

Untangling Emotions

J. Alasdair Groves
& Winston T. Smith

“You might not put a book on emotions at the top of your reading list, but given how everyday life is crammed with our emotions and those of our families, friends, and enemies, the topic is highly important. This book will lead you to engage with emotions in good and fruitful ways.”

Ed Welch, Faculty and Counselor, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

“Theologians and philosophers have often given highly oversimplified advice to people about emotions: *Subordinate them to the intellect! Welcome good emotions (joy, peace) and suppress bad (fear, anger)!* Such oversimplifications are not true to Scripture, and they hurt those who are struggling with difficult situations. Here Groves and Smith help us enormously as they untangle things, relieve confusion, and help us think through these issues in a serious way. We’re enabled to see that in Scripture every emotion (whether we think of it as good or bad) has right uses and wrong ones. There is good anger and bad anger, good fear and bad fear. We’re shown how to *engage* our emotions and how to act (or not act) on them. The authors have a deep understanding both of Scripture and of human experience, and they have put their insights into a strikingly well-written book, dealing with difficult questions through vivid metaphors, illustrations, and stories. Most importantly, this book is God-centered. It even contains an appendix showing us the senses in which God does and does not have feelings. I recommend this book to people who are struggling to understand their own feelings and to help others deal with theirs.”

John M. Frame, Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy Emeritus, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

“God made us emotional beings. We love and we hate. We rejoice and we lament. We experience guilt and shame. Sometimes, maybe often, we struggle with unwanted emotions. Groves and Smith bring their considerable wisdom as counselors and students of the Bible to bear on the subject of our emotions, helping us to understand and engage our emotions and enabling us to move closer to God.”

Tremper Longman III, Distinguished Scholar and Professor Emeritus, Westmont College

“When it comes to navigating personal emotions, Groves and Smith are like river guides on a rafting trip. They understand the currents and get you where you need to go. Particularly helpful is their recognition of the link between what we feel and what we value. In my experience, that link has often been the key to unlocking complex emotions for the people I care for.”

Jeremy Pierre, Chair, Department of Biblical Counseling and Family Ministry, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life*

“Steering a wise middle course between exalting and ignoring our emotions, Alasdair Groves and Winston Smith develop a biblically rich understanding of emotions as a gift from God, an essential aspect of our image bearing. But they don’t stop there. With practical insight and winsome examples, they demonstrate how to evaluate and direct your emotions in ways that deepen love for God and others. If you have questions about the role of emotions in the Christian life, or if you sometimes wonder why you feel too much—or too little—of a given emotion, you will profit immensely by reading this book.”

Michael R. Emlet, Faculty Member, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation; author, *CrossTalk: Where Life and Scripture Meet* and *Descriptions and Prescriptions*

“I’ve been a counselor for twenty years, and I still don’t get emotions. I need help to figure them out, and I’m sure you do, too. *Untangling Emotions* is now my go-to guide on emotions. It packs a lot into one book, and page after page honors Christ.”

Deepak Reju, Pastor of Biblical Counseling and Family Ministry, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC; author, *The Pastor and Counseling* and *Preparing for Fatherhood*

“Grab this book. Dig deep. Let the Lord have your heart, for Groves and Smith are spot on: it’s time we engage our emotions. Isn’t it obvious that times are changing? The danger we face—Christians and pastors alike—is that we follow culture and let the love in our hearts ‘grow cold’ (Matt. 24:12). But this book leads us to Jesus. Its life-giving counsel—rooted in Scripture, reliant on the Lord—helps us deal with our most difficult emotions. Read this book. Embrace the process. Live it loud so we can help others—including those lost without Jesus—do the same.”

Thad Rockwell Barnum, Assisting Bishop, Diocese of the Carolinas

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J. Alasdair Groves and
Winston T. Smith

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WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Micah Lanier

First printing 2019

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-5782-8

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-5785-9

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-5783-5

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-5784-2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Groves, J. Alasdair, 1982– author.

