



# New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

## EMOTIONS: GOD'S OTHER LANGUAGE

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Federal Way, WA  
June 14, 2009*

We are in week two of our summer series called “The Whole Story: Moving Beyond Brokenness.” Our premise is that Christ is offering us not just forgiveness but transformation. The devastated places in our lives can be restored and rebuilt as we follow him

Last week I handed out rocks to everybody, symbolizing the ruins in our life, the broken pieces. Then I made you turn them all back in to exchange for something new. This week I thought about putting a piece of Kleenex on every chair, but I decided not to, because I didn't want to get used ones back at the end. There's no exchanging happening here this morning.

We're talking about emotions today – understanding how our feelings connect with our faith. As I say that, I can almost hear the jet engines rev up around the room as all the guys prepare to take off mentally for the next half hour...

If that's where you're at, I've got to admit – I've been right there with you. Emotional maturity is something I am still wrestling with and growing in. It's not easy and certainly not something I used to get excited about. I'm not here as an expert this morning but as somebody who has had to learn the hard way what role emotions play in my life.

About 9 years ago, when Karin and I were being evaluated for whether or not we were a good fit for church planting, we sat down with a counselor to have him assess where we were at. And of course the conversation turned to feelings. Karin came through with flying colors. No surprise there. I, on the other hand, had a difficult time expressing what was going on inside with me at the time. It got to the point where the counselor recommended I buy some magnets for the refrigerator with feelings words printed on them to expand my emotional vocabulary.

I thought that sounded ridiculous. I know plenty of words. Happy. Sad. And I definitely knew mad, because I was mad at his suggestion. I'll show you I know what I'm feeling, Mr. Counselor Man. How do you like my annoyed face?? So I blew him off under the excuse that he didn't really know me. But the truth was, I had a long ways to go when it came to understanding and dealing with my emotional life. For as much as I could talk about God and the Bible, it didn't come naturally to me to talk about my own feelings.

Now you might be thinking this morning. “This isn’t for me. I’m just not a touchy feely kind of person. I’m not a crier. And I don’t want to become one.”

Great. You don’t have to. Today’s message is not about changing your personality – it’s about wholeness. It’s about being complete as yourself, totally who God made you to be. You don’t have to turn into Dr. Phil. But we’ve got to be ruthlessly honest about where we’re at, and that has to include the emotional component of our souls.

Pete Scazzero puts it this way: “It is not possible to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature.”

That’s a provocative statement. You can’t be a spiritual grown up if you’re emotionally much younger. That fits right in with what Paul told the Ephesians:

**Ephesians 4:15**

*But speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ...*

We are to grow more like Christ in all aspects. That includes our feelings. So how do I know if I’ve got a ways to go? Here are a few signs of emotional unhealth:

1. I don’t know/can’t express what I’m feeling at any given moment.
2. I deny or avoid the darker emotions of fear, anger, hurt.
3. I am emotionally flat most of the time
3. I have bursts of strong emotion and I don’t know where they come from.
4. My feelings drive my choices.
5. I can’t see a connection between the past and the present in my emotions.
6. I am unaware of the emotional effect I have on others

There are more, I’m sure, but these are some key indicators of work still to be done. And if we’re wanting to be mature spiritually, we won’t get there until we begin to address these issues. Churches have always been concerned with spiritual maturity. We help people get to know their Bibles. We teach on how to pray, how to get plugged in and learning with a small group, how to integrate Christ into their daily lives. But rarely do you see any church resources directed toward processing feelings.

Part of that is because Christians have been wary of feelings. When I was growing up, I remember seeing a diagram of a train like this in church. Facts were the engine – we were to base our beliefs on the facts of history. Faith involved taking God at his word, regardless of how anything else looked. And bringing up the rear was feelings. They weren’t to be trusted to guide our decisions, but we allowed them to be pulled along by facts and faith.

And there’s a lot of truth in that thinking. Countless people have gone astray with the claim, “I FEEL like God is telling me to do this,” when really it was just that – a feeling

and nothing more. Feelings can be highly unreliable and misleading. When you mask them with spiritual language, they become toxic and twisted.

But that's a misuse of feelings – not a reason to dismiss them entirely.

