

Nourishing Your Emotional Life



by J. ALASDAIR GROVES

A healthy, godly emotional life doesn't just happen. It takes work, time, and grace. An enormous amount of work, actually—and a *lifetime* of grace. But it's a different kind of work than you might think. In fact, all Christians seeking to live faithfully before the Lord and grow in relationship with him *are* working on their emotions, though most aren't consciously aware of it.

We can nurture godly maturity in our emotional lives without mastering a complex list of spiritual techniques or even consciously paying attention to our emotions. This is no throwaway insight. By pouring ourselves into simply knowing, trusting and deepening our love for Christ, we will, as an inseparable result, develop godly feelings. Our hearts will grow more and more to love what God loves (which will necessarily mean hating what God hates as well). Emotions, at their essence, overflow from what we love. We rejoice or feel content when what we love is blessed, safe and present. We mourn, rage, and fear when what we love is lost, harmed or threatened. Therefore, the more we love the Lord God and his kingdom, the more our emotions will overflow in godly ways, whether that is godly grief and anger at the tragedies of sin and suffering, or godly joy and contentment at the fruit of the Spirit in our lives or the lives of those around us. Thanks be to God, walking with Christ not only changes who we are, but it changes what we most love. This is the only

Alasdair Groves (MDiv) is the executive director of CCEF New England and also serves as the director of CCEF's School of Biblical Counseling.

true path to a spiritually rich emotional life.

This article¹ then has a very simple goal: to lay out six accessible practices that will incubate and nourish a godly health and maturity in your emotions across the entire emotional spectrum. These suggestions are *not* tools for changing your emotions. Rather, they are ways to harness wise, normal, spiritual practices that will grow your love for what God loves and gradually mold your feelings to reflect the emotional life of our Lord.

This, of course, does not mean there are only six ways to nurture good emotions in your life! Far from it. So please take this as a nudge to get you going, a gentle push to start your feet moving a few steps down a long road. My hope is that reflecting on and walking out any of these steps will make it easier for you to identify other areas that can enrich your heart too.

Read Your Bible

Many of you will have a sinking feeling when you see that my first suggestion is to “read your Bible.” Not only is this about the most *un*-novel suggestion you have heard for the Christian life, but it also could very easily feel like a trite answer to a complex topic. Or, worse, it could actually feel condemning and guilt inducing, as if I’m suggesting that if you would just read your Bible, then your emotions would all fall into line.

The reason I start with “read your Bible” is none of these. Instead, I start here because reading the Bible is a perfect poster child for the idea that you don’t have to come up with fancy new methods to mature your emotions. Even this most basic of Christian practices can bear rich fruit in your emotional life.

There are three main ways the Bible does this. The first and most obvious is when we turn to favorite passages in the midst of strong, troubling emotions such as anxiety, anger, confusion, bitterness, guilt, or despair—and find help.

For example, I vividly remember a late evening in early 2010, sitting in a colleague’s guest room nervously preparing myself to meet with pastors the next day. The future of the counseling center we were hoping to found hinged on the conversations of the next twenty-four hours, and I strongly suspected at least one of these conversations might be strained. I am not prone to anxiety,

¹ This article is an adaptation of a portion of my content from a forthcoming book entitled *Emotions Untangled*, which is scheduled for publication by Crossway in the spring of 2019.

but anxiety tugged and clutched at me more intensely that night than I had ever felt before or since.

Knowing that the Bible was a good place to go with my fears, I opened up to the Psalms, and God kindly placed Psalm 27 in front of me. It begins: “The Lord is my light and my salvation.” This reminded me God needed to be my hope—not our counseling center. It continues: “Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear.” If David did not need to fear literal armies, how much more could I claim refuge! It helped that night as well to see that David needed to remind himself repeatedly of the good reasons he had not to fear. I could almost hear David’s heart beating with anxiety as he wrestled his own soul toward trust in the Lord. My eyes clung to the words of the psalm that night like a rock climber to a handhold on a steep cliff. I’ve been back to Psalm 27 countless times, and also taken countless other fearful people there in counseling.

