

EMOTIONS

LET GOD REDEEM THEM

I T SEEMS ALMOST FUNNY TO ME that we ask questions like, "Emotions-Can you trust them?" Since emotions are part of our fallen human nature we cannot trust them with any kind of certainty just like any other part of our nature. But why don't we ask questions like, "Feet - can we trust them?" I mean after all we trip. Our feet are also part of our fallen human nature. We are more apt to 'trust' our feet because falling seems less scary than a broken heart. The difference between trusting our feet and trusting our emotions is that learning how to trust our emotions calls us to a deeper level of faith and engagement with God.

Last fall I was teaching about the heart and several people seemed very nervous to consider letting our heart or emotions affect any of our decisions. I simply thought, "Where in the world did we get the idea that our mind is so reliable. Why do we act like the fall only affects our heart?" If God is our creator than in his design he gave us emotions for a purpose. Emotions are a good part of the physical design just like our ears, feet or hands. If we foolishly rely on our mind as the only part of our humanity given by God to direct us we will fall short of genuinely reflecting the character of Christ. However, if we humbly rely on God (not our heart or mind) and long for the Lord to join together our heart and mind will be living in redemptive fullness. To live well we cannot run from emotions but we must learn how integrate them into our life and let them guide us. Perhaps a better question might be, "Emotions - how do we accept them and let God redeem them?"

In thinking about emotions I want to say a couple of things. First, we are too afraid of strong and less positive (sadness, jealousy,

anger, etc.) emotions and until we learn to accept them as a gift they will not be part of "guiding us into truth". Second, a holy emotional life provides us direction to move. Emotions were given to help us live out the character of Christ. Thirdly, being alive emotionally brings texture to our life and pulls people into God's story that he is telling through us.

When I think about how afraid we are of emotions in general and the darker emotions in particular I simply think of Jesus. We would have been very afraid of him because he felt and expressed his emotions. Listen to the words of G. Walter Hansen as he records all the emotions of Jesus in the Gospels and comments on them, "Jesus felt compassion; he was angry, indignant, and consumed with zeal; he was troubled, greatly distressed, very sorrowful, depressed, deeply moved, and grieved; he sighed; he wept and sobbed; he groaned; he was in agony; he was surprised and amazed; he rejoiced very greatly and was full of joy; he greatly desired, and he loved. I am spellbound by the intensity of Jesus' emotions: not a twinge of pity, but heartbroken compassion; not a passing irritation, but terrifying anger, not a silent tear, but groans of anguish; not a weak smile, but ecstatic celebration" (Christianity Today February 3, 1997).

If we knew someone who had such a full emotional life we would call them unstable. Yet, I don't think anyone of us is prepared to call Jesus unstable (at least not outwardly). Over fifteen years ago when I felt I had dealt with anger (because I had suppressed it so much and had fooled myself into thinking I was too noble to feel it) I was not at all convicted that I thought I was more spiritual than Jesus. If we are aiming to do what Jesus did,



how come we are not trying to feel more joy, sadness, or anger? His passion exposes our lifelessness. In fact, when John quotes Jesus in his Gospel as saying He came to give us life and give it more abundantly I believe in part it means that He came to restore in us here and now the life that was robbed from us through sin and the fall.

To make any movement in the direction of a fuller emotional life we have to stop being afraid of the emotions in us or around us. In fact, as long as we are afraid of emotions like jealousy, anger or sadness we will never learn to handle them well and instead of helping move us towards redemption those suppressed emotions will hinder it. When we are angry we need not quell it and pretend it will go away. If our friend is feeling jealousy we ought to give them permission to feel it and put words to it. Ten years ago when I finally began to accept that I was angry I thought all my anger was bad. Yet, as I began to be less afraid of my anger and the anger of others I saw how redemptive anger can be. Sometimes, I was angry because there was injustice around me. As I felt that anger, instead of running from it, God began to help me make movement with it. In the years since, I have learned how to be angry and move towards others in a way that can help.

In accepting that anger is good I don't mean to make light of the fact that we can sin in our anger. I have and will unfortunately continue to do so. However, trying to be angry and not sin is a much better path then denying anger and pretending that I am "supra-human" or above anger. Letting anger be a part of my life has humbled me and challenged me to trust more in the Lord's ability to redeem my character. It is the same for all the other emotions we are afraid of and suppress.

If we are aiming to have the character of Christ we must see passion as a large part of his make up. As we accept our passion the Lord can begin to help us and helping us to reflect it better

Since our emotions are God given they have a purpose. Emotions help direct us. In the parable of the Good Samaritan Luke writes, "Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt deep pity.

Kneeling beside him the Samaritan soothed his wounds with medicine and bandaged them" (Luke 10:33-34). Both the Jewish priest and the Temple assistant had already passed by the wounded man. In part, Jesus is showing how the religious system in his day kept believers from genuinely caring for those in need. Religion was about duty, position and power and this puffed people up and hardened their hearts. As such, the religious leaders were indifferent to the needs of those around them. In fact, Jesus said to them, "Hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest part of your income, but you ignore the important things of the law - justice, mercy, and faith" (Matthew 23:23). When Luke says that the Good Samaritan felt deep pity he is using strong imagery in the Greek language. The Samaritan had a passion filled reaction to the wounded man - a completely different response from the religious leaders of his day. The fact that the Samaritan's heart was free helped God direct him towards the wounded man. He could not ignore the man's pain and walk right by. The religious leaders' hearts were too hard to be directed toward the man.

