

Health And Hygiene Advice In The Bible

'Beloved, I pray you may prosper in all things and be healthy, even as your soul prospers' (3 John 1:2).

Over four thousand years ago, God gave the Children of Israel advice on health and hygiene and if they followed that advice, they could remain healthy. If they disobeyed that advice they could die or be 'cut off from the people'. Before the Jewish people were called Jews they were a large family of Hebrews who spoke the Hebrew language, just as they do today. The ancient Hebrews had no knowledge of bacteria so they had to trust the Lord for their wellbeing, but the Lord our Creator knew all about the existence of microscopic bacteria and viruses, because He created them. Nobody knew about bacteria until the nineteenth century and even then the medics believed a 'miasma' or a foul smell caused diseases. They thought the spread and transmission of infectious diseases was just bad luck, hit and miss or haphazard. Sick people were cared for at home, often resulting in the deaths of others within the home. Today, science has finally caught up with the advanced medical and scientific knowledge written in the Bible and we can fully understand why God gave the detailed advice He did to Moses who wrote down what God told him (Exodus 34:27). The ancient civilisations had appalling ignorance of even the most basic of medical knowledge.

For skin infections, some ancient physicians prescribed a poultice of worm blood and donkey dung. Hair loss was treated with animal fat mixed with honey. Snakebites were treated with water first poured over an idol then given to the snakebite victim to drink. Constipation was treated with mouldy bread, gourd, cat's dung, sweetened ale and red wine. Tumours were treated with fly dung and sap from a sycamore tree. Teething babies were treated with a paste made from seeds and fly dung. Other illnesses were treated with lizard's blood, pig's teeth, putrid meat and/or fat, pig's ear wax, milk, goose fat, donkey's hooves, faeces from animals and people, and snakeskins. These remedies were considered to be the pride of ancient knowledge but we know treatments like these would have resulted in the deaths of the people. It is amazing, the ancient civilisations did not wake up to the fact their patients died, they were not cured!

God knew these remedies would never work so He gave Moses information that would help the Hebrew people, not harm them. For example, 'You will eat no fat of a bull, or sheep, or goat. The fat of an animal that dies of itself and the fat of what is torn of animals may be used for any other service but you will in no way eat of it. Whoever eats the fat of the animal ... the soul who eats it will be cut off from his people (they will die). You will not eat any blood whether it is of bird or of animal in any of your dwellings. Whoever eats any blood, that soul will be cut off from his people (they will die)' (Leviticus 7:23 to 27). Modern medical science reveals fat can cause obesity, it can clog the arteries, cause heart disease and premature death. It is better for our own health if we refrain from eating animal fat. During the early years of medical practice, patients were 'bled' to remove 'impurities'. That caused more deaths than many diseases. In modern times we all know blood is vital. It is our lifeblood. Without it we cease to exist. The Bible says, "As to the life of all flesh, its blood is with its life, therefore I (God) say, 'You cannot eat the blood of any kind of flesh for the life of all flesh is its blood'" (Leviticus 17:14).

The information God told Moses to write down millennia ago proves God, the divine Creator inspired Moses' writing to protect the health of His chosen people. That same precise medical and hygienic information can help protect the health of people today. Throughout the Bible but especially in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible), we can discover incredibly advanced medical laws and principles, and if we follow that advice it can protect us from several fatal diseases. Here are just a few snippets of the Lord's advice. The Lord instructed His people to bury their human waste in a hole using a tiny spade (not their hands) and it was not to be left on the ground (Deuteronomy 23:13). Nobody at that time knew animal waste, human waste and decaying meat contained microscopic bacteria. Any form of mildew inside a house was considered to be a 'plague'. The first time a house had mildew, the house was cleaned out and repainted but if the mildew returned the house was demolished (Leviticus 14:34 to 48). We now know mildew in a house can cause severe respiratory problems. They had no idea cracks in pottery cooking utensils could harbour deadly bacteria, but the Lord did and told them to smash cracked cooking pots or scrub metal pots and utensils. 'The earthen vessel (used in cooking) will be broken and a bronze vessel will be scoured and rinsed in water' (Leviticus 6:28). The ancient Hebrews were told to use hyssop oil, which is a natural antiseptic, antibacterial and antifungal oil. Anything that could endure being burned had to be purified by fire. Items that could not be burned, like leather, fabrics, wooden utensils and crockery had to be scrubbed and rinsed in fresh water.