Here is a second way the Bible impacts your emotions. Words are powerful. Words that you read and hear shape your perspective. The effect may be extremely subtle, of course. In fact, most of the time you’re entirely unaware that words have made any difference at all. But, for better or worse, words always matter. They reinforce your perspective or undercut it, focus your attention or distract you, force you to pause or hurry you along. This is not just a possibility or even a strong likelihood. It is inevitable. The words we are exposed to mold our hearts far more than we think.

Which words do you want shaping the way you see and respond to the world?

How do the words of Scripture, in particular, alter your perspective for the better? In a thousand ways. They make you think about the trials and faith of the biblical characters, the similarity of your heart to theirs, and God’s faithfulness to them. God’s words soak your mind in explicit hopes, promises, comforts, reassurances, commands, reminders, and warnings. They call your attention to who God is, who you are, and how the world works. They engage your emotions directly through humor, lament, dry sarcasm, impassioned entreaty, and euphoric exaltation. They boost you up onto your mental tiptoes to peer through a window in history at God’s tender care for a young Moabite woman and her widowed Israelite mother-in-law, a youngest son whom God anoints to kill a giant and become a king, a self-righteous

murderer who is knocked on his back and becomes a missionary. Words grab your attention and slip into your subconscious as they sing, preach, teach, and narrate.

Make no mistake, every last word in the Bible bids to change you—to change how you think, *and* how you feel about the world around you. This does not mean, however, that reading the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew chapter 1 will somehow magically dispel a panic attack just because it happens to be in the Bible. A lot more people would give their children names like Amminadab or Zerubbabel if it did! It *does* mean that reading your Bible

The Bible impacts our emotions because when we encounter his words we encounter God himself.

regularly over the years will make you a different person. Choosing to let Scripture's songs, sermons, and stories enter your mind is like choosing to eat a balanced, healthy diet: every cell in your body will be affected by access to good nutrients, mostly in ways you're never aware of. As a result, even reading the genealogy of Jesus helps stabilize your hope in the gospel as you learn to appreciate how God works through families, even families that include such unlikely outsiders as Rahab, Tamar, and Bathsheba, as well as people with major moral failings like Abraham, Jacob, and David.

Finally, the Bible impacts our emotions because when we encounter his words we encounter God himself. To read the living Word of God is to relate to him. In Scripture, God both shares his heart and calls you to respond from yours. Reading Scripture is literally reading a message from God to you. It's not *solely* to you, but when God speaks to his people—and you are one of his people—his words are intended to impact your way of life.

One simple, practical way to treat Scripture as relational is to write out your response to what you're reading as if you were speaking directly to God. In the margins of your Bible or a notebook, lay out your questions, reactions, concerns, and thought processes in “I” and “you” language. In fact, maybe you should even speak your words to God aloud, like you would if you were talking to anyone else! Our “quiet times” (the phrase many of us use for our

prayer and Bible reading) should become “loud times,” since speaking out loud forces our prayers to be less distracted and more personal.

Ultimately, whether you write, speak, or do both, every passage says something about who God is and who we are. Each page of your Bible is inviting you to talk to God. So pick up your pen or open your mouth and start with “Reading this makes me think that you...” Then finish the sentence with whatever is in your heart and mind. Then start and finish another passage.

In our Bibles, we find God reaching across eons, oceans, languages, and foreign cultures to catch our attention and have a talk. Will you listen? Will you reply? Your emotions will be nourished as you do.

Go Outside

My second suggestion is to go outside more often. I hope the recommendation to be out in nature needs little defense. Most people know that getting outdoors is good for you. But in an increasingly digital age, it bears repeating: you probably need to get outside more than you currently do. And you don't have to stand in a vast open field to benefit—even a city sidewalk has whistling winds, warm rays of sun, and at least a narrow band of sky.

There is no single reason why stepping out under God's sky is good for your emotions. I admit that ten minutes facing into the breeze or feeling the sun on your face won't radically alter your mood most days. However, as with reading the Bible, it's hard to overstate the value of regularly reminding your body and soul that you live on a larger stage and in a larger story than your messy house or the four walls of your office that surround you hour after hour.

The most important way I've put this into practice has been taking a walk during my work day—six minutes each way to the stone wall in the woods behind my office, a minute or so to stand, breathe, and watch the sunlight on the forest floor, then six minutes back through the pines and young maple saplings. This little stroll past growing plants and trees and singing birds pulls my mind and senses into contact with God. It reminds me that he is the giver of abundant life and has plans for renewing this world. It also reminds me to relax my clenched shoulders and inhale deeply.

