



# Bible & Life

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### Feelings and Salvation

by David Dunlap

In a typical day, how often do we make decisions and evaluate situations based primarily on our emotions at the moment? Our constant tendency is to allow our feelings, our impressions, and our emotional background to determine what we will accept as being important. We let our feelings tell us what is true, instead of letting truth transform our feelings.

For most of us, this is not something that happens only occasionally. It is the fundamental mindset with which we approach practically everything. It is how we live. We even justify our daily decisions by saying, "I feel good about this?" or, "I have a bad feeling about it." We are conditioned to this approach not only by our feelings but also by our culture, which incessantly entices us to follow our "hearts" and to do whatever makes us "feel good."

It would be perfectly correct to follow our feelings if we could be sure that they were a trustworthy guide. But they aren't; their perspective on true living typically has huge blind spots. As a result, our emotions are fickle, flighty, and easily dominated by any number of influences—spilled coffee at breakfast, a crying baby, or an unkind comment at work. Our feelings cannot be trusted.

#### The Biblical Approach to "Feelings"

Unfortunately, it is all too common for many Christians to interpret the Christian life and the teaching of Scripture based upon how they feel, rather than upon the clear meaning of the Bible. We open our Bibles and read words like "redemption", "Savior", "gospel", and "justified"—if these words evoke little response in us, without thinking we pass them over to find something else that might light our fire. And if the enthusiasm doesn't come quickly—well, we might just forget this whole Bible study "thing." After all, who wants to spend the mental energy it takes to think carefully and intensely about the Scriptures? Who has the time to study? Who has the time to meditate on a passage of the Bible?

Unfortunately, this process moves us from bad to worse when we begin down this road. In our arrogance, we bestow upon our feelings the final authority concerning biblical and spiritual matters. Forgetting that our feelings are unstable, unreliable, and hopelessly controlled by pride and riddled with lies, we yield to emotional whims rather than to the revealed principles of Scripture. We comfort ourselves by saying, "it feels like the truth." People repeatedly yield to lies such as: "I feel like divorce is the right decision"; "I feel like I should be a leader at this church"; "I have a terrible temper because that is how God made me." It

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*"Oh, the havoc  
that is wrought  
and the  
tragedy, the  
misery, and the  
wretchedness  
that are to be  
found among  
Christians  
because they do  
not know how  
to handle their  
own feelings!"*

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**D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones**  
(1899-1981)

—from *Spiritual Depression*

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is a frightening experience to sit with individuals who actually insist that what they feel is ultimately more authoritative to them than what is clearly written in Scripture. Moreover, they somehow assume that God is sympathetic to this attitude. But He is not!

How do we begin to put things back in proper spiritual order? Our first response to God's Word *should not be* to ask, "How do I feel?" but rather to say, "I will make a conscious decision to believe what the Bible clearly teaches, regardless of how I feel." Avoid the mistake of concentrating too much upon our feelings. Above all, avoid making them central. Anyone who makes this mistake is doomed to be unhappy because he is failing to follow the biblical pattern of Scripture. The Bible concerns itself with truth and not emotions, impressions, and feelings. As we submit ourselves to truth, the proper feelings will follow. These will be reliable feelings because they are anchored in truth. The Lord Jesus Christ echoed this truth when He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Father...not my will but Thy will be done." As the hymn writer exhorts, "Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, than to trust and obey."

### **Martin Luther and "Feelings"**

Martin Luther (1483-1546), the great Reformation statesman, struggled greatly with this whole area of depression, feelings, and emotions. Through his frequent bouts with depression, he recognized the importance of using the Word of God as the means for adjusting feelings and emotions. For example, he wrote:

*I still constantly find that when I am without the Word, Christ is gone, yes, and so are joy and the Spirit. But as soon as I look at a psalm or a passage of Scripture, it so shines and burns into my heart that I gain a different spirit and mind. Moreover, I know that everybody may daily experience this in his own life.<sup>1</sup>*

On another occasion he stressed the importance of judging feelings based upon Scripture:

*We must not judge by what we feel or by what we see before us. The Word must be followed, and we must firmly hold that these truths are to be believed, not experienced; for to believe is not to experience. Not indeed that what we believe is never to be experienced but that faith is to precede experience. And the Word must be believed even when we feel and experience what differs entirely from the Word.<sup>2</sup>*

Rather than seeking a feel-good faith, we should clearly teach that true Christian feelings, emotions, and Holy Spirit experiences are the products of sound theology. Feelings and emotions, while not the cause of our faith, are the expression of our faith.

