August 13/14, 2016

The Meaning of Life

Skillful Living

Proverbs 13:1-25

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Your view of God is going to dramatically affect your view of the Bible. If you have a view of God that's messed up, then maybe you view the Bible as just a book of rules. It's a book of restrictions. It's a book of judgment and condemnation, and because of that you just don't pick it up and read it, and frankly if that was my view of the Bible, I wouldn't pick it up and read it either. Who needs more of that? But what if that isn't correct?

When you're lost somewhere, and you pull out your Garmin or your Google Maps or whatever you use, and the voice comes out and tells you where to go, how do you react to that? Do you say, "Oh, that is *so* judgmental, so offensive! I wanted to turn right, and it told me to turn left. It's just so judgmental and restrictive." I don't think anybody responds that way. You find the words helpful. You're lost. Especially if you're lost and you don't know where you're going and you need to be somewhere, there's this sense of relief. "I need some help here." What if the Bible was more like that? What if it was God saying, "This is the way to find the path of life that ultimately will give your soul what it's longing for"…what people often refer to as *the meaning of life?*

Well, that's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Proverbs 13. This is our last week in Proverbs for this summer. The next three weeks Mark Kremer will be talking about time, talent, and treasures.

As you've picked up, the Proverbs are full of themes. There's a high level of repetition of kind of these big themes. It's really helpful to remember that the Proverbs are not promises; they're proverbs. It's saying, "This is the way it typically is or normally is," but those themes are developed almost like kind of a building effect throughout the book. So it says this about a theme but then it goes on and says more about the theme and more about the theme and so basically you can't just pull a proverb out and turn it into a promise and say that's what it is because there's this sense this is the way it normally is, but because we live in a fallen world, it doesn't always work that way, and there's more to it, and that kind of develops throughout the book of Proverbs.

But there are also some themes that I would suggest are much more subtle. As a matter of fact, they're kind of these subtle themes throughout the Old Testament. One of those is this theme of *desire*, this idea that there's something deep in our souls that desires something, that longs for something, that longs for something not just different but something more. In the book of Proverbs, for example, that theme is there, but it's harder to track because the Hebrew word is translated different ways in different proverbs. So you have a Hebrew word that is used well over fifty times just in the book of Proverbs, over seven hundred fifty times in the whole of the Old Testament, but it's really about the core desire of the soul. So sometimes it's translated appetite, sometimes life, sometimes soul, sometimes desire because it's trying to capture this core inner sense, this appetite, this hunger within me for something more, for kind of what people refer to as *the meaning of life*.

What's unique about chapter 13 is the high level of repetition of that term in this chapter alone. So that's what I want to dial in on in our time together this morning, and I want to start in verse 12. We're really going to jump around, but the core of the discussion is verse 12.

> **Hope deferred makes the heart sick,**
> **But desire** (and there's our word) **fulfilled is a tree of life.** (*NASB, Proverbs 13:12)

When you have the contrast, then **hope** and **desire** would be basically poetically referring to the same thing. So let's define the terms a little bit. Hope in the Bible can get confusing. So, for example, in the New Testament hope is not like we use the word hope. It's not like, "I hope it doesn't rain tomorrow." Hope in the New Testament is always something guaranteed, something absolutely sure, but it's yet future, so it's the hope of the return of Christ. It's the hope of the gospel. It's the hope of the resurrection. That's not saying, "Well, I sure hope that happens." It's, "I know that will happen, but it's yet to come." In the Old Testament, for example, in this text, hope is much more consistent with how we use the word hope in English. It's kind of this idea of going from something bad to something good, from misfortune to fortune. There's kind of this progression from whatever it is to something more, to something better.

The idea of **deferred** kind of has the sense in our ears of something that's delayed, but that's not what the word means at all. It's not something delayed; it's something unfulfilled. It's something that's not going to happen; it's never going to happen. So it's this idea of there's this longing deep within my soul for something more. It's not just a desire for this and that in everyday life. It's the core soul desire that seems to drive life at a deep level, but this desire, this hope is never satisfied; it's never fulfilled. I can't figure out what ultimately will satisfy. This is the energy that by and large drives the culture. There's this restlessness. "There's something in me. I'm looking for something that will satisfy, something that gives meaning and purpose to life, and I can't quite figure it out. I know it's there, but I can't find that which satisfies."

