

The Heart Knows His Own Bitterness

Proverbs 14:10

“The heart knoweth his own bitterness; and a stranger doth not intermeddle with his joy.” - Proverbs 14:10.

This is an interesting bit of wisdom from Solomon for which for us to learn and to live our lives in light of. The “heart”, as virtually always in Proverbs (as well as in the rest of the Books written by Solomon; as well as virtually all of the Poetic books as well) referring to the “inner self.” It can speak of the general inner man, the disposition, one’s inclinations, and is translated as the mind, will and heart, speaking as these same ideas.

We would suspect it, in this context, of speaking of the mind as it goes on and speaks of the idea of “knowing”. Certainly, it could be speaking of emotional knowing, but that does not seem to be the sense of the verse.

“The heart knoweth his own bitterness; and a stranger doth not intermeddle with his joy.” - Proverbs 14:10.

It is not saying that the “bitterness” we experience that which Solomon wishes us see broadcast to others. At its depth, suffering and rejoicing are personal and private. No one is able to communicate them fully. In 1 Samuel 1:10 we read of Hannah’s sorrow, described as “bitterness of soul”. Even though she was in the Temple at the time, it was still known, understood and experienced by her alone. She shared it with no one until the Priest and came and questioned her.

¹⁰ And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the LORD and wept in anguish.

Over in 1 Kings 8:38, as a part of his prayer of dedication for the Temple Solomon beseeches God to forgive sin confessed to Him in knowledge its’ offense:

³⁸ whatever prayer, whatever supplication is made by anyone, or by all Your people Israel, when each one knows the plague of his own heart, and spreads out his hands toward this temple:

In Matthew 2:18, after the birth of the Lord Jesus and the visit of the kings, we see Matthew quoting Jeremiah the Prophet (Jer. 31:15):

*¹⁸ “A voice was heard in Ramah,
Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children,
Refusing to be comforted,
Because they are no more.”*

“Rachel” speaking symbolically of the Nation as a unit, is shown in great sadness and bitterness. She wanted nothing of comfort and no one to take the burden from “her”.

Further, in Matthew 26:39–42, we read of the Lord’s great sorrow and bitterness of soul in Gethsemane:

39 He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.”

40 Then He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, “What! Could you not watch with Me one hour? 41 Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

42 Again, a second time, He went away and prayed, saying, “O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done.”

Further along, in Matthew 26:75, we read of Peter’s response to the Lord telling him of his coming denials:

75 And Peter remembered the word of Jesus who had said to him, “Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.” So he went out and wept bitterly.

We can conclude, then, that Solomon is saying that great sorrow or “bitterness of soul” is a matter that is private and most often endured by one’s self.

Likewise, Solomon speaks of what he calls “Joy” with the implication that it is of the same general class as the bitterness just spoken of. A “stranger” is a person who is unknown in one fashion or another. It does not mean that it is one whom we have never even met. It is implying that one does not share joy with one with whom they are not acquainted. These are private matters and cannot really be communicated fully to others, but to understand and fully appreciate and realize them, they must be personally experienced. Joy is gladness or mirth. The individual experiences his own bitterness and joy, a stranger cannot truly appreciate the depth or profundity of them.

One writer said:

Man, in the central chamber of his thoughts and feelings, has sorrows which are fully known to God and himself only. And there also are joys too deep, too pure, to be shared by any fellow-creature, or interfered with even by an enemy. The proverb teaches the individuality of each man’s nature; hence a certain solitariness which attaches to him in life as well as in death; and hence the need of looking above this world for sympathy, and the duty of neither censuring nor intruding upon the griefs and joys of others.

There are a number of illustrations in the Bible that speak of this principle:

- Neither Hannah's husband, kind and affectionate as he was, nor yet the high priest, could enter into her grief, which she took to God.
- Michal was quite incapable of comprehending David's joy; and
- Joab, likewise, was incapable of true sympathy with David's parental anguish.
- Elisha gently made allowance for the bitterness of the Shunammite's feelings, which Gehazi would have disregarded (2 Kings 4:27).
- Job's friends, intruding into his great sorrow, proved "physicians of no value" (Job 13:4).
- Herod, amid the splendour of royalty, was haunted by a guilty conscience (Mark 6:16).
- Jesus, even when surrounded by His disciples, was alone, and when He sought their sympathy, the Scripture says He "found it not" (Matt. 26:36-43).

By way of application we note that it is well to remember that, as the great writer said: "I shall die alone," so to a great extent I must live alone. Reflection upon this will save me from much unhappiness. Many experience such who are always craving sympathy and suffer from the want of it. Into the deepest joys and sorrows no human friend, not even a wife though she strive so to do, can penetrate. I must, so far as they are concerned, bear my own burden. And hence, I must in a measure submit to be misunderstood. This, true of temporal joys and sorrows, is still more true of spiritual. Utterly unintelligible these are except to the spiritually minded (1 Cor. 2:11), and too complex and delicate to be revealed or comprehended even by them fully. The burden of guilt, the conflict with doubt and temptation, the bliss of deliverance from all these, what brother, however dear, can share with me that bitterness or that joy?

Hence the need of fellowship with God, to make me happy. Hence the unimaginable comfort and support of walking with Jesus, "*the Friend that sticketh closer than a brother*" (18:24), who became "*a Man of sorrows*," in order that He might "*have a fellow-feeling with our infirmities*" (Heb. 4:15), and that we might enter into His joy (Matt. 25:21). Having Him, I need not live nor yet die alone. For as He will have led me in life, so will He be with me to comfort me in death, when all human aid and sympathy is vain (Ps. 23). Be this, then, the sympathy I count upon for myself, while I endeavor (though not obtrusively) to rejoice and weep with others.