



GRACE CHURCH

Embracing Limitation

Psalm 131

Grace Church | 7.23.23

We have been examining the Psalms of Ascent this summer, which are in fact just songs that the people of Israel would sing as they made the hike to Jerusalem every year for worship. They are songs for pilgrims: those on a journey to God. As followers of Jesus, we are also on a journey to God. The New Testament frequently calls us strangers, aliens, not at home here. So as we walk towards the hope of a new earth, the hope of being with God in perfect paradise, we use these songs to animate and describe our journey. They are the road trip playlist of the Christian life.

This psalm is primarily concerned with two actions, a negative and a positive. The negative is in **verse 1**, where David is saying *“I do not lift my heart or eyes too high or occupy myself with things too great for me”*. In other words, David the King is saying: “I’m not overly ambitious. I don’t get involved or concerned with things that aren’t my responsibility.” The other action in this Psalm is a positive one, in **verse 2**. In fact, in the Hebrew, it reads as an oath, David swearing: “If I have not calmed and quieted my soul!” and an implied punishment, “then let me be cursed.” He is serious, not just about not reaching too high, but also learning to live in the quiet and calm. These two concepts are obviously connected. When we are too concerned with things outside of our control, we cannot have a soul at peace.

Remember this is a Psalm of David. For a king to confess this is counter-cultural: isn’t that the job of the king, to stick his hands in everything, to concern himself with lofty things? But it’s also hard for us, who have been raised in our society of progress and wealth and mobility, and taught to view ourselves as kings and queens of our own lives.

We were laughing in our staff meeting this week how this is exemplified in the simple convenience of fast food. We are taught that we are in charge by how quickly and efficiently we can be fed. I’ll never forget one time as a kid in the drive-through at Burger King. We ordered all the food for our big family, and my dad and I were ready to take it home. Back then they would give all the kids who came to burger king paper crowns—we were in charge. And the motto was (and is?): “Have it your way”. On this particular day, my Father was frustrated, because when we got up to the window to pay, they wouldn’t take his American Express card. No wonder he was frustrated: we were not being treated like kings! This psalm, written by an actual king, is instructing us: don’t be preoccupied with those things outside of your control.



The brevity of this Psalm can lead us to believe we can master this concept rather quickly. You can imagine that in the journey to Jerusalem—sometimes more than 100 miles on foot— it was sung maybe hundreds of times. The psalm is short enough to put on a coffee mug or commit to memory. But it's not easy. Spurgeon calls this Psalm "One of the shortest Psalms to read but one of the longest to learn."¹ If we are really going to put it to practice, we need to understand two actions: embracing limitation as a gift from God and unburdening our cares before God.

Embracing Limitation as a Gift from God

Limitation is not just something we encounter when we get bad customer service or don't get our way. That word "occupy" in **verse 1** means "get involved with" or literally "walk in". The Psalm is not condemning contemplation, or "thinking high thoughts" about God. Again and again in Scripture we are called to awe, to strain to comprehend the majesty of God as an act of worship. There is a difference, however, between contemplation and comprehension. The danger is not in contemplating the things of God, but in involving ourselves in the kinds of things that only God can do. What are the lofty "things" we might occupy ourselves with?

There is an infamous line in the majority opinion of *Planned Parenthood vs. Casey*, a supreme court case in 1992 which affirmed the right to abortion. In it, Justice Anthony Kennedy states that: "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life." What Kennedy means is that it would be wrong to allow the state to control us to the point of telling us what to believe and how to view ourselves. He is right, in my estimation. But what the quote *seems* to say, and why it was so controversial, is that the right to definition of existence and meaning belongs only to the individual. He does not even imply that meaning cannot be derived from others, or above all, God. And it still strikes a chord, because we live in a society that touts individualized freedom to be whoever we want to be, a freedom that goes beyond our own bodies and our own limits, a gospel of self-actualization.²

Do you see the implicit pressure this puts us under? Of all the things you could bear responsibility for—how would any of us sleep at night if we must self-define existence, meaning, and the mystery of life? So let me say it simply: there are some things too lofty for you, too great and marvelous for you to occupy yourself with, to comprehend. There are some things that only God can do. You are limited, you don't have unlimited strength, stamina, time, energy, or ingenuity: and God designed it that way.

