

Maintaining a Healthy Spiritual Heart

CONSIDER FOR A moment the creations of God. They are literally all around us, all the time. In Psalm 19:1,2, David states that “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge.” The creations of God are evident day and night for always!

In the thirty-eighth and thirty-ninth chapters of Job, God declared how great his creative powers are when he asked Job for answers to these questions: Where are the foundations of the earth fastened? How are the seas kept in place? Why do the four seasons remain constant? Who brings the rain? The snow? The hail? Who provides the food for both the lion and the raven? How are the mountains and the wilderness made a fit home for all God’s creatures?

We have no idea how God created all these things. How did God create a human being? Even in man’s

fallen, imperfect condition, there is no disputing the fact that the human body is a miracle that science could never reproduce. No combination of geneticists, engineers, and computer scientists could create a living being from the dust of the earth! Computers continue to become smaller and more powerful, but they cannot compare with the human brain. What engineer could ever hope to produce a more durable and dependable pump than the human heart?

Consider for a moment the workings of the heart. The heart is nothing more than a pump (about the size of a fist), whose purpose is to deliver blood to the body. The heart is composed of two pumps operating parallel to one another. The right collecting chamber collects used blood from the veins from all over the body (except the lungs) and empties into the right ventricle, a pumping chamber that propels the blood through the pulmonary arteries in the lungs where it absorbs oxygen. The blood reaches the lungs carrying only about seventy percent of the oxygen that it can hold, and leaves the lungs via the pulmonary veins about ninety-eight percent oxygenated. The pulmonary veins bring the oxygenated blood to the left collecting chamber, which in turn empties into the left ventricle. This chamber is nearly ten times thicker than the right ventricle because the force of its contraction must propel the blood a great deal further than that of the right ventricle. The blood gushes out into the aorta (the body's main artery) and through its many branches to the head, the limbs, and the internal organs. The sequence of the beating in the four chambers of the heart allows

the collecting chambers to empty their blood into the ventricles first, then fill while the ventricles pump. In both the collecting and pumping chambers, the right chambers contract a fraction of a second ahead of the left ones. All beats are controlled by the heart's pacemaker and its accessory branches.

Consider how hard this little pump works over a lifetime. At an average rate of seventy beats per minute, the heart pumps four thousand times per hour, one hundred thousand times per day, and thirty-seven million times per year. Over a lifespan of eighty years, the heart will beat some three billion times! Considering the amount of work this little pump does, it's not surprising that in man's imperfect, fallen condition many hearts become damaged or diseased. Coronary heart disease has become the #1 killer in the United States. More than five million people are being treated for it, and some seven hundred thousand people per year die from it.

As long as the heart beats, the body lives. If it stops for more than three minutes, vital functions in the brain will be irreparably damaged. Heart disease does not always give fair warning of onset, and is not always treatable even when it does. But there are things we know about the heart that affect its health, both good and bad. For example:

- (1) There are many known heart risks: smoking, high blood pressure, high amounts of stress, high blood cholesterol levels, diabetes, obesity, and genetics.

- (2) There are also things that are known to be beneficial to the heart: regular exercise and

improved diet are effective ways of strengthening and maintaining a healthy heart.

SPIRITUAL APPLICATIONS

But what about a spiritual heart? What constitutes a healthy spiritual heart? How do we develop and maintain a healthy spiritual heart? We would do well to start by identifying six characteristics of a healthy spiritual heart.

(1) A healthy spiritual heart delivers life-giving blood.

This is the most important characteristic of a healthy spiritual heart. While giving special instructions to Israel regarding the eating of blood in Leviticus 17:10-14, God shows how sacred blood is by saying that “the life of the flesh is in the blood.” The Apostle Paul, speaking in Hebrews 9:16,17 and 22, says that the shedding of blood is required in covenants made with God. Paul also reminds us, in Hebrews 10:19-23, that Jesus’ sacrifice gives us access to eternal life through his blood. A healthy spiritual heart recognizes that its importance is to pump the life-giving blood of our Redeemer. Therefore, it is imperative that we develop and maintain a proper heart attitude that recognizes our Master Jesus Christ’s redemption.

(2) A healthy spiritual heart represents all that God wants from us.

In Proverbs 23:26, we read, “My son, give me thine heart, and let thine eyes observe my ways.” As long as our heart is loyal to God, we will see his will more clearly.

(3) A healthy spiritual heart makes us want to be acceptable to God.

Psalm 139:23 reads, "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts." What a great scripture! Not many people like to be analyzed, but the sons of God are to ask to be watched, and to be tried, so they can become more pleasing to God.

