



A topical video study derived from the CCEF National Conference on *Emotions*

EMOTIONS

Understanding and Expressing the Heart

with Joni Eareckson Tada,
Winston T. Smith,
Alasdair Groves,
and Aaron Sironi

This workbook is intended for personal use.
The Group Handouts may be reproduced or copied. No other
part of this workbook may be reproduced or copied in any
means except with the prior written consent of the
Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation.

Emotions: Understanding and Expressing the Heart

Copyright © 2019, by Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation.
All rights reserved.

Speakers

Joni Eareckson Tada
Winston T. Smith, MDiv
Alasdair Groves, MDiv
Aaron Sironi, MS, LCPC

Curriculum Development

Bruce E. Eaton, MDiv
Rebecca Eaton, MA

Permissions

This workbook is intended for personal and group use. The Group Handouts may be reproduced or copied. Other parts of this workbook may not be reproduced or copied except with the prior written consent of the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation.

Requests for additional permissions should be sent to:

Customer Service
1803 East Willow Grove Avenue
Glenside, PA 19038
customerservice@ccef.org

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway and The Holy Bible: New International Version®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the curriculum developers.

ISBN: 978-1-938294-39-6

The Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF) is a non-profit ministry founded in 1968. CCEF exists to restore Christ to counseling and counseling to the church by thinking biblically about the issues of living. We accomplish this mission through our teaching, writing, and counseling ministries. We are located in Glenside, PA. To learn more about our ministry, visit us at www.ccef.org.

EMOTIONS

Understanding and Expressing the Heart

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Getting Started	2
Emotions in the Face of Suffering <i>Joni Eareckson Tada</i>	5
Feeling Bad About Feeling Bad <i>Winston T. Smith</i>	19
Why Do I Feel How I Feel? <i>Alasdair Groves</i>	33
What Do I Do With My Feelings? <i>Alasdair Groves</i>	47
Emotions and Relationships <i>Winston T. Smith</i>	63
Supplemental Lesson For Better or For Worse—marital intimacy for couples and helpers <i>Aaron Sironi</i>	81
Group Handouts	98
About the Speakers	105

Getting Started

About the Series

Emotions—understanding and expressing the heart is part of a CCEF series of topical studies for individuals and groups. Each study helps you to develop a biblical perspective on important topics that address counseling-related needs in the church. You will have opportunities in this series to learn the content and apply it to your own life and ministry context.

Other topics include:

- Psychiatric Disorders: A biblical approach to understanding complex problems
- Loss: A biblical approach to understanding how God transforms our sorrows
- Growing Together: A biblical approach to fruitful ministry in the body of Christ
- Uncovering Shame & Guilt: How Jesus enters our experience

About this Study

Emotions—understanding and expressing the heart addresses several important questions.

- Emotions can be overwhelming. How does finding Jesus in the midst of your circumstances change the trajectory of your experience?
- People often want to avoid experiencing negative emotions. How can you grow in understanding that the Christian life involves a call to feel bad at times?
- God has emotions and we are made in his image. How do we understand the significance of emotions as God's image bearers? How are God's emotions different than ours?
- Emotions can be difficult to identify and understand. Many different emotions can be felt at the same time. How can you grow in your ability to identify and discern the emotions you experience?
- Emotions are the overflow of our love and worship. How can you evaluate what your emotions communicate to God and others about what you love? How can you cultivate a desire to grow and change?
- God wants us to bring our emotions to him. How can your emotions help you speak about your neediness to God and to other people?
- Entering the experience and emotions of another person is the fruit of sincere Christian love. How can you grow in the important skills needed for ministry to others?

About the Videos

This workbook is intended to be used with its corresponding video series. Each video was recorded at CCEF's annual conference by professional videographers. Videos range in length from 37 minutes to 45 minutes for this study. The supplemental video is 49 minutes. You can watch the video while following along with either the workbook or the handouts. Each lesson in the workbook separates the key teaching points of each talk; and if you want to watch the video in segments for a group study, you will be able to find cues in the workbook for where a natural break and pause could be.

There is a supplemental lesson in this study entitled *For Better or For Worse—marital intimacy for couples and helpers*. This lesson was developed for two different audiences. First, it can be used by married couples to deepen and grow their relationship. Second, it can be used by helpers who want to grow in their understanding and approach to aiding married couples who are struggling. This lesson provides a biblical foundation of marriage, looks at the marital gift of the one-flesh union, and explores what the call to “cling to one another” means in Genesis 2:25.

About the Workbook

Each section of the Workbook includes a *Before You Begin* activity. Immediately following is the *Lesson Overview* which may be helpful to read prior to starting the video. Talks conclude with a *Reflection Activity* followed by *Study Questions*.

There are three types of *Study Questions*: Opening the Door, Getting Engaged, and Make This Your Own. The variety of questions allows the study to be adapted to meet the goals of a particular learner or group. The questions have been designed to provide depth and rich interaction for a learner. Yet the study is flexible enough to be used in a more casual setting, in which case not every question will be utilized.

