



(MOSTLY)

✓

DISCOVER WHY EMOTIONS ARE AWESOME AND

ALL THE FEELS

HOW TO UNTANGLE THEM WHEN THEY'RE NOT

ELIZABETH
LAING THOMPSON



If you've ever felt overwhelmed by your emotions (and who hasn't?), *All the Feels* will help you experience new freedom, joy, and purpose in your emotional life. Elizabeth offers heart-healing hope, delivered in a delightful mix of engaging stories, true confessions, and biblical insights that make you go, "Wow!" Stop letting your emotions get the best of you—and learn how to experience all your emotions in ways that will revolutionize your relationship with yourself, with others, and with God.

KAREN LINAMEN BOUCHARD

Author of *Just Hand Over the Chocolate and No One Will Get Hurt* and other inspirational books for women

Elizabeth Laing Thompson has written an interesting, insightful, and easy-to-read book about a very complex subject. The amount of thought and prayer that she has put into this project is obvious. I highly recommend *All the Feels* to anyone who wants to learn how to identify, process, and manage their emotions in a healthy and righteous manner.

MARY M. SHAPIRO, PHD

Licensed clinical psychologist

Full of laugh-out-loud stories, practical help, Scripture-based prayers, and powerful reflection prompts, *All the Feels* is one of the best books on emotions I have ever read. An experienced "big feeler" and student of the Bible, Elizabeth Laing Thompson will help you identify the type of feeler you are, the blessing to be found in feelings, and how to keep feelings in their proper place in order to live an untangled and authentic life. So whether you roll out the welcome mat to each and every feeling or try to shove them all in a closet, *All the Feels* is a must read!

JENNIFER MARSHALL BLEAKLEY

Author of *Joey* and *Pawverbs*

Dissect any given hour of my day and you'll discover a cornucopia of emotions abounding inside my heart, because *all the things* produce *all the feels* within me. As a result, I often struggle with how to handle my feelings, wondering why God wired me the way he has. But *All the Feels* has helped me untangle the blessedness of all my big emotions by looking at them through the perspective of my bigger God. I no longer believe godliness equates to an emptiness of emotion. I feel because the God who designed me for godliness experiences *all the feels* too. I highly recommend this book for tangled-up hearts everywhere, because Elizabeth Laing Thompson has given us the means to harness our happy and our heartache the way God intended. So enjoy your emotions. Keep feeling all the feels, because our God is doing the same.

TRACY STEEL

Speaker and author of *A Redesigned Life: Uncovering God's Purpose When Life Doesn't Go as Planned*

As someone who has thoughts that overwhelm me and emotions that often overtake me, I found *All the Feels* so uplifting to read! Elizabeth just gets it, and because she knows the struggle firsthand, she is able to provide practical tools along with biblical application in order to help someone like me defeat the battle that often rages within. Her stories will have you saying, "Me too." And her insight will have your heart and mind saying, "Thank you."

ELISHA KEARNS

Blogger, speaker, and founder of Waiting for Baby Bird Ministries

In a world that often tells us our feelings are “too much” or “not enough,” Elizabeth offers a much-needed message infused with encouragement and anchored in God’s Word. You’ll finish this book equipped to live an emotionally engaged life, secure in the knowledge that the Creator of the universe designed your emotions for a purpose, on purpose.

HEIDI MCCAHAN

Inspirational romance author

All the Feels is not just for the big feelers. Elizabeth’s perspectives are transformative in helping us appreciate a new layer of God’s personality through those who feel big. As a steady feeler, I have been woven together by my mom, my son, and my friends who all feel big. *All the Feels* is a practical guide for learning to feel forward and appreciate emotion in ourselves, in others, and in our Father.

LAURA HOPE WHITAKER

Speaker and founder of Java Joy and hopesweethome.com



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All the Feels: Discover Why Emotions Are (Mostly) Awesome and How to Untangle Them When They're Not

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To Mom and Dad:

*Thank you for being the safe place for all my feelings all my life:
for listening without flinching, shepherding without complaining,
and sharing your own emotions without holding back.*

*Thank you for not freaking out (at least not when I was in the
room!) when big feelings reached gargantuan proportions.*

I owe you everything and love you for always.



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PART ONE

HOW SHOULD WE FEEL ABOUT OUR FEELINGS?



CHAPTER 1

WELCOME TO OUR WORLD

I still remember the first time I read the phrase “all the feels.” I was scrolling through my Facebook feed, reading comments on a tear-jerker of a poem. A friend had written, “All the feels,” with a series of emojis: laughing, crying, laugh-crying. My heart gave a little hiccup, and I laughed to myself. *All the feels? Welcome to my world.*

Maybe, like me, you are a big feeler. A sensitive soul, you live with all the deep feelings all the time. You are captivated by beauty, devastated by loss. The first to love, the last to leave. When you dive deep (and you always dive deep), you may struggle to swim back to the surface. You live in emotional high-definition, noticing—and mourning—the ugly things of life, seeing—and savoring—every gorgeous detail in the beautiful. For as long as you can remember, you’ve sought to make peace with your powerful feelings, and you long for God to help you sort out your emotional life.

Or maybe you consider yourself a steady feeler: some mood

swings here and there, but most days you stay steady as she goes and avoid major melodrama. But sometimes. Sometimes life grows stormy, faith gets thorny, feelings become unruly—and you need guidance. You wonder how to marry faith and feelings: how to honor God when strong feelings come knocking, how to submit wayward feelings to his ways.