So what happens? The proverb says, **"Hope deferred makes the heart sick."** Now remember, the heart in the Old Testament is not limited to just emotions. In the ancient world they had no real concept of the brain and brainwaves and what the brain did. In their world everything flowed out of the heart. Mind, emotions, will, how I think, how I feel, even physically, it all flowed out of this concept of heart, so when it says it **makes the heart sick**, it's saying it starts to affect the way I think. It starts to affect the way I see reality. It affects my mind. It affects my emotions and what I feel. It can even begin to have an effect on me physically.

Now there are lots of studies that would indicate the tremendous power of hope. You read these stories of people in POW camps in Vietnam or Korea or World War II, and they had this hope, and it was a powerful force that kept them alive through the most horrific circumstances. It's extremely powerful! But those studies also tell us that when hope is lost it is absolutely devastating. As a matter of fact, it begins this what I call a death spiral that begins to take us down, and it can take us down very quickly. So I have within me this longing, but I keep trying to satisfy it, and nothing works. I try money; I try stuff; I try pleasure; I try whatever I can think of. It's kind of what drives a lot of addiction—drugs and alcohol and pornography. It's what drives materialism; it's what drives greed; it's what drives a workaholic. It shows up in all kinds

of different ways, but there's something within me that's driven because I can't figure out what satisfies.

But what happens is eventually I start to get desperate. I go from deep disappointment—I hope and I'm disappointed again and again and again. You can only hope so many times and be disappointed so many times before your hope starts to wear out and then there's this sense of desperation. "I don't know what to do." Imagine someone in the ocean drowning. It becomes more and more desperate. There's no moment where that person is thinking about helping someone else, thinking about doing a good deed. They're not thinking about anything but survival. They're going down, and it's getting more and more desperate. That's kind of the idea.

Now think about that in the context of the book of Proverbs that we've talked about. The wicked are described in the book of Proverbs. They're not those that are out doing evil things. They're just simply those that are selfish, those that now are so autonomous. "I've decided to be my own god. I want to define my own truth. I want to define my own morality. I want to define my own path." They're people that now have become so independent but also so selfish and greedy and self-centered that, "If necessary, I will disadvantage the community to advantage myself." Now imagine as hope is deferred, and there's more disappointment, and there's more desperation, that just becomes more and more true, and now all of a sudden I am in this death spiral because now I am doing things that are destroying the *shalom*, the flourishing around me. I'm not only messing up myself; I'm messing up the people around me. We've talked about this a lot. You ultimately live in the culture you create. The culture's getting worse, and it's just causing more disappointment, more desperation; so that's kind of this death spiral.

So look at what some of these proverbs say. Look at the second half of verse 2.

> **But the desire of the treacherous is violence.**

So this is our same word **desire**. The **treacherous** in Proverbs is simply talking about those that are unfaithful. This particular proverb, like many of them, is really organized around kind of this metaphor of a father sitting down with his son to talk to him about the meaning of life. This is the path to travel that will ultimately deliver life. But what about the son that doesn't want to listen? "I don't wanna hear it. I want to be my own god. I want to define my own path. I want to go my own way." The Proverbs refer to that person as the treacherous, the unfaithful. "I don't want to do what you're telling me. I want to go my own way."

So then look again what the proverb is saying. The actual desire of that person—so this would be the person who has **hope deferred**. They can't find what they're looking for on that path—is violence. Now most of the time in the book of Proverbs, it's not really talking about going into the street and shedding blood. While it may lead to that, it's much more about this idea of violence to *shalom*. It's this idea that life is found when there is mutual flourishing, when there is what the Hebrews called *shalom*. We're all in this together, and we've talked a lot about that this summer. But once I become so desperate and so selfish and so self-centered, and all I'm thinking about is myself, and I'll disadvantage whoever I need to in order to get whatever I think I need, now my actual desire is to do the very things that are unravelling the fabric of *shalom*.

Again, I'm not only destroying myself but the people around me, which is making me more disappointed, which is making me more desperate, and you can see how now I actually desire the very things that will destroy me and us together, and this is creating this downward death spiral that can be very difficult to get out of. If you've ever looked at people and thought, "I think this person is determined to destroy himself," you know we say things like, "I wonder when they'll hit bottom," and, "Where's bottom?" and, "Why would they do this?" None of that makes sense, but the problem is that this person is now so desperate, so confused; his heart is so sick. Their thinking is messed up; their feeling is messed up. Even physically they are messed up. They're now in this spiral down. So verse 4:

The soul of the sluggard craves and *gets* nothing, (Vs. 4a)

