

Feelings and Faith

Cultivating Godly Emotions in the Christian Life

BRIAN S. BORGMAN

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-

Introduction

tions, and I am perfectly fine with worshiping 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

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

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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.

“Borgman shows that love for God is more than feelings, but never less, and that there is a huge difference between emotionalism and God-centered emotion. If you have been looking for a clear, practical, and balanced book on the appropriate role of feelings in the Christian life, look no further.”

Tullian Tchividjian, *pastor, New City Church; author, Unfashionable: Making a Difference in the World by Being Different*

“An important book. I highly recommend it.”

Martha Peace, *biblical counselor; author, The Excellent Wife*

“Brian Borgman offers an emotional lifeline that will stabilize your heart and support your faith. I will return to it time and again—so will you!”

Jani Ortlund, *author; His Loving Law, Our Lasting Legacy*

“Provides unusual insight and wisdom for growth in holiness through understanding better the crucial role godly emotions play in our lives, as God designed them to do. Here is a valuable resource for personal study, marriages, small groups, and Sunday schools.”

Bruce and Jodi Ware

“The principles in this work should prove to be of real, lasting value to believers in Jesus who earnestly yearn to grasp and harness their emotions within the context of a sensate culture that is quickly careening out of emotional control.”

Lance Quinn, *pastor-teacher, The Bible Church of Little Rock, Little Rock, Arkansas*

“Emotion is one of the least understood topics in our Bible studies and churches, and this is a strong contribution to the discussion.”

Matthew Elliott, *author, Feel: The Power of Listening to Your Heart and Faithful Feelings: Rethinking Emotion in the New Testament*

BRIAN S. BORGMAN is the founding pastor of Grace Community Church in Minden, Nevada. He earned his DMin from Westminster Seminary California and is the author of *My Heart for Thy Cause*. He and his wife have three children and live in northwestern Nevada.

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