Or maybe you prefer thinking to feeling, and even picking up a book with the word *feel* in the title is already making you twitchy . . . but people keep urging you to “get in touch with your feelings” (go ahead, insert your grunt of protest here), so you’re reading even though you’re kind of in pain. As a reluctant feeler, you’re here to better acquaint yourself with your emotional side—we’re talking handshakes, not hugs—and figure out what role feelings should play in your life, especially your spiritual life.

Big feelers, steady feelers, reluctant feelers—we’ve all got feelings. And no matter how intensely or how often we experience strong feelings, our emotional life is a huge part—a defining part—of our Christian walk. Maybe it has never occurred to us that we can have any say in what we feel, when we feel it, and how long we feel it. Feelings have a mind of their own . . . right? Feelings just do what they do . . . right? Right—that is, unless we learn to take the wheel, giving our emotions some biblical direction and parameters, learning how to feel on purpose.

Figuring out what to do with our emotions—which ones to welcome and how long to let them stay, which ones to limit or avoid, and how in the world to achieve those superhuman feats—is a complex but necessary spiritual skill. One that’s essential to finding happiness and hanging onto holiness.

Me? I’m a big feeler—the word *big* being a laughable understatement. If feelings were weight lifters, mine would be a four-hundred-pound guy named Sven, legs the size of tree trunks, who can pull eighteen-wheelers across parking lots with chains clenched

WHAT KIND OF FEELER ARE YOU?		Almost always	Sometimes	Rarely
1.	I have difficulty separating facts from feelings.			
2.	I am easily overwhelmed.			
3.	People tell me I am too sensitive.			
4.	I experience mood swings.			
5.	I am profoundly moved by beauty or art.			
6.	I feel others' pain as if it were my own.			
7.	I easily put myself in other people's shoes.			
8.	I struggle to shake a mood when it hits.			
9.	Gut feelings and instinct play a role in my decision making.			
10.	I find it easy to connect with God in worship and prayer.			
SUBTOTAL				
TOTAL				

KEY

Almost always = 3

Sometimes = 2

Rarely = 1

RESULTS

22+ = big feeler

15–21 = steady feeler

10–14 = reluctant feeler

in his teeth. Honestly, I used to wish I'd been wired a little less emotionally. Especially when, as a newlywed, I'd get weepy about something—maybe it was hurt feelings or work stress or the ever-skyrocketing price of cereal, who knows?—and my new husband would look at me with a bewildered but affectionate twinkle in his eye and tease, "I never knew I married a sprinkler!" Ha. Ha. *Ha.* (Please read that laughter with an eye roll.)

What was I supposed to do with fear? With anxiety? With the way I hoped so hard I thought my heart might burst from the wanting? With the way I loved people by flinging my whole heart in, leaving myself wide open to soaring joy—and searing hurt?

What was I supposed to do with insecurity and gratitude and sorrow and loss and envy and anger and ambition and the list goes on forever? It took me half a million years to figure out where all my deep feelings fit into my Christian walk. To realize that our faith is exactly the place—the only place!—to process all our feelings.

As a woman who has lived every day of her life having All The Big Feelings All The Day Long, well—I volunteer to be your go-to feelings girl. Whether you have a sensitive soul with more feelings than you know how to name (much less process), a steady flow of emotions somewhere in the middle, or a logic-minded personality occasionally waylaid by feelings you need help interpreting, this book is for you. We've all got emotions. And we all need to learn how to identify, express, experience, and—yes, sometimes wrangle—our feelings.

In the pages to come you'll find scores of Scriptures and practical tips for how to deal with all the feels (even the kind you never asked for). You're feeling sad? Read on to find Scriptures and Bible-based strategies. You're feeling insecure? Keep reading. Angry? Anxious? Disappointed? Hopeful? Grab a cup of coffee and let's settle in for some conversation on relationships, confidence, and where God fits into that messy mix.

Where do all the Scriptures and strategies in this book come from? From a lifetime spent bringing intense emotions to God and learning—sometimes the hard way (translation: the melodramatic and miserable way)—to submit those emotions to him and his Word.

This isn't just a field for psychologists and doctors with lots of initials behind their names. Emotions are everybody's game. And I'm writing this book *because* I'm not a doctor. Not a psychologist, psychiatrist, or any kind of -ist (although I confess that on dark days I can be a pessimist). I'm just a big feeler with a big love for the Bible, a girl who's spent a lifetime seeking to align her emotional life with—and enrich it with—God's will and ways. Along

the way, I've assembled a stockpile of Scriptures and a toolbox of emotional practices that have made life in Christ—and life in general—better, deeper, and richer. I can't wait to share them with you. Of course, this book is no replacement for professional help. Sometimes we face emotional situations that require more than the pages of a book can offer. If you find yourself in a circumstance that requires additional support, I pray you seek whatever counsel and care you need.

Before we talk more specifically, step with me into a classic example, borrowed from my college years, of what goes on inside this head and heart of mine. Perhaps you'll relate (though for your sake, I hope you relate to a less dramatic degree).

