

## Emotions: Mirrors of the heart

The heart matters. It's the fountain of our personality from which everything flows. The deeply-embedded attitudes of our hearts are the key to wisdom, godly character and healthy living – or otherwise. Illustrated from her own experience and a number of case studies, Catherine offers us a sure-footed guide through the minefield of our own fallen and fickle feelings. Her sanctified version of CBT offers us a way of both understanding and managing them. We don't need to fear our emotions; they are God-given indicators to what's going on in our hearts. Best of all, he is at work in them and through them to make us more like Jesus. A good read for everyone involved in helping others to walk with him. That should be all of us, then!

– *Richard Underwood, Pastoral Ministries Director, FIEC*

It sometimes feels like the 'noise' of our emotions can drown out any rational thought about why we are reacting as we do. *Emotions, Mirrors of the Heart* gives a handy model to help us to get to the heart of why we feel the way we do and apply the Bible's truth there. I can see myself keeping these ideas in my back pocket for conversations with strugglers, including myself.

– *Agnes Brough, Associate minister for Women and Young People, The Tron Church, Glasgow*

EMOTIONS  
MIRRORS  
OF THE  
HEART

*Hope for those in the grip of powerful emotions*

Catherine Haddow

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# Introduction

*Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.*

*Proverbs 4:23*

Picture this scene if you will. It's August and we are on a family holiday, spending a couple of weeks in the stunning Gower peninsular in south Wales. As our eldest daughter, Sophie, is on a Christian camp in the area for the first week, that leaves myself, my husband, Richard, James (aged ten) and Kezzy (aged six) to enjoy a week of family fun. For us this means heading to a beach. Armed with wet suits, bodyboards, equipment for building sandcastles and playing beach tennis plus books for me, it should be a perfect day out for us. We go to the beautiful Oxwich bay, the second largest beach on the peninsula, with almost three miles of golden sand stretching into the distance. What could be better? The problem is that on this particular day you can't even see the golden sand – or the sea for that matter. There is just a dull, grey band of low-lying, cold, wet cloud. Not only that but the weather forecast for the next ten days looks remarkably similar.

My husband, who is forever an optimist, has a favourite holiday expression that is, 'Look, there's a patch of blue sky over there ...' He then drives us determinedly towards it. It's surprising how effective this approach usually is. However, today there are no patches of blue sky anywhere to head towards.

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So instead Richard is adopting his second-favourite holiday phrase, which is, 'Let's find a stream to dam.' This is taken quite seriously in our family. However much the car looks to be standing up on its back wheels, weighed down by luggage for five, the metal garden spade will be added for damming.

Richard *thinks* he has read somewhere that on this beach there is a great river. So he is off on a mission to find it, determined that his family will still enjoy the holiday despite the weather. He's six feet three inches tall, thus resembling an overgrown version of one of the seven dwarfs as he strides off, a spade flung over his shoulder. He is a man on a mission and it isn't long before he is vanishing into the distance. I am following behind rather more slowly with the children, resembling a bag lady with a further collection of plastic spades and other beach necessities. After about two minutes there is the inevitable, 'Are we nearly there yet?' from Kezzy.

General moaning and complaining from the children continues for the next quarter of an hour, interspersed with my attempt at a cheery commentary to jolly them along. Of course, in my mind things aren't quite so cheery. Angry thoughts are rising, such as, 'What does he think he's doing? He doesn't even know for certain there is a river here.' I am rapidly losing my battle to motivate the children and myself forward. A feeling which had started as mild irritation is now mounting into one of fury.

To top it off, Kezzy encounters probably the biggest pile of dog mess on the beach. She then vanishes off into the sand dunes. James follows her. Kezzy subsequently reappears but there is no sight and (very unusually) no *sound* of James for some time. Kezzy has lost one of her shoes (permanently as it turns out). What's more, a large wasp has been my personal, very close companion for the last ten minutes.

