



FAITH AND FEELING

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Welcome to Let the Bible Speak. I'm glad to have some time together to consider the teaching of the bible and to search for the will of God together. Following Christ and serving God is much more than a list of facts that we acknowledge and duties that we perform. We are to love God with not only our mind, but with our heart, soul, and strength, and the scriptures do make some distinction between those things. Our Creator not only gave us a mind to reason with, but He also gave us an inner man that includes the ability to feel. Emotions are not a bad thing; they are good and helpful when they are channeled in the right direction. There is, however, an insidious danger that lurks when our emotions are strong. We must make sure they are regulated and that they remain in the proper place and serve the correct purpose. The problem is not that we possess emotions, the problem arises when our emotions possess us and they become the measure and even the goal of our faith.

In 2 Corinthians 5:7, the apostle Paul wrote: "For we walk by faith, not by sight." In Proverbs 16:25, we're warned: "There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death." Emotions are powerful forces in the human psyche and many of us find ourselves reacting to situations and making choices based on our feelings. And because of the supernatural nature of faith and Christianity, many equate a strong emotional impulse with something being from God. There is great danger in that but, at the same time, we don't want to be without feeling and Christianity become nothing more than an intellectual exercise or a mundane drudgery. Today, we want to talk about the role of emotion and keeping it in proper perspective. What does the bible teach about the relationship of faith and feeling?

We live in a world, secular and religious, that increasingly measures truth by emotion. People commonly say, "Follow your heart," or "If it feels right, it must be right." Feelings have become the compass by which many attempt to navigate life. Yet, while emotions are powerful, they are also unpredictable. They rise and fall like the tides, shifting with circumstances, or perhaps our state of health, our environment, and even the time of year or the weather. If a person builds his entire spiritual life upon emotion alone, he is building upon a foundation that constantly shifts. At the same time, Scripture never presents faith as cold, mechanical, or lifeless. Biblical faith is not mere intellectual agreement with a set of doctrines that we acknowledge. It involves the heart, the affections, and the deepest emotions of the soul. Jesus answered the question posed by a scribe, "what is the first or greatest commandment" by rightly quoting the great Shema of Israel: "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment." (Mark 12:30)

There's more to man than a body animated by a brain. God made us with not only the ability to think but to deeply feel. And throughout Scripture, we see that genuine faith in God has produced very strong emotions in those who believe. David was a man after God's own heart, we recall, and we see in him a tender heart at times that could be moved to great joy or deep sorrow. The David who poured his heart out to God while fleeing from Saul and later Absalom, cried rivers of tears, even asking God to put them in a bottle and remember them. That same David could stand in the face of an angry giant and defy his brute strength by telling him it was no match for the power of God. It's hard to imagine David uttering such a challenge in the dull monotone sound of a college chemistry lecture. When the Ark of the Covenant was retaken from the Philistines and brought to Jerusalem, the bible tells us that David danced before the Lord. That wasn't a lascivious dance but an excited reaction to what he was witnessing. I don't believe it was a planned and choreographed display meant to set a mood or gin up the people. It was an honest, in the moment reaction to the tremendous victory the arrival of the ark represented. When the people of God sinned, we sometimes find faithful prophets rending their clothes and visibly grieving over the fact. When people were convicted of their sin by the preaching of the prophets and by the judgments of God, their repentance was sometimes marked by their wearing sackcloth and ashes – an outward sign of sorrow, suffering, and distress. The Psalms are filled with heartfelt praise and reaction to the majesty and the works of God.

Having and even displaying emotion is not wrong, it's often very appropriate. Genuine emotion can be one sign of a tender and sincere heart. But the bible also warns that emotions can also be misleading and blind us to the truth of God. As we noted in our introduction, the way that often seems right to a man is the way that leads to death. We can mistake emotions for truth and reality and many today are doing just that. We see it in nearly every phase of life. Some make financial decisions based on emotion and that usually doesn't end well. Many make health decisions based upon emotions and that can be lethal. Many make political decisions based upon shallow emotions instead of reasoning from the law and the constitution and that leads to vitriolic division such as we're seeing in our society today. We might even argue that we are raising a generation to feel instead of thinking. The most dangerous of all is when

people make spiritual decisions based on their emotions or when they see an emotional reaction as the goal and the measure of what is right and good. This begs the question: If emotions are not wrong but at the same time can be dangerous, where is the balance? What is the proper relationship between faith and feeling? How do we guard against emotionalism while still maintaining a vibrant, inner relationship with God? Well, we need to keep some things about truth and emotion in mind.

