

# feeling like God

the emotional side  
of discipleship—and why you can't  
fully follow Jesus without it

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*Feeling like God: The Emotional Side of Discipleship—and Why You Can't Fully Follow Jesus without It*

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LOVE ALONE KNOWS what it was like before all time began, when the fellowship of three conceived a dream to share its joy. This cosmic dance was opened up with perfect, pure delight—a gladness that was never born but always very alive. As yet, no sacred veil would interfere to hide these feelings streaming long and deep, as intimate secrets flowed at will from Father to Son to Spirit to Son to Father and back again through each—a never-ending circle in a rhythmic celebration. Like brightly glowing embers that burn with growing fervor, they could satisfy each other yet were always seeking more. Unhindered in intensity, such passion can't resist the urge to burst out in its pleasure and invite all those who listen to come drink of its sweet beauty, and then charm all those who taste it to be captive to its love. "What music would our voices sing if breathing through another—like us . . . but *not* us; with us . . . but *in* us; and always where we are?" Relentless holy union for the first time skipped a beat, and this glory-driven circle stirred with new creative songs and broke the silence of its kingdom with a blessing on its dream:

*"Let us make them in our image,  
let our heart be multiplied!  
If we breathe the breath of romance  
into dust and ask it to dance,  
we can gaze forever into souls  
invited to our ball."*

Perfectly good, creation gasped, and so the world began. Now carefully formed by the breath of the three, never before was an image so true—and lovingly primed to know the joy of the heartbeat of its King.

## CHAPTER 1

# mysteries of his heart

the emotional side of God

THE OPENING SCENES of the movie *A River Runs Through It* depict a Presbyterian father training his two sons in the deep spiritual lessons of life and fly-fishing. Because he believes life is set in motion and sustained by God's unwavering rhythms, Reverend Maclean teaches his boys to discern the order of creation and to cast their lines by the cadence of a metronome. God's word, he tells them, lies underneath layers of rock a half-billion years old, and if they listen carefully, they might hear it. Creation is filled with laws, rules, and principles: the steady pace of the clock, the ethics of an honest living, an ever-reliable river, diligent study and prayer—and, most of all,

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plenty of restraints necessary to keep sinful souls in line. Even artistry is methodical. Life is all about order.

This father's instruction in reading and writing is stern and pointed, and his affirmation is always carefully measured. There is love in this minister's home, but it's only implied. It's the unstated reason behind the sons' lessons in methods and discipline, as well as the source of their freedom to spend their afternoons fishing. Much like a sermon the reverend preaches—a staid, eloquent homily on the deepest feelings of the heart, given while standing under a bland wooden panel behind the pulpit that's carved with the words, "God is love"—emotions are theoretically legitimate. But they are never practiced, never even discussed, except in the most serious terms. Apparently, acknowledging their existence is acceptable. Being drawn into their influence seems unwise.

Two telling scenes near the end of the movie capture the emotional flavor of the family. In one, Reverend Maclean can hardly contain his pride when Norman, the older son, is offered a university teaching position. So how does this proud father let his feelings flow? "Well," he says, struggling to control his smile, "I am pleased. . . . I *am* pleased." A few scenes later, when Norman has to tell his parents that his brother was found dead in an alley—a victim of his own reckless living—his mother slowly and shakily rises without saying a word and then stumbles up the stairs into privacy. The father asks a few somber questions, but his face remains unaffected. Among these stunned family members, there are no wails, no sobs, no tears. Not even any hugs. From their greatest expressions of pleasure to their deepest horrors of grief, their dignity is ever maintained.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, Colonel Christopher Brandon feels emotions deeply and, at times, wears them openly. This honorable gentleman from

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Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*<sup>2</sup> falls deeply in love with the young Marianne Dashwood—an expressive, temperamental girl who reminds him of his first love years before. That long-ago love ended tragically, and Brandon is clearly still tormented by its sorrow. Now face-to-face with another young woman of “impulsive sweetness,” his passion swells again. Rising, falling, pleading, wishing, his love is torn between two destinies: too realistic to soar on the winds of hope, too desperate to crash on the rocks of circumstance. He's reluctant to dream, and reluctant not to dream—trapped in romantic purgatory.