Listed below is an overview of the types of questions in this study.

Opening the Door

- These questions help you to interact with the overall themes of the lesson and study.
- These questions allow you to reflect on your immediate impressions of the talk and respond to points you might disagree with. These questions also help you to identify specific things you still aren't sure about.

Getting Engaged

- These questions zoom in to specific teaching points and help you interact with the key elements and points of the lesson.
- At times these questions require more work, reflection, and thought. Sometimes these questions are more in-depth and challenging.

Make This Your Own

- These questions encourage you to apply the teaching points and themes from the lesson to your own life.
- These questions can build upon other lessons and ask you to consider ministry to others as you seek to engage practically with what you have learned.

A Note for Group Leaders

This Workbook can be used at two different levels for group study. For an in-depth study, both leader and participants will purchase and use the Workbook. Participants will have the time (2 hours per week) and interest (study and reflection outside the group) for in-depth study.

For an introductory study, the group leader can purchase and use the Workbook as preparation for facilitating group discussion in a small group setting or Sunday School class. The group leader will provide participants with copies of the Group Handouts. In this setting, we recommend selecting only a few study questions or activities for each lesson. When selecting which activities and questions to use, keep the particular interests of your group in mind as well as your allotted timeframe.

PREVIEW COPY ONLY

Emotions in the Face of Suffering

Joni Eareckson Tada

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

In this study you will explore what emotions are by looking at these questions:

- How do I understand God's emotions?
- Why do I have emotions?
- Why might I avoid experiences that involve negative emotions? And why might I hesitate to see "the good" in my negative emotions?
- How should I understand and then respond to my emotions?
- How do emotions impact relationships?

Our study begins with the testimony of a well-known Christian woman who has experienced a tremendous amount of physical suffering in her life. Joni Eareckson Tada shares about the many negative emotions she has wrestled with in the face of physical affliction. As you listen to her story, notice how she thoughtfully articulates how the Lord has met her in her struggle and helped her faith to grow through it. One key way she has grown is by recognizing that her emotions point her to a deeper struggle with the underlying motivations of her heart, which impacts her relationship with God.

Before you watch Joni's talk, take a moment to identify a period of suffering in your life; it can be past or present. Where do you feel overwhelmed as you reflect on your suffering? What seems impossible? As you identify your emotional responses to this suffering, how can you better understand the meaning behind your emotions?

LESSON OVERVIEW

In this lesson we hear the testimony of Joni Eareckson Tada. Joni shares what life is like with quadriplegia, with a special focus on emotions in the face of suffering. Her testimony is filled with joy and hope—it is evident, Jesus has captured her affections.¹

LIVING WITH SUFFERING

Living with Quadriplegia

Most people think that living with quadriplegia is utterly overwhelming, and it is. Joni remembers shortly after she broke her neck she met a young man in the rehabilitation center. He told her that he had been in a wheelchair for eight years. It was unimaginable to Joni. She said, “I was a teenager who still wretched at the thought of having to sit down for the rest of my life.”

Joni has been living as a quadriplegic for over 50 years, and she still looks back and thinks,

“God, how did I do that?”

“How did I make it? How have I done it after all this time?”

Quadriplegia still seems impossible.

About a month ago Joni was writing to a 17-year-old boy. He is now a quadriplegic after a swimming accident. Halfway through her letter to him, in which she listed several trials that he should expect as he goes through rehabilitation, she had to stop. She was devastated and cried out to God.

“Oh, God, how will this young man ever make it? How will he do it unless you help him? Tommy is facing the impossible.”

Facing a Life-altering Loss

A self-portrait that Joni drew after her diving accident captures the horror and dread of the experience and its implications for her life. Joni said, “It is a self-portrait, but it is also Tommy’s portrait, and any person’s portrait who is facing a life-altering loss.” There are many ways one might experience a life-altering loss.²

- Quadriplegia or paraplegia
- Traumatic brain injury
- Deep loneliness
- Disappointment
- Mental illness
- Death of a dream

A life-altering loss is not something you expect. You do not plan for it. After the initial shock, denial, anger, and bargaining are somewhat behind you, the depressing reality of the “new normal” begins to sink in. You think to yourself, *“Oh God, this is now my life?”*

Joni said, “You all know my story, the story that came out of that anguished self-portrait. There is no need to explain to this group how God rescued me. In fact, some of the people God used, who were instrumental in rescuing me, are sitting in this audience. But the self-portrait, that ghoulish anguish is not entirely behind me.”³

New Suffering, New Emotions

In 1998, during a visit to Holland, a long and arduous journey of dealing daily with chronic pain began.⁴

It is hard to explain why and how a quadriplegic can even feel pain. Pain in Joni’s lower back and left hip became all-consuming, robbing her of joy and the ability to focus on anything.

Overcoming the pain

Joni and her husband tried to be reasonable and level-headed, and so they tackled the pain with a level-headed plan. They went to hospitals, visited doctors, and had many tests performed. They tried homeopathic remedies and pain medication. Nothing helped.

