

Lesson 1: The Spiritual Roots of Disease

Healing Streams Ministry, Savannah, GA. All scriptures are from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

Introduction



Though we begin with the body, this course is not primarily about physical health and the means to achieve it. Rather, it is about seeking emotional and spiritual health of the highest order. Finding the life that is “hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3) or entering into “the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Ro 8:21) would be excellent, Biblical ways of expressing the goal. As it happens, however, modern medical science has been showing us a connection between our emotional life and the root issues of disease that gives us a practical place to begin looking at our deeper, truer need. C. S. Lewis once wrote that pain is God’s megaphone—meaning that He gets our attention when our bodies break down.¹ So it is that in seeking to find a remedy to our illnesses, we have been drawn into a far greater understanding of the ways in which we are actually going astray from our God. The diseases of our bodies are but reflections of *the dis-ease of our souls!*

The Spiritual Roots of Disease

Before we look at what is actually making us sick, let’s go over some cherished notions that we may still be carrying around in the back of our minds. There are three flawed theories of why we get sick. They may not be taught, but they are often caught.

- 1) **Germ theory.** As an explanation of why we get sick, this is accurate but misleading, since germs account for only part of all diseases. Nor does it tell us why we had the weakened immune system that allowed germs to get at us in the first place. Stressing the body by lack of sleep, poor nutrition, or lack of exercise can weaken the immune system, but are you aware that research has shown that just 6 minutes of a negative emotion can suppress the immune system for more than 21 hours?²
- 2) **“Out of the blue” theory.** This provides a graceful covering for us, since we are claiming to have no idea of any connection between our lifestyle and the disease—surely it is nothing we have done! It just came on us out of the blue. And yet everything on earth happens by cause and effect. The real problem with this one is that it seems to be pointing a finger at God who lives in those blue heavens. And God says He is definitely not the author of any evil.
- 3) **Punishment theory.** According to this theory we sinned, so God is punishing us. But God punished Jesus fully and completely at the cross for our sins—it would be a breach of justice for God to punish us when the penalty has already been paid in full by Another. A further problem is that it seems to suggest that God just reaches (in anger) into His bag of punishments and puts one on us without regard to the natural order.

The truth is that there is a natural connection between the way that we live and the diseases that come upon us. As many as 80% of all incurable diseases have a mind-body connection. According to one study, stress related disorders account for 75 to 90% of all visits to primary care physicians. Consider these connections between disease and emotional stress taken off the front cover of *Deadly Emotions* by Dr. Don Colbert:³

- **Anger and hostility**—hypertension and coronary artery disease
- **Resentment, bitterness, un-forgiveness, and self-hatred**—autoimmune disorders, rheumatoid arthritis, lupus and multiple sclerosis
- **Anxiety**—irritable bowel syndrome, panic attacks, mitral valve prolapse and heart palpitations
- **Repressed anger**—tension and migraine headaches, chronic back pain, TMJ and fibromyalgia

Negative emotions damage the body. When we perceive a situation to be dangerous, adrenaline and cortisol are released by our bodies to facilitate “flight or fight” responses.

This is part of the General Adaptation Syndrome. The problem is that most of the “dangers” that stress us cannot be resolved by fighting or running away! Modern life seems to be characterized by a mounting sea of stressful events and daily pressures coming at people from every conceivable direction. And yet the real culprit isn’t the situations which surround us—it is the emotional reactions going off inside of us. That is why Dr. Don Colbert entitled his book on the mind-body connection *Deadly Emotions*—not “deadly situations.” He writes:



No person experiences an emotion just in his “heart” or in his “mind.” Rather, a person experiences an emotion in the form of chemical reactions in the body and the brain. These chemical reactions occur at both the organ level—stomach, heart, large muscles, and so forth—and at the cellular level...The emotions that are most damaging are rage, un-forgiveness, depression, anger, worry, frustration, fear, grief, and guilt.⁴

From the Bible’s perspective there are a few “good” emotions that we might feel as negative ones: **godly fear** and immediate “**danger fear**” (see Lesson 21, page 135); **righteous anger** (study Eph 4:26-27 and Jas 1:19-20 to see what qualifies); and **pure grief** (read the article Good Grief, page 162, to see what doesn’t qualify as *pure* grief). These are good to have.

However, from a medical point of view all of the **negative emotions are stressors** to the body. It is evident how damaging they are to our physical health. But from a Christian point of view they represent something that is also very damaging to our spiritual health. **They are sins**. Now this may seem like adding to the bad news—the negative emotions (which we don’t like feeling in the first place) are not only causing disease, but they are also sins, separating us from God! Isn’t this very bad news indeed? No, it is good news, because it shows us there is a way out, both from disease and from the entrapment of negative emotions.

If the negative emotions, causing us so much loss of peace and joy as well as health, are actually things in our personality that God has given us and wants us to have then we are stuck with them—and the diseases they induce. But if they are sins then He has provided a way of freedom. Jesus died to free us from sin’s penalty and from its power. That way of freedom will be the subject of all of the lessons which follow. For now let us consider the negative emotions in relationship to their opposite—the peace of Christ.

