

The Human Body: A Gift and a Responsibility

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During a special Council in Heaven, our Heavenly Father announced His divine plan—the great plan of happiness. The purpose of the plan was to provide an opportunity for His spirit children to “obtain a physical body and gain earthly experience to progress toward perfection.”¹ We were so excited to learn about our Father’s plan that we “shouted for joy.”²

Why were we so happy to learn about Heavenly Father’s wonderful plan? It was partly because our heavenly parents have glorified bodies of flesh and bones. For us to become like Them and to receive a fullness of joy, we knew that our celestial spirits had to be united with physical bodies—bodies created in the image of God.

I grew up outside of the Church. As a youngster I was taught that God is a bodiless spirit who fills the universe. He is everywhere, yet He can dwell in my heart. So when I first learned that Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ are two distinct beings and that each has a perfected physical body, I was overjoyed. My testimony grew rapidly once I had an accurate understanding of the Godhead. Brothers and sisters, I love Heavenly Father, and I testify that Jesus Christ is His Son and our Savior.

In the premortal world we learned that our earthly experience would be challenging. Our bodies would be subject to disease, pain, and temptation. Some of us would have significant disabilities while others would have to live in hostile environments. Despite these hardships, each one of us accepted the invitation to leave our heavenly home, receive a physical body, and do our best to overcome the natural man.

Joseph Smith said:

*We came to this earth that we might have a body and present it pure before God in the Celestial Kingdom. The great principle of happiness consists in having a body. The Devil has no body, and herein is his punishment.*³

So Satan and his followers were punished and we were blessed—blessed with tabernacles of flesh. We are each privileged to have a body. It is a special gift from God. Of all the creations of the Almighty, there is nothing more holy and magnificent than the human body. Worlds without number He has

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created, yet man and woman are His finest masterpieces.

Scientists have been studying the intricacies of the human body for centuries. The more we learn, the more we feel awe and admiration. The body is truly miraculous. Just a few months ago my youngest son and his wife had their first baby—a boy. He is beautiful in every way. Whenever I hold him, I can sense holiness about him. His fingers and toes are so tiny. He has a cute little dimple when he smiles. His eyes are already sending a steady stream of data to his brain, which is quickly learning to interpret the infinite images before him. His little heart pumps rhythmically to move blood to every cell of his body. Over the next eighty years his heart will beat more than three billion times.⁴ What a remarkable creation!

The scriptures tell us that our bodies are temples. In the New Testament, while confronting those who were treating His Father's house as a store, Jesus referred to His body as a temple. Later, while speaking to the people of Corinth, the Apostle Paul announced, "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" He then declared, "For the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are."⁵

Brothers and sisters, do we treat our bodies as temples? In the early Church the Saints sacrificed tremendously to build and care for their temples. They gave much of what they had in order to build the best for the Lord. Today the Church invests substantially in the temples it builds. Each is a special house of the Lord. Only high-quality materials and the finest craftsmen are used to construct temples. Temple grounds are landscaped with beautiful flowers and trees. Often there is a fountain. Special care is devoted to keeping our temples clean and in excellent condition. Why? Because they are sacred structures.

Elder Paul B. Pieper of the Quorum of the Seventy said:

*Sacred means worthy of veneration and respect. By designating something as sacred, the Lord signals that it is of higher value and priority than other things. Sacred things are to be treated with more care, given greater deference, and regarded with deeper reverence.*⁶

Temples are sacred. The human body is sacred. It follows that our bodies should be given higher priority and more care than other things.

Elder Pieper continued: "That which is sacred to God becomes sacred to us only through the exercise of agency; each must choose to accept and hold sacred that which God has defined as sacred."⁷ Our bodies are holy in the Lord's eyes. Do we see our bodies as sacred or merely as an object that we have to put up with?

As a professor I spend much of my time studying how we can best care for our bodies—what we need to do to keep them healthy and fit. Because our bodies are special gifts, they deserve special care. In today's world it is common for some—even for members of the Church—to rationalize that they do not have time to care for their bodies. They give little thought to the food they consume and view exercise as an activity only for athletes. Can you imagine how the Lord would feel if one of His holy temples were neglected because it was viewed as insignificant or not worth the effort?