Brandon's affections are obvious to those who are observant, but Marianne either doesn't notice them or intentionally ignores them. Instead, she falls head over heels for the dashing John Willoughby, who seems equally enamored of her. Colonel Brandon watches in silent anguish as the romance between his true love and her handsome suitor develops. His heartbroken eyes grieve every affectionate glance between Marianne and Willoughby, who makes fun of him when he's not around. The beautiful flowers he gives her get pushed aside to make room for her boyfriend's cheap bouquet. The characteristics Brandon loves about Marianne—she's the passionate, sentimental “sensitivity” from the title—are the same characteristics that drive her toward this charming man she knows little about. And every day, Brandon aches from the sight.

In spite of Marianne's blind devotion to another man, the colonel's love for her never wavers. He knows her fleeting passion will lead to heartache; Willoughby's an irresponsible cad who will never deserve her. But affections can't be forcibly turned from the directions they've chosen, so Brandon keeps his silence. When Marianne is distraught over Willoughby's callous treatment of her, Brandon tries to ease her

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pain by explaining the dirty truth behind the actions of her unworthy beau—how his immoral behavior would have eventually led to heartbreak anyway. When she needs rescuing in a storm, he finds her in a field overlooking the mansion where Willoughby and his new, wealthy wife now live, and he carries her three miles in driving rain. And when her life is threatened by an infectious fever, he paces constantly, consumed with concern and desperate for anything that will help her. He is faithful to the love of his heart, even though her heart has run in another, self-destructive direction.

### A MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTION

Between those two pictures—a devout, dignified minister and father, and a passionate romantic in the throes of heartbreak—which is biblically closer to the personality of God? Is he compassionate but reserved? Or does he wear his heart on his sleeve? Are his emotions carefully measured by the laws of the universe and the rhythms of creation, or do they bleed into the soil of human sin? According to

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the soil of human sin?*

his own revelation, what is God's emotional makeup? Is he happy? angry? sad? complacent? Is he ever in a good mood?

In the minds of most people, God is a lot like Reverend Maclean. Love is there, but it is a formal and willful love. It's the kind of love a family has for its most difficult member: obligatory when it's essential, but never a delight. It's something to rely on and to break your fall in an emergency, but if you want to see it in the normal course of life, you have to look for it. It's the never-changing river that runs through our stories—present



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but unspeaking, consistent but unaffected by those who stand on its banks, always moving but never moved. That kind of implied love may be a reassuring assumption in a crisis, but it doesn't make for a great relationship.

The Bible far more often describes God as an emotionally charged being who is deeply, relentlessly in love with his people and who interacts with them regularly on that basis. The story of Colonel Brandon's faithful love in the face of rejection is a tragic picture of human heartbreak, but it's not a far cry from the prophets' portrayal of God's feelings when Israel jilted him for worthless idols. God's epic romance is filled with twists and turns of hopefulness, irony, and grief. And, like Brandon, he will ultimately get his bride in the end. Stories of human love are often necessarily different than stories of God's love, as God doesn't experience the same kind of desperation we do. But they aren't as different as we often think. God, according to his own revelation, is subject to extremes of passion.

It's true that God's ways and thoughts are inexpressibly higher than our ways and thoughts,<sup>3</sup> which is why theologians have a difficult time with his emotions. How *would* an infinite being feel? Our Father is not surprised by anything, so he doesn't feel the shock of tragedy or boil over in sudden outrage. He's too wise and powerful to be governed by whims, moods, and the ups and downs of everyday life in heaven. He's all-knowing and all-powerful, perfectly loving and perfectly understanding, and nothing catches him off guard. So he doesn't feel exactly the same emotions we would feel in a given situation. That changes somewhat in the incarnation; though Jesus has the same emotions as the Father, they are filtered through human eyes and experiences. But those feelings are still the perfect image of God's heart. And his thoughts—and feelings—are higher and holier than ours.

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At the same time, we're also made in his image, which means there must be at least *some* correspondence between our makeup and his. The couple he placed in the garden was crafted to be a picture of his likeness. And even though that picture was vandalized by the first sin, the goal of creation is still to have an image of God on earth reflecting who he is. That's why we are being made into the likeness of Christ—to restore and perfect God's image in creation. We're designed to be a visible representation of our Maker. So it stands to reason that we would learn not only to think like him and to act like him but also to *feel* like him. We are destined to share every aspect of his personality.

How do we reconcile the constancy of divine love and joy with the ups and downs of feelings and moods? After all, it just isn't logical for attributes of an unchanging God to mix with volatile human frailties.