John Piper once said that the reason strip clubs board up their windows is not primarily to stop passers-by from unpaid peeks. Instead, it is to stop paying customers from looking *out* and seeing the sky. The owners know that

if customers see the heavens, they will be reminded that a vast sky full of stars or clouds hovers above them—and mutely refutes the folly of ascribing worth to a passing, pseudo-pleasure.

“The heavens declare the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1) and we need to listen. So while a daily walk won’t kick your depression or cement your contentment, it is one of the most practical things most of us can do to steer our heart in the right direction.

As Christians, we need to pour in time and effort to grow in godly guilt, grief, dismay and the like. Far too often, we short circuit God’s good purposes for our negative emotions.

Cultivate *Good* Negative Emotions

It’s telling that the sole example of a book of the Bible named after an emotion is not *Joys* but *Lamentations*. Though it sounds counter-intuitive (and counter-cultural), this reminds us that sometimes it is actually *good* to feel bad. Think of Jesus weeping at the tomb of Lazarus, of God’s anger at invading armies desecrating his temple and slaughtering his people, of David repenting in sackcloth and ashes and urging us to have a “broken and contrite heart” when we have sinned (Ps 51:17). Sorrow, anger, and abject guilt don’t feel pleasant, but they are normal emotions in a vital Christian life.

Because of this, there are actually ways in which you should feel “bad” more often and more strongly than you do! I do not mean you should seek out melancholy moods for their own sake. Instead, I’m simply suggesting that as Christians we need to pour in time and effort to grow in godly guilt, grief, dismay and the like. Far too often, we short circuit God’s good purposes for our negative emotions. We crush them, deny them, or escape from them rather than letting them do their good and healthy work of driving us to him.

What does it look like to cultivate healthy negative emotions?

Probably the most important way to nurture uncomfortable emotions

in our lives is by learning to lament. A lament is an honest, impassioned expression of sorrow, frustration, or confusion. Laments name a loss or injustice and the impact it has had. It is no accident that psalms of lament are the most common kind of psalm. The psalmists knew how badly our world is broken and turned instinctively and earnestly to God.

Psalms 13 is a good illustration of a lament. The author asks “How long, O Lord?” several times. He poignantly expresses feeling forgotten, abandoned, lonely, sorrowful, defeated, humiliated, and in deep despair. He asks God to hear him and see him and, implicitly, to have mercy on him. While he ends with clear hope, it is hope in a rescue that is not yet realized. In short, in the midst of anguish, the psalmist persistently pours out his heart to God. The psalms of lament take God’s promise that he cares for us very seriously.

Laments honor God in two ways. They stand with God and grieve the brokenness of the world as he does. God hates sin and suffering and will one day eradicate both. Laments yearn, ache, and call for the coming of that day. This orientation drives our souls to see the world as he does, a beautiful story in desperate need of the happy, heavenly ending that only he can bring.

Laments also trust God with something we care about. My dad died in February of 2007. I remember someone comforting my siblings and me by saying the pain would “grow easier in time.” In response, my then-fifteen-year-old sister said that she didn’t want the pain to lessen because this much pain was the only way she could ever imagine feeling about losing the father she loved so deeply.

I believe she was on to something.

When we love passionately, and lose something or someone, our grief is a testament to God’s good work in creating the person or treasure we’ve lost. To stay present with the pain of loss as laments do is, in a strange way, to acknowledge God’s goodness in giving the gift in the first place. The biblical pattern is not to shrug losses off and move on. Rather we are to wail in honest heartache at the wrongness of death and destruction of God’s beautiful creatures, especially his fragile children. If you truly love others as Christ calls you to, then you will also truly lament when evil of various kinds befalls them.

Laments, however, are not the only way to engage God faithfully in our negative emotions. Guilt, for example, is a vital emotion to embrace.

