



The Emotions of God *Making Sense of a God Who Hates, Weeps, and Loves*

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The God of the Bible is emotional. But for some Christians, the idea of God experiencing deep emotions can be confusing and problematic. In this rich study, Biblical scholar David Lamb examines seven divine emotions, arguing for the goodness of God's emotions, so that we might better know and reflect the beauty of emotion to the world.

Why Don't We Want to Associate Emotions with God?

"Away in a Manger" is one of the most popular Christmas carols. I may not need to remind you of the words, but I will anyway, just for the second verse.

The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes,
But little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.
I love thee, Lord Jesus, look down from the sky,
And stay by my cradle til morning is nigh.

Why doesn't baby Jesus cry? The cattle are lowing (mooring), so bovine bellowing seems to have woken him. What do babies do when they are woken up in the middle of the night? They cry . . . unless, apparently, they are divine.

While the biblical text is silent on any possible nocturnal noises that may have been uttered by the little Lord Jesus, the carol's lyricist silences him, depriving him of any emotional outburst. It is difficult to determine the reason an infant cries. Hunger may be a factor, but emotions like fear, anger, or sadness are often a primary cause—a child often calms down when comforted, even before being fed. If the Gospel writers provide us no hints about the behavior of baby Jesus, why do we sing that he didn't cry? I think it goes back to our view of God. We aren't comfortable with an emotional God. It's unsettling.

If people didn't find the portrayal of the stoic swaddled Savior compelling, this carol wouldn't be so popular. Emotions were deemed beneath baby Jesus, not just by the carol's lyricist but by the millions of Christians who love and sing this song every Christmas.

While I believe that, like all human infants throughout history, baby Jesus cried, I don't want to ruin this song for people. My goal isn't to stop carolers from singing it, but merely to question what it implies about emotions and appropriate divine behavior. As we'll see throughout this book, the God of the Bible often expressed emotions. Big Lord Jesus cried on at least two occasions (Lk 19:41; Jn 11:35), and, according to Hebrews, he was even known for weeping (Heb. 5:7). As a man who cries regularly (twice publicly in the past two weeks—in the Covid spring of 2020), I find great comfort in the image of a Savior who weeps, as infant or as an adult. We are called, after all, to follow Jesus (Mk 1:17; 2:14; 8:34). Sometimes this will involve weeping.

Our God is an awesome God, and part of his awesomeness is his emotional-ness. Emotions are divine. Just as we have needed to update the archaic language of many classic hymns, this carol is due for a slight revision.

*The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes,
So little Lord Jesus, loud crying he makes.*

That's better. He's little but makes a loud noise—lungs worthy of a future preacher.



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“In The Emotions of God, we get great insight from David Lamb, who is not just a super smart scholar but one who truly understands everyday life with average people. So this is a really accessible and practical guide to the very big questions about God’s emotions. We are created in God’s image, and this affects how we gain understanding of ourselves as emotional human beings.”

—Dan Kimball, faculty at Western Seminary and author of *How (Not) to Read the Bible*

The negative perspective on divine emotion of this carol is tragically not unique. If it were, we could dismiss it as an anomaly. But many Christians, including biblical scholars, theologians, and pastors, ignore the many passages in Scripture where God is described as displaying certain emotions. Emotions are divine, but we have an irrational fear of an emotional God.

When it comes to God and emotions, we have two problems. First, certain emotions are commonly viewed negatively, like hate, anger, and jealousy, which are particularly problematic to associate with God—and yet the Bible frequently does just that. These negative emotions don’t fit with how we think God should act. There is a tension between the textual portrayal of God and what we “know” to be true of God. How are we to understand a God who hates, gets angry, and is jealous?

Second, emotions are often perceived to be irrational, uncontrollable, and confusing. We don’t want to associate them with God (“no crying he makes”). We feel more comfortable with a God who is rational, predicable, and comprehensible, so biblical texts that describe God with human emotions are often discounted. We do this to protect God’s honor, but since the God we find in the Bible is in fact highly emotional, our de-emphasizing his divine emotions doesn’t honor him—it distorts his character. As we will see from the psalms and elsewhere, the emotional side of God is not to be hidden but praised.

While the book of Psalms is often skipped over when the Bible is summarized as a story, it has always been popular. One of the many reasons people love the psalms is they are filled with beautiful and intense emotional language, as the psalmist expresses passion for God, hate toward enemies, and joy over God’s Word. The Psalms therefore serve as a good introduction to divine emotions.

The Psalms are quoted or alluded to in the New Testament more than any other Old Testament book. While many factors contribute to this phenomenon, one reason for their popularity is their rich emotional language. In the prayers of the psalmist, God is frequently described emotionally, and all seven divine emotions examined here are mentioned in the psalms.

God hates (Ps 5:5; 11:5; 45:7).

God gets angry (Ps 6:1; 30:5; 78:21).

God delights (Ps 18:19; 22:8; 35:27).

God loves (Ps 5:7; 25:6; 136).

According to the Psalms, emotions are divine.

This deeply emotive book teaches the people of God how to praise. Interestingly, the title of the book in Hebrew, *Tehillim*, means “Praises.” The book of Psalms reveals that God’s emotions are not to be ignored or hidden, but they are to be praised, sung, and shouted to the nations.

—Adapted from chapter one, “Emotions Are Divine”



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David T. Lamb is the Allan A. MacRae Professor of Old Testament and dean of faculty at Missio Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He previously worked in campus ministry with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and has taught extensively in various crosscultural contexts. His books include *God Behaving Badly*, *Prostitutes and Polygamists*, and *1 and 2 Kings in the Story of God Bible Commentary* series.

Divine Emotions Help Us Understand God and Ourselves Better

What motivated you to write this book?