ONCE UPON A TIME, IN THE LIFE OF A BIG FEELER

The student worship night has ended. While all the other college students hang out and have fun in the sanctuary, I've retreated to one of the Sunday school classrooms, the one with the pastel Noah's ark border, trying to catch up on schoolwork. Sitting cross-legged on the carpeted floor, I am a stressed-out island surrounded by a sea of school supplies: battered green backpack, barely-read copy of *The Odyssey*, Greek dictionary, notebooks, flash cards, pens, highlighters. *Behind, behind, I'm so behind.*

Guilt and shame swirl inside, an eddy with tornado potential. *How did I let this happen?* If I'd been reading a little every day like my professors told me to, I wouldn't be eight hundred pages behind and spending precious weekend hours cramming. Fear enters the mix as my old nemesis, Worst-Case Scenario Disorder, rears its ridiculous head: *What if I fail Greek Civ? I've never failed a class in my life, but there's a first time for everything, and if I fail I'm totally wasting Mom and Dad's money, and then they'll pull me out of school and I'll fall apart and lose all hope and ambition and end up scooping ice cream for the rest of my life and—*

"Knock, knock." My thoughts blink off, momentarily stunned, a squirrel in the street.

The Boy is standing just inside the door. Leaning against the doorframe all casual and *I-know-I'm-cute-so-sue-me*.

My heart does a cartwheel.

Fighting the dopey grin that wants to hijack my mouth whenever he's around, I spare him a tight-lipped, *no-I-don't-think-you're-the-most-beautiful-human-alive smile*, and brace myself: Here's the part where he flashes me a stiff grin and then rushes off to find the person he was actually looking for.

"Hi," he says, flashing me a totally not-stiff grin.

"Hi?" I say, then force my eyeballs not to roll. *Why'd you have to tack a question mark onto that "hi," Elizabeth? Just say hi! Exclamation point!*

Then: *Did he come in here on purpose? Was he looking for me?*

The eddy of feelings reverses direction, a different kind of stress: a swirl of lovesick longing.

Easy with the hoping. He's probably looking for someone else. He's always looking for someone else.

I dig into my bag and shove a piece of gum into my mouth, my only resistance against the flood of inane comments trying to bubble up my throat. *Don't babble, just chew. Ignore him and go back to your books and your angst.*

But then The Boy plops down beside me, folding his mile-long legs up and hugging them to his chest. Settling in for a chat.

We're sitting alone in a room.

Just the two of us.

I half-choke on my gum, making a horrifying gargly noise, which I try to cover with a cough.

"So . . . whatcha doin'?" he says, and his Georgia drawl does something squirmy to my stomach.

"Oh, you know, berating myself for procrastinating in between

pondering the influence of Greek culture on biblical writers. The usual.” I give what I know is a borderline flirtatious grin, then barely suppress an I-hate-myself groan. *Could you have possibly given a more dorky response, Elizabeth? Now he thinks you’re a vocabulary show-off and a Bible nerd. On top of being a school nerd. So basically, you’re a triple nerd. Not to mention a very bad flirt—and isn’t flirting a sin?* Guilt-tinged worry prods at my conscience.

I duck my head and start shoving my stuff rather violently into my bag. *Must shut this conversation down before more humiliations pile up.* I wait for The Boy to get bored and leave, but he stretches out his legs and leans back on his elbows, like he plans to stay awhile. Confused, I slow down my packing.

He flicks a finger at my imitation Doc Martens. “New boots?”

My cheeks, foul traitors, blaze with pleasure. *He noticed!* “Yep,” I say, trying to affect a casual shrug. “They’re really comfortable. And they were on sale, so . . . yeah.” *Babbling. UGH.*

My eyes dart up to meet his. Usually this is when we both look away—he because he’s waving hello to another football player or sporty girl, me because I’m trying not to let him see me swoon—but tonight he holds my gaze, and I dare to hold his back. His eyes are brown, coffee brown—no, chocolate brown. No, coffee *with* chocolate brown. No matter, I adore both. It must be a sign.

“I like them,” he says, sliding me one of his side-smiles.

“Thanks.” I drop my eyes back to my boots, hoping he doesn’t realize my heart has sprouted wings.

He stretches, yawns. “Well, I guess it’s time to head back to campus.”

“Yeah,” I say. “About that time. Can I still get a ride?”

He smacks my shoulder. “Always.” He winks.

My heart bursts out of my chest and zings around the room in a hallelujah dance. *He said “always”! Like a little promise. We’re totally getting married.*

I shake my head, trying to calm my chaotic thoughts, crush my idiotic hopes. *Don't be a fool, Elizabeth.* I stumble to my feet, fumble my backpack onto my shoulder, and traipse behind him, new boots squeaking, already planning how I'm going to call my best friend, Sara, and spend four hours breaking down every nuance of this four-minute conversation. After that I can get back to my regularly scheduled guilt trip.

Welcome to life with all the feels, all the time.

It took me many years in Christ to get comfortable with the emotional sides of my character—wait, who am I kidding? I don't have a side that *isn't* emotional. It took me ages to realize that as Christians, we can lead our feelings instead of having our feelings always lead us. It took me forever to understand that emotions can be a defining part of who we are, but that each day's emotions don't have to define that day. And what a revelation it was when I realized that my emotional nature—and yours, too, whether you have all the feels, some of the feels, or reluctant feels—is from God.

FEELING IN HIS IMAGE

Feelings and all, God the great Artist made us exactly as he wants us to be. His loving hands knit us together in our mother's womb (see Psalm 139:13)—and our emotional capacity is a precious gift. Made in the image of God, we reflect his nature not just physically, but emotionally. And what a passionate God he is! We feel because *he* feels. We love wildly and give lavishly because *he* shows us how.

