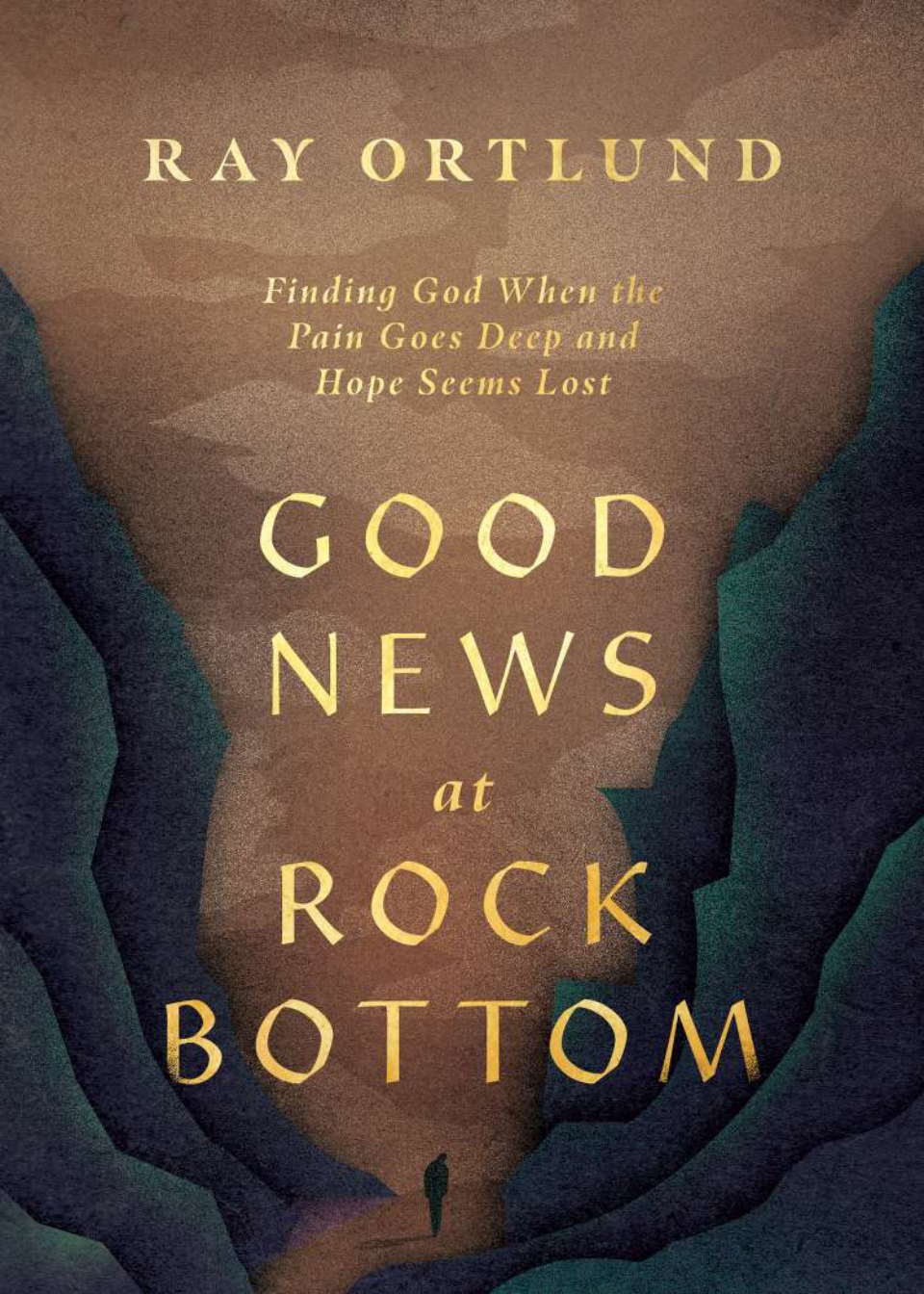
RAY ORTLUND

Finding God When the Pain Goes Deep and Hope Seems Lost

GOOD NEWS *at* ROCK BOTTOM



"I know pain, inside and out. I live intimately with its brutal assault, and at times it almost convinces me that all hope is lost. That's when I reach out for the kind of rock-solid hope that is able to survive the worst of times. Honestly, it's there. It's available. And it's meant for you. Ray Ortlund tenderly explains how to find and embrace it in his excellent book *Good News at Rock Bottom*. I love Ray's style of writing—always accessible, believable, and gentle on the heart. The book you hold in your hands is extraordinary, and I envision that, by the last page, you will find the hope-filled release and relief you are yearning for."

