

Feelings and Faith

Cultivating Godly Emotions in the Christian Life

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Foreword by Bruce and Jodi Ware

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Feelings and Faith: Cultivating Godly Emotions in the Christian Life

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Introduction

She was angry. She was hurt. She was trying unsuccessfully not to cry. Gripping the tissue in her hand like a child's security blanket, she said, "Pastor, you don't understand; you don't know how it feels. The thought of his being with that woman grips my mind like an iron claw and it will not let go. I pray. I cry. I pray again. I do not want to think about it. But I can't help it. The thoughts create a hurricane of emotions. By the time he gets home from work I hate him all over again. I don't want him near me. I want him to die. I can't stand the way I feel."

* * *

With a trembling voice that seemed out of place in his massive, rugged frame, he said, "I would wake up and know that God was just waiting to kick sand in my face. If it was a really bad day, I figured God said, 'Forget the sand, I'll just kick your face.' The dark cloud of thinking that God loved other people but certainly did not love me sank me into a deep depression. If something good happened to me, I chalked it up to God playing with me so he could pull the rug out from under me. I believed God hated me, and my feelings would not let me believe anything else."

* * *

The pastor said with serious concern, "Scott, I notice you never sing during worship. May I ask why?" With a pseudo-philosophical tone he replied, "You know, I walk into church and see all these people lifting their hands, singing the songs, tears running down their face. Frankly, I am not into all that *emotionalism*. When I come to church I don't think I need to sing, and I certainly don't need to get all 'touchy-feely' with God. After all, you can't trust the emo-

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tions, and I am perfectly fine with worshipping God in my own way without all those gushy feelings.”

* * *

The defiance was frightening. “I know what you are thinking. I know what you are going to say. But I can tell you right now that nobody has ever loved me like he has. Nobody has ever cared for me and listened to me like he does.” The pastor gently yet firmly replied, “But he is not in the Lord; you know what the Word says about being unequally yoked.” The rebuttal was undaunted, “I love him, and we are getting married. What do you expect me to do? I’m in love. *I can’t help the way I feel.*”

* * *

“Pastor, there is a joy I never knew before. To believe that God really cares about the way I feel and that he has changed the way I feel is amazing to me! I finally get it. God has opened my heart to be compassionate. I care about people. When I sing his praise, I feel a passion for his glory. There is a joy that comes, even when the Word cuts deep. For so many years, I felt emotionally dead to the things of God, but he has breathed something into me. My heart caught up with my head. I finally believe that God has all of me!”

* * *

What do these scenes have in common? It is quite simple. The emotions play a critical role in each person’s thinking and behavior.

The unrelenting pain of unforgiveness, the poison of bitterness, the short breaths of anxiety, the cancer of lust, the devastation of volcanic anger, the ravages of insane jealousy, the inescapable ruts that lead to strife and broken relationships, habitual patterns that drag one into depression all have one thing in common: they are all related to our emotions.

The tears of joy while singing God’s praise, the conviction of sin during the preaching of the Word, the contentment that comes from holding your wife as you watch the sunset, the thrill

that comes from seeing your son hit a home run during All-Stars, the satisfaction of a good day's work, and the sense of peace that flows from communion with God are also all related to our emotions. Matthew Elliott does not overstate the case when he says, "Everything we do, say, and think is, in some sense, emotional. We enjoy it, we dislike it, or we just don't care. We describe our experiences and ourselves by describing how we feel. Life without emotions would be in black and white."¹

But what can we do about the emotions? This is a huge question for me because as a pastor I am called to help people. I want to see them mature into Christlikeness and practical godliness. My desire is that they grow into mighty oaks of righteousness as moms and dads, husbands and wives, sons and daughters, employers and employees, followers of Jesus in a hostile world. As a result, I need to help people deal with anger, lust, bitterness, and envy and grow in faith, joy, peace, and contentment. If I do not see that the emotions play a crucial role in all of life, then I am a blind guide. Martyn Lloyd-Jones observed:

I regard it as a great part of my calling in the ministry to emphasize the priority of the mind and the intellect in connection with the faith; but though I maintain that, I am equally ready to assert that the feelings, the emotions, the sensibilities obviously are of very vital importance. We have been made in such a way that they play a dominant part of our make-up. Indeed, I suppose that one of the greatest problems in our life in this world, not only for Christians, but for all people, is the right handling of our feelings and emotions. Oh, the havoc that is wrought and the tragedy, the misery and the wretchedness that are to be found in the world simply because people do not know how to handle their own feelings! Man is so constituted that the feelings are in this very prominent position, and indeed, there is a very good case for saying that perhaps the final thing which regeneration and the new birth do for us is just to put the mind and the emotions and the will in their right positions.²

Have you ever wondered why so many of God's people stay stuck as stunted saplings instead of growing into mighty oaks in the Lord? Why is it that people who attend good Bible-teaching

churches with sound doctrine often fail to progress, even though well taught? Why do certain sins cling like sap from an evergreen, while certain fruits of the Spirit barely dangle from the branch? I propose that one of the reasons is that we do not have a biblical understanding of our emotions, and therefore there is little or no biblical handling of the emotions. We try to treat symptoms and fail to get to the root of the matter.

We are under a twofold obligation to understand our emotions. First, the emotions are a biblical subject. Since the Bible has much to say about the emotions, it is imperative for us to understand what it teaches. Whenever God speaks, on whatever subject he addresses, we are obliged to listen and learn. Second, the emotions are a deeply personal subject, playing a prominent role in each of our lives. Therefore, it is vital to understand what the Bible has to say for our own personal maturity.

