

## **“A Heart-Stillled Song for a Strong-willed Child”**

### **Psalm 131**

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A few weeks ago, Dr. Doriani asked if I would preach on the topic of anxiety. And can I tell you a secret? I got a little anxious but within a few seconds I thought of Psalm 131. *A heart-stilled song for a strong-willed child.* I can get very anxious. Perhaps the shoe fits you as well.

God speaks his truth in love throughout scripture and especially in Psalm 131. It's a psalm of confidence. It belongs to a collection of songs called the Psalms of Ascent. Three times a year, God's people would ascend, make their way up to Jerusalem, and they would sing Psalm 121 all the way to Psalm 134. And this psalm was one of the songs for the road. It's a song of David. You'll notice in just a few minutes that he actually begins, *O Lord.* And so immediately we sense that we're listening in to the heart of a man who is after God's heart. This was a psalm of David, but this was also a song of Jesus. He would sing this song on his way up to Jerusalem as well. And so it's a song that gives a window into what we might call the normative psychology. The Psalms give us a window into the heart, as the heart is designed to operate, to relate to God, and we have intimate access into the way a human being is supposed to process life. Because this was his song, the son of Jesus.

But it's also your song. And tonight, Psalm 131 bids to become your song to transform you and me, how we think and how we process life. If you have your Bible with you, I invite you to open it up to Psalm 131 as I read the text for us.

*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. All Israel, hope in the Lord. From this time forth and forevermore.*

This is God's word. Let me pray for us.

Father, we know because you reveal it, that you give grace to the humble. And we need your spirit to work in our hearts to overthrow that strong will within us, and to reinstate your rule. And tonight, we want to bow before you. We want to listen to what you have to say. And we are utterly dependent on your Holy Spirit to open the eyes of our hearts in order that we might know the hope to which we have been called in Jesus. And so we pray that you would help us. Would you draw near and help us? In this we ask in Jesus name. Amen.

The great preacher Charles Spurgeon said Psalm 131 is one of the shortest psalms to read, but one of the longest to learn. Oh, that is so true. Let's be disciplined by God's Word. Let's seek to learn Psalm 131. If I could sum up the message in a sentence, I might put it this way. Psalm 131 reveals a life of peace that results from a work of faith in response to the call to hope. Let's break that down. First of all, we'll look at the life of peace. Verse one. Secondly, we'll look at the work of faith. Verse two. And finally, we'll consider the call to hope. Verse three.

To begin with, a life of faith is on display in verse one. Picture with me a glassy sea, a calm body of water, a peace like a river. For me it's the Pungo River in eastern North Carolina, right down the road from Bath, North Carolina, where Blackbeard the pirate used to hang out. My great grandfather had a farm, and I grew up on the Pungo River. In the afternoon. It was tossing and turning and dotted with whitecaps, but at sunrise it was so peaceful, free from a disturbance. And that is a window into David's soul. And the big question tonight is why is David so quiet on the inside? Why this peace and rest? Listen to how he answers. *Oh Lord, my heart is not lifted up. My eyes are not raised to high. I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.*

Now, you might expect David to answer the question with a series of affirmations. But instead he answers the question with three denials. And in doing so, David invites us to consider another question. Why am I? Why are you? Why are we so noisy so often on the inside? Why am I so anxious? Why are you so restless? And in this sense, this little psalm functions like a reliable noise detector. It reveals why we're so anxious so many times.

Notice how it works. First of all. *My heart is not lifted up.* God made me and God made you to live in glad, humble dependence upon him. And on the one hand, David's first denial explains his peace and quiet. He's living according to God's design. It's a picture of perfect submission. All is at rest. As Fanny Crosby wrote, it's the sanity of humility. As one of my professors at Welch commented... It's being settled under your God. Everything is properly ordered. He is the Lord. I am his servant. He is my father. I am his child. And all is well. But on the other hand, this first denial identifies one reason why there is so much noisy anxiety in our soul. Sin living in me and sin living in you has at least a couple of effects. First of all, a self-exalting effect. We become the wrong size. We get too big for our britches. We are high and lifted up. Have you ever noticed how fear or anxiety is often the other side of the coin of pride? It's as if deep in my heart, I believe I can do this. I don't need to live in dependence on the Lord. I can do this. Thank you very much. And so I try to step into his role. I step into his shoes, and all of a sudden I realize I'm way in over my head. And I get very anxious. Often anxiety is the other side of pride living in me.