Title: Untangling emotions / J. Alasdair Groves and Winston T. Smith.

Description: Wheaton: Crossway, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018037956 (print) | LCCN 2018053864 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433557835 (pdf) |

ISBN 9781433557842 (mobi) | ISBN 9781433557859 (epub) | ISBN 9781433557828 (tp)

Subjects: LCSH: Emotions—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4597.3 (ebook) | LCC BV4597.3 .G76 2019 (print) | DDC 233/.5—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018037956>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

LB 29 28 27 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my mother,
who taught me to care what others felt
and to know that God cared about my heart:
You led us with faith, courage, and vulnerability
through our family's darkest hour.
—J. Alasdair Groves

To Kim:
Your childlike delight in the most ordinary things,
your revelry in the good and your angry tears over the bad,
your humility and faithfulness—
in these and a thousand other ways
you show me the love of Christ every day.
—Winston T. Smith

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Acknowledgments

When you write a book, you realize how much of even your most creative thinking has been formed and fertilized by other people, most of whom will never realize how great their impact on you has been. How do you thank all the people who have taught you everything you know? Nevertheless, we'd like to take this opportunity to say "thank you" to a few who have especially helped us bring this project to fruition.

To Dave Dewit and the publishing team at Crossway, thank you for your patience, your input, and, most of all, your encouragement.

We are grateful as well to our colleagues at the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF). Your service to this institution creates a very special environment, outside of which we'd never have been able to bring these thoughts together. Thank you especially to Jayne Clark for working as our agent, to David Powlison for allowing us time to work on this book, and to the whole faculty for sharpening our thinking and affording us the chance to hone our ideas in the context of CCEF's national conference in 2016. Further specific thanks are due the School of Biblical Counseling staff team, who put up with me (Alasdair) when the book pulled me away.

To the staff and board of CCEF New England, a "thank you" as well for embracing this project and giving me (Alasdair) the freedom and support to pursue it. I needed both more than you know.

On a similar note, I (Winston) thank the congregation of St. Anne's Episcopal Church for welcoming me into your family and inviting me to take my first steps as a parish priest here. I love you all. You make me want to follow Christ more passionately each and every day.

A very special thanks to Dr. Paul Maxwell—your efforts and conversation were invaluable in shaping the material into its final form. We couldn't have done this without you! Thank you also to Andy Hanauer, Kevin and Dianna Sawyer, Susie Matter, Lauren Groves, and Alden Groves for reading parts of our manuscript in its fragile, infant, and unlovely form—you helped us to know what we meant and to say what we weren't yet saying.

Finally, our greatest “thank you” of all goes to our families. Lauren, Emily, Adara, and Alden, I (Alasdair) thank you for being excited for me and for bearing much of the stress this put on me. You are the ones I treasure most on this earth and are thus at the center of all my emotions (for better and for worse). There is no one else with whom I would rather share life's sorrows and joys. I (Winston) thank Kim, Gresham, Sydney, and Charlotte for constant love and support. Thank you for graciously accepting my shaky efforts at practicing what I talk, write, and speak about so confidently.

Introduction

How Do You Feel about How You Feel?

Emotions are strange.

They're strange in that they can make us behave in ways we don't want to. Strange in that they can flood through our bodies whether we like it or not. Strange in that they can help us see and do things we would never have done without them. Strange in that most of us don't know (or even stop to ask) *why* we are feeling what we are feeling most of the time.

And that's why we wrote this book. We want to help you understand what your emotions are (and aren't) and what you can do about it. The reality is that, while we might be slow to admit it, we're all troubled by our emotions.

Maybe your struggle is with anxiety. Maybe you're just someone who feels "stressed" a lot. Maybe you're frequently melancholy, or you live with constant low-grade frustration. Maybe life is mostly just boring. Or maybe you've never really thought about your emotions at all. It's not that hard in this day and age to flit from Netflix to email to Facebook to your job and never land anywhere in between long enough to notice that you're feeling anything.