To experience in your gut that you have done wrong, and that your only hope is to turn around and walk in the opposite direction, is of enormous value. While guilt can easily misfire and lead to wallowing and ugly self-condemnation, its purpose is to turn us to the One who offers forgiveness. Even those of us who beat ourselves up too much actually need *more*, not less, guilt. The self-flagellation of “bad” guilt is actually a twisted and disguised arrogance—when I don’t measure up to my own standards of how good I should be, I feel awful about myself and punish myself. This pride-in-disguise is itself a sin for which we need to repent! But “good” guilt is freeing. It calls us to weep and be ashamed of our wicked choices. It helps us feel our need to change and leads us to draw near to God and his mercies. And gospel repentance and change lead to joy and purposeful action.

Perhaps most surprisingly of all, doubt is actually a valuable negative emotion to experience at times. Don’t get me wrong, the dangers of doubt are very real. All too often doubt becomes a self-centered faithlessness. That is not what I am encouraging! But the kind of doubts we overhear voiced by Habakkuk, Job, the author of Psalm 73, and the father of a demon-afflicted boy in Mark 9 all express deep confusion precisely *because* the speaker trusts God’s character. They are confounded and ask urgent questions when God’s justice and salvation are painfully absent. This means we can be faithful and still say to God, “I know you are good and don’t delight in evil...So how come the wicked seem to be doing just fine while helpless and vulnerable people—especially those I love—are being destroyed?” Cultivating such a mindset doesn’t mean searching for reasons to question God’s reality or character or decisions. It’s actually the exact opposite! Engaging godly doubt means bringing him your questions about the gap between the way he reveals himself to be perfectly good and just on the one hand, but then allows terrible evil to befall people we know he promised to protect on the other.

The list of *good* negative emotions could go on. We are to cultivate a *fear* of the Lord, a *distrust* in false teaching, and a *hatred* of all that is godless and perverse. Ultimately, our goal is not to feel bad more often, but rather to be willing to face, and even step into, the uncomfortable and distasteful parts of this world we live in. Each time we do, we can be sure it will mean feeling distressing emotions if our hearts share God’s affections and priorities. To love

what he loves will mean to hate what he hates and mourn what he mourns. His call that we grow in love for him and each other necessarily means that we must also grow in our capacity to be pained by what goes wrong for those we love in the world that God so loves.

Build Altars

The altar enters the story of Scripture very early in Genesis, long before God commands the Israelites to build altars to him in the tabernacle. And altars remain a central element of how God's people relate to him throughout the Old Testament.

What is an altar?

An altar is an acknowledgment that something important has happened and needs to be remembered. It serves as a long-term memory aid for who God is and what he has done (e.g., Gen 28:10–22; Josh 22:10–34; 1 Sam 7:12). In this sense then, an altar is the spiritual equivalent of an expensive souvenir. Something precious bought on a family road trip, or a gift brought home to beloved children from your travels, or the candlestick from the restaurant where you had your first date. Souvenirs remind you of that place, that event, and that special person every time your eyes fall on them. For this reason, our most precious souvenirs tend to live where we will see them often: on the mantle or on the nightstand. Souvenirs compress a story into a single glance.

Like souvenirs, altars communicate by reminding us of something: the great value and worth of the object of our worship. An altar can be a physical object or it can be any regular practice that reminds us of the value of the object of our worship. We need altars to God. They are reminders of his goodness and refreshing tastes of his kind and personal care for us. Our attention is so easily distracted and our hearts so quickly forget all that he has done for us. It is no accident that Christ gave us bread and wine, elements we can smell, touch, see, and taste, to remind us over and over of his covenant. We consume them regularly until the day he comes back. We need to be told over and over and over again by all five of our senses that our God is with us.

Every one of us needs to build altars that reorient us to God.

What kind of altars should we build? Almost any kind imaginable! While we wouldn't use stones and burnt offerings, there are many ways to build

altars that will regularly call God's faithfulness to mind. Any physical object or intentionally chosen practice can become, in this sense, an altar.

One young woman I worked with struggled deeply to believe that God really was a concerned and loving father who cared deeply about her and her life. We zoomed in on the "pearl of great price" parable, and it became our shorthand for the way all her precious "pearls" in life could be safely entrusted to her heavenly Father. So she started wearing pearl earrings. When she wore them, every turn of her head shook the two small, white, spherical altars and offered a gently-whispered reminder that she was safe with her dad.

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personal care for us.

