**Capitol Hill Baptist Church**

**Stewarding Health, Wealth, and Happiness**

**Week 11**

**Stewarding Poor Health**

**PRAYER**

**I. Introduction**

Last week we looked at God’s purposes for health—because by God’s grace most of us are healthy most of the time. But of course, sometimes we aren’t. So this morning we’ll be thinking about what it looks like to steward poor health. How do we think about more chronic conditions that weigh on us for years? What about disabilities we receive? What about serious diseases like cancer? What about mental illness? If God is the owner of our health and our bodies, then we should consider how we act as his stewards in these times as well as the good times. After all, as Job put it to his wife when she told him to curse God and die: “shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?” (Job 2:10).

It’s an interesting question. How should we *steward* poor health? *Why is it important that we answer that question well?* [Get a few answers from the class; comment on some if it seems appropriate.]

Those are all the things we’re going to get into over the next forty minutes or so. We’re going to start by considering where poor health comes from. Then we’ll see what implications that has for *why* poor health can be part of God’s good purposes. And we’ll wrap up with some thoughts on being faithful stewards in these difficult times. So let’s get started!

**II. Where Does Sickness Come From?**

God created us without sickness. So when we read in Genesis 1:31 that creation “was very good” we see a picture of unbroken perfection. But then two chapters later in Genesis 3, sin enters the world through Adam, and God curses the world. In fact, Romans 8 tells us that this sin and the resulting curse are the root and source of all the brokenness of this world around us. I’ll read starting in verse 19 of Romans 8:

**19**For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. **20**For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope **21**that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. **22**For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. **23**And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

Why is “the whole creation” groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now? Why are “we ourselves”—even those indwelt by the Spirit of God—groaning “inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption?” Because of sin.

But that’s not the whole story, is it?

Look back at verse 20. You see that passive tense there: “was subjected to futility.” *Who subjected creation to futility?* [God did.] OK. So there’s more of an explanation here than “sickness came from sin,” isn’t there? *In verse 21,* why *did God subject his creation to this curse?* [so it might be set free.]

OK. What’s going on here? God’s good, isn’t he? Why is he messed up in something like this? Well, to understand this we need to go back to Genesis.

God had given Adam and Eve some very simple instructions when he made them. They were told, chapter 1 verse 28, to fill the earth with their offspring and to subdue the earth. In other words, to fill the earth with God’s image in two important ways. First by making lots and lots of images of God in their children—who like them would be made in the image of God. And second, to subdue the earth. To make the whole earth like this garden, the place where God dwelt with man. This command is a procreation command, and a work command, and a pastor command, and a missionary command. All wrapped in one. I think we see that command fulfilled in the prophecy of Habakkuk (2:14): “For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” God is amazing! So make his name known *everywhere*! Fill the whole world with his glory.

Now, with that command in mind (fill the earth and subdue it) look what God does in Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve choose to sin. In verse 16, God curses Eve’s ability to bear children. He curses her relationship with Adam. Her “desire” will be for her husband. Same word as in chapter 4 verse 7 when God tells Cain that sin’s “desire” is to have him. That’s a desire to control. And Adam will “rule over” her. Not a benevolent rule but an abusive rule.

Then turn to Adam in verse 17 and you see that the task of subduing the earth is frustrated also. “In pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you.”

Now. How was this curse in hope that creation would be set free from bondage, as Romans 8 puts it? Because God is cursing our idols, that’s how! Family, relationships, work—were all created as good and satisfying because they were all conduits to the larger purpose of bringing God’s glory to the ends of the earth. But in a fallen world our temptation is to find satisfaction in them as dead ends. So God makes sure they won’t hold up those expectations.

God is good in his judgment, and he is also good in his mercy. I wonder if you’ve ever thought of the curse in Genesis 3 as God acting in mercy? In mercy, because of sin, he subjected this world to this curse so that its brokenness will never satisfy, and that will drive us to him. In that sense, when Ecclesiastes describes life under the curse as Meaningless, that’s by design. Exactly. Because the most loving thing God could have done once sin separated us from him was to ensure we would not find meaning in anything but him.

