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# The Church in Prayer

## Victory Life Online

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Sunday, Sept 20, 2020 — Psalm 131 - Calm and Quiet Humility

### Introduction

Prayer is one of the primary ways that we nurture our relationship with a God we are in covenant with, and one of the primary ways we learn cooperative obedience.

The primary purpose of prayer is not to get God to do what you think He should do. The primary purpose of prayer is relationship, and in that relationship we are transformed. Prayer must be primarily about being *with* God, not primarily about asking (or especially demanding) something *from* God. It is within the context of this relationship that our trust is built and our character transformed that we learn how to pray rightly and live rightly while enacting His will in cooperative obedience.

### Psalm 131

#### **Psalm 131:1-3 (ESV)**

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,  
like a weaned child with its mother;  
like a weaned child is my soul within me.

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

### Humility and Aspiration

In connection to last week, unity is a powerful witness to the world. But each of us are called to do our individual part in cultivating that unity. We looked at what means to be each other's priest as well as looking for the Holy Spirit working with an unpredictable freshness in each person's unique lives and circumstances.

If we are to cultivate the unity Jesus calls us to, we must recognize our individual temptations that get in the way of this personal responsibility. What gets in the way of us cultivating that unity is our own pride and selfish ambition. It's somewhat difficult to recognize pride and ambition as sins when they are upheld as virtues in our culture. But nonetheless, they get in the way of our relationship with God and our unity with one another. We need recalibrated toward God and each other.

Praying Psalm 131 acts as that recalibration. It begins with a declaration of humility, humility in an inward posture and an outward demeanor.

**Psalm 131:1a (ESV)**

O LORD, my heart is not lifted up;  
my eyes are not raised too high;

The “heart” here would be referring to our inward character and the seat of our intelligence, or our mind. It’s a way of referring to the posture of our inner life that filters and controls our outward life. In praying this verse, we are confessing (maybe even commanding) our heart and mind not to be “lifted up” in pride or self-exaltation, but to take an inward posture of humility.

That inward posture of humility works its way into the outward demeanor by our “eyes” not being “raised too high.” That phrase can be translated as being “haughty.” It’s a way of saying, “I don’t look down my nose at others.” Proverbs 6:17 lists “haughty eyes” among the seven things the Lord hates and considers abominations in His eyes. The person who prays this Psalm is rejecting the sin of pride, which undervalues others, and rejecting the sin of presumption, which overestimates one’s self. This Psalm is confessing the most appropriate way to live before the Lord and in community is with an inward posture and an outward demeanor of humility.

The first verse builds upon the inward posture and the outward demeanor of the person praying into the world of business, vocation, lifestyle, and decision-making. The prayer doesn’t just value humility by rejecting pride and presumption, but values aspiration by rejecting blind, selfish ambition.

**Psalm 131:1b (ESV)**

I do not occupy myself with things  
too great and too marvelous for me.

Ambition, especially when it is blind and selfishly motivated, is not the same as aspiration. Aspiration can be a dissatisfaction with mediocrity, a hopeful striving for the best God has for us. Ambition is aspiration gone crazy. Aspiration is the channeled, creative energy that moves us to growth in Christ, shaping goals in the Spirit. Ambition is taking that energy and building a Tower of Babel for the greatness of our own name.

The idea of ambition harkens back to Genesis 3 and the first temptation with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The temptation that was laid before humanity between trusting God, symbolized by partaking of the Tree of Life, and seizing autonomy from God, being the controller of our own destinies, symbolized by partaking of the Tree of Knowledge. Mankind decides to be the master our own lives and partakes from the Tree of Knowledge. This is the sin of pride and selfish ambition.

Psalm 131 recalibrates to an appropriate view of ourselves and our place in the world. We are not to get “too big for our britches.” We are not to let our hearts get in pride or our eyes haughty, nor are we we be occupied with things that are beyond our ability or control.

“Our lives are lived well only when they are lived on the terms of their creation, with God loving and us being loved, with God making and us being made, with God revealing and us understanding, with God commanding and us responding.”<sup>1</sup> ~ Eugene Peterson

Psalm 131 is a prayer that confesses that I will not try to run my own life or the lives of others; that is God’s business, I will not pretend to invent the meaning of the universe; I will accept what God has shown its meaning to be. I live in humble submission to God and my aspiration is solely His will.

### Trust in God

This may be easy to understand with the mind, but it’s far from easy in the daily grind of life and emotions. What begins with the noble pursuit of humble aspiration of God’s will often leads to anxious pursuit of control. The world of politics and news and elections and family and business knock us back and forth in life, and our souls can drift from the posture of humility quite easily. The temptation toward anxiety and depression are a constant pull on our minds and hearts.

