

“*True Feelings* is an excellent book about the goodness and grace of God in the middle of our many emotions. Carolyn and Nicole consistently point us to God’s Word, and practical wisdom flows from every page. Read this book, and be reminded that the Lord alone is our help and hope, regardless of our circumstances.”

David and Heather Platt, president, International Mission Board;
author, *Radical*; and his wife, Heather

“What do we do with our feelings? Jesus demands that every facet of our life be brought into submission to his lordship, even our emotions. Yet few Christians think about just how significant our emotions are in our daily lives. *True Feelings* is a needed resource that is biblically sound and theologically faithful. Carolyn Mahaney and Nicole Whitacre are sure guides for thinking biblically about our emotions as gifts of God needing redemption by the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

R. Albert Mohler Jr. and Mary Mohler, president, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; and his wife, Mary, director, Seminary Wives Institute, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Through their careful research and engaging style, Carolyn and Nicole will leave you glad that God has given us emotions, less afraid of the more painful ones, more able to listen to what emotions are saying, and expectant that they can be refined and sanctified.”

Ed Welch, counselor; faculty member, The Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation; author, *Shame Interrupted* and *Side by Side*

True Feelings

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*God's Gracious and Glorious
Purpose for Our Emotions*

CAROLYN MAHANEY AND
NICOLE WHITACRE

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
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To the girlyies—Caly, Tori, MJ, Sophie,
Claire, and Summer

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Foreword

Every woman loves . . . and despises them.

I'm talking about emotions. When your feelings rise to euphoric delight, your heart longs to live there, like: *This is me, the true me . . . this is who God destined me to be.* The next day, a burnt casserole, broken dishwasher, and a stubbed toe have you feeling depressed and fuming: *Yep, this is me, the true me . . . this is who God destined me to be, an emotional basket case: happy one day, crashing the next.*

But before you cry, “Oh God, who will rescue me from this body of sin and death?” (Paul’s words, not mine), remember this: Christ died for *all* of you, not just your body and spirit, but your emotions too. God is into redeeming everything about you, even your fluctuating feelings. And as a follower of Jesus, you have the glad-hearted assistance of the Holy Spirit in taming them.

Need help? Sure, you do. And this is why I am glad you have *True Feelings: God’s Gracious and Glorious Purpose for Our Emotions*. My friend Carolyn Mahaney, with the aid of her daughter Nicole Whitacre, writes a compelling and glori-

Foreword

ous guide for every woman seeking to understand her emotions from God's point of view. And not only understand, but subdue and even appreciate them.

In Carolyn and Nicole, you will find two trusted friends. Seasoned Christians who understand emotional upheavals and deep disappointments, they have a true heart to help other women move forward into Christ-honoring maturity. Carolyn and Nicole know that your emotions have to come along on that ride . . . and thus, the reason for this book.

If you want your feelings to conform to the Lord and Savior who utterly delights in you, whose emotions overflow for you, then you will find a worthy guide and companion in *True Feelings*. So get started, turn the page, and be blessed by Carolyn Mahaney and Nicole Whitacre's wise reflections. I have a *feeling* you are going to like this book!

Joni Eareckson Tada
Joni and Friends International Disability Center
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Introduction

The Soaring Pays for the Thud ... Or Does It?

John Calvin Layman was not a man in touch with his feelings. Each day he woke his sons before dawn and strode ahead of them to the barn where forty cows were stomping and snorting in the frigid air waiting to be milked. If his boys didn't feel like coming out from under the warm covers, they would feel a whole lot worse five minutes later when their father poured a bucket of cold water on them in their bed. John Calvin Layman never said anything twice.

Our esteemed ancestor, John Calvin Layman, was a Mennonite dairy farmer in rural Virginia. A short, solid, serious man of Swiss-German stock, he had ten children, of whom Carolyn's father, Ezra, was the seventh. In many ways, Ezra grew up to be like his father. He rose every day at four and drove a company truck to his job as a construction superintendent.

He took his family to church twice on Sunday and every Wednesday evening. Ezra was gentle and hardworking, a man of strong, quiet conviction. He wasn't what you would call emotional. Neither is Carolyn.

