

A LITTLE KNOWN CURE: A MERRY HEART

Pastor H. Rondel Rumburg, D.Min.
Friendship Baptist Church
Appomattox, VA

“A merry heart doeth good like a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones,” (Proverbs 17:22). Also, Robert Young translated it, *“A rejoicing heart doth good to the body: But a smitten spirit drieth the bone.”*

I would like to paraphrase the verse myself, *“A joyful or cheerful heart does a body good, but a wounded spirit will cause you to waste away.”* Peter Muffet in the late 1500’s penned, *“A joyful heart causeth good health: but a sorrowful mind drieth up the bones.”* As God’s people know sin is a great destroyer and we need to remember that it is not a purveyor of peace and joy. A cheerful heart is good in the short term as well as in the long term.

THOUGHT: Have you ever heard the phrase, “Laughter is the best medicine?” As we have just read the *Bible* spoke of this hundreds of years ago. Medical science is now, after hundreds of years, about to catch up on that truth. They are now finding that laughter is conducive to lowering the blood pressure, reducing stress hormones, increasing muscle flexion, and boosting immune function by raising levels of infection-fighting T-cells, disease-fighting proteins called Gamma-interferon and B-cells, which produce disease-destroying antibodies. Laughter, they say, also triggers the release of endorphins, the body’s natural painkillers, and produces a general sense of well being. Drs. Gael Crystal & Patrick Flanagan found that “laughter is a form of internal jogging that exercises the body and stimulates the release of beneficial brain neurotransmitters and hormones.” This finding is called *psychoneuroimmunology*, which is the study of how the mind affects health. At California’s Loma Linda University Medical Center they have found two kinds of stress: good stress and bad stress. Laughter was found to be a good form of stress, or stress in reverse. To help us understand Dr. Stanley Tan remarked, “All these neuro-hormones act like an orchestra, each instrument makes a particular note. Laughter makes the entire orchestra more melodious or balanced. In other words, laughter brings a balance to all the components of the immune system.”

INTRODUCTION:

Mankind seems to go from the complex to the simple. This is especially true regarding health and cures. Blind leaders of the blind are noted for straining **out** gnats and swallowing down camels (see NKJ on Matt. 23:24). The Matthew passage is referring to one who strains out a gnat larva in a cloth sieve and gulps down a camel. There is an Eastern proverb, “He eats an elephant, and is suffocated with a gnat.” Often we miss the obvious, in other words we miss the forest for the trees.

The twentieth century has been a period of history noted for great leaps in medical science. We have artificial hearts, organ transplants, wonder drugs and even the virtual extinction of some health problems (as polio). However, in the time of great advance there has been a cloud of unbelief distorting some areas. Religious diversity has led people back to witch doctors and demons. The pursuit of depravity has marked the era. There has been a rejection or demeaning of Christianity along with the repudiation of the Word of God either directly or indirectly. That which is pagan has been embraced with both arms.

It seems only logical that the God who created the body knows what is best for sustaining and curing it of its ills. We must not forget that God made man upright but man sought out many inventions or schemes (Eccl. 7:29). Since the fall in Eden mankind has been at odds with God and has been dying! Health declines because of Adam’s transgression and sometimes because of our own disobedience. This is why men can strain out gnats and gulp down camels so easily. When men ignore or reject even what God says about health they suffer the consequences. Certainly man must be regenerated by the Holy Spirit and redeemed by the blood of the Lamb to come to a truly healthy spiritual state. And to be in a healthy spiritual state enhances the probability of being healthy in a physical state, although God’s providence takes precedence and accomplishes His purposes for His glory; and secondarily brings about what is good for us. There is no guarantee for we know not what is ultimately best for us but the Lord knows. Of course that should contribute to a merry heart as well. And how is that to happen? This message is intended to clarify that point more fully.

Since we are prone to think in complicated ways about good health we need to consider things from a Biblical perspective. God in His word teaches us about “moderation.” “Moderation is the state of keeping from going to

extremes by calmness, temperance or equanimity.” And God in His Word teaches us that a “*merry heart*” is like a medicine. We are prone to lean too heavily on the arm of flesh in every realm and especially in the medical realm trusting doctors and medical science rather than the Lord. But we need to remember that God is a jealous God! Also, we trust the scientific world too much and look for it to come up with a cure or wonder drug and fail to cast our every care on Him who cares for us (1 Pet. 5:7).

Samuel Cox correctly related, “Medicines, whether remedial or preventive, imply disease, and our liability to it; and, in like manner, to prescribe cheerfulness is to imply that there are many causes of sadness and melancholy around us, and that we are likely to be infected by them.” Our text points out a need and a cure.

