

# Psalms of Ascent

## A Quiet Place for the Soul

### Psalm 131

Psalm 131 is the shortest of the Psalms or Songs of Ascent. It is a Psalm of David which is significant upon further reflection. He claims to have learned humility and indeed the young shepherd and newly anointed king was a humble man. But as years passed and his power grew the humble song-singing king was given over to arrogance and scandalous sin. In this way Psalm 131 provides a powerful reminder that he who claims to have learned humility may be proving that he does not possess it after all.

Charles Spurgeon called Psalm 131, “one of the shortest Psalms to read but one of the longest to learn.” The virtues upheld in this Psalm are those to which every Christian ought to aspire. In lyrical prose the Psalmist commends humility, trust, and hope in the Lord. At the center is the portrait of a contented child having been fed and now weaned. Such a picture is the exact opposite of a restless soul. A hungry baby will squirm and scream until he has what he desires. So it is with the soul which has not found its rest in the security and provision of the Lord. Until we find our refuge in the Lord we will be tortured by our nagging appetites and battered by the waves of anxiety.



The Psalm closes with a call for God’s people to trust in the Lord: “O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forevermore.” Derek Kidner writes that these words rouse us from “contemplating David to following his example and that of his greater Son: not through introspection but through being weaned from insubstantial ambitions to the only solid fare that can be ours” (p. 448). Through the dying and rising of Jesus, God has provided his children with the salvation which is our source of peace now and hope for tomorrow. The place of rest for our souls is not circumstance but a Savior; not a place but a Person.

**Main Idea:** The Christian may find rest in the Lord from the demands of pride and anxiety.

### 1. The quiet place of humility

Vs. 1 – “Oh Lord, my heart is not lifted up...”

a) *Humility begins with a proper view of God.*

- David begins his prayer by addressing God. He employs God’s covenant name revealed to Moses: Yahweh. The name God gave to his people is the Hebrew “to be” verb. It means “I Am” or “I Will Be Who I Will Be.” The implications are profound. God is the self-existing One. He alone is ultimate and independent Being. In their prayers, God’s people strive to avoid addressing him in ways which reduce or diminish him but, rather, uphold his greatness.

b) *Humility requires a proper view of the self.*

- The Hebrew idea of “heart” is not limited to the emotions the way it often is in our day. Rather the heart was understood as the seat of the soul or the center of one’s self. So when David states that his “heart is not lifted up” he is making a statement about the way he understands his position in relation to God and others. That his “eyes are not raised too high” indicates a rejection of haughtiness or pride.
- As a result, he has is not preoccupied “with things too great and too marvelous for me.” David was the King of Israel and the author of many of the Psalms. His exploits were remarkable. And

yet he knows that in the relation to God's person and works he is rather small. An important part of cultivating humility is routinely recognizing our smallness.

- This is not a prescription to avoid doing good things. We are not being told to avoid accomplishing anything that may be considered great by some. It is about having the proper perspective on one's life. Few people will be well known. Few will be rich. Few will accomplish things that impress the world. Humility is contentedness with the person God designed you to be.
- As one commentator puts it: "If we take the energies that make for aspiration and remove God from the picture, replacing him with our own crudely sketched self-portrait, we end up with arrogance...Ambition is aspiration gone crazy. Aspiration is channeled, creative energy that moves us to grow in Christ...Ambition takes these same energies for growth and development and uses them to make something tawdry and cheap, sweatily knocking together a Babel when we could be vacationing in Eden."

## **2. The quiet place of trust**

Vs. 2 – "...Like a weaned child with its mother..."

- Here the Psalmist describes the goodness of trust. This is not so much a change of subject as it is a further development. Humility and trust are related virtues. The humble soul is the one who has learned to trust. The Psalmist uses the picture of a weaned child to capture the meaning of humble trust. It is a picture of contentedness as well which is inseparable from trust. A hungry child who has not been weaned is a picture of anxious want. The child in that condition knows only of his unmet desire and his whole body reacts in anxious fear and anger.
- The Psalmist desires for us to see the connection between trust and rest, even happiness. The child has not yet learned that he "needs" to be rich and admired. He has not learned that he "needs" an always satisfying career, a spouse who serves his needs, and children who make him proud. The weaned child only knows that his need to have what is truly required has been met by the one who cares for him. So it is with the one who trusts in the Lord.
- The soul that rests like a weaned child is learning that the things which the world presses him to desire are not the things he needs. He is learning to cease from the restless rush which the world prescribes for happiness.

## **3. The quiet place of hope**

Vs. 3 – "O Israel, hope in the Lord..."

- As the Lord weans us from thin and self-serving ambitions he directs our hope to himself. The Lord alone can quiet the cacophonous soul. Hope is a word laden with meaning for the child of God. It is connected with waiting. Indeed, the word translated "hope" in verse 3 may also be rendered "wait." What is hope after all, but waiting for the Lord to bring to completion all that he has promised? Here, the people of Israel were being taught to think in terms of eternity. They needed to be prepared to settle in for the long haul such as the painful circumstances described in Ezra and Nehemiah. They would need to reject any notions of ushering in God's kingdom but rather trust that the Lord alone brings his kingdom.
- From the time of the fall God has taught his people to direct their hope toward that redemption which would finally give rest to their sin wearied souls. It is the redemption found only in Jesus, David's greater Son.