Whatever your story, whether you know it or not, sometimes you don't like how you feel. And in that way, you're just like every other human being.

Consider a few of the different ways people experience emotions. First, take Jen. Her Tuesday morning is going just fine till a picture at the top of her Facebook feed grabs her attention. Everything about the shot of her three smiling friends, arms around the others' shoulders, proclaim that they are having a great time. The caption reads, "Girls' night out! Just what I needed!" There's just one thing missing from the picture: Jen.

Betrayal, embarrassment, surprise, anger, and a keen sense of being left out wash over her. Tears well up in her eyes, her heart begins to pound, her cheeks flush with heat. Jen can't shake the feelings and a low-grade nausea the rest of the day. *I hate this—of course no one wants to be with me*, Jen thinks. *I doubt other people feel like this. I doubt other people are like this.*

For others, like Angie, emotions are less like a storm and more like quicksand. Angie feels trapped in a world without ups or downs. Most often she just feels bored, empty, even numb. She has no idea why her emotions are so flat, why there's never any spark, why excitement and joy are experiences for others but not her. She always seems to be on the outside looking in. While others are enjoying a good laugh, celebrating a victory, or having a deep and satisfying conversation, she's only partially there, more a spectator than a participant. It's lonely and alienating, and she's tired of it.

Still others, like Chad, are hardly aware of their emotions at all. Sometimes he's happy, sometimes he's sad, sometimes he's angry. He can go for days without noticing what he's feeling, and he doesn't see what the fuss over emotions is all about. But his wife periodically struggles with anxiety and depression. He wishes he could help, but he doesn't know how. Chad feels more like a witness to the world of emotions than a participant and feels awkward at any significant display of emotion in others.

Finally, there's Aaron. Aaron has it pretty easy. He knows he has emotions, but they don't trouble him often. When they do, he rarely stays blue or irritated for long. He's not hiding from his deeper feelings; he just doesn't get upset all that often, and he finds that when he does, things turn out all right if he just takes a little time to let everything blow over. The sun always does seem to come out tomorrow.

So how do *you* feel about how you feel? Can you relate to any of these stories?

As we've counseled over the years, we've found that sometimes Christians are more disturbed by their emotions than non-Christians are. Christians often see negative emotions, the ones we would describe as feeling "bad," as signs of spiritual failure. Anxiety is proof that you don't trust God. Grief is failure to rest in God's good purposes for your life. Anger is just plain old selfishness. It seems that Christians are never *only* dealing with negative emotions. Instead, every dark feeling also carries with it a sense of spiritual failure, guilt, and shame about *having* that dark feeling. As a result, negative emotions are to be squashed and repented of immediately rather than explored, and should be expressed only when carefully monitored and controlled—preferably while wearing a hazmat suit.

Actually, Christians are sometimes uneasy even with positive emotions. Happiness must be scrutinized for fear of "loving the gift more than the giver," meaning God. A sense of accomplishment or satisfaction over a job well done might just be a cover for pride or taking credit for something for which we were only instruments. If you feel good for too long, it could mean you are selfish and aren't in tune with the needs of those around you.

It seems like Christians just can't seem to get it right, no matter how they feel.

The way you respond to your emotions, including how you feel about how you feel, is of vital importance to your relationship with God and others in your life. Our emotions are one of the

most common and commonly misunderstood opportunities in our lives to grow in maturity and love. They have the power to deeply enrich our relationships or drive wedges into them.

Who This Book Is For

With that in mind, we hope three different kinds of people will pick up this book. First, we are writing for those whose emotions tend toward the extremes, like Jen or Angie. Both those who feel like the walking dead and those who get swept away by emotional tides have a daily need for God's comfort, help, courage, and wisdom.

Second, however, this book is for you if, like Chad, emotions baffle you. Maybe it's your own emotions you can't figure out. Maybe it's the emotional storm of a loved one. Or maybe you just can't understand why certain people in your life do the things they do, and you feel lost.