You can imagine her culture shock when she joined her husband's gregarious Irish family in the Maryland suburbs. They were passionate and talkative, the men cried as often as the women (if not more!), and they all went into full-blown mourning every time their beloved Washington Redskins lost to the Dallas Cowboys.

Sometimes Carolyn wondered how to access the emotional world of her expressive preacher husband. She watched CJ worship and weep, wishing that she could feel the same joy and enthusiasm. She even felt guilty at times for not feeling as passionate for God as he seemed to. Even-keeled Carolyn and her loud, humorous husband had three daughters in quick succession: Nicole, Kristin, and Janelle; a son, Chad, was born twelve years later. Nicole, the oldest, inherited her emotional makeup from her father's side of the family, her personality bearing little resemblance to her Layman ancestors.

Once, when Nicole was sixteen years old, she traveled to India on a short-term mission trip. It was a three-week adrenaline rush. The team touched down in the sweltering city of New Delhi and boarded a train for the twenty-hour trip to the southern city of Hyderabad. Nicole bunked in a beautiful stone monastery, gained five pounds eating piles of delicious naan bread and potatoes, and was fitted for a bright green and saffron-colored sari by a local seamstress. She even walked the

white marble floors of the Taj Mahal. Nicole's group visited villages and town squares doing open-air evangelism, and she had the privilege of praying with people to receive Christ. She felt exhilarated, inspired, and fulfilled. This was the life, and this was how she always wanted to feel.

Then she came home to her cookie-cutter house in the suburbs, to long afternoons as a church receptionist, and to six more weeks of summer where the most exciting event was the free-swim hour at the local pool. She was restless, discontent, and irritable. She wanted to feel those exhilarating feelings again as soon as possible. Nicole has always lived life at full throttle; her emotional switch came set on high. Whatever she feels, she feels it strongly.

As a mother and daughter, we share the same curve of mouth and slight stature, but we're different emotional creatures. Our differences are mirrored by an exchange between the fictional mother and daughter, Marilla Cuthbert and Anne Shirley, in the book *Anne of Avonlea*. Marilla says to her adopted daughter, Anne:

“It seems to me, Anne, that you are never going to out-grow your fashion of setting your heart so on things and then crashing down into despair because you don't get them.”

“I know I'm much too inclined that way,” agreed Anne ruefully. “When I think something nice is going to happen I seem to fly right up on the wings of anticipation; and then the first thing I realize I drop down to earth with a thud. But really, Marilla, the flying part *is* glorious as long as it lasts . . . it's like soaring through a sunset. I think it almost pays for the thud.”

“Well, maybe it does,” admitted Marilla. “I’d rather walk calmly along and do without both flying and thud.”¹

Walking calmly along, like Marilla, is what Laymans have done for generations, Carolyn not excepting. Nicole is like a blond-haired Anne, flying up on wings of anticipation and then crashing down into despair. Imagine Marilla Cuthbert and Anne Shirley writing a book together, and that’ll give you an idea of what’s ahead.

But that’s only half the story. We may be emotional opposites, but we share a common curiosity and enthusiasm to learn what the Bible has to say about a woman’s feelings.² Over the past couple of decades, we have studied God’s Word and as many biblical resources as we could find on the complex topic of emotions. Whatever wisdom you find in these pages, we first learned from someone else. But we do have a lot of personal experience with emotions. Carolyn raised three daughters—a household full of hormones. They are all married now, and Nicole has two of the six granddaughters in the family. Our lives are fairly spilling over with feelings.

This is a book we wrote for ourselves as well as for the women and girls in our family whom we love. We also wrote this book for you. It’s been an emotional journey. These pages echo with our laughter and are wet with more than a few of our tears. It has also been a surprising journey of learning about God’s gracious and glorious purpose for our emotions. Our simple prayer is that every woman who reads this book will be surprised and delighted by how God created her to feel.

Fact, Fiction, and Feelings

Carolyn grew up near the shores of Lido Beach on the Gulf Coast of Florida. Here the white sand sparkles like quartz, pearly-pink coquinas dot the beach, and turquoise waves gently lap the shore. But powerful rip currents sometimes lurk beneath the tranquil waters. These narrow bands of swiftly moving water can pull even the strongest swimmer away from shore and out to sea. Rip currents pop up without warning, move at a breathtaking pace, and sap the strength of any swimmer who panics and tries to swim straight to shore. Tragically, many people lose their lives to these dangerous currents every year.