That word **soul** is our word *desire*. Like I said, it's capturing the core desire and so it's saying, "Now because of this spiral, **the soul of the sluggard craves.**" The sluggard in Proverbs is the lazy, but it's also the person that's just given up. "I can't really hope anymore. I'm tired of being disappointed. **Hope deferred makes the heart sick.** I'm just giving up on life." And so they have these deep cravings, but they'll never be satisfied. They're just rolling over. They're giving up. That's the idea there in verse 4. Look at verse 13:

The one who despises the word will be in debt to it, (Vs. 13a)

The word is a reference to the Scripture, to the Proverbs, the teaching of Proverbs and the whole of Scripture. The idea is the one who despises that. "I don't wanna hear it." Now my thinking is so messed up. We talked about this last week. The one who doesn't want instruction; they don't want to be told what to do. They don't want to be told that they are wrong, so they despise the word. They see the Word of God as a book just of rules and restrictions and condemnation and judgment, and, "I don't wanna hear it." But what the text says is they end up **in debt to it**, meaning you will pay a price.

We've talked about this a lot this summer—that the road to life is basically the road that lines up with God's morality. There is an absolute. Therefore, there has to be absolute truth, which leads to moral laws and social laws and spiritual laws, and the essence of life is aligning our beliefs and behaviors with what is true. You can't just decide to believe and think and do your own thing and expect reality to adjust to that. So that's what the proverb is saying. There is a price to be paid when I choose to go my own way, but it's not just me myself that pays the debt. We create the culture that we live in. We all either flourish or go down together. So look at what it says in verse 23. It's a very interesting proverb.

Abundant food *is in* the fallow ground of the poor,
But it is swept away by injustice.

The fallow ground was basically that ground that was left for the poor. It wasn't farmed; it wasn't plowed; it wasn't taken care of. But the poor could have at it, and they could plant their seeds, and they could grow more than enough for the poor to have plenty to live on. So the question is: then why were there people starving to death? The answer is in the second part of the

proverb. Because **it is swept away by injustice,** because selfish people in it for themselves take what the poor need to survive in order to keep it or sell it to make a profit.

In essence what this proverb is saying is that God has created the earth in such a way that there is plenty of food for everyone. People look at starving children in the world, and they want to blame God. "If God is so good…" What the proverb is saying is God has created the earth in such a way there is more than enough food for everyone. Then why are there starving children? Because of injustice, because of wicked, greedy people around the world who are determined to disadvantage the community to advantage themselves, and these people ultimately take it for themselves, and there is a consequence. The community doesn't flourish; the community suffers.

So imagine a culture where people are by and large in that death spiral where they're going their own way; they are traveling their own path; their hope is deferred. It's one disappointment after another. It becomes more desperate which means they become more selfish; they become more greedy; they become more self-centered. It becomes more the law of the jungle, and everyone's in it for themselves. Now the very thing they desire is the thing that's going to destroy us all, and it creates this death spiral that drives the culture deeper and deeper and deeper into its misery. I would suggest to you that's where we're at.

One of the things that's very interesting is to listen to the solutions that are proposed to the things that concern us all. What you find if you really listen, you find that nobody has a clue what to do. There is a level of desperation; there is a level of confusion. The solutions are simplistic; they're naïve, and they have no real sense of the depth of the problem and what has to change in order for real change and justice and flourishing to happen in our community. So what's the alternative? Verse 12, second half of the verse:

> **But desire** (there's our word) **fulfilled** (satisfied) **is a tree of life.**

But when you travel the path that God has called us to…So imagine the father is trying to teach his son. "This is the path of life. This is the path where you'll find what your soul is searching for. When you find that, that longing in your soul will be fulfilled. What is it like? It's like **a tree of life.**" No question there is a poetic reference back to Genesis 2 to the Garden of Eden, to Paradise, to the world as God intended it to be. We at least get moments and pockets of that kind of flourishing in this life with a promise of that in the New Heaven and the New Earth to come.

In the ancient Near East, a tree was a really big deal. We take trees for granted. We take lots of things for granted, but in the ancient Near East, it was such a dry, barren, thirsty climate that trees were rare, and they were valuable. We saw this in our Samuel study. It was the king that got the opportunity to sit under the shade of the tamarisk tree because trees were so valuable and so rare. They also carried the idea where there is a green and flourishing tree, there is some source of water. There is life there. Think about Psalm 1. Those who feed and meditate on the Word of God are like trees firmly planted by springs of water. It was a powerful imagery in that ancient climate. So those that travel that path, rather than have hope deferred, there's this satisfaction to their dry and thirsty soul that becomes like this tree of life. You see it again in verse 13.

