

The Psalms of Ascents place peace (Ps 122), justice (Ps 125) and prosperity (Ps 128) right alongside contentment as one of the main blessings of Mount Zion. Sojourners sang their way to Jerusalem from all over Israel several times a year. They prepared their hearts and minds for worship by praying these fifteen psalms which form a pattern, a three psalm sequence repeated five times. Each triad deals with distress, dependence, and deliverance. The conclusion of the sequence always ends on a delightfully positive truth: peace, justice, prosperity, and contentment. The people of God all over the world continue to pray these psalms as they gather together as the body of Christ in their households of faith. On the journey of discipleship these psalms help us “press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Phil 3:12). Psalm 131 is good training in the wisdom of self-awareness. It is an antidote to our natural bent toward pride and selfish ambition.

Humility

*My heart is not proud, Lord,
my eyes are not haughty;
I do not concern myself with great matters
or things too wonderful for me.*

Psalm 131:1

The psalm is attributed to David the king, the very one whom everyone looked up to and who routinely dealt with great matters. If the king is not above humility neither are we no matter what our position may be. We cannot speculate on how this psalm shaped Jesus’ self-understanding except to say that no one lived and modeled humility better than the King of kings and Lord of lords. “Who, being in very nature God . . . made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!” (Phil 2:6-8).

David bases his humility on three things: his heart is not proud, his eyes are not haughty, and his actions are not beyond his abilities. The king’s brief enigmatic statement invites meditation and reflection. How can he say something so profound and hard to learn so easily? How can a lifelong challenge be expressed in a psalm the size of a tweet? Spurgeon noted the paradox: “It is one of the shortest Psalms to read, but one of the longest to learn. It speaks of a young child, but it contains the experience of a [adult] in Christ.”¹ Allen observes, “This state of spirituality has been attained only by struggling with his headstrong self.”²

The weight of David’s firm resolve lies behind these words. He boldly announces to the Lord, “My heart is not proud.” Yet we know how notoriously difficult it is to control the impulses of the heart, the unconscious look of superiority, and the thinly concealed will to power. Our fallen human nature thrives on inner pride and selfish ambition, but the tone of this terse psalm is nothing if not self-determined. The psalmist claims responsibility: “my heart,” “my eyes,”

¹ Spurgeon, Treasury of David, first page under title.

² Allen, Psalms, 199.

“myself,” and “I have calmed and quieted myself.” He distances himself from anything that would rationalize away or mitigate against his responsibility to shun pride, superiority and vain ambition. He does not spiritualize the discipline of humility by hiding behind prayer. He is fully responsible for his heart, his eyes, and his concerns.

David’s self-description emphasizes humility as a deliberate act of the will that reflects the believer’s state of grace. Contrary to popular opinion, humility is not an unconscious act of good will. One of my professors used to say that the moment you thought you were humble you were guilty of pride. While this is a valid warning, David claims humility is a learned discipline of the will. Humility is not a natural gift nor a serendipitous feature of personality. Humility is an intentional commitment of the will in relationship to God and others. It is a chosen and cultivated quality of character that matures and deepens with the experience of Christ. Humility is the resolute self-emptying or surrender of the will to the commands of God and the needs of others.³

Humility is the chosen awareness of our needy dependence on the mercy and wisdom of God. It is not to be confused with humiliation, the feeling of shame, inadequacy, and disappointment that comes from our sinful self-reliance. Humiliation involves trusting in ourselves; humility involves trusting in God. Humiliation rejects God; humility bows before God. Humiliation leads to discouragement, disorientation and despair; humility leads to hope. Humiliation thrives on self-promotion; humility frees us from the pressure to make a name for ourselves. Humiliation is our enemy, we feel it in our soul; but humility is our friend, whether we know it or not. For there is no other way to deal with humiliation, than through humility.⁴

Any form of spirituality that plays down the believer’s responsibility and separates him or her from personal discipline, determination and diligence is foreign to the work of the Spirit of Christ. To be filled with the Spirit causes all believers to embrace the challenge profiled in Psalm 130. It is our responsibility to be faithful, wise, obedient and open to the work of the Spirit *for the sake of others*. The part of us that is self-conscious was meant to be concerned with humility, sacrifice and faithfulness.⁵ The apostle Peter shared David’s emphasis on personal responsibility. In his letter Peter used a unique verb to describe putting on humility (ἐγκομβώσαθε). It meant to put on “a garment or apron a slave tied over other garments in order to perform certain menial tasks.”⁶

Psalm 130 lines up beautifully with the apostle Paul’s admonition: “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph 4:2-3). The apostles embraced humility as the strategic mind-set for the people of God. Humility (ταπεινοφροσύνη) meant “lowliness of mind” and was used by Paul in *Philippians* to describe the attitude of mind that was in Christ Jesus, who “humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:3-8). Humility was not considered a human virtue in the Greco-Roman world so you might say that Christians invented the term. Paul took an attitude commonly used of slaves and servants and

³ Webster, *Outposts of Hope*, 154-155.

⁴ Webster, *Outposts of Hope*, 156.

⁵ Webster, *The Christ Letter*, 138.

⁶ Achtemeir, *1 Peter*, 333.

applied it to the Christian to profile a strength of personality that did not have to assert itself. All of this was consistent with the Lord Jesus' beatitude-based character, foot-washing humility, and cross-bearing discipline.⁷ If we were looking for a parallel New Testament text to go alongside Psalm 130 we could find no better one than the preface to the Christ hymn in his letter to the church in Philippi: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others. In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had" (Phil 2:1-5). The humility Paul has in mind has nothing to do with passivity or subservience, but rather with obedience and faithfulness.

