



NICK THOMPSON

# GROWING DOWNWARD

The Path to Christ-Exalting Humility



“Among the most significant characteristics that believers ought to seek in a world inundated with pride and arrogance is true humility. But what is humility, and how does a Christian come to embody it? In *Growing Downward: The Path of Christ-Exalting Humility*, Nick Thompson walks through the biblical and redemptive-historical teaching about humility, encouraging believers to understand what it is and how to possess it. Rooting his teaching in biblical anthropology and Christology, Thompson helps us understand better the reasons we should pursue humility, how Christ is the source and example of it, and how we can grow in it. If you are looking to read a theologically rich and spiritually edifying book, look no further.”

—Nick Batzig, pastor of Church Creek PCA in Charleston, South Carolina, and associate editor, Ligonier Ministries

“Christians can become lopsided, leaning toward how to think, live, or feel better. Thompson’s teaching on humility helps us view ourselves more accurately and realistically, affecting every aspect of our lives. His impressive breadth of application makes his teaching concrete rather than abstract. This book establishes the right way of thinking and living in light of who God is and who we are. What more could one want in any book on theology or on Christian living?”

—Ryan M. McGraw, Morton H. Smith Professor of Systematic Theology, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary

“*Growing Downward* is the most robust, biblical, theological discussion of humility I’ve seen. Nick roots the discussion exactly where it needs to begin—with a theology of God. He defines humility as ‘the downward disposition of a Godward self-perception.’ Humility happens when we see ourselves in light of the grandeur and grace of God. There is nothing trite about this book. It is a mini theology, covering topics from the character of God to the nature of sin, anthropology, Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology—all of it pointing to the magnificent glory of God and the joy of true humility before Him. The benefit of this book is that it doesn’t merely talk about humility; it actively helps readers *experience* humility as they are brought before the truth of God. While the material is weighty, Nick uses personal illustrations, stories, and notes that keep it moving along. But this is not a book

to be read quickly. The truths are too deep. It would make for a great small group Bible study. Highly recommended!”

—Dale VanDyke, senior pastor, Harvest Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Wyoming, Michigan

“In this much-needed, well-written, easy-to-read book on a critical subject for every Christian, Nick Thompson reminds us that real humility springs from knowing God and ourselves as both truly are. His book is a model of how theology should be applied to practical Christian living. He offers no manual on how to act humbly but provides biblical motivations to be humble. May God use this essential book in all of our lives so that we may genuinely confess with John the Baptist, ‘[Christ] must increase, and I must decrease.’”

—Joel R. Beeke, president, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan

“Defining *humility* as ‘the downward disposition of a Godward, Christ-centered self-perception’ in view of so much misconception, Thompson shows how relentlessly biblical the implications of this definition are for the life of the believer. Doctrinally penetrating, consistently pastoral, and highly readable, *Growing Downward* is as edifying as it is deeply searching.”

—Richard B. Gaffin Jr., professor of biblical and systematic theology, emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary

“When I was a child, my mother used to tell a fable about a man who won a medal for humility but had it taken away the moment he wore it. The point was obvious and has been proven by time: we are never as humble as we ought to be, nor even as humble as we wish to be. Yet by God’s grace we can be humbler than we are right now, and it’s for that reason that I recommend *Growing Downward*, a book that mines the Scriptures to show how to display a humility that is empowered by Christ and exalts the name of Christ.”

—Tim Challies, blogger, author, and book reviewer

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The Path of Christ-Exalting Humility

Nick Thompson



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To Tessa,  
*whose Christlike beauty captivates my  
heart like none else here below*





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## Preface

“Pride is the number one enemy of the pastor at every stage of the game.”

The statement echoed in my soul like a thunderous roar in a vacant corridor. These were not the words of a ministerial novice. They came from the lips of a man who had spent nearly four decades in the trenches of pastoral ministry.<sup>1</sup> I pondered his dogmatic assertion. *The number one enemy? At every stage of the game? Could this really be true?*

I had more than a sneaking suspicion that it was. The statement resonated with me. I had just graduated from seminary and was ready to change the world. I was eager to pour myself out in ordained pastoral ministry, fighting against evil in all of its forms. In these moments, however, God brought me face-to-face with my ultimate spiritual foe. And here was what was so alarming about it—this fiend lived within my chest.

