

Songs for the Journey

*“Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?
And who shall stand in his holy place?”
(Psalm 24:3 ESV)*

*“But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not
ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.”
(Hebrews 11:16 ESV)*

I Have Calmed and Quieted My Soul

January 14, 2024

Psalm 131

Pastor Steve Paul

Our pastor will be back next week, starting a sermon series on Biblical Anthropology. What does God say about who we are as human beings. I’m looking forward to it.

Today, we get to look at a second Psalm of Ascent. **“Songs for the Journey,”** we’ve called them. These were songs that God’s Old Testament people sang as they hiked up to Jerusalem to worship Almighty God. You can’t just saunter in unprepared for that. Though the melody lines are lost to us, the lyrics are timeless. God gave them to tune our hearts as we walk with Him and worship our way HEAVENWARD.

The last few weeks a song burrowed into my memory that I haven’t thought of for years.

Just a closer walk with Thee
Grant it, Jesus, is my plea
Daily walking close to Thee
Let it be, dear Lord, let it be.

The origins of the song are unknown. It likely sprang from the harsh soil of deep south slavery.

Through this world of toils and snares
If I falter, Lord, who cares?
Who with me my burden bears?
None but Thee, dear Lord, none but Thee.

God, this will never be home, I need to be near you.

Is that your longing this year? A closer uncluttered nearness to God?

But ... what gets in the way of that? A million and one things, I suppose!

Do you ever get distracted like I sometimes do? Do YOU ever get in the way—or want YOUR way in your walk with God?

On the other side of the relationship, does GOD ever baffle you? Does He ever disappoint ... or upset you?

Every time we open our Bibles to draw near to God, we're opening a window on something bigger than we can take in. We're peering into the UNFATHOMABLE. The INCOMPREHENSIBLE. We're looking into INFINITY. It's like, hoping for a glimpse of the Grand Canyon, we step out onto a transparent viewing deck and find a VAST ABYSS underneath.

It's dizzying!

I like a cozy chair and hot coffee during my quiet time. But how do you get close to a God who discomforts us? Confounds us? Maybe even terrifies us?

How do you walk in intimacy with the God whose greatness is unsearchable (Ps 145:3)? Whose wisdom and ways are beyond finding out (Romans 11:33)?

That's what Psalm 131 will help us explore this morning. Psalm 131 (p 519 of the church Bible).

Hear now the Word of the LORD:

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.

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.

³ O Israel, hope in the LORD
 from this time forth and forevermore. (Psalm 131, ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Reading this psalm is like driving through Edgar, Ontario. Blink and you miss it. *“It is one of the shortest Psalms to read, but one of the longest to learn.” (Charles Spurgeon)*

To experience “a closer walk with God” this little song says, we need to

Learn Child-Like Submission to God

We need a **maturing dependence**. Like that of a child.

Before we unpack the song, it might be helpful (for the benefit of anyone who’s new God’s Word), to sketch out how the Bible compares a person’s *spiritual life* to the stages of *physical growth* we go through—from birth, through infancy, and on to maturity.

Our **physical life** begins with **the miracle of conception and birth**. Our birth happened TO us. We were there, but nothing about the process was really up to us. In a similar way a person’s **spiritual life** *begins* with **a miracle** only God can do in the heart and soul of person. It too happens TO us. Our spiritual life is not handed down to us by Christian parents like our DNA is. It’s not something we choose deliberately by our own independent volition. It’s a miracle called the **“new birth”** where God’s Spirit brings us from being **dead** in sin (unresponsive to God) to **alive** in Christ (responsive to God).

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is **born again**¹ he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:3, ESV)

That’s where spiritual infancy *begins*. We can’t enjoy “just a closer walk with God” unless God brings us to life spiritually. Prior to that work of God in us, the Bible describes our condition as ‘dead’ (Ephesians 2:1), as ‘alienated from the life of God’ (Ephesians 4:18), ‘hostile’ (Colossians 1:21) and ‘enemies’ of God (Romans 5:8).

From a HUMAN point of view, this **new birth** happens when the good news about Jesus lands like a seed in our hearts and germinates there. The good news that Jesus came as God’s love

¹ Or ‘born from above’ – it’s an intentional double-meaning. Unless GOD does it ...

gift FOR us, to live a holy life, to die for our sins, and to rise again ... so IF we humble ourselves and receive ... trust ... TAKE what God says as TRUE, turning from our sin and taking Him at His word—that seed TAKES in our hearts and God springs it to life.

