

## Psalm 131

Three verses long - that's not a ton of content - but it is rich and incredibly practical content for all of us who live in the 21st century. If you want to live in a counter-cultural way, following Jesus with your heart and with your actions, the words of Psalm 131 are words that you would do well to memorize, reflect on, pray through and apply daily. Our last visit to the book of Psalms this summer will end with this one:

*LORD, my heart is not proud  
My eyes are not haughty  
I don't concern myself with matters too great or awesome for me  
But I have stilled and quieted myself  
Just as a small child is quiet with its mother  
Yes, like a small child is my soul within me  
O Israel, put your hope in the LORD - now and always*

We return to one of the 15 "Songs of Ascent" this Sunday, a song that was sung by pilgrims on their way to one of the three great feasts that were held in Jerusalem each year. And, as we noticed with Psalm 130, which we looked at 3 weeks ago, we notice here again the strong emphasis on putting one's hope in God. In fact, I would say that we've seen this theme shine through many of the psalms that we've looked at this summer. "O, Israel - O, people of God - put your hope in the LORD - now and always."

We'll return to that closing statement after we look closely at the first two verses.

*LORD (or Yahweh) my heart is not proud - My eyes are not haughty*

The first declaration of the psalm is that of a personal choice to remain humble.

And then this:

*I don't concern myself with matters too great or awesome for me*

The second declaration is that of a personal choice to avoid presumption.

Presumption says that I have a valid opinion on any and every topic and that I have a right to be heard. But the psalmist is saying that, on certain matters, he doesn't have access to the whole story and so he doesn't offer an opinion.

Now, let's think about the setting. The song was written to be sung on a pilgrimage journey to Jerusalem. The song is sung by people who are going to some form of celebration, whether it's remembering the Passover in Egypt or thanking God for the harvest and living in booths for a week, people are on their way to a significant religious festival, a time for reflecting on who God is and what He has done for His people Israel.

The first word of the psalm tells us who it's addressed to: Yahweh. "Yahweh, my heart is not proud; my eyes are not haughty." In other words, "as I make this journey to the holy city to honour You for Your goodness to Israel, I'm not thinking about how great I am, how competent I am, how much knowledge or wisdom I have." As a person sang these words on the dusty roads through Judea, she would not be looking around at the other people on that journey and saying, "I'm better dressed than she is", or "I understand these matters with greater wisdom than that loud man over there." This person is not comparing himself or herself to other people who share the journey with

them. We'll see in a few minutes that they have taken an entirely different attitude than that of the person who will spend their time feeling irritated with and superior to, the rest.

We all struggle with this, almost instinctive, reaction to the people we come across. We want to justify ourselves, to be able to affirm things about ourselves, and so we compare ourselves to those around us. The call of this song is the call to let go of our need, or our tendency, to make comparisons, to feel proud or haughty, or even to feel insecure and lacking confidence - which is the emotional flip side of our pride. The call is to walk humbly with a whole host of people who are very different from us, but who are also on the same journey that we're on, and therefore sharing the same road. It's a powerful and beautiful picture of life in the church as well as of life on the road to Jerusalem.

"I don't concern myself with matters too great or awesome for me." If there's one thing you read from the comment sections on any number of websites is that there are many, many people out there who spend a lot of their time concerning themselves with matters too great and too awesome for them. Too many of us have too many opinions about things we know far too little about. Too many of us have simple solutions for complex problems that we don't fully understand. Too many people have access to too many tools for expressing opinions that are uninformed and unhelpful - but that doesn't restrain many folks from offering those opinions anyway.

And so these words of this "Song of Ascents" ring hollow in our day, but still they contain great wisdom: "I don't concern myself with matters too great or awesome for me." What does it take to come to that realization? How can we come to the place where we limit our conversations to topics we actually know something about?

The humility required in this second part of verse 1 is the humility of knowing our limits, of admitting sometimes that we simply don't know, and of living and working out life within those boundaries. It's the opposite of pretension - pretending to know everything, pretending to have a valuable opinion on every subject. And it's not presumption, presuming that my opinion is important or that my knowledge of a subject is sufficient to base an opinion on. Instead, this person is saying, "Actually, I don't know and so I'm not willing to offer an opinion on this topic."

So, where does that humility come from? In a world where people are continually striving to be noticed and affirmed, what is this lack of pretension and presumption based on? The second verse tells us:

*But I have stilled and quieted myself  
Just as a small child is quiet with his mother  
Yes, like a small child is my soul within me.*

It's helpful to look at a different translation in this case:

*But I have stilled and quieted my soul;  
Like a weaned child with its mother  
Like a weaned child is my soul within me (NIV)*

A weaned child is not leaning into mum to get its next meal, but is at rest. A weaned child is nestling in for the comfort of love, of close relationship. There is a reason why the psalmist chooses to illustrate his point with the weaned child rather than the nursing infant. The child that is not striving, is not anxiously seeking to be nourished, is the child at rest, the child enjoying the comfort of his mother's presence. And the psalmist says that he has taken action here; he has stilled and quieted his soul so that he is now feeling and acting like the child at rest.

So, he's not proud, doesn't feel superior to others, doesn't presume that his input is necessary on the topics of the day or that he must provide answers to the questions people are asking. And the reason he's not feeling all self-important and needing to make his voice heard is that he has stilled and quieted his soul.

