

Union

*HOW  
DOES GOD  
CHANGE  
US?*

*DANE C.  
ORTLUND*

“This lovely, easy-to-read primer by Dane Ortlund grounds our discipleship in the glowing center of Christianity—our Lord Jesus. It’s easy to think that as we grow as Christians, we move on to ‘higher things’ (whatever that means!), when in fact we simply need to learn the beauty and depth of Jesus and all that he’s done for us. That’s what Ortlund helps us do here. This book will bless you!”

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

“That angst in your soul for more is a part of the growing process—a gift of hunger and thirst that Jesus, the inexhaustible well, will fill. In *How Does God Change Us?*, Dane Ortlund reminds us that the angst is satisfied not by behavioral modification or some quick fix but by the beauty of friendship with Jesus and the peace more deeply accepted in our souls. If you are hungry and thirsty for more life, more joy, more peace, and more Jesus, this is a book for you.”

**Matt Chandler**, Lead Pastor, The Village Church, Dallas, Texas; President, Acts 29 Church Planting Network; author, *The Mingling of Souls* and *The Explicit Gospel*

“Jesus said that our greatest ‘work’ is to believe. As much as any living author, Dane Ortlund has helped me to believe again by reacquainting me with the stunning tenderness and beauty of Jesus. As I read his words, I can sense my heart growing in trust, devotion, and godly affections, grounded in the Savior’s love for me. In this incredibly helpful, pastoral book, Dane works out the implications of that vision of Jesus for personal growth, showing us how the key to going further with Jesus is going deeper in his finished work.”

**J. D. Greear**, Lead Pastor, The Summit Church, Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina

“How does God change us as his beloved daughters and sons? Think less of climbing a mountain and more of swimming in a deep ocean of the always-more-ness of Jesus. If you’ve ever wondered what the Bible really means by ‘fixing our gaze on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith,’ this should be the next book you spend time with. Dane helps us understand that the gospel is more of a person to adore and know than theological propositions and categories to master.”

**Scotty Smith**, Pastor Emeritus, Christ Community Church,  
Franklin, Tennessee; Teacher in Residence, West End  
Community Church, Nashville, Tennessee

*HOW DOES GOD CHANGE US?*

## **Union**

A book series edited by Michael Reeves

*Rejoice and Tremble: The Surprising Good News of the Fear of the Lord*, Michael Reeves (2021)

*What Does It Mean to Fear the Lord?*, Michael Reeves (2021, concise version of *Rejoice and Tremble*)

*Deeper: Real Change for Real Sinners*, Dane C. Ortlund (2021)

*How Does God Change Us?*, Dane C. Ortlund (2021, concise version of *Deeper*)

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*DANE C. ORTLUND*

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*Affectionately dedicated to  
the faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary, 2002–2006,  
who taught me about real change from the Bible,  
then showed me with their lives*





“Aslan,” said Lucy, “you’re bigger.”

“That is because you are older, little one,” answered he.

“Not because you are?”

“I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.”

C. S. LEWIS, *Prince Caspian*



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## Series Preface

OUR INNER CONVICTIONS AND VALUES shape our lives and our ministries. And at Union—the cooperative ministries of Union School of Theology, Union Publishing, Union Research, and Union Mission (visit [www.theolo.gy](http://www.theolo.gy))—we long to grow and support men and women who will delight in God, grow in Christ, serve the church, and bless the world. This Union series of books is an attempt to express and share those values.

They are values that flow from the beauty and grace of God. The living God is so glorious and kind, he cannot be known without being adored. Those who truly know him will love him, and without that heartfelt delight in God, we are nothing but hollow hypocrites. That adoration of God necessarily works itself out in a desire to grow in Christlikeness. It also fuels a love for Christ's precious bride, the church, and a desire

## SERIES PREFACE

humbly to serve—rather than use—her. And, lastly, loving God brings us to share his concerns, especially to see his life-giving glory fill the earth.

Each exploration of a subject in the Union series will appear in two versions: a full volume and a concise one. The concise treatments, such as this one, are like shorter guided tours: they stick to the main streets and move on fast. You may find, at the end of this little book, that you have questions or want to explore some more: in that case, the fuller volume will take you further up and further in.

My hope and prayer is that these books will bless you and your church as you develop a deeper delight in God that overflows in joyful integrity, humility, Christlikeness, love for the church, and a passion to make disciples of all nations.

*Michael Reeves*

SERIES EDITOR

# Introduction

THE BIBLE SAYS, “GROW in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18). But how do we do that? How does God actually change us?

The basic point of this little book is that change is a matter of going deeper. Some believers think change happens through outward improvement—behaving more and more in accord with some moral norm (the biblical law, or the commands of Jesus, or conscience, or whatever). Others think change happens mainly through intellectual addition—understanding doctrine with greater breadth and precision. Others think it comes centrally through felt experience—sensory increase as we worship God.

All three of these elements are included in healthy Christian development (and if any is missing, we are out of proportion and will not grow), but real growth transcends them all. Growing



in Christ is not centrally improving or adding or experiencing but *deepening*. Implicit in the notion of deepening is that you already have what you need. Christian growth is bringing what you do and say and even feel into line with what, in fact, you already are.

Let me be clear: We're not after behavior modification in this book. I'm not going to talk to you about setting your alarm earlier or cutting carbs. We're not even going to reflect on tithing or church attendance or journaling or small groups or taking the sacraments or reading the Puritans. All of that can be done out of rottenness of heart. We're talking about *real* change. And we're talking about real change for *real sinners*.

A few things right up front.

