

"One Of The Shortest Psalms To Read And The Longest To Learn"

Psalm 131

21 May 2017

Charles Spurgeon said that Psalm 131 was one of the shortest psalms to read but the longest psalm to learn. How true! You can read this psalm in about 10 seconds, but it will take you your whole life to learn it. And by the time you get through this sermon, I think you'll agree. Psalm 131 is not the shortest of the psalms, Psalm 117 is, but it's pretty short and it does take a loooooong time to learn- like the rest of your life.

Psalm 131 shows us that we all struggle with fear and worry and anxiety and panic at times. We all do to some degree. And some of us really struggle with anxiety and panic attacks. So I know that there is not easy answer to all of these issues. Some people struggle with severe cases of anxiety and panic attacks that are debilitating. I had a pastor friend call me this week and tell me that he suffered a massive panic attack that sent him to the hospital. And in that moment, it would not have mattered if you quoted Psalm 131 to him because he was out of it.

Of course, we want to share Scripture with people- it's God's word for crying out loud! But sometimes it isn't as simple as just quoting a Scripture to someone. It may require medicine. Now, I don't want to get into a debate on the validity of using medicine to help, but I will say this, that my friend said that it is helping him. But whatever our beliefs on all of that are, we have to be pastoral and caring as we help people with deep anxiety and fear and panic. You cannot just shout a Bible verse at them. Please don't do that. That's not what they need. They don't need to be shouted at. They need to be prayed for. They need their hand held. They need to be comforted. Yes, share God's promises with them, share God's word with them, but don't shout it at them and tell them to just get over their fears. That's awful. Please don't do that.

Imagine doing that with your children who are scared of the dark or the supposed monsters under their bed. Imagine just yelling at them, *"Get over it! Monsters aren't real! There's nothing to be afraid of. Jesus is with you. Good night!"* That's not what scared children need. They need your presence and comforting words, and they need God's word to be reassured that Jesus is with them. What they don't need is law- someone yelling at them and telling them to just believe and get over it. And if you've never dealt with deep-seated anxiety and fear that cripples you and you cannot move, then you may not be the person to help- *if you're gonna shout Scripture at them.*

So I just wanted to say at the beginning of this sermon that there are extreme cases of anxiety and panic that don't have simple answers. Those probably require more. But for the run-of-the-mill worries and fears that we all experience, I think Psalm 131 will suffice. That's what Psalm 131 is addressing. But whatever our struggles, we all have to fight and work hard to rest. Yes, we have to work hard to rest. We have to fight the good fight of faith so that we can get our hearts to a place of rest.

So today we are going to bring the Gospel to bear on these very normal experiences that we all face. All of us, at some time, will be plagued with fear and worry and anxiety and panic. In fact, you don't live too long as a human being before you deal with this. Children get scared all the time. All of us were scared as children. If you disagree, well there are a lot of Bible passages that deal with lying.

Bob Goff says that, *"God is never as nervous about our future, or as concerned about our past, as we are."* And last week saw this in Psalm 130. Psalm 130 taught us that God is not as concerned about our past as we are. And today Psalm 131 will teach us that God is never as nervous about our future as we are. And the reason why: *Jesus*. Jesus takes care of our past and He's taking care of our future.

So the Gospel that we saw in Psalm 130 is the key to life in Psalm 131. In Psalm 130, we rest in forgiveness. In Psalm 131, we rest in our *Father*. In Psalm 130, we wait for Jesus to make all things new. In Psalm 131, we wait for Jesus to work *in all things* for our good. In Psalm 130, we trust Jesus for our salvation. In Psalm 131, we trust Jesus with our *situations*. And this is what David will remind us of today:

SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO TELL YOUR HEART, "SHHHH! REST."

That's what we do with fussy children. That's what we do with scared children. We hold them and we tell them, *"Shhh. It's going to be okay. Be quiet. Rest."* Jesus does that for us in the Gospel and that's what we have to do with our hearts too.

LOOK AT VERSE 1...