Joni Eareckson Tada, Founder and CEO, Joni and Friends International Disability Center

"Simeon had been waiting for the consolation of Israel, but what he found was Jesus (Luke 2:25), and that consolation from Christ soaks every page of this book. With understanding and tenderness, Ray Ortlund draws us back again and again to the all-sufficiency and matchless compassion of Christ. This is pastoral theology at its best—real, biblical, and deeply comforting."

Sam Allberry, Associate Pastor, Immanuel Nashville; author, *One with My Lord*

"Whenever I feel I'm hitting rock bottom, Ray Ortlund is one of the first people I call. He doesn't cheerily wave away pain. He's seen what lurks in the darkness. Yet I always walk away hopeful and grateful and feeling alive again. That's because he knows the light that shines in the darkness. Reading this piercing book, you will experience the counsel of one who knows how bad it can get and who can help you see how good it can be."

Russell Moore, Editor in Chief, *Christianity Today*; author, *Losing Our Religion: An Altar Call for Evangelical America*

"Ray Ortlund writes these words as a friend in the trenches with you, desperately needing God to be who he says he is in Isaiah 57:15. The night before I read this book, I was kept awake by loneliness, guilt, shame, and fear. The night after I read this, I was kept awake by the impossibility of processing how much God loves me. *Good News at Rock Bottom* was a love letter directly from God to me, through Ray. Trust me, read this! I'm already reading it again, with my wife and kids!"

Walker Hayes, singer; songwriter

"This gospel-saturated book has been so encouraging to me! I found myself nodding on every page as Ray Ortlund describes the pain of betrayal, the isolation of loneliness, the separation of sin, and the beautiful way God draws near to the brokenhearted. Ortlund underscores and illuminates this stunning truth: When we reach rock bottom, we find God is closer than we ever imagined and better than we ever dreamed. I highly recommend this book!"

Vaneetha Rendall Risner, author, *Desperate for Hope* and *Walking through Fire*

Good News at Rock Bottom

Crossway Books by Ray Ortlund

The Death of Porn: Men of Integrity Building a World of Nobility

The Death of Porn Study Guide: Men of Integrity Building a World of Nobility

Good News at Rock Bottom: Finding God When the Pain Goes Deep and Hope Seems Lost

The Gospel: How the Church Portrays the Beauty of Christ

Isaiah: God Saves Sinners

Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel

Proverbs: Wisdom That Works

You're Not Crazy: Gospel Sanity for Weary Churches, with Sam Allberry

Good News at Rock Bottom

Finding God When the Pain Goes Deep and Hope Seems Lost

Ray Ortlund

CROSSWAY®
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Good News at Rock Bottom: Finding God When the Pain Goes Deep and Hope Seems Lost
© 2025 by Ray Ortlund
Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.
Published in association with the literary agency of Wolgemuth & Associates.

Cover design: David Fassett

First printing 2025

Printed in the United States of America
Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. The ESV text may not be quoted in any publication made available to the public by a Creative Commons license. The ESV may not be translated in whole or in part into any other language.

Scripture quotations marked CSB have been taken from the Christian Standard Bible®, copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible® and CSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the New American Standard Bible®, copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. All rights reserved. www.lockman.org.

Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, a Division of Tyndale House Ministries, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked REB are taken from the Revised English Bible, copyright © Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press 1989. All rights reserved.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.
Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-9886-9
ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-9888-3
PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-9887-6

Names: Ortlund, Raymond C., Jr., author.

Title: Good news at rock bottom : finding God when the pain goes deep and hope seems lost / Ray Ortlund.
Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, [2025] | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024023573 (print) | LCCN 2024023574 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433598869 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781433598876 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433598883 (epub)
Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Gospels. | Christian life. | Depressed persons—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Anxiety—Religious aspects—Christianity.
Classification: LCC BS2555.55 .O87 2025 (print) | LCC BS2555.55 (ebook) | DDC 248.8/6—dc23/eng/20240911
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024023573
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024023574

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

LB 34 33 32 31 30 29 28 27 26 25
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To
Immanuel Church
and
St. Patrick's Anglican Church,
my dear friends in Christ

Contents

Preface *xi*

1 Way Up High, Way Down Low *1*
2 Betrayed *27*
3 Trapped *53*
4 Lonely *83*
5 Dying *109*
Conclusion *135*

Acknowledgments *137*
General Index *140*
Scripture Index *144*

Preface

THANK YOU FOR PICKING UP this book. My plan here is to ask of you as little as I can and to give to you as much as I can. You have a busy life to live. But right now, while we are together, literally on the same page, let's make the most of it.