Carolyn remembers her mom, a perpetual worrier, warning her children before they went to the beach: “Whatever you do, watch out for rip currents!” The kids learned to be vigilant

after a storm and especially careful when they swam out to a sandbar. One year, two friends from Canada, a brother and sister, came to visit and spend time at the beach. They were floating on their rafts when they drifted into one of these rip currents. Carolyn and her siblings watched, horrified, as the two friends tried to paddle back to shore, but the current took them farther and farther out to sea. Thankfully, one of the lifeguards on duty swam out to rescue Carolyn's frightened and exhausted friends. This experience lent new solemnity to her mother's warnings.

Our emotions can feel like an ocean full of rip currents. We're floating along on a sea of happy feelings when suddenly we get caught in a powerful current of anxiety, a fast-moving river of anger, or an unforeseen tide of depression. One moment we feel fine, and the next moment we are overwhelmed by hurt and bitterness, or we are jealous and upset. Your husband makes a comment. A friend shows off her ring. The toddler pours his milk all over the floor. A song replays your sadness. *Instantaneously. All of a sudden. Out of the blue.*

Emotional rip currents pull us into a whirlpool of confusion. "My emotions have extreme ups and downs," one college student wrote to us. "The hardest thing for me is understanding why they're there. Is it just hormones? Is it just because I'm tired? Is it the Devil attacking me? Or is it a reflection of how far away from God I am? Does it even matter where the feelings are coming from? It's so confusing." The questions come so fast that we can't keep pace. We worry that our fluctuating emotions mean that we are not trusting God or that

we must be sinning in some way. Even those of us who aren't very emotional can wonder if something is wrong with us. We can't figure out why we feel (or don't feel) the way we do or what God wants us to do with our feelings—and so confusion leads to condemnation.

Feelings can be so unpleasant that at times we would rather do without them altogether. Gloomy feelings follow us around like Eeyore's cloud. Guilty feelings from the past won't leave us alone. We can't even feel happy in the present without worrying that something bad is going to happen in the future. And when something bad does happen, our emotions only make it worse. Not to mention that everyone else seems happy, and this makes us more miserable. Social media reinforces this perception: "Facebook is a constant bombardment of everyone else's great news," observed the author of a recent study, "but many of us look out of the window and see grey skies and rain. . . . This makes the Facebook world, where everyone's showing their best side, seem even more distortedly bright by contrast."¹ On social media, television, and even at church on Sundays, everyone appears to be happy. Everyone, that is, except for us. We take this distorted perception of reality and assume we should be feeling happy all the time too. But we don't, and so we feel even more depressed.

Many of us bury our unhappy emotions, keep a tight lid on them, stuff them deep down inside. Others of us explode and vent. Bad feelings lead to hasty reactions and poor decisions—which only brew more bad feelings of frustration, failure, shame, and regret. We make a mess of things because

we feel bad, and then we feel bad because we made a mess of things. Another young woman wrote to tell us about her trouble with her feelings: “I get so discouraged when, for an ungodly and completely ridiculous reason, I get frustrated or very sad. These feelings immediately intensify as I am even more upset by the mere fact that I am feeling them. It’s stupid, irrational, and so far from the holiness and Christlikeness that I desire. I never wanted to act like this—like a teenager. I feel utterly ridiculous.”

I never wanted to act like this—like a hormonal teenager or an angry mom or a needy wife or an emotional woman. We all want to act mature, but our emotions often trip us up, sending us to the back of the godliness line. Not to mention that our feelings can sometimes make things awkward. The men in our lives don’t seem to understand us, and we worry about showing too much emotion. We’re embarrassed to laugh too loudly or cry at the wrong time. We don’t want to be viewed as weak or vulnerable, but we feel powerless to resist the emotional rip currents in our lives. We don’t know where they come from, when they will surface, or how to control them. We panic. We paddle. We drift into despair as the shoreline of serenity recedes into the distance.

Feelings feel bad. They feel unpredictable, confusing, and difficult to control. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a medical doctor and a pastor, famously put it, “I suppose that one of the greatest problems in our life . . . is the right handling of our feelings and emotions. Oh, the havoc that is wrought and the tragedy, the misery and the wretchedness that are to be found in the

world simply because people do not know how to handle their own feelings!”² The good doctor was right. Emotional rip currents are one of the biggest problems in the Christian life.