First, I'm not going to hurry you. No one else should either. We are complicated sinners. Sometimes we take two steps forward and three steps back. We need time. Be patient with yourself. A sense of urgency, yes; but not a sense of hurry. Overnight transformations are the exception, not the norm. Slow change is still real change.

Second, as you begin this book, open your heart to the possibility of real change in your life. One of the devil's great victories is to flood our hearts with a sense of futility. Perhaps his greatest victory in your life is not a sin you are

## INTRODUCTION

habitually committing but simply a sense of helplessness as to real growth.

Third, this book is written by a fellow patient, not a doctor. It is written to me as much as by me. Out of failure as much as out of success.



# Jesus

THIS IS A BOOK about growing in Christ. The first thing to get clear, then, is what Jesus Christ himself is like. Our growth is not independent personal improvement. It is growth *in Christ*. Who then is he?

The temptation for many of us at this point is to assume we pretty much know what Jesus is like. We've been saved by him. We've spent time in the Bible over the years. We've read some books about him. We've told a few others about him.

And yet, if we are honest, we still find our lives riddled with failure and worry and dysfunction and emptiness.

One common reason we fail to leave sin behind is that we have a domesticated view of Jesus. Not an unorthodox view; we are fully orthodox in our Christology. We understand that he

came from heaven as the Son of God to live the life we cannot live and die the death we deserve to die. We affirm his glorious resurrection. We confess with the ancient creeds that he is truly God and truly man. We don't have a heterodox view. We have a domesticated view that, for all its doctrinal precision, has downsized the glory of Christ in our hearts.. We have forgotten that the Bible speaks of "the *unsearchable* riches of Christ" (Eph. 3:8).

So we need to begin by getting clear on who this person is in whom we grow. And we start just there—he is a person. Not just a historical figure, but an actual person, alive and well today. He is to be related to. Trusted, spoken to, listened to. Jesus is not a concept. Not an ideal. Not a force. Growing in Christ is a relational, not a formulaic, experience.

In this chapter I want to mention just one truth about Jesus, perhaps the most neglected and also the most vital truth about him if you are to get real traction in growing spiritually: Jesus is tender with us.

## **Tender**

Jesus Christ is infinitely gentle. He is the most open and accessible, the most peaceful and accommodating person in the universe. He is the most tender, least abrasive person you will ever come across. Infinite strength, infinite meekness. Dazzlingly resplendent; endlessly calm.

If you had only a few words to define who Jesus is, what would you say? In the one place where he himself tells us about his own heart, he says, “I am gentle and lowly in heart” (Matt. 11:29). And remember that the “heart” in biblical terms is not merely our emotions but the innermost animating center of all that we do. Our deepest loves and desires and ambitions pour out of our hearts. And when Jesus opens himself up and tells us of the fountain, the engine, the throbbing core of all that he does, he says that deeper than anything else, he is gentle and lowly. Peer down into the deepest recesses of Jesus Christ and there we find: gentleness and lowliness.

We who know our hearts resist this. We see the ugliness within. We can hardly face ourselves, we feel so inadequate. And Jesus is perfectly holy, the divine Son of God. It is normal and natural, even in our churches, to sense instinctively that he is holding his people at arm’s length. This is why we need a Bible. The testimony of the entire Bible, culminating in Matthew 11:29, is that God defies what we instinctively feel by embracing his people in their mess. He finds penitence, distress, need, and lack irresistible.

You don’t have to go through security to get to Jesus. You don’t have to get in line or take a ticket. No waving for his attention. No raising your voice to make sure he hears you.

In your smallness, he notices you. In your sinfulness, he draws near to you. In your anguish, he is in solidarity with you.

What we must see is not only that Jesus is gentle toward you but that he is positively drawn toward you when you are most sure he doesn't want to be. It's not only that he is not repelled by your fallenness—he finds your need and emptiness and sorrow irresistible. He is not slow to meet you in your need. It's the difference between a teenager's alarm going off on a Monday morning, forcing him to drag himself out of bed, and that same teen springing out of bed on Christmas morning. Just look at the Savior in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. With whom does he hang out? What draws forth his tears? What gets him out of bed in the morning? With whom does he eat lunch? The sidelined, the hollowed out, those long out of hope, those who have sent their lives into meltdown.

### **The Real Jesus**

The first thing I want to make clear here, early in this book, is that the real Jesus is gentle and lowly in heart. I say the *real* Jesus because we all unwittingly dilute him. We cut him down to what our minds can naturally imagine. But the Bible corrects us, tells us to stop doing that. We can only create a Jesus in our own image—a Jesus of moderate gentleness and mercy—without a Bible. Scripture tears down that diluted Jesus and lets loose the real Christ. And what we find is that his deepest heart is gentle and lowly.

This is a book about how we change. Let me be plain. *You will not change until you get straight who Jesus is, particularly with regard to his surprising tenderness.* And then spend your whole life long going deeper into the gentleness of Jesus. The only alternative to the real Jesus is to get back on the treadmill—the treadmill of doing your best to follow and honor Jesus but believing his mercy and grace to be a stockpile gradually depleted by your failures, and hoping to make it to death before the mountain of mercy runs out. Here is the teaching of the Bible: If you are in Christ, your sins cause that stockpile to grow all the more. Where sins abound, his grace superabounds. It is in your pockets of deepest shame and regret that his heart dwells *and won't leave.*

As you read this book and as you continue to work your way through life, shed once and for all the reduced Jesus and lift your eyes to the real Jesus, the Jesus whose tenderness ever outstrips and embraces your weaknesses, the Christ whose riches are unsearchable. This Christ is one under whose care and instruction you will finally be able to blossom and grow.