Here is what I promise you: I will try to explain the gospel of Jesus honestly and helpfully for your needs. I will not lie to you. And I will try to believe the gospel honestly and helpfully for my own needs.

Here is what I ask of you: Give Jesus a chance. Allow for the possibility that the good news about him is relevant to what you really, really care about—maybe more relevant than you have ever dared to believe.

So, my honest thoughts, with your courageous openness—let's see what happens.

This book began as a series of talks on Wednesday evenings at Immanuel Church, Nashville, in September 2023.

Immanuel is a church where people can heal. It's where I healed—and I was the pastor! So I wanted those talks to serve that gentle purpose. But still, I was surprised at the people's response. Something special was happening there in that room, and it was not me. It was more than all of us put together. It was the Lord himself, with the healing touch only he can bring.

Now I hope this book brings some of that healing to you too, by his grace, wherever you are, whatever you're facing.

And I wish I could give you a hug right now.

For thus says the One who is high and lifted up,
who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:
"I dwell in the high and holy place,
and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit,
to revive the spirit of the lowly,
and to revive the heart of the contrite."

ISAIAH 57:15

1

Way Up High, Way Down Low

YOU DON'T NEED TO GO looking for it. Sooner or later, it comes and finds you—something horrible, some experience unforeseeable and even unimaginable. It comes upon you. It lays hold of you. It changes you. And the reality you always understood to be your life—suddenly that life is gone for good. Now you're stuck with a different reality, and not one you chose. It was forced upon you. And however it happened, things are different for you now. And not in a better way.

I'm sorry to be dredging up bad memories for you. But if we sit quietly before the Lord for a while, I believe our hearts can crack open to something new—strong hope, deep healing,

> to revive the spirit of the lowly,
> and to revive the heart of the contrite.

So, please don't close this book. I will be careful in everything I say. I have bad memories too.

What was it that came after you? Maybe it was betrayal. Someone won your heart. You trusted them, and you gave your heart away. But eventually, you found out they didn't really mean it. You did mean it—way down deep, too. But they didn't. Then you saw it, and it was a shock. To this day, the memory, the very thought, is still hard for you to bear. And they aren't coming back to apologize—ever. But your heart is still broken.

Or maybe it was a betrayal of your own. Maybe you were the one who crossed a line, knowing it was wrong. You were reaching for a thrill, to escape your boring life. You felt you deserved something exciting for a change. You wanted to find out if you still had what it takes. But that sin you picked up in your hands to play with, just for a while—now it *owns* you. You're trapped.

Or maybe it's nobody's fault. Maybe it's just the way your life has unfolded. It's like you've never found that place where you really belong, or that person you want to be with forever. Wherever you go, you feel like an outsider looking in. You don't hate your life. You have a lot to be thankful for. But you're lonely—every day.

Or maybe it's loss. For example, as you age. You don't just lose your job. You lose your youthful vigor, your very health.

You're not amazing anymore. You get tired just walking upstairs. And tomorrow will be *more* loss—maybe catastrophic loss. You look at yourself in the mirror and think, "Really? That's *me*?" And any time now, your life will be over.

We could go on and on. There are many ways to hit rock bottom. But everyone goes there. Which means you and I have a lot in common. Our broken hearts can bring us together. That's what I'm hoping for as you read this book.

We're in This Together

Neither of us wants to spiral down into self-pity. That doesn't help us, and it doesn't honor Christ. What you and I do want is enough hope to keep going with dignity. We want to face life as it is, upheld by Christ. Yes, we suffer anguish along the way. But we want to feel loved by him, as only survivors can.

We accept, we *deeply* accept, that there is no easy way through this world. But we want to walk *his* way, all the way. He himself is living proof that the cross leads to resurrection. His is the *only* way into the life that is truly life, even at rock bottom—especially at rock bottom. Our pain has become too real to settle for any theoretical "salvation." We're staking everything now on Jesus being real to the real us.