O LORD, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.

Notice how David begins. The first words out of his mouth are "O, Yahweh." And what David is doing here at the beginning of this song is giving us a tutorial in humility. David is teaching us about humility. Those 2 words, "O, LORD," are the beginning place of humility. Humility begins with those 2 words. Humility doesn't begin with the letter "H"- humility begins with "O, LORD." Humility begins with Jesus. In fact, in the Hebrew, there is no word "O" at the beginning of verse 1, like there is in most English translations. In Hebrew, the first word is Yahweh. The Hebrew reads, "Yahweh, not lifted up my heart." Yahweh, my heart is not lifted up.

So the beginning place of humility is Jesus. It's crying out to Jesus. Let me ask you: Do you want more humility in your life? Do you want to learn how to humble yourself? Well, if you can pronounce "Jesus" then you're well on your way. David is telling us that humility begins with 2 words, "O, LORD."

But David also tells us something about himself here in verse 1. He says that his heart is not lifted up and his eyes are not raised too high. These are 2 Hebrew phrases for pride, the opposite of the humility that he expressed at the beginning. In the Old Testament, to have one's "heart lifted up" is an expression of pride (2 Chronicles 32:26; Ezekiel 28:2) and to have one's "eyes raised" meant that person was haughty (Psalm 18:27; Proverbs 6:17; 21:4). So David is acknowledging that in this moment, he is not prideful.

But what does this kind of pride look like? What does it look like to be prideful and superior? The answer may surprise you. The answer may hit a little closer to home than any of us want it to! The answer is this: pride reveals itself in our hearts when we worry and stress and panic. Ouch! Let me say that again because it probably knocked the wind out of some of y'all. *Pride reveals itself in our hearts when we worry and stress and panic.*

That's probably not how most of us think of pride. We tend to think of the negative kind of pride- because there is a positive kind of pride, like pride in the accomplishments of your kids- but here the psalmist is talking about negative pride. We tend to think of pride in negative terms, like someone being prideful, someone being full of themselves, someone looking down on others, etc. And that is pride, too.

But here in Psalm 131, David is telling us that pride also dresses up in outfits that we are far more familiar with: *worry, stress, panic*. Those are the dresses that pride likes to wear: *worry, stress, panic*. So pride is anti-trust. Pride expresses itself in worrying about the future, panicking about a situation, and stressing about things. *Pride is anti-trust*. Ouch! That just hits too close to home for me! I was so convicted as I worked on this sermon this week because I don't tend to think of myself as a prideful person. But some dude named David came along this week and totally exposed me! I've been outed as a prideful person! I've been outed as a prideful person because *I do worry* about the future and *I do panic* about situations and *I do stress* about things.

And I am going to go out on a far, far limb here and make the assumption that y'all do too. I am going to assume that y'all struggle with worry and fear too. You sinners! You prideful people, you! I'm so glad that I'm not alone! It's nice to see that we're all in the same boat because I know all of us worry and stress and panic about things. But we don't want to stay in the boat, do we? And here's why: *because pride is sin*. And that's why we don't want to stay in the boat. We want to get our hearts to the place where David is in this song. Why? Because pride is sin and God hates pride.

Proverbs 6 tells us that pride is one of the 7 things that God hates. Now, God hates a lot of sins, more than 7. But there's something about making the top 7 list of things that God hates, and pride not only makes the top 7 list, pride comes in at #1! God hates "haughty eyes" Proverbs 6 tells us. The same Hebrew phrase used in Proverbs 6:17 for "haughty eyes" is used here in Psalm 131. Pride, haughty eyes has been at the top of the charts since Satan rebelled in Heaven. Pride has stayed in the #1 spot for a looooong time! So why does God hate pride so much? I think C.J. Mahaney says it best-

Pride not only appears to be the earliest sin, but it is at the core of all sin. "Pride" John Stott writes, "is more than the first of the seven deadly sins; it is itself the essence of all sin." Indeed, from God's perspective, pride seems to be the most serious sin. From my study, I'm convinced there's nothing God hates more than this... Why does God hate pride so passionately? Here's why: Pride is when sinful human beings aspire to the status and position of God and refuse to acknowledge their dependence upon Him. (Humility: True Greatness, p.30-31)

