



Our Emotional Saviour

The gospel writers paint their portraits of Jesus using a kaleidoscope of brilliant “emotional” colours. Jesus felt compassion; he was angry, indignant, and consumed with zeal; he was troubled, greatly distressed, very sorrowful, depressed, deeply moved, and grieved; he sighed; he wept and sobbed; he groaned; he was in agony; he was surprised and amazed; he rejoiced very greatly and was full of joy; he greatly desired, and he loved.

In our quest to be like Jesus we often overlook his emotions. Jesus reveals what it means to be fully human and made in the image of God. His emotions reflect the image of God without any deficiency or distortion. When we compare our own emotional lives to his, we become aware of our need for a transformation of our emotions so that we can be fully human, as he is.

Paul tells the Corinthians that as Christians gaze upon the glory of the Lord, “*with unveiled faces,*” we “*are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory*” (2 Cor. 3:18). The apostle is suggesting that looking intently on the Lord will bring about a metamorphosis into Christ’s image by the Spirit. Paul illustrated this kind of transformation in his own life when he told the Philippian Christians, “*I long for you with the compassion of Christ*” (Phil. 1:8). Paul embodied the emotions of Jesus.

Many theologians throughout history have argued strongly that God is not moved by emotions. This doctrine of the impassibility of God, developed by early Christian apologists such as Justin Martyr, sought to distinguish the God of the Bible from pagan gods whose passions led them into all kinds of scandalous behaviour. It is not surprising that Christians responded to the myths of Zeus’s rapes and arbitrary vengeance with an absolute statement of divine impassibility. What they meant to emphasise was that God does not have mad, shameful passions like the gods of pagan mythology.

The question “What is God really like?” is answered during an exchange between Jesus and his disciple Philip. “*Show us the Father,*” Philip said. Jesus responded, “*He who has seen me has seen the Father.*” Not only do the emotions of Jesus reflect an essential component of the image of God, his emotions also reveal the nature of God. On the basis of our belief that the written Word and the Living Word give us a trustworthy revelation of God, we know that God is emotional.

If we are the body of Christ, created and redeemed to represent Jesus in our world, then we, like Paul, need to “*gaze upon him*” and learn to experience the emotions of Jesus. Then we can know him, and in knowing him know God, and know ourselves as we were created to be.

Compassion

The Gospels tell us that Jesus “*felt compassion*”. The Greek word for “compassion” speaks literally of a sensation in the guts, but was used to speak metaphorically of an emotional sensation, just as we speak of “heart-breaking,” “head-spinning,” or “gut-wrenching” feelings today.

For whom did Jesus feel compassion? For people in need: a leper (Mark 1:40-41), a widow by the coffin of her only son (Luke 7:13), and two blind men (Matt. 20:34). He also felt compassion when he saw crowds starving for bread (Mark 8:2). His compassion was stirred by physical and spiritual needs. His heart broke when he saw people who were distressed and downcast, like sheep without a shepherd (Matt. 9:36).

Once, when I was living in the Philippines, one of my great mentors — Phil Armstrong — and I were watching small children scavenging for food on mountains of smoking garbage outside of Manila. The nauseating stench turned my stomach. When a little boy struggled to turn over a rotting dog to find something under it, Phil's body convulsed with sobs. "O God! O God! Please, God, save these children!" Whenever I read of Jesus' compassion for the crowds of starving people, I hear Phil's heart-rending cry. His compassion ignited and fuelled the mission movement he led, just as Jesus' fuelled his mission.

Jesus' empathy flowed out from his intimacy with the Father. It was after a time of withdrawal to a lonely place by himself for prayer that Jesus saw the leper and felt compassion (Mark 1:35-42). It was when he was in a lonely place by himself that crowds of people came to him and he felt compassion for them (Matt. 14:13-14).

In times alone with God, Jesus gained emotional receptivity and energy. Out of these times, his vision was clear, his words were empowered, and his touch cured. He created bread, restored sight to the blind, cleansed a leper, and raised a widow's dead son. His compassion was translated from feelings to actions. His empathy was the effective power behind them.

Anger

Compassion moved Jesus not only to heal, but also to anger. In a dramatic scene, Mark portrays Jesus *"looking around with anger"* at religious leaders (3:5). They were concerned only to see if Jesus would break their rules by healing a man on the Sabbath. When Jesus did, they immediately plotted to kill him. But though Jesus was angry with these religious rulers, he was also *"grieved by their hardness of heart"*. While the cruelty of their callousness deserved his anger, the condition of their stony hearts caused him grief.

Aristotle saw clearly that *"anyone can become angry — that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way — that is not easy."* That is the challenge before us.

I look back with regret at most of my angry outbursts. But I do not regret an incident at the neighbourhood pool when I was 10 years old. Some teenagers were tormenting my brother Kenny, who had Down syndrome. I went ballistic — screaming, scratching, gouging, biting. When the lifeguard pulled me off them, he told me to say I was sorry. I refused to apologise for defending my powerless brother against the "powerful" bullies. But only now is my anger mixed with grief over those who were so stunted emotionally that they were insensitive to the needs of precious people like my brother.