A Sisterhood of Struggle

We all share in a sisterhood of struggle with our emotions. “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man” (1 Cor. 10:13). This verse offers solace to each of us when it comes to our feelings. Our temptations are *common*. Charles Spurgeon, a famous nineteenth-century pastor who wrestled with depression, wrote:

I know that you are tempted to think that you are a lone traveler on a road and that nobody has ever traversed before you; but if you carefully examine the track, you can discover the footprints of some of the best of God’s servants who have passed along that wearisome way. It is a very dark lane, you say—one that might truly be called, “Cut-throat Lane.” Ah! but you will find that apostles have been along that way . . . martyrs have been that way, and the best of God’s saints have been tempted just as you now are.³

“The best of God’s saints” have traveled the rough road of emotions. You are not unique. You are not alone.

Knowing that we are not alone can help. We find comfort in connecting with someone who “gets” us, who feels the same way we do. How much more comforting is it that the men and women of Scripture and church history felt the same as us, not to mention countless Christians all over the world today? If we could talk to them, face-to-face, they would surely exclaim, “I

know what you mean!” and “I feel the same way!” Every feeling you have ever experienced has been felt by countless other Christians, many of whom were pillars of the faith.

In the process of writing this book, the women in our family—mother, daughters, and granddaughters—attended the public memorial service for the well-known missionary and author, Elisabeth Elliot, whose first husband, Jim Elliot, was killed by the Auca Indians. Toward the end of the beautiful and God-glorifying service, Valerie Shephard, Elisabeth Elliot’s daughter, read excerpts from Elisabeth’s jungle diary. One entry finds her lamenting her weaknesses and failures:

Lack of patience with the Indians. Laziness in myself. Failure to discipline myself.

The next day she experiences a rip current of grief:

The hours of early morning are always hardest for me for some reason. Perhaps because that is the time I always counted on to lie on Jim’s strong shoulder. To wake and find his place empty beside me is a stab in the heart.

Another entry records her ongoing struggles:

It has been hard today. I got so discouraged and impatient with these girls in school that I had to come downstairs for awhile and write a letter just for a break . . . I feel so helpless without Jim . . . O Lord help me, for I am truly helpless.⁴

Sound familiar? Like something you might write in your journal? Here was a widow and missionary, lying in a hammock in the jungles of Ecuador more than half a century ago,

struggling with the same feelings of grief, loneliness, impatience, and discouragement we experience on a daily basis. How comforting that this godly woman was a woman like us.

But Elisabeth Elliot's difficult emotions did not have the last word. At her memorial service, friends and family shared stories of a woman who was full of life, joy, wonder, humor, and a peaceful acceptance of the will of God. Our heavenly Father helped Elisabeth Elliot to handle her emotions, and he will help us too.

What Plato Got Wrong

When we go looking for a solution to our emotional problems, however, we don't always open our Bibles. We think we'll feel condemned for our messy emotions, so we hold off until we feel better. Or, we assume that God cares only about what we do, not how we feel. But the opposite is true: God cares about our feelings—a whole lot more than we may realize. And did you know that the Bible tells us *how* to handle our emotions? Scripture isn't a dry, dull book; it is heavy with emotion and full of emotional stories. It speaks to feelings, and it speaks with feeling. As professor Sam Williams writes, "God's written Word is anything but silent about emotion."⁵

But as Christians, we often get mixed messages and contradictory advice about our feelings. "Throughout my Christian life I've been taught such differing views on emotions," one woman complained, "from 'just ignore your emotions completely' to 'you really need to work hard on changing your emotions.' As someone who is very open with my emotions

and struggles with being governed by emotions, these differing views and the general lack of teaching on this topic make the struggle even harder.” Confusion over our feelings spawns new rip currents of frustration, discouragement, and self-reproach, while so-called Christian advice only exacerbates our struggles.

Have you ever followed someone’s advice and then discovered it was based on a myth? You know the type: “If you go swimming within thirty minutes after eating, you will get a cramp and drown” or “If you swallow chewing gum, it will stay in your stomach for seven years” or “If you go outside with wet hair, you will catch a cold.” Many of us have spent years following these maxims only to discover they aren’t true. As it turns out, many of us have also believed certain myths about what the Bible says regarding our feelings.