People with infectious diseases were separated from the general population so the sickness was not spread through the camp or city. People who cared for the sick had to adhere to stringent cleansing laws. Anyone who suffered any type of infection, after being quarantined for a week had to thoroughly wash themselves, scrub or burn their clothes, shave off all of their body hair and they were then examined by a priest to make sure the infection had gone (Leviticus 14:8 & 9). Every skin condition known to mankind, every allergy rash, burns, boils, acne, eczema or psoriasis were all known as leprosy (Leviticus 13:1 to 59). 'Command the

Children of Israel, they will put out of the camp every leper, everyone who has an issue (pus filled infection) and whoever is unclean by (handling) the dead. You will put male and female outside of the camp so they do not defile their camp, in the midst of which I dwell' (Numbers 5:2 & 3). Moses was raised in the Egyptian king's palace and would have been taught by the Egyptians. 'Moses was taught in all wisdom of the Egyptians and was mighty in words and in deeds' (Acts 7:22). As a royal prince, Moses would have been taught all the medical knowledge the primitive Egyptians had, yet none of their deadly so-called cures and disgusting practices were ever mentioned in the Bible. Over two hundred or a third of the over six hundred commandments the Lord gave the Children of Israel to follow, were regarding health and hygiene.

Dead bodies are very toxic because the immune system dies with the patient so there is nothing to quell the multiplication of deadly bacteria. Any infectious disease the deceased had can be transmitted to people who come close to the dead person. That is why medical staff wear protective clothing when performing an autopsy or when handling a body. Thousands of years before scientists discovered bacteria, the Scriptural laws regarding the handling and burial of the deceased were very involved. Every person who handled a dead body had to wash themselves thoroughly after cleansing the body and they had to stay outside the camp 'in quarantine' for seven days (Numbers 19:11). Their clothing had to be washed or burned. The patient's bed was burned. Only the blood relatives of the dead could go near a body (Leviticus 21:1 to 3). Apart from dealing with a body for burial, nobody was to go near a dead body (Numbers 6:6). If a person died inside their tent home, every person who came into contact with that dead person had to be quarantined for seven days, plus anyone who came across a grave, old or new, was also quarantined for a week (Numbers 19:14 to 19). The same laws applied to dead animals. Nobody was to go near a dead animal and they had to be burned outside the camp (Leviticus 5:2; Hebrews 13:11). That was to destroy any bacteria. The man who handled the carcass was quarantined for a week.

Before the Lord gave food laws to the Children of Israel, the Hebrews were able to eat whatever animal they wanted. Every moving thing was to be considered food. 'Every moving thing that lives will be food for you. As I have given you the green herb (vegetables) I have given everything to you but not flesh with its life, its blood. You will not eat the blood' (Genesis 9:3 & 4). Only after the Hebrews were brought out of Egypt did the Lord impose strict food laws onto them for their own protection. Since Jesus came, we are once again allowed to eat whatever we desire, as long as we keep to the three areas the apostles instructed us, which were similar to what the Lord told the ancient Hebrews and they are (1) we must never eat food that has been offered to idols. (2) We must never eat animals that have been strangled or died of natural causes (Leviticus 7:24). (3) Blood is the essence of life in every living creature and must not be eaten (Acts 21:25). People with faith are free to eat what they want but we all need to exercise common sense. The reason the laws were given to the Children of Israel regarding food was to keep them healthy. For example, apart from avoiding animal fat and blood, they were told not to eat offal, the entrails containing faeces, the skin or the head. It all had to be burned outside the camp, or away from the general population (Leviticus 8:17). Eating offal is not healthy. Liver and kidneys were created to purify the inner workings of bodies so when people consume offal they are eating impurities. Eating the brains can transmit the most shocking diseases from the animal to the human. Skin was created to keep bacteria out of our bodies and it is covered with bacteria, so it is not a good idea to eat these things. Eating wild pig could give us parasites but the modern farmed pigs are vaccinated, drenched and fed clean food, mostly whey, fruit and vegetables so they are free of parasites and disease and are very safe to eat, especially in Western countries where food production laws are strict. Wild animals might have diseases or parasites but farmed animals are safe to eat. The Children of Israel were told not to eat shellfish and other crustaceans (Leviticus 11:9 & 10). Some shellfish can harbour botulism and thousands of people have suffered food poisoning after eating contaminated oysters or other shellfish. Some sea creatures called 'bottom feeders' live on the bottom of the ocean and eat only waste and may carry disease. Birds also carry disease so eating many species of birds was disallowed (Leviticus 11:13 to 19). Eating reptiles, amphibians, rodents and most insects was also disallowed (Leviticus 11:20 to 31).

Certain plants and herbs can be used for medicines as the Bible says, "By the river on its bank, on this side and on that side will grow every tree for food whose leaf will not wither, neither will its fruit fail. It will bring forth new fruit every month because its waters issue out of the sanctuary. Its fruit will be for food and its leaf for healing" (Ezekiel 47:12). We all know eating fruit and fresh vegetables, especially our greens is a good way of keeping ourselves healthy. God gave us green vegetables to eat (Genesis 1:30). God also gave us cereals, nuts, seeds, edible root tubers, pulses, lentils, legumes, garlic, milk, cheese, butter, honey, herbs, spices and some flowers to eat.