By 2007 the pain made quadriplegia feel like a walk in the park. Joni would dread the nights because she could not make herself comfortable, and she would dread the mornings because she knew the pain would be worse and she would be sore and stiff.

And depression, dark, grim depression, something she had not felt in years began to settle in like a constant low-grade fever.

Finding grace for the totally unbearable

By 2009 Joni cried out to God, *O God, this is now my life? I don’t think I can do this! I don’t think*

I can handle pain like this! She said, “I could not believe how easily overcome I was by fears of the future, and that my pain might get worse!”

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

1 Corinthians 10:13

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.

2 Corinthians 12:9

Joni said, “I knew that God would not let any testing befall me for which he would not also give grace to bear it. But where was the grace for the totally unbearable? I did not believe that God thought I could handle this, even with his grace. I was surprised and ashamed for feeling like this. This pain left me in deep waters, with uncontrolled pain emotionally dragging me under the water.”

Testing, temptations, and intensifying negative emotions

During this time Joni was serving on a coalition to defeat a proposed assisted suicide law. Joni’s pain and her emotions took her down an even darker path. This law may be written for the terminally ill, but it could jeopardize people with disabilities as people ask questions like, “where does a disability stop being a disability and become a terminal illness?” But when she would lie in bed at night and was alone with her thoughts, she wondered if assisted suicide might not be a bad idea.⁵

Joni said, “I knew that my pain was under the governance of my sovereign God. But now God’s sovereignty seemed so scary. I was supposed to be able to trust in his sovereignty. This doctrine had always been a comfort to me throughout all my years in my wheelchair.”

Following after Christ

Joni’s thoughts brought her to Jesus and his cross. She said,

“I wondered how Jesus felt when he was in the garden of Gethsemane? He shuddered, he trembled, he sweated, and he prayed that the gruesome cup might pass from him.

“He knew the cross was his Father’s will, but I don’t think that softened the foreboding hor-

ror of it all. Even when he was impaled on cross beams, Jesus' emotions tumbled out. He cried from his gut, *My God, why have you forsaken me?*⁶

“If you think about it, the scene is emotional and so hard. Yet at that very moment Jesus had to know, he had to know, that he was in the very center of his Father's perfect will. As I mused on Jesus, on his cross, I realized I am also in the very center of my Father's perfect will. Even in *this* pain, and even though my pitiful and pathetic emotions insisted otherwise.”

Breast Cancer

The pain persisted until 2010 when Joni was diagnosed with stage-3 breast cancer. Ironically, the very day she learned the news her depression lifted. She thought, *O merciful God, you are getting ready to take me home. I am so grateful. I am so thankful. Hallelujah! Here I'm coming.*

Her depression also lifted because her focus was off pain and entirely on battling her cancer. Joni would need a major surgery and a lengthy treatment of chemotherapy. As the doctor described all she would undergo, she sobbed and said to Ken, “I can't do this! This is enough. I cannot do this.”

A Turning Point

Joni's battle with quadriplegia for 50 years had been her footrace against men. But cancer was a race against horses.

*If you have raced with men on foot, and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses?
Jeremiah 12:5*

Friends often questioned why she was called to suffer so much.

*For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.
1 Peter 2:21*

Joni understood her calling and believed she could follow in Jesus' steps, even if it included elements of foreboding horror. She knew Jesus was worth it. But she didn't always feel what she knew to be true. This was her struggle and challenge.

The emotional turning point for Joni occurred as she experienced a deeper fellowship with Jesus as a result of her suffering. She reflected, “Suffering wakes you up and gets you thinking about the real hell Christ has rescued you from. What are splash-overs of heaven? Days without pain? Easy, breezy days? Are those splash-overs of heaven? No. A splash-over of heaven is finding Jesus in the midst of your splash-over of hell. There’s nothing more poignant than finding Jesus is with you right in the middle of your hell. That was an emotional turning point. My emotions finally got in line with my head, my heart, and the Word of God. I saw Jesus as I had not quite seen him before.”

SEEING JESUS

In Joni’s early days of quadriplegia, it helped her to know that she had a Savior who had been wounded with her miseries. He was a merciful high priest.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Hebrews 4:15

“Jesus identified with *me*, he resonated with *me*, he was looking out for *me*, and he was with *me*. But now, seeing Jesus as precious in my hell was a divine invitation to identify with *him*. Not so much *him* with *me*, but *me* with *him*. To see *him* grieving on the cross and to grieve over the sins that caused *him* so much pain.”⁷

Joni had been looking for her emotions to get in line with her heart, and suddenly her heart was filled with fresh adoration for her Savior. “Seeing Jesus like this was nothing that I had quite experienced before. It was like he was taking my hands and laying them upon his breast, letting me feel how his heart broke over the sin that caused the world’s suffering.”