The Lord understands everything about the human body. He created it. He knows how to make it healthy and what causes it to weaken and die. As He demonstrated with the Three Nephites⁸ and with John the Beloved,⁹ if He desires He can modify the physical tabernacle so that it will not get sick or die. Science is a long way from those discoveries, but, gradually, through research and the Lord's inspiration, we are learning how to best nourish, exercise, and repair the body.

In Doctrine and Covenants 130 we learn that if we want the blessings of good health, we have to obey certain laws. I love verses 20 and 21:

There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated—

And when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated.

Notice that *all* blessings are predicated on obedience to certain laws. Blessings—and, for that matter, negative consequences—do not occur randomly. Natural laws govern all aspects of the universe, including how the human body functions. These laws are eternal and unchanging. They are “truths.” I find it fascinating to watch as new discoveries are made regularly, helping us better understand the eternal truths that govern all that we as humans know and have yet to learn.

We now know that much of good health and disease is determined by living or not living certain laws. We do not know all the truths that govern the human body, but we do know markedly more than we did just fifty years ago. It was only about fifty years ago, in 1964, that the Surgeon General of the United States officially declared that cigarette smoking is hazardous to health.¹⁰ Of course members of the Church had inside information from the Lord, who revealed this law to His Saints roughly 130 years before the Surgeon General shared it with the country.¹¹ It is exciting to think about the laws governing health and disease that will be discovered over the next fifty years. Before long I expect scientists will be growing customized hearts, hips, and hair. I need to get on a waiting list for the latter.

I love to get up in the morning and go to work to study the laws that govern human health and disease. These laws are intriguing to me. As Church members we are greatly blessed to have some of the most impor-

tant and basic laws of health in the Word of Wisdom. I fear that many Church members underestimate the value of the Word of Wisdom. These truths are not all-inclusive, but there are many wonderful laws of health contained within the twenty-one verses of Doctrine and Covenants 89. Given that these truths were revealed in the early 1800s, they are remarkable in their coverage and accuracy. However, there is a catch. We must obey the laws to receive the blessings.

The Word of Wisdom is loaded with wonderful counsel and powerful warnings designed to bless our bodies and our spirits. Because we have been told that “tobacco is not for the body,”¹² members of the Church have avoided countless serious diseases and premature deaths. Since the original Surgeon General report on smoking, more than 12 million Americans have died prematurely because they smoked.¹³ If we did not have the Word of Wisdom, tens of thousands of Church members would suffer the horrors of tobacco use just like the rest of the world.

Let me share with you a personal story. My father was in World War II. He was not a member of the Church. Cigarettes were given to soldiers as part of their rations back in those days. As a result he and untold other young men became smokers. Keep in mind that the ills of smoking would not be known by the public for another twenty years. In fact, smoking was promoted as a healthy practice. In short, he did not know better. But here is the key: he smoked, and, as you would expect, natural laws govern smoking. Fortunately, when science determined that smoking was unhealthy, my dad quit. But while he was a smoker, natural laws could not be cheated, and his precious temple was damaged. The Lord blesses those who learn His will and follow His commandments. I testify that He loves us, and we are greatly blessed because we have known for over a century that “tobacco is not for the body.”

Smoking is not a temptation to most of us. It is clearly hazardous, and we have a commandment to not smoke. But what about exercise and physical fitness? This may surprise you. Adults who smoke have a death rate that is about two times higher than nonsmokers,¹⁴ but those who are unfit have a death rate that is about four times higher than those who are fit.¹⁵ That is amazing. Everyone knows that smoking is dangerous, but few are aware of the hazards of being unfit and the protection afforded those who are fit. My objective is not to minimize the risks of smoking but to emphasize the value of becoming fit to protect our wonderful temples.