This past week, there was an Israeli woman who wanted to surprise her elderly mother with a nice gift. So she bought a new mattress for her to replace the ratty, lumpy old one she had been sleeping on forever. While her mom was out of the house, she threw out the old one and replaced it with the beautiful new one.

But she didn't get quite the reaction she was expecting when her mom came home. Her mother flew into a panic, because for years, she had been stuffing her life savings into that old mattress for safekeeping, and she had roughly one million dollars in there. So now there is this massive hunt underway in the dumps of Tel Aviv for the million dollar mattress.

Some of us are too quick to toss out our emotions. They can be ugly and uncomfortable and we'd rather not deal with them anymore. But what a tragic mistake, because there is true treasure hidden inside them for us. Because God created us as emotional beings, which means our feelings have purpose and value and are worth exploring.

Let me make one disclaimer before we really get into our discussion. Emotions are not just mental or spiritual. They affect us physically as well. When you get angry, your body reacts. When you feel fear, your body reacts. When you're depressed, your body reacts. And sometimes the physiological dimension requires a physiological solution. Medication can be a good thing for emotional problems just like it is for other physical problems we experience. And sometimes it's just plain necessary. That is not a failure of faith any more than it would be to take Tylenol for a headache. I don't want to suggest as we're talking about wholeness that we mean you should just lean on God and everything will be okay. It's more complex than that and we should make use of all the best resources God puts at our disposal.

But for our purposes today, we have to narrow our discussion to the spiritual aspect of our emotional life. And in the limited time we have together today, what I most want to do is to take just one passage of Scripture and draw out some basic underlying truths. Then each of us can run with those concepts and apply them in more specific ways for our individual lives.

There's no place better in the Bible to look for teaching on emotions than in the Psalms. There we find not just instruction, but real people working through their own real feelings.

I'd like to look at one Psalm with you in particular, but before we dig in, I want to talk about a word the author uses frequently, and that's the word soul. That's a good Christianese term we use a lot but don't think too deeply about. The word for soul in Hebrew is *nephesh*. It can mean a range of things, such as the whole person or the inner

person or the personality. But it also means *the seat of the emotions*. Our emotional core. The word can mean more than that, but certainly not less.

So what I would like to do this morning as I read Psalm 42 is swap out the word soul with the words “emotional core” and “feelings”. It’s going to sound a little hokey, but hopefully it will be just unusual enough to help highlight some truths we might not see otherwise.

### **Psalm 42**

*As the deer pants for streams of water, so my emotional core pants for you, O God.*

*My emotional core thirsts for God, for the living God.*

*When can I go and meet with God?*

*My tears have been my food day and night,*

*while men say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"*

*These things I remember as I pour out my feelings:*

*how I used to go with the multitude,*

*leading the procession to the house of God,*

*with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng.*

*Why are you downcast, O my emotional core?*

*Why so disturbed within me?*

*Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him,*

*my Savior and my God.*

*My emotional core is downcast within me;*

*therefore I will remember you from the land of the Jordan,*

*the heights of Hermon — from Mount Mizar.*

*Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls;*

*all your waves and breakers have swept over me.*

*By day the LORD directs his love,*

*at night his song is with me — a prayer to the God of my life.*

*I say to God my Rock, "Why have you forgotten me?"*

*Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?"*

*My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me,*

*saying to me all day long, "Where is your God?"*

*Why are you downcast, O my emotional core?*

*Why so disturbed within me?*

*Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him,*

*my Savior and my God.*

When we read it that way, we can hear how much this Psalm had to do with emotional health. Even without my changes, the author could have made his own set of refrigerator magnets. Just look at the feelings vocabulary he uses: Tears, joy, downcast, disturbed,

love, agony and mourning. His conversation touches on depression, grief, shame and hurt. He even sounds a bit angry with God at some points.

The writer's honesty models for us that it's okay to be honest with our own emotions. The first truth we take from this passage is that

### **Feelings are meant to be felt.**

Take a look at these two lists of feelings words. The ones on the left are all happy, positive words. The ones on the right are the negative feelings, the ones we don't like as much.