What if we follow Jesus together, you there and me here? We can find, to our surprise, that it's down at rock bottom

where *he finds us*. In fact, the low place of loss and bewilderment and regrets and tears—*he's already down there*. It's where he dwells, where he awaits us and welcomes us.

It's not so bad down at rock bottom with Jesus there. And some really great people are down there too—the best people I've ever met. Welcome to the party! We weep at this party, but we laugh too. We laugh a lot. And we don't have to fake our joy. In fact, we wouldn't go back to our above-average lives for anything. We feel the way Martin Luther did.

> May a merciful God preserve me from a Christian Church in which everyone is a saint! I want to be and remain in the church and little flock of the fainthearted, the feeble and the ailing, who feel and recognize the wretchedness of their sins, who sigh and cry to God incessantly for comfort and help, who believe in the forgiveness of sins.[1]

There is a reason we talk about going to "a deeper place" with Christ. He meets us at our worst moments and our lowest defeats. He even takes us deeper than we thought we

1 Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 22, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 1–4* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1957), 55, quoted in *1 Corinthians*, ed. Scott M. Manetsch, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 29.

needed to go. If we could have found an easier way, we would have settled for it! But since it's honest reality with Jesus we want, then the real us can be known *only* in the low place. Our false selves are exposed as frauds. It's painful. But our selfish dreams fading away to nothing—that's where Jesus surprises us with everything we really wanted all along. But he sure isn't the cheerleader of the triumphant winners. He is "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isa. 53:3). He knows rock bottom firsthand. He *is* our good news at rock bottom.

The One Who Dwells with Us

What helps us most, when we need help urgently, is to discover *who Jesus is* for *people like us*. His wisdom is better than our escapism. What we want deep down is Jesus himself, with us, even us.

For example, Anselm, a theologian back in the eleventh century, had a conversation with himself one day. He dared to "change the subject" in his thoughts from his own turbulence to God. Anselm spoke bluntly to himself:

> Come now, little man, flee for a moment from your preoccupations, escape for a while from your agitated thoughts. Put aside now your burdensome cares, and postpone your wearisome toils. Abandon yourself for a while to God, and

> rest a little in him. Enter into the resting place of your soul, shut out everything but God and what helps you to seek him. And after locking the door, seek him. Say now, O my whole heart, say now to God: "I seek your face. Your face, O Lord, I need."[2]

Whatever happened next, I'm guessing Anselm went on to have a good day! In our hyper-busy lives today, it can be even harder to get close to God. But rock bottom opens that door. We're finally desperate enough to shut the noise out and turn to him. We sure don't get to that profound place while sipping ice-cold lemonade on a sunny beach at Kiawah Island, do we? But when our hearts are crying out, "Your face, O Lord, I *need*," it's because we're in trouble. *So thank you, Lord, for trouble*.

C. S. Lewis said it well in one of his stories. Just this snippet of the dialogue makes the point:

> "And what is this valley called?"
>
> "We call it now simply Wisdom's Valley; but the oldest maps mark it as the Valley of Humiliation."[3]

2 Anselm, *St. Anselm's Proslogion*, trans. M. J. Charlesworth (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), 110–11. I have changed the translation slightly.

3 C. S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1958), 125.

The Bible is an old map. It is honest, and hopeful. It's meant for real sufferers who wouldn't mind getting their lives back and having a future again. What then does the Bible have to say to people like us?

Where God Meets Us

> For thus says the One who is high and lifted up,
> who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:
> "I dwell in the high and holy place,
> and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit,
> to revive the spirit of the lowly,
> and to revive the heart of the contrite." (Isa. 57:15)

Let's do this: let's pick that verse up in our hands, turn it over and over like a priceless jewel, and see its facets of ancient wisdom from different angles. We can also think of it like a piece of hard candy. We pop it into our mouths, swirl it around with our tongues, and enjoy all the flavors.

The healing powers of this one verse can flow down into the deepest crevices of anguish within us. My plan, then, is to stare at Isaiah 57:15 for a while in each chapter of this book. We will keep gaining new insights along the way.