Millions of Americans drink alcohol, but the Word of Wisdom instructs us not to. This confuses some because research indicates that alcohol has some benefits.¹⁶ But here is the crucial point: the negative consequences of alcohol use far outweigh the positive. The Lord, in His infinite wisdom, knows where to draw the line. Alcohol is a powerful drug—an addictive drug. When consumed, inhibitions are reduced. In other words, under the influence of alcohol, people do things they would not normally do. Many think that alcohol use is fun, but we cannot drink and have the Spirit. We cannot drink and have full control of our thoughts and actions. Consequently, alcohol use is strongly linked to higher rates of suicide, spouse and child abuse, fatal car accidents, rape, job loss, and crimes such as robbery and assault.¹⁷ Alcohol use has some benefits, but the costs are too great.

Although I grew up outside of the Church, I have never had a drink of alcohol. As a high school athlete I was pressured to drink after games, but something inside of me gave me strength to never drink alcohol. Two of my best friends in high school were killed in separate accidents because they drank and drove. Even more traumatic, several of my close relatives were alcoholics. It was horrible to watch alcohol destroy them. The Lord in His mercy has

saved us much misery by giving us the commandment to not drink alcohol.

As we know, the Word of Wisdom contains much more than counsel to not smoke or drink. It also encourages us to eat healthy foods, especially plants. Doctrine and Covenants 89:10–11 states:

All wholesome herbs God hath ordained for the constitution, nature, and use of man—

Every herb in the season thereof, and every fruit in the season thereof; all these to be used with prudence and thanksgiving.

Herbs are plants. Research shows that fruits and vegetables are especially good for us.¹⁸ Most adults eat only a small fraction of the recommended servings. Remember, we have to live the law to receive the blessing. Similarly, in verse 12 we are encouraged to eat meat sparingly. I testify that the Lord wants to bless us. That is why He gave us the Word of Wisdom. If we will follow His counsel, we will have better health, less suffering, and longer lives.

Natural laws dictate the consequences of our choices—all of them. If we understood all the laws of the universe, we could explain all the consequences. However, we currently know only a small percentage of the laws. Some are simple: When we fall off a ladder, there are obvious, immediate consequences. When we eat unhealthy food, there are also immediate consequences, but they are not as obvious. At the cellular level, damage occurs. Specialized equipment is needed to observe these acute changes, so they go unnoticed—at least for a time. When we engage in exercise, like brisk walking, there are dozens of benefits. We know this because research has identified the laws that govern the effects of exercise on the body. In short, our day-to-day choices have significant consequences on the body. Even if we do not know the science behind the effects, the consequences still occur day by day, month by month, and year by year.

Hundreds of scientific studies illustrate the concept that our day-to-day behaviors have important effects on our health. A classic investigation is the Nurses' Health Study.¹⁹ It included more than 84,000 women who were tracked for fourteen years by Harvard researchers. Results showed that 82 percent of all the heart attacks and strokes that occurred in the sample could be attributed to just five lifestyle factors—five choices: smoking, obesity, physical activity, alcohol use, and diet. More than eight of every ten heart attacks and strokes that occurred during the fourteen years could be accounted for by those five choices—not genetics, not environment, not education: just lifestyle. Without question the day-to-day care we give our bodies makes a tremendous difference in our health.

The effects of abiding by spiritual laws are typically gradual, line upon line. If we miss our morning prayer or skip our daily scripture study, there are consequences. We may not notice any change, but we will be different, ever so slightly. Fortunately we do not lose our testimonies in a day. If we miss another day, the effects are more significant, but we still may not notice any difference. Slowly but surely our testimonies grow or deteriorate based on the extent to which we nourish them. Over time the consequences of what seem to be insignificant choices accumulate, and we become who we now are.

The same is true regarding our lifestyle decisions and the health of our bodies. Line upon line, day by day, our bodies change ever so slightly based on what we eat, the extent to which we exercise, whether or not we smoke, and other important choices. The daily consequences appear insignificant, but when summed together the effects are amazing—often dictating the diseases we develop, how long we live, and the quality of our lives.