At this point Richard enthusiastically bounces back, grinning away like an excited schoolboy. He's *found* the stream, he

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announces, and it is *great*. ‘Just a bit further to go,’ he declares, waving his hand vaguely into the distance. I glower at him, struggling to resist the overwhelming desire I have to whack him over the head with one of the five spades I am carrying. Kezzy moans, ‘Aw, not further, Daddy.’

‘What’s wrong, Kez?’ says Daddy brightly, his eyes glinting with pending dam anticipation. That’s it. I see red.

‘I’ll tell you what’s wrong with her,’ I shout, and I launch into a detailed analysis of how I have been feeling for the last mile. Thankfully, due to the weather, the beach is totally deserted.

You may wonder why I am sharing this story with you. It’s because as I’d been walking along with my mounting fury, I’d also had the opportunity – but had sadly failed – to start applying to myself some of the things I use in my professional work, namely to:

- Break down the unhelpful thoughts
- Acknowledge my sulky and stropky demeanour towards my husband and children
- Acknowledge the fact that the same event was resulting in very different, positive thoughts and behaviour for my husband compared to mine
- Assess my heightened internal physiology
- Ultimately take a painful look at my heart and understand that my motivations and loyalty all pointed firmly at gratifying me
- Wonder at the purposes God had in placing me in this situation to change me

The idol of ‘me’ and ‘my’ perceived needs was gripping my heart, screaming at my hubby, ‘I don’t like this. This is hard for me and this is all *your* fault.’ And, although I wasn’t aware of it, I was also

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screaming at God, 'I am *not* going to rejoice in this situation you have intentionally placed me in'. I had failed to do what Proverbs 4:23 instructs us: 'Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.' My heart was all about *me* and what I wanted, and that certainly wasn't this awful walk along a beach on a miserable day. Everything about my thoughts, actions and emotions was flowing from my selfish heart desires and it wasn't a pretty sight.

This was a fairly brief glimpse into a heightened emotion flowing from the wellspring of my heart, and thankfully it was all over fairly quickly. But it is so easy to get caught up and enslaved by the difficult emotions we experience in daily life. This is especially true when they linger and occur regularly.

I work with people who are often crippled in their walk following Christ because of the overwhelming grip of their intense emotions. Perhaps some of you reading this book are aware that difficult emotions are a problem for you in your daily Christian walk? Or maybe you are involved in the pastoral care of others who are in the sway of difficult emotions?

My prayer is that from this book you will be equipped to understand more clearly your emotions, or those of others you support through pastoral care, as a mirror of the heart. But more than that, I pray that you will be guided to see how the beauty of God's love for us and his life-transforming grace shine through our brokenness and struggles as he gently moulds us into the likeness of his beloved Son, Jesus Christ.



# Emotions as mirrors of the heart

*The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond  
cure. Who can understand it?*

*Jeremiah 17:9*

‘Emotions are poor leaders, but good mirrors of the heart’ – these were words preached in a sermon at my home church a few years ago and they made a profound impact on me. We live in a postmodern culture that is dominated by the pursuit of emotions, and their unique meaning for the individual experiencing them. But a biblical worldview of absolute truths turns postmodernism entirely on its head, as we will explore in this chapter.

## **We have deceptive hearts**

The idea that emotions are poor at leading us but good at showing us our hearts cuts straight to the chase of the battle of the Christian life. Our emotions and heart can deceive us – they tell us what we want, which is not necessarily right or the truth, and encourage us to selfishly pursue our own agenda. Yet in motivating us in all that we do – for everything flows from our heart – they also highlight the essence of our sin. This shows us just how watchful we need to be of our emotions.