We can have the mistaken idea that true emotional health is getting rid of the less pleasant feelings words and living only on the left side. Being whole is being happy, right? So we figure the best choice is minimize our exposure to the darker side of things. It's like we're on one of those flying amusement rides that we're trying to keep up in the air the whole time and never wanting it to land.

That's not what we mean by being whole and healthy. Sometimes we feel guilty about our emotions. "Well the Bible says not to be anxious about anything, so I have to stop being anxious." "That verse says not to let the sun go down on your anger and it's already midnight, so I can't be mad!" "If I really had faith I wouldn't be feeling afraid."

If you're walking with a child down a dark street and they get scared, you grab their hand and say, "Don't be afraid." You're not trying to make them feel bad for being scared – you're wanting them to feel better. The point of the Bible telling us to not be afraid or anxious is not to induce guilt – it's to alleviate fear. It's lifting a burden, not adding one.

When we take on the belief that our feelings are somehow wrong or unChristian, we stuff them down deep inside and pretend they aren't really there. Feelings that are stuffed don't really go away – they just come out sideways. We clench our teeth and smile at that person that's totally frustrating us, as if they can't pick up on the vibe that's still coming through. Or maybe we avoid a run in with that friend we're angry with so we don't have to acknowledge the conflict.

That's not healthy, because it's not being honest. Ignoring or hiding feelings doesn't make them disappear – it just makes them come out disguised in ways that are often more harmful. As strange as it seems, the way to move beyond feelings is to feel them.

Honesty is hard, even when it comes to allowing other people to express their emotions. We're uncomfortable with letting each other work through the tougher feelings. Just this week, a friend called me up. I said, "How are you?" He said "I'm angry." Then he related to me this unfair situation he was dealing with. Instantly my mind went into the mode of wanting to rush him to a happy place. But I couldn't come up with a shred of advice. So there ended up being these long pauses in the conversation where we shared the silence on the phone. Which was good, because that was more helpful than advice.

He just needed space to process his feelings and to have someone validate that his anger was understandable.

I'm not saying we should just vent our feelings any old way we want. We don't have a license to lash out and be destructive. But we do need to give ourselves permission to feel what we feel. We do need to acknowledge what is real, to label the emotion and let ourselves work through it. Otherwise we won't be able to find the healing we're looking for.

What's more, cutting off feelings deadens us. To quote Pete Scazzero again, "When we deny our pain, losses and feelings year after year, we become less and less human."

This Psalm writer is letting himself feel it all and naming his emotions as he pours out his heart. He says, "I'm sad, because I feel abandoned by you God. I'm grieving and depressed and upset." Not pleasant words. But there's no apology to God for feeling that way – just the statement of how it is. It is only by acknowledging our emotions that we can begin to deal with them in healthy ways. Feelings were meant to be felt.

But that's not the end of the matter, because **Feelings are meant to be explored.** In Psalm 16, David wrote these words:

**Psalm 16:7**

*I will praise the LORD, who counsels me;  
even at night my heart instructs me.*

Our hearts and our feelings have the capacity to teach us. The reason for that is because strong emotions almost always indicate that something deeper is going on inside us. When our son Addison was a toddler, he used to get really angry all the time. He would scowl and yell and throw a fit. But after a while, we could see that a short temper wasn't the main problem – it was his lack of verbal skills. He was frustrated because he couldn't communicate what he really wanted to say, so all that came out was mad. Once that improved, the anger took care of itself. We laugh about it now, because Addison's about the most mellow person in the family.

That's often how it is for us as adults. We have these explosive feelings that we want to suppress, but they're not the central issue – they're symptoms.

Dan Allender says, "Emotions are like messengers from the front lines of the battle zone. Our tendency is to kill the messenger. But if we listen carefully, we will learn how to fight the war successfully."

I remember times when Karin and I were newlyweds. She would come home from the store with some very small purchase like placemats or something and I would get all upset. My reaction would be way out of proportion to the amount of money involved. It would catch me off guard, and I realized that I wasn't really reacting to what she bought

– I was stressed about our bigger spending habits and feeling guilty for not being more disciplined and out of control and inadequate for not making enough money. Our feelings are just the messengers of something deeper. When you get a mildly upsetting call at work and you find yourself going home and eating a whole bag of chips because you're stressed, something deeper is going on. When your kid comes home from school and you blow up when they ask you to take them somewhere, the situation isn't the real issue – there's a battle going on at a different level in your soul.