David T. Lamb: I'm an emotional person, but I have struggled to make sense of how the Bible speaks about emotions. Obviously, the "good emotions" like compassion and love get talked about a lot, but the troubling ones like wrath, hatred, and jealousy don't. Scholars and pastors often seem to downplay or ignore some of the problematic portrayals of divine emotions in the Bible. Divine emotions like sorrow or joy, we aren't really sure what to do with, since they don't make sense to us.

I wrote this book not only to help me understand the Bible better but to help me understand myself better. Writing it has been like therapy for me, helping me reflect on my life, my family, and my emotions. The stories I share are some of my deepest memories of intense sorrow and joy. It has been helpful to reflect on how God connects with me emotionally in the midst of these experiences.

What are some key themes in your book?

David: Some of the main themes in the book include the notion that people often perceive emotions negatively, Christians are uncomfortable with emotions, or with an emotional God specifically, and the God of the Bible is highly emotional. A couple of additional themes are that Yahweh in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New are not embarrassed about emotions but speak about them frequently. Image-bearers of God, and followers of Jesus, will feel, talk about, and express emotions like God.

Who do you see as the ideal audience of your book?

David: There are several key audiences for this book. It is a book for Christians who read Scripture and are confused by the emotional portrayal of God. It is also for people who love the Bible but believe that emotions are irrational, uncontrollable, and confusing, so they don't want to associate them with God. It is a book for anyone who doesn't feel safe expressing honest emotions in Christian contexts and preachers and teachers who neglect teaching about the emotional God of the Bible because they feel uncomfortable with these emotions.



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“Many Christians fear their emotions. They worry their emotions will control them and make them do or say something they will regret. In his excellent and highly readable book *The Emotions of God*, David Lamb reminds us that emotions can be ‘normal, natural, even divine.’ After all, he shows us, God has a rich emotional life himself. Those who read this book will grow not only in their understanding of God but also of themselves.”

—**Tremper Longman III**, distinguished scholar and professor emeritus of biblical studies, Westmont College

What are four takeaways from your book that you want readers to remember?

David: I hope readers will gain the following knowledge:

1. The Word of God not only records God’s emotions, but it emphasizes them as a crucial aspect of his character.
2. God and God’s Word help me understand my emotions and help me know how to express them appropriately in ways to bless people around me.
3. Even problematic divine emotions like hatred, anger, and jealousy are appropriate in certain situations because what motivates them is divine love.
4. Instead of being irrational or uncontrollable, emotions are powerful, natural, beneficial, and even divine.

How is your book distinct from other books?

David: No trade book that I am aware of from a Christian publisher focuses on God’s emotions. Books like Daniel Coleman’s *Emotional Intelligence* (1995, 2005) discuss how research into how EI (social and emotional learning) has deeply impacted the realms of science, education, and business. But the theological preoccupation with divine impassibility has made many parts of the church resistant to reflecting on divine emotions and how humans created in God’s image should appropriately and express emotions. Old Testament theologians (particularly Goldingay’s and Brueggemann’s) discuss God’s emotions among his many other attributes, but they tend to be tomes (perhaps even three volumes!).



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“Old Testament professor David Lamb discusses the intriguing topic of God’s emotions as described in Scripture: God’s hatred, wrath, jealousy, sorrow, joy, compassion, and love. This very readable book includes personal anecdotes, theological reflection, and exegetical insight based on the original language used in Scripture to refer to God’s emotions.”

—Karen H. Jobs, Gerald F. Hawthorne Professor Emerita of New Testament Greek and Exegesis,

“A Deep Dive” Into God’s Heart

“I laughed, cried, and worshiped my way through *The Emotions of God*. With a deft sense of humor and touching personal stories, David Lamb invites us to engage deeply with the biblical portrait of God as an emotional being. For those who struggle with the idea that God could experience hatred, wrath, and jealousy, this book will reveal how even those more negative emotions express the depth of God’s love. And it will draw readers to worship God holistically—with mind, heart, and soul—embracing the emotions that God has given us as people created in his image.”

—Brittany Kim, Northeastern Seminary at Roberts Wesleyan College

“Theologians have concocted an unemotional (impassible) God, but that God is not the God of the Bible. David Lamb has patiently examined seven emotions of God, and he has done so in the context of ancient and modern discussions of feelings. What we discover is that our discomfort is not God’s: our God is an emotional God, and those divine emotions can become our instructors for our feelings. A must-read.”

—Scot McKnight, professor of New Testament at Northern Seminary and author of *A Church Called Tov*

“*The Emotions of God* is a deep dive into our Creator’s heart and makes the case that emotions are both human and divine. It echoes the call to image our Creator by owning our own emotions and stewarding them in ways that reflect his heart for the world. Definitely the kind of wisdom we all need in these emotionally turbulent times.”

—Carolyn Custis James, author of *Half the Church* and *Malestrom*

“I finished this book with tears in my eyes, since David Lamb’s closing words echo the love of my own heart for the Scriptures that show us the love of God’s heart—and all the other emotions there. Indeed, if knowing God better is the goal of attentive Bible study, then this book achieved that goal for this reader. And if a sense of humor counts as an emotion, then Lamb’s cheerful sprinkling of his own surely reflects something of God’s own playfulness, while helping us to take seriously, for the good of our souls, the range and depth of divine emotion so richly expressed in God’s Word.”

—Christopher J. H. Wright, Langham Partnership, author of *The God I Don’t Understand*

“‘Well obviously God doesn’t have feelings. That would make him unpredictable and irrational. The Bible’s just making allowance for our way of seeing things when it describes him that way.’ Once again David Lamb shows how wrong we can be about the Bible (and God) and how much more interesting the Bible is than we thought (and how much more interesting God is).”

—John Goldingay, professor of Old Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary and author of *Old Testament Ethics*



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