Though I would have had a difficult time defining *pride* that day or explaining precisely how it was manifest in my life, I was sensible enough to recognize that I was proud. And I understood that if I didn’t make war with it, my pride had the potential to debilitate, even destroy, my future ministry.

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1. John Piper, “Advice to Young Pastors” (panel discussion #3, T4G, 2020), <https://t4g.org/resources/ed-moore/advice-to-young-pastors/>.

That summer was a wonderfully painful season as God gently peeled back layer after layer of pride within. He began to expose my natural bent toward self-promotion, self-protection, and self-pity. He enabled me to see how this infatuation with self bled into every facet of my existence, even into my service to Christ. By God's grace, I became persuaded that pride was indeed my number one enemy. What became equally clear as I studied the Scriptures, however, was that pride was deeply problematic not merely for pastors and those pursuing pastoral ministry but for every person on the face of the globe.

### **Your Greatest Foe**

Here is the unvarnished truth: pride is *your* number one enemy at every stage of the game. This is true of you regardless of your vocation; your economic, political, or social status; and your age, ethnicity, or education. It is even true of you regardless of your spiritual condition, whether in Adam or in Christ. To be a human postfall is to be inundated with pride. And there is nothing that could possibly be more dangerous or harmful. Pride doesn't merely have the ability to destroy ministries; it has the ability to destroy men, women, boys, and girls. Left unchecked, it will obliterate you.

The focus of the book you are holding, however, is not the negative vice of pride, but the positive virtue of humility. So why begin in such a bleak, dismal manner? I begin here because it is only as we come to understand pride as our greatest enemy that we will learn to embrace humility as our greatest ally.

### **Your Chief Friend**

If pride is our chief foe, then humility is our chief friend. All of us have acquaintances given to ear-tickling flattery. Humility is no such friend. It is a straight-shooting, tell-it-like-it-is, black-and-white kind of friend. Humility has no patience for unrealities. When it paints your portrait, you won't catch it smoothing over your pimples. Given our deeply ingrained arrogance, even the best among us find

humility's company painful, sometimes even traumatic. We much prefer to surround ourselves with airbrushing flatterers.

All of us aspire to grow in prominence, power, and prosperity. Our tendency is to view life as an uphill climb. But spiritual growth is not an ascent; it is a descent. To grow in humility is to grow *downward*.<sup>2</sup> Quite frankly, that is not a pleasant experience. Why do you think so many kids want to be astronauts when they grow up, but no one wants to be a ditch digger or a coal miner? There is nothing impressive or exhilarating about getting down in the dirt. But that is precisely where humility is intent on taking us, and it is resolved to take us there because that is where we belong. Humility is concerned with reality, and the reality is that corrupt creatures like us are in our rightful place only when we are brought low with faces pressed to the dust before our Creator.

### No Walk in the Park

Be warned: the pages ahead are aimed at bringing you low by God's grace. They were painful to write, and those who read them carefully and prayerfully will not come out unscathed. For years I have stayed in shape through a rigorous exercise program during which, as my body is about to collapse from exhaustion, the instructor has been known to bark, "The elite go past the point of comfort!" There is immense wisdom in that expression. God's elite are the humble, but the road to humility is no walk in the park. If we would grow as God wants us to, we must go past the point of comfort. You and I must crucify our inclinations toward fluffy, feel-good religion. Christianity is nothing of the sort. It is a call to die, for it is only as we die to ourselves that we can truly live.

By God's all-wise design, the painful path of humility is the one to true meaning and fulfillment. It is a path that can be trod only through union with Jesus Christ. He was the only truly humble

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2. The phrase *growing downward* is taken from the nineteenth-century Anglican preacher Charles Simeon. See H. C. G. Moule, *Charles Simeon* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1948), 64.

man ever to walk this earth, and He alone has the power to make us humble as He conforms us to His image by His indwelling Spirit. True humility can only ever be pursued in Him.

Would you join me in striving after humility by His power and for His glory? The path will not be easy, but I promise you that it will be worth it.

## Toward a Definition of Humility

“You do not really understand something,” quipped Albert Einstein, “unless you can explain it to your grandmother.”