So there is the self-exalting effect. But also, there is this self-absorbing effect. The theologians of old used the Latin phrase **in covetous in say**. It literally means to be curved in on yourself, to be so preoccupied with me. We become self-absorbed. And consider with me what happens when

our heart is lifted up. We create and we climb up towers of vanity. We become very busy imposing our will on another person. I want you to do my will. I don't want you to cross my will. We busy ourselves with proving our worth. I was talking with someone not long ago who summed it up this way. I like to show and prove. You know, I can relate to that. A heart that is lifted up. I'll show you through my grades. I'll show you through my trophy. I'll show you through my promotion. We busy ourselves with getting more stuff, more comfort, more recognition. And consider the noisy anxiety that results from a proud heart. Lots of conflict -- With others. Lots of regret as you look back, lots of anxiety.

So, notice David begins in the heart. Pride begins in the heart. But pride gets expressed in our behavior. The invisible root gets expressed in very visible fruit. Which is why David says next. *My eyes are not raised to high*. Now consider the way it's supposed to be. That second great commandment that flows out of the first great commandment *love him and love them. Love your neighbor as yourself*. And that little word, as is the great equalizer. We are to treat another human being with equal dignity and honor. David says, I'm living according to that design. He calls me to love my neighbor as myself. And I'm relating to other people according to God's call. *My eyes are not raised to high*. But notice, on the other hand, the second denial identifies another reason why there is so much noisy anxiety in our soul. What happens when our eyes are raised too high? In other words, what happens when we are looking down on another person. We create and we climb up towers of rivalry. Not only am I looking down because my eyes are raised so high. I'm comparing. I'm competing. I'm scheming as to how I can outdo and outperform to show that I am superior to you. Oh my.

Consider the noise that results from proud eyes. Sometimes you feel the evil pleasure of looking down on another person. But other times you feel that evil panic as you see someone else inching closer up the ladder and you become very anxious that someone else is going to overtake you. *My eyes are not raised to high*.

Thirdly, David says, I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. Hmmmm. We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus, which God has prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. He's mapped out a course, a race for us to run. And on the one hand, this third denial explains why David has so much peace and quiet in his soul. He's embracing his role relative to God's role. I want you to imagine with me two concentric circles -- we might call the first circle in the middle, the circle of responsibility. And everything that goes in that circle are the things that God has called us to do, and that we actually can do, because he's given us the capacity to do and everything within our circle of responsibility we are to pursue faithfully. But consider the outer circle. We might call that the circle of concern. And in this circle of concern are things that we really care about. They're important to us, and understandably so. But the things that are in mind, the things that are in your circle of concern,

are the things that you care about, but you can't make happen. It's beyond your control. And so, the things in your circle of concern, well, those are the things that you must entrust to the Lord prayerfully. And David's got it right. He understands his role, his lane. He understands his creaturely capacity. *I do not occupy myself with things too great and things too marvelous for me.* In other words, it's a phrase that David uses that you'll find elsewhere in the Old Testament. All those great things, those wonderful things, wonder - ful, for only God can do it. Like parting the Red sea. And David understands there are some things he cannot do. And he's at home living in submission to the Lord.

But of course, this third denial identifies another reason why there is so much noisy anxiety in our soul. There's the problem of mission creep. My circle of responsibility expands to take on things that are not my responsibility. I think I can do it. I take on things that are too great and too marvelous for me. Can you relate to that? I remember I was talking to someone many years ago and I was thinking about this particular passage and, and it was becoming very clear that he really wanted to know all things. He was having difficulty making decisions because he wanted to understand the implications. And so he wanted to know all things. And I asked him the question, would you like to be honest? Would you like to have godlike powers? And without missing a beat, he said, absolutely. Can you relate to that? Does your heart like his? Like mine? You seek to take on things that are too great and too marvelous for you? Proud presumption.

Maybe you're a parent and you really care about your kids. And rightly so. And then they learn to drive. And you so want certain things to happen, but you're not in control. And so you get anxious, just like I did and stayed up all night. All kinds of examples that we can think of. We get busy, busy, busy because we take on things too great. We bite off more than we can chew. Sometimes it leads to manipulation. Sometimes it leads to sleepless nights. But not with David. *I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.* What happens when we try to control uncontrollable things? Noisy anxiety? Well, we might put it this way. This noise of anxiety is a worship disorder, isn't it? I've elevated my place as though I had godlike powers. I substitute my strength for his. Can you relate to that? Then we are exactly the kind of person that God moves towards to help to restore our worship, to come under his lordship and rule.