Confident trust in God is no easy endeavor. It does not happen without effort and pursuit. Our souls need a constant calibration. Psalm 131 continues beyond the posture of our heart, the demeanor of our lives, and the pursuit of our goals and instructs us in the way we stay calibrated to trusting God:

#### **Psalm 131:2 (ESV)**

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

The trustful confidence in this prayer did not come naturally, but after a concerted effort through struggles to “calm and quiet” the soul. Our whole being gets pulled toward anxious hurrying to survive, to accomplish, to succeed, to make it. We clutter our schedules with busy tasks and meeting demands and it clutters our souls with hurry. The noise of business and news, of children and neighbors, of social media and entertainment moves beyond our eyes and into our souls. Our souls become noisy with distraction and temptation. It requires a significant amount of effort and resistance to “calm and quiet” our soul.

Cultivating this kind of calm and quiet trust is not an easy step by step program you follow; there’s no magic pill, no microwave instructions. To describe what it’s like to do

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, p. 153

this, the prayer does not lay out an instruction manual, but utilizes a metaphor. “Like a weaned child with its mother.” A weaned child can rest comfortably in their mother’s arms, while a baby who is not yet weaned is fussy and restless.

The declaration of humility in verse 1 is built upon by a declaration of trust in verse 2. This metaphor suggests a child who no longer cries out in hunger for the mother’s breast, but who seeks out the mother for her warm embrace and nurturing care. It’s an image of one who finds calmness and quiet in the embrace of God.

“Just as the child gradually breaks off the habit of regarding his mother only as a means of satisfying his own desires and learns to love her for her own sake, so the worshipper after a struggle has reached an attitude of mind in which he desires God for himself and not as a means of fulfillment of his own wishes. His life’s center of gravity has shifted. He rests no longer in himself but in God.”<sup>2</sup> ~ Artur Weiser

The person who learns to pray Psalm 131 is learning how to stay humble before the Lord and cultivate a quiet and calm trust that comes a maturing relationship with God. Every believer begins as a baby that lives in constant attachment to God as Provider. The maturing believer lives with a trust in God as Provider without anxiety and fuss, but cultivates a relationship with God for the sake of relationship, not provision. Remember, prayer must be primarily about being *with* God, not primarily about asking (or especially demanding) something *from* God. Psalm 131 teaches us that kind of prayer.

### Hope in God

This kind of trust and confidence and relationship is not something you set in place and then move onto something else. This confident trust is something we are encouraged to constantly and consistently work on.

#### **Psalm 131:3 (ESV)**

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

The person praying, having nurtured trust in God, now admonitions Israel to do the same. Hope looks out into the future and sees that God will fulfill His will at some point in time, He will be faithful to His covenant just as He always has been, and therefore can be trusted now and forever, “from this time forth and forevermore.” The people of God, may face struggles, but their ultimate trust needs to be in the God who can take care of them, like the mother of a weaned child.

The message of Psalm 131 is that pride, haughtiness, and seeking after great and wondrous things will not provide the calm and quiet that simple (and total) reliance on God provides.

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<sup>2</sup> Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, p. 777

“Psalm 131 nurtures a quality of calm confidence and quiet strength that knows the difference between unruly arrogance and faithful aspiration, knows how to discriminate between infantile dependency and childlike trust, and chooses to aspire and to trust.”<sup>3</sup> ~ Eugene Peterson

## Jesus

Jesus is the perfect example of what this kind of calm and quiet trust looked like in the chaos and grind of human life. Jesus, though He was the Son of God, recognized to fulfill the will of God, He must be completely submitted to Him without selfish ambition.

**John 4:34 (ESV)** *Jesus said to them, My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.*

**John 5:19 (ESV)** So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.”

Jesus, possibly subtly referring to Psalm 131, encourages a child-like humility and faith without endorsing being childish.

**Matthew 18:1-4 (ESV)** At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

**Mark 10:13-16 (ESV)** *And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.*

Jesus also modeled what this is like to be completely submitting to the will of God in His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.

**Mark 14:34-36 (ESV)** And he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch.” And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.”

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<sup>3</sup> Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, p. 158

## Conclusion

Paul takes his cue from Jesus and explains to the Philippians church how to live out Psalm 131.

**Philippians 2:1-11 (ESV)** So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, **being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit**, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

**Philippians 3:12-14 (ESV)** Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

**Philippians 4:11-13 (ESV)** Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.