

## The Joy of a Quieted Soul

Psalm 131

The great preacher Charles Spurgeon wrote of Psalm 131, “It is one of the shortest psalms to read, but one of the longest to learn.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it is. This psalm, nestled in the collection known as “songs of ascents” (Psalms 120-134) is a mere three verses long. And yet it speaks of a life change that reaches down to the depths of the heart and affects the whole of life. I would dare say that there is not a single struggle, circumstance, difficulty, or sin in your life that is not in some way addressed by the heart change we have on display here in Psalm 131. It is a psalm you could probably memorize in a few minutes, but applying it consistently in your day-to-day life is the work of a lifetime.

The vision that David holds out for us by his example, the vision of a calmed and quieted soul, is one that I find to be beautiful and compelling. When I read about David’s inner life in this psalm, I think, “I want that! How can I get it?” I don’t think any of us consciously think, “I want my life to be riddled with anxiety, bitterness, resentment, and exasperation. I want to find my mind racing at night when I should be sleeping. I want to live with my emotions on edge, with a pervasive sense of instability. I want to feel frustrated constantly by my inability to control things that I want to control. I want my inner life to be full of noise, noise, noise.” Have any of you written that kind of mission statement for your life? I didn’t think so. If we all rightly see how repulsive that way of life is, why do we yet remain so susceptible to it? I think this psalm offers a great deal of insight on that question, as well as giving us a way forward, a roadmap to the joy of a quieted soul. And not only that, but David does all of that for us in only three short verses, which simply cries out for a three-point sermon.

So what can we do to achieve the same kind of inner life that David pictures for us here? Let me give you three words of instruction. First,

### **1. Tune out the noise (v. 1).**

What is the noise of the soul? Where does it arise from? David speaks in verse 1 of pride, arrogance, and presumption. In the first line he prays, “O LORD, my heart is not lifted up.” Obviously, David is not speaking here of lifting up his heart in praise, but rather of lifting up his heart in pride. The same phrase is used of King Uzziah in 2 Chronicles 26:16, which says, “But when he was strong, he grew proud [literally ‘he lifted up his heart’], to his destruction. For he was unfaithful to the LORD his God and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense.” King Uzziah, not recognizing his own limits, assumed the prerogative of a Levitical priest and transgressed the boundary that God had established for his altar. As a result, God struck him with leprosy because he lifted up his heart in pride. Pride is always a danger in our hearts, and it manifests itself often in attempts to be wiser than God. Just as Uzziah assumed, “I know what God has commanded, but I think my way is better,” so can we easily slip into the same mindset. “I know Jesus warned against nurturing anger at another person. But that person really hurt me, so right now my heart says nurturing anger is appropriate. I can be wiser than God.” Or, “I know Jesus told his disciples to watch and pray that they would not enter into temptation, but it’s no big deal to toy around with sin by putting myself in tempting situations with my girlfriend. I can be wiser than God.” Or, “I know God has commanded me to demonstrate my faith by giving regularly and sacrificially to the church, but finances are hard right now, so it seems better to me to hold back on giving so that I can pay my bills and then save up whatever I can. God says I should rely on him, but on this matter I think I can rely on

myself. I can be wiser than God.” Pride flowers in many different ways, but it’s all noise to the soul. David had tuned it out.

In the second line, David speaks of the noise of arrogance. If pride is thinking too highly of ourselves, arrogance takes that one step further and looks down on others. In the second line of verse 2, David prays, “My eyes are not raised too high.” In Proverbs 2:16-19, Solomon lists seven things that are an abomination to the Lord, and at the top of the list in verse 17 is “haughty eyes.” A heart lifted up in pride stands behind the eyes that hold others in contempt. Perhaps nothing illustrates this better than the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable of Luke 18, the man who stood at the temple to thank God that he was not like other men, but he fasted twice a week and gave a tithe of all he had. In the movie *Tombstone*, Doc Holliday said of the villain Johnny Ringo, “A man like Ringo has got a great big hole, right in the middle of himself.” I think that’s the paradox of arrogance. Arrogant people are trying to fill a hole. They lack security in knowing the love of God, so they grasp for security by convincing themselves, “I am better than him. I am better than her. My tribe is better than that tribe. My church is better than that church.” And on and on it goes. But the hole never gets filled. And the arrogance just creates more noise in the soul. David, though he had plenty of reasons, humanly speaking, to be arrogant, had tuned out the noise of arrogance.

In the third and fourth lines of verse 1, David addresses the noise of presumption. These lines read, “I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.” You may recall the story of Job, a righteous man who suffers terribly for reasons he has no clue about. Throughout the course of the book of Job, as we see him arguing back and forth with his friends, Job rightly maintains his innocence, but also laments that God has treated him unfairly, and Job has no recourse. After 36 chapters of dialogue, the Lord finally answers Job out of a whirlwind with an overwhelming display of his transcendent power, knowledge, and wisdom. Having been overwhelmed by the sheer God-ness of God, and having been reminded once again of who he is before God, Job says in Job 42:2, “Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, *things too wonderful for me*, which I did not know.” Where Job naively wandered into deeper waters than he could handle, David avoided that kind of presumption.

