

## **Painful Feelings**

### **By David Feddes**

Professor Craig Keener is a teacher of New Testament, and he tells about something that happened to a student whom he knew. This student one day got into an argument in a Bible class at the seminary where he was studying, and he had a very heated argument with his professor about how to interpret a particular verse. After the class was over, the student went away, and for the rest of the day he just really felt threatened. So he began to pray.

As he prayed, he wondered why he felt so threatened. He knew he needed to apologize to his professor, but he was still puzzled as to why he had felt so threatened. As he prayed, it began to come to him that he had always felt threatened by his own father. In his relationship with his father, he had always felt that he could never talk to him—and that when he did try to talk to him, his father always mocked him and belittled him, even when he seemed to be making sense or had a good argument. As he continued to think about that and pray further, he realized that he hated his father—just had feelings of being threatened by his father and of hating him. But then he also realized that he loved his father too.

Well, the next day he went to talk to his professor. He told his professor he was sorry for what had happened, that he apologized. The professor apologized in return and said, “We’re going to be better friends for this.” Their relationship was taken care of. But there was still the matter of his father.

That summer, the student traveled back home. He hadn’t been home for a few years, but he went home that summer to see his family. One day, when the rest of the family was gone and out of the house, he noticed that his father was reading the newspaper. So he went to him and said, “Dad, can I talk to you?” His dad said, “Sure, son,” and kept on reading the newspaper.

He said, “Dad, I’m not saying you were really this way, but when I was growing up, I felt like I could never talk to you, and like you always just mocked whatever I had to say. I have to admit that I felt like I hated you for that. And Dad, I’m really sorry that I felt that way. I want you to know that I love you.”

His dad never looked up. His dad never moved the newspaper from in front of his face. He just said, “That’s all right, son. All kids feel that way about their dad.” End of conversation. Well, that wasn’t how the young man had hoped things would turn out. But he had done what he felt he needed to do. He’d expressed his feelings to his dad, and so he left.

A while later, his mom phoned and asked him, “What did you say to your dad that day? He’s been different. He’s been spending more time with your younger brother, who was still living at home. He’s been talking with him and listening to him more and doing more things with him.” So the student told his mom what he had said during that conversation with his dad—when his dad hadn’t seemed to take any of it to heart at all. His mom said, “Well, that’s how he felt about his dad. And they never made peace before his dad died.”

After that, the young man himself also began to have a more open and loving and affectionate relationship with his father. That had a tremendous blessing for that family. It all began with that young man going through some very painful feelings from an argument with a professor. In a time of prayer, those feelings showed him how he had hated his father and at the same time had loved him. Rather than just keeping all that bottled up, he had spoken about that with his dad. At first, it hadn't seemed to get anywhere, but it turned out to have a tremendous blessing—for his life, for his father, for his brother, and for the rest of their family.

I want to talk today with you about painful feelings, because those painful feelings are worth exploring. It's not always fun to do that, but it is very valuable and helpful. We're talking about emotional fitness.

Here's just a quick overview of what we've already said in a previous talk about emotional fitness: You're emotionally fit when your feelings are in tune with reality, in tune with others, in tune with God—when your feelings reflect the way things are. You're emotionally fit when you display your emotions appropriately—when you're not too easily triggered, when you don't hang on to them too long, but you display them appropriately. You display your anger in a way that's fitting, your joy in a way that's fitting.

You realize that your emotional fitness is tied into other aspects of total fitness. Your feelings help you to sense true and deep realities and give you hints of what's going on in your own heart, what's going on in God's heart.

You're emotionally fit when the painful feelings—though real and sometimes sending you valuable messages—are still limited. You don't become a totally angry person or a totally sad person or a totally hateful person. Even though you may have those feelings, they're limited. And the feelings of joy and peace and love and other such pleasant feelings are unlimited—because they come from the living God, who gives those blessings forever.

So let's look a little bit more at our emotions. In a later talk, we're going to talk about pleasant feelings and what we discover from those. But today we're going to look at the painful feelings of fear and sadness, guilt and shame, anger and hate. There could be other painful feelings, but those are the ones we're going to get into in this talk.

Let's begin simply by reading the Psalms. There are many psalms that express painful feelings—of anger, of rage, of sorrow, of hate. There are other parts of the Bible too that express very painful feelings.

The book of Job—Job pours out his sorrows and his sadness. The prophets—such as Habakkuk—say, “God, why? Why do evil men get away with what they do, and why are these terrible things happening?” Or the prophet Jeremiah too—the weeping prophet—is crying out to God with great sorrow. These are outpourings of painful feelings.

Psalms 69 is one such prayer, and there are many others—what are called “psalms of disorientation,” of feeling that things are just bad, and intense feeling about that:

<sup>1</sup> Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. <sup>2</sup> I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me. <sup>3</sup> I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail, looking for my God.

<sup>4</sup> Those who hate me without reason outnumber the hairs of my head; many are my enemies without cause, those who seek to destroy me. I am forced to restore what I did not steal.

<sup>5</sup> You know my folly, O God; my guilt is not hidden from you.

<sup>6</sup> May those who hope in you not be disgraced because of me, O Lord, the LORD Almighty; may those who seek you not be put to shame because of me, O God of Israel. <sup>7</sup> For I endure scorn for your sake, and shame covers my face... <sup>9</sup> for zeal for your house consumes me, and the insults of those who insult you fall on me.