All that has some very important ramifications for how we face times of poor health. John Piper put it well in his blog post called “Don’t Waste Your Cancer.” Here’s what he wrote:

“It will not do to say that God only uses our cancer but does not design it. What God permits, he permits for a reason. And that reason is his design. If God foresees molecular developments becoming cancer, he can stop it or not. If he does not, he has a purpose. Since he is infinitely wise, it is right to call this purpose a design. Satan is real and causes many pleasures and pains. But he is not ultimate. So when he strikes Job with boils ([Job 2:7](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Job%202.7)), Job attributes it ultimately to God (2:10) and the inspired writer agrees: “They . . . comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him” ([Job 42:11](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Job%2042.11)). If you don’t believe your cancer is designed for you by God, you will waste it.”

need to stop thinking that our goal is to “get through” the hard times so we can have life back the way it was before. Instead, we must begin thinking that our goal is to accept what God has given us and with the eyes of faith act knowing it is good for us.

**III. God’s Purposes in Poor Health**

But saying “see with the eyes of faith” is very different than actually doing it, isn’t it? If we want to be good stewards, we need to assume that God’s purposes in difficulty are far better than what we would have chosen for ourselves. But we can’t simply make faith happen, can we? So how can we trust him? Well, in his Word, he’s shown how he can use times of sickness and disability to further his good purposes. And those visions of past goodness can help us believe that he has goodness for us in our own affliction. So with that in mind, let’s step through four different ways God can use poor health. I’m not saying that these are his purposes in your own difficulty—and I’m not saying that we can expect this side of heaven to know what God is up to. But these should be good evidence on which to build your faith.

*Purpose #1: That We Might Hate Sin*

As human beings, we have a natural bias for sin and against God.

But God hates sin. And we should long to do the same. Think of Proverbs 8:13 – “The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil.” Not just “I understand intellectually why this is suboptimal” or “I know I really shouldn’t do this.” Hatred of evil.

Well, to that longing comes sickness. In sickness we stare down the pure, unadulterated effects of sin in all its ugly glory. After all, no matter the immediate cause, Romans 8 tells us that all sickness is the fruit of sin in this world. [share a story of when someone’s sickness gave you a new hatred for sin]

So when you encounter poor health—be it in you or another—take it as opportunity to improve your hatred for sin.

*Purpose #2: To Wean Us from Self-Sufficiency*

Here’s how Paul speaks of his own affliction in 2 Corinthians 1:8 and following.

**8**For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. **9**Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. **10**He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.

Why was Paul afflicted? So that, verse 9, he might not rely on himself but on God. And I love that next phrase: “who raises the dead!” What a contrast! Between Paul, so utterly beyond his own strength that he despaired even of life. And God, who raises the dead. God uses the wasting of our bodies to wean us from self-dependence. Of course, sometimes we’d say, “God: thanks for being good to me. I recognize your goodness to me in this sickness. But could you please be a little less good? I’d like things to go back to where they were before.” God loves us too much to do that. He knows that dependence on him is the source of greater happiness than health could ever bring. So by faith we must believe this as well.

In fact, it seems God has specifically designed the trajectory of our lives to teach us not to depend on ourselves. Think of the life of a typical person. He fights through adolescence and young adulthood, learning to be independent, where his happiness is in his control. Then, most likely, he gets married and now his happiness depends partly on someone else. But at least he has control over who that someone else is, because what normally happens next—kids—puts his happiness in the hands of someone he didn’t pick at all. Then, when life finally begins to settle back down to just him and his wife, he even begins to lose control over his own body. God is relentless in making his point: YOU ARE NOT IN CONTROL!!