... you have been **born again**, not of perishable **seed** but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God. (1 Peter 1:23, ESV)

What word? God's word about Jesus. BUT, Jesus says,

“Truly, I say to you, **unless you turn and become like children**, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3, ESV)

Only IF and only WHEN we humbly receive Jesus does our **spiritual infancy begin**. Only *THERE* does our walk WITH God begin.

Baby believers then begin to grow by ingesting the MILK of God's Word—feeding on the baby basics God teaches us in the Bible as we first get to know Him. GROWING UP is the goal. We're meant to grow out of infancy and on to SOLID FOOD and further on to full MATURITY. There's more to it, but essentially it's a process where Christlike character is formed in us as we walk with God.

Hebrews 5:12-13 chides professing believers who've stunted their own progress:

... though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature ... (Hebrews 5:12-14, ESV)

Grow up. Get off the bottle. Get beyond pabulum. Spiritual infancy isn't a place to park.

Coffee cup Christianity makes us think a closer walk with God is all cozy comfort. It's not. It requires growing up. And that, Psalm 131 says, means learning **Child-Like Submission to God**. It means, getting past INFANTILE selfishness and on to CHILD-LIKE confidence in God.

How do you do that? First,

1. Curb Your Bent Toward SELF.

Step down from a self-consumed way of life. See v1?

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. (Psalm 131:1, ESV)

Every newborn enters the world unaware of much. Yet, we all begin life like tiny tyrants. The minute we start breathing, our needs impose themselves on everyone. The world revolves around us. Everything has to go OUR WAY on our timetable.

Spiritually, we begin the same way. Bent toward SELF. Full of SELF. We naturally look at everything around us—including God—through the lens of ME.

The songwriter here (David, the title says) recognizes this, so he prays, "God, I renounce all that. I'm taking the off ramp."

I don't want my **heart lifted up** in pride.

I don't want **my eyes raised high** in haughtiness, looking down from the grand heights of ME, surveying my realm, envying, making sure others get cut to size. I want down from arrogance.

I don't want to be consumed with '**things too great**' ... chasing grandiose ambitions, fueled on EGO to throw life's spotlight HERE.

Most of all, I don't want ME to be the measure of things **'too marvelous'**, meaning wondrous things, supernatural things, God-sized things.

Do you see the progression? Pride. Arrogance. Selfish ambition. Idolatry. God, I unplug from all that.

It's not easy these days to recognize pride and selfish ambition as dangers when they're upheld everywhere as virtues. What the Bible says is a basic sin, the sin of taking things into your own hands, grabbing what is there while you can get it, being your own god, is championed as the way to go!²

But James 3:15-16 warns, that 'wisdom' isn't from above, it's earthly, natural, demonic!

Demonic? Yes!

It's the self-ascension that got Lucifer turfed out of heaven, "I will be like the Most High."

But SELF ... can quietly almost imperceptibly seep into our thinking about God.

Have you ever heard someone say, "I know what the Bible says, but I like to think of God as ... dot ... dot ... dot." When we squeeze God into the shape of our preferences or confine Him to the measure of our imagination we walk into dread danger. Why?

"A god begotten in the shadows of a fallen heart will quite naturally be no true likeness of the true God. 'Thou thoughtest,' said the Lord to the wicked man in the psalm³, 'that I was altogether such an one as thyself.' Surely this must be a serious affront to the Most High God before whom cherubim and seraphim continually [thunder], 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God [Almighty].'" (A.W. Tozer)⁴

Why would I make miniscule ME the measure of ... Almighty God? What am I thinking trying to fit Him into the mold of my own comfort?

The true and living God is **incomprehensibly** great. To think my finite brain can figure Him out? To think my head can wrap Him into a neat, tidy, likeable package? God and his ways are

² Adapted from A Long Obedience in the Same Direction, Eugene Peterson, p. 146.

³ Psalm 50:21

⁴ A.W. Tozer, The Knowledge of the Holy, p. 11.

unfathomable. Unsearchable. The early church Father Anselm described Him as “that than which nothing greater can be CONCEIVED.”⁵ Stretch your gray cells to their earnest limits, and God still exceeds that to an infinite degree.

That doesn’t mean God is **unknowable**. Our Pastor reminded us on Christmas Eve Sunday that God HAS come close to us, that in Jesus He has made Himself known.

But what do you do with those God-sized marvels that God’s flawless word tells us are true? Like,

God is ONE. Yet He reveals HIMSELF to us as Father, Son, Spirit. THREE persons.

God is HOLY (unapproachably pure) ... Stare at a welder’s arc and we fry our eyes; get too close to the HOLY, HOLY, HOLINESS of God and we disintegrate.

He’s TRANSCENDENT (in a category all His own).