The great preacher Charles Spurgeon has been quoted as saying, "It is folly to think the Lord provides grace for every

trouble but the one you are in today."[4] We are never helped by looking over at someone else and thinking, "I wish I had their life. Mine is such a letdown." The truth is, you *cannot* bear the burden of that wished-for life you'd gladly trade up to. Yes, it looks good. But it wasn't shaped to fit *you*. You'd end up hating it. And by God's grace, you *can* bear the burden of the actual life you're living. He is lifting you into your true dignity and destiny. And on your way there, you'll be encouraged by your fellow sufferers as they walk with you. I want this book to be one of those encouragements. If we savor Isaiah 57:15 *for the rest of our lives*, it will keep us going.

What, then, can we expect to happen, as the high and holy one dwells with us down at rock bottom?

First, let's notice the obvious: Isaiah 57:15 is about *God*. And for good reason. Our painful experiences raise *huge* questions about God. Like, "Where was he when I needed him most?" And the Bible doesn't always answer our questions. What it offers is a new way to hope and to worship—right where we are.[5]

4 I have been unable to confirm the source.

5 C. H. Spurgeon, "Job's Resignation," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 42 (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1896), no. 2457: "O dear friend, when your grief presses you to the very dust, worship there!"

For example, the first thing we pray for in the Lord's Prayer is "Hallowed be your name" (Matt. 6:9). See that God-first priority? But "hallowed be your name" *isn't* the Lord implying, "I'll get around to *your* problems when I feel like it." He is saying to us, "You will be most helped in your pain today by looking to me first. Here I am, all that I am. I have real grace for the real you, as no one else does. But don't diminish the help I'm offering you by diminishing me." If God doesn't matter that much, we don't matter either. Nothing does.

But Isaiah 57:15 helps us see God, and ourselves, and everything in our lives that we hate—yes, *hate*—with new eyes. Let's take our verse line by line:

For thus says the One who is high and lifted up.

God is not silent. He has something big to say to us, something he wants us to be sure of. And Isaiah wrote it down, because he wants everyone, until the end of time, to know what God above has to say to people like us. Thank you, Isaiah! Truly, "there is something magnificent about these prophet-dreamers who are so sure of God."[6]

6 Ralph S. Cushman, *Practicing the Presence: A Quest for God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1936), 108.

Isaiah is declaring this as a herald, a spokesman for the King. He calls us to give our full attention to a royal proclamation. As a point of comparison, when the brutal king of Assyria attacked Jerusalem, his emissary shouted, "Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria" (Isa. 36:4). Then he proceeded with his saber-rattling blah-blah-blah. But here, our kind King breaks through the angry noise of this world to speak to us. What's the message?

We can think of Isaiah 57:15 as the King's domestic policy. It isn't his mood in the moment—he isn't moody *at all*—but his settled posture toward us as we stumble our way, wounded and exhausted, into his kingdom. God has settled on an arrangement that does two beautiful things at once: it does justice to who God is, and it brings mercy to where we are. The one high and lifted up has mercies for us way down low. And he wants us to be *sure* of it.

In our world of lies and spin, this pronouncement from our faithful King stands out. Every day advertisers, governments, and even friends can lie to us. But what a relief it is to listen to the one far above all the heartbreaking fraudulence of this world! He alone is "Faithful and True" (Rev. 19:11). He doesn't *adhere* to that standard. He *is* the standard. The universe itself will have to implode before the Holy One will lie to us.

So, we're sitting on the edge of our seats, eager to listen.

But wait. Isaiah has more to say about our King. If he is "high and lifted up," what does that even mean? And how does his loftiness up there help us in our troubles down here?

"High and lifted up" doesn't mean God is spatially located above us—like we have to crane our necks to see him. God is spirit (John 4:24). He has no limits, no edges.[7] The Bible says, "Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you" (1 Kings 8:27). In other words, the towering majesty of God transcends all our measurements—all inches, miles, light years. It was the pathetic pagan gods who were limited and localized. "Baal *of Peor*" (Num. 25:3), for example, was like a Mafia crime boss over in the Peor neighborhood.

Let's not slip into the same mentality today. If we cut Jesus down to size as our particular "take" on God, we are denying his greatness. He is no bobblehead "Jesus Junior"! To say he is "high and lifted up," the Bible is straining at the leash of language to describe him. Strong words like *majesty*, *splendor*,

7 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.20.40: "He is not confined to any particular region but is diffused [expansive] through all things [*diffundi per omnia*]. . . . God is set beyond all place, so that when we would seek him we must rise above all perception of body and soul. . . . [He is] of infinite greatness or loftiness, of incomprehensible essence, of boundless might, and of everlasting immortality."

glory, and *greatness*[8] nudge our thoughts upward, toward his actual grandeur. He *exceeds* what we expect, even what we need. He is, and he deserves to be, our King. His "royal dignity"[9] is Isaiah's point.