The reason we don't want to feel certain emotions is because they force us to examine a part of ourselves and our world that we'd rather ignore. But that's the value of feeling – to get our attention and pull our eyes around to look at what's going on inside us.

The Psalm writer doesn't just take his own emotions at face value and say, "Well, I'm feeling down today." Instead he explores the hidden reasons for that. He says, "Why are you downcast, oh my soul? What is going on in me that makes it hard to trust God right now?" He took some time for personal reflection and self examination.

Michael Rand shared a story with me a couple weeks ago that I thought was the perfect illustration of this, and he was gracious enough to agree to let me share it with you. Michael and Mindy have a daughter named Lily who had been taking Tae Kwon Do and at the last minute had decided to sign up to compete in a championship that was being held at a local high school the next day.

They get there that Saturday morning and the place is packed with 1500 people. Michael and Mindy were up in the stands and they watched as Lily took a bronze medal for her form.

Then came the sparring. As Michael was watching, he thought she was doing really well because she was landing all these punches. He turned to a friend sitting next to him and said, "Look at her! She's going for it."

And his friend said, "Yeah, but they don't score points for punching. Only kicking. It looks like she doesn't know that's how it works." And Michael thought, "He's right. She doesn't know." He looked and saw that the other kid had a coach right there, but Lily was all by himself. And he started to get upset. He began yelling, "Kick, Lily! Kick!"

The longer the match went on, the more frustrated and angry he became. He felt like the coach didn't care about her and hadn't trained her properly. He starts fuming and planning what he's going to say to the coach and how this will probably be the end of Lily's Tae Kwon Do experience.

As they're walking out into the hallway afterwards, Michael looked around and realized, "Nobody else is mad. This is just about us and Lily, and she doesn't care. She's still going to get a medal and that's fine with her. And if I make a stink about this, what will that do to her memory of this moment?"

And right there, he had a revelation. His feelings weren't about Lily's performance at all. They were about his own sense of shame. His daughter's not knowing something was feeling like a reflection on him. Suddenly inside he was a five or six year old little boy who didn't feel good enough. His anger was due to how he felt the rest of the world was looking at him, when in fact nobody was thinking any less of him at all.

Fortunately, he had the presence of mind in the moment to recognize it and choose not to give into it. He didn't confront the coach. He was able to genuinely be happy for Lily, and as a result, broke the cycle for his daughter and let her feel really good about herself.

And just the other day, Lily came to Michael and told him the school was having a talent show. He said, "What are you going to do in it? Dance? Sing?" She said, "No dad – I'm gonna do Tae Kwon Do."

What do you react strongly to? What twists your stomach in knots or gives you panic attacks or makes you want to punch through the wall? Chances are you feel the way you do because you are carrying that emotion over from something else and your entire being is begging you to take stock.

Here are some simple questions for taking stock:

1. What is it that I'm feeling right now?
2. What is this making me want to do?
3. Does that reaction fit the situation?
4. Where in my past does this feeling take me?

Over and over again, the Psalmist comes back to the question, "Why am I feeling this way?" We like to focus on managing the way we handle our emotions, whether that is stress or anger or fear. But unless we are able to get in and address some of the underlying causes, we will not be able to move toward true wholeness and health.

One final thought about the connection between emotions and faith comes from the very first lines of Psalm 42:

*As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirst for God, for the Living God.*

Remember – we equated "soul" with "emotional core". So our emotional core has this built in appetite for God. **Feelings are meant to point us toward God.**

C.S. Lewis once wrote, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

This is another important reason why we should not ignore or run from the more difficult emotions. They are one more very powerful means for knowing God better. As I see it, feelings have the potential to do this for us in three ways:

Many of you are afraid to be honest with God about your feelings because you're afraid you will lose your faith. I'd like to venture to say that if you believe you can't tell God the truth – the he would be angry with you or disappointed or simply not care – then that's a faith worth losing. Because that's an inaccurate picture of who God is. He's the God who says he's close to the heartbroken. He's the God who says to weep with those who weep. He's the God who invites us to cast all our cares on him. He's the God whose love never fails.