In this passage we find a small sample of the multihued emotional palette from which our God paints:

I will tell of the kindnesses of the LORD . . .
yes, the many good things he has done
for the house of Israel,

according to his compassion and many kindnesses.
 He said, "Surely they are my people,
 sons who will not be false to me";
 and so he became their Savior.
 In all their distress he too was distressed,
 and the angel of his presence saved them.
 In his love and mercy he redeemed them;
 he lifted them up and carried them
 all the days of old.
 Yet they rebelled
 and grieved his Holy Spirit.

ISAIAH 63:7-10

In these few lines we glimpse God's compassion, kindness, devotion, affection, protectiveness, empathy, generosity, distress, mercy, hurt, and grief. If we are sometimes sensitive, our God is infinitely more so. He delights, he dotes, he protects. He mourns, he grieves, he shouts with joy. The universe with all its beauty and danger—sunsets and tsunamis, wildfires and fireflies—reflects the many facets and feelings of our mighty, passionate God. The very skies proclaim his artistry, his lyricism, his love of the poetic and ineffable. Every morning his sunrise sings hallelujah; each night his sunset cries, "Glory."

We should not be surprised, then, when we are like him, having powerful feelings—some of us some of the time, some of us all of the time. One of my favorite Bible scenes unfolds in Ezra 3. Whenever I read it, I stand riveted—and affirmed. I think, *Here are my people: deep-feeling, wild-dreaming. And here is our God: all-loving, heart-healing.* Years earlier, faithful Israel had been banished into the humiliation of exile. Long years they had languished, homeless and heartsick, their pain compounded by regret and shame, knowing their suffering was a consequence of their

own disobedience. Home was now little more than a memory: Jerusalem, with its festivals, its lavish Temple, its rich history, was gone—all gone. Destroyed. Out of reach.

But finally—finally!—God opened a way for their return, and with slow hands and cautious hearts, they began to rebuild their lives, their nation, their faith. For months the entire community labored together to rebuild the Temple, a home for the God they had once abandoned but were now determined to serve anew. When the foundation of the Temple was complete—the work far from over, but still beautifully begun—they paused the work to celebrate, commemorate:

When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the LORD, as prescribed by David king of Israel. With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD:

“He is good;
his love toward Israel endures forever.”

And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.

EZRA 3:10-13

Can't you see it, hear it, feel it? The sea of people with streaming eyes and shouting mouths, raised arms and bent knees? The cry so loud the distant people could hear? Laughter and wails, cries of sorrow and shouts of triumph all amingle in one cacophonous roar, a howl so earth shaking and heart wrenching it rumbled down into the earth and surged back up through the soles of their feet—up, up—till it set their souls to trembling?

The children of God: home at last, forgiven at last. The lost Temple: rising from ruin, resurrecting hope. The old ones, the ones who remembered the glory of Solomon's Temple—now they looked on with throats clogged and eyes clouded with memories: far-off, sacred, untouchable. And the young ones, the ones who had lived an estranged half-life in a foreign land, knowing their true home only in stories and borrowed memories—now they cast eyes upon and took first steps into a new life, a free future . . . all they had hardly dared to hope and never hoped to touch. Regret and renewal, longing and loss—where does one feeling end and another begin?

Oh, God's people are emotional people, because they love—and are loved by—an emotional God.

If you have always kept your faith in one compartment of your heart and your emotional life in another, get ready for something new. Get ready to bring God to your emotions and your emotions to God—the God who invented feelings and who now welcomes yours.

BEHIND THE DOOR OF YOUR HEART

In the pages ahead, I invite you to throw open the doors of your heart as we explore what God has to say about feelings. And you might be surprised to discover how much God has to say about feelings!

If you feel bored with faith, stiff or distant when you pray; if you secretly feel that your faith doesn't apply to your "real life," perhaps you have never learned how to bring your true feelings to God. Perhaps you never knew you could: *God's got the universe to run. Why would he care that I'm having a bad day? That I'm lonely or anxious? That I'm so happy I'm about to dance with a lamppost and sing in the rain?*

Maybe on Sunday mornings you put your feelings in airplane mode (*I'll deal with you after church*), walk into church all shiny and presentable, and wonder why you don't *feel* anything in worship. Why God feels distant and intimidating, or perhaps vaguely disapproving, like a relative you admire from afar. But then you hear other Christians talk about being "close to God," and you're stumped. "*Close to God?*" *What does that even mean?* It sounds weird . . . but wonderful. When service ends, you walk back out to your car, hoist your emotional burdens back onto your weary shoulders, and wonder what you're missing.

Deep down, we all long for more with God, more from faith. And we all need help with our feelings. In the pages to come, you'll find that God cares deeply about your feelings. If it matters to you, it matters to him. He longs to share your joys, guide your heart, and—most wondrous of gifts—carry your sorrows.

Whether you consider yourself a big feeler, a steady feeler, or a reluctant feeler, in the pages to come you'll find God-centered guidance for your specific emotional needs. First we'll do a drone-style flyover, mapping out the big-picture view. How does God want us to feel about our feelings? What foundational, biblical truths do we need to embrace in order to construct an emotional life that is healthy, happy, and holy? What biblical principles need to undergird our emotional life, giving it stability? And then there are more practical matters: How do we distinguish fact from feeling, and should we trust our feelings? Do we get any choice in which emotions we

experience and how intensely we feel them? Which emotional gifts does God want us to expand, explore, and offer to his service?

