



EMOTIONS AND FAITH: THE PERPLEXING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WHAT WE FEEL AND WHAT WE BELIEVE

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Most of us have developed a love-hate affair with the emotions. We recognize, at least in part, that emotions are central to what it means to live life, to be human, and to experience reality. As Robert Solomon puts it, "We live our lives through our emotions, and it is our emotions that give our lives meaning. What interests or fascinates us, who we love, what angers us, what moves us, what bores us—all of this defines us, gives us character, constitutes who we are." When we talk with one another, our conversations often focus on emotions. We ask, "How are you?" Then we share, at least with those close to us, what makes us upset, what brings us joy, what saddens us, and what makes us smile.

Yet, many of us also see emotions as problematic. They impact our lives in ways we cannot control. From an early age, our society has taught us:

- Emotions are irrational.
- Emotions are childish.
- Emotions are a sign of weakness.
- Emotions can interfere with getting what you really want.
- Emotions are not always reliable.

We know that negative emotions can overtake us and those we love. Sometimes, the cool sphere of reason seems a welcome alternative to the stormy and tumultuous landscape of emotion.



WHAT EMOTIONS ARE

With a touch of humor, psychologists Fehr and Russell have observed, “Everyone knows what an emotion is, until asked to give a definition.” What exactly are they?

Obviously, we feel emotions—sometimes in overpowering ways. They trigger physiological responses within us, whether tears or smiles, an inner tightening or “the lifting of a load.”

Emotions thus involve our bodies in profound ways. However, emotions also involve our minds. The feelings we have stem from judgments we make about the world around us. Sometimes, these judgments happen so quickly that we do not even realize we are making them. But at their core, emotions involve assessments, typically regarding things that matter deeply to us and things we cannot fully control.

To illustrate, consider the following chart:

	PAST or PRESENT	FUTURE
POSITIVE	Happiness, Joy, Relief	Excitement, Hope
NEGATIVE	Guilt, Sadness, Anger	Worry, Anxiety, Fear

As it begins to illustrate, our emotions are caught up in positive and negative assessments we make about the past, present, and future.

Some emotions involve a fairly general type of assessment. Thus, happiness is a broad term that stems from the judgment that something positive has happened or is happening. Joy tends to be more specific, referring to the judgment that something positive is enduring. Relief, on the other hand, is even more specific. It is our reaction when something we feared fails to materialize.

Meanwhile, hope and excitement anticipate that something good is coming.

On the other hand, worry, anxiety, and fear occur when we expect something negative to come our way. Guilt arises when people judge that they have done something wrong. Anger occurs when someone else commits a wrongdoing. Sadness results from the perception of loss.

Emotions, then, are not merely feelings. They do not reside solely in our hearts. Instead, they lie at the intersection of the body and mind. They cause changes in what our bodies feel. At the same time, they stem from quick judgments made by our brains about the nature of the world around us.

If emotions are one way we make sense of the world around us, why does our culture often devalue emotions, seeing them as irrational and childish?

That question is quite complex and can be answered in many ways. Greek philosophers continue to exert a fair amount of influence on our culture. Plato and Aristotle thought that emotions, especially anger, could be irrational. Seneca even went so far as to claim that anger, particularly because of its connections to violence, has done more to threaten the survival of humanity than even the deadliest plague.



There are other reasons than simply our philosophical heritage. Peter Stearns, in his book *American Cool*, argues that our culture has developed a set of rules governing the expression of emotions. He suggests that as consumerism, corporate management, and the service sector arose in twentieth-century America, the middle class devalued displays of emotions, particularly in the workplace where they could interfere with the generation of profits. Employees who appear angry or sad could hurt the bottom line. So our culture valued dispassion, or to use the word popular since the 1960s, we strove to be “cool,” even under pressure. Flight attendants, for example, are trained to avoid emotional displays even amid the most taxing of situations.

Yet, for many of us, our discomfort with emotions does not result primarily from our culture’s philosophical heritage or desire to maintain profit-margins. Instead, we feel uneasy about emotions because we know they can negatively affect us. We have seen loved ones trapped in cycles of negative emotion, or perhaps we have experienced depression ourselves. There are times when our emotions do not make much sense. We have all done things motivated by emotion that we end up regretting later. For some of us, we simply like feeling in control of our lives, and emotions are a powerful reminder that there is much we cannot control.

Stoics believed that while individuals cannot control the initial feelings that arise in response to situations, one can choose whether to continue to be moved by what transpires. They tried to prevent emotions from erupting and taking over. Our culture often practices something similar.