This enhanced her perspective on the words of Hebrews 4:15. It gave her a whole new disdain for her own sin and a powerful recognition that one day we will be saved to sin no more.⁸

She reflected, “Oh, to be one of those who might be counted trustworthy to stand with Jesus for his sake, not mine. To be counted among a follower of whom Jesus might say affectionately, ‘You are those who have stayed with me in my trials’ (Luke 22:28). What an honor!”

TURNING OUTWARD

Joni said, “For too long pain had riveted my focus on myself, my agony, my anguish. But bless God for the cancer that he gave, because it incinerated my self-focus and fixed my eyes on Christ.”

Thomas Merton wrote,

In order to suffer without dwelling on our own affliction, we must think about a greater affliction, and turn to Christ on the cross. In order to suffer without hate we must drive out bitterness from our hearts by loving Jesus. In order to suffer without hope of compensation, we should find all our peace in the conviction of our union with Jesus. These things are not a matter of ascetic technique but of simple faith.⁹

Joni said, “In simple faith I embraced my pain with willful, determined thanks. Entering into it, I was no longer afraid of it and trusted that God would make every particle of my suffering work in me a death to self.”

William Law wrote,

Receive every inward and outward trouble with both your hands. Receive every darkness and desolation, every deep disappointment with both your hands as a blessed opportunity, as a blessed occasion of dying to yourself and entering into a fuller fellowship with your Savior. Look at no inward or outward trouble in any other view. Reject every other thought about it and then every trial and distress shall become the blessed occasion of your spiritual prosperity.¹⁰

Joni knows that the power of Christ’s death and resurrection is the kind of power that will put sin to death even further in her life. “I want the fellowship of entering into his suffering if it means I can meet Jesus in my hell. I want to take up my cross daily and die to the sins that he died for on his cross.”¹¹

Even as Joni continued to experience stabbing pain on her work commute, God gave her a promise,

*My comfort in my suffering is this:
Your promise preserves my life.
Psalm 119:50*

Following Jesus’ example, Joni committed to quote promises from Scripture out loud.

- You are my ever present help in trouble. (Psalm 46:1)
- You promise you will never leave me or forsake me. (Deuteronomy 31:6)
- You promise to fight battles for me. (Joshua 1:9)
- Your grace really is sufficient. (2 Corinthians 12:9)

Joni understood the blessedness of being conquered, of losing her own strength and desires, and seeing only Jesus. “There came over me the most amazing indifference to my suffering. I experienced a kind of calm, sweet carelessness that enabled me to inwardly smile at my own affliction. It was there I could know Jesus better. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”¹²

REACHING OUT

Joni saw that being like Jesus in his death meant reaching out to others as he had during his crucifixion. During his crucifixion:

- He counsels the apostle John.
- He counsels his mother.
- He gives instructions.
- He gives wisdom.
- He rescues and mercifully reaches out to the thief next to him.

These reflections led her to start a private Pain Pals group on Facebook. The purpose of this group was for mutual encouragement and prayer in the midst of suffering.

We offer biblical truth with compassion

Joni asks, “How do you convince someone that Jesus goes where no one else can go? What about those whose suffering does not get fixed, or solved, or mended? How can they be made to see that Jesus is ecstasy beyond compare and that it is worth anything to be his friend?”

“I have learned that when you offer biblical truth to someone whose life is bleeding out of control, you don’t offer it as though you were slapping a pint of life-preserving blood on a counter and saying to someone, *Here, here, believe this. Take this life-giving principal. Swallow it, ingest it, you’ll feel better.*”

“Instead, we are called to do the more difficult and demanding thing. We are to walk with that person in their painful journey, hooking up our spiritual veins to theirs, infusing into their hearts truth that will bolster their spirits as we carry their burdens and pray for them.”

Our counsel is meant to be given with compassion, ‘with our own suffering.’ We are with another person in their heartache, and our healing presence shows them that the Lord Jesus promises to never leave or forsake them. And then when they feel the pain of deep brokenness, they may accept it as the sharp painful wedge of God’s will. As we help the sufferer see his place in the body of Christ, he experiences what it means to fit and be supported by others.

Spiritual community makes all the difference

Joni recounts a humorous episode in her life in the train station in Baltimore City. As a small group of friends began to sing, they were told to leave the station because no loitering was allowed. Joni was also told to “put that wheelchair back where you found it.” Her reply, “But sir, it’s my wheelchair!”

Joni's friend said to her afterward, "Joni, I want to thank you. That's the first time I heard you call it *my wheelchair*." Joni learned an important lesson that night, to own her weakness and affliction and to take responsibility in it. That is how a spiritual community of caring friends infuses biblical truth into your veins. And when it happens, you are well on your way to emotional healing.

God never intended that we should suffer alone

Comfort and healing occur in spiritual community. Isolation will always spell death. It is important for churches to reach out to people with disabilities because they are so isolated, and healing comes through relationships.

A LIFE LIVED WITHIN GRACE

In our Christian walk we are called to serve others. And the Christian life is meant to be lived in support, with other brothers and sisters in Christ. It was never meant to be one of comfort and ease and good health.