Everyone must be reminded that a person’s state of being goes a long way toward explaining his general condition. At one of the political conventions in 1932 a young reporter approached Will Rogers and pompously said, “I’m covering strictly the serious side of the convention, Mr. Rogers, so if I see anything humorous, I’ll let you know.” “Thanks,” said Rogers, “and if I see anything serious happen, I’ll tell **you** about it.” Perhaps these two men demonstrate two extremes. However, Will Rogers had a healthier attitude. Such an attitude is more in tune with our text.

The text does not demean the fact that life is serious especially when one realizes that it is the anteroom to eternity. However, this does not preclude a sense of cheerfulness in our perspectives on life for we are to walk by faith and not by sight. It certainly will help relieve tension and stress which complicates life. We need a proper Christian attitude.

David’s prayer should be our prayer, “*Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me*” (Psalm 51:10). The Christian graces are conducive to better health, “*love, joy, peace, ...*” (Gal. 5:22-23). The world and the things of the world are not able to give permanent satisfaction and joy. The world passes away (1 Cor. 7:31). Ralph Wardlaw¹ commented, “A cheerful, contented spirit, contributes to promote the beneficial influence of a medicine in the recovery of health.”

“*A merry heart does good as a medicine*” but that does not mean that silliness or foolishness does the same thing. This is no defense for “*foolish talking*” or “*foolish jesting*” (Eph. 5:4). The verse is not a plea for the habitual punster whose acts almost drive a person berserk or the prankster (practical joker) whose pranks risk life or limb. Solomon described the loud and noisy mirth of fools as not conducive to medicine, but more in line with “*madness*” (Eccl. 2:2 cp. 1 Sam. 25:36, 37).

A very important element in having “*a merry heart*” is Christian faith. Faith is a strong ally to the child of God’s well being. Think of Ira Sankey’s hymn,

*Simply trusting every day,
Trusting through a stormy way;
Even when my faith is small,
Trusting Jesus, that is all.*

*Trusting him while life shall last,
Trusting him till earth be past;
Till within the jasper wall:
Trusting Jesus, that is all.*

Such faith is evident in the trust bestowed upon God in salvation and in sanctification. A mark of faith’s presence is seen in the acceptance of the providences of God in daily events. “Simply trusting” is the only recourse if one is being held by the hand of God, and that security should encourage a merry heart.

There are three questions we need to ask and answer. [1] What is the centrality of man’s being? [2] What is a joyful heart? And [3] what is a good recovery?

First: WHAT IS THE CENTRALITY OF MAN’S BEING?

A. The Heart of Man Refers to the Centrality of Man’s Existence.

¹ Ralph Wardlaw’s (1779-1853) life was very impacting, His ministry made a great impression on Scottish congregationalism, which extended beyond His death.

This of course does not mean the heart as the physical organ of the body. That organ is used in a metaphorical way of speaking of the seat of man's being. It encompasses his very life and strength. Man's heart is used to refer to his relation to well being. Owen Brandon in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* wrote, "in the OT, heart is also used very frequently ... as the center or focus of man's inner personal life. The heart is the source, or spring, of motives; the seat of the passions; the center of the thought processes; the spring of conscience." And later he noted, "Since the heart is regarded as the center of man's personal life, the spring of all his desires, motives, and moral choices—indeed, of all his behavioral trends—it is not surprising to note that in both Testaments the divine appeal is addressed to the 'heart' of man."

B. The Condition of the Heart of Man.

The heart is the seat of affections and passions and each person is accustomed to its operations. However, only God knows the heart for He alone can search it. *"I the LORD search the heart, I try the reins (the most secret parts), even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings"* (Jer. 17:10). Man's heart was damaged beyond human repair at the fall. Its condition is pathetic—*"The heart is deceitful (fraudulent) above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?"* (Jer. 17:9). The answer to that question we have already given, for only the Lord can know the heart. *Buck's Theological Dictionary* explained, "Heart is used for the soul, and all the powers thereof; as the understanding, conscience, will, affections, and memory. The heart of man is naturally, constantly, universally, inexpressibly, openly, and evidently depraved, and inclined to evil, Jer. 17:9. It requires a divine power to renovate it." The Lord can replace a stony heart with a heart of flesh or living heart, but only He can do so (Ez. 36:26)!

Second: WHAT IS A JOYFUL HEART?

A. First, Let Us Look at it Negatively—"a broken spirit drieth the bones" or "a wounded spirit will cause you to waste away."

The spirit of man is that which sustains him when infirmities weaken his body or reverses destroy him financially, but an infirmed spirit or a hopeless heart is more than he can bear. **A sorrowful heart makes a man "stoop or sink in depression."** *"Heaviness (fearfulness or anxiousness) in the heart of man maketh it stoop (prostrate)"* (Prov. 12:25). *"By sorrow of heart the spirit is broken (wounded)"* (Prov. 15:13b). **A wounded or broken spirit is the opposite of a joyful heart.** The spirit either lifts up or casts down. A desponding spirit destroys the strength and vigor which in turn breaks down the condition of the body. This makes recovery more difficult. **A wounded spirit is a gloom gatherer.** Being a merchant of gloom is not conducive to a joyful heart (Eccl. 2:1-3 cp. 1 Sam. 25:36-38).

