

This past summer, we had the privilege of spending some time in Victoria, BC. It has a beautiful downtown area where the Pacific Ocean fills its harbor. There are plenty of tourists. One day, I waited outside the tourist information center to meet up with my family. When tourists abound, street performers gather. There was one every 3 or 4 meters who performed their skill or played their instrument. They hoped that tourists would drop a dollar or two or five into their instrument case or little box.

I noticed this one younger lady who tried to play an instrument. She did not sound very good. Soon it became apparent that she had some obvious special needs. But she was quite aggressive with tourists passing by. She would play a little on her instrument and then thrust her hat or whatever she had towards them saying something like “a donation to help a needy person?” If the tourist said no, she would follow them or pester or sometimes even tap them on the shoulder or grab their arm.

I watched this for a little bit and observed how people responded. Some responded with anger. The aggressive approach offended them. Some laughed because the instrument sounded so poor and they thought it was a joke. Some were afraid especially when she touched them or grabbed their arm. Some were just puzzled trying to figure out what was going on. Some showed compassion quickly grasping the situation. They would smile and some even gave a little. After a few consecutive rejections, she packed up her stuff and moved somewhere else.

So several tourists experienced the same person who approached them all the same way. Yet this brought forth very different emotions from people. Why? Our emotional reactions to an event, a person or a situation depends a lot on our experiences, past, opinions, beliefs and personalities. Emotions can be a wonderful gift. But they can also be a crippling burden.

Sometimes we don't understand why we experience the emotions we do. Sometimes we do. Sometimes they get us in trouble. Other times they open a door to fun or deeper friendship. Sometimes they led to an embarrassment. Or we may have pushed down our emotions and later regretted not expressing them. And everyone has probably put on a happy face when they haven't felt that happy inside. So how do we deal with our emotions? How can we understand them?

God provides key insight and counsel for us in His Word. As we continue the series about “Understanding Our Hearts from the book of Proverbs,” we are going to focus on our emotions for the next 3 messages. Today, we will look at 4 Proverbs that speak about emotions generally. Next week – address 3 negative emotions – anxiety, loneliness and guilt. Then we will look at the positive emotions of hope and joy and learn how to gain a healthy self-control over our emotions.

My prayer is this will help all of us more fully understand our emotions; gain a Biblically centered perspective on them; and help us to live with a healthy approach to our emotions that will glorify Christ. Today we’re answering the question **“What do we need to understand about emotions to cooperate with God’s transforming work in us?”**

The first answer comes from **Proverbs 14:30 – A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot. (ESV)** The New International Version or NIV translates this verse **“A heart at peace gives life to the body but envy rots the bones.”** Now remember we have learned that the heart in the Bible refers to much more than the emotions. We use the term heart to represent the emotional, feeling side of us. Our head or brain is the thinking and rational piece. But in the Bible, the heart was seen as the center of everything. Remember the Proverb 4:23 “Guard your heart for from it flows the springs of life.” So the heart represents our deepest trusts, hopes, beliefs and passions which include our emotions. Notice this Proverb 14:30 states that a tranquil or peaceful heart gives life to the body. But envy rots the bones.

So that implies that our emotions can impact our physical health. This points to the greater principle - **1 – Emotional well-being is inter-connected with the whole person.** Your emotional health can affect your physical health and your spiritual health. We might think that we can separate ourselves into neat little compartments; emotional; rational; physical; spiritual; moral. In some ways our society encourages this compartmentalizing. If you have a physical problem, you go see a doctor. If you have a mental or emotional problem, you go see a psychologist or psychiatrist. If you have a spiritual problem, you go see a pastor. If you have a social problem, you go see a social worker. And though each one can help in a particular area of our lives, we must recognize all areas come together as one in us and influence each other. Sometimes we can get stuck in life because we’re only addressing one aspect of ourselves while neglecting some other areas.

