical Health – How should I live?

More resources on Physical Health are available at [www.humanjourney.org.uk](http://www.humanjourney.org.uk)