Finally, we are writing to you if you want to love and care for people whose emotions, for one reason or another, have them over a barrel. As counselors, we know how challenging it can be to care for emotionally volatile people, and we want to help you move into their lives with wisdom and practical ideas.

And what about the Aarons of the world? Do those who are happy with their emotional lives get a pass on reading this? Perhaps. But keep in mind that those with an easygoing temperament, those who are rarely forced to deal with hurt feelings, are also at risk of missing the growth and even the joy that God intends for his children in dealing with their emotions in a way that more tightly and richly connects them to him.

We believe the best way to serve you as a reader, whichever category you fall into, is to speak directly to those in the first category, those of you who struggle with your feelings and don't need anyone to tell you that emotions are challenging. Those of you in the other two groups, listen in. Don't be surprised, however, if you find that more applies to you than you had expected, and not just

the “emotional people” around you. Our hope is to help all of you understand your own inner world—and that of your spouse, friend, or office-mate—better by hearing us speak to those who feel the problem of their feelings all the time and yearn to change.

Emotions Are a Gift

The Bible has a lot to teach us about emotions. It’s true that Scripture warns us about the dangers of emotions, how they sometimes reflect our disordered inner world and prompt us to hasty, unwise, and destructive actions. But it also teaches us that they are an indispensable part of being human and play a crucial role in our relationships with God and others. A careful study of the Bible can help us discard faulty assumptions so we can engage our emotions rather than be ruled by or flee from them.

Here are a few of the critical truths we will be exploring together:

- *Emotions are an essential way we bear God’s image.* God expresses emotions, and he designed us to express emotions too. In the Bible we see and hear God’s anger, joy, sadness, and even jealousy. Of course, God does not experience emotions exactly as we do. He is spirit and doesn’t have a body (an important element of our emotional lives) and is sinless, but there’s no denying that he has chosen to reveal himself in the language of emotions and that our emotions are an aspect of his choice to create us to be like him.¹
- *Jesus leads the way.* Jesus gives us a perfect picture of human emotions in action. Jesus, who is fully God, also became *fully* human. That means that Jesus knows and experiences emotions not only as God does but also as we do, as a flesh-and-blood human being. In the Gospels we witness Jesus’s compassion for suffering and heartache. We see his anger as he speaks to callous religious leaders.

1. See the appendix, “Does God Really Feel?,” for a discussion of the doctrine of God’s impassibility.

We hear his groans as he grieves over unbelief and death. As we live in relationship with him, he actually begins to work in us to give us hearts increasingly like his own, hating what he hates and loving what he loves.

- *It's all about love.* Emotions have many important roles. In part, they tell us about ourselves and what's going on inside and around us. They also can provide us with the motivation and energy to take action when important things need to be done. But at the heart of all of their roles, emotions flow out of what we love, and, at the same time, they actually help us to love the right things: God and one another.

Where We're Going from Here

This book has three main sections.

Part 1 addresses the emotions of everyday life, untangling and explaining the complexity of our emotional experiences. We'll explore biblically what emotions are and what God designed them to do. As we do, you'll likely learn that some of the ways you have been taught to think about and handle your emotions need to change. We'll see how emotions involve our minds, the ways we value things, and even our bodies. We'll also learn how our emotions are an important part of how God teaches us to love one another as they help us understand and enter into each other's experiences. Perhaps most importantly, we'll learn how all of our emotions help us to turn to God and grow in our relationship with him.

Part 2 focuses on how to *engage* our emotions. This section isn't so much about how to *change* your emotions but how to respond to them and bring them wisely to God and other people. We don't want to handle emotions by being controlled by them or ignoring them; instead, we want to deal with them wisely in a way that leads to growth in our relationships with God and others.

Part 3 offers guidance on engaging the emotions that tend to trouble and confuse us the most: fear, anger, sorrow, guilt, and

shame. For example, we'll explore how our anger is intended to reflect God's and actually work in our lives to protect and restore relationships. We'll discover that sadness and grief aren't always evidence of a lack of faith but, in fact, can be very important expressions of faith. We'll even find that fear isn't necessarily a bad thing but can be an expression of affection and right concern, offering us an opportunity to turn toward God.

