

The
H E A R T
of
J E S U S

*How He Really
Feels about You*



DANE ORTLUND

“This is a sweet and comforting book that will grow your knowledge, provoke your worship, and inspire your devotion. Best of all, it will help you to know, love, and trust our God and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

Tim Challies, author, *Seasons of Sorrow*

“During a difficult time in my life, the Lord used Dane Ortlund to remind me of the beautiful reality of Christ’s love—that he is gentle and lowly in heart, overflowing with perfect love and compassion for sinners like me. Now, in *The Heart of Jesus*, we find these comforting gospel truths made even more accessible to needful, weary souls. I pray this book is read widely, leading many to draw near to Christ for cleansing mercy and true rest.”

Scott James, author, *The Sower*; *Mission Accomplished*; *The Expected One*; and *The Risen One*

“Dane Ortlund’s *The Heart of Jesus* is a profound journey into the very core of Christ’s being, revealing his unfathomable love and unending compassion for humanity. Through reflections on Christ’s emotions, actions, and unchanging character, Ortlund beautifully illustrates the depth of Jesus’s heart, inviting readers to experience the transformative power of his love. This book not only unveils the heart of our Savior but also reassures us of his eternal devotion, making it a must-read for anyone seeking to deepen their understanding of God’s boundless love.”

Shane Pruitt, author, *9 Common Lies Christians Believe*; *Calling Out the Called*; and *Revival Generation*

“As a grandfather who loves to read to his grandchildren, I’m always on the lookout for good books. I look for works that will bring them joy as well as nurture their love for the Lord. I also look forward to the day when I can give them great books to read on their own. One of the first books I plan to give them is Dane Ortlund’s *The Heart of Jesus*. I wouldn’t be surprised if they read it over and over—just as I have read and reread Ortlund’s *Gentle and Lowly*.”

Randy Newman, Senior Fellow, The C. S. Lewis Institute; author, *Questioning Evangelism* and *Questioning Faith*

“During the height of the 2020 pandemic lockdown, I received a copy of Dane Ortlund’s *Gentle and Lowly*. I’m not sure if there was ever a more perfect book for me, personally, at just the right time. It gave me life. I am thankful that Ortlund’s scriptural thoughts on the heart of Jesus will now be accessible to those in the multigenerational church I pastor, people I desperately want to see realize the Savior’s love. I believe the church will be strengthened in our affections for Christ as we grow in knowledge of his heart for us. The gospel is indeed good news. Ortlund has served us greatly by putting together this much shorter and more reader-friendly version of what I consider to be his modern classic. What a gift to be reminded of the Savior who runs to our suffering and sin rather than away from it. Take in this deep breath of fresh air.”

Dean Inerra, Pastor, City Church, Tallahassee, Florida; author, *The Unsaved Christian* and *A Short Guide to Church: What Is It All About?*

“When I read *Gentle and Lowly*, it changed my life! In 47 years in church, I’d never noticed that Jesus described himself this way. It was also mind-boggling to see how Dane Ortlund described Father God as so gracious, based on Jesus’s words, when I’d been taught more of the wrath and anger of God. As a public high school English teacher, I’ve seen how today’s students have fallen behind in their reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition, and how their attention spans have shortened. For most of them, the original version would go over their heads, or they would give up trying to read it. I am thrilled that *The Heart of Jesus* has been created, and I cannot wait to tell students and church youth groups about it!”

Jen C., mother and teacher, North Carolina

Praise for Ortlund’s *Gentle and Lowly*:

“Beyond the tangible gift of this book lies the intangible gift of the gospel that *Gentle and Lowly* shares with anyone who has the privilege of reading it. Our humble fellowship has chosen to read it together so that we may all better know the ‘single diamond’ of Christ’s heart, as conveyed in both this book and the word of God.”

Thomas, inmate, San Quentin Rehabilitation Center, California

The Heart of Jesus

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How He Really Feels about You

Dane Ortlund

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

The Heart of Jesus: How He Really Feels about You

© 2024 by Dane Ortlund

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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This book is adapted from Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

Cover design: Jordan Singer

First printing 2024

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-9373-4

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-9375-8

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-9374-1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ortlund, Dane Calvin, author.