While walking the roads of Palestine, Jesus encouraged others to follow Him. We will also be blessed if we follow His footsteps. Because

He was not denied agency, He could choose for Himself. Christ chose to live a life of sacrifice. He displayed remarkable self-control. He learned at an early age to do what is right and let the blessings follow. To care for our temples, we too must learn self-control. If there were no consequences, most of us would rather eat a cookie than a carrot or be entertained rather than exercise. However, we often have to sacrifice today to earn the richest blessings tomorrow. It may take more than a lifetime to learn to master the flesh as Christ did, but the Lord expects us to do our best and to keep trying.

Balance is an important part of a healthy lifestyle. Our bodies need daily exercise and a healthy diet, but we can overdo. Remember, the Lord's piano has a full keyboard, and the best music is played using a variety of keys, not by pounding on just one or two. The Lord is pleased when His Saints are fit, not fanatical. On the other hand, in our culture the tendency is to underdo. Doing too little or too much can cause us to lose choice blessings.

Extremists often have distorted views of the body. Some despise their bodies, even inflicting intentional damage. Others worship their bodies, focusing excessively on physical appearance. In each case the body is seen merely as an object. I testify that these are not righteous views. The human body is a gift from God—a temple—to be treated with thankfulness and respect, not despised or worshiped.

As wonderful and miraculous as our bodies are, they have limitations. They wear out. Because of the Fall they are subject to disease and eventual death. It is part of the plan. But keep in mind, bodies that are neglected wear out long before those that receive good care. We all have work to do here on the earth—important missions to accomplish. If we cut corners regarding the maintenance of our temples, we may not finish our earthly assignments before our bodies fail.

Some rewards in life require special talents, but that is not the case for good

health. Developing a healthy lifestyle simply requires the right attitude, hard work, and self-discipline. After all, how skilled do we have to be to walk a few miles each day? The path to good health is not without challenges, but the rewards are not limited to a special few who have exceptional abilities. The Lord wants all of us to enjoy good health, so He designed a body that can be kept in good condition with minimal talent.

Are all health problems the consequence of our behaviors and our day-to-day choices? Definitely not. Although research clearly shows that a large percentage of the major killers can be attributed to our lifestyles, some health problems have nothing to do with the choices we make. Our day-to-day decisions are paramount, but the choices of others can greatly affect our lives. For example, when I was a young boy a drunk driver nearly killed me and my parents. My dad, who was driving, did not do anything wrong, nor did my mother who was in the seat beside him. I was in the back. Without warning a truck driven by a drunk man smashed into our car at high speed. The forces were incredible. There was broken glass and torn metal everywhere. Our car was demolished. Cars did not have air bags in those days, but they had seat belts, and my parents and I each had one on. Our car was destroyed, but we were not seriously hurt.

Our lives were almost taken in just a few seconds. We had done nothing wrong. Clearly, health problems and premature death are not always a result of our choices. Sometimes they are the result of the choices of others. Our environment, genetics, and other factors can also play important roles.

In John 9:1–3 we read:

And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth.

And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?

Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.

In this story the blind man had done nothing to cause his disability, and his parents were innocent as well. We all know people like this man—perhaps not blind but disabled or diseased in some way. No doubt such circumstances can be difficult. Frequently individuals with such challenges are spiritually mature and holy. They have endured much. Often their rough edges have been worn away and their spirits have been polished by the grind of hardship. Sometimes the elect are required to endure the most, such as Joseph Smith, Job, and Jesus Christ. Our challenge is to endure, no matter what our circumstances are.

Brothers and sisters, the human body is a magnificent gift and a significant responsibility. It is our Master's finest creation. We are more like our heavenly parents—not less—because we have bodies. Our bodies are sacred temples, worthy of special care and respect. Sacrifice is required to keep our temples in good condition. Do not give up. A fit body is a righteous desire. I testify that if we will turn to the Lord and call upon Him, He will help us, but He will not circumvent our agency. With the right attitude and the Lord at our side, we can learn to live a healthy lifestyle, which will enable us to more fully participate in life and enjoy its blessings. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Ensign*, November 1995, 102.
2. Job 38:7.
3. *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, comp. and ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Provo: Religious Studies Center, BYU, 1980), 60 (5 January 1841).
4. 72 beats per minute x 60 minutes x 24 hours x 365 days x 80 years.