He NEEDS NOTHING (not even us). What is man that you are even mindful of him? (Ps 8:4)

His understanding INSCRUTABLE. There are things about God only God will ever know for all eternity.

“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever ...” (Deuteronomy 29:29, ESV)

What do you do with those ‘secret things’ that confound you about God? The God-sized things too marvelous for you?

A friend once asked me, “Steve, have you ever worshiped God for making hell?” It’s a startling question. What does hell tell us about the infinite value of God’s holiness?

Can you worship God for how He designed you and your sexuality to reflect Him?

Pride will turn that into doubt or distrust. Measure God by ME, and I’ll be tempted to deconstruct my faith. To walk away. I prefer God MY WAY. In my box. On my terms.

⁵ Cf. None Greater by Matthew Barrett, p. 9

Child-like submission, however, will choose to take God on God's terms. Child of God, GIVE WAY to what confounds you about God and marvel at God. Curbing your bent toward SELF will help you turn your DOUBT into ADORATION.

"I do not try, Lord, to attain Your lofty heights, because my own understanding is in no way equal to it. But I do desire to understand Your truth a little, that truth that my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand." (Anselm)⁶

There's a type of knowledge that's beyond our reach as creatures. We can know much, but there is far more we don't know. If we attach our hope of walking close to God to OUR ability to comprehend God, we will certainly despair. But, like David does here, if we curb SELF and remain content to live as mere creatures before our unfathomable Creator, that's a heart posture God rewards.

For thus says **the One who is high and lifted up,**
 who **inhabits eternity,** whose name is **Holy:**

"I dwell in the high and holy place,
 and also *with him* who is of a *contrite* and *lowly spirit*,
 to revive the spirit of the *lowly*,
 and to revive the heart of the *contrite*. (Isaiah 57:15, ESV)

Want a closer walk with God? Curb your bent toward SELF.

Then

2. Commit to Contentment in GOD.

⁶ Anselm, Proslogion 1, quoted in None Greater by Matthew Barrett, p.9

Seek to be SATISFIED in GOD

But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
 like a weaned child with its mother;
 like a weaned child is my soul within me. (Psalm 131:2, ESV)

Other Bible versions begin this verse with the word “Surely.” Surely I have calmed The Hebrew words literally say something like, “If not ...” or “If I haven’t calmed and quieted my soul ...” It’s shorthand for taking an oath or making a solemn promise. “If I don’t do this ... God, deal with me. Hold me to this: I’m committed to ditching my SELF-FUELED RESTLESS DISTRUST for a soul that’s QUIET and CONTENTED in You. STILL, like a lake unruffled even by a breeze. CALM, like a child who’s grown past infancy because of the weaning process.

Weaning was **one of the first real troubles** that we met with after we came into this world, and it was at the time a very terrible one to our little hearts. We got over it somehow or other. We do not remember now what a trial it was to us, but **we may take it as a type of all troubles**; for if we have faith in him who was our God from our mother’s breasts, as we got over the weaning, and do not even recollect it, so we shall get over all the troubles that are to come, and shall scarcely remember them for the joy that will follow. (Spurgeon)⁷

Out of love, our mothers inflicted discomfort on us. They deliberately chose to vex us, perplex us, distress us. So we would grow up.

And that’s God’s pattern with us.

What’s the difference between a nursing infant and a child that’s weaned?

When a nursing infant gets hungry it begins to bellow, gets ticked, and if mom doesn’t answer the call of duty, he gets frantic.

But the weaned child has moved beyond restless distrust, has grown out of the frantic groping of infant days and no longer doubts that his mom will provide the nourishment he needs, even when he’s hungry. His confidence has grown through the discomfort of the weaning process to

⁷ From Charles Spurgeon’s sermon, The Weaned Child.

trust that his mom will not withhold good from him. A weaned child no longer needs the milk he used to depend on and can rest on his mother's chest not for what he can get from her but simply because he delights in her!⁸

Of the two pictures. Which is more like you?

The nursing infant? Or the weaned child?

Stormy or still?

It's a blessed mark of maturity when we can forgo the joys which once seemed essential and can find our solace in him who denied them to us.⁹ (Spurgeon again)

Do you walk with God merely for what you can get from God? When God withholds some good you think you need or you believe you deserve, do you get unsettled? "GOD!?" Or do you decide, "No, I know You, God. I know Your goodness. I know Your greatness. I can rest ... I COMMIT myself to CONTENTMENT IN YOU ...

That was the gauntlet Satan threw down, remember? "Job only walks blamelessly before You God because you give him kids, stuff, health—smooth sailing." But take it all away and he'll prove You aren't worth trusting or treasuring. He will walk away from you, God.