From there we'll take a closer look at specific feelings and emotional tendencies that can give us trouble: anxiety, sadness, cynicism, idealism, burden-borrowing, guilt, and more. What does the Bible have to say about these feelings, and what practical tools can we add to our emotional toolbox?

In the final section, we'll consider how our emotions affect our spiritual life, and we'll draw out the spiritual skills every Christian must develop in order to cultivate a healthy emotional-spiritual life. How do our feelings flare up when we read difficult passages in Scripture, and what do we do about that? What emotional pitfalls can we avoid in our relationships, and what strengths can we nurture? What effect does social media have on our emotional-spiritual life? We'll come full circle by envisioning how we can use our emotional makeup and gifts to draw closer to God than we've ever been, and how we might devote our particular temperament to his glory.

* * *

In the pages to come, I pray you will find more happy and learn how to stay holy. I pray you will be inspired by the wondrous possibilities your emotional nature allows. Emboldened to embrace the beautiful soul God dreamed you would be. Equipped with more of the biblical perspectives, practical tools, and scriptural arsenal you need to encourage your faith, protect your joy, and amplify your strengths.

Like me, perhaps you feel excited about the journey to come. Intimidated by the need to grow. Giddy about spiritual discovery. Nervous about diving deeper. Humbled, eager, overwhelmed, inadequate, understood, comforted, valued . . . well, you know. All the feels.

FEELING YOUR WAY FORWARD

At the end of every chapter, you'll find material to help you apply what you've read to your walk with God. The prayer prompts are emotionally rich prayers drawn from Scripture, particularly the Psalms. You can borrow the psalmists' exact words and speak them to God, or you can use them as springboards for prayers of your own. The journal prompts are questions for self-reflection that will help you think about how the principles and practices in this book might apply to your daily life. Even if you don't usually journal, I recommend writing down your answers. The act of moving pen across paper cements truth more deeply into our hearts and memories, and it gives us a record of our thoughts and growth over time.

Prayer Prompt

You are my God; have mercy on me, Lord,
 for I call to you all day long.
 Bring joy to your servant, Lord,
 for I put my trust in you.

You, Lord, are forgiving and good,
 abounding in love to all who call to you.
 Hear my prayer, LORD;
 listen to my cry for mercy.
 When I am in distress, I call to you,
 because you answer me.

PSALM 86:2-7

Journal Prompts

1. What do you most love about your emotional side?
What do you think God most loves about you?
2. What strengths does your emotional disposition give you?
How might you use those gifts to honor God and love people?
3. If you could change one trait about your emotional makeup, what would it be? Why?



CHAPTER 2

EMBRACING YOUR EMOTIONAL GIFTS

I'm sitting in my quiet-time spot—the comfy chair in the corner between two windows. I'm reading, praying, waiting.

The earth is hushed but alert, night's velvet black giving way to barely there gray. The air holds a stillness, a reverence, as if the world—sky, stars, animals, sleeping humans under covers—holds its breath, awaiting his call, awaiting the sun.

I am praying my way through Psalm 139 for the thousandth time: “You have searched me, LORD, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely. You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me . . .”

Oh, God, thank you that you are bighearted, passionate, and affectionate—that you feel all the feelings I do—just without any of the

sin. It makes me realize that I'm . . . I'm a little bit like you. I mean, not perfect, but—I feel kind of the way you feel.

I read on: “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am”—my breath catches—“fearfully and wonderfully made.” I’ve read these words before—a thousand times I’ve read them—but now I stop. I meditate.

My inmost being. The real me. The inner me. Complex, bewildering, highly strung, deeply moved, easily weeping, fiercely loving me.

Outside, the gray takes hold. A lone bird sings one tentative note; the other birds’ silence rebukes the intrusion. *Too soon.* Fog creeps across the ground, tickling the grass. *Wake up. The sun is coming.*

Fearfully made.

Wonderfully made.

Fearful.

Wonderful.

Wonder-full.

Long minutes I sit and ponder. Even though I’ve always felt free to express all my deep feelings at home and with God, I have always secretly—almost unconsciously—felt like my intensity was a weakness, particularly when it came to my faith. I have always been *too* everything: too intense, too excitable, too trusting, too “all in,” too hopeful, too devastated by disappointment, too heartbroken by pain. Surely all of this must be frailty, a sign of immature faith. Surely all these feelings were detriments to clear thinking and faithful living. Surely all my emotions were distractions from the Christian I imagined I should be: steadfast, unflappable, tough; striding through conflict and crisis with my head high, my path clear, my relationships unclouded by sentiment.

Truth dawns: soul-affirming, axis-shifting, dizzy-making truth.

Laugh-crying, I stutter a prayer. *You made me this way! Your*

hands shaped this emotional soul of mine. And you like me this way! I clap my hands over my mouth to hold in a cry. If I wake the house, this alone-with-God moment ends. It wasn't a mistake. I'm not a mistake! All this passion, all these feelings—they're not flaw or weakness or sin. You made me this way, and it makes you happy when I'm me. When I'm awestruck by clouds and weak-kneed by music and dreaming wild and loving so hard I think my heart will split in half. Because in all this, I reflect you. I honor you. In all this, I am like you.