Jesus felt *"indignant"* (Mark 10:14) when his disciples did not allow mothers to bring their children to him for his blessing. The disciples' self-importance irritated Jesus. Jesus slapped them with stinging rebukes: *"Let the children come to me; stop preventing them."* Jesus then hugged the children, blessed them, and laid his hands on them (10:16). Jesus' feeling of annoyance with the disciples quickly gave way to an outpouring of warm affection for the children.

In another instance, crass commercialism in the temple inflamed the zealous anger of Jesus and moved him to a violent action. The words of the prophet were like fire in his bones: *"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations"* (Mark 11:17, quoting Isa. 56:7). The pursuit of profits had excluded the opportunity for Gentiles to find and worship God in the court of the Gentiles, where people of different ethnic backgrounds and physically disabled people could gather to worship. But merchants had packed that area with their tables, stalls, boxes, and animals. People who had travelled a long way to find God were shut out. Though the terrified merchants running from the crack of his whip saw only the destruction of business as usual, Jesus' anger was motivated by *"zeal for your house"* (John 2:17, quoting Ps. 69:9) and directed toward the positive purposes of the worship of God and the mission to all nations.

Recently in our town there was a discussion about building a shelter for hundreds of homeless women and children. A friend of mine said that selfish pursuits were blinding people to this

desperate need. She was upset, as Jesus was, that needy people were not being given the opportunity to find and worship God. Her beautiful, blazing eyes hinted at how Jesus would have reacted. Just as Jesus' zeal motivated him to cleanse a space for outsiders to worship God, so my friend's anger energized her to build a place for the homeless to find shelter. In both cases the origin of anger was meeting the needs of others, and the aim of anger was constructive.

Our anger is often sparked by a threat to our own self-interests and usually results in bitter hostility. We need to heed Paul's warning: *"Be angry, but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil"* (Eph. 4:26-27). The temple-cleansing story is too often used to justify incivility and unforgiving animosity. Paul knew of our propensity to legitimize our self-centredness, and so his words on anger are full of warning.

Anger is fire. When it burns destructively, it harms and destroys life. But the anger of Jesus kindles a flame within us that warms and restores life.

Grief

Take a moment and reread the story we call Jesus' *"triumphal entry"* (Luke 19:41-44). In Roman tradition, a triumphal procession displayed a victorious general riding in a gold-covered chariot pulled by white chargers. His army marched in resplendent array behind him. Wagons loaded with spoils and slaves attested to his power. But Jesus rode on the colt of a donkey. A motley parade of peasants and children cheered him on his way as their long-awaited king. And the emotion that best describes Jesus' state as he rode was grief.

Jesus predicted the destruction of Jerusalem as he rode down the Mount of Olives into the city. His words describing the impending catastrophe were hyphenated by sobs. He wept, he wailed with grief over the coming desolation of Jerusalem.

Jesus also wept at the tomb of Lazarus. Witnesses said, *"See how he loved him"* (John 11:36). When Jesus saw Mary weeping, *"he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved"* (11:33). When he stepped near to the tomb of his friend, *"again he was greatly disturbed"* (11:38). When the word "disturbed" was used for animal sounds, it denoted the loud, angry snorting of horses. When used for human emotions, it emphasised the mixture of anguish and rage. Jesus wept. His groans welled up from the depths of his spirit, racked his body, shook the tombs, and echoed back from them. He raged against death, that terrible enemy that had attacked this, and every, family.

When Bill Pollard wept as he spoke at my father's memorial service, I was amazed to see him lose his composure. I always viewed him as Service Master's chairman of the board, a strong, invincible man. Now, two years later, I don't remember his words, but I am still deeply moved and comforted by his tears. *"See how he loved him,"* I reflect to myself, echoing the words of those who observed Jesus' grief at the tomb of his friend.

Likewise, Jesus was *"troubled in spirit"* when he told his disciples that one of them would betray him (John 13:21). He grieved over this betrayal by his friend Judas. Jesus had lavishly given his love to Judas. He called Judas to be one of the inner circle with the Twelve, to be close to him, and to participate in his work. He gave Judas the moneybag. He washed his feet. He gave Judas the place of honour next to him at the table. He gave him the dipped bread, a sign of love. All the time he knew that Judas would betray him. But still Jesus did not withdraw to protect himself. He gave himself to Judas without measure, and so he set himself up to suffer the pain of betrayal. When Judas led the temple troops to arrest Jesus in the garden, Jesus called him "friend".

The Gospels portray Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane as one who is crushed by a heavy load of grief. He did not shrink from disclosing his deepest and darkest emotions to his disciples: *"I am deeply grieved, even to death"* (Matt. 26:38). He begged them to stay awake and keep him company, but they *"slept because of sorrow"*. His emotions were too heavy for them to bear. They escaped into sleep, leaving Jesus alone. *"Terror-stricken and in terrible anguish"* (Mark 14:33), Jesus agonized over the awful choice to endure or to escape the cross. As he wrestled in prayer, he was drenched in his own sweat *"which ran like blood to the ground"* (Luke 22:44).