<sup>13</sup> But I pray to you, O LORD, in the time of your favor; in your great love, O God, answer me with your sure salvation.

<sup>14</sup> Rescue me from the mire, do not let me sink; deliver me from those who hate me... <sup>17</sup> Do not hide your face from your servant; answer me quickly, for I am in trouble. <sup>18</sup> Come near and rescue me; redeem me because of my foes.

<sup>19</sup> You know how I am scorned, disgraced and shamed; all my enemies are before you. <sup>20</sup> Scorn has broken my heart and has left me helpless; I looked for sympathy, but there was none, for comforters, but I found none. <sup>21</sup> They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst...

<sup>23</sup> May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever. <sup>24</sup> Pour out your wrath on them; let your fierce anger overtake them...

<sup>26</sup> For they persecute those you wound and talk about the pain of those you hurt. <sup>27</sup> Charge them with crime upon crime; do not let them share in your salvation...

<sup>29</sup> I am in pain and distress; may your salvation, O God, protect me. <sup>30</sup> I will praise God's name in song and glorify him with thanksgiving... <sup>32</sup> The poor will see and be glad—you who seek God, may your hearts live! <sup>33</sup> The LORD hears the needy and does not despise his captive people.

What an outpouring of pain and hurtful feeling we find in that prayer of Psalm 69. There's fear and sadness, guilt—he knows he's not completely innocent—shame at all the mockery that's come his way, anger, hate: "Destroy them, God. Don't save them." Just this outpouring of pain. And we find that in other psalms and other prayers of the Bible.

What do we do with those painful feelings? Well, let's begin with fear and sadness.

In Psalm 55, the person prays, "My heart is in anguish within me. The terrors of death assail me. Fear and trembling have beset me. Horror has overwhelmed me. Destructive forces are at work in the city; threats and lies never leave its streets" (Psalm 55:4–5, 11).

Sometimes fear and sadness is a healthy reaction to the way things are. When the city is filled with threats, when you're in danger of death, you have the right to be afraid. When destructive forces are at work in the city and it's full of threats and lies and evil, you ought to feel sad. If you don't feel any fear or any sadness there, there's something wrong with your emotions if you're in that kind of a society and you feel nothing.

So there is a legitimate role for fear and sadness—painful emotions in our heart. But there's also such a thing as misguided fear, misguided sadness. "The wicked man flees though no one pursues" (Proverbs 28:1). Sometimes people are afraid and there's really nothing to be afraid of. And sometimes it's wicked people—because they know that punishment ought to be coming their way—and they flee even when nobody's chasing them.

"Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe" (Proverbs 29:25). Sometimes we worry too much about what people think of us. Sometimes we worry too much about what they can do to us, and our fear gets away on us. We should fear people less and fear God more.

And sometimes we're sad when we really shouldn't be. Ahab was so sad. Ahab lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat. He'd lost his appetite. His heart was filled with sorrow. Poor Ahab. What had been going on? Well, Ahab happened to be the king of all Israel, with vast wealth, enormous power. And there was one vineyard that he wanted, that somebody wouldn't sell to him. A man named Naboth said, "This is the inheritance of my family for generations. I want to keep it" (1 Kings 21:3). And so Ahab was so sad. He merely had a kingdom. He merely had mounds of silver and gold. But there was one vineyard he didn't have. And so his heart was broken.

Sometimes our sadness is very misplaced, and it can lead us to do terrible things. Ahab murdered the man who had that vineyard—murdered Naboth and took it. And then he was happy. But you see how sometimes the painful emotions we have are totally misplaced—because Ahab had no right to feel sad whatsoever. The only reason he felt sad was because he was a totally selfish pig who couldn't get everything he wanted from everybody else.

There is such a thing as misguided fear and sadness. And there's healthy fear and sadness. "Do not fear what they fear and do not dread it. The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy; he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread" (Isaiah 8:12–13). Or as Jesus put it, "Don't fear those who can destroy the body and can't do anything more after that. Fear the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell" (Matthew 10:28).

There's a healthy fear—that God holds our destiny in his hands. And there is a healthy sadness. James in chapter 4 talks to people who've been fighting and bickering, and he says it's because you're so worldly and you want stuff and you're not getting it and you quarrel and fight. You want something, and you ask God sometimes, and you ask with wrong motives because you

want to spend what you get on your pleasures. You love the world; you hate God. "Grieve, mourn, and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom" (James 4:9).

For some people, intense sadness and wailing and sorrow would be the best thing that happened to their emotions—because they would realize their own sin and be really sad about it. There is healthy fear. There's healthy sadness. And when you fear the Lord, when you're sad about your sins, don't just wish you could make those feelings vanish. Say, "Thank you, God, that I've got a sense of your majesty and your righteousness that makes me afraid of your wrath. Thank you, God, for showing me how serious my sin is and for making me sad about it." There is such a thing as healthy fear and sadness.

Jesus himself entered deeply into the fear and the sadness of his people. At the tomb of his friend Lazarus, who had died a few days beforehand, Jesus was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. Jesus wept (John 11:33, 35). Jesus went on to raise Lazarus from the dead, but he felt great sorrow at the unbelief of people, and he felt great sorrow just at the presence of death and what a horrible thing it is.

