

Emotions

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Chapter 2

What's Going On Here?

God's Purpose for Our Emotions

Wouldn't life be significantly easier if we didn't have to struggle with our feelings? Wouldn't the problems we face be far more manageable if our emotions weren't involved? Think about it. It usually isn't our circumstances that devastate us; rather, it's the memories and sentiments they stir up that cause us to become disheartened. Our moods can transform any minor trial we face into a truly intense and demoralizing battle.

For example, when dismissed from a job, what is it that really troubles us? Generally, it is that we feel some level of rejection and fear of the future—often wrestling with the wounds caused by other losses we've faced. We wonder if anyone will ever hire us or find us competent again. Of course, we have the assurance "My God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus." (**Philippians 4:19**) As believers, we have absolutely no reason to suspect that the Father will ultimately fail to supply what we need. But our emotions undermine the sense of security we should have in God's perfect provision.

Likewise, when waiting for the Lord to fulfill a heart's desire or promise to us, why do we distrust Him? Why don't we think about all the times God has kept His word and proven Himself faithful? Isn't it Him? Why don't we think about all the times God has kept His word and proven Himself faithful? Isn't it because of our feelings—because we doubt ourselves and our circumstances? Don't we focus on the instances when our hopes were disappointed? Aren't we bombarded with feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness? When waiting on the Father, we could easily claim promises such as the one we find in **Romans 8:31-32**: "If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" But our emotions often stand in direct opposition to our faith in the Lord and what He is achieving for us.

Sadly, our emotions can even keep us from obeying God. Not long ago, I spoke with a man who admitted to me that when he was young, the Lord called him to become a pastor. It had been more than thirty years, but he told me he could still remember how strong and powerful the Father's call was. From his demeanor, it was easy to tell he was wracked with regret that he had failed to pursue it.

"What kept you from obeying Him?" I asked.

He didn't hesitate in replying, "I was scared."

"What of?" I asked.

"I was petrified at the very idea of public speaking. The thought of getting up in front of a crowd still causes my mouth to go dry and my heart to pound. I couldn't imagine preaching."

What a tragedy. This man missed the awesome privilege of serving God because of fear. I could see the lack of fulfillment and disappointment on his face. He would always be left wondering what the Lord could have done through him—what people could have been saved and what lives could have been transformed had he been faithful. Yet this is what our emotions sometimes do—they prevent us from obeying God and trusting the excellent plans He has for our lives.

So why would our loving heavenly Father give us our feelings in the first place? Why would He equip us with the capacity to feel such terrible sorrow, rejection, and despair when these emotions can be so destructive? What was His purpose?

The Gift of Emotions

As I suggested in the previous chapter, the Father formed us with the ability to experience emotions so we could enjoy life, interact meaningfully with others, and mirror his likeness. But from the time sin entered the world, painful feelings surfaced that had not been observed previously in the Garden of Eden.

After they disobeyed God by eating the fruit that was forbidden, Adam and Eve expressed shame at their nakedness (**Genesis 3:7**) and dread toward the Lord (**Genesis 3:10**)—sentiments they had not felt beforehand in the biblical record. (**Genesis 2:25**) This doesn't mean they did not have the capacity to experience these emotions until the fall. In fact, we know that even before the fall, the Father saw the possibility that Adam would face loneliness and took action. (**Genesis 2:18**) Rather, it means that one of the consequences of their sin was to awaken these negative feelings in them.

Likewise, the fall does not make our emotions any less of a gift from God. Instead, it signifies that it is even more important for us to understand the reasons the Father gave us our feelings and to live within the healthy boundaries He has given us for them.

For example, before Adam sinned, he was never frightened of spending time with God. He would walk with the Father, learn from Him, and enjoy His presence. But after the fall, Adam was so afraid of being seen by the Lord that he hid himself. (**Genesis 3:10**)

Ever since then, the Father has had to encourage us repeatedly: “Do not fear” (**Genesis 15:1**), “love the LORD your God” (**Deuteronomy 6:5**), and “walk in His ways.” (**Deuteronomy 8:6**) Like Adam, the consequences of sin within us make us feel vulnerable and exposed when we meet with God, so we may hide ourselves from Him as a result. But realizing this, we can make a decision to do what we know will heal us—which is to “draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace.” (**Hebrews 4:16**)

With this in mind, let us take a closer look at why the Lord gave us the ability to feel.