It is only when we gain a biblical perspective on this significant part of our humanity that we can begin to grow and put the mind and the emotions and the will in their right positions. As we learn to understand and handle our emotions biblically, we begin to mature in new ways. My pastoral experience has taught me that a biblical understanding of the emotions and the application of these truths can become a virtual greenhouse for spiritual growth and maturity.

If our emotions are to be sanctified, if our emotions are to be conformed to the image of Christ, then we must have a grasp on what the Bible says. If we are going to successfully cultivate our emotions for greater godliness and put to death those destructive, ungodly emotions, then we must have a handle on what the Bible says about them. A biblical theology is foundational for us if we ever hope to understand our emotions and grow spiritually. A commitment to the sufficiency of Scripture must undergird our approach. A confidence in the grace of God is a prerequisite if we are to change. Once that commitment and confidence are firmly in place, we can begin the journey with the expectation that God will teach us, prune us, and grow us.

As soon as we start this journey, however, we encounter

obstacles and potential detours because there is so much erroneous teaching on the emotions. We need to navigate around the obstacles, avoiding dangerous detours, and cut a clear course when it comes to the emotions and what the Bible teaches. To think erroneously, that is, unbiblically, about the emotions is to be held captive by wrong thinking and to remain powerless to overcome wrong feelings and cultivate right feelings. To have a biblical foundation for understanding the emotions is to think rightly about them. Such an understanding is a *pou sto*, a place to stand. To have a theologically robust perspective on the proper use of the emotions is to enter into the greenhouse of spiritual growth, for, as Jonathan Edwards argued in his classic, *Religious Affections*, “The nature of true religion consists in holy affections.”

Common Misconceptions about the Emotions

Our secular culture is preoccupied with emotional wholeness. We are a therapeutic society in search of wellness. Take for instance the support group Emotions Anonymous. Their Web site reads:

Emotions Anonymous is a twelve-step organization, similar to Alcoholics Anonymous. Our fellowship is composed of people who come together in weekly meetings for the purpose of working toward recovery from emotional difficulties. EA members are from many walks of life and are of diverse ages, economic status, social and educational backgrounds. The only requirement for membership is a desire to become well emotionally.³

The number of self-help books, seminars, CDs, DVDs, institutes, and gurus of inner peace and emotional wholeness is overwhelming. The foundational perspective of any given book or seminar may vary from a minimal foundation, just dealing with emotions as something we feel, to an evolutionary psychology of the emotions that is purely physiological and chemical. But apart from Christian theology there is no sound understanding of the emotions. Yet many Christians, influenced by our psychologized culture, fall prey to the shallow, even godless, views of the emotions.

Some Christians teach that emotions are bad and need to be suppressed. From the philosophical side of life Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics argued that passions (emotions) could not coexist with moral virtue. Emotions are contrary to reason and all rational principles, thus they are contrary to all that is desirable and good. Therefore, moral virtue includes the subduing of the emotions. A common Christian version of this says that the mind is all that is important. The emotions do nothing but mess us up. They cannot be trusted and should be suppressed. A stoic and cerebral Christianity is the result.

Others have not gone that far but do teach that the emotions are irrelevant and unnecessary. What matters is not feeling but believing or doing. The emotions are there, but they are like in-laws who have overstayed their welcome; they are a nuisance and best if ignored. This view of the emotions is captured in a gospel tract:

Let's say that a snowmobile represents "fact" and the sled it is pulling represents "feelings." *A snowmobile will run fine without a sled.* And, of course, it would be useless for a sled to try to pull a snowmobile. It is the same way when we are Christians. We cannot trust our feelings. We have to put our trust in God.

It is certainly true that we put our trust in God and not in our feelings. But the message is clear: the emotions are optional. They are untrustworthy. Our faith would function fine without them.

Another misconception about the emotions that many Christians buy into is that emotions are so powerful that they govern and control us. At the popular level this is seen in expressions such as "I can't help the way I feel!" This appeal to the sovereignty of the emotions is used to justify hatred, divorce, infidelity, and all kinds of sinful conduct. From this perspective, the emotions remain immune from obedience, exempt from Christ's lordship; they are simply external forces that thrust themselves upon us, leaving us at their mercy. One Christian writer expresses this sentiment: "As a saved person, you can control your mind and your will, but not your feelings. God's plan is for us to *believe* Him and choose

to submit ourselves to His loving care and authority regardless of how we feel. All together now, *Rain on how I feel!*"⁴

Just as some Christians elevate reason and dismiss the emotions, others believe that the emotions are the most important thing about us. This view or, rather, *feeling* turns many Christians into experience junkies who just want to have an emotional high. Such experiences are the sum and substance of their Christianity. They reduce their faith to an empty emotionalism. Being led by the Spirit is nothing more than how a person feels about something. Feelings determine duty. Doctrine is determined by "how I feel about it," thus, "I don't believe *that* doctrine because it makes me feel yucky." The idea that the emotions should be changed, sanctified, or cultivated is not even on the radar.

This is a very brief and generalized view of some of the most common misconceptions about the emotions. Although these are generalizations, they are accurate ones.

A Working Definition of the Emotions

The Bible does not give us a clinical definition of the emotions, but it does give us numerous words that describe both the source and expression of the emotions. The Bible often commands our feelings, commending or condemning certain emotions. This is an important observation in establishing a working definition. In the Bible, emotions are not amoral. We are responsible for how we feel, and we are expected to exercise self-control and have certain emotions.

