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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)—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 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 idea is that church leaders can read the full treatment, such as this one, and so delve into each topic while making the more accessible concise version widely available to their congregations.

SERIES PREFACE

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

HOW DO CHRISTIANS GROW?

The question itself immediately elicits different feelings among us. Some of us feel guilt. We're not growing, and we know it. And the guilt is itself self-perpetuating, further paralyzing us in spiritual stagnation.

For others of us, longing erupts. We deeply desire to grow more than we are.

Some of us, if we're honest, become smug when the question of spiritual growth arises. We are pretty confident we're doing fine, though this self-assessment is largely shaped by quietly comparing ourselves with others, and a less-than-penetrating understanding of what really motivates us in our Christian lives.

The question ignites low-grade cynicism for others of us. We've tried. Or at least it seems that way. We've attempted this strategy and that one, read this book and that, been to this conference and that. And at the end of the day, we still feel like we're spinning our wheels, unable to get real traction in our growth in grace.

None of us questions the need to grow. We see it in the Bible: "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18). "We are to grow up in every way" (Eph. 4:15). And we see the need for growth not only in the Bible but

in our own hearts. The painful exercise of honest self-examination surprises us. We discover that so much of our lives, so much even of the ways we are blessing the world around us, flows subtly from the fountain of Self. The gift is given, the service is rendered, the sacrifice is made, not out of the large-hearted motives we present to others, and to God, and even to ourselves, but for self-serving purposes. And that's only considering what others see. What about the ugliness of our lives when no one's looking? How do we kill the sins done in the dark?

The question, then, isn't *whether* we need to grow but *how*. And for everyone who has been born again, somewhere amid these diverse reactions there will always be a seed of sincere desire for growth.

How then does it happen?

The basic point of this 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.

My argument is that 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.

This is roughly the way Henry Scougal outlined the Christian life in his little book *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*.¹ Scougal was a professor of divinity at the University of Aberdeen who died of tuberculosis at age twenty-eight. In 1677 he wrote a lengthy letter to a discouraged friend which later became the book. It was the catalyst in the conversion of British evangelist George Whitefield, who said, “I never knew what true religion was till God sent me this excellent treatise.”² In that book Scougal says that some Christians think we grow through purer behavior, others through sharper doctrine, and others through richer emotions, but real change occurs through this reality: the life of God in the soul of man.

Scougal and other saints from the past will help us climb inside the Bible and see the riches that God has for us in his word for our day-to-day Christian lives. And we will bring to the table various sages from the past to help really understand the Scriptures. The vast majority of wisdom available to us today is found among the dead. Though their spirits are now with Christ in heaven, the books and sermons of Augustine, Gregory the Great, Luther, Calvin, Knox, Sibbes, Goodwin, Owen, Bunyan, Edwards, Whitefield, Ryle, Spurgeon, Bavinck, Lewis, and Lloyd-Jones remain with us. So we will draw strength and insight from the great ones of the past far more than the famous ones of the present as we consider what Scripture gives us for growing in Christ.

And so we will be thinking in this book about “real change for real sinners,” as our subtitle puts it—as opposed to surface change for

1 Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 1996).

2 In Thomas S. Kidd, *George Whitefield: America's Spiritual Founding Father* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 28.

theoretical sinners. 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*. If you confess the doctrine of original sin but at the same time feel yourself to be doing pretty well as a Christian, you can put this book back on the shelf. This book is for the frustrated. The exhausted. Those on the brink. Those on the verge of giving up any real progress in their Christian growth. If you not only subscribe to the doctrine of original sin on paper but also find yourself proving the doctrine of original sin in your daily life, this book is for you.

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. And it's the normal way God deals with us. Take your time.

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

Third, I encourage you not to consume this book but to reflect your way through it. Maybe that means journaling alongside reading. Maybe it means reading with a friend. Do whatever you can to process slowly, marinating, meditating, letting the Bible's truths shepherd

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you into the green pastures you long for in your walk with the Lord. Fast reading, for a book like this, is minimally absorbing reading.

Fourth, 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 a heterodox 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.

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.

Who then is this person?

Unsearchable

Ephesians speaks of “the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Eph. 3:8). The Greek word underlying “unsearchable” occurs just one other time in the New Testament, in Romans 11:33: “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How *unsearchable* are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” Romans 11 calls God’s wisdom and knowledge unsearchable. That makes sense. God is infinite and omniscient; of course his wisdom and knowledge are unsearchable. But Ephesians 3 calls Christ’s *riches* unsearchable. How so? What does it mean that there are riches in Christ and that these riches are unsearchable? That we can dig and dig but never hit bottom on them?