By nature, I am an intellectual. I enjoy reading and discussing theology at a deep level. I have a strange attraction to big ideas and big words. But one of the great blessings of being a father is that it keeps my feet tethered to planet earth. If I were to open family worship with an explanation of the etymological significance of the Greek word *perichoresis* as a segue into a twenty-minute lecture on the ontological Trinity, it would take an entire two seconds for my five-year-old’s eyes to be glazed over with indifference. During my years as a seminary student, I came to realize that if I could not explain what I was learning in an understandable way to my children (or my grandmother), then I hadn’t really learned.

Defining *humility* in a simple and clear way is no easy task. Some assert that the multifaceted complexity of this virtue defies a simple definition.<sup>1</sup> But is it possible that our inability to explain humility concisely and clearly has less to do with humility’s intricacy and

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1. For example, Christopher Hutchinson purposefully avoids giving a one-sentence definition of humility, declaring that the entirety of his two-hundred-plus-page book is his definition. *Rediscovering Humility: Why the Way Up Is Down* (Greensboro, N.C.: New Growth Press, 2018), 3. Though offering a minor critique here, I highly recommend Hutchinson’s work, especially his treatment of humility in relation to the life of the local church.

more to do with our failure to understand it? In this introduction we will attempt to wrap our minds around the essential contours of this vital virtue.

### **Humility Defined by Activity**

Humility is often explained in terms of what it does. In his classic work, Andrew Murray defines humility as “the place of entire dependence on God.”<sup>2</sup> His definition concentrates on what humility does in relation to God. It completely relies on Him. If Murray’s definition stresses the Godward activity of humility, then John Dickson’s definition stresses the humanward activity of humility. According to Dickson, humility is “the noble choice to forgo your status, deploy your resources or use your influence for the good of others before yourself.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, humility sacrificially spends itself for the sake of other people.

These are accurate and clear descriptions of what humility does. And there is certainly biblical warrant for describing humility in these ways (e.g., Phil. 2:3; James 4:6–7). But properly defining someone or something ordinarily requires moving beyond mere activity.

If you were to inquire about my wife, I could respond by saying, “Well, her skill in the kitchen is extraordinary. On top of that, she pours herself out in homeschooling our boys while still managing to keep the house clean and the laundry done. She is pretty great!” Anyone who knows Tessa knows all of that is wonderfully true. But if Tessa were to overhear my description of her, she would likely feel offended and undervalued. Why? Haven’t I praised her? Sort of. I have praised her activity, not her person. Of course the two cannot be separated. It is the person who carries out the actions. But my

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2. Andrew Murray, *Humility* (New Kensington, Pa.: Whitaker House, 1982), 16. J. Lanier Burns similarly defines *humility* as obedient and dependent submission to God. *Pride and Humility at War: A Biblical Perspective* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2018), 15, 24, 65.

3. John Dickson, *Humilitas: A Lost Key to Life, Love, and Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 24.



wife is far more than what she does. The large-hearted, godly woman she is explains her frenzy of loving service in the home.

Rather than defining people by what they do, we ought to define peoples' doings by who they are. Such is the case with humility. Is it true that humility depends on and submits to God? You better believe it. Does it lovingly serve others? Absolutely. But the more fundamental question we must ask is, *Why* does humility do these things? What is it about this virtue that makes it desperately cling to God and selflessly consider others? What is humility in its essence?

### Humility Defined by Essence

To put it as concisely as I am able, humility is *the downward disposition of a Godward self-perception*. Admittedly, apart from further explanation this poetic mouthful has the potential to go over a person's head. But continue to read as we unpack the various contours of this definition together.

#### *Humility Is a Downward Disposition*

The word *humble* in both Hebrew and Greek is often translated “lowly,” expressing the idea of being bowed down to the ground. The Scriptures draw a sharp contrast between “the humble” and “the haughty” (e.g., 2 Sam. 22:28; Pss. 18:27; 138:6). The lowliness of humility is not a physical, external attribute any more than haughtiness is. It is a disposition of the soul. That is why elsewhere God refers to the humble as those who are “lowly in spirit.”

One's pride will bring him low,  
but he who is *lowly in spirit* will obtain honor.  
(Prov. 29:23 ESV)

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 ESV)

Here is the essence of humility—lowliness of spirit.