Pride is when sinful human beings aspire to the status and position of God and refuse to acknowledge their dependence upon Him. Ouch! Do you know why God hates pride, Grace? Because pride says, "I challenge you, Sovereign Lord of the Universe, to do battle with me. Let's put on the gloves, let's hop in the ring, and let's get ready to rumble!!!! I can do a better job than You! I know what's best for me!" We might not think of it that way, but that's what we are essentially saying when we try to put ourselves in the place of God.

So God hates pride, but the good news of the Gospel is that He is drawn to the humble! Grace is drawn to humility! That's good news! Do you want to experience God's grace? Then humble yourself! Do you need God's grace? Then humble yourself! God is drawn to humility. But He resists the proud. Like a magnet, Jesus is drawn to humility. Jesus cannot resist humility. Jesus cannot stay away from a bended knee. Jesus cannot and Jesus will not resist any person who simply says, "O, LORD."

Jesus is drawn to humility because the humble person recognizes that they are under the mighty hand of almighty God. Grace is drawn to the humble person because the humble person trusts and rests in God's sovereignty. The truly humble person trusts that God knows what He is doing and therefore they rest in that. So humility says, *"I don't know what's happening in my life, God. I don't know why things are the way they are. I honestly don't know why You are doing what You are doing, Lord. But I trust you. I rest in Your sovereign care."*

And that's what David is getting at when he says in verse 1: *I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.* The Hebrew literally reads, *"I do not walk in great things, in things too marvelous for me."* The Hebrew word *halak* means to walk, to behave, to act a certain way. It's the same word used in Psalm 1:1, *"Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked..."*

The idea here is that David is not perpetually living in a state of worry and doubt and fear. He's not characterized by panic and stress. He doesn't walk in these things continually. In other words, David is saying, *"I'm not going to walk around stressed out and panicking and spend my energy trying to figure out what God is up to."* He's not preoccupied with this. He's not trying to solve the riddle of God's providential direction of his life, he's just resting in the truth that Jesus has got it all under control.

Now, keep in mind that this is David in Psalm 131 at this point in his life, on this day. This is how David feels as he's on the songwriter's retreat when he composed this psalm. At this moment in his life, it is well with his soul. But that could change, and I'm sure it did. David didn't reach this place of soul rest and never struggle with worry again. I'm sure he struggled with worry and fear after writing this song. Just read his other psalms! David is all over the place in the psalms. He's a basket case at times and he's completely stress-free at other times. Mostly though, David's a basket case and that's why we like the Psalms, and why we relate to him. David is just like us. One minute he is full of Gospel hope, the next minute he is full of fear and worry.

So please don't misunderstand what David is saying here. He is not saying that there is some "higher life" where you can reach this plateau of trust and peace and never struggle again. You may, for a season, have a rock solid peace and trust, but because you are a sinner and you live in a fallen world, that will not last. You will have to fight to get your soul at this place of rest that David describes here. That's just plain old Christianity! We have to fight the good fight of *faith*. And that's what David has done at this moment in his life. David would tell you today-

SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO TELL YOUR HEART, "SHHHH! REST."

That's what David has done in this psalm. He is not occupying himself with things too marvelous for his pea-sized brain. The Hebrew word translated as *marvelous* is used regularly to describe how Yahweh does wonderful, amazing, extraordinary, surpassing, incomprehensible things. It's used in Psalm 139 to describe all of the incredible things Yahweh does-

Psalm 139:1-6

O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it.