This world is filled with difficulties. G.K. Chesterton once said, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried."¹³

These words from Scripture should be true of every Christian,

Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.
2 Corinthians 6:10

Joni's pain persists, but she has learned how to die to it as she has learned how to die to a great many things. She said, "As I look back on over 50 years, try as I may, I cannot now recall the horror of it all. The many hospital stays, the surgeries, the accident, pain, and cancer. I cannot even recall how awful it felt lying in bed for a full week last week."

Why? She said, "Grace keeps softening the edges of awful things, choosing only the highlights of eternal importance. What I am left with is peace that is profound, joy that is unshakeable, and faith that keeps reaching out to my beautiful Savior.

Through all the sufferings she has walked through, she has learned to say with a smile, *O God, this is now my life.*

REFLECTION ACTIVITY

Reflect on these words from Joni's talk.

Suffering is like little splash-overs of hell. Suffering wakes you up and gets you thinking about the real hell Christ has rescued you from. So what are splash-overs of heaven? Days without pain? Easy, breezy days when everything on the horizon is rosy? Are those our splash-overs of heaven? No. A splash-over of heaven is finding Jesus in your splash-over of hell. There's nothing sweeter than finding Jesus with you right in the middle of your hell.

As you reflect on Joni's testimony, how did God use Scripture, hymns, and community to help "soften the edges of awful things" in Joni's life as she found Jesus in the midst of her hell?

How does what Joni shared about how she found Jesus in the midst of her hell help you find Jesus in the midst of your own suffering?

STUDY QUESTIONS

The following questions are divided into three types: Opening the Door, Getting Engaged, and Make This Your Own. To learn more about the structure of the study questions, read the Getting Started section at the beginning of this workbook.

In this lesson Joni walked us through her battle with chronic pain. She provided us with an example of a person whose faith grows in the midst of overwhelming suffering that is not easily remedied. In the following sets of questions you will work through 4 components of Joni's testimony.

- Joni's honest wrestling with God in her pain
- Responding faithfully to the concerned questions of others
- Finding Jesus in her suffering
- Reaching out to others

Opening the Door

In her story, Joni shared her fears and doubts about her ability to endure the suffering God was calling her to. In her suffering God's Word felt distant to her and seemed to have lost its power to encourage her faith. The Spirit impressed upon her the reality that the issue wasn't simply her lack of faith in God's goodness or his Word. The issue was that her feelings were not in line with her thoughts and the Word of God. She said, "I knew that my pain was under the governance of my sovereign God. But now God's sovereignty seemed so scary. I was supposed to be able to trust in his sovereignty. This doctrine had always been a comfort to me throughout all my years in my wheelchair." Joni wondered where God's grace was to bear the unbearable. She felt easily overcome by fears of the future and that her pain may increase. She said, "I did not believe that God thought I could handle this, even with his grace. I was surprised and ashamed for feeling like this. This left me in deep waters, with uncontrolled pain emotionally dragging me under the water."

1. How does it help you to know that a person like Joni, who is full of faith and has had that faith refined and tested over many years, still struggles with doubt and fear of what the future will hold?
2. Have you ever had a similar experience, when you believed a truth from God's Word but struggled to see its power at work in your own life? And as a result you struggled with shame?
3. How does what Joni shared help you to see the complexity of the human struggle in suffering? For example, how can you understand and help someone who wants Scripture's truth to minister to them in their struggle, but they still struggle to experience the spiritual impact of God's words for them?

4. How would you have helped Joni find God's grace for this totally unbearable circumstance? What words can you bring to bear on this struggle?

Joni not only needed to face her own doubts, she needed to process the questions of her friends as they learned she had been diagnosed with cancer. In their concern for her, they questioned why God was calling her to go through so much. Joni's faithful response to their questions also sparked her own further spiritual searching. She said, "Could I follow in Christ's steps this time, even if the Father's will had in it elements of foreboding horror? Yes! Jesus is worth it! But how can I make my emotions feel it? That was the struggle and my challenge." Joni knows she wants to follow Jesus. But how can she make her emotions fall in line with her faith?

1. Have you ever had a similar experience, where you knew Jesus was worth it, but you struggled to have your emotions fall in line with your faith?
2. We are often surprised by circumstances that call us to suffer. How does 1 Peter 2:21 capture the reality that we will suffer in this life, and in fact that suffering will be a part of following in Jesus' steps? How does this verse help you find Jesus in the midst of your own splash-overs of hell?
3. In Matthew 26:41 Jesus identifies an important struggle in the Christian life—the spirit is indeed willing but the flesh is weak. How does this verse capture our struggle for faith in the face of suffering? How can this verse help influence the emotions you feel in the midst of suffering? Do you believe expressions of emotional pain are always faithless?
4. Joni learned an important lesson in the Baltimore City train station about weakness and affliction shortly after her diving accident. When a station manager told her to return her wheelchair where she found it, she was forced to claim it as her own. For her this was a turning point in her walk with Jesus. For the first time she had embraced the suffering God had called her to. Do you struggle to embrace your weaknesses or sufferings? Are you striving to avoid suffering more than you are striving to know Jesus in your suffering?