From beginning to end, Christianity is concerned with the heart. Likely drawing from Old Testament texts like Proverbs 4:23, Jesus taught that every action and word of a person proceeds from the heart (Matt. 15:19). This is of central significance—before humility ever acts, it is first an internal frame of the soul.<sup>4</sup> And this inner constitution is directed downward. The spirit of the humble is not lifted up with self-conceit.

This is in contrast with pride. Pride manifests itself in a self-sufficient rejection of God and an abuse of others for selfish gain. But like humility, pride must be defined by its essence, not its activity. If humility is a downward disposition, then pride is a haughty disposition. In the great Old Testament text on humility, Proverbs 3:34, Solomon classifies the proud as “the scornful” (elsewhere translated “the scoffers”): “Surely He scorns the scornful, but gives grace to the humble.” He later provides a concise explanation of the scorner as a “proud and haughty man...[who] acts with arrogant pride” (21:24). Solomon heaps word upon word to explain the egotistical, high-minded arrogance of the scoffer, and that makes a lot of sense when you think about the nature of scoffing. How can people perpetually mock God or others? Only after they have elevated themselves to the position of judge. Interestingly, one of the chief character traits of scoffers is that they cannot stand to be rebuked by others (e.g., 13:1; 15:12). They have deceived themselves into believing they are beyond criticism or correction. They are the epitome of those who possess a high-minded, haughty spirit.

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4. We typically speak of three faculties comprising the human soul—the mind, the will, and the affections. Humility has its seat in the affections. I am, therefore, using the term *disposition* synonymously with *affection*. But by affection, I do not mean a flash-in-the-pan feeling or mindless emotion; I mean an intense inclination of heart that is informed by truth (the mind) and leads to action (the will). Humility is an intense inclination downward. To read further on the nature of holy affections, see Gerald R. McDermott, *Seeing God: Jonathan Edwards and Spiritual Discernment* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1995), 27–41.

We see, therefore, that humility is a downward disposition of soul in contrast to pride, which unduly exalts the self. But to stop with the definition there is to leave the door open to potential confusion. Not every lowly disposition is humble. Modern psychology has popularized a form of lowliness lacking in humility. It is called low self-esteem. If you don't personally struggle with low self-esteem, you likely know someone who does. Such a person lacks confidence, being perpetually plagued with feelings of inferiority, incompetence, and hypersensitivity. It is easy to confuse low self-esteem with humility. But this lack of self-confidence, while having many potential secondary causes, has a singular primary cause. It is only because the soul has raised the self to the level of highest importance that it can be so distraught over its inherent weaknesses, failures, and oppression.<sup>5</sup> People with low self-esteem are no less consumed with themselves than people with high self-esteem. This kind of lowly spirit is simply a veiled form of pride. Low self-esteem is a haughty spirit clothed in the garments of a false humility.

It will not do, then, for us to merely say that humility is a downward disposition of soul, for not all downward dispositions are created equal.

### *Humility Is Produced by a Godward Self-Perception*

Humility is a certain kind of lowly spirit. It is brought about by seeing ourselves in the light of God's glory. This is what I call *a Godward self-perception*.

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5. Low self-esteem is complex and does have varied secondary causes or triggers. For example, a child may lack confidence because of his father's verbal abuse ("Dad is right; I am good-for-nothing."), or a wife may struggle with the same due to a husband's pornography addiction ("If only I were as attractive as those women, then my husband would love me."). These are tragic realities that cannot be quickly dismissed or ignored. But they are nonetheless secondary causes of low self-esteem. The primary cause is always an unhealthy fixation on the self.

William Farley defines humility as “the capacity to see myself in God’s light.”<sup>6</sup> This definition is on to something vital about humility, though it actually misses the essence of humility. Humility is not the ability or capacity to have a Godward self-perception. It is the downward disposition that is brought about by such a God-entranced vision of the self. It is the internal frame of the soul that results from seeing ourselves before the face of God. It is not the power of sight, but the product of sight.

This is why humility is intimately related to the fear of the Lord in the Scriptures. For example, Proverbs 15:33 states, “The fear of the LORD is the instruction of wisdom, and before honor is humility.” By way of synonymous parallelism, Solomon draws a close connection between these two virtues. Again, he writes, “By humility and the fear of the LORD are riches and honor and life” (22:4). The fear of God is not entirely synonymous with humility. They are distinct graces. But the downward disposition of biblical humility is always wed to the fear of God. The two can never be separated.