When Jesus faced his own death—and not just his own death but the suffering and sorrow that he was about to go through—he said, "Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour" (John 12:27). When he was in the Garden of Gethsemane, he said, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (Matthew 26:38). He had this overwhelming, intense fear of what was coming upon him and sorrow and sadness about what he was going to go through. Jesus knows fear and sadness more intensely than anyone who ever lived. And that should be an encouragement to us in our times of fear, in our times of sorrow.

So it's okay to feel legitimate fear, legitimate sadness. And at the same time, we don't want to feel sad about the wrong things like Ahab did or afraid of the wrong things. Instead, we need to realize that in a broken world, it's okay to feel sad about that brokenness. In a world with enemies, it's okay to have some degree of fear of those enemies, even though our fear of the Lord should be greater. But also not to be stuck in fear, not to be people who just live in fear, who are just stuck in unending sorrow.

Psalms 56 prays, "When I'm afraid, I will trust in you... Record my lament; list my tears on your scroll... In God I trust; I will not be afraid" (Psalm 56:3, 8, 11). So he says, "I'm afraid," and then he pours it out to God. And by the end of his prayer, he's trusting, and he's not as afraid as he was. And that fear—when he hands it over to the Lord—that sadness—when he hands it over to the Lord—is diminished.

And also we realize that fear and sadness don't have the last word. "Everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away" (Isaiah 35:10). Even when you're going through painful emotions, take heart that they don't last forever. Sorrow and sighing will flee away when God pours out his blessings and crowns you with everlasting joy.

Guilt and shame is another pair of very painful emotions. And they're emotions that can be appropriate at times. There's something wrong with us emotionally if we never do feel guilty or ashamed of things that are truly wrong and shameful.

Jeremiah the prophet says, "Let us lie down in our shame and let our disgrace cover us. We have sinned against the Lord our God" (Jeremiah 3:25). We're guilty. We should feel ashamed.

And then he talks about false prophets, about people with hardened consciences, about people who say, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace. And he says, "Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush" (Jeremiah 6:15).

Something has gotten very sick in your emotional life when you can't even blush about the things that are horrible. And we sometimes see that in our own time, where people march in parades celebrating things that the Bible calls an abomination—where their hearts have become hardened against feeling any shame about what the Bible calls shameful. So guilt and shame are part of healthy emotional life for people who actually have sinned and done things to be ashamed of.

"Against you, you only, have I sinned," says David (Psalm 51:4). David committed a terrible sin. He committed adultery with another man's wife, and then he arranged for the murder of that man and seized the wife for himself. He had it all covered up, and he seemed at least not to feel too bad about the whole deal. He had the woman that he wanted. He moved on with business as usual.

Then the prophet Nathan came to him and said, "Something happened that you need to know about. There was a poor man and his family. They had one little lamb, and it was such a cute, darling little lamb. They would feed that little lamb, they'd even take that little lamb to bed with them and cuddle that lamb. And nearby there was a rich man who had a huge flock of sheep. He had some guests come along. And instead of taking one of his own sheep and slaughtering it for them to eat, he took that poor man's little lamb and slaughtered it and ate it with his guests."

David heard that story and got so mad. He said, "That man deserves to die!" Nathan the prophet said, "You are that man. You stole another man's wife even though you could have any woman in the kingdom, and you murdered that man."

And so David admitted, "I've sinned against the Lord" (2 Samuel 12:13). Then he prayed Psalm 51: "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight... Surely you desire truth in the inner parts... Create in me a pure heart, O God... Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me... Save me from bloodguilt, O God... A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Psalm 51:4, 6, 10–11, 14, 17).

Now, was David more emotionally healthy when he was feeling on top of things—when he had Bathsheba, had stolen her, and was feeling really pretty good about the whole situation? Or was he more emotionally healthy when he wept and cried out to God in anguish over what he had done, after he heard Nathan the prophet expose to him the seriousness of his sin?

There is healthy guilt and shame.

There's also a sense of being wrongly shamed. People who don't deserve to be made ashamed nonetheless may feel that way.

Job, the Bible says, was the greatest man in the East—the most righteous man, whom God singled out and pointed out as the most righteous (Job 1:1, 8). And yet, he was made to feel very ashamed because all sorts of calamities came on him. He was attacked by the devil. His own friends and family turned on him. And so Job says, "Even if I am innocent, I cannot lift my head, for I am full of shame and drowned in my affliction" (Job 10:15).

You can be right and still be so looked down upon by other people, and have so many things said to you, and be so weak in your spirit, that you just feel totally shamed.

The psalmist in Psalm 4 says, "How long, O men, will you turn my glory into shame?" (Psalm 4:2). Sometimes you're mocked for glorious things. You're mocked for following the Lord. You're mocked for doing something right. You're mocked for refusing to go along with a crowd. You may be mocked for refusing to join in with a drunken party. You may be mocked because you're not sleeping around with people the way some of your friends claim they are. And even though you're doing the right thing, you can feel shame.

In Psalm 69 he says, "I endure scorn for your sake, and shame covers my face" (Psalm 69:7). Shame is a terrible feeling. Sometimes you feel ashamed even though you've done the right thing and are mocked for it.