Getting Engaged

Joni's time of spiritual renewal and her emotional turning point occurred as she embraced the call to identify with Jesus in her suffering and not just believe that Jesus identified with her. She said, "In my early days of quadriplegia it helped to know that I had a Savior who had been wounded with my miseries. Jesus identified with *me*, he resonated with *me*, he was looking out for *me*, and he was with *me*. But now, seeing Jesus as precious in my hell was a divine invitation to identify with *him*. Not so much *him* with *me*, but *me* with *him*. To see *him* grieving on the cross and to grieve over the sins that caused *him* so much pain."

1. As Christians, if we are going to understand and engage with suffering, we have to engage with Jesus' life and the cross. We will be controlled by our suffering or be controlled by God in our suffering, as Jesus was. How do you respond to the assertion that if we are controlled by our suffering our emotions will also be controlled by our suffering?
2. It is a glorious reality to know that we have a Savior who identifies with us. It is a glorious but hard reality to know that we are called to identify with him. What is your response to this flipped-coin-perspective of Hebrews 4:15?
3. Read Psalm 119:50 out loud. *My comfort in affliction is this, your promises give me life.* How do you find comfort in the promises of the Lord in the midst of suffering? An important part of Joni's spiritual renewal involved reciting Scripture aloud as a way to connect to God's promises in her suffering. How has reciting Scripture aloud impacted you?

Make This Your Own

Turning outward, Joni embraced God's call to reach out to others. How do you convince someone that Jesus goes where no one else can go? Joni answered, "I have learned that when you offer biblical truth to someone whose life is bleeding out of control, you don't offer it as though you were slapping a pint of life-preserving blood on a counter and saying, *Here, here, believe this. Take this life-giving principal. Swallow it, ingest it, you'll feel better.* Instead, we are called to do the more difficult and demanding thing." Instead, we counsel with compassion—which means we emotionally engage with the person who is suffering.

1. How can we avoid the "take this life-giving principal and feel better" approach to ministering to someone in the throes of emotional upheaval?
2. Helpers can fall into two traps. One is to see a bleak situation and not be able to find hope. The other is to recite platitudes. Joni provides us with a third way. She doesn't shy away from the badness of the bad in terms of her suffering, but she also isn't frozen by it. How does her story help you move toward those who are suffering?
3. How can you grow in offering hope to someone that can be digested in a present circumstance? How does taking time to know someone help you offer rich words of life which touch down into the details of a person's experience?

Joni's experience highlighted the significant need for spiritual community. As you help a suffering person see his place in the body of Christ, he experiences what it means to fit and be supported by others. Joni said, "God never intended that we should suffer alone. Isolation always means death, but healing comes through relationships."

1. How has spiritual community made a difference in your life? Has another person helped you to honestly engage with your negative emotions?
2. God never intends that we should suffer alone. How can you be a person who welcomes a sufferer into your midst?
3. How can you grow in being thoughtful about noticing what others experience?
4. As you counsel in community, or more formally, how do you envision leading someone to the point where they reach outward to God and others? How do you convince them that, as Joni said, “a beautiful transparency” can bind them to their Christian friends as they see Jesus again in new ways in the midst of their pain?

¹ To learn more about Joni Eareckson Tada, visit www.joniandfriends.org or read her testimony in *Joni: An Unforgettable Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001).

² Reference Handout 1b in your workbook. This charcoal-pencil sketch of Joni called “Face of Anguish” was recreated for the movie *Joni*. The original, rendered in 1968 by Joni Eareckson when she was hospitalized, was destroyed.

³ In 1967 Joni dove into the Chesapeake Bay and suffered a fracture which left her paralyzed from the shoulders down.

⁴ For resources on the topic of chronic physical suffering reference Joni’s book *A Place of Healing: Wrestling with the mysteries of suffering, pain, and God’s sovereignty* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2015), a book Joni wrote with Steve Estes *When God Weeps: Why our sufferings matter to the Almighty* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), and a pamphlet Joni wrote *Making Sense of Suffering* (Peabody, MA: Rose Publishing, 2018). Also reference two *Journal of Biblical Counseling* articles: Michael R. Emler “When It Won’t Go Away: A biblical response to chronic pain” (23:1, 2005) and Esther Smith “Searching for Healing: How to counsel individuals with debilitating chronic pain” (31:2, 2017).

⁵ In 2015 a California law was passed which permits physicians to help the terminally ill die by prescribing medication. It is referred to as death-with-dignity. Joni publicly opposed this law.

⁶ Matthew 26:36–46; 27:45–50

⁷ 1 Peter 2:21; Philippians 1:29

⁸ Joni sings a lyric from *There Is a Fountain*, William Cowper (1772).

⁹ Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2005), 98.