As I tried to think of how we might be tempted toward the sin of presumption, I thought of two different kinds of examples. One is that of the rationalist, the person who feels compelled to subject everything to his own rational evaluation. There are some who come to Scripture with the mindset, “I will believe what God has said once I can see a firm rational basis for everything. I will be ready to rest in faith only after I understand.” And so they go on intellectual journeys to try to understand everything before they can allow themselves to rest in faith. When Adam and Eve were told by God, “Do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” should they have said, “Now, let us determine by rational inquiry whether or not that was indeed the voice of God that we heard”? No, the Word of God itself, not their own reason, was to be the foundation of their knowledge. It was self-attesting. They weren’t summoned to put their faith in evidence and propositions. They were summoned to trust God himself, the communicating agent who spoke to them. Faith is much more about relating to a Person than it is to understanding everything. In contrast to the rationalist approach, I would hold out to you the example of the 11<sup>th</sup>-century theologian Anselm of Canterbury, who prayed, “I do not seek, O Lord, to penetrate thy depths. I by no means think my intellect equal to them: but I long to understand in some

degree thy truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand that I may believe; but I believe, that I may understand.”<sup>2</sup> There is nothing wrong with wanting to understand things. That’s actually good. But there is something wrong with being unable to trust God with what you don’t understand. That is when you cross the line into presumption, thinking that it’s your job to make sense of everything on your own, without allowing the Word of God to define reality for you. If you go down that road, here’s what you will discover: no matter how much you come to understand by your reason, there will always be more out there that you don’t understand. And that presumption of thinking you were meant to master it all by your own intellect will create the noise of anxiety in your soul.

The other way I think we may be tempted toward presumption is in our endless desire to control what we cannot control. In his masterful essay on this psalm, the late David Powlison explains how the noise of presumption can manifest itself in our lives: “What happens when you attempt to control another person’s attitudes and choices? You set yourself up for despair or rage, anxiety or short-lived euphoria, suspicion or manipulation. What happens when you attempt to ensure that you will not get sick and die? You become obsessed with diet and exercise, or litigious toward doctors, or plagued with fear that any nagging pain might be the one that finally gets you. What happens when you are obsessed with getting people to like you? You become flirtatious or artificial, a coward or a deceiver, a chameleon or a recluse. What happens when you live for success in sports, career, or your physical appearance? You get injured. You retire. Someone comes along who is better than you. You get old and wrinkled. You die. . . . Most of the noise in our souls is generated by our attempts to control the uncontrollable. We grasp after the wind. We rage, fear, and finally despair.”<sup>3</sup> How much of our anxiety, discontent, and seething resentment is owing to the fact that we simply do not recognize our own limits? How frustrated are we because we assume the ability to control our circumstances, control the hearts of our spouses or children, control our employers, control our health in every minute detail, and the simple fact is that we can’t do any of those things? Have you occupied yourself with things too great and too marvelous for you?

All three inflections of this sin—pride, arrogance, and presumption—are rooted in a view of ourselves that is too high and a view of God that is too low. That is the source of all the noise in our souls. Recognize these sinful tendencies for what they are, tune them out. Put these sins to death.

So then, if we get rid of a noisy soul, what is the alternative to pursue? That brings us to the next word of instruction:

## **2. Train your soul to be quiet (v. 2).**

Verse 2 reads, “But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me.” Notice, David doesn’t just say, “I have a quite soul.” He says, “I have calmed and quieted my soul.” He has moved himself from a state of inner noise to inner calm and quiet. That suggests that he has taken prolonged action. The image of a weaned child illustrates perfectly that process perfectly. In our culture, children are normally weaned completely from breastmilk by the age of 1, but in the ancient world that would have been around 3 years of age. Now, what is the difference between an unweaned child being held by his mother and a weaned child being held by his mother? The unweaned child will start to get fussy an irritable the moment he wants food, because he is thinking, “When Mom holds me, I get

food.” The weaned child, on the other hand, is now accustomed to eating solid food at the table. So he understands that when his mother holds him, it’s not for the purpose of feeding. It’s just so that she can hold him. The weaned child can rest content in his mother’s arms, whereas the unweaned child often cannot.

Does that transition from unweaned to weaned happen all at once? No, the process of weaning requires a mother to train her child not to expect breastmilk anymore. He may cry and scream and wiggle around when she holds him, but she must persevere through all the discomfort to teach him how to grow up. And David says here, “My soul is just like that. I have trained my soul to the point that my inner life is calmed and quieted, I hold my soul just as a mother holds a weaned child.” It is the image of perfect contentment, and the complete opposite of inner turmoil and noise.

Can you really act upon your own soul like that? Yes, you can. In Psalm 42:5 the psalmist writes, “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.” The psalmist models for us the act of preaching to oneself. If I am going to train my own soul, I have to be intentional. I cannot simply let myself drift along, being led around by every spontaneous thought or feeling that arises within me. If I do that, you know what will happen? My soul will be overwhelmed by noise. The natural thoughts and feelings that are stirred up in me by living in this fallen world are often not godly thoughts and feelings. They are self-centered, tainted with pride, arrogance, and presumption, and often do not take God into account. I can’t let those thoughts just run on their own. I have to tell my soul to be quiet and listen. I have to renew my mind, intentionally, by applying the truth of the Word of God to my thinking, my affections, my choices. You cannot train your soul passively. You must preach to yourself.