As the two of us have studied emotions over the years, we’ve been surprised to discover that a lot of commonly accepted truisms about emotions actually have pagan roots instead of a biblical foundation. Plato and the Stoics—not Scripture—promoted the idea that emotions are unruly, irrational, the enemy of virtue, and the weakest part of us. These philosophers believed that the mind and will are vastly superior and should rule over the emotions. Sadly, much of today’s popular wisdom about emotions is rooted in this ancient tradition. Even some of the “wisdom” that gets passed around in Christian circles owes more to Stoic philosophy than biblical theology.

Many of us have unknowingly imbibed a lot of these

misconceptions about our feelings. We believe things like, “feelings are fickle” and “feelings are unreliable” and “don’t trust your feelings.” We contrast feelings with faith as if they were diametrically opposed to each other. And we assume “I can’t help the way that I feel.” We think and talk about emotions as if they are bad rather than good. But none of these “truths” about our feelings are true. So let’s dispel a few myths: just as you won’t carry around a wad of Juicy Fruit in your stomach for seven years, so your emotions are not bad, fickle, or uncontrollable.

The myths and misconceptions that cause much of our emotional confusion also lead to bad methods for handling our emotions. This, in turn, stunts our spiritual growth. Pastor Brian Borgman writes, “Why is it that people who attend good Bible-teaching churches with sound doctrine often fail to progress [in the Christian life], even though well-taught? . . . I propose that one of the reasons is that we do not have a biblical understanding of emotions, and therefore there is little or no biblical handling of the emotions.”⁶ We must return to what the Bible has to say about our emotions if we want to grow in godliness.

When we clear away the clutter of misconceptions and take another look at what Scripture teaches, we will unearth some wonderful truths about our feelings. We can change the way we feel! Scripture shows us that emotions are not unreliable, but are one of the most reliable things about us. Emotions are not a hindrance to wise decision making, but are central to the Christian life. Feelings are not bad. Instead, they play a good

and useful role with the other faculties. God's Word doesn't pit feelings and truth against each other but calls us to feel more deeply about the things that are true. In other words, Scripture leads us to have *true feelings*.

The Solution from Scripture

Due to the range and complexity of human emotions, many aspects of emotions are beyond the scope of this book or our ability to address. We're not medical doctors or psychologists. We're one mother and one daughter, and we know enough to know how much we don't know. While this book is a short take on the expansive topic of feelings, we pray it will encourage you to bring all your emotional questions and troubles to Scripture. If you are experiencing an emotional crisis or extended emotional suffering, we do not come to force the light of truth down the tunnel of your soul; we simply want to talk to you, friend to friend, with all the love and limits that come with that relationship. If your situation warrants it, we urge you to seek pastoral counsel and, if necessary, medical advice. But this we know: no person or problem is beyond the reach of God's grace.

Whatever our emotional struggle—and we should put every confusing, bizarre, and unruly feeling in this category, leaving nothing out—we will find help and hope in the Bible. There is hope for the teenage girl who wonders why her emotions feel out of control and hope for the woman whose hormones stalk her every month. There is hope for the employee trying to manage stress in the workplace and for the mom who hates that

she's always getting angry at her kids. There is hope for the middle-aged woman whose emotions have been scrambled by menopause and hope for the woman who feels locked in a dungeon of depression. There is hope for *every* woman “through the encouragement of the Scriptures” (Rom. 15:4).

Scripture's encouragement does not get rid of all of our unpleasant emotions; rather, it shows us that God has a purpose for our feelings—the good and the bad. Most of all, it proclaims the good news of the gospel: “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people” (Titus 2:11). God sent his Son to save us from our sins. Jesus Christ laid down his life for us, taking our place on the cross. He absorbed the wrath of God we so justly deserved. If God gave his Son for our sins, how much more will he help us to deal with the problem of our feelings!

When we lose heart, when we feel helpless to change our emotions, we must remember the gospel. God, who did not spare his own Son to save us from our sins (Rom. 8:32), will not leave us to drown in our emotional rip currents. There is no feeling too strong from which he cannot save. There is no person who has drifted too far that he cannot reach. The Life-guard of our souls has come, and he will rescue us.