And we certainly want a God who fits our logic, don't we? So most

*We're designed to be a visible representation of our Maker. So it stands to reason that we would learn not only to think like him and to act like him but also to feel like him.*

Christian theology ascribes deep emotional qualities to God without “humanizing” those emotions. We are comfortable as long as he has the “good” feelings—love, joy, peace, compassion, delight—in unchanging permanence; and we are nervous when we talk about the dynamics of his anger and grief. We can acknowledge these attributes, but we sterilize them. We know they have to be different than ours because we know what ours are really like: fickle, misplaced, and distorted by misperceptions and sin.

Because of our experience with emotions—either our own or someone else's—we try to distance God from them. We know he

isn't fickle or out of control, so therefore, we reason, he can't be emotional. But defining God's personality by our own experience will take us pretty far off track. Flawed human beings are never an accurate picture of divine truth. They simply shape our perspective, usually negatively. That explains why the American evangelical mind-set often uses words like *emotions*, *feelings*, and *heart* as evidence of spiritual immaturity. They are associated with extremes like rage and despondency or, at the very least, instability. That's just too human to mix with God.

But we forget: The attributes of an unchanging God *did* mix with volatile human frailties during one particular lifetime. We call him Immanuel, God with us, the incarnation of the Holy One himself. If we ever wondered how to reconcile the ups and downs of moods with the constancy of God, all we have to do is look at Jesus. We know he's the exact representation of God,<sup>4</sup> and we also know he never sinned.<sup>5</sup> Yet he got angry, he grieved, and he cried out with a loud voice and tears.<sup>6</sup> For godly emotions, that looks remarkably human.

According to Scripture, God experiences nearly the full range of emotions that human beings feel, with a few exceptions we'll discuss later. And his feelings are presented in pretty subjective terms, not as static attributes that fit our idea of holiness. He loves, hates, rejoices, grieves, is zealous, gets jealous, and swells in anger when his mission is obstructed or his character impugned. And, according to his own Word, God is not immune to heartbreak.

## **GODLY GRIEF**

In fact, heartbreak is the most prominent emotion of God in the prophetic books. If he were simply disappointed in his people or angry over how badly they'd messed up, he would express only judgment

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and wrath. In fact, that's what many people see in the God of Israel in the Old Testament: plenty of wrath with an occasional hint of grace. And if Reverend Maclean represents our perception of God—with restrained and unchanging affections—it's no wonder his dealings with Israel seem harsh and unbalanced. But underlying every incident of God's wrath toward his own people is their betrayal of his love. He gets angry in Scripture not because he likes to or because that's his natural disposition, but because he has so lavishly poured out his affections and they've been thrown back in his face again and again. That's why God repeatedly inspired his prophets to use the image of an abandoned husband whose precious bride has prostituted herself. God doesn't come across in Scripture as angry at impersonal objects. He comes across as a lover who's been stabbed in the back.

That image is perhaps clearest in the book of Hosea, which tells of a prophet who not only had to tell God's message but live it. While many of us get to live the upside of God's message—the joy that flows in and out of a harmonious, passionate marriage—Hosea's calling was to portray God's heartbreak by marrying a prostitute who kept abandoning her loving husband to sleep with other men. That's not the sort of call that most of us dream of receiving from God, but in this case someone has to do it. Why? Because God wants a visible, graphic illustration of repeated forgiveness for repeated betrayal, and a visual explanation to show why he would have to separate himself from his beloved people. For an excruciating season, Hosea and God shared the same heart.

Hosea lived the pain of God's emotions, but Ezekiel described them perhaps even more vividly. Chapter 16 of his book offers what may be the most jolting picture of betrayal in Scripture. Israel is portrayed as an abandoned baby girl still squirming in afterbirth in

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an open field. God, in his great compassion, took her in, clothed her, raised her, and beautified her. When she became “old enough for love” (v. 8, NIV), he brought her into a more intimate relationship with him. He treated her like a queen—doted on her, gave her expensive gifts, lavished his love and his wealth on her.

Realizing how beautiful he had made her, she showed her gratitude by becoming a prostitute and sleeping with whatever lowlife she could find. All of the clothing and jewelry he had so extravagantly given her became the currency of her adultery; instead of receiving gifts from her lovers, she paid them for the privilege of her promiscuity. And then, to top it all off, she took the children born from the intimate marriage with her faithful husband and slaughtered them—burned them at the feet of idols. She had been given the treasures of heaven, and what did she do? Traded them in for poisons and pain.