I would argue this Proverb describes reality. If your heart is at peace that can automatically benefit your overall health. An anxious heart increases blood pressure and heart rate. A calm heart keeps our blood pressure and a heart rate

at a good level enabling the body to function well. But envy can grate on our well-being. We can be constantly angry or frustrated. Envy eats away at us. Such an emotional state can contribute to feeling like our bodies rot away.

Or consider **Proverbs 17:22 – A joyful heart is good medicine but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.** If you've ever been sick and maybe hospitalized, you hopefully have experienced a visit from someone with a joyful spirit. That visit can help with your overall healing. But if you have ever been despondent or despairing, you know how that can affect you physically.

This Proverb speaks to the reality of different parts but overall unity of the person. Now we might think that we can only know and understand ourselves today because of the discoveries of modern medicine. Modern medicine is great and is leading to tremendous advances. But we can have an arrogant, superior attitude towards people who lived in ancient times. We can conclude that because we're way more technologically advanced than they were, we must be more advanced in every area of understanding including the nature of a person. So we can conclude that we understand ourselves today only because we've got the technology and expertise to really understand. But we must not assume the ancients had no understanding of human nature. Tim Keller states "Long before medicine and psychology even existed as practices, Proverbs taught that emotional well-being was connected to physical health and well-being."

Richard Baxter was an English minister in the late 1600's. He had discovered that depression could be rooted in physical causes, emotional trauma, moral guilt or spiritual warfare with evil forces. He wrote about this in a little pamphlet called "What are the best preservatives against melancholy and overmuch sorrow?" But Baxter was not trained in modern science. So how could he possibly know this? He learned it from Scripture in general and Proverbs in particular.

So let's apply this principle to depression – emotional well-being is inter-connected to the whole person. Godly wisdom refuses to reduce depression to any one cause. It does not simply have a chemical or simply a moral or simply a spiritual cause. All the dimensions of our nature are usually involved. It is foolish to reduce the solution to "just take a pill" or just "repent." Keller writes "As modern people – we love quick solutions that we can access on YouTube. But the world has far more dimensions than anyone can imagine. We need to be patient, seek much advice and depend on the Lord to make progress with problems." So "Emotional well-being is interconnected with the whole person." That's one principle about emotions generally that we can gather from Proverbs.

Another one is found in **Proverbs 18:14 - A man's spirit will endure in sickness but a crushed spirit who can bear?**

This proverb talks about two difficult situations. In the first phrase, a person suffers from physical sickness. In the second, the person suffers from a crushed spirit. But notice the contrast. Though the physically sick person faces difficulty, they can endure or carry on. But the person with the crushed spirit cannot. So this leads to another principle about emotions.

2 – Without physical health, life is hard. But without joy (emotional health), life is unbearable. Sickness is difficult. But a person with a strong spirit can endure it. But if you have a crushed spirit, life becomes unbearable.

Many of you in this room have endured or are enduring physical difficulties. Yet you are here. You keep going. You may share about the reality of your situation. But you have a spirit that keeps you going because of the Lord's help, the encouragement of others and the choices that you make. But people with crushed spirits may have a tough time getting out of bed. Everything in their lives is clouded by their despair. So this Proverb teaches us that "a broken body can be sustained with difficulty by a strong spirit, but a broken spirit cannot be sustained by even the physically strongest person in the world.

One of the greatest living examples of this Proverb of the first half of this Proverb is Joni Eareckson Tada. At the age of 17 she was in a diving accident that broke her neck. This left her in a quadriplegic state – so no use of her lower body; some movement of her arms but unable to use her hands or fingers. She needs help to get dressed and have her hair done. Sometimes, she needs help at night to turn in bed. She certainly went through times of despair in adjusting to this new reality in her life. But through the encouragement of the Lord and friends, she determined to embrace this new life and see what God would do through her. She has come through 50 years as a quadriplegic. Today she is an author and advocate for disabled people around the world. She has travelled extensively and brought hope and joy to thousands of marginalized people. Her spirit has endured in great physical difficulty. But had she remained in her crushed spirit state, none of this would have happened through her life. We might say, "Well that's just Joni. She was blessed with a strong spirit." No. Read her devotionals and books. She went through a very hard time of adjustment. She experienced despair. She had times where she felt like giving up. But she turned to the Lord and found deep comfort in His Word and presence. The same is possible for us today.