John Murray defines the fear of God as “the controlling sense of the majesty and holiness of God and the profound reverence which this apprehension elicits.” It is “the reflex in our consciousness of the transcendent majesty and holiness of God.”<sup>7</sup> The fear of God is reflexive. It is a disposition of loving reverence necessarily evoked by beholding the living God.<sup>8</sup>

6. William Farley, *Gospel-Powered Humility* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2011), 24. Later he defines it as “the God-given ability to see self and God as we really are” (37).

7. John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 236–37. Elsewhere Murray writes, “The fear of God means that God is constantly in the centre of our thought and apprehension, and life is characterized by the all-pervasive consciousness of dependence upon him and responsibility to him.” *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 1:105.

8. In the Scriptures, loving God and fearing God are largely synonymous realities (e.g., Ps. 145:19–20). Michael Reeves explains that “the trembling ‘fear of God’ is a way of speaking about the intensity of the saints’ love for and enjoyment of all that God is.... True fear of God is true love for God defined: it is

Wherever you find this profound reverence drawn from the controlling consciousness of God's glory, there will of necessity be humility. Given Murray's definition of the fear of God, we could define humility as *the profound lowliness elicited by the controlling sense of our own creatureliness and corruption*.

As we are gripped by the majesty of God, we come to see ourselves as finite, dependent creatures. As we behold the holiness of God, we come to see ourselves as radically corrupt sinners, and this perception produces a downward disposition of soul. As the soul grows upward in the fear of God, it grows downward in humility.<sup>9</sup>

If you happen to be a multimillionaire who lives in Dubai, you might consider renting a luxurious apartment at the Burj Khalifa. At the time of writing, this skyscraper is the tallest building in the world, reaching 2,716 feet into the air. For a building to stand that tall requires a foundation that reaches deep into the ground. The foundation of the Burj Khalifa plumbs 164 feet below the earth and is made of 110,000 tons of concrete and steel. That is how the fear of God and humility work. To grow upward in fear requires growing downward in humility, and vice versa. The higher up we grow in knowing God, the lower down we must grow in knowing ourselves.

Redemptive history is filled with graphic pictures of this interplay between humility and the fear of God. One such picture is the righteous man Job. In the face of traumatic suffering and less-than-helpful friends, Job questioned the wisdom of God's rule. He wanted an explanation for the sudden agonizing and seemingly random loss of his riches, family, and health. And finally, at the end of the book,

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the right response to God's full-orbed revelation of himself in all his grace and glory." *Rejoice and Tremble: The Surprising Good News of the Fear of the Lord* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2021), 52–53. So when speaking of the fear of God, I understand such affectionate reverence to fulfill the first and greatest commandment: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37).

9. My language here is indebted to John Piper's description of the spirituality of Charles Simeon as "growing downward in humility and growing upward in adoring communion with God." *21 Servants of Sovereign Joy: Faithful, Flawed, and Fruitful* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2018), 320.

God explains Himself. He appears in a whirlwind of glory, asking Job seventy-seven questions, beginning with this one: “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” (Job 38:4). This barrage of divine questions was intended to drive home a singular point: “Job, I am God, and you are not.” Such was not the explanation Job was looking for, but it was the one he most needed. Job’s encounter with the uncreated majesty of God left him crying out,

I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear,  
But now my eye sees You.  
Therefore I abhor myself,  
And repent in dust and ashes. (42:5–6)

Don’t miss the “therefore.” It introduces the reflexive result of Job’s vision of God. The reflex of his fear of the Lord was humility. Job, beholding the perfections of God, was laid in the dust. The upward gaze of fear led to the downward disposition of humility.

The great problem with the proud is that they have willfully forgotten God. Pride, writes C. S. Lewis, is “the complete anti-God state of mind.”<sup>10</sup> Arrogant people deify the self. Their haughty disposition is elicited from the controlling sense of their own supposed greatness and impeccability. They haven’t learned to see themselves before the face of God. In the words of the psalmist, “There is no fear of God before his eyes” (Ps. 36:1).

No wonder John Calvin began his *Institutes* by telling us that “man is never sufficiently touched and affected by the awareness of his lowly state until he has compared himself with God’s majesty.”<sup>11</sup> If we would have a disposition of soul that accords with how lowly we truly are by nature, we must see ourselves before God. We must have a Godward self-perception.