That kind of imagery doesn't come from a God who's beyond the sway of passions. It comes from someone whose heart can be broken; who hurts when his love is unrecognized, thwarted, and abused; and who even told his beloved people that his name was Jealous.<sup>7</sup> He didn't just warn them that he might be *prone* to jealousy. No, he said it defined him—or at least a part of his true character. This high and holy God who, according to theologians, is far above the ups and downs of human emotion, sometimes smolders, even burns, with the jealousy of a jilted lover.<sup>8</sup>

How do we reconcile this scriptural picture of God with our theological belief in his “immutability”? After all, the fact that he is unchanging is scriptural too.<sup>9</sup> The distinction is that fluctuating emotions do not imply a change in personality or in essence. God is always God, and his essence never changes. However, God's immutability does not make him a static deity. In Scripture, when people

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interact with him on issues of his will, he changes directions.<sup>10</sup> Yet his ultimate purposes and his eternal personality are not altered. We don't contradict God's unchanging nature when we talk about his emotions coming and going.

God is also unlike us in his capacity to feel multiple emotions at once. We do this to a degree when, for example, we weep at someone's funeral even though we're glad he or she is done with suffering and is now in the presence of God. We call that "mixed feelings." But God has mixed feelings all the time. At this very moment, for instance, God is comforting someone who's hurting, feeling anger at someone's stubborn rebellion, rejoicing over a sinner who just repented, delighting in the prayers of his children, grieving over the tragedies we inflict on ourselves, and remaining at perfect peace about his plans for the world. In finite beings like us, we'd call that "conflicted" and go in for counseling. In an infinite God, however, multiple emotions are normal.

This is one reason the "God never changes" argument against his emotional constitution is unfounded. It's based on our experience with our own emotions, which we usually feel in succession rather than simultaneously. With God, that's not an issue. Though his emotions do, in fact, change in Scripture, they don't change suddenly and dramatically like ours do. He doesn't leave joy behind when he grieves or forget his anger against Satan while he's rejoicing over those who have come to him in faith. When God leaves anger behind, as he does when separating us from our sins at the Cross, it's because he chooses to, not because another emotion comes along and replaces it by filling up the only space he has in his heart. God's unchanging personality feels a lot of different things in a lot of different places at the very same time. He is always moving and never stilled by the status quo. It is in his unchanging nature to be dynamic.

As a result, we find the always-beating, sometimes-bleeding heart of God on nearly every page of Scripture if we look closely enough. He feels the same ways we do—not because we’ve made God in our image, as some suggest, but because he made us in his.

## A DEEPER CONNECTION

Why is this important? Because God calls us into a relationship with him. To know God is more than to acknowledge his characteristics and describe his attributes. To know him is to bond with him and to grow continually deeper in our connection with him. That can’t be done apart from emotions. We don’t connect with people through shared information or even shared experiences. Have you, for example, bonded with all those people you spent long hours with in a driver’s license renewal line who were waiting for the same experience you were about to have? Or come out of a lengthy budget meeting strongly attached to people you’ve shared a lot of information with? Probably not. Shared information and experiences in themselves don’t draw us closer. It’s the shared emotional responses to that information and experience that creates closeness. When our sentiments line up with someone else’s, we feel a connection. When they don’t, we don’t. That’s how a mutual bond develops.

*To know God is to bond with him and to grow continually deeper in our connection with him. That can’t be done apart from emotions.*

But the church today too often focuses on the establishment of the relationship (salvation) and the factual basis of the relationship (Bible study) to the exclusion of cultivating the relationship (emotional responses). There’s nothing wrong with emphasizing evangelism and discipleship—thank God for those who have done so—but when we

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simultaneously do all we can to chase emotions out of those aspects of the relationship, we're missing the whole point. Salvation and study are the means to an end—"pleasures forevermore," according to Psalm 16:11<sup>11</sup>—not the end in themselves. God didn't create us to "get saved." He saves us so we can know him and relate to him in every facet of our personalities, including (or especially) emotionally. But we're so focused on getting "truth" right in all its details that we miss the joy that the truth is supposed to lead to.

As a result, we have plenty of vehicles that can get people on the path to growth, but no fuel to help those vehicles go anywhere. We're great with the road map, but we usually just hand it to people and send them on a business trip to meet with God. And no one really wants to linger very long on a business trip.

God really enjoys mixing business and pleasure. He likes the informational meetings we have with him—they're very important—but he loves the leisure time more. His ultimate goal is for us to rest in his presence and to experience his joy—the "room temperature" of heaven. Most of all, he wants us to connect with him. That's why he created us; he wants to share his Spirit with us. And his Spirit, wherever he shows up in Scripture, always prompts some sort of emotional response.