Your soul may not like it at first. Your inner self may fight and scream against you like a child being weaned from breastmilk. But don’t give up. The act of calming and quieting your soul takes time and patience. You are forming a new habit, a new virtue in yourself. Don’t expect that you can rush it. It is a daily task, or even an hour-by-hour or moment-by-moment task. You put your resentment to death and decide you are finally going to forgive someone else. And then you find the next day that you have to do it all over again. You catch yourself obsessing over circumstances you can’t control, and you release them to the Lord. And then you find later in the same day that you’re trying to seize control again, and so you have to release them to the Lord yet again. Do it, over and over again. Train your soul to be quiet.

If verse 2 tells you *that* you must train your soul to be quiet, it doesn’t give you much direction on *how* you can actually go about doing that. But thankfully, the psalm doesn’t end at verse 2. Now we come to a third word of instruction:

### **3. Settle your hope on the Lord (v. 3).**

How can you train your soul to be quiet? It’s not by saying to your soul repeatedly, “Be quiet!” It’s by giving your soul a new focus, namely, God himself. Here in verse 3, David’s personal example now becomes a command given to the whole nation of Israel: “O Israel, hope in the LORD, from this time forth and forevermore.” What does it mean to hope in the Lord? The verb used here is often translated “wait upon.” Have you ever been to a restaurant, and you put your name on the list for a table, and they give you one of those pagers to hold on to while you stand

around the waiting area? You stand around, or you find a place to sit, and you make conversation. But the whole time, everybody is really just waiting on that pager to go off. That's where everybody's heart is set. That's what it's like to hope in the Lord. It's to make him the focal point of your life. You "wait upon" him even more eagerly than you wait for that pager to go off, knowing that everything good that you have or that you can ever hope for is to be found in knowing him.

This verse echoes Psalm 130, which probably explains why it was placed here right after that psalm. In Psalm 130, a celebration of the Lord's forgiveness of our sins, the psalmist says in verses 7-8, "O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption. And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities." As David Powlison says, "You stop pursuing impossibilities when you start pursuing certainties."<sup>4</sup> What are the certainties we can pursue? The certainty of a Roman cross where Jesus Christ suffered and died in our place. The certainty of an empty tomb declaring his resurrection from the dead. The certainty that this event was long foretold as the plan of God, originated in his love for us, to deliver us from the guilt, penalty, and power of our sins and to reconcile us to himself. The certainty of the love that embraced us while we were yet sinners, wiping away our sins and destining us to share in the glory that our risen Savior now knows. When you rest in the security of God's love for you in Christ, you no longer need to look for the false security that you chase after in pride, arrogance, or presumption.

I use the verb "settle" intentionally. David calls upon Israel to hope in the Lord "from this time forth and forevermore." It is not a fleeting hope to which he calls us. It is a settled, enduring hope. It is the cultivation of a habit of hoping, an entire direction of life. A quiet soul is nurtured by a settled faith in the Lord.

Notice that throughout this psalm David says nothing about changing his circumstances. So often we fall into the faulty assumption that the only way to quiet the noise of our souls is to change the things around us that give rise to all the noise. "If my wife understood me, if my children were well-behaved, if my job wasn't so hard, if my financial situation could improve, if I didn't have these health problems, if I could find a marriage partner, if I could have a baby, if I could get through this busy semester...then I would be able to quiet my soul. Maybe at some future day I'll stop living with all this inner noise, but not until my circumstances change." David doesn't say that at all. His focus is not on changing his circumstances. It's on changing his heart. And that doesn't happen by changing circumstances. It happens by knowing God. The vision of a quieted soul held out for us in Psalm 131 is a vision of a life shaped by walking with the Lord day-by-day in faith.

David Powlison imagined what it would be like to express this prayer in its opposite form. What would the prayer of a noisy heart look like? Here is his rendering:

Self, my heart is proud (I'm absorbed in myself),  
And my eyes are haughty (I look down on other people),  
And I chase after things too great and too difficult for me.  
So of course I'm noisy and restless inside; it comes naturally,  
Like a hungry infant fussing on his mother's lap,

Like a hungry infant, I'm restless with my demands and worries.  
I scatter hopes onto anything and everybody all the time.<sup>5</sup>

I don't want that kind of life, and I don't think you do either. The vision of a quieted soul that David models for us is one that I think we all would say appeals to us. How can we pursue it? Tune out the noise of pride, arrogance, and presumption, and then train your soul to be quiet by settling your hope on the Lord. Learning this lesson will take a lifetime, and I invite you to join me in it. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, vol. 3, *Psalm CXI to CL* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson), 136.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Spurgeon, 140.

<sup>3</sup> David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition through the Lens of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2003), 80, 83.

<sup>4</sup> Powlison, 84.

<sup>5</sup> Powlison, 78.