Keller writes "We are taught that our happiness is based on external things such as beauty, health, money and status. But here we are told 'No, it has nothing to do with your outward circumstances. Happiness is determined by how you

deal with your circumstances from the inside, how you process, how you address and how you view them.” This Proverb teaches us that nothing is more important than maintaining our inward spiritual life. We can go into each day putting our emotions in the shaky hope that everything will go well today. Or we can go into each day putting our emotions in the hands of the eternal, unchanging God of the universe. He can fill us so that no matter what a day brings, we can endure it.

Two principles. Emotional well-being is inter-connected with the whole person. Without physical health, life is hard. Without emotional health, life is unbearable.

Another general principle comes to us from **Proverbs 14:13 – Even in laughter the heart may ache and rejoicing may end in grief.** Well that’s kind of a downer of a Proverb. But it reveals a truth that we likely all know deep down, yet may sometimes forget. If we forget it we can make false conclusions about others that leads to our judging them or to our own sadness. **3 – Some tragedy and sadness is part of everyone’s life.** We can sometimes look at others and conclude “they have it all”. Everything goes well for them. They always seem happy. They always get the breaks. Or they have the looks. Or they have the great lifestyle. They have all this good stuff and nothing bad. But this Proverb reminds us that everyone has difficult times and carries some sadness with them. I was talking with someone this week and we were getting to know each other a little. We shared how we ended up where we are now. Within a few minutes, I learned this person’s first wife died after only 4 and a half years of marriage. So they carry that with them and will for the rest of their lives. They have moved forward in their lives. But that’s part of their reality.

This Proverb teaches us that there is tragedy and sadness to life from which no amount of celebration or rejoicing can provide a full escape. Keller again writes, “Some wounds never really heal. The joy Jesus brings now is partial. One day it will be full and complete. But Jesus did a lot of weeping – not because there was anything wrong with him – but because his perfect, loving heart was affected by the sadness of life.” Sometimes Christians can be the worst at recognizing this. We expect people we see in church to be happy. If they’re not, we can wonder why they’re not living with the joy of the Lord. We certainly do need to live with the Lord’s joy. We cannot let our sadness consume us or rule us. We always have hope because of Christ. But sometimes a trigger reminds the person of that tragedy or loss. The birth day of a loved one comes up or the day they died; the time of year; a song; something brings up those memories and tears off the scab on that wound. We would do well in the Body of Christ to bear with our brothers and sisters when they suffer. We can pray

for them or sympathize with them. We also need to stop concluding that other people never experience suffering. In fact some of the most celebratory and outgoing people might be compensating for some tremendous loss or sadness in their lives.

The last principle I'd like to deal with today comes from **Proverbs 15:13-14**. **A glad heart makes a cheerful face, but by sorrow of heart the spirit is crushed. The heart of him who has understanding seeks knowledge, but the mouths of fools feed on folly.** Now the first Proverb seems to just state the obvious. Of course a glad heart makes the face cheerful. Of course sorrow of heart crushes the spirit. But here again we have to apply the Bible's definition of heart not our equation that heart = emotions. The heart in verse 13 stands for the thoughts and attitudes. So the glad heart in verse 13 is not glad because of external circumstances. It is glad because of its thoughts and attitudes. The same is true of heart in the second half of the verse. The sorrow comes from the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Now there are certainly situations that are troubling and sorrowful. But how we think about them and the attitudes we hold towards them can greatly influence our outlook. So we could maybe restate verse 13 like this – the thoughtful heart with a right attitude leads to gladness which shows up as a cheerful face. The sorrowful heart with a wrong attitude can lead to a crushed spirit. So the thoughts and attitudes in our hearts affects their outlook which shows up on our faces.

