

Feelings

By Santiago Lange

“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body”.

2 Corinthians 4:7-10



Feelings—they may surface at the strangest times. All of us have them. Indeed, we are all emotional beings. There are occasions when our feelings take charge, and afterward, we are often left with regret.

We have feelings because God created us that way. We experience joy, excitement, compassion, love, anticipation, loneliness, fear, confusion, sadness, despair, and anger. We can be both sad and glad. Engaging with our emotions is sometimes more difficult than we anticipate. After all, our feelings do not always „play along“.

The Scriptures declare that all of creation was affected by “the Fall”. Our feelings reflect our imperfection. Sin has distorted them to the point where, at times, they become a stumbling block.

Are we experiencing troubling feelings? Perhaps they are feelings about another person. Perhaps they are feelings about a situation at work. Perhaps they are feelings about God. Perhaps they are feelings about our self. They could be feelings of anger, doubt, resentment, discouragement, rejection, confusion, unforgiveness, or even hatred. How do we interact with those kinds of emotions? Does the Bible provide concrete advice about this subject? Is there anything that we, as Christians, can do?

We can see from 2 Corinthians 4 that it is possible to be under pressure in adverse circumstances and still be able to deal positively with our inner turmoil. Paul talks about being afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. In the midst of even the most trying of times, though he felt extremely perplexed, Paul was able to pull up short of despairing. In other words, even though he did not always understand what God was doing, he was able to hold his feelings in check and not be side-tracked by them. There are several key lessons we can glean from Paul and other biblical figures about wrestling with feelings.

One thing we can learn is that feelings are feelings. That does not mean that feelings are not real. They are! Still, our feelings might not be an accurate reflection of how things REALLY are. Therefore, we should recognize them for what they are and what they are not.

We should not deny how we feel and simply try to suppress what we experience. God CAN and DOES work with and through our perspectives, will, memories, attitudes AND emotions. How we feel is how we feel, for better or for worse. This does not mean that we are obligated to always tell everyone why we feel the way we feel. That would certainly not be wise. But we do need to honestly acknowledge and „own“ our feelings recognizing that they are ours.

God certainly knows how we feel. And God can deal with it. Even when we are angry with Him, He can handle it. Unlike us, God is not easily offended. He does not wear His feelings on His sleeve, so to speak. He loves us even when we are angry at Him. He loves us, even when we are misunderstanding His purpose for us. He loves us, even when we are confused and frustrated. So, we should not only acknowledge our feelings to ourselves, we should also acknowledge our feelings to God.

King David is a good example of someone who told God just how he felt. In the Psalms we see the full panorama of feelings expressed. There were certainly times when David was rejoicing in the Lord and expressed his praise. But there were also times when he was in despair and confusion. He exclaimed in *Psalm 42:5*: "*Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me?*" There were also times when he was feeling the crushing guilt of his own sin. In *Psalm 31:9-10* we read: "*Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye is wasted away from grief, my soul and my body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength has failed because of my iniquity, and my body has wasted away.*" There were times when David was angry with his enemies and called God's wrath down upon them. In *Psalm 35:26*: we read "*Let those be ashamed and humiliated altogether who rejoice at my distress; let those be clothed with shame and dishonor who magnify themselves over me.*" Again, in *Psalm 58:6,8* we read: "*O God, shatter their teeth in their mouth; ... Let them be as a snail which melts away as it goes along.*" It should be obvious that David did not hesitate to tell God openly how he felt.

Just as it sometimes helps to verbalize our feelings to others, it also helps to verbalize our feelings to God. In fact, that is an essential step in properly sorting out our emotions.

Another thing we can do is to accept the fact that sometimes we must all struggle with our feelings. It is not a sin to wrestle with them. It is not a sin to be confused. It is not a sin to feel rejected. And it is not a sin to struggle with how we feel. In fact, the sin may be in refusing to struggle with how we feel. The sin may be when we refuse to confront those feelings and to seek to do something about them. When we resign ourselves to feeling a certain way, we accept defeat. The reason why Paul could say that he was perplexed, but not despairing was that he refused to allow his feelings to turn him away from his hope in God. He may not have understood what God was doing but he did know that God was doing something. And he refused to despair before he got the answers.

When we struggle with our feelings, if we remain open to God and do not despair, God will lead us through that struggle to an eventual answer. Through the struggle He is transforming our lives. We might hate the struggle as much as the ground, if it had feelings, would hate the plow. Like the ground, however, there are times when our lives must be broken up to receive from God.

The key here is to understand that God is ultimately in charge. Sometimes that is easier said than done, specially when we don't even believe that He is listening to us. But that is the foundational point. Knowing that God has a purpose that He is working out in our lives helps us to make sense of the struggle. Paul saw that we have this treasure in earthen vessels that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not of ourselves. In other words, Paul was saying that God is at work. He is at work in our lives to reveal His power, even in our weakness. When we don't understand all that God is doing, we can trust that He is still at work. It is not up to us to understand everything or even to have all the answers. We can trust God to do His work however we may feel.

What do we do when we have acknowledged our feelings, been honest with God about them, and accepted the fact that we often need to struggle with our feelings in order to find the answers? There is still one more important thing to do.

In order to deal effectively with our feelings, we must focus on the facts concerning God, our relationship to Him, and His plan for our lives. Our feelings may be the result of focusing on wrong information. Our feelings may be the result of focusing on a lie. Our feelings may be the result of deception. Our feelings may be the result of the weakness of our own flesh. Our feelings may be the result of focusing on external circumstances.

In order to deal with our feelings, we must focus on what is THE truth rather than simply what is true. There is a difference between THE truth and the true. And when we add all the true together, it may equal a lie.

An example of this difference can be found in the classic account of the spies that were sent into Canaan to gather information on that land. When the children of Israel crossed the wilderness they prepared to enter Canaan and conquer the land. God had told them that they would be successful. They selected twelve men to serve as a reconnaissance team to determine the lay of the land, where the important cities were, and determine their fortifications. When the scouts returned, the majority had been so overwhelmed by the apparent might of their enemies that they brought a negative report concerning the prospects of victory. Ten of the twelve said they should not attempt to defeat the inhabitants because their cities were large and fortified and their warriors were men of great size. In fact, they said that after they saw these large men that they "*became like grasshoppers in their own sight.*" Only Caleb and Joshua were willing to take God at His word. They encouraged the people to go in and take possession of the land.

Here is the difference between what is true and what THE truth is: It was true that the cities were large and fortified. It was true that the inhabitants were men of great size. In fact, the description of the land was accurate. It was true. But it was not THE truth. The truth was that Israel could conquer this mighty people. They could do it because God had said they could. It looked impossible. The majority certainly felt like it was impossible. But their feelings were the result of their perception of the true instead of their reliance on THE truth.

We should focus on THE truth about God, that He a loving God, a powerful God, a sovereign God, a God who is working out His plan in our lives. We must learn to focus on THE truth about ourselves, that we are important to God, that we matter to Him, that our feelings may not be reliable. We have a moral responsibility to be as happy as possible. We „owe“ this to our fellow human beings. Happiness is more of a moral virtue than an emotional state. This does not

mean we must ignore our own real pain and suffering. But, the biggest battle we face is not society or situations, but the self. It is a spiritual struggle and the Adversary is active. We may not be able to control circumstances but, guided by the Holy Spirit, we can decide how to react to them. As we focus on THE truth found in His Word, and behave accordingly, we may find that our feelings will begin to reflect a renewed and vibrant faith in Him.

Jesus said, *"And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."* John 8:32 □