B. Secondly, Let Us Look at it Positively—"A merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance" (Prov. 15:13a). "He that is of a merry heart hath a continual feast" (Prov. 15:15b).

A heart cured through the blood of Christ of deceitfulness and sin in general is joyful. Such a heart is at peace with God because of forgiveness and reconciliation—*"Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee: because he trusteth in Thee. Trust ye in the LORD for ever: for in the LORD JEHOVAH is everlasting strength (or the rock of ages)"* (Isa. 26:3-4). Do you trust to the Lord your eternal destiny and forgiveness? John Trapp in his uniqueness noted, "All true mirth is from rectitude of the mind, or a right frame of soul. When faith has once healed the conscience, and grace has hushed the affections, and composed all within, so that there is a Sabbath of spirit, and a blessed tranquility lodged in the soul; then the body also is vigorous and vigetous (lasting), for most part in very good plight and healthful constitution, which makes man's life very comfortable." Those who trust the Lord have been raised to newness of life and view everything from the mind of God or the mountain of Scripture. *"Heaviness in the heart of man maketh it stoop: but a good word maketh it glad"* (Prov. 12:25). *"Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and Thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart: for I am called by Thy name, O LORD God of hosts"* (Jer. 15:16). Consider what George Lawson wrote, "A merry heart diffuses its influence through the body, and preserves its vigour and health, or tends to restore it where it is lost; but a broken spirit crushes the frame of the body, enfeebles its powers." And Matthew Henry proclaimed, "It is a great mercy that God gives us **leave** to be cheerful, and **cause** to be cheerful; and especially if, by His grace, He gives us **hearts** to be cheerful." Sin is the destroyer of joy—*"Rejoice not, O Israel, for joy, as other people: for thou hast gone a whoring from thy God, thou hast loved a reward upon every cornfloor"* (Hosea 9:1). Did you know that not serving God with joy is sinful (Deut. 28:45-48)? For example: God loves a cheerful giver.

Third: WHAT IS A GOOD RECOVERY?

The joyful heart is the kind of heart that “*does good like a medicine or makes a good recovery or brings a good recovery.*”

A. There Is a Curative Quality to a Joyful Heart.

This is not a despondent heart but a “*merry or joyful*” heart that is so healthful. Thus the temperament of the entire being is affected for good. This is the good state of a trusting heart—“*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. Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the LORD, and depart from evil. It shall be health (medicine) to thy navel and marrow (moisture) to thy bones*” (Prov. 3:5-8). The result is the opposite of a broken spirit that dries up the bones. “*My son, attend to my words; incline thine ear unto my sayings. Let them not depart from thine eyes; keep them in the midst of thine heart. For they are life unto those that find them, and health to all their flesh. Keep (preserve) thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life*” (Prov. 4:20-23). How does this impact a person? Consider Paul and Silas in prison and their behavior in that circumstance (Acts 16:25).

B. There Is a Catalytic Quality to a Joyful Heart.

The joyful heart “*does good*” or literally “*makes medicine even better.*” A joyful heart is itself a good medicine for it is a catalyst to enhance the value and power of medicine when it is taken or applied. Dr. John Gill in an excellent remark on a joyful heart noted that it “*‘does a medicine good’; makes that operate kindly, and to a good purpose.*” Thus a joyful heart is as an element introduced to speed up a good recovery. In other words, when a joyful heart is mixed into daily life it produces elements conducive to a more rapid or complete recovery.

CONCLUSION:

Jesus announced, “*These things have I spoken unto you, that **my joy** might remain in you, and that **your joy** might be full*” (John 15:11). Jesus has “*spoken*” and the mind and heart of the believer needs to be saturated with the teaching of the Lord Christ. The presence of the Lord brings fullness of joy. “*Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in Thy presence is **fullness of joy**; at Thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore*” (Ps. 16:11). “*Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid: for the LORD JEHOVAH is my strength and my song; He also is become my salvation. Therefore **with joy** shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation*” (Isa. 12:2-3).

“*The joy of the LORD is your strength*” (Neh. 8:10). Is your trust in the Lord Christ? Will you cry out with David, “***Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which Thou hast broken may rejoice***” (Ps. 51:8)? This is a necessary prayer!

Charles Bridges confided, “Joy is a forbidden fruit to the ungodly.” Remember what Hippocrates said, “All immoderations are great enemies of health.”

John 16:20-24 deals with the time when your pain turns to joy! Consider those verses that convey Jesus’ message when He anticipated a question, “*Verily, verily, I say unto you, That ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: and ye shall be sorrowful, but **your sorrow shall be turned into joy**. A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, **for joy** that a man is born into the world. And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and **your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you**. And in that day ye shall ask me nothing. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, He will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that **your joy may be full**.*”