Of course, the idea that we should “depend on God” can be confusing. After all, at least looking in from the outside, it’s not like we sit back and let God move our arms and legs like some kind of mannequin. Practically, I think this idea boils down to two basic thoughts:

1. When things go wrong, we must learn the *goodness* of the Proverbs 16:9, “The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.” Living in dependence on God means that when he changes course, we are content to trust that his ways are best. Rather than trying desperately to seize control and turn back in the direction we came from.
2. When things go right, we must understand that our responsibility is for faithfulness, but God’s is for results—like we studied in class #2. Living as if we depend on God means that we will naturally give him the praise when things go well—because we recognize that everything comes from him. Remember 1 Corinthians 4:7, “What do you have that you did not receive?”

I often think of the truth of Psalm 119:67 – “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word.” So often it is pain that God uses to guide us toward a wisdom that is worth far more than the pain.

Of course, seeing this in practice is far more powerful than hearing it described. So let’s think about this together. *How have you seen in your own life—or in the life of those close to you—that times of poor health have helped you live more dependent on God?* [Make time for a few minutes of conversation with the class.]

*Purpose #3: Poor Health Gives Others Opportunity to Serve*

Listen to how Paul describes his experience bringing the gospel to Galatia in Galatians 4:13-15:

**13**You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, **14**and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. **15**…if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me.

It’s interesting—when Paul planted churches elsewhere, he did by supporting himself while he worked a second job as a church planter. But the churches in Galatia seem to have come about through his dependency. Not through strength, but through sickness.

Often, that’s exactly how God uses poor health. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:7, “we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” Poor health forces us to depend on others. How does God use this for good?

1. Corrects the lie that worth is found through productivity. Remember, we are evaluated as stewards based on our faithfulness, not our productivity. But that is such a hard truth to learn, isn’t it! God often uses sickness and disability to wean our sense of self-worth off of what we can do. Remember, God doesn’t need you to accomplish what he wants. BUT: in his good pleasure, God has given you work to do in order to show off his work in you. That is your worth and value.
2. Creates an opportunity to glorify God by depending on others. You might call this the “ministry of dependency.” How sad it is when a once-strong person becomes a pain to be around because they cannot stand having to depend on others. It seemed that Paul in Galatia accomplished far more by depending on others in his ailment than he could have done in his health. When you depend on others, you give them the opportunity to glorify God in their service to you. And your dependence models contentedness with God’s will, you may end up serving them far more than they serve you, with an example of Godliness that’s hard to see when you’re healthy.
3. Encourages the faith of others. The experience of watching God deliver your body—or your faith even if he doesn’t deliver your body—is exactly what someone else needs to strengthen their own faith. And when you stand before him in heaven, I can assure you that the difficulty of your struggle will pale next to that faith, which Peter says is of greater worth than gold.

[In fact, I wonder if you’ve noticed how many of the Scripture references this week and last week have been from Paul’s letters in the New Testament. There are 66 books in the Bible, and we’ve been focused on a very small portion of them. Why is that? Because Paul had such a hard life, that’s why! He was sick, he was beaten, he was close to death. And through that his books overflow with gems of wisdom that come from affliction. His dependence is a source of great strength to us.]

*Purpose #4: Poor Health Makes Us Long for Heaven*.

At the beginning of this class, I described where sickness came from, in the mercy and judgment of God’s curse in the garden. But I didn’t describe it’s future. Which for us is glorious. Revelation 21:3, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there by mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

Every sickness you ever face is temporary. Because when God finally sets creation free from its bondage to corruption (Romans 8), there will be no more sickness. Your diseased and disabled and pain-ridden body will be replaced with one that is glorious beyond compare.

So in 2 Corinthians 5, Paul sees the wasting of his earthly body—or tent, as he calls it—as a reminder that he is headed to heaven. Verse 2: “For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.”

No matter your health today, I can assure you that your body is getting ready for the grave. Have you seen those magazine ads with photos of men in their sixties with non-photo-shopped bodies that look like they belong to a 20-year-old? I don’t care if what they’re selling works or not. It’s only temporary. The battle to preserve our bodies is a battle we will all lose. But that’s no reason to despair! It’s simply a reminder than in a few short years we’ll be able to cast off these bodies and, to quote Paul, be swallowed up by life.