As you wade into this book, let me propose an idea. Let me suggest that you consider the possibility that your current mental idea of Jesus is the tip of the iceberg. That there are wondrous depths to him, realities about him, still awaiting your discovery. I’m not disregarding the real discipleship already at play in your life and the true discoveries of the depths of Jesus Christ you have already made. But let me ask you to open yourself up to the possibility that one reason you see modest growth and ongoing sin in your life—if that is indeed the case—is that the Jesus you are following is a junior varsity Jesus, an unwittingly reduced Jesus, an unsurprising and

predictable Jesus. I'm not assuming that's the case. I'm just asking you to test yourself, with honesty.

When Christopher Columbus reached the Caribbean in 1492, he named the natives "Indians," thinking he had reached what Europeans of the time referred to as "the Indies" (China, Japan, and India). In fact he was nowhere close to South or East Asia. In his path were vast regions of land, unexplored and uncharted, of which Columbus knew nothing. He assumed the world was smaller than it was.

Have we made a similar mistake with regard to Jesus Christ? Are there vast tracts of who he is, according to biblical revelation, that are unexplored? Have we unintentionally reduced him to manageable, predictable proportions? Have we been looking at a junior varsity, decaffeinated, one-dimensional Jesus of our own making, thinking we're looking at the real Jesus? Have we snorkeled in the shallows, thinking we've now hit bottom on the Pacific?

In this chapter I'd like to mention seven facets of Christ, seven "regions" of Christ that may be under-explored in our generation. Dozens more could be considered. But we'll restrict ourselves to these seven: ruling, saving, befriending, persevering, interceding, returning, and tenderness. The point of this exercise is to bring the living Christ himself into sharper, starker contrast, to see him loom larger and more radiant and more glorious than ever before—to trade in our snorkel and face mask for scuba gear that takes us down into depths we've never peered into before. —and to seek Christian growth out of an accurate and ever-deepening vision of the Christ to whom we have been united.

Ruling

Jesus exercises supreme authority over the entire universe.

Just before his ascension he said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt. 28:18). He is not hoping to

be in charge; he rules supremely now. The world's sidelining of his authority does nothing to reflect the reality of that authority. From heaven's perspective, everything is going according to plan. Jesus Christ is overseeing all that happens, both in the church and in world history at large. Our perception of and ability to see his rule may wax and wane; but that's perception only. His actual rule holds steady—supreme, strong, exhaustive, all-seeing. No drug deal goes down apart from his awareness, no political scandal unfolds beyond the reach of his vision, no injustice can be exacted behind his back. When today's world leaders gather together, they themselves are held in the hand of a risen Galilean carpenter.

This supreme reign holds true not only for the cosmos and for world history but also for your own little life. He sees you. He knows you. Nothing is hid from his gaze. You will be judged one day not according to what was visible to others but according to what you really were and did. The Bible says that when Jesus comes to judge the world, he “will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart” (1 Cor. 4:5). Not only what we did in secret, but even our very motives will be laid bare and judged.

We may not see Jesus with our eyes. But he is the most real thing in the universe. The Bible says that “in him all things hold together” (Col. 1:17). Subtract Jesus from the universe, and everything falls apart. He is not a bobblehead Savior, to be smiled at and merely added to an otherwise well-oiled life. He is the mighty sustainer of the universe, to whose supreme rule we will bow the knee in either this life or the next (Phil. 2:10).

Consider the depiction of him in Revelation 1. John is clearly attempting to capture in words what cannot be captured in words as he describes

one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. (Rev. 1:13–17)

Have you reduced the Lord Jesus to a safe, containable, predictable Savior who pitches in and helps out your otherwise smoothly running existence? Have you treated what is spiritually nuclear as a double-A battery? Might one reason we stall out in our growth in Christ be that we have unwittingly domesticated the expansive authority and rule of Jesus Christ over all things? Might we be lacking an appropriate fear of, wonder at, trembling before, the Lord Jesus, the real Jesus who will one day silence the raging of the nations with a moment's whisper?

Jesus rules.

Saving

It may seem obvious that the real Jesus is a saving Jesus. But I mean something quite specific when I call him “saving.” I mean he is saving *and not only helping*. As sinners we are not wounded but dead in our trespasses and we need not merely strengthening or helping but resurrection, a full-scale deliverance (Eph. 2:1–6).

As we consider our growth in Christ, do we have an impoverished view of the length to which God had to go in Christ to deliver us? And in our ongoing walk with the Lord now, do we functionally believe that the healthy Christian life is basically a matter of our efforts, baptized with a little extra push from Jesus?

Do we know what it means to be *saved*? In Luke's Gospel, Jesus tells a parable to make the point:

One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher."

