

The background of the cover is a classical landscape painting. It depicts a wide valley with a large body of water in the distance, surrounded by rolling hills and mountains. In the foreground, a flock of sheep is gathered on a rocky, grassy slope. One black sheep stands out among the white ones. The overall tone is soft and atmospheric, with a focus on natural beauty and tranquility.

Dane Ortlund

GENTLE
and
LOWLY

*The Heart of Christ for
Sinners and Sufferers*

“*Gentle and Lowly* comes from the pen of someone who has not just profited from reading the Puritans—but who, more importantly, has read the Bible under their tutelage. One short book can never be enough to convey all the glory of the character of Christ, but this book deftly unpacks something we often overlook: Christ is meek and lowly in heart and gives rest to those who labor and are burdened. Written with pastoral gentleness and quiet beauty, it teases out what twenty biblical texts contribute to this portrait of the heart of Christ, all of it brought together to bring comfort, strength, and rest to believers.”

D. A. Carson, Emeritus Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School; Cofounder, The Gospel Coalition

“In this timely work, Dane Ortlund directs our attention back to the person of Jesus. Centered on the Scriptures and drawing upon the best of the Puritan tradition, Ortlund helps us see the heart of God as it is revealed to us in Christ. He reminds us not only of Jesus’s promises of rest and comfort, but of the Bible’s vision of Jesus: a kind and gracious King.”

Russell Moore, President, The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention

“The title of this book immediately evoked within me a sense of longing, hope, and gratitude. The message it contains is a balm for every heart that feels pierced by sin or sorrow—whether from within or without. It is an invitation to experience the sweet consolations of a Savior who moves toward us with tenderness and grace, when we know we deserve just the opposite from him.”

Nancy DeMoss Wolgemuth, author; Teacher and Host, *Revive Our Hearts*

“My life has been transformed by the beautiful, staggering truths in this book. Dane Ortlund lifts our eyes to see Christ’s compassion-filled heart for sinners and sufferers, proving that Jesus is no reluctant savior but one who delights in showing his mercy. For any feeling bruised, weary, or empty, this is the balm for you.”

Michael Reeves, President and Professor of Theology, Union School of Theology, Oxford, UK

“On the rough, rocky, and often dark path between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet,’ there is nothing your weary heart needs more than to know the beauty of the heart of Jesus. It is that beauty that alone has the power to overwhelm all the ugly you will encounter along the way. I have read no book that more carefully, thoroughly, and tenderly displays Christ’s heart than what Dane Ortlund has written. As if I was listening to a great symphony, I was moved in different ways in different passages but left each feeling hugely blessed to know that what was being described was the heart of my Savior, my Lord, my Friend, and my Redeemer. I can’t think of anyone in the family of God who wouldn’t be greatly helped by spending time seeing the heart of Jesus through the eyes of such a gifted guide as Ortlund.”

Paul David Tripp, President, Paul Tripp Ministries; author, *New Morning Mercies* and *My Heart Cries Out*

“The Puritans breathed Christ-centered practices: they embraced the Bible as a lifeline, exercised it like a muscle, and relied upon it like a bulletproof vest. They knew how to hate their sin without hating themselves because they understood that Christ’s grace is an ever-present person, a person who understands our situation and our needs better than we do. They understood that we suffer because of sin. Dane Ortlund masterfully handles a treasure trove of Puritan wisdom and deftly presents it to the Christian reader. Read this book and pray that the Holy Spirit reveals Christ to you as the Puritans understood him, and you will be refreshed to understand God’s grace in a whole new way.”

Rosaria Butterfield, Former Professor of English, Syracuse University; author, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*

“‘He is so strong that he can afford to be gentle.’ That old movie line is more than a throwaway sentiment when we consider the theological precision and pastoral heart of Dane Ortlund describing God’s heart toward those who are weak, weary, sin-sick, and despairing. The insights of *Gentle and Lowly* are truly a river of mercy flowing from the throne of God, through great pastors of the past, and into precious and powerful ministry for today.”

Bryan Chapell, Senior Pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church, Peoria, Illinois

“Only a few pages in I started to realize how unusual and essential this book is—it is an exposition of the very heart of Christ. The result is a book that astonishes us with the sheer abundance and capacity of his love for us. Breathtaking and healing in equal measure, it is already one of the best books I’ve read.”

