

## The Paradox of Ascent

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*Psalm 131*

### The Paradox of the West

Today I would like to begin with a poem. It's a haiku poem by the comedian Bill Bailey, which he says is meant to capture the experience of living life in the modern West.

As he points out, news of chaos and destruction constantly enter our lives via the internet. It's upsetting and overwhelming; but we can't be upset all the time, otherwise we'd never take the bins out.

And so we need to distract ourselves, with the mundane, and the sensual, and the trivial. He calls this poem the *Paradox of the West*:

In this mad world, spun fast  
For nothing, lives fly past  
Helplessly, we look on aghast  
Oh! Cake!

I love that. And don't you think it captures something very true to our experience? Our lives are flooded with information. We are aware of injustice and atrocity and just sheer ridiculousness from 1000s of kms away from where we live. And on top of that we're exhorted to care and act, lest we find ourselves complicit in this wrong. From primary school kids are told that the purpose of their lives is to make a difference, or to change the world. And on top of it all, we are burdened with the responsibility to find ourselves, to create and curate our own meaningful existence. Lest for nothing, our lives fly past.

Is it any wonder that we are driven to distraction? Whether it's hours spent scrolling on social media, binge-watching the latest show, or playing an addictive new word game on your phone. We need respite from the tidal wave of content that threatens to overwhelm us.

Perhaps there is no better word to describe the current state of our culture than restless. Whether we're running around trying to create meaning or make a difference, or rushing after some diversion to ease our sense of burden, there's a restlessness that characterises modern life.

And it's into this restlessness that Psalm 131 powerfully speaks. This Psalm belongs to a collection of 15 psalms called the Psalms of Ascents. These are Psalms of "going up", and most people suggest they were collected together and sung by pilgrims on the way. It could have been pilgrims returning from exile, or more likely pilgrims going up to worship at the temple in Jerusalem.

Both for Ancient Israel, then, and for us today, these Psalms are given to us by God to help us faithfully follow the Lord wherever we find ourselves.

For us, I think this Psalm will help us to find contentment in all our complexities; it will help us to find stillness in the chaos; it will point us out of weariness towards worship, and it will lead us out of our restlessness and into rest.

Ultimately this Psalm is calling us to let go of constant striving, of satisfying our desires and depending on ourselves, and instead to "put our hope in the Lord, both now and forevermore." (v. 3)

## A Pilgrim Psalm

So what we'll do today is look at Psalm 131 verse by verse, as it presents before us an Aspiration, and Illustration, and a Conclusion.

### 1. *Aspiration*

The Psalmist begins:

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. (Ps 131:1)

This, I believe, is as much a statement of aspiration as it is a statement of fact. As the Israelites sang this song on their pilgrimage, they were *teaching and admonishing one another* (see Col 3:16). This is the goal: to subdue the natural pride of our hearts; to still the unruly arrogance of our desires; to confine ourselves to those things which God has called us to do.

The aspiration of this song is to a whole-bodied humility. From the state of my hearts: not proud. To the seeing of my eyes: not haughty. And ultimately to the concerns of my life: not things too great or wonderful for me.

I wonder if any of us could come up with a more counter-cultural statement if we tried! According to the wisdom of our day, there is *nothing* too great for us, and there is *nothing* too wonderful to be pursued. Every single person, we're told, can be anything they want to be, and achieve anything they want to achieve. If this verse were written today it might be:

In your heart is all you need / chase after whatever you see

Concern yourself with great things / wonder is your destiny.

Now at first this sounds invigorating and inspiring. But there's really something quite inhuman about demanding that everyone does something or is someone special and spectacular. As the writer Alan Noble suggests:

The fundamental assumption of modern life is: you are your own and you belong to yourself. And if we are our own, then it's *up to us* to forge our own identities and make our lives significant. But while this may sound empowering, it turns out to be a crushing responsibility—one that never actually delivers on its promise of a free and fulfilled life but instead leaves us burned out, depressed, anxious and alone.

