

# Nourishing Your Emotional Life



by J. ALASDAIR GROVES

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A healthy, godly emotional life doesn't just happen. It takes work, time, and grace. An enormous amount of work, actually—and a *lifetime* of grace. But it's a different kind of work than you might think. In fact, all Christians seeking to live faithfully before the Lord and grow in relationship with him *are* working on their emotions, though most aren't consciously aware of it.

We can nurture godly maturity in our emotional lives without mastering a complex list of spiritual techniques or even consciously paying attention to our emotions. This is no throwaway insight. By pouring ourselves into simply knowing, trusting and deepening our love for Christ, we will, as an inseparable result, develop godly feelings. Our hearts will grow more and more to love what God loves (which will necessarily mean hating what God hates as well). Emotions, at their essence, overflow from what we love. We rejoice or feel content when what we love is blessed, safe and present. We mourn, rage, and fear when what we love is lost, harmed or threatened. Therefore, the more we love the Lord God and his kingdom, the more our emotions will overflow in godly ways, whether that is godly grief and anger at the tragedies of sin and suffering, or godly joy and contentment at the fruit of the Spirit in our lives or the lives of those around us. Thanks be to God, walking with Christ not only changes who we are, but it changes what we most love. This is the only

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true path to a spiritually rich emotional life.

This article<sup>1</sup> then has a very simple goal: to lay out six accessible practices that will incubate and nourish a godly health and maturity in your emotions across the entire emotional spectrum. These suggestions are *not* tools for changing your emotions. Rather, they are ways to harness wise, normal, spiritual practices that will grow your love for what God loves and gradually mold your feelings to reflect the emotional life of our Lord.

This, of course, does not mean there are only six ways to nurture good emotions in your life! Far from it. So please take this as a nudge to get you going, a gentle push to start your feet moving a few steps down a long road. My hope is that reflecting on and walking out any of these steps will make it easier for you to identify other areas that can enrich your heart too.

### **Read Your Bible**

Many of you will have a sinking feeling when you see that my first suggestion is to “read your Bible.” Not only is this about the most *un-novel* suggestion you have heard for the Christian life, but it also could very easily feel like a trite answer to a complex topic. Or, worse, it could actually feel condemning and guilt inducing, as if I’m suggesting that if you would just read your Bible, then your emotions would all fall into line.

The reason I start with “read your Bible” is none of these. Instead, I start here because reading the Bible is a perfect poster child for the idea that you don’t have to come up with fancy new methods to mature your emotions. Even this most basic of Christian practices can bear rich fruit in your emotional life.

There are three main ways the Bible does this. The first and most obvious is when we turn to favorite passages in the midst of strong, troubling emotions such as anxiety, anger, confusion, bitterness, guilt, or despair—and find help.

For example, I vividly remember a late evening in early 2010, sitting in a colleague’s guest room nervously preparing myself to meet with pastors the next day. The future of the counseling center we were hoping to found hinged on the conversations of the next twenty-four hours, and I strongly suspected at least one of these conversations might be strained. I am not prone to anxiety,

<sup>1</sup> This article is an adaptation of a portion of my content from a forthcoming book entitled *Emotions Untangled*, which is scheduled for publication by Crossway in the spring of 2019.

but anxiety tugged and clutched at me more intensely that night than I had ever felt before or since.

Knowing that the Bible was a good place to go with my fears, I opened up to the Psalms, and God kindly placed Psalm 27 in front of me. It begins: “The Lord is my light and my salvation.” This reminded me God needed to be my hope—not our counseling center. It continues: “Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear.” If David did not need to fear literal armies, how much more could I claim refuge! It helped that night as well to see that David needed to remind himself repeatedly of the good reasons he had not to fear. I could almost hear David’s heart beating with anxiety as he wrestled his own soul toward trust in the Lord. My eyes clung to the words of the psalm that night like a rock climber to a handhold on a steep cliff. I’ve been back to Psalm 27 countless times, and also taken countless other fearful people there in counseling.

Here is a second way the Bible impacts your emotions. Words are powerful. Words that you read and hear shape your perspective. The effect may be extremely subtle, of course. In fact, most of the time you’re entirely unaware that words have made any difference at all. But, for better or worse, words always matter. They reinforce your perspective or undercut it, focus your attention or distract you, force you to pause or hurry you along. This is not just a possibility or even a strong likelihood. It is inevitable. The words we are exposed to mold our hearts far more than we think.

Which words do you want shaping the way you see and respond to the world?

How do the words of Scripture, in particular, alter your perspective for the better? In a thousand ways. They make you think about the trials and faith of the biblical characters, the similarity of your heart to theirs, and God’s faithfulness to them. God’s words soak your mind in explicit hopes, promises, comforts, reassurances, commands, reminders, and warnings. They call your attention to who God is, who you are, and how the world works. They engage your emotions directly through humor, lament, dry sarcasm, impassioned entreaty, and euphoric exaltation. They boost you up onto your mental tiptoes to peer through a window in history at God’s tender care for a young Moabite woman and her widowed Israelite mother-in-law, a youngest son whom God anoints to kill a giant and become a king, a self-righteous

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