Title: The heart of Jesus : how he really feels about you / Dane C. Ortlund.

Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, 2024. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023048462 (print) | LCCN 2023048463 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433593734

(trade paperback) | ISBN 9781433593741 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433593758 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Spiritual life—Christianity. | Heart—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Jesus Christ.

Classification: LCC BV4501.3 .O77 2024 (print) | LCC BV4501.3 (ebook) | DDC 232—dc23/eng/20240213

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023048462>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023048463>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

LB 33 32 31 30 29 28 27 26 25 24
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*Affectionately dedicated, with all my heart, to my five
magnificent kids: Zach, Nate, Jer, Chloe, and Ben*

“But please, please—won’t you—can’t you give me something that will cure Mother?”

Up till then he had been looking at the Lion’s great front feet and the huge claws on them; now, in his despair, he looked up at its face. What he saw surprised him as much as anything in his whole life. For the tawny face was bent down near his own and (wonder of wonders) great shining tears stood in the Lion’s eyes. They were such big, bright tears compared with Digory’s own that for a moment he felt as if the Lion must really be sorrier about his Mother than he was himself.

“My son, my son,” said Aslan.

C. S. LEWIS, *The Magician’s Nephew*

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Introduction

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT the heart of Jesus Christ. Who is he? Who is he *really*?

What is most natural to him? What flows out most freely? Who *is* he?

In 2020 Crossway published a fuller version of the book you are now holding. It was called *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers*. The purpose of this concise version of that book is to make the content more readable for a variety of other readers—young people, new believers, or anyone who would like to reflect on Christ’s heart in a shorter, more accessible format. Much has been dropped and much has been lightly rewritten with these different audiences in mind. The result is this book, *The Heart of Jesus*.

Both this concise edition and the longer version have the same goal: to help Christians to see that Jesus is wonderfully different than what we think.

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We tend to think that Jesus loves us when we're doing well, and puts up with us when we're not doing so well. But the Bible teaches us something different, something surprising. The love of Christ for us is just as strong when we are at our worst—and in a certain kind of way that we'll explore, his love grows even *stronger* when we are at our worst.

When we are in pain or even when we are sinning—how does Jesus feel about us? Do you ever wonder what Jesus thinks of you? The Bible answers this question with a wondrous surprise.

It is one thing to ask what Christ has done. And there are many good books on that topic of how he saves us from sin and hell. In this book, we are not focusing mainly on what Christ has done. We are considering who he is. These two matters (what he has done and who he is) are closely connected. But they are also distinct. The gospel not only gives us a clean record; it also sweeps us into Christ's very heart.

You might know that Christ died and rose again on your behalf to rinse you clean of all your sin; but do you know his deepest heart, his deepest feelings, for you? Do you live with a knowledge of what he did on the cross to forgive your sins? But do you also live with a knowledge of his longing heart for you amid your sins?

A wife may tell you many qualities about her husband—his height, his eye color, his education, his job, his friends, his

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hobbies, his personality, and his favorite sports team. But what can she say about his knowing gaze across the table over a dinner at their favorite restaurant? That look reflects years of their ever-deepening friendship, thousands of conversations and arguments through which they have safely come, and a settled assurance of embrace come what may. That glance speaks in a moment of his loving care more clearly than a thousand words. In short, what could she say to communicate about her husband's *heart* for her?

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

So it is with Christ. It is one thing to know the truths that he is God and that he is coming back one day and a hundred other vital doctrines. It is another, deeper 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 ONCE POINTED OUT to me something that he'd learned from the old British preacher Charles Spurgeon. In the four Gospel accounts given to us in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—eighty-nine chapters of the Bible—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 teachings. 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.

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)

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 “cold and demanding in heart.” We are not told that he is “exalted and majestic 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, it is not speaking simply about what we feel or our emotions. The *heart*, in Scripture, is the central reason behind all that we do. It is what gets us out of bed in the morning and what we think 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. It is what defines and directs us. The heart drives all we do.

And when Jesus tells us what animates him most deeply, what drives all he does, what we find there is: gentle and lowly.