Matthew Elliott's thorough work on the emotions goes into great detail answering the question, "What is emotion?"⁵ Historically, there are two views on the emotions: one sees the emotions as unrelated to the mind or thinking (the noncognitive view). The other sees the emotions directly related to the mind or thinking (the cognitive view). For those interested in the philosophical and psychological nuances I gladly point you to Elliott's excellent work. The noncognitive view is generally an evolutionary perspective that sees emotions as a physiological change in feeling (e.g., sweaty palms, racing heart, euphoria), which is named by the person

experiencing the change (fear, happiness, etc.). In other words, we are subject to our emotions and are not ultimately responsible for them. They are something that happens to us, physically or chemically. We cry and feel sadness. We feel anxiety because our hearts race. Although emotions often have physiological manifestations (the Bible affirms this), this view is biblically unacceptable. It also flies in the face of common sense and is just plain backwards!

The cognitive view of the emotions sees the emotions as based on beliefs, standards, judgments, evaluations, concerns, and thoughts. The emotions and reason are interdependent. The emotions are not simply impulses; they are the indicators of what we value and what we believe. "Our emotions can be considered to arise from our beliefs and concerns."⁶ The emotions reflect and express the inner man, the heart, the soul, the mind. They have an object. For instance, thinking about anger cannot make us angry, but thinking about the injustice of abortion can make us angry. The object of the emotion of anger is the injustice of abortion because we value human life. The thought of losing one's spouse can cause us fear or sorrow. The emotion of fear has an object: the thought of losing a spouse. Seeing my daughter deliver the valedictorian speech at her graduation brings me joy, because I value my daughter and am proud of her achievement. The power of the emotion is based on our own personal evaluation and valuing of the object. I would have a different emotional response seeing a car hit a jack-rabbit and a car hitting a child. Matthew Elliott summarizes this:

Emotions are not primitive impulses to be controlled or ignored, but cognitive judgments or construals that tell us about ourselves and our world. In this understanding, destructive motives can be changed, beneficial emotions can be cultivated, and emotions are a crucial part of morality. Emotions also help us to work efficiently, assist our learning, correct faulty logic and help us build relationships with others.⁷

As we work through the theology of the emotions, we will do so using this definition: *the emotions are an inherent part of what it means to be a person; they express the values and evaluations of a person and influence motives and conduct.*⁸ The emotions are more than feelings;

they tell us about what we value and what we believe, producing desires and inclinations that affect our behavior. “Emotions were given in order to energize behavior and were intended by God to be a catalyst for action.”⁹

This does not mean that all emotions are rational. They often are not. But it does identify the fact that the emotions are responses to our perceptions, which may be right or wrong, real or imagined. “Emotions are the language of the soul. They are the cry that gives the heart a voice.”¹⁰ This is not to claim that all emotions are easily intelligible and able to be thoroughly analyzed. They often cannot. And yet, we must learn to understand this basic part of our humanity. Sam Williams rightly notes, “God gives emotions for a specific purpose. They are necessary for us properly to know and relate to and glorify God.”¹¹

Part One

A Biblical-theological
Foundation
for Understanding
Our Emotions

CHAPTER 1

The Character of God

The child, the philosopher, and the religionist have all one question: "What is God like?" At the outset I must acknowledge that this question cannot be answered except to say that God is not like anything; that is, He is not exactly like anything or anybody.

A. W. TOZER¹

We begin our biblical-theological foundation with the starting point of all true theology—God. The theology that does not begin with God will end in error. God is the beginning, middle, and end of all things (Rom. 11:36). In the Bible God displays a variety of emotions. We could even say that emotions are part of his divine nature or person. Matthew Elliott straightforwardly asserts, "It is clear that the Old Testament presents Yahweh as an emotional God. . . . God's emotions play a key role in many texts, as God feels with intensity."² This is an important yet neglected area of the doctrine of God. It is, as Pastor Greg Nichols says, "uncharted water."

The unambiguous biblical portrayal of God is that he has absolute capacity to feel and has perfectly holy emotions. In the history of systematic theology, the mind and will of God have often been the focus. But the Bible speaks of God's heart, his emotions and feelings. Some circles deny that God actually has emotions. This is called the doctrine of divine impassibility.³ However, the sheer weight of biblical evidence demands that we see God as a being who has real emotions and feels intensely. Nichols defines God's emotional capacity:

God's emotivity is His supreme capacity to act responsively and sensationally; to feel pure and principled affections of love and hate, joy and grief, pleasure and anger, and peace; in accord with His supreme, spiritual, and simple Being and impeccable virtue.⁴

Immediately we must qualify our statements on God's emotions for the simple reason that we cannot experientially relate to this dimension of God because we are so different. The real danger is to impose our emotional experiences on God and thus be guilty of the indictment of Psalm 50:21, "You thought I was just like you" (HCSB). We must keep in mind that God's emotional capacities are both invulnerable and perfect. His emotions are not dependent on anything outside of himself. Although he responds to and is moved by human events, he is never emotionally vulnerable, never surprised by an event or overcome with emotion. His feelings are not subject to sinfulness, since he is holy. His emotions are perfectly righteous in their essence and exhibition. Elliott again notes, "God's emotions are always in line with His holiness and moral character. God's emotions are always correct, righteous and moral because He is always correct, righteous and moral."⁵

The legendary Princeton theologian Benjamin B. Warfield has captured the importance of recognizing God's emotions: "A God without an emotional life would be a God without all that lends its highest dignity to personal spirit, whose very being is movement; and that is as much as to say no God at all."⁶

Throughout the whole Bible, we see a God who has and expresses perfect emotions. We cannot cover all of them, but we will expound some of them and, hopefully, in the process see God more clearly in the light of his Word.

