### The Human Body

Having studied the nature of our inner person, we embark on an investigation of other aspects of the human constitution, beginning with human physicality. In all of the natural world, there is nothing to compare with the mastery of form and function found in the human body. Let us learn the biblical view of human physicality.

**1. Proper Attitude toward the Body**

The human body is a masterpiece of God’s wisdom and creative power, which constantly leaves us amazed and inspires us to worship our Creator. Let us briefly highlight several of its amazing features.

People possess a respiratory system that enables them to procure oxygen from the atmosphere, a necessary element for all bodily processes. The digestive system processes food, incorporating the useful parts and disposing of the rest. Skin covers the body, providing protection and form. Hormones and enzymes, regulated by the endocrine system, control the physical processes of the body.

The urinary system rids the body of unnecessary and potentially harmful substances. The muscular-skeletal system allows bodily movement and enables physical labor. The circulatory system, with its constantly beating heart, bathes the body with elements needed for survival and normal functioning. The nervous system enables a person to perceive the outside world, process information, and initiate movement. Finally, human reproductive capacities secure the perpetuation of the human race.

The Bible never forbids care for one’s body, but encourages us to nurture it (Eph 5:29). The material world that God created provides people with all they need to both survive and thrive. The following passages affirm that truth:

- Do not worry then, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear for clothing?” For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things (Matt 6:31-32).

- …who forbid marriage {and advocate} abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude (1 Tim 4:3-4).

- …to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy (1 Tim 6:17).

Moreover, the Scriptures give us a number of instructions for proper care of the body. First, the body needs rest. For this reason, God established the Sabbath for restoration of strength (Ex 31:15-17). Even young people can tire and need periodic relief (Isa 40:30). Psalm 127:2 also prescribes rest: “It is vain for you to rise up early, to retire late, to eat the bread of painful labors; for He gives to His beloved {even in his} sleep.” From time to time, Jesus led His disciples away for periods of inactivity (Mk 6:31).

Second, the Mosaic Law speaks much of physical hygiene, which ensured not only ceremonial purity, but also prevention of communicable diseases. The sons of Israel were commanded to cover their excretions outside the camp (Deut 23:13), to isolate people with contagious infections (Lev 13), and to wash themselves after a bodily emission (Lev 15). Third, in His earthly ministry, Jesus devoted much attention to physical heath – healing the sick.

Furthermore, although Paul recommends spiritual discipline over physical exercise, nonetheless he recognizes that physical training has value (1 Tim 4:8). Finally, followers of Jesus must consecrate their bodies to the Lord by abstaining from sin:

- Do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin {as} instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members {as} instruments of righteousness to God (Rom 6:13).

- Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, {which is} your spiritual service of worship (Rom 12:1).

- For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body (1 Cor 6:20).

**2. Neglect of the Body**

In this section, we defend the position that a normal, healthy human experience requires possession of a physical body. Some, however, devalue the physical aspect of humanity and neglect their bodily needs. Asceticism, unfortunately, has a long history in organized Christianity. Many have sought to attain higher levels of “spirituality” by neglecting or abusing their bodies. Some have even denied a future physical resurrection, teaching that the saints will enjoy eternal glory in a disembodied state.

Neglect and severe treatment of the body traces its origins not to the biblical witness, but to Greek philosophy, especially in the thought of Plato.[[1]](#footnote-1) In his view, echoed later by Plotinus, the essence of the person is the soul. Plato records Socrates saying, “Since neither the body nor both together (i.e. “body and soul”) are man… if man is something, he turns out to be nothing but soul” (*Alcibiades I, 130 c 1*).[[2]](#footnote-2) Again, Plato cites Socrates referring to the body as the “sepulcher” or “prison” of the soul, drawing a parallel between the Greek terms σώμα (*soma*), i.е., “body,” and σήμα (*sema*), i.е., “grave” (*Cratylus*, *400 с 2*).[[3]](#footnote-3)

Plato thought that the body hinders the soul from knowing truth and classed it as “non-being.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Plotinus taught that in order for the soul to become immortal and eternal, it must become a substance independent from the body.[[5]](#footnote-5) Such an attitude would naturally lead to neglect of the body, which Plotinus indeed did practice. Porphyry notes that Plotinus acted as if he was ashamed of his body, failing to observe proper hygiene or receive needed medical therapy.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The historian Lane summarizes the Greek view of human nature:

The Greek philosophers saw human nature as essentially twofold: body and soul. The body belongs to this world of becoming and change. The soul is a ‘divine spark’ from the world of being, and is rational…. The *real* person is the soul. The body is like a house or a set of clothes in which the person lives. In fact, the body is often seen as the tomb or the prison of the soul. The ultimate destiny of the soul, which is immortal, is to be released from the body. Our destiny is deification, becoming like God. This includes the goal of impassibility – total absence of all feeling and emotion.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Origen, being heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, echoed this same attitude in his own teaching. He felt that God created humans as spiritual beings, but due to some sinful act committed by them, He made the material world to punish his human creatures by giving them bodies. God’s intent, however, is to someday liberate humanity from their material state.