When someone starts expressing a negative emotion, many of us, as a matter of habit, try to talk people out of that emotion. We try to help others see why they need not continue in a place of sadness or anger. Sometimes, those in the church are especially prone to do so. We feel Christians should have the joy of the Lord in our hearts, and we are concerned that emotions like anger can lead us away from God. Emotions threaten us.

In fact, when we feel persistent negative emotion, many of us feel it is time to consult a specialist. We go to therapists and counselors, who give us safe environments to express emotions.

Hopefully, they help us understand our feelings and ourselves a little better.

HOW EMOTIONS RELATE TO THE LIFE OF FAITH

Does our faith make any difference when it comes to the world of emotions? The Bible speaks about the transformation of our minds ([Rom 12:1](#)), but what about the transformation of our feelings? Should we, as Christians, experience emotions differently than those outside the faith? How does the Bible relate to guilt, anger, sadness, and fear? Should Christians feel less of these emotions and more of the positive ones like happiness, joy, tranquility, and hope?

At first glance, the emotional landscape of the Bible seems rather confusing. Both the Old and New Testaments seem to uphold fear as a good emotion, particularly when people fear God ([Deut 6:13](#); [Acts 10:22](#)). Yet, when God or one of God’s messengers appear to people, they typically say, “Do not be afraid” ([Gen 15:1](#); [Luke 1:30](#)). New Testament epistles frequently mention anger in their lists of sin ([Eph 4:31](#); [Col 3:8](#)), but the Bible describes both God and Jesus as angry ([Num 11:1](#); [Mark 3:5](#); [Rom 1:18](#)). Paul instructs the Philippians to “rejoice always” ([4:4](#)), but then other parts of the Bible make clear that grief sometimes should overwhelm believers ([Jer 4:8](#); [James 4:9](#)).

How does one make sense of the wide spectrum of emotions and the variety of things the Bible says about them? First, the Bible recognizes that human experience can be quite diverse. A word that works well in one situation may not work well in another situation (see [Prov 26:4-5](#)). When it comes to the emotional life, the Bible does not offer commandments that hold for everyone in every circumstance. Instead, there are particular words for particular people in particular circumstances. As [Romans 12:15](#) puts it, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (NRSV here and elsewhere).



Certain times call for certain emotional reactions. There will be seasons in life when we feel the tranquility that comes from God's peace, which passes all understanding ([Phil 4:7](#)) – but there will also be seasons when we join Ecclesiastes in decrying how utterly meaningless life can be ([1:2](#)).

Second, the Bible makes clear that we are broken people living in a fallen world. As a result, our emotional reactions will not be perfect, at least not this side of Christ's return. There will be times when we resemble Potiphar in the book of Genesis. When Potiphar received news that Joseph tried to seduce his wife, he became angry and had Joseph imprisoned ([Gen 39:19-20](#))—a seemingly reasonable response. However, we as readers know that his anger caused an innocent person to suffer. The situation was more complex than he realized; the accusations against his servant were false. Potiphar did not always get his emotions right, and we will not either.

Being a perfectionist with one's emotions can easily lead to disastrous results. It is a losing battle. God gives us many ways of making sense of the world around us: the Bible, tradition, friends, experience, reason, and emotion. None of these faculties are completely sufficient on their own. We can misinterpret the Bible. The church's tradition did not always get things right. Friends can misguide us. Experiences are open to multiple interpretations. Reason has its limits. Emotions do not always make perfect sense. God gives us all of these faculties to work together. Relying on just one of them can lead to a skewed view of God and the world.

Third, the Bible envisions that faith can have a significant impact on our emotional lives. As just stated, the correlation between our faith and our emotional life will not always be perfect. We may find ourselves unmoved by hearing the good news. Or, we may be unable to rid ourselves of anger even after attempting forgiveness. We are not perfect. However, even in our broken bodies, there will be times when the reality of our faith profoundly touches us. Many of us can think of moments in worship when we were moved to tears or found ourselves smiling because of God's presence. Clearly, there will be times when we join Jesus in weeping over the death of those we love ([John 11:35](#)). However, as St. Paul reminds us, the resurrection has blunted the sharp edge of such grief ([1 Thess 4:13](#)).