First, we should always keep in view that **BIBLICAL FAITH IS ROOTED IN TRUTH, NOT EMOTION**. The foundation of biblical faith is **ALWAYS** truth that is revealed by God. There are no exceptions to that. If it comes from something besides the word of God, it's not faith in God. Romans 10:17 declares, "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." Faith does not originate from emotional experience. It originates from divine revelation which today, is in the form of God's completed and sufficient word! Many confuse faith with a feeling when they say, "I just feel like God is leading me to do this or the other..." I have had many people come to me through the years for spiritual counsel and say, "I don't feel saved" or "I don't feel like God has forgiven me..." But Scripture never defines faith as a feeling, and it never uses emotion as the test of whether we're in a right relationship with God. Hebrews 11:1 tells us, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Faith rests upon God's promises whether emotions confirm those promises or not. Consider, for example, Abraham. God promised him a son when his body was as good as dead and Sarah's womb was barren. Everything Abraham could see and feel suggested impossibility. Yet Romans 4:20 says, "He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith." Abraham did not wait until he felt confident. He believed because God had spoken. It was as simple as that.

You see, feelings are unreliable indicators of truth. One day a believer may feel very close to God, but the next day, he may feel distant, dry, or discouraged. If our relationship to God were based on emotional experience, we would live in constant instability. The Psalmist understood that struggle. In Psalm 42:5, he speaks to himself, saying, "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted in me? hope thou in God." Notice the order. He did not follow his feelings. He corrected them by reminding himself of the truth. No, faith doesn't deny emotions, but it refuses to let emotions become the authority. God's Word must always be the ultimate authority.

Second, **BIBLICAL FAITH PRODUCES** GENUINE EMOTION. It's not the other way around. While faith is not built upon feeling, genuine faith will ultimately affect the heart in one way or another. Christianity is not merely intellectual assent. The gospel touches every part of the human soul. How is it possible for a sincere person to look by the eye of faith at the Christ crucified on Calvary without being moved to a deep gratitude and affection for the Christ who died for him or her? Now people manifest emotions in different ways and different degrees. Some are easily moved to tears while others are very stoic. That doesn't necessarily mean they are devoid of feeling. Their feeling may be manifest in other ways. It may be transferred into quiet action and a deeper resolve and commitment to serve Christ, but you may never know that by the expression on their face or by some outward emotional display. You see, that's one

of the dangers of emotionalism: when we begin to judge the faith of others or even our own faith and obedience based on a mere outward emotional reaction. Yes, scripture repeatedly connects faith with strong emotion, but that emotion may take different forms of expression. When a person truly understands, believes, and obeys the gospel, he experiences joy. We read in Acts 8 about the Ethiopian nobleman who heard the gospel from Philip, and immediately halted his chariot along the side of a desolate road and had Philip baptized him right then and there because he wanted to be saved. Phillip baptized him and the scripture says, "he went on his way rejoicing." I don't know what that looked like, and you don't either. It may not have looked like the reaction you or I may have had when we obeyed the gospel, but we know that in his heart, the man was rejoicing. How could he not?

1 Peter 1:8 describes believers as those who "rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory." When the prodigal son returned home in Luke 15, the father rejoiced with overwhelming compassion and celebration. Even Jesus Himself demonstrated deep emotion in reaction to things He experienced. He wept at the tomb of Lazarus. He felt compassion for the multitudes. The bible says on one occasion, He saw a hungry and aimless crowd, and he was "moved with compassion" because they were like sheep without a shepherd. In the original language that phrase means that His bowels were wrenched within Him at the sight of the lost multitude. He experienced sorrow in Gethsemane. The Son of God was not emotionally detached. He burst into sobbing, convulsive tears when He stood on the Mount of Olives and surveyed the doomed city of Jerusalem. But, you see, His emotions were based upon truth, not the other way around. We're told by Jesus, as we studied here a few weeks ago, that true worship involves both spirit and truth (John 4:24). Worship without truth becomes empty emotionalism. Truth without heartfelt response becomes cold formalism. God desires worship that engages both the mind and the heart. I think the psalms illustrate that balance. The writers express fear, sorrow, joy, frustration, and gratitude. Yet those emotions are always anchored to God's character, promises, and works. Their feelings were produced by their theology, not the other way around.