We can be glad that God is "our Father *in heaven*" (Matt. 6:9). It means he is transcendent. Wherever life may take us, high or low, wonderful or horrible, God is already there, ready for us in all our need.

Let's improve our thoughts about God. The gentle J. I. Packer put it bluntly: "If you have been resigning yourself to the thought that God has left you high and dry, seek grace to be ashamed of yourself. Such unbelieving pessimism deeply dishonors our great God and Savior."[10] He is "of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the Maker, and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible."[11] He sure doesn't need any help from us, does he? *Only he* has "grace upon grace" (John 1:16) for our need upon need.

8 For example, "The LORD . . . is robed in majesty" (Ps. 93:1); "On the glorious splendor of your majesty / . . . I will meditate" (Ps. 145:5); Jesus is "the radiance of the glory of God" (Heb. 1:3); "Praise him according to his excellent greatness!" (Ps. 150:2).

9 John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 105.

10 J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 79.

11 The Thirty-Nine Articles, 1, "Of Faith in the Holy Trinity," in *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms: A Reader's Edition*, ed. Chad Van DixHoorn (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 115.

Years ago, J. B. Phillips, the brilliant Bible translator, wrote a book entitled *Your God Is Too Small*. In it he starts out with this insight: As we grow from childhood to adulthood, our concepts about reality grow bigger—our historical knowledge, our psychological awareness, our cultural sensitivities, and more. Our mental horizons get stretched in every direction. But if our thoughts of God aren't developed too, he starts looking smaller. He can even shrink to the vanishing point. And how can an adult worship a God who seems outclassed by everything else, especially everything terrifying? Phillips writes about each of us, "If, by a great effort of will, he does [keep believing in God], he will always be secretly afraid lest some new truth may expose the juvenility of his faith."[12]

We can't survive, much less flourish, with small thoughts of God. And God himself understands our need. It's why he gave us Isaiah 57:15. The one who is "high and lifted up" towers over everything that makes us feel small and defeated. But nothing about him can be offset by anything down in this world. He is not waiting for anybody's permission. He is not pushing against any door that won't open. As Martin Luther taught us to sing, our King reigns "above all earthly powers."[13]

12 J. B. Phillips, *Your God Is Too Small* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), v–vii.

13 "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," *Worship and Service Hymnal* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope, 1957), 1.

We enjoy standing out under the stars on a clear night and looking up and marveling at the vast expanse of the universe. We feel tiny, but also calm. What if we gaze even higher and see God far above the universe itself? We start feeling even more tiny, and more calm. Whatever we're facing, seeing *God* more clearly helps us breathe a sigh of relief.

Now, line two:

. . . who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy.

You and I experience reality in tiny increments, one moment after another, as time unfolds. But God, in his majestic eternality, is equally present to all points of time at once. For us, time means we have to wait—and we *hate* waiting. Amazon Prime built their success on our impatience! But God is never forced to wait. He isn't stuck inside time. He invented it and stands above it. Time *serves* him.

So there goes old Mr. Time out there, pottering around, doing God's will, slow as molasses—and God is okay with that. The upside is, God is always present in the moment with us. He is *always* right here right now. And as each new second breaks upon us, sometimes with a nasty surprise, God offers us eternal hope.

God "inhabits" eternity, Isaiah says. God *lives* there. God is *who* he is, *where* he is—which means he can attend to us, with no needs of his own. He is free at heart to be *all in* with us all the time.

What's more, ". . . whose name is Holy." His "name" is how he is rightly thought about and prayed to. His "name" makes him accessible. And surprisingly, his name "Holy" is a negative category. I don't mean it's a bad category. But "holy" means God *isn't* like us.

> I am God and not a man,
> the Holy One in your midst. (Hos. 11:9)

For example, the Bible describes God with many wonderful images—a lion, a rock, a shepherd, and so forth. But his name "Holy" means that all these metaphors, while they give us real insights into God, also fall short. Is he like a rock? Yes. How? He's steady and solid. But God is also tender. And no rock in this world is tender. And *everything* about God is "holy" like this—different, and better.