Only God can truly provide what you need financially. Only God can keep you healthy and safe, if he wills it. Only God can provide for you meaningful work in this world. Only God can honor you and say "well done" in the way you desire to hear it. Only God can raise the dead and save you from the fear of death. And only God can give to you the identity and meaning you desire.

¹ C.H. Spurgeon, *Treasury of David*

² Scott Sauls, "The Gracious Gift of Limitation".



Many of us fail to understand that our limitations are a gift from God, and therefore good. This produces in us the burden of trying to be something we are not and cannot be.³

The secret to a calm and quiet soul is not complicated: let God be God. **Let God do what only God can do.** See your limitation, your humanity, not as a curse, but a gift.

We have trouble with this because of two fallen conditions: pride and presumption.⁴ Pride is the undervaluation of others—considering yourself more highly than others. This is what David has in mind in **verse 1a**, a “heart” that is lifted up is a heart that is proud, filled up, or the traditional interpretation: a “haughty” heart. Curiously, this is the same root word used to describe Saul in 1 Samuel 10: he was “higher” than others, usually connoting stature, being tall. In the same way, we can have “tall” hearts, grown accustomed to disdainful superiority, looking down on others. The only way to raise your heart high is to put others down. So a disquieted spirit comes out when a proud heart is humbled, when you are not treated or considered to be in the “high place”, when you are made to look or feel smaller than you think of yourself.

Pride situates itself in the heart, but starts with the eyes. Previously in Psalm 121, we are told to “lift our eyes to the hills”, to see that our help comes from the Lord. What the author has in mind here is not a contradiction, but an affirmation. We look to the Lord, like a maidservant to her mistress, we never look *beyond* the Lord. The reason is that our help comes from dependence on God, not independence from God. We never graduate from God, as if we level up to not needing him. Remember, there are some things that only he can do.

A devaluing of others begins with a misdirected ambition. Remember the tower of Babel? Their eyes looked not towards God, but *past* God. Their pride and undervaluation of others was accompanied by presumption, and overvaluing of self. We overshoot our ambition because we overvalue ourselves. We preach the gospel of self-actualization—that we can do anything we set our mind to, and so we begin to learn to view ourselves as less than human.

Let me show you how this works. Because of our pride and presumption, we start with a faulty definition of limitation: it is something to be overcome, a result of the fall. We must *optimize* ourselves, even our bodies, to transcend our limitations. We need coffee just to function. We need technology to do more faster than we’ve ever done before.

This leads to one of two things, both expressions of pride. One is self-promotion, a further “puffing up” or “lifting up” of our heart. Ultimately this is path to vanity, which we considered a few weeks ago in Psalm 128: unless the Lord builds the house, we labor and self-promote in vain. The other path from this faulty view of limitation is self-abasement. We realize we cannot overcome our limitations, we burn out, we are met with too much opposition, and therefore we have no worth. If

³ Kelly Kapic, *You're Only Human*

⁴ Derek Kidner, *Psalms*



our value is found in transcending limits, what happens when our limits catch up to us? What happens when we age, or suffer? Our lack of awareness of limitation has led to over realized ambition or defective ambition: giving up in despair and fear. Ultimately we isolate ourselves: either because no one wants to be around our ego, or we consider ourselves unworthy of others' love.

On the other hand, there is a way to view our limitations in light of the gospel. God created us human—not all of our limits are a result of the fall. He created us to be dependent on him. And he actually welcomes us, gives us value and worth, *before* we prove anything to him. Before the foundation of the world, he chooses his church to lavish his love on—he loves us in our limitation. In fact, he *accepts* human limitation onto himself by becoming man! Jesus, God incarnate, humbles himself, embracing our human limits, coming down so we realize the gospel is not that we must come up. We do not receive worth by transcending limitation, but by embracing limitation as the freedom to let God be God. This understanding leads away from self-promotion and self-abasement into true humility, what Tim Keller calls “the blessedness of self-forgetfulness”.⁵ Instead of pushing others away by our ego or our despair, people want to be around us because we are confident in our worth before God, with no need to prove it to others. Ultimately this leads to true greatness, what G.K. Chesterton calls it “The miracle of the magnanimous man, who is great and knows that he is small.”⁶

Embracing limitation—in your body, in your work, in your heart—is the way to let God be God and you be human. It’s the way to true humility, and true greatness. And, as we will see, it’s the way to true quiet of the soul.