The problem with this modern assumption is it places us and our own desires at the centre of the universe. We are the centre of our own meaning and identity, we are the centre of our own plans and destiny. Even news from around the world is delivered to us with a sort of veiled question: well, what are *you* going to do about it? And whether we commit ourselves to the endless road of self-optimisation, or resign ourselves to just trying to get by, this lie that we belong to ourselves leaves us exhausted and exasperated.

And so the aspiration of Psalm 131 ought to be like a breath of fresh air. Here is something to aspire for:

Not to be the centre of everything but to humble your heart before the Lord. Not to chase after everything you see, but to pursue only those things which are good and right and true. Not to concern yourself with every great and wonderful thing but to confine your attention to the things before you, to the sphere of influence to which God has called you. Not to grasp for greatness, but to gratefully receive everything you have from the hand of God.

## 2. *Illustration*

This is very point then illustrated in verse 2:

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

If we just described the modern person as *restless*, verse 2 pictures the faithful person like a child resting happily in her mother's lap.

Now I don't have much knowledge about the weaning of a child, so I can't exactly speak from experience. But I think that this illustration is teaching us two things about finding contentment.

Firstly, the contented weaned child is no longer ruled by their instincts or desires. I gather that's the way that babies work. They feel hungry and so they cry. They need to burp and so they cry. They poo their pants and so they cry. The young child's life is entirely governed by their needs of the moment. But as the child grows older, those instinctive desires are brought under some measure of control.

The weaned child still gets hungry. But that feeling of hunger doesn't dominate over everything else. And because basic desire no longer rules, it means the child is no longer constantly restless. It can sit quietly, even with an empty stomach, because the stomach is no longer King.

And what makes this possible is the second aspect of this illustration. The weaned child, says the psalmist, sits content *with its mother*. The great comfort of the weaned child is that they are not entirely responsible for satisfying their every need and desire. They do not belong to themselves, but to their mother. And they have

come to know and to trust the loving care of their mother as the truth that rules all others. From this comfort flows contentment, as the child happily waits upon their Mum, even as their empty stomach grumbles.

Psalm 131 is pressing us to see that we have this same comfort in our relationship with God. We can calm and quiet ourselves because the loving care of God is the truth that rules all others. Consider for example the first question and answer from the Heidelberg Catechism:

Q: What is your only comfort in life and death?

A: That I am not my own,  
but belong with body and soul  
both in life and in death  
to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.  
He has fully paid for all my sins  
with his precious blood,  
and has set me free  
from all the power of the devil.  
he also preserves me in such a way  
that without the will of my heavenly Father  
not a hair can fall from my head;  
indeed, all things must work together for my salvation.  
Therefore, by his Holy Spirit  
he also assures me of eternal life  
and makes me heartily willing and ready  
from now on to live for him.

We do not belong to ourselves. We belong to a loving heavenly Father and a faithful Saviour.

Which means we don't need to justify our own existence, Christ has justified us by his blood. We don't need to secure our own freedom, Christ himself has set us free. We don't need to create our own meaning, God has revealed to us his own divine will. We don't need to make our lives significant, God is working everything for our good. We don't bear our responsibilities alone, for God has poured his own Spirit into our hearts.

We don't need to grasp for anything, and we don't need to distract ourselves from reality. For the fundamental reality of our lives is not our own desires, but the divine love of the triune God. And so contentment comes from living life in God's lap, as it were. Receiving from his hand everything we need to live our particular life in our particular place, and particular time in God's story of redemption.

### *3. Conclusion*

Which, of course is the conclusion of verse 3. Verses 1 and 2 have a certain obscurity that repays careful rereading and attention. Verse 3, however is abundantly clear:

Israel, put your hope in the LORD  
both now and forevermore.

When all is said and done, patient trust in the Lord is the spring from which humility and contentment flows.

Rather than relentlessly trying to make a difference, or restlessly seeking to satisfy our own desires, or running after the latest distraction or diversion, this Psalm calls us to depend on the Lord, to wait upon him, to allow him to be the one who rules us. When we set ourselves upon that course, that is the way of rest.