Another young man found himself overthinking his faith and struggling to find any joy or genuineness in his walk with God. Every event, activity, choice, and recreation dragged with it a pressure to self-analyze. Ironically, my friend's intelligence and theological breadth hampered him from approaching God in natural relationship. In an effort to break through his overthinking, and because he liked to cook, I tasked him to go to the grocery store, buy himself something both healthy and mouthwatering, and savor it prefaced only by a simple prayer of "thank you." My goal was not to make him less precise in his theology or dwell less on how every moment can connect us to God. My goal was to help him build an altar to God through the act of cooking, through tasting and seeing (and smelling) that the Lord was good in a way that would be unclouded by endless analysis.

I have various altars in my own life as well. A picture of my wife and children on my desk reminds me regularly to thank God for the family he's given. I try to play piano five minutes every day, which regularly reminds me how much beauty can flow from even small ventures in self-discipline. When I drink tea, especially if it's during counseling, I try to force myself to focus on the taste and receive it as an experience of God's delight in giving us good

gifts. I need these reminders often.

I could name countless other altars, but I'll mention just one: the triple-A battery I keep on the chair rail by my desk. This little battery refused to die week after week as it powered the audio recorder of a woman I counseled. She often taped our sessions so she could revisit helpful parts of our conversation later. The little battery-that-could now silently testifies to me (and to her when I point it out from time to time) that God cares for his hurting children, brings and preserves words of hope through his people, and superintends every detail of our lives for our good.

In summary, build altars in your life from whatever “stones” of God’s kindness and care are lying around. Such reminders can scale the walls of our distractions and lead formidable truths to capture our attention and hearts.

Cling to Corporate Worship

Unlike the personalized altars I just described, church services are public, obvious and communal. Sunday worship impacts our emotions because we are surrounded by other visitors to God’s house. In his house, surrounded by members of his family, we are tangibly reminded that we are not alone in this world.

Countless preachers and teachers have called corporate worship an oasis for our parched souls under the beating sun of life. This holds true for our emotions as well. Because it has the power to refresh your wilting worship, church services have the potential to revive godly emotions as well.

Does this mean that showing up on a Sunday morning guarantees a rich spiritual or emotional experience? Of course not. Church can be hard for people for a variety of reasons—some personal, some due to weaknesses in the church itself (poor sermons/music, etc.). Benefitting spiritually or emotionally from church will be difficult for most of us, at least on occasion.

That said, the formal fellowship of shared Sunday mornings has the potential to shape our emotions for the good in several ways.² First, being with others who also place their hope in God’s character, plan, and power reinforces to our hearts that we are neither alone nor insane in our faith. This

² I have been heavily influenced by James K. A. Smith’s perspective on the formative power of corporate worship. See *Desiring the Kingdom* or his more popular level work *You Are What You Love* for a more in-depth discussion.

can happen by simply walking into the foyer or the back of the sanctuary, before a word has been preached or sung. (If you are in the persecuted church, gathering in hiding—imagine the encouragement to see even two other Christians slip into your covert meeting place. They, too, are risking their lives just to be with others who love what you hold most dear!) To be with a crowd, even a small one, is to be part of something larger than yourself. On Sunday morning we get a small taste of being part of a great sea of individuals drawn together by a larger purpose that binds us together and excites us. You're getting a taste of the celebration to come, a communal rejoicing so vast that no Super Bowl crowd would even be audible next to the cries of victory, praise, and delight that will echo eternally in the wedding hall of the Lamb.

When God's people gather, we receive a great gift from each other: affirmation of our mutual faith and a revitalization of our all-too-often-flagging love for our Lord and his kingdom.

All this and we haven't even started singing yet!