1. So We Can Enjoy Life

The first reason we were created with emotions is so we can enjoy and appreciate the lives God has given us. Just imagine what our existence would be like if we couldn't experience love, happiness, excitement, fulfillment, or surprise. Think about how awful it would be to have no internal reaction or affective response when a child is born, a victory is won, or great goals are achieved. To not feel joy, satisfaction, or delight in these events would be a tragedy indeed. We wouldn't be living; we would simply exist with nothing to motivate us but our physical needs.

But perhaps you wonder, *Why didn't God just give us the affirming emotions? Why did He give us the painful ones as well?* This is a good question—similar to one theologians and philosophers have wrestled with for centuries: *Why would our gracious Father allow grief and suffering?*

As we just discussed, we live in a fallen world, and the enemy takes the aspects of our lives that the Lord meant for good—especially our emotions—and distorts them in order to cause us pain and keep us from serving God. However, the Father created us with the ability to experience negative emotions for some very practical and advantageous reasons that we cannot ignore. In fact, they are crucial for our daily lives.

For example, we can probably agree that a healthy fear of lions, grizzly bears, and active volcanoes is good. It protects us from approaching them foolishly without the proper precautions and losing our lives.

Likewise, the sorrow we feel when a loved one passes away not only helps us understand how valuable life is but also teaches us to appreciate the time we have with people.

However, I think the most important reason we have been given the more difficult emotions is because without them, we might not realize we need God. Most people don't seek the Lord when they are happy—at least, not in the beginning of their relationship with Him. They do not automatically ascribe the blessings they receive to His kind and generous hand.

Rather, it is in the difficult times that the majority of people look to the Father for help. Perhaps they have hit rock bottom, the painful consequences of their sins overwhelm them, and they recognize they need His divine deliverance. Or maybe someone they love is suffering and there is nothing they can do other than pray. It could even be that a persistent emptiness or uneasiness continually assails their soul, so they search for answers. Whatever the case, the emotional distress gets their attention and drives them to the Lord, who then offers them a gift they may not have realized they needed—eternal life.

I realize that is a very brief treatment of the topic of suffering, and that to do it justice, we must look into it more deeply. I promise we will do so in the pages to come. We will also examine how the enemy warps our emotions in order to overwhelm us and keep us in bondage.

The point is, the Father can teach us to enjoy and appreciate our lives even through our negative emotions. Therefore when we experience them, we must remember that He never intended for us to remain in them. Rather, their purpose is to protect us, show us what is good, and make us aware of what is really important and fulfilling.

2. So We Can Meaningfully Relate to Others

Many things divide people: cultures, tastes, politics, beliefs, and what have you. But what binds us together—what helps us understand each other and connects us to one another—is our emotions. I've often been amazed that the sermons that are meaningful to people in the United States are just as poignant to those in Venezuela, Kenya, Lebanon, Bulgaria, and Malaysia, even though our societies are so diverse. Of course, it is the power of the Holy Spirit that makes those messages powerful and all glory goes to God. But He uses the commonality of our brokenness, sins, needs, and trials to reach people all over the world with His good news of salvation.

This is because we have all faced the deep, piercing pain of losing someone we care for through betrayal, distance, rejection, or death. We also realize how wonderful it is to be loved and to cherish others in return. And whether we recognize it or not, we long to be accepted, to belong, and to be considered worthy—especially by the One who comprehends us completely and will never forsake us.

This is why our strongest, most long-lasting relationships are usually with individuals we trust enough to share our most intimate thoughts and feelings with. We feel joined to them because they appreciate and comprehend us, which is often due to the fact that they've experienced many of the same trials, emotions, and comforts from the Father as we have.

Unfortunately, we often use our emotions as an excuse to build walls in opposition to each other. Someone offends, upsets, or stirs the envy within us and how do we react? Rather than seeking to comprehend where they are coming from or why they bring up these pains within us, we write them off, bad-mouth them, and try to turn others against them.