Who could ever have thought up such a Savior?

“I am gentle . . .” This means that Jesus is meek. Humble. Tender. He is not trigger-happy. Not harsh, reactionary, or easily irritated.

He is the most understanding person in the universe. The posture most natural to him is not a pointed finger of accusation but open arms of embrace.

“. . . and lowly . . .” The point in saying that Jesus is lowly is that he is *accessible*. For all his majestic glory and dazzling holiness, no one in human history has ever been more approachable than Jesus Christ. No admission ticket required. No hoops to jump through. The minimum bar to be welcomed into the embrace of Jesus is simply: open yourself up to him. It is all he needs. In fact, 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 says, “I will *give* you rest.” His rest is a gift, not something we pull out our wallet to pay for. Jesus Christ’s desire that you find rest, that you come in out of the storm, looms larger than even your own desires for such rest.

“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 about himself if our answer is: gentle and lowly.*

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

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

His Heart in Action

And he had compassion on them.

MATTHEW 14:14

WHAT WE SEE JESUS CLAIM with his words in Matthew 11:29, we see him prove with his actions time and again in all four Gospels. What he is, he does. His life proves his heart. Consider the Gospel accounts, taken as a whole:

1. When the leper says, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean,” Jesus immediately stretches out his hand and touches him, with the words, “I will; be clean” (Matt. 8:2–3). The word *will* in both the leper’s request and in Jesus’s answer is the Greek word for “wish” or “desire.” The leper was asking about Jesus’s deepest desire. And Jesus revealed his deepest desire by healing him.

2. When a group of men brings their paralyzed friend to Jesus, Jesus is so eager to help he doesn't even wait for them to speak first: "When Jesus *saw* their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven'" (Matt. 9:2). Before they could open their mouths to ask for help, Jesus couldn't stop himself—words of reassurance tumbled out.

3. Traveling from town to town, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless" (Matt. 9:36). So he teaches them, and he heals their diseases (9:35). Simply seeing the helplessness of the crowds, pity ignites.

4. Compassion comes in waves over and over again in Christ's ministry. His compassion drives him to heal the sick: "And he had compassion on them and healed their sick" (Matt. 14:14). It drives him to feed the hungry: "I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat" (15:32). It causes him to teach the crowds: "And he had compassion on them. . . . And he began to teach them many things" (Mark 6:34). And it brings him to wipe away the tears of those who are sad: "He had compassion on her and said

to her, ‘Do not weep’” (Luke 7:13). The Greek word for “compassion” in all these texts refers to the guts of a person. It’s an ancient way of referring to what rises up from deep within. This compassion reflects the deepest heart of Christ.

5. Twice in the Gospels we are told that Jesus broke down and wept. And in neither case is it sorrow for himself or his own pain. In both cases it is sorrow over another—in one case, Jerusalem (Luke 19:41), and in the other, his friend Lazarus, who has just died (John 11:35). What was his deepest anguish? The anguish of others. What drew his heart out to the point of tears? The tears of others.

6. Time and time again it is the morally disgusting, the socially hated, the disobedient, and the undeserving, who do not simply receive Christ’s mercy but *to whom Christ most naturally draws near*. He is the “friend of . . . sinners” (Luke 7:34).

When we take the Gospels as a whole and consider the total picture given to us of who Jesus is, what stands out most strongly?

Just as dolphins can’t help jumping and apple trees can’t help bearing apples, what’s happening inside us always shows

itself through what we do. The heart reveals itself in our actions. And if the actions of Jesus reflect who he most deeply is, we cannot avoid the conclusion that it is the very fallenness, which he came to undo, that is most irresistibly attractive to him.

This is deeper than saying Jesus is loving or merciful or gracious. The testimony of the four Gospels is that when Jesus Christ sees the fallenness of the world all about him, his deepest impulse, his most natural instinct, is to move toward sin and suffering, not away from it.

Time and again in Jesus Christ's earthly ministry, his heart refused to let him sleep in. Sadness confronted him in every town. And wherever he went, whenever he was confronted with pain and longing, he embraced others with cleansing mercy.