## The Paradox of Ascent

I think that helpfully takes us to the heart of this Psalm's message to us today. To the paradox of life in the west, this Psalm presents us with the *paradox of ascent*. The key to going up, is to go down in humility before the Lord. The key to growing up is to become like a dependant child. The key to a truly transformative life is simple trust in the Lord. The key to being a pilgrim is following the right voice: to hear over and against every other call the voice of our faithful Saviour saying, "follow me."

And all of these things come together in Jesus' conversation with the rich young ruler in Matthew 19, and it's a fitting place for us to end.

For you get the sense from this man's interaction with Jesus, that here was a guy concerned with greatness. Great wealth, great power, great influence, great aspiration. I suspect if he walked in here today we would be just as impressed with him as Jesus' disciples were. But he's utterly perplexed as Jesus attempts to teach him about the paradox of ascent.

For Jesus is trying to teach this young man to wean himself of self-dependence, and instead to trust in the Lord. From the very beginning of their conversation, Jesus is seeking to take this man and his stuff out of the centre, so that there would be room for the Lord.

There is only One who is good Jesus says: humble your heart before him. Take all you have and give it away Jesus says: take your eyes off earthly things.

Follow me, Jesus says! Put your hope in me, now and forevermore.

But he can't humble his proud heart. He can't lower his lofty eyes. He can't let go of his concern for great things. This man cannot calm and quiet his desires. And so he cannot find the happy contentment that comes from belonging to Christ. He goes away sad, *because he has great wealth.*

Here is the paradox of the West in a nutshell. Our constant pursuit of greatness and wonder leaves us wearied and exhausted. Many people have observed the sad malaise that characterises our culture, despite the fact we have more than pretty much any time or place in history. We go away sad, *because we have great wealth.*

But here is the paradox of ascent that bookends this whole story. Jesus says: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, **for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.**"

And again: "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But **many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.**"

When we become like little children we find ourselves heirs of God's kingdom. When we give up our own aspirations of greatness for Jesus' sake, we find it not to be a sacrifice but an investment, and we receive far more in return.

When our heart is not proud and our eyes are not lofty, we are lifted up to the throne. We must go down to go up. We must be last to be first.

And so when we give ourselves to quietly praying for our government rather than constantly criticising them on social media, we will not only find ourselves far less outraged, but also far more politically productive.

When we stop trying to become amateur epidemiologists who know everything about responding to a global pandemic and submit to our government and seek to love our neighbours, we'll find ourselves far less vexed and far less vexing to the people around us.

When we show greater concern for the needs of our next door neighbours than keeping up with current events in America we'll make a far greater impact on the world.

When we give up on trying to bring in the kingdom of God, or doing great things for God, and instead seek to faithfully follow Jesus in the ordinariness of our lives, we shine his light all the brighter.

And when we resolve to open our Bibles rather than pick up our phones. When we decide to feast on God's word rather than binge Netflix. When we stop to pray rather than pressing on with our day. Then we will find ourselves calmed and quieted, our restlessness replaced by the true rest and refreshment that comes from living all of life in relationship with God.

Psalm 131 is calling as to the whole-bodied humility that comes from knowing you belong not to yourself but to Christ. And with this belonging comes comfort and contentment that the world simply cannot offer. And perhaps most counter-culturally of all, it holds out to us the real hope that comes from knowing that the future is ultimately in God's hands and not our own.

And so may what Spurgeon said of the writer of this psalm be true of us:

How he prizes the grace of hope! He has given up the things which are seen, and therefore he values the treasures which are not seen except by the eyes of hope. And there is room for the largest hope when the self is gone, ground for eternal hope when transient things no longer hold the mastery of our spirits.

Brothers and sisters, May we be humble and faithful, rather than haughty and lofty. May we seek the quietness of following Christ rather than concerning ourselves with great and wonderful things. May we be those who are ruled by the hope of heaven rather than our hankering for the world.

There are many people around us with proud hearts and lofty eyes, but as the apostle Paul says in Philippians 3:19-20:

Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.

So let us hope in the Lord, now and forevermore. Amen.