Well, that's the life of peace, the quiet that's happening inside a soul. But secondly, this life of peace results from a work of faith. It's a process. Notice how David puts it in verse two. *But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.*

One of my professors, David Paulson, in a very helpful and insightful article on this particular passage talks about what Psalm 131 is not describing. It's not about unruffled detachment. It's not about stoic indifference. It's not about an easygoing personality. It's not about low expectations or retreat from the crowd in the commotion or retirement to ease or wealth. It's

not the result of a glass of wine. It's not about any of those things. It's about something much different. What David is describing, first of all, is something that is consciously active. Did you notice *I have calmed and quieted my soul*? I have chosen this. It is very active, very deliberate. On the one hand, it is not a faith without work. It's not letting go and letting God. That's the problem of moralism. On the other hand, it's not work without faith. It's not sheer will trying to overthrow self-will. That's the problem of moralism. Instead, it's a third way, a gospel way. It is a work of faith.

Something I'm consciously doing by faith. And not only is it consciously active, it's secondly, relationally responsive. Notice the image of the child with its mother. David's action is in response to God's action.

As Dr. Paulison, writes, how do you purify your heart? How does a proud heart become a humble heart? You do not wrestle yourself down by doing penance. You can beat on yourself. Resolve to mend your ways. Wear a hair shirt and still be proud. You do not destroy the tumult of self-will by sheer will. I will stop being irritable. I will stop being fretful. I will stop imposing my will on the universe. No. Can the leopard change its spots? You are not strong enough because our pride is too strong. You only wrestle yourself down by the promises of God's loving kindness. You and I need the invasion of the Redeemer. The hand of the Shepherd. You need great help. The way a drowning man needs great help from outside of himself to rescue him. Only one thing is strong enough to overpower and slay unruly cravings and a stormy life. And it's this -- what God promises to do for you and me through Jesus. As the Apostle Peter puts it, it is by God's precious and very great promises that we escape the corruption that is in the world by lust. From God's side, we escape ourselves by being loved by Jesus through the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit. And from our side we escape ourselves by learning a lifestyle of intelligent repentance and faith.

Do you see the two sides of the covenant? It's a relationship. From God's side he moves toward you, and he pours out his love toward you and makes promises and we listen. He says, I will help you.

And from our side of the relationship, we're listening. And having listened to what he promises. Now we pour out our heart to him. You will help me because that's who you are. I believe what you say. It's a work of faith.

Moments ago, we listened to those words penned by Katarina von Schlegel a few hundred years ago. Listen, as she works out the implications of this passage. She's listened to what the Lord says. And having listened, she now opens up her heart and speaks.

*Be still, my soul. The Lord is on your side. Be still my soul. The waves and the wind. Still know the voice who ruled them while he dwelt below. Be still my soul. Your Jesus can repay from his own fullness all that he takes away. Be still, my soul.*

Do you hear it? A person who has listened to the promises that God makes believes what God reveals. She calms and quiets her soul by believing what the Lord has revealed. *Be still, my soul. The hour is hastening on when we shall forever be with the Lord.*

It's a beautiful picture of this work of faith. This relationally responsive work of change. And notice, thirdly, it's not only consciously active, not only relationally responsive, but also supernaturally transformative. David gives us this beautiful image. And mothers can especially appreciate this. *Like a weaned child is my soul within me.* It's just very gradual process. A nursing mother tapering off the milk supply to her nursing child until the child no longer craves it. And you can see in your mind's eye the striking contrast between the unweaned child and the weaned child. That unseen child is squirming and fussing and whining. Can you relate to that? Does your soul ever sound like, talk like, feel like that? Ignorant of the relationship. The mother is just. Just an object, not a person. There's no such thing as a promise. The child is relying on himself to obtain. If I don't come through I will die.

On the other hand, what a miraculous transformation that we see in the weaned child. She's sitting. She's resting. She's waiting. There's this new confidence in the relationship. The mother is not an object. The mother is a person. And the child begins to learn something of this person's character. She is full of promise. And the child is relying on the mother to provide. It's as if we could climb into the heart of a weaned child. We'd hear things like, she will feed me. She will hold me. I'm going to be okay. I will live.