### Jesus knows our hearts

Let's briefly look at how Jesus shows this to us. Mark 10:18–27 tells us the well-known story of the rich young man who asks Jesus how he can 'inherit eternal life' (v. 17). The young man has not grasped that eternal life is a gift from God rather than something he can inherit through works. He is confident in his salvation because he believes that he has kept God's commands perfectly from his youth. Jesus' reply that the young man should sell everything he owns and give it to the poor cuts straight to the heart of the problem and shows the rich man that he idolises money. The rich man, faced with the prospect of losing all that is dear to him, goes away 'sad' (v. 22). His heart idol – his love of money and all that it enables him to acquire – creates a powerful emotional attachment to all his worldly goods. When Jesus threatens his idol, he experiences extreme emotional discomfort. As Jesus comments to his disciples, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God' (vv. 24–25).

The rich man's overt struggle to follow the second greatest command, 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (Mark 12:31), is revealed by his reluctance to give to the poor in the horizontal relational plane – that is to express his love to his fellow human beings. Moreover, this in turn clearly indicates his bigger covert struggle: to follow the most important command, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength' (Mark 12:30). He is failing to love, on the vertical relational plane, the Lord his God. The question the rich man must face is who is he going to worship – God or his money?

### What are our hearts saying?

We need to face up to similar questions about our own idols too.

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Though our specific heart desires may be different from the rich young man, the emotions we feel and their associated outward behaviours are a language which communicate so much about the 'real us' and about what is truly going on in our hearts. Like the young man, we have the same choice to make about who we are going to worship. We need to decide if we are going to do things our way or God's way. The strong emotions we experience are in fact almost always a form of 'spiritual smoke alarm' going off. In the case of the difficult emotions this book considers, the alarm tells us that deep down, at a heart level, something needs addressing. Our daily interactions with others – on what could be termed the horizontal level – are a reflection of our vertical relationship with God. Our emotions are revealing something about our hearts, the 'real us', the 'us' that only God truly knows and what he most wants to change.

### **We are image bearers**

However, I wouldn't want you to go away from reading this book thinking that emotions are bad. These are God-given, and to experience a full array of emotions is to be human and made in the image of God. The stoical attitude of an unemotional 'stiff upper lip' is not supported by Scripture. The Bible is full of individuals experiencing a vibrant array of emotions, both good and bad. The psalms reveal the phenomenal impact and depth of love, joy, contentment, pain, betrayal, compassion, grief, indignation, sorrow, fear, peace and thankfulness. Even experiencing some of the very difficult emotions listed here is not necessarily 'wrong'.

The key issue is that there is either a godly or a sinful way to manage our emotions. Emotions of all kinds can be good and biblical in energising us and driving us forward, but they can also lead us unhelpfully astray.

### **What exactly is an emotion?**

It's perhaps useful at this point to clarify exactly what an emotion is. It's an elusive word that we hear a lot in everyday speech. When we get into discussions about emotions and feelings we can get tied in knots. Emotions are complicated as they are rarely felt in isolation. The boundaries between them are very blurred, for example someone displaying anger may actually also be very frightened. Also, our emotions are often something we find very hard to express verbally. So, to make sure we're all 'singing from the same hymn sheet', here's a couple of definitions for you:

A dictionary definition would describe emotions as a conscious mental reaction, subjectively experienced as a strong feeling, usually directed towards a specific object and typically accompanied by physiological and behavioural changes.

However, *the Bible* understands emotions as so much more than this. Our emotions reflect our image-bearing status of God, who experiences perfect emotions. Through the lens of Scripture, emotions are a language which force us – and others – to pay attention and respond. They provide invaluable communication about our inner selves and our true desires. And these desires are determined by the loyalties of our heart. Yet that language is sometimes very complicated for others and ourselves to decipher: our emotions are intertwined. They also communicate at two levels: on the horizontal about others, and on the vertical about God.

For the purpose of this book I will be using the terms 'emotion' and 'feeling' interchangeably.



