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He is Strong When We are Weak: A Review of Gentle and Lowly

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Abstract

"We often view the heart as the center of our emotions, but it meant much more than this in the ancient world."

Posting about the book *Gentle and Lowly* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/he-is-strong-when-we-are-weak-a-review-of-gentle-and-lowly/>

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He is Strong When We are Weak: A Review of *Gentle and Lowly*

Donald Roth
July 7, 2021

Title: *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers*

Author: Dane Ortlund

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When our consciences are truly pricked, we are repulsed by our sins. When we are in anguish, we often feel disconnected from others, including our God, and we naturally join the Psalmist, crying “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In these times, as we are caught up in pushing or feeling pushed away, it’s natural for us to think that God shares our inclinations. After all, we’re made in His image, right?

The soul of Dane Ortlund’s *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* is to help us realize that this natural impulse is exactly backward. When we are weak, when we are afflicted, when we are driven into the wilderness places, the tender heart of our Savior is especially drawn to us. For readers oppressed by the sense that they are not delightful, Ortlund draws on Scripture and luminary theologians of the past (especially Puritans) to remind us that our Lord’s greatest delight is to bind up our wounds and draw us to Himself.

In this wonderful collection of short reflections on the heart of Christ, Ortlund relentlessly fixates our eyes on what Scripture reveals to us about God’s desire for us, provides a convincing case for why he’s right, and offers all Christians a worthy and accessible meditation to inspire and assure us in all seasons of life.

Fixing our Eyes

Have you ever tried to really get someone to see something the way you do, to really appreciate something you're passionate about? The short chapters that make up this book create a rhythm of reinforcement of central themes that feels like Ortlund is grabbing the reader by the head and focusing us on something really important. Every time I turned my head away, it was like I was being turned back, like Ortlund was stopping me and saying "No, but do you *really see*?"

The book's short chapters likely contribute to this rhythm, and it would probably help the reader keep the central ideas in mind if they only read one chapter a day over a few weeks. However, I read the book in a few sittings, and the effect of the repetition of themes at first walked a line of turning me off—that is, until I finally *saw*.

The core of Ortlund's book is the one time in Scripture where Christ speaks directly about what motivates Him. In Matthew 11:29, Jesus offers this invitation: "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."

We often view the heart as the center of our emotions, but it meant much more than this in the ancient world. In the context in which it was spoken, the "heart" was the center of being; it was the animating "why" of whoever was described. When Jesus says that He is gentle and lowly, He is saying that the reason He gets out of the bed in the morning is to gather in "all who labor and are heavy laden."

Ortlund unpacks what this really means through 23 short, devotional chapters, and I imagine that there will be at least one of these approaches that moves you from an intellectual, objective knowledge of the theological truth that Ortlund is highlighting and into the sort of personal, subjective knowledge of Christ that the author wants his readers to experience.

Drawing Near

For me, the movement from seeing to *seeing* happened the second time I sat down to read a chunk of the book. Chapters eight and nine deal with the present, ongoing work of Christ in intercession and advocacy, respectively. Ortlund calls intercession "one of the more neglected doctrines in the church today,"¹ and I was convicted that this has been true in my own faith walk. I have had a tendency

to emphasize the once-for-all work of Christ on the cross and the current and coming dominion of Christ on the throne of heaven. My Christ was a priest in the sense of the final sacrifice described in Hebrews 10, but I neglected the “prayers and supplications...loud cries and tears” offered by that priest in Hebrews 5.

In between those two passages is the quote that frames Ortlund’s eighth chapter, namely Hebrews 7:25, which says, “Consequently, [Christ] is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” In the immediate context, “he...lives to make intercession” is a reference to the fact that Christ is not subject to death and so can carry out His priestly calling; however, Ortlund makes a compelling case that Christ’s power to “save to the uttermost” means that it’s not just that Christ is still alive to intercede for us, He *lives* for it.

This emphasis broke through for me as I reflected on these chapters in conversation with a book I read a few months ago that focused on the intersection of theology and psychology.² Specifically, that book described the classical view of emotions as functions of pursuing what is desirable and avoiding what is harmful. The concept is more complex than this, but this essential summary is what jumped out at me in a new way through Ortlund’s writing.

I realized my default was to think of Christ’s intercession like a parent whose kid just broke something in the store. With a heavy, frustrated sigh, He would intervene to assure the shopkeeper that He would pay the tab. It was natural to think this way; I have young children myself.

This isn’t how Christ responds, though. Even when I am repelled from myself by my own sin, Christ is pursuing me. When I am overwhelmed by sadness (an aversion to my situation), Christ is pursuing me. Christ is actively interceding to repair our broken relationship with the Father and draw us to Him, but He is also our advocate, coming alongside us most closely in times when our need for that restoration is greatest.

I didn’t know it coming to the book, but I needed to *see* so that I could come to more personally know the comfort of a Savior who pursues me, especially in times where I am pulling away.

Revealing Himself

This insight also sunk in because Ortlund provided a satisfying sense of *why* Christ would have this sort of heart for sinners and sufferers. Christ delights to draw near to us because it demonstrates who He is.

We often know that we possess certain qualities that others don't always see until the occasion calls for us to demonstrate them. We might be courageous, but that courage isn't displayed in times of safety and security. We might have great endurance, but that isn't on display if we're typically involved in sprints. There is a certain pleasure that we take in proving to others (and ourselves) who we consider ourselves to be.

Christ is called the great physician, so it makes sense that He would take special delight in healing the sick (and **Matthew 9:12-13** suggests that He does). When God described His character to Moses, He described Himself in Exodus 34:6-7 as "merciful and gracious, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin," so it makes sense that He would delight in showing this mercy and love, even when He is also a thrice holy God who will not abide sin.

Ultimately, this book was a needed and refreshing reminder that our God calls us into a personal relationship with Himself. Doctrine can tend to abstraction when it is not linked to this sort of felt connection to the person that the doctrine describes. Mere feeling lacks substance when it is not grounded in the revelation of God. For all their reputation for austerity, the Puritans felt deeply, and this feeling was rooted in a clear vision of our Savior and who He revealed Himself to be. If you find yourself in need of encouragement to see the heart of your Savior in a time of sin or sorrow, then Ortlund provides an important and accessible avenue to that assurance.

1. p. 77

2. That book was Matthew Lapine's *The Logic of the Body*