In every chapter we'll be as practical as possible. After all, we don't just want to help you *think* differently about your emotions; we also want to help you *do* things that make a difference in your day tomorrow as you parent fussing children, enjoy coffee with friends, take out the trash, work through conflict with your spouse, sing in church, cry in the bathroom, or find a quiet moment to read. Our prayer is that as you read this book God would nurture your emotional life in the midst of both the real and troubling problems in the world around you and the real and perfect promises of God.

PART 1

UNDERSTANDING
EMOTIONS

Sometimes It's Good to Feel Bad

Jesus wept.

That was kind of a strange thing for him to do, don't you think? We don't know how you picture Jesus, but your mental image is probably not of him wracked by sobs as tears run down his cheeks into his beard. Jesus bleeding on the cross yet forgiving his enemies? Sure. Jesus with children in his lap, smiling compassionately down? You bet. Jesus wailing loudly or shaking with silent tremors at a funeral? Not so much.

Yet that is exactly what the Bible says. Standing with Mary, the sister of his close friend Lazarus, and staring at her brother's fresh grave, Jesus is stabbed by grief and breaks down in tears (John 11:32–36). Now think about this: As God, Jesus controls the entire universe and can change anything at any time. In fact, he is going to raise Lazarus from the dead in around five minutes. Why on earth would Jesus weep when he's about to do an amazing miracle and fix the problem?

Because he's perfect. He cries at the death of his friend and is deeply moved by Mary's anguish because *that is what love does when confronted with loss*. Jesus is the only perfect human being

who has ever lived, and that is why he does not refuse to share the pain of those he loves. Not even for ten minutes. Not even when he knows their sorrow is about to turn to astonished exultation.¹

Have you ever thought about grief (or anger, or discouragement) as something that could be right and important? Even if you *could* fix the problem? It cuts against every instinct in us, doesn't it? Yet the Bible teaches over and over again that sadness, anger, dismay, and even fear have a good and right place. Most of us are deeply uncomfortable with negative feelings and assume something is wrong with us whenever we do feel sad or mad or bad. Surely, we think, if we just had more faith, a better perspective, more strength of character, we wouldn't feel this way. Or, at the very least, we'd get over it faster.

The Bible takes a radically different view. Unlike our assumption that the most faithful people will be the most carefree and emotionally upbeat, Scripture is full of aching, grieving saints who tear their clothes and sit in the ashes when their world gets up-ended. The basic logic in the Bible is this: if you care about others and the kingdom and mission of God in this world, you will be *and you should be* full of sorrow when you or those you love are injured, suffer loss, or die. You ought to feel angry in the presence of injustice. Your heart should beat faster when your family is in danger. As counterintuitive as it seems, awful feelings like grief can actually be exactly the right feelings to have, feelings that honor God and would be wrong *not to* feel. Christian author and thinker C. S. Lewis put this vividly when he said:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless,

1. We are indebted to Tim Keller for the observation that Jesus's tears flow from his perfect love.

airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.²

Indeed, God so loved the world that he made himself vulnerable to it, even to the point of losing his beloved Son, of sending him among us to take on our pains, weep our tears, and ultimately die the death we should have died. God loves, so God grieves. God cares for us, so he hates the sin that separates us from him. God is perfect, so he hurts when his beloved creation and precious people hurt each other and are hurt by the hurts of this hurtfully broken world.³

Hurt, hate, grief, and fear are terrible things to taste. What is more—as you are no doubt aware—the Bible does command joy, gratitude, contentment, peace, and the like. But that is not the whole story, and the missing pieces are vital. As strange as it seems, we have to start by understanding what is good about our negative emotions if we are ever going to handle them well when they are out of order.