The English preacher Thomas Goodwin said, "Christ is love covered over in flesh."¹ Picture it. If compassion clothed itself in a human body and went walking around this earth, what would it look like?

We don't have to wonder.

1 Thomas Goodwin, *The Heart of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2011), 61.

The Happiness of Christ

For the joy that was set before him . . .

HEBREWS 12:2

IMAGINE THAT A COMPASSIONATE doctor has traveled deep into the jungle to provide medical care to a primitive tribe afflicted with a horrible disease. All the medical equipment has been flown in. He has correctly identified the problem, and the medicine is prepared and available. He is very wealthy and has no need to be paid anything. But as he seeks to provide care, the sick retreat back into the thickets of the jungle. They want to take care of themselves. They want to heal themselves.

Finally, a few brave young women step forward to receive the care being freely provided.

What does the doctor feel?

Joy.

His joy increases to the degree that the sick come to him for help and healing. It's the whole reason he came.

Now imagine, how much more joy he'd have if those who are sick are not strangers but his own family?

So it is with us, and so it is with Christ. He does not get flustered and frustrated when we come to him for fresh forgiveness, for renewed pardon, with distress and need and emptiness. That's the whole point. It's what he came to care for. He flew into the jungle of our world to provide healing for any who want it. He went down into the horror of death and plunged out through the other side in order to provide an endless supply of mercy and grace to his people.

When you come to Christ for mercy and love and help in your sadness and sinfulness, you are going *with* the flow of his own deepest wishes, not against them.

To put it the other way around: when we hold back, lurking in the shadows, fearful and failing, we miss out not only on our own increased comfort but on Christ's increased comfort. He lives for this. It's what he loves to do. His joy and ours rise and fall together.

But is this way of thinking biblical?

Consider Hebrews 12. There Jesus is called “the founder and perfecter of our faith, who *for the joy that was set before him* endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2).

“*For the joy.*” What joy? What was waiting for Jesus on the other side of the cross?

The joy of seeing his people enjoy what the whole book of Hebrews celebrates: cleansing forgiveness from sin. Jesus experiences joy when he sees you and me, his own brothers and sisters, receiving the medicine of his grace and love.

Perhaps it seems more natural to us to think of Jesus as receiving joy mainly when we obey him. Well, we do want to please and obey him, and surely that rejoices his heart too.

But he is thrilled also, with all his mighty heart, when we allow ourselves to truly feel forgiven. He is overjoyed as we receive his love not in a measured, restrained way, but with total freedom. Would a father with a suffocating child want his child to draw breaths from the oxygen tank in a measured, restrained way?

Remember, the Bible speaks of us as Christ’s body. Christ is the head; we are his own body parts. How does a head feel about his own flesh? The apostle Paul tells us that he “nourishes and cherishes it” (Eph. 5:29). And then Paul makes the

explicit connection to Christ: “Just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body” (5:29–30). How do we care for a wounded body part? We nurse it, bandage it, protect it, and give it time to heal. For that body part isn’t just a close friend; it is part of us.

That’s how it is with Christ and believers. We are part of him. This is why the risen Christ asks a persecutor of his *people*, “Why are you persecuting *me*?” (Acts 9:4). When God’s children hurt, Jesus himself hurts.

Jesus Christ is comforted when you draw from the riches of his atoning work because his own body is getting healed.

Able to Sympathize

*We do not have a high priest who is unable
to sympathize with our weaknesses.*

HEBREWS 4:15

THE PURITANS WERE A GROUP of English pastors in the 1600s. Their writing and preaching had special force because they blended soaring theological insight with childlike hearts of love for God. And their minds and hearts were soaked with Scripture. A typical book written by a Puritan would take a single verse of the Bible, wring it dry for all the comfort and hope to be found in it, and then, several hundred pages later, be sent off to a publisher.

One such Puritan was a man named Thomas Goodwin. In 1651 he wrote a book called *The Heart of Christ in Heaven*

towards Sinners on Earth. The single verse he was reflecting on and wringing dry was Hebrews 4:15:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

The purpose of Goodwin's book is to help Christians of all ages who are discouraged understand something very important about Jesus. This truth is hard to believe because it is so wonderful. Goodwin's goal is to convince us that even though Jesus is now in heaven and we can't see him anymore, Jesus is just as open and tender in his embrace of sinners and sufferers as when he was on earth. In other words, Jesus is just as approachable and compassionate now, from heaven, as he ever was when he walked the earth.