But there is a reason God calls us to “Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep...If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.” (**Romans 12:15, 18**) He gave us our emotions to understand one another—so we could reach into another's deepest wounds and become His instrument of healing to them. (**2 Corinthians 1:3-7**)

This is one of the reasons Jesus came to Earth. Of course, the most important purpose was to reconcile us to the Father through the cross. But **Hebrews 2:17-18** also tells us Christ “had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He was suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.”

Our Savior wanted to know how we feel, so He could relate to us in a meaningful way and truly help us live. He wanted to connect with us so we could unite with Him and experience the profound, abiding joy of knowing the Lord. We are called to do likewise with others.

3. So We Can Reflect the Image of God

Galatians 5:22-23 tells us, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control.” This means that when the character of Christ is formed in us through the work of the Holy Spirit, these are the qualities that flow out from us. **(Romans 8:29)** The Father does this so we can demonstrate His graciousness, mercy and passion to the world. These were never meant to be passive virtues that merely make us feel better about ourselves. Rather, the Lord gave us these Spirit-born feelings to mobilize us to action.

For example, consider the godly attribute of kindness. It isn’t formed within us so that others will know us as nice people—though that may be a by-product. What the Father really wants is to stir His emotion of compassion within us so we will faithfully express it to others. The apostle James asks, “If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,’ and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?” **(James 2:15-16)** In other words, we need to actively demonstrate kindness.

Why? Because as we do so, God works through us to draw others to Himself. This is in accordance with Jesus’ command in **Matthew 5:16**, in which He tells us, “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”

Therefore, through our emotions, the Lord marshals us to do His kingdom work and to fulfill His plans in the world. Or, as Paul says in **2 Corinthians 5:20**, “We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us.” We reflect His character and love so others can know Him and experience His mercy.

This means He will work through your emotions to help you understand His purpose for your life. For example, what stirs compassion in your heart? What injustices make you especially angry? Who is it that you cannot bear to see suffering? The Lord may have given you a special sensitivity in your heart for that person or group of people so you could be a blessing to them.

Something’s Wrong

Now, we know that the Father gave us our emotions so we could enjoy life, relate to others, and represent Him in the world. Also, in **2 Timothy 1:7**, the apostle Paul assures us, “God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.” So why is it that so many struggle with anxiety, rejection, bitterness, guilt, and despair? Why do we get stuck when dealing with these feelings and how do they gain such overwhelming strength in our lives?

As we noted previously, this happens when we lack control over this powerful force within us. Our emotions were given to serve us, but they become liabilities when they are not under our command. This is due to the fact many people try to manage their feelings in unhealthy ways that are not at all helpful.

1. The Belief that Emotion Is a Weakness

Some believe that being emotional is a sign of weakness—that men should not cry and so forth—so they repress what they feel. Of course, we know that is not true because the Lord Jesus wept **(John 11:35)** and often expressed His joy **(Luke 10:21)**, anger **(Matthew 21:12-13)**, and other sentiments. But these individuals refuse to acknowledge that they experience certain emotions at all. They deny their feelings, continually rejecting the fact that they exist. So their distresses and grievances remain trapped within them—wreaking havoc on their lives, health, and relationships.

2. The Inclination to Suppress or Stifle Emotions

Some people recognize that they have feelings—they admit they are present—but refuse to express them. This could be for all sorts of reasons. Perhaps they fear what they sense within themselves or do not know how to communicate their sentiments in a healthy manner. It could be that they were taught at a young age that emotions are their enemies—to reveal what they are feeling is to give power to others. Whatever the cause, they, like those who repress their concerns, keep their huts trapped within them and experience pain and isolation. They may also seek to vent their frustration in covert, devious, or vindictive ways, but it never helps.

3. The Drive to Drown Out Emotions

People who do this feel and express their emotions, but attempt to dull their effects through any number of means—busyness, hobbies, mood-altering substances, addictive behaviors, unhealthy relationships, etc. Perhaps they believe if they numb their feelings sufficiently, their wounds will eventually heal themselves. Or maybe they are simply trying to escape long enough for the most excruciating of the hurts to subside. Sadly, when a person does not address his or her pain, it never really goes away. It simply festers within them, causing other problems.