Such a notion, however, calls into question that humility consists in forgetting about the self, an idea popularized by Tim Keller in *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*. As he makes clear from the title, Keller

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10. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 122.

11. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.1.3.

defines humility as “thinking of myself less.” He explains, “The truly gospel-humble person is a self-forgetful person.”<sup>12</sup> Keller’s application of the gospel to both high and low self-esteem is immensely insightful. His description of a “gospel-humble person” as someone who has been freed through Christ from a love affair with self is likewise biblical.

My concern is over the language of *forgetting* and *not thinking*.<sup>13</sup> The Bible never calls us to banish the self from our thoughts. Keller focuses on the teaching of Paul to derive his definition of humility, but nowhere does Paul discourage us from thinking about the self. In fact, possibly more than any other biblical writer, Paul is intent on impressing on us who we are, either in Adam or in Christ. The apostle actually desires you to think about yourself, but he desires you to think about yourself *rightly* before the face of the triune God of creation and redemption. Much of Keller’s book is about how the gospel, particularly justification by faith, leads to self-forgetting freedom.<sup>14</sup> But in order to understand my righteous status in Christ so that it is working itself out in others-oriented love, I need to remember, not forget, myself. Humility is not produced by losing sight of our self but by properly perceiving our self as we relate to God and others.

So there are two dominant movements of the soul here. The soul grows upward in fear toward God and downward in humility toward self. And the upward grace of fear together with the downward grace of humility leads us to grow in the outward grace of love.

### *Humility Is Productive of Love toward Others*

Again, Job provides us with a striking picture of this. Job’s friends had genuinely tried to comfort him. They had the best of intentions.

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12. Timothy Keller, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness: The Path to True Christian Joy* (Leyland, Lancashire, UK: 10Publishing, 2012), 32–33.

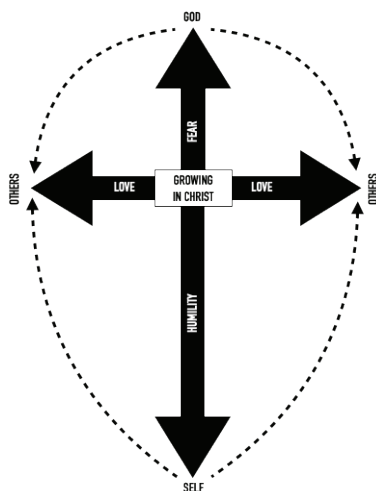
13. Lewis also wields the concept of self-forgetfulness favorably: “The real test of being in the presence of God is that you either forget about yourself altogether or see yourself as a small, dirty object. It is better to forget about yourself altogether.” *Mere Christianity*, 125.

14. Keller, *Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*, 37–44.

But unfortunately good intentions don't always lead to good results. They were terrible counselors with a truncated view of God. Job was rightly frustrated with them for their false accusations and vicious critique. We wouldn't be surprised to find him yelling, "Sayonara!" and ditching such rotten company. But after God presses Job's face to the dirt before His greatness, He turns to rebuke Job's three friends. They had sinfully misrepresented God in their thoughts and words. They needed a priest to intercede on their behalf, and God provides such an intercessor through righteous Job (Job 42:7–8). Remarkably, Job prays for these men as the blood of animals is spilled for their sin (vv. 8–9). His friends who had betrayed him in his time of greatest need become the objects of his loving intercession. How could that happen? Surely Job's natural response was to say, "It's called karma. You poured forth wrath on me, and now you are getting what you deserve!" But instead, Job offers up prayers for his enemies. Job's love was a work of grace resulting from the lowly spirit elicited through his encounter with God.

The downward disposition of a Godward self-perception frees us to love other people selflessly and sacrificially. This is why humility is often connected with loving others (e.g., Eph. 4:2; Phil. 2:3; 1 Peter 3:8). It is also why the fear of the Lord is often connected with keeping God's commands summarized by love (e.g., Ps. 19:9; Eccl. 12:13).

This diagram illustrates the relationship between humility, God-fear, and love. Here is what we must see: the profound lowliness of humility together with the profound reverence of fear liberate us to love profoundly.