That seems like something that it would be very important for us to learn how to do. What on earth does it mean to still and quiet our soul - and how can we do it? The word that is translated "stilled" or "composed" is a word that literally means to smooth out something that has a rough surface. You might experience an event that ruffles you, that causes you to feel uneven, unbalanced, out of whack. That seems to reflect what the psalmist was going through and this verse tells us how he reacted to it. He took the time to compose himself, to smooth out the emotional bumps that he was experiencing, and he quieted himself down.

That's not the easiest or most instinctive thing to do when your circumstances are getting you upset. The easy and instinctive thing to do is to let that adrenaline take over and escalate those negative emotions. You want to fight, to argue, to scream, to express in some, usually dramatic, way that you are upset. That's often how we respond to things that are not smooth, that produce the bumps in the road that we all encounter. But the psalmist's example here is a helpful one - one we should look at closely - if we're going to deal well with the emotional challenges in our lives.

Note that when someone is raging, furious, throwing a temper tantrum, we will often refer to that person as being "out of control". And notice that the psalmist here is describing being in control: "I have stilled and quieted myself." I've done what I needed to do in order not to lose control, in order to keep things in my life smooth. Another word that is sometimes used to represent this idea is the word "self-possessed" - the ability to control one's emotions when experiencing stress. It's the exact opposite of being "out of control".

Now, do you think there might just be a relationship between "my heart is not proud" and "I have stilled and quieted myself"? What does the proud heart do when confronted by some aggravation? It puffs up and launches out at any opposition. It defends itself against any perceived attacks. It is threatened by the idea that there is someone who doesn't respect me, someone who doesn't hold back their negative feelings about me or someone who openly disagrees with something I've said or done. The person who can say, "My heart is not proud" is the person who can hear a negative comment, an attack, without being threatened by it, without feeling a strong

need to defend herself, without moving the sting of hurt feelings into the anger of defensive lash-backs.

Again, the important personal question is, “How do we get there?” I can’t think of more helpful advice than to follow the path that the psalmist is following as he describes the peace of his current experience. Reading between the lines a bit, I would say that he has examined the causes of his anxiety or his anger and has decided that they are rooted in his pride, in thinking too highly of himself, of placing himself at the centre of everything that is happening around him. Then, he has addressed himself to his God, to Yahweh, and has found in Him the greatness and power and majesty that he would like for himself. He knows that he doesn’t have that power, that he’s not worthy of being called “great” or “awesome”, but that Yahweh is those things. And, in the presence of his God, in the presence of the God of Israel who he is on his way to Jerusalem to worship, he finds all the resources he needs to humble himself.

It’s in God’s sight that we have to be humble; it’s no use pretending that our opinions are more important than His or that our power is greater or that our wisdom is on a higher level. We know, immediately, that those things are simply not true. And we know that all our pretension to be wonderful and wise and worthy of the adoration and affirmation of everyone around us is full of holes, that we all struggle with our areas of brokenness and that people who disagree with us or criticize us are not evil fiends - they are merely observing something in us that they don’t approve of, whether they’re right or wrong to do so.

The reason we get angry or defensive or feel insecure or awkward with people is that we are looking to them for our sense of approval. But notice where the psalmist goes to in order to meet this need:

*I have stilled and quieted my soul  
Like a weaned child with its mother*

The comparison to a child that is no longer nursing is of a person who is resting, finding security and identity, in the arms of God. The person who is able to be composed and still is the person who has stopped striving to be somebody in the eyes of the world and is content to be a child of God. The one who knows who she really is, who he really is, is the one who can remain calm and composed, who has that sense that their life is under God’s care and that they can therefore cease striving and be at peace.

And so this Song of Ascent, this song for pilgrims on their way to meet in God’s house, ends with these words, so familiar through this series on the Psalms:

*O Israel, put your hope in Yahweh - now and always.*

What are you hoping for today? What do you most want to see happen through the years that you have on this earth? Is it something that God has given you and, if so, are you trusting Him to lead you on the journey of fulfilment? Or is it something that has begun to grow in you through pride, a desire to prove yourself superior to others, a need to prove to yourself that you can “do it”? If your motivation isn’t right, then it’s

going to be very difficult for you to wait in absolute contentment, like a weaned child snuggling in close with mama. You'll always feel like you have to do more, strive in competition with people who want the same things you do, struggle with self-image and confidence and the approval of others.

I'm not trying to say that this is an easy solution to these kinds of issues in our lives. We operate out of some form of pride and self-reliance for most of our lives and in most areas of our lives. But while it's not easy, it is very, very attractive. To live in reliance on God, to know the peace and contentment that that brings, is to know life on a whole different level.

One of my Christmas presents last year was a book called Soul Keeping by John Ortberg. It's really a book about the most important spiritual lessons he learned from his mentor Dallas Willard, the Christian teacher and author who passed away five years ago. I want to read just a couple of pages from this book to give you an idea for how we can apply this psalm to our lives.

***Read pages 88-90.***

Listen again to that phrase that Dallas used to counsel Pastor Ortberg with:

*You must arrange your days so that you are experiencing deep contentment, joy and confidence in your everyday life with God.*

If you want to rest securely in God's love and grace towards you, if you want to live with your hope fully placed in your God and if you want to live in rich contentment, you must begin by recognizing that you are the one who takes care of your soul.

That's what the psalmist did: he refused to concern himself with matters too great or awesome for him, but instead stilled and quieted his soul ... he had to make the choices to change his approach to life and to follow through by putting his trust in God ... and out of that place of being quiet in God's presence, he urged his fellow pilgrims to, now and always, put their hope in Yahweh, their God.