Emotions result from assessments made about the past, present, and future—and Christianity grounds its believers in a specific past, present, and future. Through the act of baptism, we are incorporated into the story of God healing a fractured world. We are adopted into the household of faith, meaning that Israel's story has become our story. Thus, we no longer see the past, present, and future the same way as the world. We no longer need to embrace a narrative that says only the fittest will survive. We no longer need to see our happiness as tied to what gadgets and goods we possess. We no longer need to live in denial of the immense suffering and death that pervades human existence. We no longer need to look to the future with utter uncertainty, for we know that our story ends with fellowship with God and all the saints.

Through conversion and discipleship, our personal story becomes fused with the biblical story. We see miracles unfold before our eyes. The fear of God keeps us from harming God's creation. We find reason to be happy, even when poor, because we know we possess the kingdom of God. Most of the time, these changes in our emotional life do not result from will power. They occur organically as a result of spending time in the community of faith, immersed in God's love and holiness, and partaking in means of grace like service, worship, and fellowship.

Changes in one's emotional life often result from a profound act of imagination. By "imagination," I do not mean believing in things that are false or unreal. Rather, I mean being able to see what is real but not at all obvious.

Many biblical texts give people reason to rejoice, even when surrounding realities look exceedingly grim. Consider the book of Exodus. For the Hebrews in Egypt, slavery and genocide were not abstract concepts but defining characteristics of their lives. The Bible describes their bitter, groaning misery. No one would expect that they would soon have reason to sing, dance, and rejoice. Yet, their given realities are shattered by a miracle-working God who hears the prayers of the oppressed and turns the mighty Pharaoh into a powerless fool.



Esther tells an analogous story, pointing to ways that God's people prevail even when powers and principalities try to wipe them out. While Daniel and Revelation are a very different type of literature, they function likewise, addressing those facing systematic persecution by state powers. Speaking to an audience that must have felt hopeless, these books invite readers into an alternate way of viewing reality, one defined less by fear in what rulers may do and more by God's final triumphant victory.

Prophetic messages of hope, such as [Isaiah 40-55](#) and [Jeremiah 30-33](#), similarly help readers imagine different realities. They are written to refugees, those in exile. To such audiences, it must have looked like all was lost, like their faith was in vain, like they were no more than peons in someone else's empire. Yet, these texts reach out to readers, inviting them to imagine a different way of conceiving reality. [Isaiah 40](#) begins with the well-known words, "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." In what follows, the prophet describes the restoration and forgiveness that God has in store for the exiles. Those other deities that seemed more powerful than Israel's God are shown to be mere blocks of wood ([44:9-20](#)).

Similarly, the New Testament offers hope and joy over against the given realities and accepted wisdom of the day. Even a cursory reading of the Gospels shows that Jesus caused people to think in profoundly different ways about what it means to be right with God. He angered those assumed to be close to God, while giving sinners reasons to smile. His actions and teachings caused people to imagine things in new ways.

Many of the earliest Christians who received the New Testament's letters faced persecution and adversity of one kind or another. These epistles kindle readers' imaginations, helping them to see, for example, that their "slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure" ([2 Cor 4:17](#)). We learn from reading Romans that "we are more than conquerors" ([8:37](#)), that no matter what the world may throw at us—death, life, principalities, rulers, things present, things to come, powers, or anything else—we shall not be separated from Christ's love ([8:38-39](#)). Although external realities may make Christians feel powerless, the Bible's joy and hope comes from rejecting worldly assumptions and daringly envisioning God's alternate reality.

Yet, even though we have great reason to embrace joy amid hardship, the Bible is clear that we will never achieve an anger- or sadness-free existence. In fact, the Bible suggests that nearly every emotion can be honestly expressed to God in prayer. One sees this point quite clearly in the Psalms, Job, Lamentations, and parts of Jeremiah. While excessive complaining may not be embraced (see [Num 14:27-30](#)), the Bible contains many gut-wrenching outpourings of emotion.

Many texts express grief in ways that our society rarely permits. For example, in [Psalm 6:6](#), the speaker envisions so many tears that they make furniture like couches swim and even dissolve, as though they were mere grains of salt in a glass of water. No matter how desperate, how negative, how hopeless, or how angry the Psalmists felt, they brought their hearts to God. One of the most common questions in the Psalter is, "How long?" It makes over a dozen appearances, often in verses such as [13:1](#) that express anger directly at God: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"

The Bible thus affirms that faith does not rid believers of negative emotions. Even Jesus found reason to pray with these angry Psalms. On the cross, he uttered the opening of [Psalm 22](#), "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!" Like Jesus, Abraham and Moses knew anger and grief all too well ([Gen 21:11, 23:2](#); [Num 16:15](#)). We should not expect to do better than they. When Paul tells believers to "rejoice always" ([Phil 4:7](#)), he calls the church as a whole to celebrate Jesus. He is not telling individuals they should never feel sad. Thus, we read of Paul himself having a broken heart ([Acts 21:13](#)).