### **Are our feelings reliable?**

The answer to this is a resounding ‘no’: we cannot always trust our feelings. As a psychologist, I work with many people experiencing the grip of difficult emotions. I see first-hand the deep brokenness so many carry around as a result of being led and ruled by emotions. The weight and burden of suffering these feelings can so easily pull us away from our walk on the narrow road as we try to follow Jesus. For example, we see it in the:

- Teenage Christian girl who is sleeping with her boyfriend because they both prayed about it and they *felt* peaceful about it
- Young man who has left his third job in six months to head to Australia to be a pilot because he believes that God told him to do so and it *feels* right
- Young mum who hates herself because all she wants to do is shout at her children and doesn’t *feel* they are a blessing from God
- Lady who can no longer read her Facebook page because she *feels* so worthless compared to everyone else’s amazing lives
- Christians who are committing adultery because they *feel* God has fulfilled emotional needs through it that weren’t met in their marriages
- Dear elderly man in his twilight years who doubts his salvation and where he will spend eternity because he *feels* low and has no joy

We can summarise the problem with following our feelings as follows:

We are so easily led to believe that how we *feel* explains the reality of a situation. We believe that because we *feel* bad, the situation must *be* bad. Conversely, we *feel* good and therefore we conclude that the situation must *be* good. But the reality is that **because of the Fall, we think the wrong things, we do the wrong things, we desire the wrong things and we also feel the wrong things.**

### A biblical worldview

As the summary above highlights, it is instead vital to look at our emotions through the framework of a biblical worldview – that is, through the lens of God’s perfect creation, humankind’s Fall and our redemption.

#### Creation

In Genesis 1 we see God creating a perfect world at the beginning of time and then two human beings to inhabit it. Genesis 1:27 says, ‘So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.’ Genesis 1:31 concludes, ‘God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.’ God created a perfect world and in Genesis 2 we view Adam and Eve living in perfect harmony with themselves, with each other and with God. How wonderful! We clearly see here a life free from doubts or fear and of perfect contentment with and acceptance of themselves and each other. It is also a life of direct communication and intimate relationship with God. Furthermore, in this world there is no death, no suffering (physical or emotional) or unhappiness, and no sin.

#### The Fall

Sadly, we know what happens next. God had given Adam and Eve the freedom to eat from all but one tree in the Garden of Eden (Genesis

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2:16–17). Yet Eve took the forbidden fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband and he ate it too. As Genesis 3:6–12 tells us:

*When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realised they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.*

*Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’*

*He answered, ‘I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.’*

*And he said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree from which I commanded you not to eat?’*

*The man said, ‘The woman you put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.’*

*Then the LORD God said to the woman, ‘What is this you have done?’*

*The woman said, ‘The snake deceived me, and I ate.’*

Notice how following Eve’s and then Adam’s disobedience – the Fall – their perfect acceptance and belonging is immediately gone. Sin has entered the world, and the rest of Genesis 3 spells out that the consequence of this is death. Yet even now their life that had once been very good is replaced with physical and emotional suffering. The first indications of emotional discomfort are the shame Adam and Eve feel as their perceived weaknesses or defects in themselves are revealed publicly (v. 7). As a result their behaviour changes and they hide from God rather than talking with him (v. 8). Further discord arrives in the form of blame and guilt (vv. 11–13).

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Of course, we too are fallen and therefore are sinful and fallible – in our thoughts, behaviour, desires *and* our emotions.

### Redemption

However, although we are fallen, the wonderful news is that Jesus has come to save us, and free us from the guilt of sin. We have been rescued because Jesus, the perfect, sinless one, died on the cross and took the punishment for *our* sins – and not just our sins, but the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2). Through his sacrificial death, we are free to live a new life through him and for him. The apostle Paul, addressing the church at Ephesus, puts it this way, ‘In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us’ (Ephesians 1:7–8).

God, in his grace and mercy, has provided a way for us to be right with him again through Jesus. One day Jesus will return and take us to live forever with him and God the Father in the new heaven. As Revelation 21:3–4 tells us, when speaking of this future, ‘God’s dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death” or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’ Furthermore, at this time we will be given new heavenly bodies and become like Jesus. This will include not only our character but also our emotions. We will be made pure and like Jesus in every way: in our thoughts, in our volition, in our deeds and in our emotions. 1 John 3:2–3 tells us, ‘Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.’