God Loves and Delights in His Son

The emotions God has for his Son are experienced by us in small, reflective ways when we have children of our own. There is that innate sense of joy we have as we look at or hold that little one. There is a real delight that wells up within us as we watch their achievements, whether those be in sports, school, music, or the arts. There is a pride that can fill our hearts when we see our children do the right thing, treat someone kindly, or make a sacrifice for the greater good. All of these emotions, and infinitely more, are in God as he explicitly and perfectly loves and delights in his own Son.

In Isaiah 42:1, Yahweh says, "Behold my servant, whom I

uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.” In this first Servant Song from Isaiah,⁷ the Father identifies the Messiah as his servant and his chosen. He is the one who is in subjection to the will of the Father and the one who will fulfill the purpose of the Father. Then the Father says that his soul *delights* in this chosen servant. The Hebrew word (*ratzah*) denotes a sense of being pleased with, taking delight or pleasure in. It is truly hard to imagine how this inter-Trinitarian language could be stripped of emotion. The text compels us to see that the Father infinitely values his Son. The text reverberates with his feelings of pleasure in his Son, who humbled himself in the incarnation to manifest the love of his Father and fulfill his purpose.

At the beginning of our Lord’s earthly ministry and at the very end we have bookends of the Father’s unbounded delight in his Son. At Jesus’ baptism we read, “Behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased’” (Matt. 3:17). In our Lord’s High Priestly Prayer we hear him say, “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me *because you loved me before the foundation of the world*” (John 17:24). John Piper has beautifully stated,

We may conclude that the pleasure of God in His Son is pleasure in Himself. Since the Son is the image of God, and indeed *is* God, therefore God’s delight in the Son is delight in Himself. The original, the primal, the deepest, the foundational joy of God is the joy He has in His own perfections as He sees them reflected in the glory of His Son. Paul speaks of “the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6). From all eternity God has beheld the panorama of His own perfections in the face of His Son. All that He is He sees reflected fully and perfectly in the countenance of His Son. And in this He rejoices with infinite joy.⁸

God Delights in Justice and Righteousness

After the trial and execution of one of the most ruthless dictators of the modern world, I told my family, “Justice was done and we

ought to give thanks.” Why give thanks at something as gruesome as that? The reason is that Yahweh delights in justice and righteousness. He delights when his creatures demonstrate it. When a court hands down a just verdict, when a judge delivers a righteous sentence, when a man does a just act or a righteous deed, God is pleased. He loves justice because he is just. He loves righteousness because he is righteous. He has a passion for justice and righteousness. When his creatures reflect something of his character by exercising justice and righteousness, he delights in and loves such displays.

Psalms and prophets echo this theme repeatedly. “He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD” (Ps. 33:5). “For I the LORD love justice; I hate robbery and wrong; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them” (Isa. 61:8). “But let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD” (Jer. 9:24). This both resonates with and scares us.

God Rejoices in His People

If we are listening, we constantly hear notes about how worthy we are, how we really are “all that” and a whole lot more. The notes play repeatedly in Christian books, sermons, and music. Our Christian pop music overflows with unbiblical perspectives on how worthy we are. There is a shallow, sentimental, “It’s all about me” mentality. However, in our reaction to this unbiblical emphasis, wanting to underscore human depravity and wickedness, we may end up missing an important truth about how God feels about his people. God actually values and rejoices in his people, not because of who we are in ourselves, but because of what he has made us by his grace. In the words of Casting Crowns:

*Not because of who I am, but because of what You’ve done.
Not because of what I’ve done, but because of who You are.⁹*

Listen to the language of love and passion welling up within God:

*For as a young man marries a young woman,
so shall your sons marry you,
and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
so shall your God rejoice over you. (Isa. 62:5)*

*The LORD your God is in your midst,
a mighty one who will save;
he will rejoice over you with gladness;
he will quiet you by his love;¹⁰
he will exult over you with loud singing. (Zeph. 3:17)*

“I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me. I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul.” (Jer. 32:39–41)

The language in these texts soars with emotion. When God wants to communicate how he feels about his people, he puts it in terms that are already emotionally percolating for us. The groom sees the bride; his heart leaps within, racing with excitement. He expresses his passionate delight in his people with words such as “rejoice over you with gladness.” He paints the picture of being quiet over us with his love, as a parent lovingly yet quietly looks at his child. God goes from quietness to loud, joyful singing. Imagine, God singing for joy over his people! Jeremiah uses “all my heart and all my soul.” The language throbs with emotional imagery, capturing God’s deep feelings for his people.

God Takes Pleasure in Himself, His Ways, His Grace, and His People’s Obedience

Psalmists, sages, and apostles celebrate these pleasures of God. “Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases” (Ps. 115:3). “When

a man's ways please the LORD, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him" (Prov. 16:7). "I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God" (Phil. 4:18; see also 1 Thess. 4:1). "[He] predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will" (Eph. 1:5, NKJV).

God takes pleasure in his own will. What he wills to do pleases him, and what pleases him he wills to do. He delights in the obedience and generosity of his people as a reflection of his own grace. He took pleasure in freely adopting his children into his family, apart from any virtue in them. Again, the pleasure is the emotion of joy and delight in doing his will, demonstrating his sovereign grace and seeing his grace at work in his people. God is indeed the blessed God (1 Tim. 1:11). He is the eternally joyful, authentically happy God, who overflows with delight in his own perfections as they are perfectly reflected in his Son and imperfectly and dimly reflected in his creatures.