Sometimes you feel ashamed because you didn't wear the right clothes to school, or you didn't have the latest shoes, and so you get mocked because you didn't dress a certain way. There's nothing to be ashamed of if you can't afford the most expensive clothes. And yet you feel ashamed even though there's nothing to truly be ashamed about.

So we can be wrongly shamed for a variety of reasons. People can feel intense shame who've been sexually abused or verbally abused by people and been told they're worthless. And even though they're not worthless, and even though the things they did were not things to be mocked and made light of, they feel shame because they're wrongly shamed. And then you're not emotionally fit. You're not emotionally healthy—because you're feeling shame when it doesn't actually fit your situation.

Sometimes even God can get shamed. God can have people who make him look bad. God says of Israel, "I chose you, I made you my people, and you've made me look bad. The people of Israel profaned my holy name" (Ezekiel 36:20–22). How did that happen? Well, God chose them. He brought them into the Promised Land. And then they lived in many wicked ways. God couldn't have that kind of people identified with him. So he kicked them out of his land and sent them into exile—because they had embarrassed him. But in exile, then the nations said, "What kind of God does Israel have? He couldn't even defend them and keep them in their own land." So if God let them stay in the land in their wickedness, it brought embarrassment to him. If he

kicked them out, then the nations would mock and say God wasn't strong enough to defend the people he had chosen.

So what's God going to do when he's embarrassed by these people? He said, "I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel profaned" (Ezekiel 36:21). He says to them, "Be ashamed and disgraced for your conduct, O house of Israel" (Ezekiel 36:32).

God seems to be caught between a rock and a hard place. If he leaves them in the land in their wickedness, he'll be embarrassed by having them as his people. If he sends them into exile, he'll be embarrassed by having them as his people. So God comes up with a new idea. He says, "I'm going to change them from the inside out. I'm going to put a new heart and a new spirit within them so that they're people who actually can live out my way of life and bring credit to my name" (Ezekiel 36:26–27).

In the new covenant, through Jesus Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit, God has done wonderful things. And part of the reason was so that he would remove shame from his name and make them a people worthy again of being God's people.

"Even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written, 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me'" (Romans 15:3). Christ himself endured insults and shame. Jesus was counted among those who were sinners. He bore the sins of many and interceded for sinners (Isaiah 53:12). The Bible says, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

We don't know what the feeling was for Jesus of the guilt of the whole world poured out upon him. But we do know of some of the shame that was heaped on him. Jesus entered very deeply into our shame.

He stood trial before the Jewish high council—the religious leaders—and they accused him and found him guilty of blasphemy against God. They mocked him. They put a blindfold on him and began hitting him and said, "Hey, you're supposed to be a prophet. Tell us who hit you." And they spit on him (Luke 22:63–65).

Then he was handed over to the Roman officials. He was found guilty by the Roman government and sentenced to be crucified. Just before that, the Roman soldiers were mocking him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews," and they put a crown of thorns on his head and spit on him and hit him (Matthew 27:28–30).

Then they stripped him naked and strung him up on a cross. While he was hanging there—stripped of his clothing—people were going by. The ordinary people were saying, "He trusted in God; let God save him" (Matthew 27:43). The priests and the leaders of the people were saying the same thing: "He saved others, but he can't save himself" (Matthew 27:42).

Jesus was just mocked and shamed on every side.



The Bible says, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2).

Christ knows our guilt. He bore all the guilt of the world. He knows our shame. He was afflicted. Even God himself hid his face and darkened the sun while Jesus hung on the cross (Matthew 27:45). He knows the guilt and shame more intensely than anyone else ever could.

Anger and hate—another pair of painful emotions that can sometimes be misguided. "An angry man stirs up dissension, and a hot-tempered one commits many sins" (Proverbs 29:22). The Bible says that "man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires" (James 1:20). Just merely human anger—blowing up, hating—leads to all sorts of bad stuff.

The Bible gives us examples. Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast (Genesis 4:5). What was he angry about? He was angry that God had accepted the sacrifice of his brother Abel but not Cain's. And he was upset by that. He didn't ask, "What's wrong with me?" He asked, "What's wrong with God? What's wrong with Abel?" God cautioned him, and he ignored God's caution and instead murdered his brother in anger (Genesis 4:6–8).

Getting back to our old friend King Ahab, the most wicked king of Israel—who was so sad because he couldn't have a vineyard that belonged to someone else—on another occasion Ahab was in an alliance with a godly king, Jehoshaphat, and they were going to go into battle. But first they wanted to hear from some prophets.

Ahab had a whole bunch of court prophets who were paid by him and who always said good things and promised victories. So he brought in 400 of them, and they said, "Go and triumph in battle" (1 Kings 22:6). King Jehoshaphat, the godly king, thought that sounded a little too good to be true. He knew phonies when he heard them. So he said, "Is there not a prophet of the Lord here whom we can inquire of?" (1 Kings 22:7).

Ahab said, "There is still one man through whom we can inquire of the Lord, but I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me, but always bad. It's Micaiah" (1 Kings 22:8).

Ahab hated this prophet Micaiah. Why? Not because Micaiah was evil or doing wrong, but simply because Micaiah prophesied against Ahab—because Ahab was a wicked king. A wicked man hated a righteous prophet. Ahab wouldn't listen to Micaiah, even when Micaiah gave the warning that the battle would not go well for him. Ahab sentenced Micaiah to jail, then went off to battle—and got himself killed (1 Kings 22:27, 34–35).