Sam Allberry, Apologist and Speaker, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries; author, *7 Myths about Singleness*

“Dane Ortlund writes about what seems too good to be true—the Lord delights to show mercy to you and to me—so he works very carefully through key texts and enlists the help of saints past. I was persuaded, and I look forward to being persuaded again and again.”

Ed Welch, Counselor and Faculty Member, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

“Dane Ortlund leads us into the very heart of God incarnate—not only what Jesus did for us, but how he *feels* toward us. That’s right: feels toward us. Anchored in Scripture and drawing on the Puritan Thomas Goodwin, this book is medicine for broken hearts.”

Michael Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California

“Dane Ortlund helps us rediscover the heart of Jesus that is the very heart of the gospel. This delightful book opens up the sheer immensity of Jesus’s tender love for us. As you immerse yourself in Christ’s very heart, you’ll find your own heart warmed at the fire of the love of God. Ortlund opens up a neglected theme among the Puritans (in bite-sized chunks that won’t overwhelm you), where you’ll discover their grasp of the beauty of Jesus’s love. Your soul needs this book. I highly recommend it.”

Paul E. Miller, author, *A Praying Life* and *J-Curve: Dying and Rising with Jesus in Everyday Life*

GENTLE

— *and* —

LOWLY

*The Heart of Christ for
Sinners and Sufferers*

Dane Ortlund

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To Hope
Luke 18:16

Fatherlike he tends and spares us
Well our feeble frame he knows
In his hand he gently bears us
Rescues us from all our foes

H. F. LYTE, 1834

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Introduction

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT the heart of Christ. Who is he? Who is he *really*? What is most natural to him? What ignites within him most immediately as he moves toward sinners and sufferers? What flows out most freely, most instinctively? Who *is* he?

This book is written for the discouraged, the frustrated, the weary, the disenchanted, the cynical, the empty. Those running on fumes. Those whose Christian lives feel like constantly running up a descending escalator. Those of us who find ourselves thinking: “How could I mess up that bad—again?” It is for that increasing suspicion that God’s patience with us is wearing thin. For those of us who know God loves us but suspect we have deeply disappointed him. Who have told others of the love of Christ yet wonder if—as for us—he harbors mild resentment. Who wonder if we have shipwrecked our lives beyond what can be repaired. Who are convinced we’ve permanently diminished our usefulness to the Lord. Who have been swept off our feet by perplexing pain and are wondering how we can keep living under such numbing darkness. Who look at our lives and know how to interpret the data only by concluding that God is fundamentally parsimonious.

It is written, in other words, for normal Christians. In short, it is for sinners and sufferers. How does Jesus feel about them?

This may already raise some eyebrows. Are we overly humanizing Jesus, talking about his feelings this way? From another angle, how does the heart of Christ relate to the doctrine of the Trinity—does Christ relate to us differently than the Father or the Spirit relates to us? Or are we already out of proportion if we ask what is most central to who Christ is? And how does his heart relate to his wrath? Yet again, how does Christ's heart fit with what we find in the Old Testament and its portrait of God?

These questions are not only legitimate but necessary. So we will proceed with theological care. But the safest way to theological fidelity is sticking close to the biblical text. And we are simply going to ask what the Bible says about the heart of Christ and consider the glory of his heart for our own up-and-down lives.

But we are neither the first nor the smartest to read the Bible. Throughout the history of the church God has raised up uniquely gifted and insightful teachers to walk the rest of us into the green pastures and still waters of who God in Christ is. One particularly concentrated period of history in which God provided penetrating Bible teachers was 1600s England and the age of the Puritans. This book on Christ's heart would not exist if I had not stumbled upon the Puritans and especially Thomas Goodwin. It is Goodwin more than anyone who has opened my eyes to who God in Christ is, most naturally and easily, for fickle sinners. But Goodwin and the others raised in this book such as Sibbes and Bunyan are channels, not sources. The Bible is the source. They're just showing us with particular clarity and insight what the Bible has been telling us all along about who God actually is.

And so the strategy of this book will simply be to take either a Bible passage or a bit of teaching from the Puritans or others and consider what is being said about the heart of God and of Christ. We will consider the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, the apostles John and Paul, the Puritans Goodwin and Sibbes and Bunyan and Owen, and others such as Edwards and Spurgeon and Warfield and open ourselves up to what they tell us about the heart of God and the heart of Christ. The controlling question is: Who *is* he? There will be a fairly natural progression through the book from chapter to chapter, though not so much as a logically building argument but rather looking at the single diamond of Christ's heart from many different angles.