His holiness is not one more trait alongside others—his sovereignty, goodness, power, and so forth. *Everything* about God is holy—holy sovereignty, holy goodness, holy power,

and all the rest of him. That's why his *name*, his very identity, is Holy—different, and better.

Let's always leave room for God to exceed our highest thoughts of him. Thinking about God is the noblest thing we ever do. But we will never wrap our brains around him completely. He will always keep surprising us.

Those are the first two lines of Isaiah 57:15. So far, we know that God stands over all creation, eternally unchanging, and better than our best thoughts of him.

Now, in lines three and four, the King himself speaks:

> I dwell in the high and holy place,
> and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit.

Those two lines answer an urgent personal question: *When everything is on the line for us, where can we find God?* And the answer is, God can be found in two opposite places: way up high where we *can't* go, and way down low where we *can* go. "The high and holy place" is his royal palace in heaven above. It's a real place. The angels live there too. And the opposite place where God can be found is down with everyone who is "of a contrite and lowly spirit"—the devastated people at rock bottom. Here, then, are God's two addresses—up high, and down low.

But God does *not* make his dwelling place in between, in the social space I call "the mushy middle." We all understand that place. It's where people are doing pretty much okay. The kids are above average, the career is on track, and life is basically working. And "church" is a weekend option for upgrading an already pleasant life into an even more pleasant life, bumping up from maybe 6 to 7 on a scale of 1 to 10. That's the world I call "the mushy middle."

Many live there. Many more *want* to live there. It's where we finally get the prestige we want, the superiority, the control, the safe aloofness. It's where "the cool kids" hang out. And who wouldn't like to be invited to their parties?

Some churches cater to the mushy middle. Their "Jesus" is the chaplain to their status quo. He never judges, always approves, and squeezes uncomplainingly into the margin of their busy routines. He knows his place. In fact, he feels lucky to have their attention for one whole hour on a Sunday morning. But Isaiah sees a problem there. *The one who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy—the mushy middle is not his dwelling place.*[14]

Of course, God can get through to anyone anywhere. Some people in that world do love him. But life has not yet

14 Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 134: "[God is] present in all His creatures, *but He is not present in every one of them in the same manner*." Italics added.

forced them to discover *how real he is*. They might even look at someone who is "of a contrite and lowly spirit" and feel sorry for them. It's easy to go to church in the mushy middle, but it's hard to be awestruck by God there. The whole point of that world is to prop up a man-made heaven on earth. Here's the tragedy of that dreamy ideal:

> For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly,
> but the haughty he knows from afar. (Ps. 138:6)

> He who is mighty has done great things for me,
> and holy is his name. . . .
> He has brought down the mighty from their thrones
> and exalted those of humble estate;
> he has filled the hungry with good things,
> and the rich he has sent away empty. (Luke 1:49, 52–53)

What about "contrite and lowly," then? Our very future hangs on those words. Here's what they mean. The word "contrite" means crushed, devastated, beaten down. And the word "lowly" means humiliated, demoted, diminished in worth.[15]

15 J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 358.

Those sufferings land us down at rock bottom—*right where the high and holy one dwells*.[16]

What is the high and holy God doing down with a bunch of losers? *What's going on at rock bottom?* He tells us in the last two lines of our verse:

> . . . to revive the spirit of the lowly,
> and to revive the heart of the contrite.

Whatever others might think of you, the risen Christ doesn't despise you. He isn't wondering when you'll finally "get it" and join the successful big shots of this world. The high and holy Christ is drawn tenderly to the injured, the despairing: "He offers life to those from whom the life has been all but crushed out; he offers life to those whose spirit has been ground down to nothing."[17]

What he *loves* to do is gently breathe hope back into us—not ambition to make it back into the mushy middle, but happiness to live near *him*, wherever *he* dwells. He revives us,

16 Herman Bavinck, *The Wonderful Works of God* (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2019), 117: "*Precisely because* God is the High and Exalted One, and lives in eternity, He also dwells with those who are of a contrite and humble Spirit (Isaiah 57:15)." Italics added.

17 John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

puts fresh heart into us, helping us to believe again that we have a life worth living, better than *anything* on a worldly scale of 1 to 10. He revives us by giving us himself more vividly than we've ever known before—*and* by giving us to one another.