The Psalter suggests that sometimes, anger and sorrow will be enduring ([Pss 44, 88](#)). Yet, many of the Psalms begin with raw expressions of anger and grief, but then they end with praises of God. Somehow, in the midst of these gut-wrenching prayers, a way is made for rejoicing in God, even amid our tumult. It is as though those praying are invited to take a bold step of faith, engage their imaginations, and recognize that God has heard their plea and will work on their behalf in powerful ways. Earlier, we read the Psalm that begins, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" ([13:1](#)). It ends with a bold expression of confidence in God's decisive action: "But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to



the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me" ([13:5-6](#)).

While much more could be said about emotions and faith, my final point will focus on the emotion of guilt because the Bible spends so much time on this topic. It makes clear that people rarely get this emotion correct. There are times when we feel the overwhelming burden of our own sins, assuming we are beyond redemption. Thus, we read of the tax collector, too ashamed to enter the temple or even lift his eyes toward heaven. Strikingly, Jesus tells us that although this man imagined himself remotely far from God, he was in fact closer to God than the highest religious leaders of his time ([Luke 18:9-14](#)).

One of the most popular stories of the Bible is the prodigal son ([Luke 15:11-32](#)). We love it in large part because it addresses all of us who feel weighed down by guilt and shame. Like this wayward child, there are moments when we "come to our senses." We realize that we have squandered what God has given us, and we assume that at best God will treat us like a servant. But then, we are surprised by joy when God comes running out to embrace us—the foolish and guilt-covered child.

In the Old Testament as well, we read of those who appear awash in their own guilt, unable to think that God would forgive. Most of the prophets spent their ministry trying to shock people out of their complacency and help them realize their sinfulness. Yet, these prophets knew that their audience could go too far in the opposite direction, imagining themselves and their descendants as damned for all time. And so, they bring incredible messages of hope and forgiveness to a people crushed under the weight of their own sins. In the book of Isaiah, the guilt-ridden people assume that God has forsaken and forgotten them. The Lord responds, "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands" ([49:14-16a](#)). Joel similarly tells people that God will make up for all the years of hunger they have endured, that they will find such incredible restoration that they will never feel ashamed again ([2:25-26](#)). Likewise, Jeremiah envisions a time when the fearful people in exile shall return home and find themselves quiet, at rest, and in peace ([30:10](#)).

While the Bible thus has a powerful word of comfort for those overwhelmed by the emotions of guilt, shame, and fear, it also has a powerful word of judgment for those who seem incapable of feeling any guilt or remorse for their wrongdoings. Much of the Bible shows that people fail to feel guilty when they should: Numbers, Judges, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, most of the Minor Prophets, Jesus' Teachings of Woe, admonitions in New Testament Epistles, and much of Revelation. As these scriptures suggest, we can easily deceive ourselves about what is right and wrong. Thus, Isaiah describes how we confuse such basics as good and evil, light and darkness, sweetness and bitterness ([5:20](#)). Morally mixed up, we sin without realizing it, failing to feel healthy guilt, and thus we wreak havoc on the goodness in this world.

The Bible has a strong message for those who fail to feel appropriate guilt. The prophets, Jesus, and St. Paul use all manner of persuasion and rhetoric designed to shock people out of their complacency. They remind people that although God is slow to anger, God is not immune to anger. Even though God's anger lasts only a moment, it still can come. God is no friend of evil, and God does bring punishment when sins are habitual, systematic, heinous, grievous, and relentless. The appropriate response to realizing our sins and self-deception is to feel guilty; to grieve the ways we have hurt others, ourselves, our world, and God; and to ask God to make us better people.

CONCLUSION

On Mount Sinai, God walks before Moses, letting the human see the divine. In this dramatic text, as Moses hides in the cleft of a rock, we read this description of who God is:

The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." ([Exodus 34:6-7](#))



In many respects, the Christian emotional life is shaped in response to God's character. We feel peace, joy, love, and hope from knowing of God's mercy, grace, love, and faithfulness. We also have a healthy sense of fear of God. Knowing that God is slow to anger does not make us want to continue in sin. We have an appropriate sense of guilt over failing to love God, our neighbors, and ourselves. Or, at least we genuinely try to, in this imperfect world outside of Eden.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What emotion is the most confusing to you? Why?
2. How could Christian worship change to allow people to express negative emotions before God?