That was an excruciating ordeal for Job, wasn't it? Slog your way through the long book of Job and you will see that committing ourselves to contentment in God doesn't mean we can't express discomfort or ask God questions or pound on His chest in pain. But Job never hit the guardrails. He never sinned by charging God with wrongdoing. Through the ordeal, God gave Job a vastly expanded view of GOD. James 5:11 tells us, that God's purpose in putting Job through all that was to help US see "how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. We can love and trust God not merely when he comforts us, but even when he tries us.

Learning this isn't easy, is it! It's a lesson we learn and relearn over a lifetime.

It's harder for some than for others. None of us can do this on our own steam.

I'm encouraged by the desperate dad that came to Jesus in Mark chapter 9. His boy had been afflicted since childhood by a demon that pitched him into frequent self-harm. The exhausted dad came to Jesus, "**If you can** do anything, have compassion on us and help us." Jesus picks up

⁸ Adapted from <https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/articles/cultivating-a-hope-filled-life/>

⁹ Charles Spurgeon, The Treasury of David, Zondervan, 6:137.

on his own words, “If you can! All things are possible **for one who believes.**” Remember the father’s reflex?

“I believe; **help** ... help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24, ESV)

Child-Like Submission to God is a heart posture we always need God’s help to learn. Every life circumstance and every new stage of life offers opportunities to relearn what we thought we already had. That’s why learning this is not a solo effort.

We need to do like David indicates in v3 and

3. Invite Others into This Rest.

Come with me ...

O Israel, hope **in the LORD**

from this time forth and forevermore. (Psalm 131:3, ESV)

People of God. Let’s US do this. Now. All year. Till our King comes. (Ps 37) Let’s delight ourselves in the LORD, and HE’LL give us the desires of our hearts. He won’t give us all we want; He’ll shape our hearts and SATIATE us with what we truly need.

When God weans us, his purpose is to produce endurance in us, which produces character in us, which produces hope in us. And hoping **in the LORD** will never disappoint you.

We’re all growing in spiritual maturity, which means we’re all at different stages along the way.

The early stages of Christian belief are not infrequently marked with the miraculous signs and exhilarations of spirit. But as discipleship continues, the sensible comforts gradually disappear. For God does not want us neurotically

dependent on him but willingly trustful in him. And so he weans us. The period of infancy will not be sentimentally extended beyond what is necessary¹⁰. (Eugene Peterson)

The next time you find yourself unsettled or confounded by God, “Where are YOU? I don’t feel like I used to when I was a young Christian. Is it me? Is it YOU?”

Run to this psalm. Remember that the spiritual weaning process isn’t one and done.

When David was a youth, his dad sent him on an errand to the battlefield. He was so baffled that his brothers wouldn’t take Goliath on, that his big brother Eiah lashed out, “You pipsqueak! You’re so full of yourself.” Was he? Did that unsettle him?

Later, when David was running for his life, because the crown God promised him was still on the head of the man who wanted him dead ... when David had a chance to take Saul out and claim what was rightfully his ... Did he?

Much later, when his own son Absalom conspired against him and he was again on the run ... how is it that David could pick up his pen and write (in Psalm 3:5), “I lay down and slept ... ?”

Because ... from his earliest days when he was relegated to the back 40, caring for sheep ... David tried to practice what he’s picturing here ... I have calmed and quieted my soul. How do I know?

He also wrote: The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. Even ... His rod and staff comfort me.

Getting to know God will humble you. ... will expand you. ... will eminently comfort you. Those were Charles Spurgeon’s words when he was barely 20. Listen to him--

“Oh, there is, in contemplating Christ, a balm for every wound; in musing on the Father, there is a quietus for every grief; and in the influence of the Holy Ghost, there is a balsam for every sore. Would you lose your sorrow? Would you drown your cares? Then go, plunge yourself in the Godhead’s deepest sea; be lost in his immensity; and you shall come forth as from a couch of rest, refreshed and invigorated. I know nothing which can so comfort the soul; so calm the swelling billows of sorrow and grief; so speak peace to the winds of trial, as a devout musing upon the subject of the Godhead.¹¹

¹⁰ Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, p. 150.

¹¹ From J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p 18.

Let's pray:

Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer to Thee;
E'en though it be a CROSS
That raiseth me,
STILL ... ALL my song shall be
Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer to Thee.

From Psalm 73,

may God make this ring in our hearts and true as we go:

²⁸ But as for me, it is good to be near God.
I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge;
I will tell of all your deeds.