

Proverbs 13:12: Heartsick or Satisfied?

OUTLINE

Sinful desires
Legitimate desires
Transformed desires

INTRODUCTION

Today we are going to be reflecting on our hearts, our desires and what satisfies us. We are coming to the end of 2018 and approaching a new year. It is a good time to take stock and be deliberate in our plans for the coming year. The verse for our reflection is Proverbs 13:12, 'Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life.' The book of proverbs is a particularly fitting book to reflect on as we seek to plan for 2019. It is a book about wisdom; practical wisdom on how we are live our lives under God. The book of proverbs is biblical psychology that predates Greek philosophy by 500 years in its wisdom and insights. It is written by the one who made us and helps us to understand ourselves better than any other philosophy or psychology can.

Our verse is speaking to us about depression, loss of hope, disappointment, and satisfaction. Think over this past year and think about your biggest disappointments, those things that nearly broke your spirit; that made you heartsick. Think as well on those things that were your joys and satisfactions. This verse is reflecting on those realities. This verse reveals to us something very basic about ourselves. We are creatures of desire. We have empty spaces and deep longings. We are hard wired to look away from ourselves for our satisfaction and peace. And so when we are disappointed or satisfied, this does something deep and significant to us both positively or negatively. What you need to appreciate is that this verse is an observation and not an exhortation. It is stating basic facts about us, but that does not mean that it is not practical; we are left to draw the obvious inference as to what ought to be done. In other words, once you see how you work, you will be able to see what ought to be done. As we look at this verse which talks about disappointment and satisfaction I want us to look at three perspectives on it focusing on sinful desires and legitimate desires and transformed desires.

Sinful desires

A phrase that I have been hearing over and over again is this one: 'The heart wants what the heart wants.' Just think about that phrase with me. It was originally a quote from Emily Dickinson. It was used again by Woody Allen to justify his love affair with his adopted daughter. Selena Gomez uses it in a song about her relationship with Justin Beiber. However, I have heard it used in debates about homosexuality, or to justify the irrational nature of our desires. Just think about the assumption in this use of the statement. It is claiming that desires are irresistible, and that desires create moral norms that must be given way to. When two people are in a relationship and there is immorality involved all they have to say is, 'I love them,' and this is thought to trump any moral protest. Our generation is especially in bondage to the tyranny of our emotions. The whole gender identity debate is driven by the fallacy that you are what you feel.

Where do our desires come from what explanation do we give of their origins. here is the view of one psychologist. Paul Thagard, a Canadian psychologist and philosopher, writing for Psychology today gives the two schools of thought on where our desires and emotions arise from. 'The cognitive appraisal theory of emotions says that emotions are judgments

about how well a situation fits with your goals, so that happiness is an estimate of goal satisfaction and sadness is an estimate of goal dissatisfaction. On this theory, it should be fairly easy to control your emotions, because you can reappraise the situation and figure out whether falling in love accomplishes your relationship goals. But emotions are never that simple.

The alternative theory of emotions is that they are just reactions to physiological changes, such as heart rate, breathing, and hormone levels. The physiological perception view of emotions fits well with the idea that the heart wants just what the heart wants, putting feelings outside of cognitive control. But mere physiology doesn't explain how the brain differentiates among emotions that are physiologically similar, such as fear/anger and shame/guilt, nor how the brain produces socially complex emotions such as pride, gratitude, envy, and embarrassment.¹

In typical psychology style he suggests that the truth is a mixture of both, so that we can control our emotions to some degree through exercise, rest and medication. So to a certain extent, the heart can want what the brain wants. Now all truth is God's truth and there is some truth in what is said here. However, if it is presented as all the truth it becomes untrue. The Bible gives a deeper explanation for the direction and the nature of our desires.

God made us in His image. We have capacities and emotions that God gave us to feel, bestowing upon us the privilege of being an analogy of His own perfections. We can feel love, hate, anger, mercy, etc., because God does. There are no doubt physical mechanisms that are part of our feeling process, because God has made us a body-soul union, but we cannot explain the source of our emotions in merely mechanistic terms. So for example love may include a release of endorphins in the brain, but love is not to be confused as merely the effect of endorphins in the brain. But there is more to our emotions than that God gave them to us. The bible also has a narrative that tells us that we were made perfect in our emotions and desires, but now because of the effects of sin, we desire in broken, disobedient, self-harming and destructive ways. This means that we want things that are wrong, and experience the pain of disappointment in ways that are distorted as well. Let's bring this to bear on our verse.

