

**Be Still, My Soul**  
**Psalm 131**  
**August 6, 2023**

Close to 15 years ago I was planning to preach through a few Psalms at a retirement home here in town. As you know, there are a number of ways to do this (Psalms of Lament, Christological Psalms, Psalms of Ascent), but I ended up deciding to ask those that attended that gathering—predominantly 70–80-year-old ladies—what their favorite Psalms were. I would then preach those. About 10 years later we did the same thing here. Maybe you can quickly imagine the Psalms chosen at the retirement home (23, 1, 46, 100, 121). Some of those absolutely were. However, one lady that almost *never* missed a Saturday chapel for 6 years—Ollie Elliot—said to me, “Psalm 131 is my favorite Psalm.”

I’ll be honest. In 2008 I probably couldn’t have told you one thing about this Psalm. But, to prepare for that sermon, I began studying it, meditating upon it, and it wasn’t long until I thought, “Breaking news: this faithful woman who’s loved Jesus for 60+ years knows a good bit more about the Psalms than the guy in his mid–twenties.” And *since* that series through the Psalms 15 years ago, Psalm 131’s effects have persisted. I told someone this week that, other than Psalm 121, I’ve read Psalm 131 at more hospital visits than any other.

The Psalm is a bit of holy eavesdropping into David’s relationship with the Lord. As we listen in, aspects of this Psalm will be comforting, other aspects borderline shocking. These are the words of a man that faced persistent and intense pressures; and yet, in the *midst* of life’s turbulence, he sings of a quiet soul.

David Powlison writes, “Psalm 131 is a show and tell for how to become peaceful inside.”<sup>1</sup> If your soul is full of noise, I hope that sentence grabs your attention like it did mine. And that this Psalm might deeply minister to you, as it did Ollie Elliot, and countless others. We’ll look at this three verse Psalm, surprisingly, under three headings. Note first,

**1. The Results of Peace/Contentment (v. 1–2a)**

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. But I have calmed and quieted my soul.** Now, if you’re like me, you read those verses and say, “Um, excuse me, King David, you did . . . what?!”

Powlison writes, “We see the results first, and are intrigued.” That kind of thing—being intrigued by—your attention drawn in by *results*—happens all the time. Every do-it-yourself project on the internet starts with a picture of the finished product. There’s a desk someone built, a kitchen remodel, or maybe an exquisite dessert made in that kitchen. The finished product—the result—hooks us, so what do we do? We scroll down for the steps taken to arrive there.

In one sense, this is what happens in Psalm 131. David *leads* with the results, a calmed soul—which he connects to a heart not lifted up and eyes not raised too high. What does he mean by that imagery? “Heart” points to the inner person; it’s not unrelated to the idea of “soul” in verse 2. The imagery of “eyes” often speaks to direction, ambition, or longings.<sup>2</sup> The Psalmist is clear: *both* heart

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<sup>1</sup> David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes*, 75. This chapter is the best thing I’ve ever read on Psalm 131; and it’s not close. This sermon borrows much from his profound insights. If you don’t have the book, you can find the chapter online at this link: <https://www.ccef.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Peace-be-still-Learning-Psalm-131-by-Heart.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Alec Motyer, *Psalms by the Day*, 383.

and eyes are not high; they're low. The NASB translation gets to the essence of it, **my heart is not proud, nor my eyes haughty.**

If your soul is more turbulent than still—might it be due, in part, to pride? I tend to think the more you grow in Christ the *more* you find layers of hubris. The balance of verse 1 shows us how pride *might be* related to a soul far from quiet. It centers on pride's first-cousin, presumption.<sup>3</sup> David writes, **I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.**

Pride manifests itself in many ways. It can undervalue other people—eyes high, looking *down* on all the “lesser” imagers of God—it does *that*; and it does *that* because it overestimates oneself. Wednesday night Andy clearly described both God's omnipresence and omniscience. And, to bring those doctrines to bear upon our hearts, he pointed out something both absurd and, yet, familiar: *our* continual seeking to be both. As in, “I need to be there and there and there. Or, I need to know more and more and more.” We then drift into seeking to be omnipotent too. Why not? It's sort of a package deal. And we end up occupying ourselves, and our thoughts, with things too great for us. And what happens when you obsess over things you can't control? It's not peace.

One commentator wrote this, “The difference between God and us is that God never thinks He is us.”<sup>4</sup> So, consider the noise in your own soul. In what ways is pride related to that noise? Have you occupied yourself with things too great for you? Spurgeon wrote, “A man does well to know his own size.”<sup>5</sup>

David Powlison put together something of an anti-Psalm 131. By that, it's a song that confesses the opposite truths King David does: “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.”<sup>6</sup>

We think we're something, don't we? But what does the gospel say to our pride? The gospel message shouts that we're *so* fundamentally flawed—and we've acted so heinously—that God had to send His flawless Son to die the death we deserved.

We think we're something. Look at what *I* can do. Don't you know I'm a big deal. God and His gospel humbles us.