"A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives

sins?” And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” (Luke 7:36–50)

Every human is five hundred denarii in debt. The point of the parable is that we tend to *feel* only fifty denarii in debt. The more obvious failures of a given culture sense their sinfulness more readily than others and are therefore readier and more eager for a deliverance that sweeps them up out of death with a full and total salvation.

One reason our spiritual growth grinds down is that we gradually lose a heart sense of the profound length to which Jesus went to save us. *Save* us. When we were running full speed the other direction, he chased us down, subdued our rebellion, and opened our eyes to see our need of him and his all-sufficiency to meet that need. We were not drowning, in need of being thrown a life-preserver; we were stone-dead at the bottom of the ocean. He pulled us up, breathed new life into us, and set us on our feet—and every breath we now draw is owing to his full and utter deliverance of us in all our helplessness and death.

Jesus saves.

Befriending

“No longer do I call you servants . . . but I have called you friends” (John 15:15). A heart sense of the friendship of Jesus with his own is a facet of his all-sufficiency without which vital growth cannot happen.

Some of us may have a strong sense of the transcendent glory of Jesus—as vital an aspect of who he is as any. We tremble at the thought of him. His resplendent greatness looms over our daily consciousness. We approach him with reverence and awe. As we should!

But he who is both Lion and Lamb is both transcendent and immanent, both far and near, both great and good—both King and Friend. I am asking you whether the Savior is your dearest and truest *friend*.

What does a friend do? A friend draws near in time of need. A friend delights to come into solidarity with us, bearing our burdens. A friend listens. A friend is available to us, never too high or important to give us time.

A friend shares his deepest heart. That's precisely the point of the above quote from John 15, which more fully reads, "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15). Incredible: the triune God brings us into his plans to restore the universe. He makes us part of his inner circle. He informs us of what he is doing and welcomes our participation in it.

Jesus was accused of being "a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:34). Yet that very accusation, laced with contempt, is deep comfort to those who know that they fall into that category of "sinners." That is why these two groups (tax collectors and sinners) were precisely those who "were all drawing near to hear him" in Luke 15:1. Around Jesus, sinners—those who *know* themselves to be sinners—feel safe. They find themselves both known to be guilty and embraced in love, rather than one or the other. Our felt shame is what draws Jesus in. He is the mighty friend of sinners.

And what other kind of Savior will do? Who of us could really get fresh traction in our lives if we were following a Savior who kept a safe distance? Who treated us not like friends but like employees? But if this is a Savior who draws near to us, who is repelled only by self-righteousness but never by acknowledged shame and weakness, there is no limit to just how deep a transformation is possible in us. It is at our point of deepest guilt and regret that his friendship embraces us most assuredly, most steadfastly.

If he is the friend of sinners, and if you know yourself to be a sinner, then let him befriend you more deeply than you ever have. Open up to him as you do to no other earthly friend. Let him love you as the friend of failures, the invincible ally of the weak.

Jesus befriends us.

Persevering

It is the nature of all human relationships that they vacillate. We profess undying commitment to each other, and we truly mean it. But we humans are fickle. Even in marriage, we enter in by force of a covenant. Why? Because we know our feelings come and go. We need a bond that goes deeper than our feelings to bind husband and wife together.

Who is Jesus? A non-vacillating friend. He perseveres. Heading into the final week of his earthly life, John's Gospel tells us, "having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (John 13:1). Jesus binds himself to his people. No expiration date. No end of the road. Our side of the commitment will falter and stumble, but his never does.

We will not grow in Christ if we view his presence and favor as a ticking clock, ready for an alarm to go off once we fail him enough. We can flourish into deeper health only as the truth settles over us that once Jesus has brought us to himself, he will never be looking for an off-ramp. He will stick by us to the end. In that knowledge we calm down and begin to flourish. One Bible scholar rightly called our growth in Christ "a strangely relaxed kind of strenuousness."¹ We strain forward, but it is a straining that is at the same time relaxed,

1 C. F. D. Moule, "'The New Life' in Colossians 3:1-17," *Review and Expositor* 70, no. 4 (1973): 482.

because it has been settled in our hearts that we cannot sin our way out of the grip of Jesus.

That's the logic of Romans 5. Jesus died for us “while we were still weak” (v. 6), “while we were enemies” (v. 10)—he certainly isn't going to let us go now that we are his brothers. If Jesus went to the cross for us when we did not belong to him, he has proven that he will hang in there with us now that we do.

Jesus perseveres with us.

Interceding

Another vital yet neglected part of our growth in Christ is knowing that his work did not end when we rose from the dead. It is common but mistaken to limit the work of Christ to

birth → life → death → burial → resurrection → ascension.