Unlike Greek thought, the Bible claims that God created all things “very good” (Gen 1:31), including the human body. The New Testament confirms this truth. In 1 Timothy 4:4, we read, “Everything created by God is good,” including the physical body. Asceticism runs contrary to Paul’s teaching in Colossians 2:23, where he states, “These are matters (i.e., asceticism) which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, {but are} of no value against fleshly indulgence.”

Although we reject asceticism, we in no way undervalue fasting, which the Bible encourages. Fasting, though, differs from asceticism. First, fasting is for a limited period of time, while asceticism is a lifestyle. Second, the goal of the ascetic life is attaining greater spirituality, while fasting aids in intensifying one’s prayer life in times of crisis or special need.

The Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Ilarion gives the following wise counsel about our attitude toward the body, “The Christian ideal is not to abate the flesh, but to cleanse it and liberate it from the effects of the Fall.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

The Scriptures reveal that in order to be a complete person, one must possess a physical body. Paul stresses this point in 2 Corinthians 5, where we read, “For we know that if the earthly tent (οὶκία) which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house (οὶκία) not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (v. 1). This verse contains two mentions of the idea “tent/house,” rendering the single Greek term οὶκία (*oikia*). The first instance obviously refers to the physical body. We may also safely assume that in the second instance, a physical body is also meant, but now a glorified, resurrected body.

We then read, “For indeed in this {house} we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked” (v. 2-3). Paul makes an important point here. He states that the departed soul wishes to “be clothed with our dwelling from heaven,” that is, receive the glorified body, in order not “to be found naked.” Thus, the disembodied state is compared to being naked. Life outside of the body is an incomplete, abnormal condition.

Erickson concurs, “Scripture indicates that there is an intermediate state involving personal conscious existence between death and resurrection…. For the intermediate (i.e., immaterial or disembodied) state is clearly incomplete or abnormal (2 Cor. 5:2–4).”[[9]](#footnote-9) Ilarion affirms the same, “Only the combination of soul and body make up a full-fledged person-hypostasis. Neither the soul, not the body alone does so.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Moreover, Paul claims that it is disagreeable and uncomfortable to leave the body. Therefore, Paul comforts the dying with the hope of a future resurrection: “For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life” (v. 4). Nonetheless, we must someday leave this body behind. Therefore, we need to muster courage to do so:

Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord – for we walk by faith, not by sight – we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord (v. 6-8).

In summary, a dying person desires to immediately obtain a new body in order to avoid the disembodied state. Yet, resurrection day is still to come. Therefore, one must muster courage to depart from the body and enter into this incomplete, abnormal, disembodied state.

Some hold to the opinion that God does indeed provide the departed soul with a temporary physical body. In support, they cite the appearance of Moses and Elijah with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. It is assumed that they appeared in the flesh. It is also supposed that the “white garments,” in which the martyrs are clothed (Rev 6:11), are temporary physical bodies.[[11]](#footnote-11) We encounter this teaching in the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher.[[12]](#footnote-12)

However, this theory lacks biblical support. Several times, we see in Scripture that the departed are in a disembodied state (Rev 6:9; 7:9; 20:4; Heb 12:23). We also note Stephen’s prayer, when he requested the Lord to receive his spirit. It appears that he did not expect to receive a temporary body (Acts 7:59). In addition, a careful reading of 2 Corinthians 5, as we have seen, shows that at death, the individual departs from the body for the disembodied state. This is why we must “be of good courage” and await the resurrection of the body at the coming of the Lord. Finally, Paul is “willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord” (2 Cor 5:8).

1. See Лега В. П. Тело и плоть: платоновское и христианское понимание // Евангельский Интернет; Иларион А. Таинство веры. – М.: Издательство Братства Святителя Тихона, 1996. – P. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Plato. Socrates and Alcibiades / Trans. D. Johnson. – Newburyport, MA: Focus Philosophical Library/Focus Pub., 2003. – P. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Plato. The Cratylus, Phaedo, Parmenides, Timaeus, and Critias of Plato / Trans. T. Taylor. – Minneapolis: Wizards Bookshelf, 1976. – P. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. From Леги. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Porphyry, *Life of Plontinus*. Taken from Леги. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Lane T. A Concise History of Christian Thought. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006. – P. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Иларион, p. 71. Author’s translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Erickson M. J. Christian Theology. – 2nd ed. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998. – P. 555. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Иларион, p. 70. Author’s translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Noted in Horton S. The Last Things // Horton S. M. Systematic Theology. – Rev. Ed. – BookMasters. Kindle Edition. – P. 691-692. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Mueller J. T. Christian Dogmatics. – St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1934. – P. 618. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)