4. The Need to Express All Emotions without a Filter

The fourth error people make in responding to their emotions is to express everything they feel all of time with barely any filter. This, of course, is never wise. Look at what the book of Proverbs has to say about unrestraint:

- When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise.” **(10:19)**
- “A quick-tempered man acts foolishly.” **(14:17)**
- “Like a city that broken into and without walls is a man who has no control over his spirit.” **(25:27-28)**
- A fool always loses his temper, but a wise man holds it back.” **(29:11)**
- An angry man stirs up strife, and a hot-tempered man abounds in transgression.” **(29:22)**

Unwise, indeed. These individuals often vent their emotions without any discipline or discretion—and they do so to anyone who has the misfortune of being around them. They may even find this to be an effective way to get attention. But instead alleviating their suffering, this actually serves to deepen and intensify it.

This is not to say we don’t need an outlet for our feelings. We absolutely do. We all benefit from loving, godly people who will listen to us and give us wise counsel. But even our closest, most devoted friends do not want to know all the complaints we have, every time we have them. They could not bear that, and we should not ask them to.

Instead, if you would like a truly safe and restorative place to express your emotions, there is only One who offers that—and that is the Father.

Here is what you can do: Go to your bedroom, your prayer closet, or wherever you can have some time alone. It is best if no one will interrupt you. Get on your knees, open the Word of God, and tell the Lord whatever you’re feeling. Be honest—He will not get mad at you. In fact, He already knows what you are thinking and what’s plaguing you.

Not only is He always willing to listen, but when you are in such pain that you cannot communicate what’s in your heart, He also assures you of help. “The Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” **(Romans 8:26-27)**

This is a particularly important promise if you are used to repressing or suppressing your emotions. It may be that you do not understand what you feel or have never learned how to articulate what's inside of you. The Holy Spirit can teach you the healthy, beneficial ways to express and take hold of your emotions.

Finding the Real Root

Of course, I am certain there are those who wonder, *What about counseling? Medication? Group therapy? Aren't those needed? Don't some people need extra help for their problems?*

Yes, some do—and God can work through those remedies to help people. However, there are so many who have tried everything and still haven't found rest from their painful emotions or any victory in their lives. Nothing seems to reach deep enough within them. Therefore, my goal as a pastor and fellow believer is to help with the spiritual aspect of your feelings, because that truly permeates everything else in your life.

Unfortunately, in our find-it-fast world, our first response is often to seek a solution that covers the wounds we have, rather than really healing them.

For instance, we know medication is necessary for those who have true biochemical imbalances. When our bodies are not functioning as they should, the physical problems can affect our emotions. A good example of this is an underactive thyroid (also known as *hypothyroidism*), which can slow a person down, making the individual feel weary, drained, and depressed. Conversely, an overactive thyroid (also known as *hyperthyroidism*) can increase a person's level of irritability and anxiety. Both of these conditions—and the others that cause an imbalance of your internal chemistry—can and should be treated.

However, it concerns me greatly how often people turn to prescription treatments—often enduring the most terrible side effects imaginable—merely to *numb* their emotions. The problems still exist because they are not truly biochemical or physical in nature; rather, they're relational and spiritual.

I realize that as you read this, it is possible you've already made this choice; perhaps you have turned to medications to anesthetize your anguish but are still struggling. My prayer is that you will realize that God has better plans for you and He wants you to be free. The Father can heal the emotional bondage that remains within you that no prescription has been able to or will ever be able to touch. Of course, this does not mean you should discontinue using a medication immediately without your doctor's guidance—some drugs have devastating effects if stopped too quickly. Rather, what I am saying is that if your problem is not biochemical or physical, there is a far better and more effective way to deal with it—and that is with God's help. The Lord can give you victory over the pain you feel. You do not have to live with a dulled version of those emotions constantly assailing you.

As for Christian counselors, I think they can be extremely helpful as long as you're careful. You should always be cautious about whose advice you listen to and put into practice. Therefore, when looking for a counselor, the wisest thing to do is make sure the person you speak with is not only a mature believer who is focused on God but also a faithful confidant who will also be discreet about what you share with him.

Christian counselors can be very effective in helping us overcome difficult emotions. They can teach us a great deal about why we respond the way we do. They can also show us the important tools we need in order to overcome our difficulties. In fact, I think the most important benefit we can gain from godly counselors, mentors, and leaders is their helping us identify the patterns of thinking that are keeping us in bondage.