Negative Emotions Are *Not* Always Bad

The basic reason we need negative, unpleasant emotions is that we live in a fallen world. God made us to respond to things as they actually are. Human beings *should* be distressed by what is distressing, horrified by violence and abuse, deeply concerned (we'd call it “anxious”) about the possibility of injury to someone or something we love, angry at arrogant injustices. To *not* feel grief when someone we love dies, to not feel discouraged when we find ourselves falling into the same pattern of sin yet again, to not be upset when our children lie or hurt each other would be wrong. Even Job, the man who lost everything in a day and still worshiped

2. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960), 169.

3. For those interested in a more in-depth discussion of God as “vulnerable” or “hurting,” see the appendix, “Does God Really Feel?,” which explains how the doctrine of “impassibility,” the doctrine that God is not driven or changed by passions, is not in conflict with the way the Bible describes him as having emotions in response to the world and people he has made.

God and submitted in faith to God's control, "arose and tore his robe and shaved his head [a sign of grief] and fell on the ground" when he heard about the death of his children and the ravaging of his vast wealth (Job 1:20). You were made in the image of God himself, and that means you were made to see the world as he sees it, to respond as he responds, to hate what he hates, and to be bothered by what brings him displeasure.

That doesn't mean that godly grief or righteous anger or holy discouragement will feel pleasant! It does mean that a whole host of uncomfortable feelings can be deeply godly, right, and holy.

As if that isn't counterintuitive enough, we need to recognize the flip side of this: sometimes it's actually bad to feel good! Obviously things like cruelty (taking joy in causing pain) are wrong, but any kind of positive feeling can be warped. To be glad when someone else suffers a setback because it gets you ahead is wrong. To feel content and peaceful because you have enough heroin for another couple of days even though you're about to lose your kids is a travesty. To feel hopeful that your affair is going to stay secret is a bad thing indeed.

Seeing good in our negative emotions becomes somewhat easier when we realize God displays a whole range of negative feelings in the Bible. For example, he is described in countless places as angry or wrathful. This is hard for most of us. We feel somewhat uneasy and embarrassed by the idea that God is angry at anyone. But what kind of parents *wouldn't* be angry when someone was taking cruel pleasure in abusing their children! This wrath is exactly what the prophet Nahum, for example, recounts. He writes about God coming like a warrior against the Assyrians who had invaded Israel and were famous even in the ancient world for creative cruelty to conquered peoples. In Nahum, God comes like a SWAT team descending on a group of terrorists who have captured and tortured helpless children. If you are a helpless, abused child, God's anger on your behalf is good news. If you have suffered and been mistreated, God being upset by

your pain and furious with those who have harmed you is deeply comforting.

Or think about God's grief. He is grieved in Genesis 6 when he sees the unrelenting arrogance of Adam and Eve's descendants as each passing generation becomes more violent and self-centered. Thousands of years later, in Matthew 23, Jesus mourns the sin and foolishness of his beloved Jerusalem, and he laments that these people have rejected God's loving help and correction again and again and again. And, as we observed a moment ago, Jesus weeps at the death of Lazarus his friend.

It doesn't stop with anger and grief. God is frequently "jealous" for the affection, loyalty, and worship of his people. In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus trembles and sweats blood from some combination of dread, anguish, and loneliness. The list could go on.

Here is the big idea: Our negative emotions, like God's, play a necessary role in our lives. They tell us that something is wrong. Just as happiness, joy, peace, and contentment look around and conclude that things are as they ought to be, so disgust, annoyance, discouragement, and fury are designed to identify places where this fallen world is fallen, where disorder, damage, and destruction have broken something we rightly hold precious. Evaluating the world as fractured and being moved in response are deeply *Christian* experiences.

This doesn't mean our anger or sadness always points us in the right direction—far from it, as we all know from countless personal experiences! Still, we need to understand that our darker feelings are not a curse but a gift. A dangerous gift—sometimes it feels like giving permanent markers to a toddler—but a gift nonetheless. Our emotions—all our emotions—give us the chance to share God's heart, purpose, and perspective and so to truly be his "friends," as Jesus calls the disciples at the Last Supper (John 15:15).