(4) A healthy spiritual heart trusts God implicitly for strength and understanding. Speaking of this strength, the psalmist tells us, "Wait on the LORD: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart." (Ps. 27:14) Again, in Psalm 28:7, we read, "The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusted in him, and I am helped: therefore my heart greatly rejoiceth; and with my song will I praise him." Trusting in God also gives us understanding, as we read in Proverbs 3:5,6, "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths."

(5) A healthy spiritual heart brings joy to our lives.

Our Heavenly Father wants us to be filled with joy, and he gives evidence of this fact in Proverbs 15:13-15. "A merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance: but by sorrow of the heart the spirit is broken. The heart of him that hath understanding seeketh knowledge: but the mouth of fools feedeth on foolishness. All the days of the afflicted are evil: but he that is of a merry heart hath a continual feast."

(6) A healthy spiritual heart makes us truly love our brethren.

MAINTAINING A HEALTHY HEART

Just as a human heart can be cared for to keep it in a healthy condition, so too the spiritual heart.

(1) Eliminate risks—The Scriptures are clear that we are to stop smoking, or spiritual pollution that comes from the false religious systems. Revelation 18:1-5, and 8-10 tells the church to come out from the pollution of Babylon to avoid its sins and plagues.

We are told to reduce high blood pressure by putting all our trust in the blood of Christ. I Peter 1:18-21 tells us that we were redeemed not by silver or gold, but by “the precious blood of Christ.” Matthew 11:28-30 describes how this trust reduces our blood pressure: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

We are to reduce high amounts of stress by getting along with all those around us, especially our brethren. I Corinthians 1:10 states it clearly. “I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.”

We are not to allow sects (or disunions) into our fellowship. God has dealt with us with truth and love, and he expects nothing less among his children. I John 3:14-16 says that our final test will be how we treat our brethren. “We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in Him. Hereby perceive we the love of God,

because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”

(2) Make use of genetics—Family history can lead to additional risk to the body’s heart, but our heritage is a positive on the spiritual heart. Paul mentions the faith heroes of the Old Testament, in Hebrews 12:1, when he says, “Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us.” We all have our favorite examples of faith, mentors in our spiritual growth. Remembering those special brethren who have been influential in our lives is an important way of taking advantage of our genetics in the faith.

(3) Improved diet—Like those who search for a healthy diet for their best chance of reducing heart risk, we need to know what spiritual food is best for our spiritual health and which to avoid. Daniel and his three friends rejected the king’s meat and drink in favor of pulse (peas and beans) because they knew the simple food of their God was the healthiest for their spiritual well-being. Paul made the argument that we cannot mix the good spiritual food with the bad and maintain a healthy spiritual heart, when he said in I Corinthians 10:21, “Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils: ye cannot be partakers of the Lord’s table, and of the table of devils.” A good spiritual diet begins with the milk of the word (I Pet. 2:1-3), and progresses to strong meat as Paul stated in Hebrews 5:12-14. “When for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which

be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil." We must adhere to a healthy diet to maintain a healthy spiritual heart.

(4) Regular exercise—Doctors are unanimous in their belief that no diet is totally effective if not combined with a regular exercise routine. The same is true in maintaining a healthy spiritual heart. The Bereans were commended for their daily searching of the Scriptures in Acts 17:10,11, and were said to be more noble than those in Thessalonica as a result. There is a reason to study, to exercise our spiritual minds, as stated in II Timothy 2:15, "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." There's a reason to study! It is equivalent to exercise, which strengthens our heart and draws us closer to our Heavenly Father.

Sometimes even a strong heart can suffer a heart attack. If this should happen to any of us, our loving God would have us benefit from it rather than to suffer needlessly. One who suffered just such an attack noticed many blessings from the experience.

The power of prayer during the attack and the prayers of the brethren afterward were found to be powerful beyond belief. It made certain the words of James, "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."—chap. 5:16

The experience also demonstrated how the LORD tailors each of our lessons just for us for our spiritual well-being. The LORD knows what each needs to grow spiritually, and will craft our experiences for our eternal welfare.

The experience also confirmed Paul's statement that our experiences will never crush us. I Corinthians 10:13 assures us that we will never be given more than we can bear, and living through a heart attack with the LORD's help is a strong proof of that promise. Such an experience gives a greater awareness of God's power and love. The world believes that it is the highs and lows that bring out the best of life. Such, also, are God's dealings with our spiritual hearts. To feel his power and love through a crushing experience can only build us up in our spiritual walk.

Finally, such an appreciation gives us a greater appreciation of God's coming kingdom when there will be a release of all suffering within the human race. The day is soon coming when, "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away."—Rev. 21:4

May we strive daily to maintain a healthy heart, ever mindful that we have given it to God. ■