The implications of that are huge. If God is a thoroughly emotional being, we can't really get to know him unless we know the emotions he feels, no matter how much objective truth we've learned. And we can't really *know* the emotions he feels unless we experience them. (Consider that next time you're suffering from heartbreak. You're feeling the same way he feels when his people break his heart. Kind of makes his character come alive in your experience, doesn't



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it?) In order to get to know our sentient God better, we have to be sensitive to the emotions he expresses in Scripture.

The importance of sharing his emotions shows up often in Scripture, but Jesus' comments in Revelation to the seven churches are particularly revealing. He gave them specific encouragement as well as specific rebukes. The Ephesian church, for example, got high marks for doctrinal purity and enduring patiently in the face of persecution. So why would Jesus have anything negative to say to that congregation? Well, they had lost their first love. That's it. And he told them to repent.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, the church at Sardis was rebuked for being dead rather than alive and urged to do works that better exemplify a church with energy and love.<sup>13</sup> They had the truth, and they did some good works, but there was no life in them. Finally, the well-known church at Laodicea had the distinction of nauseating the Lord because of their lukewarmness.<sup>14</sup> In love and practice they were neither hot nor cold, and that was revolting to God.

*His Spirit, wherever he shows up in Scripture, always prompts some sort of emotional response.*

Some of the churches in Asia Minor were rebuked because they weren't lined up with God's truth or his work, but it's also clear that some were rebuked because they were not lined up with his heart. Why? Because they had let their love grow cold, their energy and motivation die, and their complacency and apathy lead them astray. They weren't vitally and meaningfully connected with their Savior at points that mattered deeply to him.

It's clear that God has a lot of emotional expectations for his people. Why? Because he's very emotional himself. He has a dynamic personality that feeds emotional responses and receives them wholeheartedly.

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Far from giving us feelings as a fringe benefit, he established them in us as core elements of our personhood. He wants our hearts to swell and to soar with his.

Reverend Maclean is right about the universe operating on a rhythm, but he is wrong about the nature of the beat. It isn't uniform and impersonal. The world isn't filled with principles and order for the sake of principles and order; it was fashioned according to the heartbeat of a God who feels. His pulse was dictating the days of creation, his joy rising up with every "It was good." He took great pleasure in each new masterpiece, and he crowned his pleasure with beings made to feel the way he feels.

# NOTES

## CHAPTER 1

1. *A River Runs Through It*, Columbia Pictures, 1992.
2. *Sense and Sensibility*, Columbia Pictures, 1995. Though the film follows the plot of the novel very closely, a few details vary between them. The illustration in this chapter is drawn from the specifics of the film.
3. Isaiah 55:8-9
4. Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 1:15
5. 2 Corinthians 5:21
6. Hebrews 5:7
7. Exodus 34:14
8. Deuteronomy 6:15; Psalm 79:5; Zechariah 8:2, NIV
9. Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8
10. Exodus 32:14; Isaiah 38:5
11. This is also expressed well in the Westminster Shorter Catechism: “to glorify God and *enjoy him forever*” (italics added).
12. Revelation 2:4-5. The result of their repentance is to “do the works you did at first,” which seems like a very action-oriented instruction. But the rest of Scripture is emphatic that works with no heart behind them are repulsive to God. Love has to be the motivation.
13. Revelation 3:1-3
14. Revelation 3:15-16

## CHAPTER 2

1. Actually, they tied for the honor of being the first last-place team to go to the Series. The team they lost to in seven games was the Minnesota Twins, who also had made it to the World Series after having been worst in their division the previous year.
2. Matthew 18:3-4; Mark 10:15; Luke 18:17
3. I am not using this analysis of our being in a Greek rational way. Greek philosophy (as well as the doctrines of many Christians) compartmentalized the personality in ways the Bible never does. In Scripture, human beings are integrated wholes: body, soul, and spirit are one ultimately inseparable unit, which is why the resurrection is so critical. The Bible does not teach a soul-only, exclusively spiritual salvation. God’s re-creation of the new earth maintains physical elements.

For the purposes of this book, however, I use the terms *mind*, *will*, and *emotions* not as compartments but as descriptions of aspects we all know we have. Whatever you believe the human soul to be, we can all agree that we have minds that rationally process information; that we have the capacity to act by force of the will; and that we have feelings that often but not always correlate directly with the information at hand.
4. I introduced this illustration in my book *Creative Prayer* (Multnomah, 2006).