So David isn't sitting around trying to figure what God is up to. He's not stressing about what is happening in his life, his family, his church, his workplace, and his neighborhood. He's resting in the Gospel, trusting that Yahweh is working all things out for his good. If David could re-release this song, he'd probably add a new verse before the guitar solo, that goes like this:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28

Understand this, Grace: At all times in your life, God is weaving His patterns in the story of your life, working for your good and His glory. Now, I know that we all know that. We know that Romans 8 tells us that. We know this, right? We do. But how often do we forget it!? All the time! We don't have to be consumed with things too great for us. We don't have to occupy our minds with things too marvelous for

us. All we have to do is remember something that we already know but forget too much: God is working for your good and His glory. In everything that happens in your life, that's true! You can bank on that! Forget trying to figure out what God is up to! Forget trying to comprehend things that you can't comprehend and just rest in the truth that God is working for your good and His glory. No matter what happens, God is working for your good and His glory. No matter what is happening in your life right now, God is working for your good and His glory.

I want you, right now, to think about something that is stressing you or keeping you up at night. Whatever it is. Whatever. Identify it. Do you have something? Everybody got a situation or problem or relationship that has been stressing you out? Ok. Think about it. Now, when you leave today and you begin to stress over that, and begin to lose sleep, and you begin to toss and turn in bed over it, and you begin to lose your appetite and not eat, I want you to repeat these words over and over again until you have calmed and quieted your soul:

God is working this out for my good and His glory.

When the stress and anxiety and panic and worry monsters come your way, say that 50x if you have to. Over and over. And then if you want to get extra Gospel hope and extra Gospel peace, emphasize different words in that sentence.

God is working this out for my good and His glory.

God is working this out for my good and His glory.

God is working this out for my good and His glory.

God is working this out for my good and His glory.

God is working this out for my good and His glory.

God is working this out for my good and His glory.

God is working this out for my good and His glory.

God is working this out for my good and His glory.

God is working this out for my good and His glory.

God is working this out for my good and His glory.

God is working this out for my good and His glory.

If that doesn't get your heart to a peaceful state, rinse and repeat. And if it still doesn't work, you can get your money back.

So there is no need then to worry about things, there is no need to be anxious, even though we all struggle like this at some point, but there really is no need to worry because David told us in verse 1 that worry is just a form of pride! Right? Worry is a form of pride. Ouch! That truth still stings because we all worry, don't we? It's just pride. Refusal to trust is pride. Refusal to trust is pride and that's a hard pill for us to swallow.

So worry is me acting like I am God. Worry is me acting like I could do things better than God, in my way, in my time, etc. And that's why we need humility. Because grace, because God is drawn to the humble. When you put worry to death and you trust and rest in God's sovereignty, guess what? You get God! You get Jesus! Jesus is drawn to humble people! Jesus is drawn to repentant people.

As Jack Miller said in a letter to a missionary who was struggling with an illness, "*May God grant you grace to deepen your repentance! Pray that He will do the same for me! For repentance is just humility, and humility stands in the low place, not on the mountains of pride. Therefore, humility gets much grace because grace runs downhill!*" (The Heart of a Servant Leader: Letters From Jack Miller, p.65)

Humility brings God close. Repentance brings Jesus close. The hope of the Gospel is that as we humble ourselves, Jesus draws near to us. We don't need answers to our questions, we need Jesus! What we need most when our minds are occupied with things too marvelous for us is Jesus!

We want to know what in the world God is up to when what we really need is *to know God more*. Knowing God will help us as we wonder what's going on in our world. Stressed about the country? Know Jesus. Confused about a situation you are in? Get to know God more. Whatever it is that has occupied your mind, the answer is always being satisfied with Jesus. Whatever it is that is renting space in your brain, the only way to kick those tenants out is to know Jesus more, spend time with Jesus more: in prayer, in Bible intake, in community, in service, and outreach. But all of that requires humility. It requires a bended knee.

So this call to trust Jesus is a call to humility. The call to trust and hope in the Lord is a call to humility. And humility grows in a heart centered on Jesus. That's the environment where humility thrives and grows: a heart that is centered on the Gospel, a heart that is centered on Jesus. So the Gospel is actually a powerful assault on our pride.