Chronically elevated cortisol levels have been shown to:

- Impair immune function
- Reduce glucose utilization
- Increase bone loss
- Reduce muscle mass
- Inhibit skin growth
- Increase fat accumulation
- Impair memory
- Destroy brain cells
- Increase blood pressure

Deadly Emotions p. 17

In fact we always have a choice how we will respond to life: will we go into stress, take on the negative emotions so close at hand, or will we choose to find the path of peace that comes from trusting and obeying God? God created us to live in peace with His peace. Even under the conditions of the Hebrew covenant, it was possible to live with perfect peace, but there was a condition: keeping one’s mind fixed or stayed on the Lord. How does one do that? By trusting in God.

You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock. Isaiah 26:3-4

Peace comes to us on the basis of our actual heart trust in God, not the doctrinal rightness of our beliefs. Our minds judge right and wrong, but it is with our hearts that we judge whom to trust. Whenever we actually release our hearts to trust God, our minds naturally become rested or stayed upon Him—until something else disturbs our rest. In the New

Covenant Jesus promises us peace as well and His peace goes far beyond any of the outward things that disturb us.

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” John 14:27

How does the world give us peace? Anyone can get peace from the world in this way:

I see the problem; I go to work on it; I begin to see the thing get better; I get peace back.

You don’t have to be a believer in anything but yourself to get peace in this way. But there are real problems with getting peace this way:

I can’t always make things better so I lose even more peace in the attempt; I have to wait until things look like they are getting better before peace begins to return to me; and as soon as one trouble is fixed, I may lose peace over two more that just flared up!

Jesus gives believing, trusting hearts **peace at the first sign of trouble**—whenever we cast our cares on Him (Ps 55:22; Mt 11:28-30; 1Pe 5:7). When our hearts and minds are at peace, our bodies experience peace (homeostasis) and all systems work in balance to maintain health. As Art Mathias of Wellsprings Ministries in Alaska likes to say, our bodies are barometers of our spiritual health.



The pathway of disease:

- **Loss of health** comes from loss of peace in the mind or heart (mainstream science).
- **Loss of peace** comes through the entry of negative emotions (simple displacement).
- **Negative emotions** draw power from unresolved issues carried from the past.
- **Unresolved issues** reveal that there are broken relationships of trust and love with God, self or others—a breach of the two great (most important) commandments.

And he said to him, "‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’" Matthew 22:37-39

- Loss of peace indicates **there is a sin issue** to deal with (Col 3:15).
- Loss of peace warns us that **the other kingdom is manifesting** through us. Just as peace, love, joy and the other fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22) manifest the life of Christ and the working of God’s kingdom through us, so too the negative emotions are actually manifesting the “emotional life” of the enemy (coming out of our carnal or fallen nature) and advancing his dark kingdom through us. Ouch!

We are paying a terrible price for not living in the peace of Christ.

End notes for The Spiritual Roots of Disease

- 1 C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co, Inc. 1962), 93.
- 2 Berk, L.S. as quoted by Art Mathias, *In His Own Image* (Anchorage, AK: Wellspring Publishing, 2003), 29.
- 3 Don Colbert, Md., *Deadly Emotions* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003), cover.
- 4 Colbert, 9, 20.

Notes/Journal



Exercise

List any diseases or infirmities you may have. Now consider how they may be affected by stress. Do they seem to get better or worse when you experience times of excessive stress? Did any time of specific stress seem to be going on in your life when the disease began? Not all disease are stress related—consider doing some research on the ones you may have to see if they are. Ask your doctor or search the web.

| Disease or condition | Moods or stress emotions that may trigger or amplify it |
|----------------------|---|
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |

Discussion Questions

Ask group members to name the things that stress them the most. How many of these are related to money, to time, to work, to family, to politics, etc? Does a loss of peace seem inevitable to them whenever these stressors show up? What have they been doing to try to overcome the stress in these situations? Have they been mainly trying to eliminate the problem, ignore it, be distracted from thinking about it, or have they been trying to learn how to overcome their negative emotional reactions to it? What works? What doesn't work? Close by praying for all these situations!

Main Points

- Loss of health comes from loss of peace in the mind or heart.
- Loss of peace comes through the entry of negative emotions—these are sins.
- Negative emotions draw power from unresolved issues carried from the past.
- Unresolved issue reveal a breakdown of love or trust for God, self, or others.
- Loss of peace indicates that we have a sin issue to deal with (Col 3:15).
- Loss of peace indicates that the other kingdom is manifesting through us.
- We are paying a terrible price for not living in the peace of Christ.

Digging Deeper

The mind-body connection

Many ordinary illnesses are nothing but the expression of a serious dissatisfaction with life.

Every day doctors have to deal with people who are worn out and unable to stand up to the life they lead. They generally assert that it is impossible to alter the way they live, and sincerely believe that their overwork is the product of circumstance, whereas it is bound up with their own intimate problems. It is ambition, fear of the future, love of money, jealousy, or social injustice that makes men strive and overwork, invent all sorts of unnecessary tasks, keep late hours, take too little sleep, take insufficient holidays, or use their holidays badly. Their minds are over tense, so that at night they cannot sleep and by day they doubly fatigue themselves at their work.