¹⁰ William Law wrote these words in a letter titled *To a Person burdened with inward and outward troubles*. Published as “A Collection of Letters: On the most interesting and important subjects, and on several occasions” for J. Richardson (London: Pater-Noster Row, 1760) Letter XI, paragraphs 45 and 46, accessed May 22, 2018, <http://www.ccel.org/l/law/letters/let.htm>.

¹¹ Philippians 3:10

¹² Galatians 2:20

¹³ G. K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 37.

How you process your own feelings will influence what you think about other people's feelings. What perceptions do you have about other people who exhibit anger, worry, or deep discouragement? How do you respond (what do you think, say, and do)?

PREVIEW COPY ONLY

LESSON OVERVIEW

This lesson will challenge a common perception (which can be particularly strong among Christians) that feeling and expressing negative emotions is always wrong. Many Christians live with inner conflict over their negative emotions. They are unsure of how to interpret feelings that could be understood as sinful or faithless.

How should we understand our emotions rightly? We can learn from the emotions we see Jesus express when he is faced with the death of his friend Lazarus. What Jesus makes clear to us by example in this gospel story is that emotional pain and some negative emotional expressions are meant to be a part of who we are as believers living in a fallen world.

We begin with the question, “Do you ever feel bad for feeling bad?” You might expect a counselor to ask you a question about how you feel, but this question asks you to go a step further and consider how you feel *about* how you feel.

- Do you get angry at yourself for being angry?
- Do you ever get anxious about your anxiety?
- Perhaps most importantly, do you ever feel guilty or ashamed for just feeling bad?

DO YOU FEEL BAD FOR FEELING BAD?

The attitude you have toward an emotion directly impacts how you experience it.

Two Illustrations

A simple example is how negative emotions can build upon one another and ruin a good night's sleep. Your anxiousness about the next day becomes frustration. Your frustration becomes real anger that makes it impossible to sleep. Then you get angry at yourself for being angry. Then you feel foolish for feeling all these things and wrecking your own sleep.

A more serious example is of a woman whose marriage is a painfully lonely experience. There is little meaningful connection and sharing of life with her husband. She feels rejection very deeply and at times erupts in anger toward her husband. She pesters and screams at him. Over the years she has come to realize that this response just makes things worse. She gets angry at herself for getting angry. Sometimes the anxiety, anger, and pain are so overwhelming that she burns herself on the arm with a cigarette lighter. For a little while the pain stops, but she feels ashamed and guilty for harming herself.¹ She wonders if anyone could love someone like her, and so the cycle continues.²

Our Dilemma

The dilemma is this: the more I feel bad, the more bad I feel for feeling bad. This lesson will explore why this dilemma exists and how Scripture challenges our typical assumptions about emotions.

SHOULD CHRISTIANS VIEW ALL NEGATIVE EMOTIONS AS BAD?

Why is it that negative emotions can be an especially difficult problem for Christians? Perhaps this is so because Christians often consider emotional pain to be evidence of spiritual failure.

The Argument

The case against negative emotions for Christians can be argued like this: “Jesus has come! This is great news. We are deeply loved with a love that cannot be lost. We have been forgiven of our sins, cleansed, accepted, and we’ve received God’s grace! Sin and the devil have been decisively defeated on the cross. More than that, whatever horrible, painful, ugly things ever happen to you in your life God promises to use them for your good.” What is there to feel bad about? In the face of this argument, it does not seem Christians have much to be upset over. At best, our negative emotions show a lack of perspective and at worst it seems that we don’t truly understand the gospel.

The Negative Feedback Loop

Christians can understand the sweet truths of the gospel in a way that actually intensifies suffering. Christians will suffer more if anxiety can only mean that they are not trusting in God’s protection. Sadness and grief can only mean that they don’t believe God’s promises. Of course I will feel like a failure if my anger can only mean that in my heart I am a wicked judge. This way of thinking creates an inescapable feedback loop where every negative emotional experience is layered by guilt, shame, and failure. But there is something wrong with our understanding of emotions (and our understanding of the gospel itself) if the gospel becomes an occasion for more guilt and shame—because the gospel is good news.

The Bible warns us about the dangers of emotions.³

Anger can be very fast and destructive. Anxiety and fear can seize and rule us. Our hearts are mysterious places. We can be very sinful at times, and our emotions can be a part of our sinfulness. So we do have to be careful in how we think about, experience, and act on our emotions—just as we are careful in every other area of our lives.

Scripture's warnings about the dangers of some emotions should not obscure the fact that it also teaches us that negative emotions are designed to deepen our relationship with Christ and with one other.

A CLOSE LOOK AT JESUS' EMOTIONS IN JOHN 11

Scripture challenges our typical assumptions about negative emotions in John 11, when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. Mary and Martha call for Jesus, but when Jesus does come Lazarus has already been dead for four days. Jesus calls Lazarus from the tomb, and clearly he has revealed himself as the Messiah. Jesus conquers death and it foreshadows what is to come in the crucifixion and resurrection.

