

Knowing thyself

Various proverbs

When I was a child my brother owned a book that I was constantly peering over.
 It was a book filled with sectioned drawings
 of large vehicles and modes of transport:
 an ocean liner cut in half
 so you could see all the rooms and facilities that were hidden inside,
 the fuselage of the concord, peeled back so you could look inside the plane .
 Even a space station got the treatment
 and so you could take a peek within and see how the astronauts lived.

Have you seen books like this?
 I could spend hours looking at them.
 Underneath the skin there is so much complexity, isn't there?
 It's a fascinating way for the young to spend their time
 And perhaps the not so young—
 these cross-sections still hold a lot of fascination for curious people of all ages.

However, there is another type of search beneath the skin
 that may be a little more confronting
 (although for some it's still a subject of much interest),
 And that's the search beneath the human skin into the inner person.
 What we find there can be just as complex as an intricate machine,
 It can be fascinating, and it can also be a little disturbing.

But even though we may be a little disturbed at what we might find there,
 the search within is an important one for the Christian
 because as this new sermon series will demonstrate
 God cares a great deal about our inner-life,
 so it's important subject for us to attend to.

In fact, the great French Theologian of the 16th Century, John Calvin,
 He once said this: *Nearly all the wisdom we possess consists of two parts...
 knowledge of God, and knowledge of ourselves.*
 And Calvin goes on to say that the two are related,
 the more we understand about ourselves
 the more reason we have to seek out knowledge of God
 "Look at me I'm a mess! Why has God made me this way?
 Is he going to leave me like this, or does he have something better for me?"

So it's important to seek out knowledge of ourselves from time to time,
 and the Bible is a very good tool in helping us do this.
 And within the Bible the Old Testament *Book of Proverbs*
 is especially helpful in providing this insight.

One theme that emerges in the Book of Proverbs is that of the *human heart*.
Now, in ancient Israelite thinking, in Old Testament thinking,
the heart is a broad term encompassing all of a human's inner life.

In our modern western thinking we compartmentalize our inner workings a bit;
we talk about the *mind* when speaking about rational thought,
and we speak about the *heart* when talking about our emotions.
When making a tip in the footy tipping comp, we might say
"My heart says Manly Sea-Eagles but my brain says Melbourne Storm".
That wouldn't make sense to an ancient Israelite,
if they heard us say that they might say "well, your heart is divided";
In the OT it's all the heart: emotions, rational thought, desire and the will—
the heart is all that goes on within us, which can be quite a lot!

And, according to *Proverbs*, the workings of the heart are quite significant.
One of the first things that stuck me this week
is that our hearts can be a key to either great joy or tremendous sadness.

Look at the third proverb that I have there on your sheet:
Ch 13 verse —I've written 21 but it's actually verse 12.
Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.
What a contrast, a sick heart or a tree of life,
and the difference is something internal: hope deferred or a longing fulfilled.
We've all experienced this: when you long to see someone
and there's a reunion at the airport, that's a joyous moment isn't it?
or the heart-sinking feeling when someone says they're not visiting after all.

The heart can be a great blessing to us,
a cheerful and happy heart is good medicine we're told in 17:22.
But sometimes the sadness of the heart can run very deep,
15:13 A happy heart makes the face cheerful, but heartache crushes the spirit.
And then 17:22 again
17:22 A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.
These are not flippant words and images that the Bible is using,
to be crushed is a serious thing to have to endure,
and it saps you of life: a crushed spirit dries up the bones.
It's an image from a drought afflicted farm: dry bones fallen in the dust.
The heart can lead us to some pretty awful experiences.

One of the problems with the heart
is that its highs and lows can be a lonely experience:
14:10 Each heart knows its own bitterness, and no one else can share its joy.
We are talking about the *inner-life*,
and while what happens there is not completely shut off from everyone else
—As water reflects the face, so one's life reflects the heart (27:19)—
it is possible, isn't it, to be carrying the weight of the heart all on your own.

And the lows of a troubled heart can be persistent

14:13 Even in laughter the heart may ache, and rejoicing may end in grief.
 For some people the darkness feels like a constant companion,
 and for many people it is;
 The highs are wonderful but soon enough they end
 and the mood returns to a much lower position.

Sadly for some people it becomes all too much

18:14 The human spirit can endure in sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear?
 Solomon is saying that he can suffer through a physical ailment,
 and in the ancient world that's no small thing to say
 because they suffered a great deal more than we do,
 but when it comes to the suffering of the inner person that is much worse,
 and it raises the question as to how on earth we can endure it.
 I don't think Solomon would be surprised
 that some people take drastic action in the face of these difficulties.

It's interesting that most of the proverbs come from King Solomon.

How did he come up with them?
 Did he collect them from other sources,
 are they born out of his observation of other people,
 or are these reflections on his own personal experience? I'm not sure.
 Maybe they're a mixture of all three.
 I think he must have personally understood something of their truth
 for him to decide that they were worthy of inclusion in his book
 Even if you have all the world's resources laid your feet, as he did,
 you will not be immune from the rollercoaster ride that is the human heart.

What do we make of the fact that the Bible speaks in this way about our inner life?

I think one conclusion we can draw is that God has great sympathy
 when it comes to the human heart and its troubles.
 Mental health still has a stigma attached to it,
 but Bible doesn't dismiss a crushed spirit as weakness or an embarrassment,
 God doesn't tell us to 'snap out of it' when we find ourselves at a low point,
 rather the Holy Spirit recognizes the problems we can have with our mood
 and openly address this issue as a topic worthy of discussion.

Although it would be nice for the Bible to go a step further than offering sympathy.