**IV. Living as Faithful Stewards**

As we close our time together, let me leave you with a few practical points for what faithful stewardship looks like when health is lacking.

1. Be willing to accept a different role. Helen Young joined our church in 1953 and was a faithful member until her death five decades later. If you knew her in the 80s, you knew her for her friendship and bustling hospitality. Then, after the death of her husband Hardin and a stroke, her primary ministry became one of prayer and note-writing—often in labored, uneven handwritting. At her funeral, Mark asked who had ever received a note of encouragement from her and hundreds of hands went up. But if you only knew her in the years following her stroke, you would never have guessed that her ministry was once so much more active. Because she seemed so content with the role God gave her. Remember: just like with your money and your time, the capacity God gives you in your health is no accident. Like Helen, we will do well to contentedly accept changing capacity and continue to do what is good.
2. Be wise in taking action. Sometimes it seems there’s a contradiction between taking action ourselves and trusting in God. But when we understand faithfulness as the goal of a steward, this contradiction disappears. God’s normal means of preserving our health is his common grace of the medical community. Refusing to make use of these resources because we trust God to heal is a bit like saying, “I’m too special to merely have God’s *normal* means of provision. I want him to provide in a way that’s fantastic. That shows how special I am to him.” No. Think about how we trust God to provide in our retirement, and yet save up money if he’s given us the ability in order to be faithful as his stewards. In the same way, we pursue medical care for our health in order to be faithful as his stewards. All the time, trusting *him* for whatever healing he provides, be it through his normal means of provision or something that’s extraordinary.
3. Trust in God. That said, our primary goal when we’re suffering from poor health is not to preserve our bodies; it is to preserve our faith. All suffering is a battle for faith—and suffering is what shows our faith to be genuine (1 Peter 1:7). So don’t put your faith in your odds of recovery, or in your doctor’s reassuring words, or in your plan of action, or in that next therapy that someone’s aunt’s cousin said worked wonders for her. Instead, pursue care to be faithful as I just said. But trust in God. And trusting in God doesn’t mean presuming that he’ll heal. After all, what promise has he given for healing in this life? Trusting in God means trusting that he has the power to heal in this life. And the promise that one day, on the other side of death, all will be healed. Trusting in God means trusting that whether he chooses to heal in life or in death, his decision is best because he knows us and loves us. That’s the peace that transcends all understanding (Phil. 4:7). That we are in the strong hands of a loving God (Ps. 62:11-12).
4. Lastly, keep your mind focused on heaven. This world is passing away. Your body is passing away. The reality of a perfected reality is dawning soon. So live as a pilgrim in this world, with that heavenly city as your home.

**Conclusion**

Allen Gardiner suffered much in his live of 57 years. In the mid-19th century, he served as a missionary in many places from New Guinea to South Africa to South America, often having to leave because of hostile conditions. In 1851 he arrived in Tierra del Fuego to tell the people there the good news of Jesus. But his landing didn’t go well. A boat was lost, his food was stolen, and as food and water disappeared, he and his fellow missionary, Dr. Williams, died on the beach. But when a rescue party arrived a few weeks later, they found not just the men’s bodies, but their diaries. Their writing told the story of hunger, thirst, wounds, and loneliness. But the last entries, written in a shaking hand, were the most amazing. Williams had written, “Let all my beloved ones at home rest assured that I was happy beyond expression the night I wrote these lines and would not have changed situations with any man living . . . that heaven, and love, and Christ, which means one and the same divine thing, were in my heart.” And Gardiner, simply: “I am overwhelmed with a sense of the goodness of God.”

This world would suggest that without health, all is lost. But Jesus has a better way. He is the author of health; he is the Great Physician. He is good and has good plans for you no matter the state of your body’s decay. No matter your health, the greatest of joy is bound up in your service to him—and even more as you draw nearer to heaven.