### **The challenge for us now**

Of course, this glorious future is not what we experience now. In the meantime, we must keep our eyes focused firmly on Christ whilst we experience the knocks and trials of life here on earth. Otherwise the trials can so often result in us being ruled and led by destructive feelings, such as the following:

- ‘I can’t *feel* God so he must have left me’
- ‘How can I even call myself a Christian if I *feel* this way?’
- ‘I thought Christians were supposed to *feel* joy – but I have none. What’s wrong with me?’
- ‘I must have done something really wrong for God to let me *feel* this way’

Whilst we are in this world, we will inevitably be hit with emotional turbulence from experiencing the trials of this life. Yet as our emotions are fallen, they cannot be trusted to lead us, though too often we let them do just that. It is so easy to become caught up in emotional bondage and to be led astray by our feelings. Our everyday emotions can sometimes feel so strong that they take us by surprise and overwhelm us. They can ensnare and trap us. For some of us, this will seriously impede our walk following Christ. We will stop maturing in the Christian life and not know the true freedom his salvation brings. We might become stuck in what someone referred to as a ‘Christian cul-de-sac’ as we experience the pull of life’s pressures.

The prophet Jeremiah asks, ‘The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?’ (Jeremiah 17:9). God can. Obviously he understands it so much better than we do. And through our difficult emotions he is often revealing something amiss about our hearts before him. The problems in our ‘horizontal’ relationships and interactions with other people

are revealing issues in our vertical relationship with God. Our challenge, then, is that rather than listening to our emotions, we need to stop and listen to God – through his word, through prayer and through loving pastoral care.

### **Helping others effectively**

In the church I think we often struggle to effectively help someone who is experiencing difficult emotions. We can be guilty of offering them the grace of God whilst dismissing all other things as if they didn't matter. We can offer words from Scripture such as 'Do not be anxious about anything' (Philippians 4:6) but often do not acknowledge their pain, suffering and deep emotional and spiritual distress. We do not remind them that their identity is in Christ through his death on the cross. Therefore we don't show them how that wonderful biblical truth can be transformed from head knowledge to being truly known in their hearts and lived out in faith and love.

We can also apply the grace of God at the expense of the potential biological component of their emotions. We are complex, embodied souls – biological *and* spiritual – and both dimensions must be acknowledged and connected. There are many illnesses and medications that can present symptoms of emotional difficulties and it is vitally important that these aspects are checked by a GP. Ignoring either the spiritual or biological component of emotional distress can be extremely damaging, for example by encouraging someone to stop taking prescribed medications without first seeking medical guidance.

### **Perfect emotions**

God created us in his image. Through his word we see that he is a thinking God, a God of action and a God of feeling. We also think, act and feel. We see in Jesus, who is fully God and fully

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human, the perfect demonstration of thinking, behaving and feeling in sinless harmony.

Graham Beynon has written some superb material on emotions. In his fantastic book *Emotions: Living Life in Colour*,<sup>1</sup> he illustrates the sinless emotional life we see in Jesus. Beynon observes that Jesus always felt the right emotion for the event. Not only that but Jesus always experienced the emotion to the right degree for that event.<sup>2</sup> For example, we see Jesus' perfect sorrow through his tears in John 11:35: 'Jesus wept' – the shortest verse in the Bible. Jesus weeps with Mary and others who are mourning the death of Lazarus. In Matthew 21:12–13 we see Jesus experiencing perfect, righteous anger in the temple when he finds people using God's house as a place for buying and selling. But what about us? In this fallen world, as Beynon's diagram illustrates below, we regularly experience either the wrong emotion for the event (for example, points C and D below), or the right emotion for the event but felt to the wrong degree (points A and B).<sup>3</sup> Yet sometimes we experience the correct emotion to the event and to an appropriate level (point E), here because we 'mourn with those who mourn' (Romans 12:15).

