

Lesson 7: The Emotional Life of the J-Curve

In this session on the J-Curve, I wanted to focus more specifically on our emotions. A lot of us are confused by our emotions, and we feel them deeply. But sometimes they get us into trouble, and sometimes they are out of balance or overdone. And yeah, it's healthy to express them. If we don't express our emotions, they eventually leak or explode. Because as we see in this particular lesson, Paul and his team's emotions are shaped by a dying love, and therefore, they're free to express them.

Let me take you to Philippians chapter 2:25-30. The Apostle Paul says, "I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honour such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.

The Philippians were well aware and knew that Epaphroditus nearly died for the work of Christ, but we don't often kind of know how risky it really was. Let's remember, Paul is in prison in Rome awaiting his trial. He needs a large sum of money to pay a lawyer to represent him before Caesar because a delegation from the Sanhedrin has arrived from Jerusalem to slander him. Without a lawyer, Paul faces execution as a troublemaker to the government. The Philippians learn of Paul's need and immediately take a generous collection (you see that in Philippians 4) and they want to send the money to Rome. They choose one of their trusted leaders, Epaphroditus. Try to imagine, you're Epaphroditus, you have this large amount of money, and you begin a three-week journey. On the way, you get malaria, you feel really sick, but Epaphroditus refuses to stop and rest. He knows that without this gift, Paul could die. Epaphroditus arrives in Rome nearly at death, and so Paul and Timothy nurse him back to health. His sacrifice moves Paul deeply. The gift allows Paul's case to be defended in court and silences Paul's accusers about whether he should even bother defending himself.

Meanwhile, word gets back to the Philippians, who sent Epaphroditus, and they find out that he's nearly dead. The Philippians write to Paul, describing their deep concern for Epaphroditus. Now, Epaphroditus is distraught because the Philippians think he's dead. And so Paul dictates the letter of Philippians which Epaphroditus eventually carries back. Knowing that in the back of our minds, let's take another look at this passage. What emotions do we see in the passage, and who are feeling those emotions?

In verse 26, we see that Epaphroditus has the feeling of longing for the church, and he's been distressed because they heard he was ill. So he's worried and distressed because they're worried. Paul, in verse 27, says that he is experiencing sorrow upon sorrow, and in verse 28, he's eager to send Epaphroditus back to be able to relieve the distress of the Philippians. In verse 28, we see that Paul's hope for the Philippians is that they may rejoice and they may experience that joy. In verse 28, we see

that he's feeling anxious. And then in verse 29, we see that the Philippians are feeling joy. So there is a myriad of feelings being expressed by people all throughout this passage. Epaphroditus is longing and feeling distress because the Philippians are concerned about him. Paul is feeling sorrow for Epaphroditus, as well as for the Philippians, and he's eager to get Epaphroditus back. The Philippians, for Paul's desires, that the Philippians would experience joy, and he's anxious until they can experience that joy. So if we were to experience the emotions on a J-Curve, we see it here. Epaphroditus is in distress, Paul is feeling sorrow and anxious, and there's a longing of Epaphroditus for the benefit and blessing of the Philippians. There's an eagerness in Paul that the Philippians would experience joy.

Now, when we're anxious, our hearts are frustrated because we're trying to control something we can't. Anxiety is not inherently wrong. Paul doesn't seem to be guilty about his anxiety. He seems to be modelling what good anxiety looks like. Think about what's driving Paul's anxiety. He's concerned about Epaphroditus, and he's anxious because he's concerned about the Philippians. Love is driving Paul's anxiety.

Christians, at times, have been legalistic about the emotion of anxiety. We make a rule across the board that all anxiety is wrong. This can be doubly painful for those who are suffering and feel anxious about it. Not only are they feeling the pain of going through a tough time, but then they feel guilty for feeling anxious about it, or they may feel judged by others for feeling anxious. Some of us might be wondering how Paul can say 'be anxious for nothing' in Philippians 4:6 and yet he talks about his anxiety here.