I sit tear-blinking, thunderstruck. In all my years of following God, it has never occurred to me that my emotional nature might be a gift from God. Might be *strength*, not weakness. Might make him happy. Might honor him. And might even *reflect* him in this world—show people little bits of him.

* * *

I pray that you, too, will awake as I did that joy-tipped morning. Awake to the pieces of himself that God put in you—divine sparks he lit so you would shine as he does:

Wake up, sleeper,
rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.

EPHESIANS 5:14

Oh, how beautiful you are! How gifted by God! How loved and admired and carefully crafted and delighted in and sung over you are!

Now . . . what to do with all that fearful wonderfulness inside you? What purpose does it serve? Because God does not waste gifts. He does not hand them out haphazardly, for no reason. God entrusts us with our emotions, our sensitivities, and it is our job to figure out how best to use those gifts.

TAKING OFF THE BLINDERS

First things first. What *are* our gifts? How do the different types of feelers reflect the heart of God in this world? Before we dive in, let's acknowledge a difficulty that seems to especially plague those of us who fall on the more sensitive side of the feelings spectrum: we may struggle when it comes to self-analysis. We can readily see where others are gifted, how others should serve, where others are best utilized and fulfilled. But when it comes to assessing ourselves? Deep feelers can be self-blind. We may view our sensitivity as a hindrance, a weakness, a problem to wrestle into submission. In our own view, our weaknesses loom large and hideous; our strengths shrink ever smaller. Even our gifts seem to have less oomph, less punch, less pizzazz. Why? Because many of our greatest gifts are inner strengths, invisible to the wide world.

No one can see us sitting there offering all that beautiful empathy, instinctively understanding what someone else feels and needs. No one can hear us thinking all these insightful thoughts. No one can see the joy flooding through us as we walk along the sidewalk, awed by a cloud-smeared sky. All they see is a space cadet who won't look where she's going and keeps tripping over bumps in the sidewalk.

Many of the sensitive soul's most valuable gifts—compassion, insight, instinct, a knack for listening—won't chart so well on a résumé. And yet these are some of the most impressive assets we have to offer to a school, a church, a family, a team, a workplace. Invaluable as these traits are, they are quiet. Unobtrusive. Subtle.

We're going to take off the blinders and look for all the feeling types' gifts—including our own—and I implore you, please don't run away from this part of the conversation. Don't try to deflect attention to someone else. It's just you and this book, and it's okay

to look inward for a few moments. It's okay—indeed, it's right—to give God glory by recognizing and then using the gifts he has invested in you. So what unique contributions do the different types of feelers bring to the world, and where do you fit in?

What Reluctant Feelers Have to Offer

1. Reluctant feelers help people through hardship.

They are safe harbors in storms. Providers and protectors.

When life knocks a person down and the world crumbles beneath their feet, they want to lean on someone who is unchanging and reliable, trustworthy and true. The reluctant feeler's gifts of logic and constancy make them a dependable source of safety, protection, and wisdom.

2. Reluctant feelers help to preserve justice.

They are fair-minded listeners, defenders of truth.

Not easily ensnared by gossip, petty conflict, or prejudice, reluctant feelers can rise above arguments to discern truth. Because they are not easily enamored by selfish ambition or swayed by others' opinions, they aren't afraid to speak up for what's right.

3. Reluctant feelers help people solve problems.

They are fact sifters, solution finders, crisis managers.

Because reluctant feelers are able to take a step back from emotionally charged situations, they can see past the feelings and drama that may distract more emotional people and say, "Yes, everyone has a lot of feelings about this. But what needs to be *done*?" When crises come, the reluctant feeler's ability to "box up" emotions for a time means they can isolate emotions from solutions and make decisions—even hard ones.

4. Reluctant feelers help more emotional people preserve their relationships.

They are peacemakers, guides, leaders.

The reluctant feeler's commitment to fairness makes their analysis trustworthy. Their integrity makes their counsel unprejudiced. Their levelheadedness makes their advice dependable. All this makes the reluctant feeler an invaluable guide when relationships need protecting, mending, and directing.

What Steady Feelers Have to Offer

1. Steady feelers help other people manage their feelings.

They are shoulders to cry on, compassionate confidants.

The steady feeler is unique in that they experience strong emotion but rarely get swept away by it. This allows them to relate to and comfort people who are experiencing intense emotions but also to fly above the fray, remaining steadfast and strong. As emotionally intelligent listeners, steady feelers empathize without making things too personal.

2. Steady feelers are able to multitask emotionally.

They are many-hat-wearing adapters.

Because the steady feeler is able to experience and intake a range of emotions without getting easily overwhelmed, they can meet multiple needs. They can wear many relational hats—friend, listener, comforter, counselor, solution finder, and more—and can change roles with ease. When it's inappropriate to spiral out emotionally, steady feelers find a way to muscle through and remain a source of strength for others. They possess the skill of placing their emotions in a holding pattern until the right time. Their resilience means that even when they feel strongly, they can still function effectively.

3. Steady feelers help people feel understood while actively meeting their needs.

They are compassionate and capable caretakers.

Because they experience a broad range of emotions, steady feelers are able to feel with and for hurting people while still maintaining forward motion, thinking and planning and providing for needs.

4. Steady feelers motivate people.

They are inspiring and forward moving.