That's what David declares. His heart and eyes have been brought low. And, in that proper estimation of himself, he's found those elusive results. Verse 2: **But I have calmed and quieted my soul.** One man says this calming is akin to the levelling of a field by a plow.<sup>7</sup> Others make the picture a bit more current, as if a building site has been bulldozed. Whether plowed, or bulldozed, David's soul has leveled out. It's as if he said, “shhhhh” to the turmoil.<sup>8</sup>

If you're like me, you might *still* be thinking, “Uhhh, come again, you did . . . what?!” We're intrigued by these results—a peaceful and contented soul. That happens first. Then David gives us an image that beautifully communicates just how kind God's mercy is toward those that humble themselves.

## 2. The Image of Peace/Contentment (v. 2)

Verse 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.**

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<sup>3</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150*, 483.

<sup>4</sup> John Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, Baker Commentary.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Treasury of David*, vol. 3, 137.

<sup>6</sup> Powlison, 78.

<sup>7</sup> Josh Moody, *Journey to Joy*, 139.

<sup>8</sup> Powlison, 81.

Maybe the opposite of this image would be instructive for us. Most of us have seen an unweaned, hungry child. Around 5 months in with one of our kids,<sup>9</sup> Julie and I decided to do some arithmetic. For ease of math, 5 months in, roughly, is 150 days. Let's say that child was fed 4 times a day. That's 600 meals. Had that child *ever* missed a single meal? No, we were 600 for 600. 5 months later we were 1200 for 1200. I don't mean to brag, but we were batting a thousand. Yet, what did that child do as each meal time approached? They thrashed about with uncontrollable emotions in demanding hunger like we'd *never* fed them before. That's the opposite image, something inconsolable, flailing about irrationally, making no shortage of noise.

Does that sound like something else? Your soul? Powlison's anti-Psalm continues: "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."

However, the Psalmist says his soul is *not* like that at all. Verse 2: **I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me.** The child no longer frets for what it used to find indispensable.<sup>10</sup> It's content. Rather than upset, distressed, and noisy, it's calm, still, and at peace. You interested?

If so, it's vital we see this image rightly. To see it rightly, we should note *where* the weaned child is. The child hasn't been provided for, and then quickly run away. The picture is of a child *with* its mother. Though it no longer demands nourishment in the way it used to, it remains in her lap. Spurgeon writes, "He is weaned *on* his mother rather than *from* her."<sup>11</sup>

Do you see the contrast? An unweaned child thrashing about because he or she is hungry, or a content child resting peacefully in its mother's lap? Could it be starker?

How is a proud heart humbled? Of course, this is something of a process. Yet, the composure the Psalmist learned has been learned in relationship.<sup>12</sup> He's satisfied—his heart is stilled—because of One he's learned this peace from.

So, consider again, in what ways does pride cause noise within? And in what ways does pride keep us from Him? Are those two considerations connected?

When I've read this Psalm in hospital rooms, I almost always say, "This is going to sound backward." Maybe in our Bible reading we expect instruction first, quickly followed by promised results. Do this, and *this* will happen. But, as we've mentioned, this song's first verse sang about staggering results—a peaceful and contended soul. Then, to further the intrigue of those results, the Psalmist sketched an image for us. Finally, in verse 3, he sings something that's intended to also be instruction.

### 3. The Reason(s) for Peace/Contentment (v. 3)

But, first, note that the one being spoken to shifts as well. Again, verses 1 and 2 were a bit of holy eavesdropping, as he began, **O Lord**. Yet, in verse 3 the Psalmist addresses the people, beginning, **O Israel**. As we've mentioned, it's likely the people of God sang these Psalms as they headed to Jerusalem. And *why* were they headed to Jerusalem? To worship Him who'd delivered them from slavery. *They* were the people God chose in mercy, the people whom He'd continued to show His lovingkindness to, though they'd turned their own way times without number.

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<sup>9</sup> like most everything else, I've mentioned this before.

<sup>10</sup> Powlison, 84.

<sup>11</sup> Spurgeon, 137.

<sup>12</sup> Powlison, 77.

They had quite the shared history. Redeemed, rebellious, repentant, restored, repeat. If they were going to be instructed, they were going to be instructed in *that* context. They were going to be reminded, “This is who you are, the people of God.”

Many of you know that Julie’s grandmother Martha passed away on Wednesday at the age of 91. The funeral was on Friday. I wonder if I’ll ever attend one quite like it again. By that, I mean the funeral was held in the country church she’d faithfully attended since 1950. This church was less than a mile from her home, which she’d *also* lived in since 1950. Last Wednesday, when she drew her final breath, she was in the home she’d lived in for 73 years. That home is on a fourth-generation dairy farm. Julie’s parents live within walking distance. When you talked about a shared place, it can hardly be topped.