## A Definition of Humility

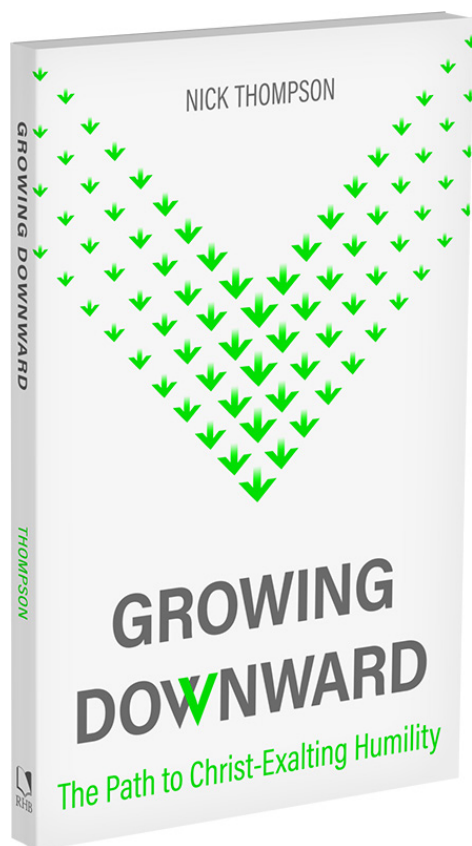
These three movements of upward fear, downward humility, and outward love naturally give rise to three questions:

1. How do I view God? (i.e., Do I fear Him?)
2. How do I view myself? (i.e., Am I lowly in spirit?)
3. How do I view others? (i.e., Do I love other people tangibly and from the heart?)

If you quickly skimmed over these questions, please go back and prayerfully ponder them. They are instruments by which you can gauge your humility, but probably not in the way you first imagined. Humility is not measured by the level of piety exemplified in your answers, but by the level of pain inflicting your heart as you answer. Those who are inundated with pride will possess a blind indifference toward their haughtiness, often clothing it in pious religiosity. Just think of how a first-century Pharisee might have answered these questions. It is only when we are truly humble that we see how lacking in humility we truly are. As paradoxical as it is, those who possess a lowly spirit are those who lament their lack of such a God-fearing, people-loving, downward disposition of soul. What do your answers reveal about your heart?

This introduction has been a mere pencil sketch of humility's portrait. There is great need for this preliminary drawing to be filled in with living color, and so the chapters that follow could be likened to distinct paint colors applied to the canvas. The book's five parts attempt to grapple with diverse, God-centered perspectives on the self.

*Growing Downward* is an elementary primer on a Godward self-perception. But only the Spirit of Christ can take these God-saturated truths about the self and drive them home to your heart in such a way that you actually grow downward. As you read on, plead with Him to do this gracious work. God forbid that we would rest content growing in the understanding of humility without growing in humility itself.



Humility is the downward disposition  
of a Godward self-perception.

Nick Thompson walks readers through the practical implications of this definition, leading them to embrace a God-centered perspective on the self.

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## —WARNING—

The pages of this book are aimed at bringing you low!

Author Nick Thompson recognizes that pride is our worst enemy. If pride is our chief foe, then humility is our chief friend, even though its company may be painful. But spiritual growth is a descent—we must grow *downward*. Defining *humility* as “the downward disposition of a Godward self-perception,” Thompson walks us through the practical implications of this definition, leading us to embrace a God-centered perspective on the self. With winsome illustrations and warm pastoral instruction, *Growing Downward* shows us that the path of humility, though difficult, is the way to true meaning and fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

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“When I was a child, my mother used to tell a fable about a man who won a medal for humility but had it taken away the moment he wore it. The point was obvious and has been proven by time: we are never as humble as we ought to be, nor even as humble as we wish to be. Yet by God’s grace we can be humbler than we are right now, and it’s for that reason that I recommend *Growing Downward*, a book that mines the Scriptures to show how to display a humility that is empowered by Christ and exalts the name of Christ.”

**Tim Challies**, blogger, author, and book reviewer

“Defining *humility* as ‘the downward disposition of a Godward, Christ-centered self-perception’ in view of so much misconception, Thompson shows how relentlessly biblical the implications of this definition are for the life of the believer. Doctrinally penetrating, consistently pastoral, and highly readable, *Growing Downward* is as edifying as it is deeply searching.”

**Richard B. Gaffin Jr.**, professor of biblical and systematic theology, emeritus,  
Westminster Theological Seminary

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