But the one who fears the commandment (fear meaning respects it, believes it, obeys it) **will be rewarded.** (Vs. 13b)

There's a reward for listening and following what the proverb says and, of course, the whole of Scripture. Verse 14:

The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, (Vs. 14a)

Those who listen, those who obey, those who listen to the voice as, "This is giving me directions how to find the path that leads to that which will satisfy my soul," the idea is the **fountain of life** is like the springs of life. Again, in an ancient Near East culture, to find a spring full of cool, fresh water was the greatest picture of this water that satisfies my dry and thirsty soul. Verse 15:

Good understanding produces favor,
But the way of the treacherous is hard.

We talked about this word **understanding** the first week. It carries the idea of understanding how things work, how God intended them to be and how they work together. I likened it to a mechanic who can see all the pieces of an engine lying on the shop floor, and the mechanic says, "I know how an engine works. I know how it runs. I know how all the pieces fit together. I can put it all together, and the engine will run." That's kind of the idea of this word—so for someone to understand, "This is God's vision. This is the world as God intended it to be. This is the pathway of mutual flourishing. I understand the vision; I understand the parts, and I have some sense of how to put it together. Even if I am only creating a pocket of flourishing here and there, it is at least a glimpse of the world as God intended it to be." The proverb says that's where you find favor; that's where you find what your soul is looking for.

But the way of the treacherous (which again is those that are unfaithful, those that don't want to travel that path) **is hard.** (Vs. 15b)

The word **hard** doesn't mean difficult. Life for the righteous can be very difficult. Hard is the idea that it will never satisfy. It's unsustainable. It's like going across a bridge that definitely won't hold you. It is going to crash. There's simply no doubt about that. Verse 16:

Every prudent man acts with knowledge, (Vs. 16a)

Remember the word **prudent** is someone who's kind of street-smart. They're kind of wily. They're clever. They get it. The world is complicated, and they learn how to live with a high level of skill. **Knowledge** is the idea that I don't just understand it in my head, but I understand it to such a level I actually live it out. Again, the Hebrews believed if you don't live it you don't know it, so knowledge always had the idea of, "I know it so well I actually live that way; I treat people that way. This is how I live my life." So the prudent, the street-smart, the wily person acts with that kind of knowledge.

But a fool displays folly. (Vs 16b)

That word **displays** is a Hebrew word used to describe a salesman or saleswoman displaying their merchandise in order that people would buy it. So imagine in the ancient world somebody goes to a busy marketplace, lays all their wares out and displays them in order for others to see their stuff and to purchase it. That's the word that is used, so it says the **fool displays**, lays out his or her foolishness for all to see.

Now think about it in our culture. Is it not true that we have become so confused? It starts with this heart that becomes sick. Now my thinking is sick. Now my emotions are sick. Now I don't understand; I actually crave the things that are going to destroy me, but I'm absolutely convinced that's the right way to such a degree that now I actually display my foolishness as something to be celebrated. I am constantly shocked in our culture how much we celebrate stupidity. We do! And we display it like it's some sort of badge of honor. People can make millions of dollars by displaying their stupidity, and that's just where we're at as a culture. That's exactly what the proverb is saying, and it's not good news. It's an indication we're in this death spiral to where we actually call evil good and good evil. We're in real trouble. Look at what it says then in verse 19.

> **Desire** (there's our word) **realized is sweet to the soul,** (Vs. 19a)

There are lots of people in this room this morning that would say, "I know exactly what you're talking about. I made a decision to travel God's path, and I have found that which satisfies my thirsty soul, and it's sweetness to a desperate soul."

> **Desire realized is sweet to the soul,**
> **But it is an abomination to fools to turn away from evil.** (Vs. 19)

In other words, thinking has becomes so messed up that when someone suggests to the fool who's on this death spiral to possibly rethink the choices that are destroying him, they find that an **abomination**. They just find it offensive. "How dare you say that to me?" Any suggestion to turn from your evil ways and maybe try a different path is offensive. It's repugnant. That's what the proverb is saying. Is it not true that we as a culture by and large celebrate that which will destroy us, and when anyone comes along and suggests we rethink that—what if we were to actually think there is absolute truth, and there are moral laws, and there are social laws, and there are spiritual laws—and what if we really recaptured a sense of God as the absolute and travelled a different path? Immediately people react. People don't say, "Well, that's something to think about." They don't say that at all. They're deeply offended. "How dare you suggest that?" Suddenly you're labeled as a hater and a racist and a homophobe, and out come the labels, and by and large what the culture says is, "You know, you Christians need to kind of go back to your church and shut the door; you can talk about whatever you want there, but please, don't share it outside the doors of your church."