### **Feelings and Acceptance Before God**

There is another aspect to this subject of feelings that needs to be explored, and that is what Bible teachers call "acceptance." This term is taken from a phrase in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, "...accepted in the beloved" (Ephesians 1:6). Very often, when things are going well in their lives and God seems to be blessing, believers feel that God loves them and accepts them. However, when trials and hardships come in the Christian life, they begin to wonder if God loves them, why He is not blessing, and in some cases, they wonder if they are saved at all. First of all, it should be remembered that most of our best spiritual development

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*"We can mark  
our lack of  
faith by our  
lack of joy; for  
our joy must  
necessarily be  
as great as  
our faith."*

*"...You have  
as much  
laughter as  
you have  
faith."*

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**Martin Luther**  
(1483-1546)  
*Protestant Reformer &  
Theologian*

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comes through the dry, difficult, and hard times in our lives. Furthermore, the Bible teaches that every believer is accepted by the Father in Christ. This acceptance is founded solely upon the work of Christ upon the cross, totally apart from anything in us or anything we could offer to God. The evangelist Watchman Nee wisely admonishes:

*Do you come to Him on the uncertain ground of your feelings, the feeling that you may have achieved something for God today? Or is your approach based on something far more secure, namely, the fact that the blood has been shed, and that God looks on the blood and is satisfied.*<sup>3</sup>

Our acceptance in Christ never changes. God looks upon us through the lens of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. We must view ourselves as God sees us because feelings are so changable, one moment we feel strong in Christ; the very next moment we are defeated and weak. Very often our emotions get in the way, and we long for the “feeling” of being accepted by God. It is so important in the Christian life not to base our acceptance and standing with God on our current spiritual condition, but on what Christ has done. Christians look at their lives and do not see very much good to commend themselves to God. These vulnerable Christians fail to realize that God already knows the depths of our sin and fully understands that there is nothing good in us. He knows all about our moral weakness, the flesh, the yielding to temptation, our unfaithfulness to God. He says to us “Turn from looking at the sins and failures, and look at what Christ has accomplished for you.” So often we feel as if we still have to find something good in ourselves to offer to God. Bible teacher C. A. Coates, using a comely illustration, shows the error of this viewpoint:

*Suppose your neighbor had a heap of rubbish in his garden, and you saw him turning it over every day with a shovel. After a while he would leave the rubbish and return to the house looking very disappointed and crestfallen. You would be sure that he had expected to find something that was very important. One day you ask him over the hedge if there was anything valuable in the heap of rubbish he has in the yard. “Oh, no,” he says; “it is only rubbish, of no value to me or to anyone else.” But the next day you see him turning it over and over again, and looking as disappointed as ever, and this occurs day after day, week after week. You would think, “Whatever the man says, it is evident he has not given up hope of finding something.”*

*Many believers are like this. They say that there is no good in themselves, and that they do not expect to find any; but, nevertheless, they suffer a good deal of disappointment from time to time, and this proves they haven’t given up the thought of self-improvement.*

*Back to the neighbor across the hedge. One day you see you neighbor applying a lighted match to the heap of rubbish, and standing until the whole is consumed to ashes. You stroll down to the neighbor’s hedge and remark about it. He says, “The owner of the garden knew all about it, and he told me it was nothing but rubbish, and I proved it to be so every time I turned it over. And yet I must have had an idea there was something good in it, because I was so disappointed to find that it was nothing but rubbish. Now I am glad that it is burned, I shall waste no more time over it.”<sup>4</sup>*

We may be weak, but looking at our weakness will never make us strong. Our whole condition of what we were before salvation in Christ has come under His judgment and is done with. The heap of rubbish is burned; it is cleared away as far as God is concerned.

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***“...I know the blood has satisfied Thee; so the blood is enough for me, and is my only plea. I see now that whether I have really progressed, whether I have really attained to something or not is not the point. Whenever I come before Thee, it is always on the ground of the precious Blood.”***

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**Watchman Nee**  
(1900-1973)  
from “The Normal Christian Life”

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### Conclusion

I want to be clear on this point, I am not saying one word against having a high standard of what a Christian ought to be. I have the strongest desire to see all Christians, young and old, to be hungering and thirsting for a greater devotion toward God. However, far too many Christians are looking more at their own personal failures than are looking at Christ. Far too many make "vows" and "resolutions" to be better Christians, while trusting more in self and the flesh than in God. Some spend so much time looking at their failures, they fail to look at all the resources they have in Christ.

There is a heart-transforming truth in the Scriptures, but you will not encounter it by first trying to feel it. Knowing and wholeheartedly believing the truth will always bring you to experience the truth. But if you trust your feelings and grant to your feelings the final authority, you will find yourself on an emotional roller coaster, which characterizes so many Christians today. One of the tragic results is that we miss out on the amazing reality of the Cross, the love of God, and the marvelous benefits of salvation because we are so wrapped up in our feelings.

Indeed, all believers are—perfectly and forever — "accepted in the Beloved." God sees them in Christ, and nothing and no one can ever change this wonderful position. Nevertheless, not all believers are "acceptable" in their manner of living as Christians in the world. We labor and seek to live our Christians lives that we might please the Lord, be conformed to the image of Christ, and be perfect even as He is perfect. This is the goal, aim, and passion of every true believer in Christ. However, our misguided feelings so often discourage and hinder us from being all we should be in Christ. This must be dealt with and corrected by the teaching and exhortation of Scripture.

### Endnotes

1. Ewald Plass, *What Luther Says*, (St. Louis: Concordia , 1959), vol. 2, p. 692.
2. Ewald Plass, *What Luther Says*, (St. Louis: Concordia , 1959), vol. 1, p. 513.
3. Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life*, (Willow Grove, PA: CLC Publishers, 1961),p. 17.
4. C. A. Coates, *Spiritual Blessings*, (Kingston-on-the-Thames, GB: Stow Hill Bible & Tract, 1964), p. 36.