The steady feeler's ongoing personal experience with emotion allows them to connect with others. This connection means they can inspire and motivate others on a heart level even as they think, plan, and act. These gifts make many steady feelers well suited for leadership roles.

What Big Feelers Have to Offer

1. Big feelers help people notice.

They are eyes and ears. Receptors and recorders.

They don't just see; they notice. Details do not escape their eyes; small things do not escape their hearts. Their gifts of observation mean they may find the wonder in the ordinary or discern the problem in a plan.

They see other people as they truly are—a natural result of the way they listen and empathize carefully. They see people, they hear people, they understand and celebrate and value (and occasionally revile) people for who they really are. They may notice the quiet person others overlook or appreciate the contributions of people in the background.

2. Big feelers help people understand.

They are translators.

Their empathy and insight allow them to help people who are less observant or emotional to consider the perspective of others who baffle them. What a gift they can be to a minister, a boss, a coworker, a friend, or a parent who has a child they don't understand!

3. Big feelers help people appreciate.

They are encouragers.

They have a colossal capacity for appreciation. If they choose to make themselves vulnerable and lavish the full magnitude of their gratitude on others, they are capable of offering unparalleled joy and encouragement. Their words can make someone's *life*. (Side note: If you are a big feeler, you may need to learn, as I have, to express admiration and gratitude without expecting it in return. Unless the other person is also a big feeler, they rarely know how to respond in kind—and that's okay. They have their gifts; we have ours.)

4. Big feelers help people celebrate.

They are tasters, savorers, connoisseurs of joy.

In my family, my husband drives us forward, keeps us moving. I slow us down. I am the one who makes memories out of moments, who stops in the middle of a chaotic dinner to whisper, "Kevin, this is what we prayed for all those long infertile years. *This*. This madness, this giggling, this talking-over-the-top-of-each-other. Isn't God so good, and isn't it even better than we thought?"

5. Big feelers model vulnerability.

They are soul sharers.

Big feelers have the capacity for deep emotional expression. This is a role—both beautiful and terrifying—they

can play in this world. But so many of us sensitive types shrink from it. We have been told that emotion is weakness, so we stuff it. We keep it to ourselves. We don't like being vulnerable—it makes us feel . . . well, vulnerable! Some of us don't enjoy the fact that our emotions are permanently connected to our tear ducts. But if we don't model vulnerability—we who so readily, so fully, feel all the feels—how will the more reluctant or even stoic people of the world ever learn to find their feelings?

6. Big feelers feel—and demonstrate—love.

They are givers.

They love hard and long. And I'm talking about all types of loves, not just romantic love. (But oh, how we *could* talk about romance—we are the ones who get *Romeo and Juliet*—the falling hard, the ecstatic high, the melodramatic sense that life is not worth living if a relationship ends.)

When big feelers love, they go all in. Some rush in full steam ahead from the get-go, easily caught up in a surge of feeling; others have learned caution the hard way, so they wait and guard their hearts until they just can't hold back any longer and they *have* to love with the full force of their feelings.

As a big feeler, you may be the first—maybe even the only—person on earth who is emotionally capable of giving another person a taste of what it means to be loved by God in heaven. They may not believe God loves them until they know you do. By showing love—big, brave love—we reflect God's heart for his children.

7. Big feelers offer insight.

They are sages.

Pair acute observation with deep thinking, and you've got the gift of insight. Wisdom. The gift of *interpreting* what we see.

Insight is a gift we have to develop the confidence to use. Big feelers tend to hold back on offering their insights, partly out of respect for others' feelings, out of reluctance to overstep boundaries. They are hesitant to interrupt, to speak up too loudly, to take up too much space or attention in a conversation or meeting. If other people have things to say, we sensitive types feel emotionally bound to hear and appreciate and validate those things . . . so we may stifle our thoughts out of respect for others'. (This is not to suggest that all sensitive souls are quiet or introverted. Many an extrovert is also a big feeler.)

Even if big feelers are confident in speaking up, they sometimes have a difficult time expressing a confident opinion or taking a side, because they see both sides of an issue. They often see multiple additional sides of an argument that the rest of the group hasn't even thought of yet. And so they reserve judgment, withhold comment.

Insight is a gift I hope you'll take the time to cultivate, to pray about, and to use. If you feel stuck, seek counsel from family, friends, or coworkers on how you can offer your insights at home, at church, at work.

WIRED FOR CONNECTION

Want to know one more amazing thing about all these dazzling gifts? You can share your talents, even without an official role. You don't need to be appointed The Grand Official Listener, Sympathy Show-er, or Wisdom Giver in order to listen, show sympathy, or give wisdom. You don't need to be anointed The Steadfast Shoulder to Cry On, Rock to Lean On, or Quick Thinker in a Crisis in

order to share your strength, dependability, or competence. And you can use your gifts everywhere—at home, at school, at work, at church, on the bus, in a dorm, in lines and online—you can serve anywhere and anyone.

So what does it look like when we employ our gifts? How do they serve us in daily life, in real relationships? Here's an example from my own marriage. (You will read many stories in this book about the ways my preacher husband, Kevin, helps me navigate my sensitivities, but sometimes my sensitivities help him too.)

* * *

Kevin bangs through the front door and drops his bag to the floor with more force than necessary. It's been many years since he complimented my boots that fateful Friday night, but my heart still does a little jig when he enters the room. Four shrieking comets—our offspring—hurtle into his knees. Above their heads, I see him attempt his usual cheery greeting, but his voice is distracted, strained.