God Grieves and Experiences Pain and Sorrow

Just as God has joyful feelings, he also has emotions of grief, sadness, sorrow, and even pain. These emotions need to be qualified of course, but there is no need to relegate them to mere figures of speech.¹¹ We cannot miss the depth of feeling in these passages. The unrestrained depravity at the time of Noah grieved God:

The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. (Gen. 6:5–6)

Even when his own people were on the rebellion treadmill, his love for them flowed over in a parental grief. "They put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD; and He could bear the misery of Israel no longer" (Judg. 10:16, NASB). The father heart of God is unveiled repeatedly: "How often they rebelled

against him in the wilderness and grieved him in the desert!” (Ps. 78:40). “Again and again they tempted God, and pained the Holy One of Israel” (Ps. 78:41, NASB). Just so God appeals to his people through Paul: “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Eph. 4:30; cf. Isa. 63:10).

There are also numerous texts where God expresses his grief and pain in terms of a husband whose heart has been broken by an unfaithful wife, for example, in Ezekiel 6:9: “I have been broken over their whoring heart that has departed from me and over their eyes that go whoring after their idols.”¹² Those who have suffered the awful reality of knowing that their spouse has been with someone else sexually will immediately recognize that the language God chooses carries with it the deepest emotional pain. As a pastor, I have seen the endless stream of tears and the trembling hands and have heard the quivering voice of a soul shattered into a million pieces because that one-flesh union has been violated. Another person, an outsider, has been in that sacred place reserved by vow and covenant only for the spouse. It is a violent violation. It is a cruel act, which goes far beyond the anatomy of intercourse. It is crushing. God uses this very language to give us a picture into his heart.

In these passages, God is grieved. He expresses sorrow, even pain. He comes to a point where he can no longer bear the misery of his people. He is grieved over his covenant people’s rebellion. He is devastated by their infidelity. He is wounded as they give him a vote of no confidence in the wilderness. This language does not take away from God’s sovereignty or immutability. To interpret these emotional terms in such a way that detracts from or nullifies his sovereignty or foreknowledge is to violate the whole counsel of God. Nevertheless, to interpret these strong emotional words as figures of speech with no emotional reality is to drain them of their meaning and force. The God of the Bible knows what it is to sorrow and grieve.

God Experiences Anger, Wrath, and Detestation

Anger management is in. Blow your cork at work and you will find yourself in a class designed to help people control their anger.

A Foundation for Understanding Emotions

Although anger is a common and harmful sin, anger in and of itself is not sinful. In fact, our capacity to be angry is a reflection of the image of God in us. Unfortunately, we rarely know righteous anger. Thankfully, righteous anger is the only anger God knows.

God demonstrates his righteous care for the underprivileged by becoming angry when they are oppressed: “You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless” (Ex. 22:22–24).

He does not hide his detestation for evildoers, liars, and the violent. “The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers. You destroy those who speak lies; the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man” (Ps. 5:5–6). “God is a righteous judge, and a God who feels indignation every day” (Ps. 7:11).

His hatred of certain sins is something he refuses to hold close to his vest:

*For forty years I loathed that generation
and said, “They are a people who go astray in their heart,
and they have not known my ways.” (Ps. 95:10)*

*There are six things that the LORD hates,
seven that are an abomination to him:
haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
and hands that shed innocent blood,
a heart that devises wicked plans,
feet that make haste to run to evil,
a false witness who breathes out lies,
and one who sows discord among brothers. (Prov. 6:16–19)*

“For I hate divorce,” says the LORD, the God of Israel, “and him who covers his garment with wrong,” says the LORD of hosts. “So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously.” (Mal. 2:16, NASB)

Even as God loves justice, so he despises injustice, especially injustice done to the helpless of society: the widows, orphans, and

unjustly divorced wives. There are certain sins for which God has a special hatred. As a holy God he also has a perfect loathing of evildoers and those who are willfully ignorant and will not trust him. Although there is a biblical doctrine of God's universal love, it should not be too hard to understand that the God of perfection is a complex being who transcends our ability to comprehend. That God can love and hate the same object at the same time is a reflection of his incomprehensibility and emotional complexity. "God does not love the sinner and is angry at the sin. Rather, God loves the sinner and is angry at the sinner when he sins."¹³ All theological nuances aside, the words used in these texts pulsate with the emotion of anger.

God Is Compassionate

My wife surpasses me in a multitude of Christian graces and virtues. She is far more spiritual than I am. One of the graces in which she surpasses me is compassion. Although there have been many times when I have felt pity for someone who was in a dire situation, my wife seems to have a consistent sense of compassion that compels her to action again and again. In this, she is much more like her heavenly Father than I am. It is beautiful. The Bible does indeed celebrate God's compassion:

"I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy."
(Ex. 33:19)

*As a father shows compassion to his children,
so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. (Ps. 103:13)*

*"Can a woman forget her nursing child,
that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.
Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are continually before me." (Isa. 49:15–16)*

A Foundation for Understanding Emotions

The Hebrew word *racham*, used in each of the above passages and often translated “show mercy,” is the word for *compassion*. It is a word of intense feeling and deep tenderness. It is a gut-level word, communicating a depth of emotion. This depth of feeling is vividly painted for us in the Isaiah passage. The Lord uses the deepest attachment known by humans, a mother and her nursing child. A nursing child derives its very life from its mother. The bond is almost mystical. This is a transcultural experience. It is universal. The bond between mother and child is the most fundamental, affectionate, tender, inviolable bond we know. And yet “the love of the Lord transcends in permanence the best earth can offer.”¹⁴

God Is Loving

God’s love obviously relates to his compassion. However, there is a unique emphasis in the Bible on God’s love. It is the love of God that is most closely connected to the gospel itself.