Our misguided anger and hate can harm others a great deal and get us into all sorts of trouble. Emotional fitness means dealing with misguided anger and hate—turning away from it and repenting of it.

But not all anger and hate is bad. God gets angry. God hates.

"Who knows the power of your anger? For your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you" (Psalm 90:11). "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (Romans 1:18). "The Lord examines the righteous, but the wicked and those who love violence his soul hates" (Psalm 11:5). "The Lord detests men of perverse heart but he delights in those whose ways are blameless" (Proverbs 11:20). "The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in men who are truthful" (Proverbs 12:22).

Some verses translate this as "an abomination to the Lord." But when something is an abomination to you, you hate it. So the Lord gets angry. The Lord hates—not just what the wicked do, but sometimes it's phrased that he hates the wicked. He hates the people who love violence (Psalm 11:5). Thank God, he also loves people even when he hates them. But let's not underestimate how intense God's hatred is against his enemies and what his enemies do—how great his anger is against sin and the sinners who provoke it.

As God can righteously be angry and righteously hate, so people can sometimes have righteous anger and righteous hate.

"The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance; he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked" (Psalm 58:10). That's a poetic way of saying the righteous will celebrate when they see the crushing of God's enemies.

"Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord, and abhor those who rise up against you? I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies" (Psalm 139:21–22). You might say, "Well, that's just the Old Testament."

But the New Testament says, "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good" (Romans 12:9).

Now hate can be a very dangerous emotion. And it's a dangerous thing to pray, "Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?" Are you so sure the Lord hates them in the way you do? Should you hate with complete hatred?

In the New Testament, Jesus says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). That's true.

But let's not skip too quickly to that prayer for our enemies and that loving of our enemies. Let's also face the fact that there is healthy anger and healthy hatred. It's expressed in the Psalms and elsewhere. People who are vile—who have done terrible things—ought to arouse our anger. There's something wrong with us if it doesn't make us mad. We ought to consider them enemies—enemies of God and enemies of us—unless God changes them.

We might pray, "Lord, smash them. Bring them down. Destroy them. Ruin them." And we might say, "Well, that's not how Jesus teaches us to pray." And sometimes, I'm not quite sure what to make of it all.

I'll just say this: Don't pretend when you go to God in prayer. If you are angry and hating something that's wrong, pour it out to God and hand it over to him.

"Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Romans 12:19).

You may have anger—maybe even righteous anger and hate—but hand it over to him. Say, "God, this is your problem."

Moreover, say, "God, there are options here, and I know that. I'm full right now of anger and hate, and I want that person destroyed. But there are two ways to destroy a person. One is to judge them and send them to the fires of hell. The other is to kill their old self and bring to life a new one—the person they were truly meant to be. And God, even though I know vengeance would be just, and my desire for justice is right, I love your grace more. Justice is good; mercy is even better. So Lord, give them your mercy."

God does have those two ways of destroying his enemies. Remember the story of Stephen praying for Paul when Saul was killing him: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60). God heard that prayer and turned Saul into the mighty missionary Paul.

That doesn't mean it was okay what Saul did in murdering the first martyr. It means he needed to be destroyed—but he was destroyed by being brought to repentance and raised to new life in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Don't feel too guilty if you feel anger and hate when it's been aroused by things that are wrong. That's part of being emotionally healthy—reacting the way God reacts to that kind of thing.

Sometimes we even feel sad and mad at God himself. There are psalms that speak that way:

"But now you have rejected and humbled us; you gave us up to be devoured like sheep... All this happened to us, though we had not forgotten you or been false to your covenant... But you crushed us and made us a haunt for jackals; you covered us over with deep darkness... Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep?" (Psalm 44:9, 11, 17, 19, 23).

Have you ever dared to pray like that?

We sometimes think, "Oh, we've got to be polite with God. We've got to only say nice things about God and to God." How can you dare to say, "God, are you sleeping? Wake up!"?

Yet in the New Testament, Jesus encourages us to pray like someone who goes to his friend at midnight, is rude, and yells to wake him up (Luke 11:5–8). Jesus tells another story about a widow trying to get justice from a judge who won't give it to her—so she just keeps bugging him until he gives in (Luke 18:1–8). Jesus says, "God isn't really an unjust judge, but sometimes it may seem that way. So cry out to God your Father, and he will bring justice."

God knows how we feel. You don't have to pretend when you feel sad and mad at God. It does no good to paste on a smile and say, "God, I'm going to be very polite with you." Just pour it all out. God already knows. If you pour it out, maybe you'll know too and get in touch with where your heart is really at. Say, "God, it seems like you're sleeping. It seems like you're taking forever to do anything about this. Why? How long is this going to go on?"

You read that again and again in the Psalms: "Why? How long, Lord? Arise! Wake up! Do something!"

God likes prayers that are raw and real better than polite prayers where we're just pretending.

If you're sad and mad at God, it may even be sinful—the feelings you have—but it's better to be honest with your sinful feelings than to try to fool yourself, because you're not fooling God. Get in touch with the real emotions you feel and bring them to the Lord.