This story has a few strange and important twists

Jesus intentionally delays going to see Lazarus in order that he will die. When he heard that Lazarus was sick he stayed where he was two more days (John 11:6). Jesus told his disciples that Lazarus had fallen asleep, but he was going to wake him up (11:11). His disciples didn't understand this, so Jesus said even more plainly that he was glad for the disciples' sake that Lazarus had died so that they could believe (11:15). It was strange for the disciples, but we can understand it better today—Jesus allows something bad to happen for really good reasons.

This is Jesus' mindset as he draws near to Bethany and Lazarus' home. Martha struggles to understand why Jesus did not come sooner (11:21) and Jesus responds with powerful words: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (11:25–26). Jesus knows what he is doing. He invites Martha into his mindset so that she too can participate in what he is about to do.

Mary's reaction to Jesus is the same as Martha's (11:32), but Jesus' response to her is different. When he saw her weeping he was deeply moved in Spirit and troubled (11:33). And when they took him to the tomb he also wept (11:35). Twice Jesus was "deeply moved," which describes the emotional storm that was brewing inside of him. This is more than sadness. It is emotional anguish.

Things we say to quiet our emotions

This story is striking because it is full of all the ingredients and messages that Christians use to quiet themselves in moments of emotional pain. Lazarus' death is not an accident. There are reasons that Jesus intentionally delays in order that Lazarus might die.

- To reveal and magnify his own glory. In this story Jesus' glory is unveiled in a new and exciting way, and his identity is more clearly revealed.

- There will be a happy ending. Within an hour of Jesus' encounter with Martha and Mary there will be intense joy and celebration.
- These are the kinds of things we say to ourselves when we are upset. "There are good purposes in this. Jesus will be glorified. It's going to be okay in the end."

Jesus and his emotions

Resurrection is a minute away. We know the ending of the story. Jesus knows the ending of the story. Yet he weeps. He grieves. He is in anguish.

These expressions of emotion do not mean that he has changed his mind. He does not think that Lazarus' death and resurrection was a great idea four days ago, but now he has lost his nerve or he is uncertain. His tears are not a weakening of resolve. He is not experiencing a moment of doubt. This is not a crack in his faith or even something as lovely as his humanity appearing.

Instead, Jesus has come face to face with the ugliness of sin and death. He can see it on his friend's faces and he can hear it in their cries. He can see it in their tears, and that reality is staring him in the face in the form of a cold, dark tomb. He also comes face-to-face with the brokenness of this world and all that it will cost him. He is emotional. He weeps.

In a sense, knowing God's will and being aware and in touch with his glory and his purposes intensifies the grief. The rightness of the right intensifies how bad the bad really is, and it makes the ugliness and the wrongness of sin and death even uglier.

Jesus' tears are much more than a display of his humanity. This is a display of Jesus' divinity.⁴

EMOTIONS HAVE A DIVINE ASPECT

God is engaged with our plight.

The God who is revealed at Lazarus' tomb is the same God we see throughout Scripture—the God who angrily warns Israel about her sin and the God who yearns for her repentance through the prophets. The Jesus who reveals God at Lazarus' tomb is the same God who laments Jerusalem's destruction in Jeremiah, Lamentations, and the Psalms.⁵

God loves us and he hates sin, and he hates its effect on creation and in our lives. God is not just intellectually committed to the destruction of sin and our rescue. He is not somewhat interested in us and what is going wrong with us; he is deeply and intensely involved.

Jesus' emotions reveal the nature of his love. It is God's nature to be fully engaged with our welfare—God is love and Jesus is Immanuel, “God with us.” This love that is with us will be intensely emotional and engaged with our welfare.

The thought of God having emotions can be an unsettling experience⁶

We often experience emotions, and especially strong emotions, as a bad thing because we can be pushed or led by our emotions. Our emotions can take us places and bid us to do things that we know that we should not do.

Yet God is never pushed, led, or ruled by his emotions. God's emotions, whether anger or joy or sorrow, are always perfect expressions of his holy character and his loving purposes.

Christians do not need to defend God by denying or destroying his emotions, but we do need to understand how they are different from ours as expressions of his perfect character and love.

TWO TAKE-AWAYS

We can learn from God's emotions.

When we understand that Jesus' expression of emotion in John 11 is an expression of his divinity and not just his humanity, it teaches us about the divine aspect of emotions *and* tells us something important about ourselves.

We were created in God's image; we were created to embody his character, his purposes and his values, and to emotionally express them as image bearers.

The more we share in God's image, the more we will experience clarity about sin and our experiences of the curse of death. The more we share in God's image, the more intensely we will experience the wrongness of the wrong.

Cling to what is good

Paul says in Romans 12:9, “Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.” To grow in clinging to the good means that we will also grow in hating what is evil. Our emotional pain is part of our image bearing duty. Like God himself, we are to be moved by the state of brokenness and sin in this world.

Experiencing new life and resurrection power does not negate the badness of the bad. In a sense, it heightens it because the glory of the good has overcome the badness of the bad. The glory of