Our text speaks to us about hope being deferred. A hope is something more than a desire. To wish for nice weather tomorrow is not what the bible means by hope. Your hope is something substantial that plays a fundamental role in your future. A single person hopes for a marriage partner; a couple hopes for a baby; an unemployed person hopes for a job. If it rains tomorrow it will not make you heartsick, but to have your hopes dashed can leave you depressed and despairing. Now sin comes into the making or breaking of our hopes as well. Hopes can be dashed because we have sinful hopes, or because sin affects the fulfilment of legitimate hopes. There are many people in the world today walking around with broken hearts because their hopes have been wrongly set. This dejection can come in two ways. Firstly, you can think that what you really want in life is this or that. We can make it something legitimate like marriage or something illegitimate like sex outside of marriage. You have it, and it does not deliver. That pot of gold that you thought would be waiting for you at the end of the rainbow is not there or it is fool's gold. It may have distracted you from your inner emptiness for a while but it soon faded. Perhaps the thing you thought would make you happy has even made you more unhappy. It is often this way when people think that drink or sex or partying or gambling will satisfy. Or, secondly, you were hoping for something, you put all your eggs in one basket counting on that hope to be

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hot-thought/201505/does-the-heart-want-what-it-wants>

fulfilled and it never materialised at all. And you are left with a gaping emptiness. Our verse applies to both these cases, 'Hope deferred makes the heart sick.'

A life of experience helps us to know the brokenness of our world and the fact that there is nothing in this world that can satisfy us. When we set our hope on anything in this life, it will inevitably disappoint us in one way or another. It is guaranteed! This points to the fact that we need a hope that cannot fail, that our ultimate treasure must not be in the stocks of this fading world but in a treasure that cannot rust or be stolen. What this text is alerting us to is not merely the possibility but the harsh and universal reality of disappointment. Here is a counter-intuitive thought for you. This disappointment is a gift. You see if the judgement of God is to hand you over to your desires, to allow you to carry on in heedless abandon on a Godless track where you can do all you want. If God's judgement is allowing you to enjoy life unhindered by inconvenience and sorrow so that you will have a hard heart that does not seek Him; then the opposite must also be true. If unbroken enjoyment of sin is a judgement, then the arresting of our steps with sorrow is a blessing. Judgement is to be handed over to desires, but it is a blessing to have desires frustrated. It is a blessing not because pain is nice, but because we are being made aware of the facts, that we are sinners in a fallen world, that this is not what we are made for. Our minds are being forced by the pain to consider the way things ought to be and turn to God and the solution that He will one day bring.

Legitimate desires

We have seen that sin affects our desiring, but our text also alerts us to the legitimacy of desires and the blessing of them being fulfilled, 'but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life.' Here we need to appreciate the positive view that the bible has about desire. Yes our desires are affected by sin, but they were also originally given by God. God willed that Israel should be successful and prosperous, and that they should enjoy those gifts to the glory of God. Marriage, children, work, rest, food, drink, etc. But there are a few qualifications that need to be made. If we take this phrase and make it axiomatic, 'a desire fulfilled is a tree of life,' that can give a wrong impression. It could be made to say that any desire when fulfilled is good, teaching a type of boundless hedonism. No, we must read this statement in the context of this chapter.

The book of proverbs is one of the hardest books to read in context because large parts of it seem to appear to be a random collection of phrases. These are collections after all of Solomon's sayings that have been collected together from a life time of wise sayings. We do not have the historical contexts for the original statements to help us know what they were addressed to. However, there are other ways in which we can see the drift of the larger context. In this chapter v1-2 mirror, v24-25. You will notice that there is a statement about discipline, and then desire in both sets of verses. This helps us to see that whoever put these verses together created a set of brackets that close this chapter off. It helps us to read them in light of the themes being highlighted by these verses. The dual emphasis of the chapter is a strange tension of desire and discipline. These are two concepts that are not usually seen side by side. Discipline is all about boundaries and saying no, and desire is all about indulging and saying yes. The path of wisdom we are being told is desire with discipline. In other words, it is telling us that we can indulge God given desires, enjoying God's good gifts, but in the boundaries of God given wisdom, discipline and instruction. Please note how desires fulfilled are described as a tree of life, but in v14 how the teachings of the wise are called a fountain of life. Life does not consist in the fulfilling of desires apart from the word of God. This gives us boundaries within which we have liberty. We can enjoy good things without making them God.

Idolatry is the great sin of our hearts where we take anything in the place of God. We can spot the idols in our lives by those things that make us mad, bad, sad, or glad. Anything that makes us angry at God as if He is evil for having removed it; anything that we are willing to break the laws of God in order to have; anything that we see we cannot go on living without; and anything we rely on for our ultimate satisfaction is taking the place of God in our lives. Instead of God being the one we love, we turn the thing we love into a god. And as C. S. Lewis put it, the thing we love, 'begins to be a demon the moment he begins to be a god.'² When this is the case, when we have an illegitimate love that we have made an idol, destruction begins. We destroy the thing we love as we put demands upon it that it cannot satisfy. Nothing can survive being your god, your ultimate reason for existence, nothing was intended to take the place only God Himself can fill.