It's exactly what the proverb is talking about. The death spiral has now become so pronounced that the actual desire is toward the things that will destroy us. And when anyone suggests maybe there's a better way, people are so deeply offended they don't want to hear it. It is a frightening thing to be so convinced you're right that you won't listen to anyone else, when in reality you are travelling a path that will destroy you. So look at how the proverb ends. Verse 25:

The righteous has enough to satisfy his appetite,

This is kind of this biblical theme through the Proverbs and through the whole of Scripture that there is something that ultimately satisfies the soul, and it comes to those who choose to travel God's path.

But the stomach of the wicked is in need.

But if you choose to travel a different path, there will be these cravings, these longings, these desires, but they'll never be satisfied. It's just hope deferred, which makes the heart sick, which leads to this death spiral that can get out of control really fast. You say, "Why would anyone do that?" We learned last week in Proverbs chapter 12 verse 15:

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, (12:15a)

Their heart has become so sick they're convinced they're right. Proverbs 14 says, "There is a way that seems right to a person, but in the end it is destruction" (14:12). Do you hear how frightening that is to actually get to such a point in this death spiral where you're absolutely convinced you're right on the right path, yet you're actually on the path that will ultimately destroy you?

There is a lot of confusion around the concept of heaven and hell, but one of the best ways to understand it is simply as these two paths into eternity. If you read the Scriptures with that in mind, it's a very consistent message. This idea that somebody's going to be thrown in hell to pay forever for their kind of temporal sins on this earth is not correct. It is that they have now reached the point where they don't want to hear God; they don't want to see God; they don't want to listen to God; they don't want anything to do with God. They're determined to travel their own path, and they're deeply offended by any suggestion they change. So God, at the end of the story, turns them over and gives them what they want. "If that's what you want, I'll let you have what you want." And that's what defines their story forever.

The essence of hell is this desire in their soul for something that will satisfy, that will virtually never be realized. It's just a desperate empty search. There will not be people in hell desperately crying out to God for grace and mercy, and God just turns His back and won't listen. That's not it at all. As people, that's the last thing they would do. They are so opposed to God and anything God has to say, they are fiercely determined to travel their path, and they have reached a point where nothing will ever change their mind.

Contrary to that are the people that at some point have said, "This isn't working. My soul longs for something more and something different, and I believe the only place I can find it is on God's path of life." There is a surrender to God and God's truth and God's laws and God's teaching with a belief that this is ultimately where I'm going to find meaning to life. This is where I'm going to find what my soul is longing for. God is so absolutely committed to you experiencing the fulfillment of that vision that when we were lost with no hope whatsoever God gave up His own Son sent to earth to die a cruel death on a cross to shed His blood in payment for your sin. There was simply nothing you could do to make yourself right with God, so God did it for you so that

God could offer you salvation freely as a gift of His grace. Whether you're rich or poor or black or white or male or female, no matter what you've done, no matter what's been done to you, God offers you this salvation freely as a gift. You were made for relationship with God, and your soul will be restless until it rests in God. There is no possibility for you to have a relationship with God without accepting God's gift of salvation. Your sins must be covered and paid for to have a relationship with a holy God, but because God has done it for you, it's free. It's a gift!

And on the basis of that, we enter into a relationship with God, and we start to get a sense of, "This is what my soul is longing for. This is what my soul wants," and we have these moments and glimpses of something that is wonderful and deeply satisfying that gives us just a sense of what is to come in the New Heaven and the New Earth when my soul will be perfectly and deeply satisfied in the presence of God forever.

The Bible is not a book of rules and judgements and restrictions and condemnation. It is a road map that God lays out in order that we might find the path that leads to life.

Our Father, we celebrate that You love us so much that when we were enemies in rebellion against You, You gave up Your Son, knowing that He would die a cruel death on a cross. But He died willingly that His shed blood might make payment for sin that You might offer us forgiveness and salvation freely as a gift of Your grace. That offer is made to every person listening to my voice this morning. God, my prayer is that we would choose the path of life before we get so far down this death spiral that we don't even understand what this means anymore. God, this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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