You see, our feelings really find their root in the beliefs we focus on and the messages we repeat to ourselves. Our emotions are the product of our thought-life.

Proverbs 23:7 tells us that a person “thinks within himself, so he is.” If we continually tell ourselves, “I am worthless. I am inadequate. No one respects me. No one could ever love me,”

it is no wonder that our emotions are a devastating mess. This affects everything about us—our health, relationships, and even how our faces appear to others.

This is why Paul tells us, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” (**Romans 12:2**) He understood that our feelings and behavior could only change when the Holy Spirit’s transformational work had begun in our minds.

This is the reason it is so exceedingly important to spend time in God’s Word and in His powerful presence. We need to take hold of what the Lord—the limitless Creator of heaven and earth, our wise Maker, faithful Savior, omnipotent Defender, loving heavenly Father, and sovereign King—has to say about us, rather than believing the lies we’ve been told by flawed and fallen humanity.

I have seen firsthand throughout the years, but especially as I preached a series of sermons entitled, “How the Truth Can Set You Free” based on **John 8:32**, “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” Every week, invariably someone would approach me, their face radiant, their new freedom shining in their eyes, and would say, “Dr. Stanley, they Lord has really set me free—He has changed my life through His truth. Thank you for teaching me!”

I can recall thinking, *Father, I am grateful You’re doing this awesome work...but what about me? I want to experience that freedom as well.*

I knew I wasn’t living with the abundant joy and liberty He had given me. Thankfully, after months of seeing people transformed by His Word, God finally changed me, too. I learned that, by faith, my thinking had to be revolutionized. I had to give up what I believed and take His truth as absolute, undeniable, unchangeable, and unwavering fact.

This is my prayer for you as well. You see, somewhere along the line, there are falsehoods that have gotten stuck in your thought patterns. There are lies that you repeat to yourself as you make decisions about your circumstances. For you to be free, those have to be removed and replaced with the powerful principles of the everlasting God.

Are you willing? It will take some work—disciplined biblical reflection and faithful obedience to the Savior—but I guarantee it is worth it. Because “if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” (**John 8:36**) And isn’t that what you truly long for, after all?

Father, thank You for the gift of emotions. How grateful I am that through them I can enjoy and appreciate the life You’ve given me, I can relate to others in a meaningful way, and I can reflect Your image to this hurting world. In faith I claim that my emotions are a blessing from You and that You can work through them for my good and Your glory.

Lord God, I confess that at times I have allowed my negative feelings and false beliefs to rule me—allowing them to stand in direct opposition to what You are doing in and through me. You promise that when we repent of our sins, You are faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. So I thank You, Father, both for forgiving me and for teaching me how to be free from the lies that keep me in bondage.

Help me to be completely honest about how I feel and the struggles I have. Where I am repressing or suppressing emotions, please unearth them and show me how to verbalize what I feel to You. Where I have drowned my feelings and tried to escape them, please give me courage to bravely confront them. And whenever I am tempted to complain to a friend or grumble about something I am experiencing, please remind me to take my concerns to You first. Open Your Word to me, guide me in Your truth, and help me to be obedient to You in every situation that may arise.

Thank You, Father, for hearing my prayers and beginning the process of transforming the way I think. Thank You for setting me free with Your truth and teaching me the boundaries that protect me and honor You. To You alone belong all glory, power, and praise in abundance. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Questions for Persona Reflection and Group Study

1. What makes your emotions gifts from God?
2. Of the reasons given for why the Lord gave us the ability to feel, which one(s) do you relate to the most? Why is this aspect important to you?
3. Have your emotions ever kept you from obeying God's call? Explain the circumstances.
4. Are you more apt to express your feelings or suppress them? How has that method affected your relationships with others?
5. How could opening yourself emotionally to the Father help give you a sense of freedom in your relationship with Him?
6. Has God moved you to a better understanding of your emotions and thoughts through this material so far? How so?
7. Have you ever experienced God's leading in terms of understanding the plans He has for your life? If so, how did it make you feel? If not, what do you think is preventing you from knowing the Lord's will?