The fact is that in denying the reality of sin, by giving people to understand that a fault of character is due to the malfunctioning of an endocrine gland, or by calling some impure temptation a "psychological complex," science destroys man's sense of moral responsibility. The present state

of the world shows where that leads... This is the state of modern medicine: It has lost the sense of the unity of man. Such is the price it has paid for its scientific progress.

Sickness may be the solemn occasion of God's intervention in a person's life.
Paul Tournier, Md., *The Whole Person in a Broken World; The Healing of Persons*

Frustration is deadly to our health

I have found over the years that with every disease there's usually an emotion linked to that disease. And the emotion that so many Americans have is frustration. We have an epidemic of frustrated Americans here.

Don Colbert, Md. *He's Got the Cure*, Charisma Magazine; November, 2003.

How the body responds to stress

*The majority of the patients that I see on a daily basis are overstressed, and this contributes greatly to the illness or disease from which they are suffering... Our mind and body seek a state of peace and relaxation, which is called **homeostasis**... When a person becomes "stressed out"..., reactions begin to occur in the body that lead to the general adaptation syndrome... Unfortunately, when most patients finally come to my practice, they are already in [the] final stage of the general adaptation syndrome... I have learned when a person reaches adrenal exhaustion, we shouldn't just treat their body ... **We must also treat the person mentally, emotionally, and most of all, spiritually.***

Don Colbert, Md. *The Dangers of Excessive Stress*, Charisma Magazine; Jan/Feb, 2001.

Sword and Shield



Texts that speak to health issues abound in scripture, especially in regard to the connection between negative emotions (sins) and physical health—what our science describes as the mind-body connection (see also Pr 3:7-8; 9:11; 16:24).

My son, attend to my words. Turn your ear to my sayings. Let them not depart from your eyes. Keep them in the midst of your heart. For they are life to those who find them, And health to their whole body. Keep your heart with all diligence, For out of it is the wellspring of life.
Proverbs 4:20-23 WEB

A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot. Proverbs 14:30

A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones. Proverbs 17:22

The emphasis of scripture regarding our health is on the spiritual food in our daily diet (Spirit and Truth), not physical food. Physical food is not seen as a threat to health, if thanksgiving and moderation are maintained (Pr 23:21; Pr 25:16; 1Co 9:25).

Let no man therefore judge you in eating, or in drinking... "Don't handle, nor taste, nor touch" (all of which perish with use), according to the precepts and doctrines of men? Which things indeed appear like wisdom in self-imposed worship, and humility, and severity to the body; but aren't of any value against the indulgence of the flesh. Colossians 2:16, 21-23 WEB

For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer. 1 Timothy 4:4

Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them.

Hebrews 13:9

Prayer Focus



Lord, help me to be honest, open and transparent before You. Please help me to choose to deal with You and with anything You may want to bring up.

Renunciations and Affirmations



Confess/renounce previous agreements with untruth; confess/believe Truth as your new Way of life.

For instance, have you believed that the peace of Christ was impossible for you to live by? That you were trapped in having to live stressed-up with negative emotions instead? Or have you developed a “scapegoat mentality” toward your body or towards the environment—blaming secondary factors for your illnesses, when it may be emotional stress that you have been allowing to rule over you? Have you been blaming other people or circumstances for your own negative emotions and the stress you feel inside—rather than unburdening your heart to the Lord (Mt 11:29-30)? **Repent of and renounce** the thought that anything outside of you has to have power over your emotional life. Then **confess the truth** that living in the peace of Christ is between you and your God!

Putting Feet to Your Prayers/Stretch Yourself!

What are some steps you can take to reduce stress in your life? Of course this workbook is intended to help you convert emotional stress back into the peace of Christ, but there are many practical ways to de-stress as well. Consider these steps that others have found helpful, then add the ones that you will actually do to the second list.

- Laughter.
- Loving—pets, children, anyone and anything you can (in a right way!).
- Getting out in nature—drink in the beauty and grace of our Creator’s world.
- Deep, relaxed breathing.
- Stretching, tensing and relaxing your muscle groups from head to toe.
- Imagining a relaxing scene (like walking along a beach or lying in sunshine).
- Meditation—focused awareness, interactive and directed toward the Lord.
- Prayer—casting your cares on Him because He cares for you; sharing the day’s burdens.
- Massage and hugging—healthy, legitimate forms of receiving and giving human touch.
- Aerobic exercise—brisk walking, cycling, swimming, jumping with reasonable intensity.
- Daily quiet time all to yourself, with little or nothing to do but relax.
- Playing gentle music, watching wholesome videos, reading good books.
- Sleep—we need between 7 to 9 hours of sleep a night and more on the weekends.

Things I could stop doing (activities to eliminate, expectations to pare down).

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____

Things I could start doing (to relax stress away, to burn it off, to forget about it).

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____