It is one thing to ask what Christ has done. And there are many sound books on this. Consider Stott's *The Cross of Christ*;¹ or Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach's *Pierced for Our Transgressions*;² or Macleod's *Christ Crucified*;³ or Packer's seminal 1974 article;⁴ or a dozen other solid historical or contemporary treatments. We are not focusing centrally on what Christ has done. We are considering who he is. The two matters are bound up together and indeed interdependent. But they are distinct. The gospel offers us not only legal exoneration—inviolably precious truth!—it also sweeps us into Christ's very heart. You might know that Christ died and rose again on your behalf to

1 John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986).

2 Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Recovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007).

3 Donald Macleod, *Christ Crucified: Understanding the Atonement* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014).

4 J. I. Packer, "What Did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution," *Tyndale Bulletin* 25 (1974): 3–45.

rinse you clean of all your sin; but do you know his deepest heart for you? Do you live with an awareness not only of his atoning work for your sinfulness but also of his longing heart amid your sinfulness?

A wife may tell you much about her husband—his height, his eye color, his eating habits, his education, his job, his handiness around the house, his best friend, his hobbies, his Myers-Briggs personality profile, his favorite sports team. But what can she say to communicate his knowing gaze across the table over a dinner at their favorite restaurant? That look that reflects years of ever-deepening friendship, thousands of conversations and arguments through which they have safely come, a time-ripened settling into the assurance of embrace, come what may? That glance that speaks in a moment his loving protection more clearly than a thousand words? In short, what can she say to communicate to another her husband's *heart* for her?

It is one thing to describe what your husband says and does and looks like. It is something else, something deeper and more real, to describe his heart for you.

So with Christ. It is one thing to know the doctrines of the incarnation and the atonement and a hundred other vital doctrines. It is another, more searching matter to know his heart for you.

Who is he?

His Very Heart

I am gentle and lowly in heart.

MATTHEW 11:29

MY DAD POINTED OUT TO ME something that Charles Spurgeon pointed out to him. In the four Gospel accounts given to us in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—eighty-nine chapters of biblical text—there’s only one place where Jesus tells us about his own heart.

We learn much in the four Gospels about Christ’s teaching. We read of his birth, his ministry, and his disciples. We are told of his travels and prayer habits. We find lengthy speeches and repeated objections by his hearers, prompting further teaching. We learn of the way he understood himself to fulfill the whole Old Testament. And we learn in all four accounts of his unjust arrest and shameful death and astonishing resurrection. Consider the thousands of pages that have been written by theologians over the past two thousand years on all these things.

But in only one place—perhaps the most wonderful words ever uttered by human lips—do we hear Jesus himself open up to us his very heart:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matt. 11:28–30)¹

In the one place in the Bible where the Son of God pulls back the veil and lets us peer way down into the core of who he is, we are not told that he is “austere and demanding in heart.” We are not told that he is “exalted and dignified in heart.” We are not even told that he is “joyful and generous in heart.” Letting Jesus set the terms, his surprising claim is that he is “gentle and lowly in heart.”

One thing to get straight right from the start is that when the Bible speaks of the heart, whether Old Testament or New, it is not speaking of our emotional life only but of the central animating center of all we do. It is what gets us out of bed in the morning and what we daydream about as we drift off to sleep. It is our motivation headquarters. The heart, in biblical terms, is not part of who we are but the center of who we are. Our heart is what defines and directs us. That is why Solomon tells us to “keep [the] heart with all vigilance, for from it flows the springs of life” (Prov. 4:23).² The

1 Matt. 11:29 was the German Reformer Philip Melancthon’s favorite verse in the Bible. Herman Bavinck, “John Calvin: A Lecture on the Occasion of His 400th Birthday,” trans. John Bolt, *The Bavinck Review* 1 (2010): 62.

2 Another Puritan, John Flavel, devoted a whole treatise to this verse and to strategies to maintain the heart: John Flavel, *Keeping the Heart: How to Maintain Your Love for God* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2012).

heart is a matter of life. It is what makes us the human being each of us is. The heart drives all we do. It is who we are.³

And when Jesus tells us what animates him most deeply, what is most true of him—when he exposes the innermost recesses of his being—what we find there is: gentle and lowly.