Imagine a friend taking your hand and placing it on your father's chest to feel his beating heart. Goodwin says that Hebrews 4:15 is like that friend. This verse takes our hand and places it on Jesus Christ's own heart. He says this verse "lets us feel how his heart beats and his affections yearn toward us."¹

1 Thomas Goodwin, *The Heart of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2011), 48.

But what exactly is Hebrews 4:15 saying? It's a deeply surprising verse. Notice the word "weaknesses": "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." We tend to think that Jesus is with us and helping us when life is going well. That is surely true. But this text adds another truth. In a special way, it is in "our weaknesses" that Jesus sympathizes with us. In all our weakness—our fear, our anxiety, our loneliness, everything that makes us feel weak—Jesus "sympathizes" with us.

Now what does that mean? The Greek word for *sympathize* here means to "suffer with" or to "co-suffer." In other words: *When we are weak, he feels that with us.*

The theological word for this is *solidarity*, which just means "with-ness." He's right there *with* us. In our pain, Jesus is pained. In our suffering, he feels the suffering as his own even though it isn't. This doesn't mean his invincible divinity (the fact that he is God) is threatened. It means that his heart is drawn into our sadness and weakness. His love is a kind of special love that cannot be held back when he sees his people in pain.

But how do we know that Jesus really understands the discouragement we're facing? The text tells us: He has been "tempted" (or tested) just "as we are." Not only that, but "in every respect" as we are. The reason that Jesus is in such close solidarity with us is that the difficult path we are on is not unique to us. He has journeyed on it himself. It is not only that Jesus can relieve us from our troubles, like a doctor prescribing medicine; it is also that, before any relief comes, he is with us in our troubles, like a doctor who has endured the same disease.

Jesus is not a Marvel superhero, too strong and mighty to identify with the weak. He was a sinless man, not a sinless Superman. He woke up with bed head. He probably had pimples at thirteen. He never would have appeared on the cover of a magazine (he had "no beauty that we should desire him," Isa. 53:2). He came as a normal man to us normal men and women, boys and girls. He knows what it is to be thirsty, hungry, hated, rejected, ridiculed, excluded, embarrassed, abandoned, and misunderstood. He knows what it is to be lonely. His friends abandoned him when he needed them most; had he lived today, every last Facebook friend would have unfriended him when he turned thirty-three and was crucified.

The key to understanding the significance of Hebrews 4:15 is to push equally hard on the two phrases "in every

respect” *and* “yet without sin.” All our weakness—indeed, all of our life—is tainted with sin. If sin were the color blue, we do not occasionally say or do something blue; all that we say, do, and think has some taint of blue. Not so with Jesus. He had no sin. No blue at all. He was “holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners” (7:26). But we must ponder the phrase “in every respect” (4:15) in a way that maintains Jesus’s sinlessness without diluting what that phrase means. That enticing temptation, that sore trial, that bewildering perplexity—he has been there. Indeed, because he is perfect, he has felt these pains more acutely than we sinners ever could.

Consider your own life.

When it feels like everyone is against you, maybe even your own parents . . . when you don’t understand your feelings or emotions . . . when your best friend lets you down . . . when you feel deeply misunderstood . . . when you are laughed at . . . here is what you must know: there, right there, you have a Friend who knows exactly what such sadness feels like. He feels it himself. You belong to him. And though your friends may unfriend you, Jesus will never do that to you.

Our tendency is to feel that the more difficult life gets, the more alone we are. As we sink further into pain, we sink further into isolation. The Bible corrects us. He is *in* us, and he bears our pain with us. We are never alone. The sorrow that feels so unique to us was endured by him in the past and is now shouldered by him in the present.

If you are in Christ, you have a Friend who, in your sorrow, will never lob down a pep talk from heaven. He cannot bear to hold himself at a distance. Nothing can hold him back. His heart is too bound up with yours.