A day is coming when we will never again feel sorrow or anger or fear or disgust, because there will be nothing at which to be

sorrowful or angry or afraid or disgusted. Until that day, however, it is only by entering into both the joys *and* the pains of God's love for his children that we can live in honest, wise relationship with the One who made us. Only those who love the Lord enough to open their hearts to the pain in his world will be able to enter into his joy as well.

Questions for Reflection

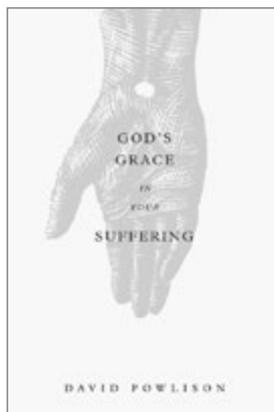
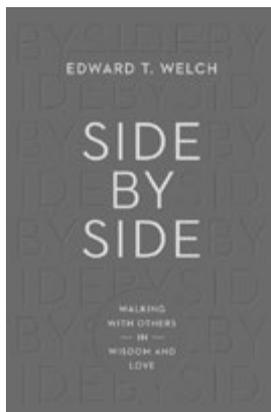
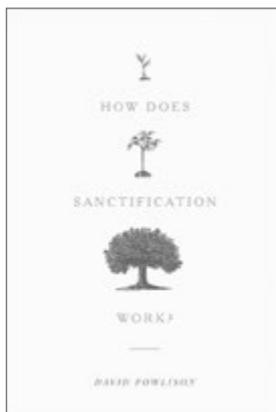
As you face your own feelings:

1. Have you ever thought of your bad feelings as having a good purpose? How does that idea strike you right now?
2. What are the most uncomfortable emotions for you to feel? Why do you think that is?
3. Would you describe yourself as a highly emotional person? As numb? As stable?

As you help others:

1. How does this chapter change the way you look at people in your life whose emotions have been a source of suffering for you?
2. Think about someone you are trying to help and love. What do this person's negative emotions say about how he or she sees the world? What specific things do this individual's emotions identify as broken, warped, or damaged?

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“CCEF is all about giving hope and help with a ‘heart.’ If you want to learn how to effectively use God’s Word in counseling, this is your resource!”

Joni Eareckson Tada, Founder and CEO, Joni and Friends International Disability Center

“The vision of the centrality of God, the sufficiency of Scripture, and the necessity of sweet spiritual communion with the crucified and living Christ—these impulses that lie behind the CCEF ministries make it easy to commend them to everyone who loves the Church.”

John Piper, Founder, desiringGod.org; Chancellor, Bethlehem College & Seminary

Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

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How do you feel about how you feel?

Our emotions are complex. Some of us seem able to ignore our feelings, while others feel controlled by them. But most of us would admit that we don't always know what to do with how we feel.

The Bible teaches us that our emotions are an indispensable part of what makes us human—and play a crucial role in our relationships with God and others. Exploring how God designed emotions for our good, this book shows us how to properly engage with our emotions—even the more difficult ones like fear, anger, shame, guilt, and sorrow—so we can better understand what they reveal about our hearts and handle them wisely in everyday moments.

“This book will lead you to engage with emotions in good and fruitful ways.”

Ed Welch, Faculty and Counselor, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

“The authors have a deep understanding both of Scripture and of human experience, and they have put their insights into a strikingly well-written book, dealing with difficult questions through vivid metaphors, illustrations, and stories.”

John M. Frame, Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy Emeritus,
Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

“*Untangling Emotions* is now my go-to guide on emotions.”

Deepak Reju, Pastor of Biblical Counseling and Family Ministry, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC

J. Alasdair Groves (MDiv, Westminster Theological Seminary) serves as the executive director for the New England branch of the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF). He is also the director of CCEF's School of Biblical Counseling.

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