Jesus' familiarity with grief should give us pause. Too often we hear Americanized versions of the gospel that offer quick fixes, easy solutions, and suffering-free discipleship. We need the reminder that the man who knew God most intimately and fulfilled his will most completely was described by Isaiah as a *"suffering servant"*: *"Surely he has borne our grief and carried our sorrows"* (53:4).

Joy

While Jesus was a *"Man of Sorrows"*, Luke also paints a scene where Jesus *"rejoiced very greatly in the Spirit"* (Luke 10:21), which implies more than cracking a wry smile. The occasion for this outburst was the return of the 70 from their successful mission. They had been given spiritual authority over all the powers of the enemy and, like a crack SWAT team, had liberated hostages. There was good reason to celebrate.

But Jesus warns them, *"Do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven"* (10:20). No matter how much power they exercised in their ministry, the ultimate source of their joy was to be rooted in their heavenly community: their names were written in heaven. Ministry is temporary. Life in the divine community is permanent. Then Jesus joyfully thanked the Father for opening the hearts of the disciples to see this and to enter into the fellowship of the Father and the Son (10:21-24).

During this last year I've seen a woman slowly waste away from Lou Gehrig's disease. She delighted in her vocation as a college counsellor. But when she had to give up her work, she was sustained by her relationships with her family, her friends, and God. Many were amazed by her joyful spirit. The way she lived and died bore eloquent witness to the wisdom of finding our ultimate source of joy not in what we do but in our permanent relationships.

On the eve of his execution, Jesus told his disciples that all he had revealed to them was so that *"my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full"* (John 15:11; 17:13). They should abide in his love as he always abides in the love of the Father (15:10), and they should be one as he and the Father are one (17:11). Here again joy is the mark of life within divine love relationships.

Jesus, the Man of Sorrows, was also the Man of Joy. He obeyed the will of the Father and endured the cross by focusing on the joy set before him — the joy of unshakable love relationships in the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb. 12:2, 22).

Love

Love permeated, guided, and empowered the spectrum of Jesus' emotions. He felt compassion, was angry, grieved, and rejoiced because he loved. Love is an unshakable commitment of the will. Love transcends feelings and keeps on going when feelings falter or vanish. But love also involves and expresses emotions.

Jesus loved with strong desire. He told his friends, *"I have desired with great desire to eat this Passover with you before I suffer"* (Luke 22:15). The combination of the verb "desire" and the noun "desire" doubles the intensity in Jesus' expression of his deep longing to be with his friends.

When a wealthy young man ran up to Jesus, knelt before him, and asked how he could inherit eternal life, *"Jesus looked at him and loved him"* (Mark 10:21). As soon as he saw him, affection welled up in his heart for him, just as sometimes when you meet someone, you get a strong feeling that this person could be your best friend.

Much is made about the difference between friendship (philia) love and divine (agape) love, but this is overdone. The words are used interchangeably for Jesus' love. For example, the sisters of Lazarus sent a message to Jesus to tell him, *"the one you love (phileo) is sick"* (John 11:3). Then the gospel writer tells us, *"Jesus loved (agapao) Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus."* The point is that Jesus loved in many different ways. All the words for love in every language of the world together are still insufficient to describe the love of Jesus.

His love led him to suffer and die. Jesus pointed to his sacrificial death as the ultimate measure of his love. *“Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends”* (John 15:13). He asks his friends to live up to that standard of love. *“This is my commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you ... You are my friends if you do what I command you”* (John 15:12, 14).

To live by that standard of love requires much more than emotions. It calls for total commitment to give up your life for someone else and to trust in the power of God to keep that commitment. But loving as Jesus loves also includes emotions — intense, diverse, deep emotions. His kind of love will arouse emotions of compassion, anger, grief, and joy.

Sometimes we want insurance against the heartbreaks of love. The way of Stoic “apathy” seems safer than the emotional traumas that inevitably accompany the way of loving as Jesus loved. But hardening ourselves against the pains of love kills the capacity to love. As C. S. Lewis warns us in *The Four Loves*:

“To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket — safe, dark, motionless, airless — it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.”

I am spellbound by the intensity of Jesus’ emotions: not a twinge of pity, but heartbroken compassion; not a passing irritation, but terrifying anger; not a silent tear, but groans of anguish; not a weak smile, but ecstatic celebration. Jesus’ emotions are like a mountain river, cascading with clear water. My emotions are more like a muddy foam or feeble trickle. Jesus invites us to come to him and drink. Whoever is thirsty and believes in him will have the river of his life flowing out from the innermost being (John 7:37-38). We are not to be merely spellbound by what we see in the emotional Jesus; we are to be unbound by his Spirit so that his life becomes our life, his emotions our emotions, to be *“transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory”*.

G Walter Hansen

©2017
www.christianstudylibrary.org