The music of corporate worship can be transformative—which is exactly what many of us need. I know for my family, Sunday mornings can be overshadowed by the chaos of breakfast and dressing the children, getting them into the car, and then out again! On top of that, I'm often tired from a long week. And my family and I are not alone in this. In fact, I've found that it's rare that anybody shows up at church with eager and quieted spirits, in the right frame of mind for worship. But think about what happens when we lift up our voices together in song. Our lungs, lips, and larynxes work in harmony to bring resonance, volume, and pitch into the air around us. This sound then reverberates out, each of us physically connected by a shared vibration through the room, through our ears, and through our chests. The melody and rhythm draw us into the words we sing. A well-crafted melody or effectively played instrument actually underscores the words for our feelings more than words without music ever could. Further, singing together bridles the pace of

our reading as we trot through the theological terrain of a song. We take in the meaning of the lyrics in ways we never could if we were galloping along at the usual skim we've learned to use when reading the Bible on our smartphones. In fact, "singing may be the one human activity that most perfectly combines heart, mind, soul, and strength. Almost everything else we do requires at least one of these fundamental human faculties...But singing (and maybe only singing) combines them all."³

If we wanted to, we could flesh out a significant emotional impact for every single element of church services. In communion, we literally taste and see that the Lord is good; we see and smell, touch and taste the good news of Christ's body and blood atoning for and sustaining us. In the sermon, we not only learn new things about the character of our Father and his call on our lives, but we are to be moved. Wise listeners ask not only "What did I learn?" but also "Was I encouraged? Discouraged? Why? How so?"

When God's people gather, we receive a great gift from each other: affirmation of our mutual faith and a revitalization of our all-too-often-flagging love for our Lord and his kingdom. Will you grab hold of these benefits to your emotions?

Watch for God on the Move

Last, seek out and seize every opportunity to hear about God's work in the lives of others. There is no substitute for good stories of our good God doing good work in the lives of people we know. The Psalms do this constantly when the singer extols God "in the assembly of the righteous," telling "Israel" or "the congregation" of all his wondrous works. Similarly, Paul explains that those who have received "comfort" from God are now equipped to comfort others with the comfort they have received (2 Cor 1:4). Simply hearing how God has tenderly cared for others can be a great encouragement.

I have a friend and colleague who instinctively notices and speaks about encouraging fruits of the Spirit he sees in those around him and, with appropriate humility, in himself. I find his awareness of God's Spirit at work immensely refreshing. His ability to notice and name areas of spiritual growth reminds me of how hiking with a nature enthusiast like my father-in-law

³ Andy Crouch, *The Techwise Family* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2017), 191.

transforms what to me would just be “trees” into cedar, white pine, and shagbark hickory. God has frequently used my colleague’s excited account of some spiritual ripening he’s seen that day to refresh my soul when I had begun to slip unconsciously into discouragement.

This does not have to be a major undertaking. Just keep an open ear for a young man handling his relationship with his parents with greater maturity, an accountability partner resisting temptation more effectively, or a child sharing about treating a difficult classmate patiently. Observe your community group and reflect on where they’ve grown in connecting with and caring for each other. Ask your spouse why he seems in such good spirits. Perhaps most basically, ask *anyone* what the Lord is doing in his or her life! ‘Tis grace has brought us safe thus far, and tales of grace in others will help to lead us safely home.

Don’t Stop Here

The six elements in this article are all valuable ways to have good emotional hygiene (that phrase is probably never going to catch on, is it?). Nonetheless, they only scratch the surface of what you can do to strengthen the way your emotions reflect God’s. Ultimately, any aspect of your daily life, carried out with thoughtfulness and faithfulness to your Maker, will be a blessing to your emotions! Anything that is good for your soul will, by definition, also have some positive impact on your emotional health. So, take these six ideas as a jumping-off point and get creative. Fill your life with conscious choices to turn the highs, the lows, and even the mundane moments of your daily life into opportunities for engaging the Lord. He will not fail to grow your love for him and mature your heart and emotions in the process!

* * *

On the next page, you will find a series of questions to help you consider these practices in your life and the lives of others.

Questions for Reflection

Here are six questions that can help you consider these practices further.

As you face your own feelings:

1. Which of these six points stand out to you as most important to work on in your own life?
2. Which do you feel you are already doing well, or at least are working on?
3. What other ideas or areas beyond these six might you add?

As you help others:

1. Which of the six are you most attuned to in the lives of those you serve? Which one are you least attuned to? What is the biggest takeaway you have for your ministry to others?
2. As we've seen, corporate worship is a spring of emotional health. How might this impact how you encourage those you are ministering to in your church?
3. What patterns in your life might be hindering you from being a source of encouragement and emotional support to those you seek to serve? Who knows (and loves) you well enough that you could ask him or her to help you see your strengths and weaknesses?

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