5. 1 Corinthians 3:16–17.
6. Paul B. Pieper, “To Hold Sacred,” *Ensign*, May 2012, 109.
7. Pieper, “To Hold Sacred,” 109.
8. See 3 Nephi 28:7–8.
9. See John 21:23; Mark 9:1; Luke 9:27.
10. See *Smoking and Health: Report of the Advisory Committee to the Surgeon General of the Public Health Service*, Public Health Service Publication No. 1103 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1964); profiles.nlm.nih.gov/ps/retrieve/ResourceMetadata/NNBBMQ.
11. See D&C 89.
12. D&C 89:8.
13. See *The Health Consequences of Smoking: A Report of the Surgeon General* (Atlanta, Georgia: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Office on Smoking and Health, 2004), 30; cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/sgr/2004/complete_report/index.htm.
14. See *Smoking and Health and Health Consequences*.
15. See Steven N. Blair, Harold W. Kohl III, Ralph S. Paffenbarger Jr., Debra G. Clark, Kenneth H. Cooper, and Larry W. Gibbons, “Physical Fitness and All-Cause Mortality: A Prospective Study of Healthy Men and Women,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 262, no. 17 (3 November 1989): 2395–2401; and Lars-Göran Ekelund, William L. Haskell, Jeffrey L. Johnson, Fredrick S. Whaley, Michael H. Criqui, David S. Sheps, “Physical Fitness as a Predictor of Cardiovascular Mortality in Asymptomatic North American Men: The Lipid Research Clinics Mortality Follow-up Study,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 319, no. 21 (24 November 1988): 1379–84.
16. See *10th Special Report to the U.S. Congress on Alcohol and Health: Highlights from Current Research*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, National Institutes of Health, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, June 2000; pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/10Report/10thSpecialReport.pdf.
17. See *10th Special Report*.
18. See Kaumudi J. Joshipura, Frank B. Hu, JoAnn E. Manson, Meir J. Stampfer, Eric B. Rimm, Frank E. Speizer, Graham Colditz, Alberto Ascherio, Bernard Rosner, Donna Spiegelman, and Walter C. Willett, “The Effect of Fruit and Vegetable Intake on Risk for Coronary Heart Disease,” *Annals of Internal Medicine* 134, no. 12 (19 June 2001): 1106–14; J. Michael Gaziano, JoAnn E. Manson, Laurence G. Branch, Graham A. Colditz, Walter C. Willett, and Julie E. Buring, “A Prospective Study of Consumption of Carotenoids in Fruits and Vegetables and Decreased Cardiovascular Mortality in the Elderly,” *Annals of Epidemiology* 5, no. 4 (July 1995): 255–60; Paul Knekt, Antti Reunanen, Ritva Järvinen, Ritva Seppänen, Markku Heliövaara, and Arpo Aromaa, “Antioxidant Vitamin Intake and Coronary Mortality in a Longitudinal Population Study,” *American Journal of Epidemiology* 139, no. 12 (1994): 1180–89; Katherine L. Tucker, Judith Hallfrisch, Ning Qiao, Denis Muller, Reubin Andres, and Jerome L. Fleg, “The Combination of High Fruit and Vegetable and Low Saturated Fat Intakes Is More Protective Against Mortality in Aging Men Than Is Either Alone: The Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging,” *Journal of Nutrition* 135, no. 3 (March 2005): 556–61.
19. Meir J. Stampfer, Frank B. Hu, JoAnn E. Manson, Eric B. Rimm, and Walter C. Willett, “Primary Prevention of Coronary Heart Disease in Women Through Diet and Lifestyle,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 343, no. 1 (6 July 2000): 16–22.