Desire itself was never made by God to be something that was to take His place, but rather it was intended to be the road that always led us back to Him. God made us to enjoy so many things, and when we received those things, we were to enjoy them, well up in gratitude and return to God in grateful praise. Every minor joy was to an echo of the greater joy we find in Him; every desire a picture of our greatest desire, every satisfaction a pointer to the greatest satisfaction to be found in Him. All things were to be enjoyed vertically.

We must pay some attention to the notion that desire satisfied is a tree of life. This is a very suggestive reference. The tree of life is only mentioned in 3 books of the bible, it features in the early chapters of Genesis where the tree of life is the sign of the promise of eternal life held out to Adam. If he were to prove obedient the tree of life would be his but because of his sin he is cut off from access to the tree and cast out of the Garden. The book of Revelation also makes mention of trees life, more than one giving a picture of eschatological fullness in the New Creation. The only other book that mentions it is Proverbs. The first and primary reference to the tree of life is to call Wisdom a tree of life, 3:18, 'She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called blessed.' Wisdom in Proverbs is of course shorthand for true religion, or love of God, for wisdom is the fear of the Lord. This reference to wisdom as a tree of life I see as foundational to all the other times it is mentioned. The other references are developments on this foundation. 11:30, 'The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and whoever captures souls is wise.' Once you have received from the tree of life by loving God, then others can receive the benefit of that from your life. 15:4, 'A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.' An important way in which the fullness of our experience of God spills over into another person's life is in the use of words. And of course our own verse which talks about desires enjoyed in the boundaries of God's ways is a further fruit of knowing God. Here is what Proverbs is preaching to the OT saint. 'Adam lost his right to the tree of life and was kicked out of the Garden of God. You as a Jew are in a garden with God called Israel, God lives in the midst of His people. If you love God you will enjoy the benefits that God gives to those who love Him, these benefits will be enjoyed by you, and others through you.' Proverbs is signalling that God and man are in fellowship again and man is able to enjoy, to an extent what Adam lost.

This is stronger in our case. The first Adam lost the right to the tree of life for he and his offspring, but the Second Adam has won the right for all of us to have eternal life and enjoy the fruit of the trees of life in the New Creation. Adam brought about the effects of sin in our hearts so that we want wrongly and experience good poorly, but Christ has come and died and reconciled us to God and filled us with His Spirit and being in His kingdom we know righteousness, joy and peace, not only in the new creation, but even now as the powers of

² Four Loves, p7.

the age to come intrude into this present dying age. The eschatological blessings of life and purity and community are tasted even now by us. The fall of Adam has already begun to be reversed and the benefits of that reversal can begin to be enjoyed.

Transformed desires

If we are to want well in the coming year, to not desire in sinful, self-destructive and God dishonouring ways, we will have to change some of our desires. How do we do this? We shared early on about the psychological view on changing desires, taking it from the heart wants what the heart wants to the heart wants sometimes what the head wants through medicine, rest, and other mechanical means. The trouble with this view that it is still dependent on your self-medicating, self-helping abilities, and the bible tells us that flesh gives birth to flesh, and profits nothing. The good news is that God by His Spirit gives us a new heart, a heart of flesh in the place of a heart of stone. By the power of the Spirit He regenerates us and causes us to want rightly and to walk in His ways. We are not going to be triumphalistic and pretend perfectionism. No we are on the road of slow but true sanctification. This is the road where the Spirit aids us in rooting out vices and planting the fruits of the Spirit. It begins by renewing our minds, by gaining the perspective of texts like these. By seeing what God has made us for. Then we need to pray to ask the Spirit to take the truth and make it applicable to us, that we would know the fullness of the things the Bible tells us our ours in Christ. We need to do the hard work of taking thoughts captive, putting on the gospel armour daily and engaging in the fight daily, of being consistent in our use of the means of grace, and God promises to change us from one degree of glory into another, into the likeness of Christ.

Secondly, the only way to overcome the strength of our sinful desires is to love what God made us to love, Himself. If we have God we have all, contentment is not a stoical rigidity where we learn to live with empty hearts. No, it is learning to live with a heart that is full of the knowledge of our inseparable fellowship with God and our eternal benefits in Christ. If we have God we have all, and no matter the disappointment, no matter the loss, our hearts need not be sick like the world's. we will experience sadness but will always have a hope in which we can rejoice and recover ourselves with, we have God in Christ. This is our biggest consolation in 2018 and I hope our biggest blessing in 2019. Remember, you are a creature of desires. You have been made by God to enjoy His gifts, but Him supremely. However, you are a sinner in a fallen world and will experience heartache and you experience the reality of our broken existence. But we need not dwell in depression and despair, we can know the fullness of life, the tree of life because we know and have God as our God in Christ. I cannot give you a bigger thought to think than, 'Go with God!'