The presence of emotion is not a sign of spiritual weakness. Genuine emotion is an outgrowth of spiritual reality not the source of it. The danger arises when emotion replaces truth instead of responding to it. One of the dangerous trends in the church today is the desire to manipulate people's emotions in the name of affecting revival and creating life in what they perceive as a dead church. If we can get people to sing the right songs, get them in the right mood, create the right atmosphere, stimulate their emotions, we can bring them to life and revival can take place. No revival ever took place in the word of God because of emotions. Revivals always took place when the preaching of the word of God and/or the judgment of God was meted out for disobeying the word they already had heard, and the word then convicted them of their sin, and they turned to God in repentance. THEN, the people would weep. THEN, the people would repent in sackcloth and ashes. THEN, the people would reform their conduct. THEN, true peace and joy would be restored in the hearts of the people. Emotionalism occurs when feelings become the priority and the primary measure of spiritual reality. It prioritizes experience over

Scripture and sensation over substance. Emotionalism often appears attractive because it produces immediate excitement, but when something is based on emotion, it doesn't last. Some people are like addicts searching for the next spiritual high. That's emotionalism. And it carries serious spiritual dangers.

For one thing, emotionalism can produce false assurance. Many people base their salvation upon a past emotional experience rather than genuine faith, repentance and obedience to the gospel. They remember a moment when they felt deeply moved during a service, responded to an invitation, or prayed an emotional prayer. But salvation is not determined by intensity of feeling. It is determined by responding to the gospel in faith by doing what the gospel requires. When one asks, "What Must I Do To Be Saved" and the word of God gives them the answer and they then do what the word says, they can be assured that God grants what He promised. It's based on the word of God and not how or what we feel. Jesus warned in Matthew 7:21 that many will say, "Lord, Lord," but will not enter the kingdom of heaven. These individuals likely had religious experiences and emotional moments. Yet they lacked obedience to Christ. The parable of the sower illustrates it as well. The seed sown on rocky soil sprang up quickly with apparent enthusiasm, but it had no root. When difficulty came, it withered away. Emotional excitement without deep conviction often produces temporary faith.

Second, emotionalism makes people spiritually unstable. When feelings become the measure of spirituality, believers experience constant instability. If they feel spiritually uplifted, they assume they are walking closely with God. If they feel discouraged, they assume they have fallen away or that whatever they have believed must be wrong, so they go searching for their feeling somewhere else. But friend, remember, the Christian life will always include seasons of dryness, testing, and spiritual struggle. Even mature believers experience times when God SEEMS distant. These seasons are not necessarily evidence of spiritual failure. Sometimes they are the times when our faith ends up growing the most because those times drive us to the word of God. People who expect emotional stimulation to feel spiritually secure, are the kind who drift from church to church, sermon to sermon, seeking emotional highs rather than spiritual depth. Third, emotionalism can open the door to doctrinal error. Throughout history, many false movements have gained influence by appealing strongly to emotion while neglecting biblical truth. When people prioritize feelings, they become vulnerable to manipulation. Jeremiah 17:9 warns, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Who can know it?" Human emotion, as powerful, is not trustworthy. When the emotions take the place of the bible, those feelings can justify sin, excuse compromise, and validate false teaching. Friend, remember, supposed spiritual experiences must always be tested by Scripture. First John 4:1 instructs believers to "try the spirits whether they are of God." The problem is, many test the scripture by their experience and not the other way around. Emotional intensity is not proof of spiritual authenticity.

Now, while emotionalism is dangerous, the opposite extreme is equally harmful. Some believers react against emotional excess by attempting to remove emotion entirely from their faith. They reduce Christianity to intellectual agreement with doctrine and outward conformity to religious duty and end up with a cold, lifeless existence that lacks passion for God. Jesus

rebuked the church at Ephesus for leaving their first love. They maintained doctrinal purity and moral discipline, yet their affection for Christ had faded. God desires heartfelt devotion. When we deny emotion, worship becomes mechanical, prayers become routine, and service becomes burdensome rather than joyful. The goal is not to eliminate emotion but to sanctify it. Scripture presents a clear order: truth produces faith, and faith produces true and legitimate emotion. Feelings are wonderful servants but terrible masters. They are meant to follow truth, not lead it. Deep roots produce stable trees. Likewise, mature believers will most often display quiet, steady devotion rather than constant emotional excitement that so often defines the fickle and unstable church member.

We have a perfect example, and that's the Lord, Himself. Perhaps no scene illustrates the relationship between faith and feeling more powerfully than Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Christ experienced overwhelming emotional distress. Scripture says His soul was "exceeding sorrowful, even unto death." He prayed with such intensity that His sweat became like drops of blood. Yet in the midst of profound emotion, Jesus submitted fully to the Father's will. He prayed, "Not my will, but thine, be done." Jesus couldn't deny His emotions! He expressed them honestly before the Father. But He refused to allow His feelings to override obedience. Truth governed emotion. And that's the pattern for us today. And when emotions come and go, and when emotions rise or fall, we can echo the words of the Psalmist: "My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever." (Psa 73:26)

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