Let's remember, in Philippians 4:6, Paul is talking about the danger of a floating anxiety, a heart that's constantly anxious, worrying. But here, when Paul is speaking in Philippians chapter 2, he's talking about an anxiety that is grounded because it is rooted in love. So, good anxiety, Paul has legitimate anxiety over a dear friend who is near death. Philippians 2:28. Likewise, Jesus is anxious as he faces death; when he sees his friends grieving over Lazarus' death; and when he faces Judas' betrayal. To be fully human in a fallen world means that at times we will be anxious. To love means we will at times enter someone else's sadness. We don't do that from above, we become sad with them. Bad anxiety, on the other hand, you see in Luke 12:22, Jesus contrasts bad anxiety. "Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on your body", with his own anxiety at the coming of his death.

The first bad anxiety is a floating, it's a bottomless anxiety that never feels secure. The second is a genuine human response to something that's very hard. So to be fully human is to feel like Jesus feels. Likewise, Paul, after he has described his own anxiety over Epaphroditus, tells the Philippians to be anxious for nothing. If you have a daughter dying of cancer, anxiety is normal and appropriate. If you're constantly worrying about money when you have a refrigerator full of food, then you should be anxious for nothing. Paul is describing anxious, harassing care. That unreasonable anxiety in one who is full of cares, especially about the future, and thus, distracted in mind.

In good anxiety, your communion with people is broken. In bad anxiety, your communion with God is broken, creating a restless, controlling spirit. Thus Paul seeks to restore that when he tells the

Philippians to replace anxiety with a praying life. He says, “Do not be anxious, in Philippians 4:6, about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

In verse 28, Paul gives two reasons for sending Epaphroditus: number one, that Paul would be less anxious, and number two, that the Philippians can rejoice. We may wonder, shouldn't Paul repent of his anxiety or of trying to control something he couldn't or shouldn't? Sadly, that is what most Christians think. But as we just saw, if you love, you will be anxious for those you love. The trip from Rome to Philippi took about 18 to 20 days, depending on the season. The most direct route was travelling south from Rome, taking a boat from Southern Italy to Northern Greece, and then crossing over Northern Greece. This would have been relatively expensive. Plus, you usually travel with a companion. We only have one record of Paul travelling alone. Is Paul wise to send Epaphroditus on a long, expensive trip just so he can be less anxious and the Philippians have more joy? Most economists would say no, that is a waste of money. But love says yes. It's the wisdom of love.

That just shows how much Paul prizes the joy that comes from community, from seeing and being with the one he loves. This is huge for Paul. So Paul's quarterly goal, if he had these massive goals, would be to increase the Philippians' joy at any cost. What's strange or amazing about that? What is Paul prioritising? Does that reflect good management principles? Of course not. Paul is prioritising love, he is caring for people.

And so here's what it looks like. Try to follow me on this chart. The Philippians, out of love, send Epaphroditus to Paul, and Epaphroditus risks his life for Paul's sake. Because Epaphroditus gets sick, Paul is anxious for Epaphroditus. Because Epaphroditus is sick, he's anxious because of the Philippians and their concern for him. The Philippians are concerned about Epaphroditus because he's sick. And so to try to solve everybody's anxiety, Paul takes it upon himself to pay for Epaphroditus to return to the Philippians so that they might be in joy. And so what we're seeing here is a divine community at work in love, full of emotions that include anxiety because of that love.

In a well-tuned heart, a heart that loves and follows Jesus, our emotions are a function of our love. They will follow Jesus' journey of dying and rising. So at different times, our hearts will be in different states. And so I hope this is a helpful lens. As you experience the J-curve, you might experience a myriad of emotions, and some of those emotions may not be wrong, although others may tell you that they are. So in light of what we see here in Paul, one of the questions you may want to ask yourself is, what's driving this emotion at this time? Is it love, or is it something else?