

Proverbs 13:12

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life.

Analysis

This beloved proverb addresses the pain of delayed fulfillment and joy of realization. "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick" captures universal human experience. Tokhelet memushakhah machalat-lev (תֹּכֶלֶת מִמִּשְׁכָּח מַחֲלַת-לֵב, hope drawn out—sickness of heart). Tokhelet (תֹּכֶלֶת) means hope, expectation, thing longed for. When prolonged (meshakhah, drawn out like thread), it produces machalat (מַחֲלַת, sickness, disease) of lev (לֵב, heart). Unfulfilled longing brings emotional, even physical, distress.

"But when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life" celebrates fulfillment's joy. Ve-ets chayyim ta'avah va'ah (וְעֵץ חַיִּים תַּאֲוָה בָּאָה, and a tree of life—desire coming). When ta'avah (תַּאֲוָה, desire, longing) arrives, it becomes ets chayyim (עֵץ חַיִּים, tree of life)—the ultimate blessing symbol (Genesis 2:9, Proverbs 3:18, Revelation 22:2). Realized hope brings life-giving satisfaction.

The proverb acknowledges pain in waiting while affirming joy in fulfillment. Abraham waited decades for Isaac. Joseph endured years before vindication. Israel wandered forty years before entering Canaan. Yet God's promises came true. Romans 8:24-25 teaches: "We are saved by hope... But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it." Christ is the ultimate desire fulfilled—"the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). While we wait for His return, faith sustains hope (Hebrews 11:1), and ultimate fulfillment will exceed all longing (1 Corinthians 2:9).

Historical Context

Ancient peoples experienced hope deferred regularly—delayed harvests due to drought, postponed marriages for bride-price collection, prolonged military conflicts, centuries awaiting Messiah. Israel's exile particularly embodied this proverb—hope for restoration was deferred seventy years, producing heartsickness (Psalm 137). Yet return came, demonstrating that God's promises, though delayed, arrive as trees of life.

Related Passages

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Study Questions

1. What hopes have been deferred in your life, and how do you handle the 'heartsickness' of waiting?
2. How can hope in Christ's promises sustain you when earthly hopes are delayed or disappointed?
3. In what ways have you experienced fulfilled desires as 'trees of life' bringing deep satisfaction and joy?

Interlinear Text

תֹּהוֹ לֵת	מִמְּלָה	לֵב	וְעֵץ	חַיִּים	
Hope	deferred	sick	maketh the heart	it is a tree	of life
H8431	H4900	H2470	H3820	H6086	H2416
בְּאֵהָ	תִּצְאֶה				
but when the desire	cometh				
H8378	H935				

Additional Cross-References

Proverbs 13:19 (Parallel theme): The desire accomplished is sweet to the soul: but it is abomination to fools to depart from evil.

John 16:22 (Parallel theme): And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.

Proverbs 3:18 (Parallel theme): She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy is every one that retaineth her.

Psalms 17:15 (Parallel theme): As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness.

Proverbs 11:30 (Parallel theme): The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that winneth souls is wise.

Psalms 69:3 (Parallel theme): I am weary of my crying: my throat is dried: mine eyes fail while I wait for my God.

Psalms 143:7 (Parallel theme): Hear me speedily, O LORD: my spirit faileth: hide not thy face from me, lest I be like unto them that go down into the pit.

Genesis 46:30 (Parallel theme): And Israel said unto Joseph, Now let me die, since I have seen thy face, because thou art yet alive.

Song of Solomon 5:8: I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if ye find my beloved, that ye tell him, that I am sick of love.

Revelation 22:2 (Parallel theme): In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.