David's personal disavowal of great projects runs against the grain of our vision casting Promethean age. We instinctively want to encourage personal ambition. We react defensively to the very idea of anyone downplaying a great undertaking. We've been told to dream big and the sky is the limit. The mantra of the age is "you can achieve whatever you set your mind to." Best selling Christian authors have no qualms about drawing their examples of successful leaders from the secular arena; the CEOs, sport's stars, generals, and politicians who put together winning teams, make things happen, focus on the big picture, cast the great vision, pay the high cost of success, inspire confidence, hold hope high, make the difficult decisions, and help others realize their potential. All of this is challenged by David's simple line, "I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me" (Ps 131:1).

When David penned Psalm 131 he may have had the temple building project in mind. After years of fighting for his life, "the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him" (2 Sam 7:1). The ark was in Jerusalem and life was good. David was ready for a royal project—something important, *a big hairy audacious goal*.⁸ No more Goliaths to contend with. Saul was dead. He was no longer on the run hiding out in the wilderness, living in tents and caves. His desire to build a house for the Lord even had Scriptural backing (Deut 12:11-14).

For David, living in a beautiful cedar house didn't square with parking the ark under the canopy of a travel-worn tent. David's intentions impress us as pure, in line with the promises of God and consistent with his passionate worship of Yahweh. For Nathan the prophet, David's desire to build a temple may have been long overdue. His reply to the king was immediate, "Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the Lord is with you." His first reaction to David's BHAG was all positive, but he spoke too soon, and that night the Lord said to him, "Go and tell my servant David, 'This is what the Lord says: Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. . . . Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?'" (2

⁷ Webster, *The Christ Letter*, 93.

⁸ Motivators tells us to dream big and cast a grand vision. Business guru Jim Collins in his best seller *Good to Great* challenges every company that aspires for greatness to have a BHAG (pronounced bee-hag, short for "Big Hairy Audacious Goal"). A BHAG "is a huge and daunting goal — like a big mountain to climb. It is clear, compelling, and people 'get it' right away. A BHAG serves as a unifying focal point of effort, galvanizing people and creating team spirit as people strive toward a finish line." Pastor Dale Burke writes, "I encourage every church or organization to always have one BHAG on their list of dreams" (H. Dale Burke, *Less Is More Leadership* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2004), 116).

Sam 7:5-7). Walter Brueggemann calls it “one of the most crucial texts in the Old Testament for evangelical faith.”⁹ God’s enduring, unconditional promise to David paves the way for the fulfillment accomplished in Jesus the Messiah. David will not build a house for the Lord; the Lord will build a house for David. David’s personal effort pales in significance to what the Lord has done, is doing, and will do. No human works project will be allowed to displace the priority of God’s initiative. David’s “not doing” is strategic, symbolic of salvation by faith, not by works, lest anyone should boast. Along with this important truth, the Lord’s “no” to David drives home the theological truth stressed by the prophet Isaiah long after Solomon had built the temple, when he said, “This is what the Lord says: “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all things, and so they came into being?” (Isa 66:1-2).

From David’s perspective, the Lord’s answer is unmistakable: “It’s not about what you can do for me; it’s all about what I can do for you.” Nathan is instructed, “Tell my servant David, ‘This is what the Lord says: I took you from the pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone. . . .I have cut off your enemies. . . .I will make your name great. . . .I will provide a place for my people. . . .’” The message is emphatic: David is not a self-made man. The issue has never been, what can David achieve or how much can David accomplish. The focus has always been on receiving from God, not achieving for God. David may have been about to cross the line from being full of God to being full of himself. Had his success and acclaim convinced him that he was in a position to do something significant for God—because God had done so much for him? If so, David was on dangerous ground, as we all are when we think we can do something special for God. Beware of being so full of what you can do for God, that you forget about God.¹⁰

Contentment

*But I have calmed and quieted myself,
I am like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child I am content.*

Psalm 131:2

David’s picture of contentment is of a child old enough to be in her mother’s lap without needing to be nursed but thankful to be in her mother’s arms. She neither clambers to be feed nor clings dependently. She is calm and content. She makes no demands. She is delighted to be present for no other purpose than to feel her mother’s love. The scene is reminiscent of the time Jesus asked the disciples, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Jesus called a little child to him and placed the child among them. He said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:1-4). Contentment and greatness have the same source: a calm and trusting dependence on the Lord. It is ironic that David and Jesus would use the trusting, dependent child as a picture of spiritual maturity. Hans Urs von Balthasar offers a crucial perspective when he writes, “Christian

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: First and Second Samuel* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 253.

¹⁰ Webster, *Living in Tension*, vol.1:168-172.

childlikeness and Christian maturity are not in tension with one another. Even at an advanced age, the saints enjoy a marvelous youthfulness.”¹¹ The more mature in Christ that we become the more we see ourselves as the contented children of God. We cry, “Abba, Father,” because the Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children (Rom 8:14-16). To be able to say with the apostle Paul, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances” (Phil 4:11) requires us to be weaned off of all those false dependencies that we are tempted to cling to.

Hope

*Israel, put your hope in the Lord
both now and forevermore.
Psalm 131:3*

The concluding admonition encourages the people of God to put their full trust and reliance in the Lord both now and forever. Psalm 130 and 131 repeat the same admonition : “Israel, put your hope in the Lord.” Both psalms are deeply personal, dealing with forgiveness and contentment, with a focus on the individual until just at the end when the scope opens up and reaches out to encompass everyone. Two observations can be drawn. The person who has the privilege and joy of encouraging hope and admonishing trust is the person who has experienced forgiveness and contentment in Christ. The second observation is that such a person embodies what it means to put our hope in the Lord. Forgiveness and trust, redemption and rest, are grounds for hope in the Lord.

¹¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, p. 41.