Milton Vincent says, *"Preaching the gospel to myself each day mounts a powerful assault against my pride and serves to establish humility in its place. Nothing suffocates my pride more than daily reminders regarding the glory of my God, the gravity of my sins, and the crucifixion of God's own Son in my place... Pride wilts in the atmosphere of the gospel..."* (A Gospel Primer for Christians: Learning to See the Glories of God's Love, p. 27-28)

So what does the atmosphere of the Gospel look like? David tells us in verse 2, which we haven't even got to yet in this sermon! The atmosphere of the Gospel looks like a weaned child who no longer wants to nurse on his mother's breasts. The atmosphere of the Gospel is no fussing, no fidgeting, but resting.

LOOK AT VERSES 2...

But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me.

David employs a very common picture here to explain the atmosphere of the Gospel, to explain the state of his heart, a picture that everyone in ancient Israel could and would understand. David knew that by using the picture of a weaned child, everyone would know exactly what he was talking about. And here's why: in the ancient Near East, children were breastfed until they were at least 3 years old, and sometimes longer. So David knows that everyone hearing this psalm would know what it was like to wean a 3 or 4 year old. I mean, it's one thing to wean a 1 year-old, it's a completely different experience trying to wean a 3 year-old who, though he is 3, still has a bad case of the terrible 2's.

And really, all you parents know that the terrible 2's don't stop at age 2, they just change their name to the "Thrashing 3's," right?

So what's it like to breastfeed until a child is 3? It's great until it comes time to wean them! If you have ever tried to wean a fussy 3 year-old, then you've probably had conversations about vasectomies. Weaning a 3 year old is tough stuff. Weaning a 3 year old is hard because their tantrums and fussiness are on steroids! If they want to nurse and you say no, then expect that little human being to just collapse on the ground and kick and scream and cry. If you are trying to wean a 3 year-old and you tell them no, it's like gravity is on steroids cause their little bodies just give out and on to the floor they go a kickin' and a screamin'.

So David knows that everyone who hears this song will know exactly what he is talking about when he says that he has calmed and quieted his soul like a weaned child. He means that he does not get fussy and irritable when things don't go his way. He means that he is not restless and fidgety. And that's because David figured out that humility begins with 2 words: *O, LORD...* David figured out that humility keeps you from becoming a functioning atheist.

But David also knew that when we forget that we are children and that God is our Father, then we act like 3 year-olds who have no idea what they are doing or what is best for them. We become anxious and we want to be like God. We want to be like God. We want to be like God. We want to be like God. Does that remind you of any passage in the Bible? Does that sound familiar? Let me help you: it involves a talking Snake who asked a lot of questions.

When we become anxious, we just hop back in a time machine and we land in the Garden of Eden and we fall prey to that talking Snake's lies and interrogations and we assume that we can be like God. When we become anxious we try to be God but we lack the wisdom, power, knowledge, and ability to pull it off. When we become anxious and worry and are consumed with things too great and wonderful for us, it is then that we assume this pseudo God-like stance where we think that we can handle what's happening in our lives. And it's only as we remember that we are little children that we will regain our sanity. It's only as we remember that we are weak that we will calm and quiet our souls.

What did Jesus say in Luke 12:32? "*Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*" Those 4 words seem like they don't go together. *Fear not* and *little flock* seem like they don't belong in the same sentence. Now, the words *fear* and *little flock* do seem like they go together. Little flocks get scared. Little kids get scared. But when Jesus says it, it makes perfect sense. Jesus is the reason why little flocks don't have to be afraid. Jesus is the reason why scared little sheep will actually get the kingdom.

So at this point in his life, David has calmed and quieted his soul. He's not like a fussy child on its mother's lap. He's calm. He's quiet. He's not fussy. No temper tantrums. No fidgeting. He's not trying to figure everything out, he's just resting, trusting. And now he is at place where, instead of trying to put all the pieces of his life together, he can trust and rest in the fact that God will do what He is going to do. He can now begin to see with clear eyes how God might be working things out.