The thought and attitude part ties into the second proverb. "The heart of him who has understanding seeks knowledge, but the mouths of fools feed on folly." So if the person's heart refers to thoughts and attitudes, so someone who seeks wisdom or knowledge will gain understanding about life. When we gain God's wisdom, we can think about life from His perspective. This thoughtful or wise heart will likely lead to gladness. Notice the fool's heart is not even mentioned. He is ruled by his mouth or desires. So he feeds on more foolishness not the wisdom of God.

So the principle would go like this – **A wise heart leads to cheerful emotions and the foolish heart leads to crushed emotions.** A person who thoughtfully takes in God's wisdom, so that it results in right attitudes, will increase the likelihood of experiencing cheerful emotions. But the person who ignores God's wisdom and will not adopt attitudes informed by it will more likely experience crushing emotions. Or to put it another way, "Happiness is a choice." Our thoughts and attitudes can decisively influence our moods positively or negatively. The more we grow in learning to live this way, the less likely we are to let circumstances dictate our moods.

Now I need to confess, I have not mastered this. I continually need to grow in learning and living according to God's wisdom. This past week in staff devotions I shared about how I can adopt a perspective towards life that lacks wisdom. Here's the perspective. "Life should generally go well." When it doesn't, the goal is to get through the trouble or difficulty as quickly as possible so you can get back to life going well. But is this realistic? Is this God's way?

Life includes many blessings and good times. But our world contains many challenges. Derek Kidner writes "The world is "riddled with evils, mysteries, and troubles beyond human grasping and fixing." So the mark of wisdom is to be ready for suffering. Tim Keller writes "If you aren't ready, you aren't competent with regard to the realities of life. But suffering is also a discipline for growth in wisdom. It can drive you towards God into greater love and strength or away from him into hardness of heart. So a wise person accepts their troubles as a means for spiritual growth and part of the plan of our loving heavenly Father. If we can do nothing else, we can always choose to glorify God by having a trusting attitude towards him as we suffer, rather than becoming bitter. And the best way to do that is to look at God the Son suffering infinitely for you."

So I need to adjust my belief that life should generally go well. And the goal to escape trouble and get back to the generally well life. I can miss what God has for me in the midst of my suffering. I can miss the opportunities to lean into God in deeper ways than I ever have before. When I make that adjustment, I find strength to go through my troubles and even experience the joy of fellowship with Christ in them. Then when they pass I am able to celebrate the relief while rejoicing over the growth. But if my focus is just escape, escape, escape because I think this should never happen, I will always despair when trouble comes. I will be a slave to circumstances beyond my control. This is just one example of how a wise heart that has gained God's wisdom can lead to cheerful emotions while a foolish heart leads to crushed ones.

So what have we seen today? Emotional well-being is connected to the whole person.

Without physical health, life is hard. Without emotional health, life is unbearable. Some tragedy and sadness is part of everyone's life. Wise hearts lead to cheerful emotions while foolish hearts lead to crushed ones.

This wisdom comes from the Lord. This is the same Lord who reached to us as undeserving sinners. Yet when we received Christ, we become the unconditionally loved child of God. As our Father, God communicates His wisdom to us. Will we receive it? Will we live according to it? God desires to help us understand our emotions so we can cooperate with Him as He transforms our lives. What has He revealed to you today and what do you need to act on? If you are not a child

of God and have never received Christ, that's the first step to receiving God's wisdom and power to actually live wisely. To actually receive Christ, maybe you could talk to someone you came with or met today. Or you can come to the front and meet the people up here to pray with them. Or maybe you need to talk with or pray with someone for the strength to act on some of God's wisdom revealed to us today. So let us come to the Lord and spent some moments in prayer responding to what He has revealed. Then I will pray.