

The Cross and Emotion

HOW TO MANAGE OUR EMOTIONS DURING COVID-19

By **Todd Olthoff**

Pastor of Pastoral Care | Saddleback Church

There is a lot in our world right now that just isn't right. We are living in a time of great loss. Loss of freedom to move about; loss of job or loss of how I do my job; disease and sickness; and the possibility of disease on a personal level and ultimately death. Daily, we are bombarded by numbers related to those infected with COVID-19 and those who have died from it. This causes all kinds of emotions, from anxiety and fear to anger and frustration. There are times when we just want to cry out to God about the unfairness of it all. Yet in the middle of all of this, we remember the most important death in history, which was followed by the most important event in history: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

There is a tendency for us to view the story of the cross from a distance. We can read about it and intellectually know what happened, but many times we lack the true experience of what it must have been like for Jesus to go through what he did. How did he process it all? How did he not just want to run and hide instead of going through all he knew would be before him? Then we might think, "Well, he was God. So he would have a different experience than you and I would." But the reality is that Jesus, the Son of God, had all the range of emotions you and I have — even the ones we are experiencing now as we face our own struggles with this global pandemic. When we realize that God himself is an emotional being, we realize that emotions are a part of who we are as beings created in his image. In fact, Jesus was very emotional — up until his ultimate sacrifice, he spent time working through those emotions.

We are told that before he was betrayed and taken prisoner, he went up to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. He took his closest disciples with him: Peter, James, and John. The Scriptures say in Matthew 26:37–38, "*He became anguished and distressed. He told them, 'My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me'*" (NLT). Jesus was feeling the weight of what he had to do. He was feeling grief. He was feeling distressed and crushed. He was flooded with emotion over what he knew he was being asked to do.

He came back to his friends, only to find them asleep. He told them in Matthew 26:40, "*Couldn't you watch with me even one hour?*" Here, Jesus was looking for support, and his friends couldn't even stay awake for him when he needed them most. I can imagine he must have felt abandoned and alone in all he was going through. He expressed his frustration with their inability to be there for him in his final hour before he would go through his journey to the cross. He was anticipating the pain and did not receive any comfort from his friends.

Where Jesus did find comfort was through his Father in heaven. The Scriptures tell us in Mark 14:35–36 that he prayed, if it were possible, that the awful hour awaiting him might pass him by. "*Abba, Father,*" he cried out, "*everything is possible for you. Please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.*" He went to his Father for comfort and cried out to him with his feelings of fear and his desires, even though they were contrary to the mission God had sent him to Earth to do. But in that expression of his emotions, Jesus found the comfort and strength to face the task before him. He wasn't looking to solve the emotions he had — he was looking for comfort for them.

You and I experience emotion all the time, but we have a tendency to either dismiss our emotion and never address it, or look for ways to solve the emotion we have, which usually ends up making our emotional state more intense. As we go through this pandemic together and remember what Christ did for us on the cross, it's important that we understand how to handle the emotion we have as Christ handled his own emotion in his own time of pain.

Emotions Are Designed to Be Soothed, Not Solved

Our emotions were not designed by God to be solved. If you have ever tried to solve any of your emotions, you may have realized it doesn't work well. Sure, you could avoid them or try to forget them, and some people are better at this than others, but our emotions were not designed to be solved — they were designed to be soothed. Soothing of emotion is just a recognition of what we are actually feeling, sitting with those emotions, and looking for comfort from God or others. In this current crisis, people are looking for quick solutions and guaranteed methods of staying safe and getting through this quickly. Yet in all the solutions, there is no peace, because our emotions are not designed to be handled that way. When we give up trying to solve our emotions and look to soothe them, we will experience more comfort in the moment.

Emotions Are Temporary

Emotions are not permanent or set in stone. If you have sat with your emotions for any period of time, you've realized they change rather quickly. I can go from feeling calm and connected to my wife, and then one thing can cause me to instantly feel upset and disconnected. If I choose to react to my emotion right away, without taking the time to identify it and sit with it for a while, I will become impulsive and do things I normally would not do. During this crisis, there has been a lot of emotional reactivity happening in people's lives. We can see this in the rush for certain supplies like toilet paper, or the issues coming up in homes where people are stuck with angry family members, or those who are out of control due to the stress and worry they are feeling. All of these things are the direct result of letting emotion drive us to react instead of understanding the temporary nature of emotion and learning to respond to it.

Emotions Bring Clarity

Whenever I take the time to sit down and really identify how I feel, it brings clarity to what is going on inside of me. A lot of my catastrophic thinking and fears during this time are fueled by emotions I have not identified that cause me to think in certain ways. When I take the time to sit down and look at a "feeling words" list, I start to identify what is underneath the chaos I feel, and it brings me a level of clarity that I would not have by trying to reason my way through what I am feeling.

Emotions Point to My Need

When I identify the emotions I am feeling, it brings clarity to what I need for comfort. If I am feeling anxious or insecure, I might need reassurance from others or to spend time with God in prayer. If I am feeling abandoned or alone, I might need to connect with my family or close friends. If I am feeling sad, I may just need to have someone sit with me and put their arm around me or share those feelings with God through journaling or prayer. The more clarity I have on what I feel, the easier it is to handle my emotions in the way they were designed to be handled.

Suggestion for Working With Your Own Emotions

As you wrestle with your emotions this Holy Week, and as our world feels like it's falling apart, remember that you are not alone. The entire world is wrestling with similar emotions at the same time, and Jesus himself experienced the same emotions. Below are some things you can do as you look to work with your emotions:

STEP 1: Identify Your Feelings

Take some time with an emotions list to identify what you are feeling. It is important to use a list [like this one](#), as it is difficult to explore your feelings when you are flooded. The list enables us to zero in on specific things we feel instead of focusing on what is wrong.

Step 2: Explore Why You Feel the Way You Do

Once you have identified what you are feeling, spend some time reflecting why you are feeling that way for each of the emotions you identified. You may want to use a tool to journal your thoughts and feelings to see them outside your mind. I use a digital journaling application [dayoneapp.com](#), but you could use paper and pencil or the notes application on your phone or computer. Seeing what I am thinking and feeling brings clarity.

Step 3: Determine What You Might Need for Comfort

Finally, spend some time thinking about what you might need for comfort in that moment. Think small and practical. Obviously, we would all like this whole pandemic to go away, but that thought will not bring us comfort because it is tied to a solution that is beyond our control. Instead look for ways to connect with others, change your environment, or spend time expressing your feelings to God.

As we reflect on what Jesus did for us on the cross this Good Friday, we must also remember that there was a resurrection three days later, and just as Jesus' death was not permanent, the situation we are in now is not permanent. Just as Jesus needed to spend time processing his feelings and seeking comfort for them in the midst of his storm, we too should take the same steps he did to process our own emotions and seek comfort from God and others.