Several times in Scripture we see Jesus feeling and then moving into action. As one example Jesus felt anger at the Pharisees' hardness of heart (Mark 3:5) which moved him to heal the man with the deformed hand to expose their self-righteousness. Another time, Jesus feels compassion on the crowd which stirred him to perform the miracle with the loaves and fish to feed them (Matthew 15:32-38). Part of our weakness as a church today is due in part to our fear of the stronger emotions. For example, I know that jealousy can be sinful. But I wonder if Christian women were freer to feel jealousy and grow into expressing it better they might become stronger. As a result they would be better equipped to help invite their husbands to faithfulness. God is a jealous God and his jealousy is helping him to invite his bride to faithfulness. What if the church was more comfortable with sadness? I question if we would be more alluring to those in need because they sensed we could weep with them. Those around us ache yet our hardness of heart keeps us from seeing it and helping them to express it. A fuller and freer emotional life would move us towards others.

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In addition to guiding and strengthening us, being alive emotionally also brings texture to our life and pulls people into the story of God. When we are dead emotionally we are like vanilla ice cream. People see us in the display case and pass right by because they are drawn to rocky road. Our rigidity, fear and deadness are not at all enticing. The lack of texture prevents others from being able to get a hold of what is going on in our life. For instance, let's say one day you go into work and you are angry at your wife (husband, friend). The co-worker in the office next store drops by to talk. Your obvious emotion pulls the co-worker into your story. You don't have to tell your co-worker what is going on but because you are free to live life it is just part of what you share with him. The next week he sees you more restful, even joyful. He asks you what happened and you tell him about how you made up with your wife (husband, friend). You may even softly weep as you talk about the restoration of the relationship. In this way your co-worker has actually tasted the Gospel fleshed out in your life. It helps him get a hold of what is real in your life. He has seen alienation, restoration and rest in the simple process of a week.

Not only does he see the Gospel fleshed out but the texture in your life helps to arouse the deeper things that are in his heart. God has made man in his image and placed eternity in our heart. Intrinsically, we know the story about alienation, restoration and rest - it is the Gospel story. When others live it out in fullness in front of us it is like watching a movie with music and imagery that helps to pull us into the story being conveyed. A person who is alive emotionally presents a fuller and more animated view of what is going on in their life. As others taste and see more of the Gospel in front of them it pulls them into the story. When we come alive emotionally and live out more fully the passion of the Gospel it helps us to become a vessel which God can speak through.

Through the years I have become more grateful for how God has redeemed my emotional life. The first couple of years it all felt pretty scary. Yet now I couldn't imagine being a husband, father or friend without being able to weep, rejoice and live life with those around me. Many days it feels good to be alive and I sense the Lord moving in and through me. It is my prayer that as the Church of the living God we come alive with all his passion. I have a hunch it makes him smile.

→ WHAT'S NEW?

There are no new developments for this quarter which is kind of nice and partly by design. Gordon is trying to concentrate on finishing (actually he needs to get moving) the dissertation for his doctoral degree in pastoral community counseling and has decided not to take on any retreats/seminars at least until the summer or fall of this year. Julie is doing a woman's retreat for a church in Dothan, AL this

month but beyond those things are kind of quiet. We are trying to plan some for next fall and winter in regards to seminars, retreats or groups we may do. Pray for us as we plan.

We are excited to report that things have continued to stay stable financially. We have been able to meet our budget each month since Gordon has gone to full time with Daymark. Although, it seems like each month there might be a shortfall someone surprises us with a financial gift that helps us to make budget. As we announced the last two quarters we would love for our

planned giving to increase (those who contribute monthly or quarterly on a regular basis) but at this point we remain very grateful to make budget and are trying to trust the Lord however he decides to work it all out.

As you are prompted please remember to pray for Gordon and Julie that the Lord would give them wisdom, strength, and patience as they counsel. We appreciate you as you partner with us!



BOOK TALK

MORE FROM AUTHOR / COUNSELOR JAN MEYERS



any of you are familiar with Jan's book *The Allure of Hope*. If you need help working through the concepts in the book a guided journal called *Hope and Joy Will Find You* is now available through Amazon.com and will be available in bookstores sometime in February. The journal is a beautiful way to allow your thoughts and heart unfold before God as He invites you to hope more deeply. It is useful for both those who have or have not read the book. Jan is currently writing her next book, *Listening to Love: The Courage to Respond to a God we Fear* and it will be available late 2003 or early 2004.

Nobility of soul is connected to carrying tension. Almost everything within our culture invites us to avoid tension and to resolve it whenever possible, even at the cost of some of our more noble instincts. Nobody will ever remain faithful in a marriage, a vocation, a friendship, a family, a job, or just to his or her own integrity without sometimes sweating blood in a garden. In Jesus' message there is a strong motif of waiting, of pondering, of chastity, of having to carry tension without giving into premature resolution. The idea is that the resurrection follows only after there has been an agony in the garden. That is also true for faith.

Ronald Rolheiser in *The Holy Longing*

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