### **1. Asking the God questions**

Over and over again, Psalm 42 is working out the connection between how the author feels and what he knows about God. He is asking the big questions we all wrestle with: Is God fair? Is God good? Does he care? Is he powerful? On one level or another, all our emotions connect us with those questions.

In their book, “The Cry of the Soul,” Dan Allender and Tremper Longman say, “Although emotions are generally aroused in a human context, they always reveal something about how we are dealing with God.”

Say for instance a coworker receives an award for the job they've done, while your contribution is overlooked. You feel jealous. You were cheated. And the longer you think about it the angrier you get.

Is it really because it's such a nice plaque that you have to have one for your cubicle? No. What bothers us is the injustice and the unfairness. Those are exactly the kinds of issues the author of Psalm 42 was concerned with. We can either take our feelings out on the person who won the award, or we can take them to God.

It's in that engagement with God that we begin to be changed and to grow. And that's a healthy role for a negative emotion to play.

The second way feelings point us toward God is through

### **2. Reminding us of God's own emotions**

I love the line in the middle of our Psalm that says “Deep calls to deep.” The deep things we go through resonate with the deep things of God. When we are feeling something intensely it is often a faint echo of what God also feels intensely.

It's true that our emotions are part of our broken humanity. They are not pure and trustworthy – they're tainted by sin just like every other aspect of our existence. And yet they still give us a glimpse of what God himself is like.

Take a quick glance through Scripture and you see God described with a whole range of those refrigerator magnet words. He loves. He grieves. He gets angry. He hates. He feels joy. He feels sadness.

Irenaeus once said, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.” If shutting down our emotions deadens us, then the reverse is also true: the healthier our emotions are the more alive we become and the more we reflect God through our feelings. We will hate injustice because that’s what he hates. We’ll get angry over sin. We will rejoice when somebody turns to him. And we’ll love people with genuineness.

That’s the goal of being emotionally mature – not just to be healthier for ourselves, but to become better image bearers of God.

All through Psalm 42, there’s a question of location. The writer himself asks,

*Where can I go to meet with God?*

His enemies are asking that same thing: “Where is your God?”

That was the question on the minds of the Jewish prisoners in the concentration camp where Elie Wiesel was sent during World War II. He writes about one day when the prisoners were forced to stand and watch a child being hanged. As they were watching this horrific event was playing out, the prisoner behind Elie said, “Where is God? Where is he?” And Elie said the answer that came to him was, “He is here. He is here hanging on this gallows.”

Where is God? He’s at Calvary. He has a suffering love for us there. That’s the place where all our emotions are met and responded to.

Our feelings do their best work of pointing us toward God when they are

### **3. Taking us back to the cross**

That’s where we see the clearest picture of a God who feels. We call it the “passion” of Christ, meaning his suffering, but the word passion is also an accurate word for describing the intense emotion he experienced at Calvary.

As excruciating as the physical pain was, that was only the beginning. It was on his way to the cross that Jesus said he was overwhelmed with sorrow. It was on the cross that he felt the shame heaped on him by the crowd and the ridicule of the robber next to him. It was on the cross that he experienced the sense of abandonment by his Father, the unbearable sensation of being all alone.

As he faced each one of those feelings, Jesus demonstrated what true and perfect emotional health looks like. It was full of strength and courage. He refused to run away and escape his feelings, staying on the cross when he had the power to get himself down.

He allowed himself to experience each feeling honestly, telling his Father exactly what he was going through all the way. He was full of unflinching honesty clear until the end.

The writer of Hebrews tells us he did all that knowing that on the far side of it something better was waiting for him. On the far side of the cross were all the best refrigerator magnets: Unspeakable joy. The complete love of his Father. The peace and hope that come when justice is served and enemies are no longer a threat.

When we can pick up our cross and follow Jesus, when we too can learn to face our own dark emotions in healthy ways instead of running away, when we can be transparent before God with all our inner turmoil and come to him with our broken hearts, he is ready to take us through them.