Paul Miller said, "*When you stop trying to control your life and instead allow your anxieties and problems to bring you to God in prayer, you shift from worry to watching. You watch God weave his patterns in the story of your life. Instead of trying to be out front, designing your life, you realize you are inside God's drama. As you wait, you begin to see him work, and your life begins to sparkle with wonder. You are learning to trust again.*" (A Praying Life, p.73)

How do you calm and quiet your soul like a weaned child? Rehearse the Gospel. Remember God's promises. Realize that you are not God. Resist the Devil. Reach out to Jesus for help. Repent of sin. And recall our big idea-

SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO TELL YOUR HEART, "SHHHH! REST."

And sometimes you realize that you are at the end of a sermon on one of the shortest psalms in the Bible and you still haven't got to verse 3! So, I'm going to tell myself right now, "*Shhhhh! Read verse 3.*"

LOOK AT VERSE 3...

O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forevermore.

Why does David call on the church to have hope? Because he knows from experience that it's easy to lose hope. This heart-state that David is in in this psalm will not last. We are sinners. We sin. We will fail to stay in this state of being at rest and calmed and quieted. So we have to fight. We have to hope. It's that rugged hope that we talked about last week. We are called to wait with hope while we watch God weave His story. But our hope is a rugged hope. As I said last week, Biblical hope is not a pansy. Biblical, Christ-centered hope is rugged. It endures hardships and accusations. Biblical, Christ-centered hope is rough around the edges. Biblical, Christ-centered hope fights when it can't feel. Biblical, Christ-centered hope does not rely on feelings but faith in God's word.

And how do you spell *hope*? J-E-S-U-S. Hope is found in what Jesus has done for us through His life, death, and resurrection. If you can trust Him with your salvation, you can trust Him for whatever temporary situation you find yourself in. How do you fight functional atheism? Jesus. How do you get humility? By saying, "*Give me Jesus.*"

Let's close with John Calvin's life motto and may it become our prayer today:

"My heart I offer to you, Lord, promptly and sincerely."

That's not a bad way to end a sermon, if you ask me. Let's pray.

"One Of The Shortest Psalms To Read And The Longest To Learn"

Psalm 131

Sermon Study Questions

1. Read Psalm 131. Describe a time in your life when you were fidgety and fussy like a child. Looking back, can you now see how God was at work? What would you tell yourself if you could go back in time?
2. Why should we not yell and scream Bible verses at people who are dealing with anxiety, worry, panic, fear, etc? Is the solution simple or complex? What and how would you counsel someone who is dealing with worry? What and how would you counsel someone who is having severe and debilitating panic attacks?
3. How was pride described in the sermon? Is Psalm 131 describing some "higher life" Christianity where you never struggle with fear, worry, etc again?

Quotes to discuss:

Bob Goff

"God is never as nervous about our future, or as concerned about our past, as we are."

C.J. Mahaney

Pride not only appears to be the earliest sin, but it is at the core of all sin. "Pride" John Stott writes, "is more than the first of the seven deadly sins; it is itself the essence of all sin." Indeed, from God's perspective, pride seems to be the most serious sin. From my study, I'm convinced there's nothing God hates more than this... Why does God hate pride so passionately? Here's why: Pride is when sinful human beings aspire to the status and position of God and refuse to acknowledge their dependence upon Him. (Humility: True Greatness, p.30-31)

Jack Miller

"May God grant you grace to deepen your repentance! Pray that He will do the same for me! For repentance is just humility, and humility stands in the low place, not on the mountains of pride. Therefore, humility gets much grace because grace runs downhill!" (The Heart of a Servant Leader: Letters From Jack Miller, p.65)

Paul Miller said, "When you stop trying to control your life and instead allow your anxieties and problems to bring you to God in prayer, you shift from worry to watching. You watch God weave his patterns in the story of your life. Instead of trying to be out front, designing your life, you realize you are inside God's drama. As you wait, you begin to see him work, and your life begins to sparkle with wonder. You are learning to trust again." (A Praying Life, p.73)