Kevin, a classic steady feeler—empathetic, but also fair minded and even keeled—hardly ever sounds upset. My heart takes a nervous dip. “What’s wrong?”

He holds up a finger, grabs a squealing kid under each arm, and lumbers toward the couch in the playroom with the other two clinging to his ankles. One by one, he tosses them into the “trash” (aka the couch). They scream with glee, clamoring for more. “I need to talk to Mommy,” he says, shutting the playroom door on their disappointed moans.

“I don’t get it,” he says, raking a hand through his black hair, making it spike up and out—think Charlie Sheen, circa 1986. “I met with Jack, and he said he feels like I don’t listen to him. I think that’s the third person who’s told me that this month. I listen, don’t I? You feel like I listen, right?”

I blink, sorting thoughts. “Well, I—”

“*All I do* is listen to people! And I bite my tongue *all the time*.” He grabs a Bible off the coffee table and waves it around. “Do you know how many things I want to say but don’t?”

“Well—”

Kevin starts pacing. “And I’m patient! So patient! And pleasant! I’m pleasant, right? You always say I’m pleasant.” He points the Bible at me like a sword.

I offer a squinty half-smile, trying to soften my words: “Do you want me to respond, or do you just want me to listen while you vent about what a good listener you are?”

Kevin opens his mouth, raises a finger, then smacks himself in the face. He gives a sheepish almost-smile before mumbling, “I want to listen.” He sinks onto the couch, hands and Bible between his knees.

“You know I think you are the best person on the planet, and yes, you are wonderfully pleasant when you are not endangering people with your violent Bible-brandishing.” This pulls a half-laugh out of him. “But I do think there are some times you don’t realize how you come across. And”—I step forward to squeeze his arm so he knows I’m not trying to be mean—“it might take me a minute to get this out, so it would be great if you’d let me talk till I’m done. Okay?”

Kevin gives a rather begrudging nod.

“Mmm-kay, so . . . you know how in the middle school locker room all those guys ganged up on you and jumped you for no reason? And you just closed your eyes and started swinging? You figured that if you punched back hard and fast, they wouldn’t try messing with you again?”

“Well, it worked, didn’t it?” He shrugs, flashing a smug half-smile.

“I know, but . . . I think you’re still doing it. When you feel

criticized, your instinctive response is to punch back, hard and fast. I've learned that you always calm down after a minute or two, and if I just give you a little time to breathe, we work things out quickly. But other people don't know you as well as I do. So when they say something you don't like and you get defensive and punch back, they just back off and shut down."

"But I—"

I tap his arm again. "And that's the second thing. You start talking before people are done. You're good at expressing your thoughts quickly, but most people aren't. You start responding when they've barely gotten started talking."

I wait, expecting a reaction, but Kevin just nods. I keep going. "The thing is, it takes people even *longer* to get their feelings out when they're talking to you, because—well, as a preacher, you're an authority figure, which makes you intimidating; plus you're tall and handsome"—I give him what I hope is an encouraging wink—"which makes you doubly intimidating."

He rolls his eyes but smiles.

I plow ahead. "I think you have to train yourself to stop punching back. To *thank* people for bringing up whatever it is that's bothering them—even if you disagree—and then invite them to get it all out. You might want to make it a habit to say, 'And what else?' And then let them talk more. And then say, 'And what else?' And let them talk even more. Lather, rinse, repeat, as many times as necessary."

Kevin heaves a sigh and chokes out, "Thank you. And what else?"

* * *

One of my roles as the big feeler in our marriage is to help steady Kevin grow in his sensitivity. To help him see hard things that his ever-so-optimistic perspective sometimes overlooks. He doesn't

mean to throw a happy filter over everything, but sometimes he does. He doesn't intentionally cut people short while they are still putting words together, but sometimes he does. He doesn't mean to miss their cues, but sometimes he does.

Just as I need his logic, positivity, and relentless joy (as you will see in many stories in this book), he also needs my insight, observations, and awareness of nuance. He needs my honesty. Yes, he is a gifted minister, but he needs me to help him not just minister *to* people—meet needs, make plans, preach sermons—but connect *with* people. To see them. Hear them. Understand them.

FANNING YOUR GIFTS INTO FLAME

Listen to Peter's words about using our gifts for God and his people:

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

1 PETER 4:10-11

Your emotional and intuitive giftedness are God's grace to you—and through you, they are God's grace to other people.

I encourage you to “fan into flame” whatever gifts God has given you—to use those gifts to the fullest capacity (2 Timothy 1:6). If you show compassion, do it with the bigheartedness God has given you. If you have insights to offer from your observations and keen sense about people, offer those insights with humble confidence. If your tenderness drives you to serve, then serve with the strength God provides.

Are you ready to give? Ready to shine? In the chapters ahead, we will talk about how we can use our God-given emotions most effectively in different areas of our lives. Let's start in the most emotional place of all: at home.

FEELING YOUR WAY FORWARD

Prayer Prompt

You created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.
My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place,
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes saw my unformed body;
all the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.

PSALM 139:13-16

Journal Prompts

1. Do you like being the kind of feeler God made you to be? Why or why not?
2. Which of the strengths listed in this chapter do you most relate to? How might you begin using those gifts more intentionally?
3. Describe a time when you have used your emotional disposition to help someone else. How did you feel afterward?

