

# CHRISTIAN HEADS, HEARTS, AND HANDS

ARTICLES TO FORM US AS FOLLOWERS OF "THE WAY"

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## How to Embrace Your Emotions without Being Ruled by Them

by Winston T. Smith

### Emotional Winds

Growing up on a large lake I developed a great appreciation for the power of the wind. I enjoyed many summer days sailing with friends on the family sailboat. When the weather was fair and there was a steady wind it made for a delightful day. The wind carried you wherever you liked and you could just enjoy the ride. But on a hot summer afternoon a thunderstorm could blow up quickly. If you were too far out on the lake it meant real trouble. Chaotic winds would stir up the waves, swing the boom wildly, and even threaten to capsize the boat.

Emotions can seem as unpredictable as the wind—sometimes gentle and comforting, sometimes stormy and threatening, and apparently beyond your control. But we don't have to live at the mercy of our emotions. Understanding why God gave them to us and how they work can help us engage them without being ruled by them. Here are a few things to keep in mind.

#### *1. Accept your emotions as a gift from God.*

First, accept your emotions as part of your makeup as an image bearer of God. One of the things that Scripture teaches us about our emotions is how deeply they are rooted in what we value. When we encounter things we consider "good" we experience emotions that feel good. For example, the blessings of life engender in us feelings like happiness, joy, and contentment. When we encounter things that we consider "bad," we experience emotions that feel bad like sadness, grief, and anger. Jesus himself exemplified this. When he encountered the hard hearts and oppression he became angry (Mark 3:5). When he encountered death and loss he grieved (John 11:35). When he faced torture and death he agonized (Luke 22:44).

In a sense, then, the more our hearts and values are aligned with God's, the more we will experience emotions that reflect God's perspective on what's happening in and around us. The more we mature into the image of Christ, the more our encounters with the truly good will engender positive emotions. Likewise, our encounters with the truly bad will engender even more negative emotions.

This is important to understand because Christians sometimes have the faulty view that the more we know, trust, and love God, the less we experience negative emotions. While it is true that our faith can keep us from being ruled by our emotions, it doesn't mean that we don't feel negative things or live in a fixed state of emotional bliss. Christians who don't understand this sometimes suffer anxiety, frustration, and shame about their emotions. Denying or hiding from negative emotions only complicates matters.

#### *2. Learn their language and name them.*

Second, it's important to develop emotional language and name your emotions. Have you ever noticed how sometimes you feel a little better after sharing frustrations or fears with a trusted friend? The actual circumstances that are bothering you may not have changed a bit. Your friend may not have done anything other than listen carefully and share their care and concern, and yet, your struggle is not as much of a burden as it was just a few minutes earlier. There are probably lots of reasons for that, but at a fundamental level, being able to name your emotions and experiences enabled you to entrust them to another who bore the burden with you. In other words, being able to name your emotions helped you to connect with another and be loved.

This can be very hard to do. Our emotions, especially the more painful ones, are often messy and complicated. We aren't necessarily sure exactly *what* we are feeling, just that it feels awful. The Bible provides some help. It is full of songs, poems, and narratives that describe the full range of human experience in all of its complicated messiness. Take the Psalms for example. There you will find thankfulness and joy, "The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation" (Ps 118:14); frustration and anger, "Be not silent, O God of my praise! For wicked and deceitful mouths are opened against me, speaking against me with lying tongues" (Ps. 109:1-2); even utter despair, "You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness" (Ps. 88:18).

When you don't have the words to describe how you feel, turn to the Bible to find them. Allow words inspired by the Holy Spirit to become your words. As you do you are beginning the process of entrusting them to another. First and foremost, you are beginning to entrust them to God by mouthing his words after him, but learning the vocabulary of emotions can begin to help you share them wisely with trusted others as well.

### *3. Discern how they invite you to grow in love.*

As God's image bearers we were created to mature into Christ's likeness which is love itself (1 John. 3:1-16), and our emotions can actually help us to grow in love. This can happen in many ways. For example, as we are more honest and engaged with our emotions we may notice a "gap" between how the Bible suggests we should feel and how we actually feel. For example, Paul writes that as an expression of genuine love Christians should, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (Rom 12:15). In other words, love requires us to enter into the emotional experience of those we love. When you experience a "gap", say you are untouched by the other's suffering or you experience their happiness as jealousy, then you know that your emotions are not being shaped by love, but something else.

Or perhaps you wrestle with particularly strong negative emotions. For example, say you have an anxiety *problem*. At times you seem to worry about everything. Or perhaps your fear is paralyzing and prevents you from living a full life. There are all kinds of techniques that you can learn to help you engage your fear and perhaps become desensitized to it, and that's fine. But realize that your fear may also suggest a need to receive more deeply God's care and love for you. The Bible records many examples of his people's fear to which he often reminds them that though they may suffer, he is with them and cares for them. Consider Isaiah 43:2, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you." Again, knowing God's love doesn't totally remove negative emotions, but it can keep them from controlling you and keep you grounded and able to learn and grow.

Navigating our emotions can be tricky, but it's easier if you continually review a few basics: First, remember, your emotions are part of how God made you to reflect his image and his values. You and emotions go together just like sailboats and wind are meant to go together. You don't want your boat to be sunk by the wind, but without the wind you aren't going anywhere. Second, learn the language of emotions. You might say that learning the vocabulary of emotions is like learning how to sail with a crew. To sail safely you need to be able to say, "Watch out for the boom!" or "We're taking on water! Grab a bucket!" And it makes sailing much nicer when you can say, "Isn't this a lovely day. I'm glad we're here together." Finally, knowing that emotions are meant to help us to grow in loving and knowing God's love is like having a compass heading. Even when the winds make sailing hard, if you know where you are trying to go you'll know how to navigate them to get there.