I was frustrated when reading a lot of the proverbs
 because for much of the time it seems that Solomon is simply stating facts:
 "It's terrible to have a crushed spirit." Yes Solomon, we know!
 Do you have any next steps for us to take?

Well, he does have a couple suggestions:

27:9 Perfume and incense bring joy to the heart,
 A little help from what God has placed in nature is not out of the question!
 In Solomon's case he found that a little aromatherapy was useful [Sarah S?]

These days we have much more at our disposal than perfumes and fragrances
 "Jesus loves me this I know, for he gave me *Lexapro*"
 That's a saying I've heard recently.
 Lexapro is a brand of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor,
 which is a relatively new breed of drug
 that is very helpful for those suffering depression and anxiety.
 God works through our doctors and pharmacists
 as they study the science of the brain and its chemicals!

And sometimes the simple outdoors can be a great tonic.
 I have a friend who works with Syrian refugees,
 he was driving a Syrian friend around Sydney
 and Sydney is a very green city, we have lots of trees.
 And sitting in the passenger seat his Syrian friend said
 "ahhhhh doesn't the sight of green trees just fill your heart!"
 Within this world God has put some great resources, let's use them

But the resource that Proverbs wants us to think of first and foremost
 is that of the *people* God has placed around us.
 The second half of 27:9
 and the pleasantness of a friend springs from their heartfelt advice.
 Looking after your heart requires the use of both nature and nurture,
 We look after ourselves by using what God has placed in the natural world,
 but also by nurturing one another.

Now, we can't do this thoughtlessly.
 As we seek to nurture one another's hearts we have to do it in the right way
 25:20 Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day, or like vinegar poured on a wound,
 is one who sings songs to a heavy heart.
 "Don't worry, things aren't that bad, my own life is going really well!"
 What's needed is sympathy and empathy, a recognition of the pain.
 "What you're going through must be really hard,
 I'm sorry to hear that things are really difficult"
 This is not to say that there is no place for helping someone think differently,
 but that comes later and possibly through the help of a professional.

Another good thing you can do is simply offer a kind word
 12:25 is really the one verse that has stuck in my mind from this study
 Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up.
 We can do a lot by choosing to say a kind word.
 "You're doing a great job,
 I appreciate it when you did this,
 I really like how you do that"
 Simple things to say, but they can have a big effect.
 And we want to have an effect
 because God has given us each other to care for one another's hearts.

But there is another aspect to the inner-life that Solomon is concerned about,
and we do need to address it
because it can have an even greater effect than that of a crushed spirit.

Solomon is concerned that we look after our own hearts as well as those of others:

4:23 Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.
We said earlier that the OT idea of the heart was a very broad concept.
So far we've been concerned with the heart as a center of emotion or mood,
But with this verse and the ones we'll look at next,
the heart is the centre of the will and of desire,
it's the inner part which controls what the rest of you decides to do.

And so it follows that if our hearts are focused on the wrong thing,
then our speech, our actions, our thoughts, these can be led into trouble.
What did Jesus say? Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks

We recently had our upstairs bathroom renovated,
and on friday morning I was standing on the ground floor
underneath where the new shower is located,
when all of a sudden, "drip-drip-drip",
from the ceiling into my arm came the dripping of a leaky bathroom.
Now I raced upstairs—waited for my sister-in-law to get out of the shower—
I raced to find the fault, but I couldn't see where the water was coming from.
Turns out it's a leak from a poorly connected pipe, inside the newly tiled wall.
So, off came the tiles, off came the cement board,
because the problem was right in the heart of the structure.
And if we left it unattended then whole structure would start to rot
And eventually— perhaps not for a while, but eventually—
we'd have to start talking demolition.

And so it is when a faulty heart is left unattended within a human,
the damage spreads and it grabs the attention of our maker
15:11 Death and Destruction lie open before the LORD— how much more do human hearts!
Obvious sins like human violence, they will not be overlooked by God,
and neither will the sins that lie hidden deep within us.

Sometimes we try and convince ourselves that our will and desires
aren't actually that problematic,
but God wont judge us according to the standard we set ourselves,
he'll judge us according to his own standard:
21:2 A person may think their own ways are right, but the LORD weighs the heart.
When I was at school, every school child believed that there was a rule
that if the temperature hit 40 degrees, everyone got sent home from school.
That was law; we were convinced! *No it's not!* There is no such law!
If it gets hot, you're staying in school!

Sometimes we convince ourselves that some sins are not that offensive to God.
Yes they are! And he'll judge us accordingly!
What Proverbs wants from us is some honest reflection regarding our hearts,
something more like 20:9
Who can say, "I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin"?
The answer, of course, is *no-one*.

In the end the heart leaves us with some significant problems.
Some of these problems find answers in the world God has given us,
through nature and science, through the nurture of others.
But this problem of an *impure* heart,
that requires intervention directly from God.

One of the great hopes of the Old Testament,
was that new hearts would be given by God to his people
In Ezekiel 36:26, God says to Israel I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in
you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.
And so, with the ministry of Jesus
that new heart is made available to anyone who places their trust in him.
What did Paul pray for the Ephesians in our reading last week?
Ch 3:17, he prayed that Christ may dwell in their hearts through faith.
And when Christ dwells in our hearts,
it ends up like a radical heart transplant.

A minister I used to work with had on his wall a framed letter,
and in the bottom of the frame was a black leather band
with sharp metal studs punched into it.
You know those studded dog collars that you might see on a bull terrier?
The letter said "Dear John, you can have this ... I don't need it any more,
I only ever used it to hurt people. Thanks for everything"
It was the letter of a man who had placed his trust in Jesus
and who'd received a new heart.
The will to harm was replaced with a will to do better.

Friends what's on the inside matters a great deal to God,
let's allow him to come in, let's allow him to do some work.

I'll lead us in prayer