Who could ever have thought up such a Savior?

“I am gentle . . .”

The Greek word translated “gentle” here occurs just three other times in the New Testament: in the first beatitude, that “the *meeek*” will inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5); in the prophecy in Matthew 21:5 (quoting Zech. 9:9) that Jesus the king “is coming to you, *humble*, and mounted on a donkey”; and in Peter’s encouragement to wives to nurture more than anything else “the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a *gentle* and quiet spirit” (1 Pet. 3:4). Meek. Humble. Gentle. Jesus is not trigger-happy. Not harsh, reactionary, easily exasperated. He is the most understanding person in the universe. The posture most natural to him is not a pointed finger but open arms.

“ . . . and lowly . . .”

The meaning of the word “lowly” overlaps with that of “gentle,” together communicating a single reality about Jesus’s heart. This specific word *lowly* is generally translated “humble” in the New

3 An excellent treatment on the Bible’s teaching on the heart along these lines is Craig Troxel, *With All Your Heart: Orienting Your Mind, Desires, and Will toward Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

Testament, such as in James 4:6: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the *humble*.” But typically throughout the New Testament this Greek word refers not to humility as a virtue but to humility in the sense of destitution or being thrust downward by life circumstance (which is also how this Greek word is generally used throughout the Greek versions of the Old Testament, especially in the psalms). In Mary’s song while pregnant with Jesus, for example, this word is used to speak of the way God exalts those who are “of humble estate” (Luke 1:52). Paul uses the word when he tells us to “not be haughty, but associate with the *lowly*” (Rom. 12:16), referring to the socially unimpressive, those who are not the life of the party but rather cause the host to cringe when they show up.

The point in saying that Jesus is lowly is that he is *accessible*. For all his resplendent glory and dazzling holiness, his supreme uniqueness and otherness, no one in human history has ever been more approachable than Jesus Christ. No prerequisites. No hoops to jump through. Warfield, commenting on Matthew 11:29, wrote: “No impression was left by his life-manifestation more deeply imprinted upon the consciousness of his followers than that of the noble humility of his bearing.”⁴ The minimum bar to be enfolded into the embrace of Jesus is simply: open yourself up to him. It is all he needs. Indeed, it is the only thing he works with. Verse 28 of our passage in Matthew 11 tells us explicitly who qualifies for fellowship with Jesus: “all who labor and are heavy laden.” You don’t need to unburden or collect yourself and then come to Jesus. Your very burden is what qualifies you to come. No payment is required; he

4 B. B. Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ* (Oxford, UK: Benediction Classics, 2015), 140.

says, “I will *give* you rest.” His rest is gift, not transaction. Whether you are actively working hard to crowbar your life into smoothness (“labor”) or passively finding yourself weighed down by something outside your control (“heavy laden”), Jesus Christ’s desire that you find rest, that you come in out of the storm, outstrips even your own.

“Gentle and lowly.” This, according to his own testimony, is Christ’s very heart. This is who he is. Tender. Open. Welcoming. Accommodating. Understanding. Willing. *If we are asked to say only one thing about who Jesus is, we would be honoring Jesus’s own teaching if our answer is, gentle and lowly.*

If Jesus hosted his own personal website, the most prominent line of the “About Me” dropdown would read: GENTLE AND LOWLY IN HEART.

This is not who he is to everyone, indiscriminately. This is who he is for those who come to him, who take his yoke upon them, who cry to him for help. The paragraph before these words from Jesus gives us a picture of how Jesus handles the impenitent: “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! . . . I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you” (Matt. 11:21, 24). “Gentle and lowly” does not mean “mushy and frothy.”

But for the penitent, his heart of gentle embrace is never out-matched by our sins and foibles and insecurities and doubts and anxieties and failures. For lowly gentleness is not one way Jesus occasionally acts toward others. Gentleness is who he is. It is his heart. He can’t un-gentle himself toward his own any more than you or I can change our eye color. It’s who we are.