Unburdening our Cares Before God

It was likely quite a jolt for those who first read or sang this Psalm to hear David the king admit he doesn’t occupy himself with things too high for him. But no one would have expected him to compare himself to a small child. For David to confess and even swear his oath to create a child-like state in his soul would be like the President of the United States confessing to having constant ideations of becoming a baby again.

We talk often about the gift of children—but we also know how demanding small children can be. They come out of the womb entirely dependent, and unafraid to demand. At first, those demands are cries, grunts, yells, but then they graduate to words, which can be even harder to hear. As the child grows in maturity however, their needs never lessen, just maybe change, but their demands lessen. The reason is not that they become more independent—a 2 year old needs parents just as much as a 2 week old, but that they become more confident. If in a healthy, stable environment,

⁵ See Tim Keller, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*.

⁶ G.K. Chesterton, *The Dumb Ox*. Quoted in Kelly Kopic, *You’re Only Human*, along with many ideas from this paragraph.



they have been provided for so often that they begin to trust. My 4 year old no longer cries out often when I leave the room for fear of me not coming back. My 1 year old does. The reason is that we have *weaned* him from that response. He has more trust, more experience of my returning, that calms his fears and stills his soul.

That is the image of **verse 2**. A weaned child is one who has started eating solid food and no longer drinking milk. In ancient times, this happened later than we do now—usually around three years—and there was a large celebration to commemorate it. This was because a weaned child had a much higher likelihood of surviving to adulthood, since he could survive without his mother. Again, the picture here is of health, peace, stability. An unweaned child has not learned how to trust, so they are always crying out, discontent. A weaned child is one at rest.

But notice too that the child is not independent—he is with his mother. There is no safer place for a child. Parents in the room know, there is no greater stillness than a child who is at peace in his mother or father’s arms. Children are not occupying their mind with all the responsibilities outside of their control—they accept their limitations as a gift to *be a child*, to run and play and imagine with innocence and trust in their parents. This is the kind of soul that Jesus says we need if we are to inherit the kingdom of God.

The promise of God is that he *will* wean us, one way or another. Not to become independent, but to trust him. He will move us, as Hebrews says, from milk to solid food. He will take us from fear to faith. That may not be easy—it might involve many dark nights of crying out. But God is never far, he has not abandoned you. He is not waiting for you to grow up before he welcomes you to himself.

All parents know that the most joyful parts of having young children, the parts you would never trade for anything, are not when they do their chores and obey. The most powerful joys are when you get to hold them, to care for them, to nurture them. God is a great Father, which means he derives more joy from your presence than your performance. The good news of Jesus is that Jesus lived perfectly, died the death you deserved, and rose again to defeat death—not so that you can impress God, but so that you can be held by God. Jesus’ death and resurrection is the means by which he unites us to God, into God’s embrace and presence. With that comes the freedom to obey, to please God with our actions, to move with God into more maturity, to a participation with him in real, meaningful work for his kingdom. But the performance never comes first.

What this great truth brings is freedom. It’s a freedom from self-promotion and self-abasement. In the arms of God, our soul can feel both our great limitation and our great worth. We can be free to rest when we are tired, to cry out when we need help, and to repent when we fail. It’s a freedom to become small instead of tall, to take the low road, to be at peace. Ultimately, as **verse 3** calls out to us, it’s a freedom to hope in the Lord, to trust him for everything we need, it’s a freedom to bring our cares and unburden them before God.

This week I had a sharp moment where I realized: “I am quite poor at bringing my cares and concerns to God.” I’m prone to overthink, overconcern myself, over-occupy myself with fully



comprehending and tackling big issues. But seldom do I first unburden myself before God.

Friends, you cannot put your soul at rest. You cannot unburden yourself—either from your sin or from the sin of the world. Only God can do that. Your soul will only rest if you come to him, in close, with the confidence of a weaned child, and bury yourself in his chest. Come to the supper, and unburden yourself before God.