But this leaves off the part of his work that he is doing right now:

birth → life → death → burial → resurrection → ascension
→ intercession

The Bible says that no one can condemn believers because “Christ Jesus is the one . . . who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us” (Rom. 8:34). He is speaking up for us. *Jesus prays for us*. This is what the ascended Christ does. The old theologian Thomas Goodwin said, “Let me tell you, he would still be preaching this day, but he had other business to do for you in heaven, where he is now praying and interceding for you, even when you are sinning; as on earth we see he did for the Jews when they were a-crucifying him.”²

2 Thomas Goodwin, *Encouragements to Faith*, in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, 12 vols. (repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2006), 4:224.

Jesus is not bored in heaven. He is fully engaged on our behalf, as engaged as ever he was on earth. He is interceding for us. Why? Because we continue to sin *as believers*. If conversion so changed us that we never sinned again, we would not need Christ's intercessory work. We would only need his death and resurrection to pay for our pre-conversion sins. But he is a comprehensive Savior. His present intercessory work applies his past atoning work moment-by-moment before the Father as we move through life desiring to please the Lord but often failing. The Bible says that Jesus "is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25). His speaking on our behalf in the courts of heaven is a constant, abiding reality—"he always lives to make intercession."

We will grow in Christ only as we recognize the ally Jesus Christ is to us, now in heaven. He did not die and rise again on our behalf back then only to stand now with arms crossed seeing how we'll do in response. He continues to work on our behalf—he goes "to the uttermost" for us—advocating for us when no one else will, not even we ourselves. *He is more committed to your growth in him than you are.*

Jesus intercedes for us.

Returning

Our growth in Christ also draws strength from a vivid heart sense of his imminent return.

It is hard to move forward in the Christian life if we allow ourselves to be lulled into the monotonous sense that this world will simply roll on forever as it currently is. But as we foster an expectation of the time "when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire" (2 Thess. 1:7–8), urgency and expectancy spur us forward.

Do we really believe that one day, “in that resurrection morning,” as Jonathan Edwards preached in 1746, “when the Sun of Righteousness shall appear in the heavens, shining in all his brightness and glory, he will come forth as a bridegroom; he shall come in the glory of his Father, with all his holy angels”?³ Consider it: This is going to happen on an actual day in world history. A certain month, a certain date. It has been fixed (Acts 17:31). Only God knows (Matt. 24:36). But it is imminent (Matt. 24:42). When it happens, will we not lament our complacency about growing in Christ? Will we not be mystified at how our bank accounts and reputations loomed so large in our minds, so much larger than our actual spiritual conditions?

Jesus left this earth quietly, but he will return loudly (1 Thess. 4:16). He slipped away; but he will come roaring back. It may be tomorrow. Even if not, we’re one day closer.

Jesus is returning.

Tender

Finally—and this is what I want ringing in your heart most strongly as you continue through the rest of this book—Jesus is infinitely tender.

He is the most open and accessible, the most peaceful and accommodating, person in the universe. He is the gentlest, least abrasive person you will ever experience. 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

3 Jonathan Edwards, “The Church’s Marriage to Her Sons, and to Her God,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 25, *Sermons and Discourses, 1743–1758*, ed. Wilson H. Kimnach (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 183.

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. Who does he hang out with? 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 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.

“I am gentle and lowly in heart.”

Jesus is tender.

The Real Christ

Make your growth journey a journey into Christ himself. Explore uncharted regions of who he is. Resist the tendency we all have to whittle him down to our preconceived expectation of what he must be like. Let him surprise you. Let his fullness arrest you and buoy you along. Let him be a big Christ. C. S. Lewis remarked in a 1959 letter:

“Gentle Jesus,” my elbow! The most striking thing about Our Lord is the union of great ferocity with extreme tenderness. (Remember Pascal? “I do not admire the extreme of one virtue unless you show me at the same time the extreme of the opposite virtue. One shows one’s greatness not by being at an extremity but by being simultaneously at two extremities and filling all the space between.”)

Add to this that He is also a supreme ironist, dialectician, and (occasionally) humourist. So go on! You are on the right track now: getting to the real Man behind all the plaster dolls that have been substituted for Him. This is the appearance in Human form of the God who made the Tiger *and* the Lamb, the avalanche *and* the rose. He’ll frighten and puzzle you: but the real Christ *can* be loved and admired as the doll can’t.⁴

Determine today, before God, through the Bible and good books explaining it, that you will spend the rest of your life wading into the unsearchable riches of the real Christ.

Let him, in all his endless fullness, love you into growth.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, vol. 3, *Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy, 1950–1963*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2009), 1011; emphasis original.