We've got the models in the Psalms for doing that. And at the same time, don't just live in anger and hate—certainly not toward God, but also not toward others. Don't let anger be the dominating mode.

You can feel righteous anger, but don't become an angry person where everything triggers you. You may hate something that's evil, but after a while you can be so negative that you become a hateful person—just cynical about everything, despising everybody.

We need to limit anger and hate.

"In your anger do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent" (Psalm 4:4).

Anger and hate are dangerous emotions. These painful emotions are dangerous. There may be a legitimate place for them, as I've said—but they are dangerous.

So when you're on your bed, search your heart. Ask, "Why am I so angry? Is it justifiable?" Be quiet before the Lord.

"In your anger, do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold" (Ephesians 4:26–27).

Don't just live in anger, because the devil can use that against you.

And then this prayer from Psalm 139. Remember a few moments ago where the psalmist in Psalm 139 says, "Do I not hate those who hate you? I hate them with perfect hatred. I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies" (Psalm 139:21–22). The very next thing he says is, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23–24).

When you feel anger and hate but you bring it to God, then you say, “Lord, search me. Maybe I shouldn’t be feeling this way. Or maybe I legitimately feel this way—but Lord, don’t let me get stuck in it. Let me look again on your goodness and your mercy and your kindness, and let me turn positive again.”

So we limit our anger and hate, even when it’s legitimate.

Fear and sadness, guilt and shame, anger and hate—feelings that can sometimes be an appropriate response to reality, sometimes feelings that can be very warped. But we need to be willing to explore them.

The reason we don’t want to feel is that feelings expose the tragedy of our world and the darkness of our hearts. This is written by Dan Allender and Tremper Longman. They say, “To be aware of what we feel can open us to questions that we’d rather ignore.” For many of us, that’s why it’s easier not to feel. We try to turn off our feelings. We try to harden ourselves to them.

But a failure to feel leaves us barren and distant from God and from others—because our feelings were given to us to get us in touch with who we are, to get us in touch with who God is, to get us in touch with where other people are. And when we try to turn off our feelings, we become dead inside. We become fake.

So even though sometimes in the short term it might feel a little easier and more comfortable to avoid our feelings, we need to explore them.

We’ve talked about painful feelings. Let me just ask you to use these questions to explore your own feelings a bit.

What is it that triggers you? What makes you feel afraid or sad or guilty or ashamed or angry or hateful? What makes you feel that way? Do you know what the cause of those feelings is? Where are those feelings coming from? Is it coming from a right reaction to things that are wrong in the world? Or is there something else going on? Think about it.

How do your feelings affect your behavior? Have you been driven, let’s say, by anger? Are you making decisions based on shame? Is hate controlling you?

What are your painful feelings saying about reality? Is reality a certain way? What’s it saying about other people? What’s it saying about God? Are you mad at God? Do you feel like God is sleeping?

What’s reality like? Is reality just grim and bad and something that makes you mad? Is that the way it is?

What do your painful feelings point to in your heart and in God’s heart? Maybe your feelings of guilt and shame are telling you something—and telling you something good. Telling you that God is at work in you, that the Holy Spirit is convicting you of sin.

Maybe your feelings of anger are telling you something good—that you’re in tune with God’s heart, that you’re angry about what’s wrong because he’s angry about what’s wrong and he’s implanted that in you.

But whatever it is, ask. I’m not going to tell you what all the answers are. What do your painful feelings point to in your heart? Those feelings can point to some bad things in your heart that need fixing. They can also point to some of the good and tender things in your heart that are in tune with God’s heart.

And this question is very important: Do your painful feelings outweigh the pleasant feelings? Have you become someone who’s perpetually sad, or someone who’s almost always feeling angry and upset inside? Do your painful feelings outweigh the pleasant?

If that’s so—if you’re stuck in the more painful feelings—I’ve said before that the painful feelings can be legitimate, but they should not be permanent. And they shouldn’t overwhelm and outweigh the positive feelings that are the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22–23). All those virtues and the many good feelings involved in them.

How do you get help when your emotions are sick?

Well, first of all, seek and maintain total fitness. We’ve already observed that the various elements of your life—the spiritual, the physical, the financial, and so forth—have a profound impact on your emotions. So if your emotions are sick, find out if there’s something else in your life that’s messing them up.

The physical can have an impact. So check with a physician. Go to a doctor or a nutritionist, just in case bodily problems are affecting your emotions. For some people, they simply need to change something about their diet or their health. For others, a certain kind of medication can help correct a chemical imbalance in their body. And the anger they feel, or the chronic depression they feel, is lifted—because it was never caused by something spiritual or wicked. It was caused by something physical.

So don’t be ashamed or afraid to check with a doctor or a nutritionist or even a psychiatrist who gives medications for certain kinds of conditions.

Sometimes the cause of sick emotions can come from traumas that we’ve endured or psychological scars that we’ve got. And you can consult a counselor or a therapist to see if there’s a mental illness or a deep wound that affects you.

Again, I know some pastors say, “Oh, you’re not counting on the sufficiency of Christ if you go to a doctor or if you go see a counselor or therapist.” Not so. God has given people in the healing professions to help us deal with these things. If the cause is physical, find somebody who’s an expert in that. If the cause is psychological, it can be helpful to see a therapist.