*The LORD appeared to him from far away.
I have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. (Jer. 31:3)*

*Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity
and passing over transgression
for the remnant of his inheritance?
He does not retain his anger forever,
because he delights in steadfast love.
He will again have compassion on us;
he will tread our iniquities underfoot.
You will cast all our sins
into the depths of the sea.
You will show faithfulness to Jacob
and steadfast love to Abraham,
as you have sworn to our fathers
from the days of old. (Mic. 7:18–20)*

And of course the most famous verse in all of the Bible:

The Character of God

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

We do a grave disservice to God when we say his love has nothing to do with feelings or the emotions. We diminish the dignity of God's person when we unwittingly relegate love to mere actions of goodwill or self-sacrifice. Such a definition of love is absolutely excluded by 1 Corinthians 13:3. The Bible condemns noble, altruistic deeds apart from love, so how can love simply be noble deeds apart from feelings? God's love has a strong emotional element to it. Whatever fragmented notes of beautiful feelings may be found in our love, these are merely distant echoes of the thunderous symphony of God's love.

This is a very brief survey, but the texts speak for themselves. They are a powerful testimony to the emotions of God. This is a significant theological foundation, which has important ramifications. God is not a static being (immutability does not mean static); he is a dynamic, personal being, possessing within himself perfect knowledge, a perfect will, and perfect emotions. He loves, he hates, and he rejoices. He is pleased, displeased, grieved, and angered. He has compassion, love, and pleasure. He interacts with and responds to his people within the framework of both a sovereign decree and perfect emotions, which reflect his values and evaluations, and influence his conduct toward them.

We are made in the image and likeness of God. In order for us to understand ourselves, we must understand God. Although there is an infinite distance between the transcendent, majestic, exalted God and us, his creatures, we can look to God and see the perfect, eternal one who possesses the glorious capacity to feel. In that capacity, he shows the dignity of his person and that we were made not only to think and do but also to *feel*. "Emotions are a good and legitimate part of man's character because they are clearly part of God's character."¹⁵

CHAPTER 5

The Foundation and Priority of Truth

Truth always comes first. As Christians, we are dogmatically committed to “true truth.” The sufficient and inerrant Word of God is the sum and substance of that truth. All of the truths we will be exploring are biblical truths that come straight from the pages of God’s holy Word. The Word equals truth, truth equals the Word (John 17:17). The truth is of first importance when it comes to the gospel. The truth also comes first as we work out the gospel in the Christian life. We have been born again by the truth (James 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23) and now are trying to live by the truth (James 1:22). This means that sanctification, increased conformity to the will of God, begins with and is shaped by the Word of truth (Rom. 6:17).

When we become Christians we gain a supernatural understanding of the truth (2 Cor. 4:6). Our enlightened minds, as new creations, have a new mental paradigm, giving us a new way of thinking. This new way of thinking is not “positive self-talk” based on “self-help.” It is a new way of thinking based on our new understanding of truth. We have new eyes. So as we explore how to obey God’s commands that involve the emotions and how to sanctify the emotions, we do not begin with the emotions or an emotional experience; we begin with the mind and the truth. Martyn Lloyd-Jones explains the process:

Truth comes to the mind and to the understanding enlightened by the Holy Spirit. Then having seen the truth the Christian loves it. It moves his heart. If you see the truth about yourself as a slave of sin you will hate yourself. Then as you see the glorious truth about the love

Biblical Sanctification and Our Emotions

of Christ you will want it, you will desire it. So the heart is engaged. Truly to see the truth means that you are moved by it and that you love it. You cannot help it. If you see truth clearly, you must feel it. Then that in turn leads to this, that your greatest desire will be to practice it and love it.¹

Any attempt to sanctify the emotions, detoxify ourselves of hazardous emotions, and cultivate godly emotions must be built on the firm foundation of Christian truth. Any other program or process will be like trying to erect a skyscraper on a chicken-coop foundation. It will collapse. In order to sanctify the emotions we must have our minds renewed with the Word, washed with the Word, and reconstructed by the Word. Wrong thinking will lead to wrong feeling. Misperceptions about God, the gospel, Christ, the accomplishment and application of redemption, the nature of Scripture, the Christian life, and faith will cause emotional short circuits that will threaten our well-being. We must grip and be gripped by the truth. *It must be noted that we are not talking about truth as an abstraction; we are talking about truth as it exists in the person of God.* To truly encounter the power of truth is to encounter God in his Son (John 8:31–32, 36). “Encounter with God will not only change our emotions; most importantly it has the potential to change our hearts.”²

Proverbs 23:7 states the importance of right thinking: “For as he thinks within himself, so he is” (NASB). Pastoral and personal experience have constantly taught me there are certain truths the Christian must understand, marinate in, and fully embrace in order to have spiritual and emotional equilibrium. There are many truths, which we may not agree on, and they will not put us in the tank (e.g., end-times views, modes and subjects of baptism, the gifts of the Spirit). Although these truths and many more are important, they are not critical to our spiritual and emotional health. They are the minerals and vitamins to our spiritual growth. However, some truths are oxygen. We cannot breathe without them. We cannot live without breathing. These oxygen truths are the character of God, justification, and future glory.