The Christian life is inescapably one of toil and labor (1 Cor. 15:10; Phil. 2:12–13; Col. 1:29). Jesus himself made this clear in this very Gospel (Matt. 5:19–20; 18:8–9). His promise here in Matthew 11 is “rest for your souls,” not “rest for your bodies.” But all Christian toil flows from fellowship with a living Christ whose transcending, defining reality is: gentle and lowly. He astounds and sustains us with his endless kindness. Only as we walk ever deeper into this tender kindness can we live the Christian life as the New Testament calls us to. Only as we drink down the kindness of the heart of Christ will we leave in our wake, everywhere we go, the aroma of heaven, and die one day having startled the world with glimpses of a divine kindness too great to be boxed in by what we deserve.

That notion of kindness is right here in our passage. The word translated “easy” in his statement, “My yoke is easy,” needs to be carefully understood. Jesus is not saying life is free of pain or hardship. This is the same word elsewhere translated “kind”—as in, for example, Ephesians 4:32: “Be *kind* to one another, tenderhearted” (also Rom. 2:4). Consider what Jesus is saying. A yoke is the heavy crossbar laid on oxen to force them to drag farming equipment through the field. Jesus is using a kind of irony, saying that the yoke laid on his disciples is a nonyoke. For it is a yoke of kindness. Who could resist this? It’s like telling a drowning man that he must put on the burden of a life preserver only to hear him shout back, sputtering, “No way! Not me! This is hard enough, drowning here in these stormy waters. The last thing I need is the added burden of a life preserver around my body!” That’s what we all are like, confessing Christ with our lips but generally avoiding deep fellowship with him, out of a muted understanding of his heart.

His yoke is kind and his burden is light. That is, his yoke is a nonyoke, and his burden is a nonburden. What helium does to a balloon, Jesus's yoke does to his followers. We are buoyed along in life by his endless gentleness and supremely accessible lowliness. He doesn't simply meet us at our place of need; he lives in our place of need. He never tires of sweeping us into his tender embrace. It is his very heart. It is what gets him out of bed in the morning.

This is not how we intuitively think of Jesus Christ. Reflecting on this passage in Matthew 11, the old English pastor Thomas Goodwin helps us climb inside what Jesus is actually saying.

Men are apt to have contrary conceits of Christ, but he tells them his disposition there, by preventing such hard thoughts of him, to allure them unto him the more. We are apt to think that he, being so holy, is therefore of a severe and sour disposition against sinners, and not able to bear them. "No," says he; "I am meek; gentleness is my nature and temper."⁵

We project onto Jesus our skewed instincts about how the world works. Human nature dictates that the wealthier a person, the more they tend to look down on the poor. The more beautiful a person, the more they are put off by the ugly. And without realizing what we are doing, we quietly assume that one so high and exalted has corresponding difficulty drawing near to the despicable and unclean. Sure, Jesus comes close to us, we agree—but he holds his nose. This risen Christ, after all, is the one whom "God has highly exalted,"

5 Thomas Goodwin, *The Heart of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2011), 63.

at whose name every knee will one day bow in submission (Phil. 2:9–11). This is the one whose eyes are “like a flame of fire” and whose voice is “like the roar of many waters” and who has “a sharp two-edged sword” coming out of his mouth and whose face is “like the sun shining in full strength” (Rev. 1:14–16); in other words, this is one so unspeakably brilliant that his resplendence cannot adequately be captured with words, so ineffably magnificent that all language dies away before his splendor.

This is the one whose deepest heart is, more than anything else, gentle and lowly.

Goodwin is saying that this high and holy Christ does not cringe at reaching out and touching dirty sinners and numbed sufferers. Such embrace is precisely what he loves to do. He cannot bear to hold back. We naturally think of Jesus touching us the way a little boy reaches out to touch a slug for the first time—face screwed up, cautiously extending an arm, giving a yelp of disgust upon contact, and instantly withdrawing. We picture the risen Christ approaching us with “a severe and sour disposition,” as Goodwin says.

This is why we need a Bible. Our natural intuition can only give us a God like us. The God revealed in the Scripture deconstructs our intuitive predilections and startles us with one whose infinitude of perfections is matched by his infinitude of gentleness. Indeed, his perfections *include* his perfect gentleness.

It is who he is. It is his very heart. Jesus himself said so.

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

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ROSARIA BUTTERFIELD

“Your soul needs this book. I highly recommend it.”

PAUL E. MILLER

“One of the best books I’ve read.”

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