And sometimes the cause of negative emotions is spiritual—entirely, or at least in part. In that case, go to a godly friend, a pastor, a godly guide whom you trust, to explore whether your emotional pain might have spiritual roots—might reflect something that’s out of tune with God.

Sometimes you just need to get right with God, and the joy of the Lord will come flooding in, and the peace of God will fill your heart, and wonderful things can happen in your emotional life when you get close to God.

But notice that I’m saying it’s not always a spiritual problem. Sometimes there are psychological scars. Sometimes there are physical causes for why you’re feeling a certain way emotionally. So you have to be open to the possibility of several ways of helping deal with your sick emotions.

If it is a spiritual matter—if it is a matter you need to deal with in God’s presence and get right with God—then here are some things to keep in mind:

Address the unhealthy pain that doesn’t have spiritual roots or a spiritual cure. I’ve already said that—it’s not all spiritual. Be aware of that. But if there is a spiritual dimension, approach it with prayer.

One of the ways to do that is to use those psalms of disorientation to help you give voice to your painful feelings. You might not dare to pray to God like that, but the psalms are there to help you pray. Even the New Testament speaks of groaning—when we don’t have words—of just groaning, and the Holy Spirit groans with loud cries (Romans 8:26).

So we can pray these psalms of disorientation, where we put into words what we’re feeling and we lay it out before God and say, “God, I don’t even know if I should feel this way, but I do. Here it is. Please deal with it and help me deal with it.”

And then, as I’ve tried to emphasize throughout this talk, fix your eyes on Jesus. Jesus knows what we’ve been through—and he’s been through it himself. He suffered for us. He suffers with us. The Holy Spirit is groaning within us right now.

The Spirit groans in this broken creation. He knows that we’re wounded and broken. He knows that creation is wounded and broken and is longing for the day when Christ comes again and sets everything right. So when we’re groaning, the Spirit himself is groaning within us—and that’s okay.

Fix your eyes on Jesus. He experienced the shame of the cross, but he also despised that shame because he looked forward to the joy (Hebrews 12:2). He experienced the guilt laid on him, but through doing that he brought salvation and cleanness to the world.

So keep your eyes fixed on Jesus—because when you’re going through all that, if you’re going through it with Jesus, you’re going to come out on the other side.

Embrace Jesus’ cross, realizing that through brokenness comes life. Through weakness comes strength. Embrace his cross on your behalf, and take your cross and follow him.

And then count on the resurrection life, when all things are made new—when your body is healed, when your emotions are healed completely, when all the causes of painful emotions are taken away and God wipes away every tear and brings joy—everlasting joy—to his people (Revelation 21:4; Isaiah 35:10). And look forward to that day.

## **Painful Feelings**

**By David Feddes**

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- Displayed appropriately.
- Linked with other parts of total fitness.
- Sense true and deep realities.
- Hints of your heart and of God's heart.
- Limited pain, unlimited pleasure.

#### **Exploring your emotions**

##### **Pleasant feelings**

- Hope, joy
- Purity, dignity
- Peace, love

##### **Painful feelings**

- Fear, sadness
- Guilt, shame
- Anger, hate

## **Psalm 69**

<sup>1</sup> Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. <sup>2</sup> I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me. <sup>3</sup> I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail, looking for my God.

<sup>4</sup> Those who hate me without reason <sup>[1]</sup><sub>SEP</sub> outnumber the hairs of my head; many are my enemies without cause, those who seek to destroy me. I am forced to restore what I did not steal.

<sup>5</sup> You know my folly, O God; <sup>[1]</sup><sub>SEP</sub> my guilt is not hidden from you.



<sup>6</sup> May those who hope in you not be disgraced because of me, O Lord, the LORD Almighty; may those who seek you not be put to shame because of me, O God of Israel. <sup>7</sup> For I endure scorn for your sake, and shame covers my face... <sup>9</sup> for zeal for your house consumes me, and the insults of those who insult you fall on me.

<sup>13</sup> But I pray to you, O LORD, in the time of your favor; in your great love, O God, answer me with your sure salvation.

<sup>14</sup> Rescue me from the mire, do not let me sink; deliver me from those who hate me... <sup>17</sup> Do not hide your face from your servant; answer me quickly, for I am in trouble. <sup>18</sup> Come near and rescue me; redeem me because of my foes.

<sup>19</sup> You know how I am scorned, disgraced and shamed; all my enemies are before you. <sup>20</sup> Scorn has broken my heart and has left me helpless; I looked for sympathy, but there was none, for comforters, but I found none. <sup>21</sup> They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst...

<sup>23</sup> May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever. <sup>24</sup> Pour out your wrath on them; let your fierce anger overtake them...

<sup>26</sup> For they persecute those you wound and talk about the pain of those you hurt. <sup>27</sup> Charge them with crime upon crime; do not let them share in your salvation...

<sup>29</sup> I am in pain and distress; may your salvation, O God, protect me. <sup>30</sup> I will praise God's name in song and glorify him with thanksgiving... <sup>32</sup> The poor will see and be glad—you who seek God, may your hearts live! <sup>33</sup> The LORD hears the needy and does not despise his captive people.