What about a shared people? She was 91 years old and there wasn’t an open seat. Martha had 19 great-grandchildren in the room. Julie and I sat on folding chairs snuck in—between pews. I had a close friend that came by who told me he wasn’t going to stay because he wanted to save whatever space there was for those that knew Julie’s grandmother better. Shared place. Shared people.

Uniting purpose? Martha’s son-in-law is a retired pastor. He gave the eulogy, beautifully, from Luke 10. Martha’s grandson is also a pastor. He helped lead too. Martha’s granddaughter—Julie—sang “It Is Well.” And when the congregation joined her on the final verse, the roof felt like it might come off.

A mile from the place where she lived for 70 plus years, steps from where her body would soon be buried, men and women and children influenced by her for decades upon decades gathered in the church she long worshipped in to sing about sin, not in part—but the whole—being nailed to a cross. My brother-in-law, who runs a slick media company in Nashville, told me afterward, “That was like a scene from a film.”

To be clear, I don’t know that what Martha Jared had is necessarily replicable. So, why am I telling you about it? Because when the Psalmist said, **O Israel**, to them that meant something like what I just described: a shared place, people, and history. *This* is who they were: His treasured possession, the people of God brought out of the land of Egypt, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:6). They weren’t isolated individuals. And this wasn’t an isolated moment. And it’s in *that* context—among a people that shared life—that this instruction comes.

Verse 3 gives it: **O Israel, hope in the Lord**. Hope is, of course, not wishful thinking, as it’s often used in our day. As in, “I hope the ice cream machine is working today.” Hope isn’t wishful thinking. Nor is biblical hope anything close to vague. Hope is, most fundamentally, patient, disciplined, confident, waiting.<sup>13</sup>

Hope might be the best of things, but if so, *misplaced* hope is its opposite. If I might finish Powlison’s anti-Psalm, it ends like this, “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 my hopes onto anything and everybody all the time.” I assume that you, like me, have scattered hope onto things that couldn’t sustain it, things that couldn’t and didn’t deliver upon what you “hoped.” The Psalmist, with a people defined by their relationship to the shaper of history, called upon them to **hope in the Lord**.

Maybe you recall this exact phrase in last week’s Psalm. They’re not *loosely* connected. In fact, this line seems to be a doubling down on what last week’s Psalm gloried in. Let me read some of it: **I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more**

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<sup>13</sup> Moises Silva, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 188.

than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning. **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** (Ps. 130:5–8).

So put yourself in these Israelites' sandals. You're journeying to Jerusalem to worship the Lord. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, you're surrounded by God's people, singing these Ascent Psalms. You *just* sang Psalm 130 about hoping in the Lord *because of* steadfast love and certain redemption. When you get to the next song, and it *too* implores you to hope in the Lord, have you forgotten about that redemption you sang about 3 minutes prior?

Further, the instruction is not absent provision. We're hoping in *Him*. As we discussed Wednesday, He's not bound by limitations. If He loves with a never-stopping love, and He aims to redeem, nothing will thwart that purpose. So, like a child, draw near to the One you hope in. *With Him*, not apart from Him, there is steadfast love. *With Him*, not apart from Him, is plentiful redemption (Psalm 130:7). Let your soul be rid of the noise, the clamoring, the misplaced hopes, the vain pursuits, and let the gospel of full and free forgiveness calm and quiet your soul.

“Be still, my soul; thy God doth undertake to guide the future, as He has the past. Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake.”<sup>14</sup>

Israel was to hope in the Lord **from this time forth**. That means *now*. Don't put it off, as in “I'll trust him *later* when I finish depending upon self.” That's a heart lifted up too high. And, in the long run, the noise in your soul won't cease.

Hope now. But not only *now*. Verse 3: **O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forevermore**. He can be trusted with this week. And when they lower your body in a grave, He can be trusted to raise you up forevermore.

And when the Scriptures talk about hope, it doesn't mean a *part* of you—a segmented aspect of your soul—hopes. Here's what Peter said about hoping in the Lord for all that's to come, **set your hope fully on the grace that will be revealed to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ** (1 Peter 1:17).

## Conclusion

We don't hope in something we've earned. We hope in grace to come. As did Israel. As did David. You think David could *always* say, “I have calmed and quieted my soul”? If so, go read 1 and 2 Samuel. Or read the balance of his Psalms. He couldn't *always* say it because he succumbed to sin like us.

. . . unlike the true and better David. Growing up, He sang these Psalms on the way to Jerusalem with Mary and Joseph. And when *He* sang Psalm 131, He sang it without a shred of guile. Among humanity, though no one has ever faced a more turbulent storm, no soul ever rested more perfectly. No one knew more peace. He could sing this Psalm at *any* moment. And for the best of news, hear His assurance in John 14: **My peace I give to you** (John 14:27). He shares it, gladly.<sup>15</sup> So, if the storm has descended, and the wind in your soul deafens, hear the God–man gently say, “Still.”

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<sup>14</sup> “Be Still, My Soul,” Kathrina Von Schlegel

<sup>15</sup> His composure is a communicable attribute, Powlison, 87.