Oxygen Truth #1: The Character of God

The character of God is the core. It is the *sine qua non*, the “without which nothing.” If we do not have the truth of God’s character firmly fixed as foundational to all our thinking, then all effort in trying to obey God and sanctify the emotions will amount to our chasing our tails, ending in frustration. We must know who God is. Bruce Ware states, “To know this God, and better to be known by him (Gal. 4:9a), is to enter into the security and confidence of a lifetime of trust in his never-failing arms.”³ The theological North Star by which we will navigate the rest of this book is this: the most important thing about any one of us is *what we know about God* and *that we know God*. The Scripture supports this truth:

Thus says the LORD: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.” (Jer. 9:23–24)

“For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” (Hos. 6:6)

I still vividly recall sitting on the lawn at Biola University reading A. W. Tozer’s *The Knowledge of the Holy* and soaking in these life-changing words: “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”⁴

Reading A.W. Pink a couple of years later, I had a similar jolt when I read this: “Soothing-syrup may serve for peevish children, but an iron tonic is better suited for adults, and we know of nothing which is more calculated to infuse spiritual vigor into our frames than a Scriptural apprehension of the full character of God.”⁵

My nonnegotiable premise in a book about the emotions is that we all must be good, God-centered, biblical theologians. I can hear someone object and say, “Hey, I just wanted to learn to control my anger. I’m not interested in being a theologian.” Well, here is the truth that R. C. Sproul has been driving home for years now:

everyone is a theologian! The question is, are we good ones or poor ones? Poor theologians, those with low, unbiblical, unworthy views of God, will never grow in their emotional life as they ought. Good theologians, those who have a biblically robust, God-intoxicated theology, marinated in the riches of God's glories, will find their capacity to sanctify the emotions expand in life-changing ways.

Another related premise is this: *knowing God—who he is, what he does, what he is like, and what he requires of us—is the foundation for life and faith, joy, obedience, love, and worship.* Knowing God is eternal life (John 17:3). When we come into the new covenant by the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit, we know God (Jer. 31:31–34; 24:7). That relational knowledge is in an infant stage, but it is a real relationship with real knowledge. The requirement is that we grow in that knowledge. As we grow in the knowledge of God, our faith also grows. Psalm 9:10 states, “And those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you.” God’s name is not his title or his proper name, but rather it is his character, what he is like. The water level of faith rises in proportion to our growth in knowing God. Pink underscores this truth: “The foundation of all true knowledge of God must be a clear mental apprehension of His perfections as revealed in Holy Scripture. An unknown God can neither be trusted, served, nor worshiped.”⁶

Not only does faith grow in proportion to our knowledge of God, but active obedience also grows as our knowledge of God grows. “But the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action” (Dan. 11:32). “Obedience to God is always based on a corresponding provision from God. God’s actions of provision in the *past* lead to trust and hope in Him for the *future*, which in turn brings about obedience in the *present*. . . . Only knowing God Himself as He is revealed in His Word can create the kind of hope in His promises that brings about obedience to His will.”⁷

A biblical understanding of the sovereignty, faithfulness, love, and goodness of God not only bolsters our faith, but it gives us emotional equilibrium and joy, peace, and a whole host of other godly emotions that can sustain us. A biblical understanding of God

helps us to see his goodness in trials. A biblical vision of who God is compels us to give him the benefit of the doubt in the mysteries and trust him in the darkness. Such a high view of our great God promotes God-honoring feelings and helps immunize us from toxic, faith-threatening emotions.

A few years ago a number of women in our church wanted to organize a women's theology study group. The elders of our church agreed this was a great idea. We cannot say, "Everyone is a theologian; we are either just good ones or bad ones," and then quench people's desires to be better theologians. The women sought the counsel of their pastors and settled on Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*. For three years they studied theology. One of the women wrote to me after they finished their first semester of study. Here is an excerpt from her letter, which illustrates the point I am trying to make:

Studying theology has brought me *incredible joy*. Knowing God better and spending more time in His presence and beholding His beauty and glory make me *happy and content* in a way I have not known before. . . . Studying systematic theology is gradually bringing together into one coherent whole all the strands of teaching and Bible reading of 30-plus years. Everything is making much more sense, both biblically and in life. Hearing *the doctrine of God* preached has made me *mentally and emotionally healthier*. I rarely suffer from depression now like I used to. *A deep joy in the Lord is mine.*⁸

Oxygen Truth #2: Justification

Another oxygen truth is *justification by faith alone*. When I originally preached this series, justification was not very controversial, at least among Protestants. It seemed safe. There were a few renegade Protestants here and there who were getting wobbly over what some call "the New Perspective on Paul (NPP)." How quickly times change! This is now a front-burner issue. I have no significant interest in the NPP. I am not going to spend any time refuting the new view or defending the old view.⁹ My complaint is that most people do not even know what the old perspective on Paul is, and,

ironically, it is the old perspective on Paul, which is the ground of all true liberty, freedom, and joy in the face of a holy God.

The Reformation recovered a glorious truth: a sinner is declared righteous by a holy God through faith alone in Christ alone. Faith is the instrument of justification. The work of Christ is the ground of justification. The work of Christ entails both the life that he lived and the death that he died. He lived a perfectly righteous life, impeccably faithful to the law of God and unswerving in his confidence in God (Rom. 5:19). He lived the life we could never live. We call this the active obedience of Christ.¹⁰

Christ's obedience was not mechanical, formal, or merely external; it was true obedience that came from his heart. He lived a life of wholehearted obedience that flowed from a perfect love for and delight in God. Jesus cherished doing the will of God. "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work" (John 4:34). "I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart" (Ps. 40:8, NASB).

With every trial, every temptation and phase of life, Jesus grew in obedience (Heb. 5:8–9).¹¹ His ultimate demonstration of "active obedience" began on the night he was betrayed and faced the horror of the cross. He had said earlier in his ministry, "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father" (John 10:17–18).

On the night of his betrayal, he began his greatest act of voluntary obedience to the Father. "Not as I will, but as you will" was his final answer (see Matt. 26:39–44). *Christ's obedience in death was the climax of his obedience.* "Who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:6–8).