## **Painful feelings**

- Fear, sadness
- Guilt, shame
- Anger, hate

## **Fear, sadness**

My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me. Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me...Destructive forces are at work in the city; threats and lies never leave its streets. (Psalm 55)

## **Misguided fear, sadness**

The wicked man flees though no one pursues. (Proverbs 28:1)

Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe. (Proverbs 29:25)

Ahab lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat. (1 Kings 21:4)

### **Healthy fear, sadness**

Do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it. The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread. (Isaiah 8:12-13)

Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. (James 4:9)

### **Jesus' fear and sadness**

He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled... Jesus wept. (John 11:33)

“Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’?” (John 12:27)

“My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.” (Mark 14:34)

### **Beyond fear, sadness**

When I am afraid, I will trust in you... Record my lament; list my tears on your scroll... In God I trust; I will not be afraid. (Psalm 56:3)

Everlasting joy will crown their heads. <sup>[L]</sup>~~[SEP]~~Gladness and joy will overtake them, <sup>[L]</sup>~~[SEP]~~and sorrow and sighing will flee away. (Isaiah 35:10)

### **Guilt, shame**

Let us lie down in our shame, and let our disgrace cover us. We have sinned against the LORD our God. (Jeremiah 3:25)

Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush. (Jeremiah 6:15; 8:12)

### **Healthy guilt, shame**

Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight... Surely you desire truth in the inner parts... Create in me a pure heart, O God... Do not cast me from your presence

or take your Holy Spirit from me. Save me from bloodguilt, O God... a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (Psalm 51)

### **Wrongly shamed**

Even if I am innocent, I cannot lift my head, for I am full of shame and drowned in my affliction. (Job 10:15)

How long, O men, will you turn my glory into shame? (Psalm 4:2)

I endure scorn for your sake, and shame covers my face. (Psalm 69:7)

### **Shaming God**

They profaned my holy name... I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel profaned.... Be ashamed and disgraced for your conduct, O house of Israel! (Ezekiel 36:20-32)

For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." (Rom 15:3)

### **Jesus' guilt and shame**

He was counted among those who were sinners. He bore the sins of many and interceded for sinners. (Isaiah 53:12)

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:2)

### **Misguided anger, hate**

An angry man stirs up dissension, and a hot-tempered one commits many sins. (29:22)

Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. (Genesis 4:5)

I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me, but always bad. (1 Kings 22:8)

### **God's anger and hate**

Who knows the power of your anger? For your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you. (Psalm 90:11)

The Lord hates the wicked and the one who loves violence. (Psalm 11:5) The LORD hates people with twisted hearts... The LORD hates those who don't keep their word. (Proverbs 11:20; 12:22)

### **Healthy anger, hate**

The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance; he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked. (Psalm 58:10)

Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? ... I hate them with complete hatred; I count them my enemies. (Psalm 139:21-22)

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. (Romans 12:9)

### **Sad and mad at God**

But now you have rejected and humbled us... You gave us up to be devoured like sheep... All this happened to us, though we had not forgotten you or been false to your covenant... But you crushed us ... and covered us over with deep darkness. Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? (Psalm 44)

### **Limit anger, hate**

In your anger do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent. (Psalm 4:4)

“In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. (Eph 4:26-27)

Search me, O God, and know my heart. (Psalm 139:23)

### **Painful feelings**

- Fear, sadness
- Guilt, shame
- Anger, hate

### **Avoiding emotions**

The reason we don't want to feel is that feeling exposes the tragedy of our world and the darkness of our hearts. To be aware of what we feel can open us to questions we would rather ignore. For many of us, that is why it is easier not to feel. But a failure to feel leaves us barren and distant from God and others. (Dan Allender & Tremper Longman)

## **Heart knowledge**

### **Emotions give hints of your heart.**

- What your heart is doing with reality.
- What your heart is doing with others.
- What your heart is doing with God.

### **Emotions give hints of God's heart.**

- Your feelings hint at God's feelings.
- God's feelings reveal his character.

## **Emotional fitness**

### **Fit emotions feel deep realities.**

Life is far worse than I dare to admit.  
Life is far better than I dare to dream.

I am far worse than I dare to admit.  
I am far greater than I dare to dream.

God is far harsher than I dare to fear.  
God is far kinder than I dare to hope.

## **Emotional fitness**

- In tune with reality, others, and God.
- Displayed appropriately.
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- Sense true and deep realities.
- Hints of your heart and of God's heart.
- Limited pain, unlimited pleasure.

## **Explore painful feelings**

- What triggers you to feel afraid, sad, guilty, ashamed, angry, or hateful?

- How do your feelings affect your behavior?
- What are your painful feelings saying about reality, others, and God?
- What do your painful feelings point to in your heart and God's heart?
- Do painful feelings outweigh pleasant?

### **Helping sick emotions**

- Seek and maintain total fitness.
- Check with physician or nutritionist in case bodily problem is affecting emotions.
- Consult counselor/therapist to see if mental illness or deep wound affects you.
- Ask godly guide to explore whether your emotional pain might have spiritual roots.

### **Trust amid pain**

- Address unhealthy pain that doesn't have spiritual roots or spiritual cure.
- Pray the Psalms of disorientation.
- Fix your eyes on Jesus, who suffered for you, and the Spirit groaning in you.
- Embrace Jesus' cross, and take your cross. Count on resurrection life.