I am adding "one another" into the picture now for a reason. "The lowly" and "the contrite" in these two lines are *plural* in the Hebrew text. God began by talking about an individual: "*him* who is of a contrite and lowly spirit." But now "the lowly" and "the contrite" are a group of people, *a community together down at rock bottom*. Drawn to him, we come together. We start experiencing real community—maybe for the first time.

What is he doing among us? He is wrapping his arms around us all, cherishing us has-beens and exiles as his own dear family. We're a mess, but we're *his* mess. That beautiful community is what we can experience every Sunday in a healthy church.

So we *love* rock bottom! *Jesus* is here. *We* are here. The most honest, gentle, and relaxed people anywhere are here. We wouldn't go back up to the mushy middle for all the money in the world!

We'll keep coming back to Isaiah 57:15. There's even more to enjoy.

Two Closing Thoughts

First, if your broken heart is starting to feel a little less isolated and more included, then maybe Charles Spurgeon can speak for you. Looking back at his conversion to Christ, he said:

> I felt that I could not be happy without fellowship with the people of God. I wanted to be wherever they were. And if anybody ridiculed them, I wished to be ridiculed with them. And if people had an ugly name for them, I wanted to be called by that ugly name. For I felt that, unless I suffered with Christ in his humiliation, I could not expect to reign with him in his glory.[18]

I hope your heart is saying that too. Mine sure is. I'm so done with fishing for approval from the wrong kind of people.

Second, if your heart is still crushed—deep injuries take time to heal—then here is a thought from Jesus himself. He said, "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me" (John 14:1). God has told us, in Isaiah 57:15, that he dwells way up high and way down low. We can't *deserve*

18 C. H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, vol. 1, *The Early Years* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), 145.

someone like that. All he asks us to do is *believe* him. And when our faith opens up, his presence shows up.

This high and holy God, who dwells among the lowly, is *himself* lowly. Jesus said, "I am gentle and lowly in heart" (Matt. 11:29). No surprise, then, that he *loves* to dwell among the lowly. And he invites you to *believe* it: "Believe in God; believe also in me." Will you? He will lead you on from there.

So maybe a conversation has already begun between your wounded soul and the living Christ. It could go like this:[19]

SOUL. I'm so sad, so confused. I'm not sure what to think anymore.

CHRIST. Let not your heart be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.

SOUL. But you don't understand. I'm weak, unsteady. I will let you down.

CHRIST. Let not your heart be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.

SOUL. But what if you find in me some pretty crazy thoughts and feelings? On a bad day, I can be downright ridiculous.

19 I am borrowing this line of thought from John Bunyan, *Come and Welcome to Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1855), 147.

CHRIST. Let not your heart be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.

SOUL. Look, it's hard for me to admit this. But I happen to have some filthy habits you don't even want to know about.

CHRIST. Let not your heart be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.

SOUL. I get it! I get it! But if I agree, if I start believing in you, will you be patient with me while I stumble along the way?

CHRIST. Give me a chance. I will prove myself to you.

SOUL. Okay, then. Okay. I believe.

CHRIST. I'm all in. And I will never leave you nor forsake you.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. It's hard to think about, I know. But what has been the worst rock-bottom experience in your life thus far? And what made it horrible for you?

2. Two surprising insights help us face our lives with new courage: (1) *who Jesus is*; (2) *where Jesus is*. Isaiah 57:15 explains both. Which aspects of this verse energize you the most? And why do you find them compelling?

3. People have reasons for wanting to live in "the mushy middle." Maybe there was a time when you wanted it too. If so, what was it about that world that you most desired for yourself? And what, by now, have you lost?

4. "Contrite and lowly" tends not to appear on our lists of life goals or career ambitions! But as you're thinking it through, how are those two categories becoming more hopeful and even desirable?

5. The word "revive" might, initially, suggest old-fashioned tent meetings and odd religious fervor. But Isaiah had better things in mind. How would you describe the picture he is painting with this word "revive"?

6. Looking at Isaiah 57:15 as a whole, and with your rock-bottom suffering in mind—if God offered you just one part of this life-giving scenario Isaiah describes, which aspect would you ask him for? And why *that* gift?

7. Maybe at this point you'd like to write out a prayer. You can lift your desire to God right now. Use your own words. He understands. In fact, he fixes our prayers on their way up!

For thus says the One who is high and lifted up,
who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:
"I dwell in the high and holy place,
and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit,
to revive the spirit of the lowly,
and to revive the heart of the contrite."

ISAIAH 57:15