This leads us right into the next aspect of justification, our

Lord's death. Some theologians have called this his "passive obedience." In reality, all of Christ's life was both active and passive obedience, as many have pointed out.¹² But we will work with the traditional categories. In his passive obedience, he lay down his life in death. His death was a substitutionary death. It was in our place. It was a penal death, that is, he paid the penalty for our sins (Rom. 5:8; Gal. 3:13; 1 Pet. 3:18). It was a propitiatory death, that is, he absorbed the wrath of God, which we deserved (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10).

As Jesus was on the cross he cried out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" He paid the penalty of death; he was the target of divine white-hot, holy wrath. He suffered our hell right there on the cross. Hymn writer Annie R. Cousin captures the awe and wonder:

*Jehovah bade His sword awake; O Christ, it woke gainst Thee;
Thy blood the flaming blade must slake, Thy heart its sheath must be.
All for my sake, my peace to make: Now sleeps that sword for me.*

Justification is the great exchange. God took his sinless Son and put all our transgressions, sin, and filth on him and in turn took Christ's perfect righteousness and put it over us (2 Cor. 5:21). He punished his Son as he should have punished us, according to our sins. All that was condemnable in us was condemned in him so that we are forever free from condemnation (Rom. 8:1). Now he treats us as his own righteous Son deserves to be treated. We are forgiven and accepted as perfectly righteous. We are justified, redeemed, reconciled, and adopted in God's family forever. We cannot add anything to the work of Christ. It is completely finished (John 19:21). It sounds almost blasphemously audacious, but the words of this theologian are gloriously true: "We have in Christ all the righteousness God can require. We are as righteous as Christ Himself. Indeed, we have God's own righteousness—we have kept the covenant as faithfully as God Himself."¹³

What does this have to do with the emotions? If you believe that your acceptance with God depends on your performance or

your works, if you believe that God treats you according to your good or bad conduct; you will be the emotional equivalent of Slinky after a three-year-old has tangled it up. No matter how much Dad tries to straighten out the twisted metal coils, it is an irreparable mess. The other alternative to thinking God accepts us on the basis of our performance is to be a self-deceived hypocrite. Neither option is very appealing.

Nothing gives emotional stability, authentic joy, and unshakable satisfaction like resting in the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone. The rallying cry of the Reformation, “Christ for me!” will give you a boldness and a strength that will go a long way in fighting off depression, frustration, and a whole anthill of ungodly feelings that erupt from a works-righteousness theology. The doctrine of free justification is a rock of solid joys and lasting pleasures. It is liberty; it is freedom, blessed freedom. Rightly apprehended and fully embraced, it becomes both a geyser of joy and Gibraltar of stability.

Oxygen Truth #3: Future Glory

The next oxygen truth has to do with eschatology. But not eschatology such as we are used to thinking about eschatology. What I am talking about has nothing to do with pre-, post-, or a-mill, horns, temples, or timelines. The oxygen truth of future glory is not tied into any one system; it is tied into something much bigger and much more certain. It is truth that has emboldened martyrs and comforted the suffering and the dying. If we are to walk in conformity with the emotional commands, sanctifying the emotions, then we must be infused with the truth and confidence of future glory. It is the reliable instrument panel on our plane when we are flying through the fog and have vertigo (Rom. 8:24–25).

Our best life is not yet. The Christian life though, is full of blessings, joy, and happiness but is not always trouble-free. It seems that certain believers have been the ordained goalie for the devil’s javelin team. As Christians, we need to maintain a future-oriented faith, which locks like a laser on our future inheritance. No matter what the best sellers have to say about the Christian life, it is our

future, eternal inheritance that provides emotional ballast for the child of God (Rom. 8:18).

Job, in spite of the little revelation he possessed and his frequent misjudgments about what God was doing, was sustained by what he knew of future glory. What he knew of future glory preserved his present hope. No honest reading of the book of Job can set forth Job as the poster child for unwavering faith and confidence. But even in the midst of incredible pain, he never lost sight of this: “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!” (Job 19:25–27). That confidence of the future sustained his present confidence. “Though he slay me, I will hope in him” (Job 13:15). “Faith is the response to the character of God, while hope springs from the promises God has made.”¹⁴

Paul knew the same truth and lived by future-oriented faith, based on a fuller revelation. The perspective provided him with spiritual and emotional ballast that withstood wave after wave of violent storm. Why didn't he capsize emotionally? Paul was not only the apostle to the Gentiles; he was also the apostle of suffering (Col. 1:24). He was locked and loaded with a confidence in the future. He knew that no matter what happened today or tomorrow, God had made certain promises about the future. He knew that in the end God and his people win, and they win big. He had the oxygen mask of truth pumping the life-giving air into his lungs, strengthening his faith and sustaining his heart.

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (2 Cor. 4:16–18)

The future weight of glory is oxygen truth that must flow through our spiritual bloodstream or else our faith platelets will

get dangerously low, our hope will become anemic, and we will have a diminished capacity to value truth and keep an eternal perspective. Once this happens we will find ourselves at the bottom of one dark pit, and such commands as “Rejoice in the Lord” will seem to mock us. “Consider it all joy” will appear cruel. “Fear the Lord” will be empty. “Forgive from the heart,” “love from the heart,” will go in the circular file because of the seemingly obvious impossibility.

The summary of these oxygen truths is simple: knowing God—who he is and what he is like, what he has accomplished for us in his Son, and what he has in store for us in the future—is necessary for progress in emotional sanctification. Those aspects of God are foundational truths. They are life and health. To lay hold of these truths, to own them, to make them a conscious part of our thinking, will help tone our spiritual and emotional muscles. To breathe in these oxygen truths will increase our spiritual stamina and emotional vigor. When our emotions are increasingly aligned with the truth of who God is, what he has done for us in Christ, and what awaits us in the future, we will find our motives and our conduct aligning with God’s Word.