



What the Bible Says

About emotions

Many people make the mistake of believing they should be emotionally monochrome once they have come to faith in Jesus. Emotions are typically dissected into the *yellow emotions*: headlined by happiness, excitement and tenderness, and the *blue emotions*: headlined by sadness, anger and fear. The assumption that being a Christian means triumph over all of the blue emotions is both misplaced and unhelpful.

Emotions are very broad and hard to define but they typically create **four responses** in us:

1. Something to **feel** – adrenaline, dread, heart pounding, etc.
2. Something to **do** – smile, cry, run, etc.
3. Something to **think** – Why? How? When? Where?
4. Something to **be aware of** – our emotion in the context of our broader lives.

Emotions have a big influence upon us and our lives. Although some Christians mistakenly believe that they should never feel emotions such as fear, anger, guilt, worry and sadness, they are an essential part of normal life and of the way our brains were designed to work. Whilst the need to sometimes suppress emotions ‘in the moment’ is a healthy part of adult emotional maturity, if denying, repressing or suppressing our emotions is the only way we know to manage them, we place ourselves at risk of harm later on.

When we look at the biblical narrative more closely, we see that emotions are not prohibited at all. Indeed, Jesus himself (who was without sin) expresses many of them:

- He shed tears (John 11:35)
- He was filled with joy (Luke 10:21)
- He grieved (Luke 23:28)
- He was angry (Mark 3:5)
- Anguish and sadness came over him (Matt 26:37)
- He showed astonishment and wonder (Luke 7:9)
- He felt deep emotional distress (Mark 3:5).

Of course, emotions are not an end in themselves: they trigger and prompt actions. The Bible does not condemn our emotions but it does hold us accountable for what we do next (Ephesians 4:26). The world might tell us ‘if you feel like it, do it’, but the Bible reminds us that emotions do not excuse our actions. In Genesis 4:6-7 we have this distinction clearly explained to us:

‘Then the Lord said to Cain: “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.” ’

Cain experienced the emotion of anger, but at this point he had not sinned, sin was just 'crouching at his door'. *What he did as a consequence of his emotion* was the key to Cain's future. Despite the strength of the emotion he felt, God makes it clear that Cain retained the ability to 'rule over it'. In the same way, we can make decisions to respond to our emotions with awareness, compassion and objectivity.

Our Christian faith can help us greatly in responding healthily to our emotions, as we have both the Holy Spirit to help us and the promises of God in Scripture to guide our decisions. We may feel worried, but choose not to worry. We may feel angry but we can choose not to hate. We may feel depressed but we can still choose to hope. We can also work to better understand our emotions. Without understanding, our reactions may be automatic and our control minimal. Once we start to understand, we open up choices – alternative ways to respond which may transform the outcome.

Remember that emotional maturity is not an absence of difficult emotions, but the ability to handle those emotions in a considered and compassionate way. Many of the emotions you experience today have been forged through experiences in childhood over which you had no control.

What is emotional maturity all about?

Emotional maturity might be understood by the following statements:

- I 'feel' all of my emotions fully and in a non-judgemental way.
- I value my emotions but do not respond to their demands automatically.
- I am aware that my emotions are not expressions of 'truth', or proportionate to events.
- I realise that my emotions can change quickly, or become entrenched over time.
- I know my emotions are influenced by benign factors, such as food, sleep, stress and hormones.
- I am aware of how past experiences can exacerbate some of my emotional reactions.
- I allow God to inform my emotions and I invite his challenge as well as his comfort.

What about in church?

Church can be a complex place for us to express ourselves emotionally. Not only are there unspoken rules about emotional expressions that vary greatly from congregation to congregation, but we very often fear that our emotions are not in line with others' expectations. However, despite this reality we have a responsibility to be authentic 'family' before God. If everyone who felt sad left the church until their mood was happier, church would become the most inauthentic community in the world. Instead, Jesus has left us the church as a gift to each other and the world.

Paul says that we receive the comfort of the Lord 'so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God' (2 Corinthians 1:4). The church is the place where this comfort should be most readily felt, but that is only possible if we feel liberated to be honest about the 'trouble'. Vulnerability can be hard, but it is not nearly as costly as silence. Try to make a decision today to make your congregation a safe place for people to express their emotions.