Leviticus chapters 12 to 15 give us advise on personal cleanliness, hygiene and sanitation, including washing hands in 'running water' (Leviticus 15:13). Women were given weeks to recover from childbirth (Leviticus 12:2 to 8) before the couple could resume sexual activity. Married couples had to refrain from all sexual activity during the wife's menstrual period to guard against infection. The laws given to Moses saved the lives of ancient Hebrew women so they thrived. When Gentiles ignored or disobeyed the laws given to

Moses regarding childbirth, infant mortality soared. When women started giving birth in hospitals instead of at home, the spread of infectious puerperal or childbirth fever killed about a third of all patients. In 1845, Hungarian born Jewish doctor Ignaz Semmelweis noticed the young interns would examine a corpse then go straight to examine a young woman about to give birth without washing their hands causing many women to die. Dr Semmelweis insisted the interns wash their hands thoroughly before examining new patients. The mortality rate in expectant mothers dropped from 30% to less than 2%. The hospital sent out letters to other hospitals in Hungary. Other countries around Europe ignored the obvious solution to deaths in childbirth and many women died needlessly. In 1876 Louis Pasteur realised diseases and infections could be carried on human hands, medical implements, soiled fabrics and via excrement so he advised all doctors to wash their hands and sterilise all medical tools between patients. Initially, the doctors who believed they were 'gentlemen' and were thus always 'clean' were furious because they could not believe something as simple as washing could stem the tide of infections in hospitals, especially after childbirth. Eventually cleanliness became mandatory for all medical practices.

Sexual promiscuity is the sole cause of the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, which are all preventable. If nobody was sexually active outside of the sanctity of marriage, sexually transmitted diseases would not be able to take hold. The Bible warns everyone to avoid sexual sin of any kind because it is the only sin that causes people to sin against their own body. When people live in a state of perpetual sin, God calls them unrighteous and lust can keep people out of heaven. 'Do you not know the unrighteous will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. The sexually immoral, adulterers, male or female prostitutes, homosexuals (or lesbians) ... will never inherit the Kingdom of God ... The body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord and the Lord for the human body ... Should you go to a prostitute? Never! ... He who is joined to a prostitute is one body with the prostitute. God said, "The two will become one flesh." ... Flee all sexual immorality! Every sin a person commits is outside the body but those who commit sexual immorality sins against their own body' (1 Corinthians 6:9 to 18).

We should put God's laws of cleanliness and hygiene into perspective. In those days, personal hygiene and washing with water was almost unheard of. Many people did not wash once during their entire lives and life expectancy was only 30 to 40 years. Amazingly, some cultures believed washing one's body was highly dangerous for their health! People used talcum powder and perfumes to mask the stench of body odour. During the days of Abraham, people only washed their feet (Genesis 18:4). God had to tell the Children of Israel several times to wash in water and later the Lord added, "So they do not die" (Exodus 30:20). Here is something to think about. When people are huddled together in a camp and moving around like the Children of Israel were, and often lacking in fresh water, we would normally see diseases like typhoid, dysentery, cholera, influenza and other respiratory ailments to be rife in the camp. Not so among the Hebrews. They adhered to God's laws regarding hygiene and none of those diseases affected them. When they disobeyed the Lord regarding the handling of food like quail meat, some died from food poisoning (Numbers 11:31 to 33). The sheer logistics involved in keeping the million or so Hebrews fed, watered and clean, plus the massive multitude of people who left Egypt with them and all of the livestock they had (Exodus 12:38), would have been astounding. Keeping all of the new laws given to Moses plus the laws of hygiene and food handling when they had to uproot themselves and move everything they had every time the Lord told them to go, even if the order came in the middle of the night would have been exhausting. They might have camped for a day, week, month or year but when God told them to move on they had to hastily gather their belongings and move on (Numbers 9:21 & 22). They would not have been able to settle or relax because they never knew when they would move again. We can only imagine how hard life was for them, especially for the heavily pregnant women and those with young children. Trying to stay clean in the desert in those circumstances would have been desperately difficult. Life would have been terribly hard for everyone and when we study the effect of all their difficulties and hardships, only two of the original men, Joshua and Caleb, survived the arduous forty-year journey through the wilderness because they wholly followed the Lord (Numbers 32:11 & 12). All of the other hundreds of thousands of the original group died. It was the children and grandchildren of the original group who finally made it into the Promised Land where they did finally settle and live within the boundaries of the hygienic commands ordered by the Lord.

Through all of the instructions regarding hygiene, there is nothing more important than having a clean pure heart, a right spirit or attitude and a pure mind. If our bodies are clean but our thoughts are filthy, no amount of personal hygiene can clean up our mind and heart. We need a clean body and a pure heart to be pleasing to God. Only the Lord our Righteousness can give us a clean mind, a pure heart and a right attitude. 'Create in me a clean heart O God. Renew a right spirit within me. Do not remove me from Your presence and do not take your Holy Spirit from me ... A contrite heart Lord, You will not despise' (Psalm 51:10, 11 & 17). 'Those who have clean hands and a pure heart ... will receive a blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of our salvation' (Psalm 24:4 & 5). 'Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God' (Matthew 5:8).

Amen and God bless you.

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