This radical dramatic change. Something that once meant everything now comes to mean nothing. And something that once meant nothing now comes to mean everything. Me, myself and I come to mean nothing. And my Lord and my God -- He has come to mean everything.

By the way. Do you know what the Lord is doing in my life? I suspect the same thing he's doing in your life. He's weaning you from the old to the new, through the promises that he calls you to believe. Several years ago, I had a difficult homily to preach.

It was 10:35 at night. And I had not a clue how to preach this message. I was in a tough spot. This was a hard one. And I remember frantically praying. Have you ever prayed like this? Oh, Lord, please help me. I don't think you will. Please help me. I don't think you will. It's as though you're praying, doing something religious but you really don't believe that he'll do what you're asking him to do. Oh, Lord, please help me. It's as if I'm trying to squeeze this help out of him. And about ten minutes later, after I was frantically fussing and squirming like an unweaned child, it was as if the spirit just gave me this, this wonderful gift. He woke me up. He opened my

eyes to see. Wait a minute. You will help me. Because that's who you are. You're for me. I am yours, and you are mine. And you will help me. And it was this rush of comfort, of calm, of quiet, flooded my soul. It was his grace through my faith. It's a very important principle in Scripture. In Galatians 3:2 the Apostle Paul asks the question.

*I've just got one question for you. Did you receive the spirit by works of the law, or by hearing God's promises with faith?* by hearing with faith. His grace flows to and through a heart of faith. It is always by grace, through faith. We calm and quiet our soul. By his grace. Through our faith in what he promises. Do you see it? From an anxious and noisy heart to a calm and quieted soul. By God's grace through a child's faith. The Puritans used to call it the explosive power of a new affection. The spirit overthrows self-will and reinstates faith in the Lord.

Well, we've considered this life of faith. And we've said secondly that it results from a work of faith, a life of peace resulting from a work of faith. And finally, verse three, a life of peace results from a work of faith in response to a call to hope. *O Israel, hope in the Lord. From this time forth and forevermore.* Did you notice the change in direction? The Psalm began, O Lord, he's turned upward. And now in verse three, he's turned outward. He's talking to you and me. From talking to God to talking to us. And did you notice the change in grammar from changing, describing his experience to inviting you into his experience? And this is highly instructive, because vertical faith in the Lord always gets expressed in horizontal love for neighbor. Living faith is not a cul de sac, but a conduit. When living faith receives God's peace, it seeks to share it, not to hoard it.

God teaches you to steal your soul in order that you might help others still their soul because they're just like you, they struggle to. And so notice he calls you by name. O Israel. By the way, do you hear the heart behind that personal address? O Israel, so tender. O Israel!

You know that name has a rich history, doesn't it? You remember Jacob, the trickster, the deceiver, the proud self-truster. And you remember Exodus 32, where he's on his way to meet his brother Esau, whom he has deceived and stolen the blessing. And word gets back to him that Esau is now approaching him with 400 men. Anxiety. And he prays, and he asks the Lord to deliver him. And he comes to the river, and he sends his family and his servants across the river. And he's left all alone at night. And you remember the story. The angel of the Lord wrestles with Jacob. Why? To deliver him from his real enemy. To wean Jacob from his self-trusting pride. And the son is about to come up. And the angel of the Lord says, let me go, for the day has broken. And Jacob says, with a hip out of joint, I will not let you go unless you bless me. And the angel says, what is your name? Do you remember the last time that question was posed to Jacob, his father Isaac? What is your name? And he lied. But this time he comes clean and he confesses. I am Jacob the proud self-truster. And the angel of the Lord says, your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel. The word literally means *God prevails*, but interesting like God graciously gives it this double meaning, as if to say, you have wrestled with me and prevailed by

trusting me. And because you have clung to me, I will fight and prevail for you. And you follow this theme into the New Testament. And we come to Jesus, the true Israelite, the man of faith, the only son who trusted his father every step of the way. But not only the man of faith, but also the man for others. The one will represent the many, as goes the shepherd so go the sheep. Because God has established this bond between Jesus and his people. And so you are a true Israelite in Jesus. And tonight God says to you, because Jesus has lived by faith for you I will prevail, and I will fight and win the battle for you. He's calling you by name. And he's also calling you to hope. Did you notice? Not an iffy, uncertain, hope so, kind of hope, but a sure and certain hope in the Lord.

Our call to worship this evening was from Psalm 130, verse five. Psalm 131 is paired with Psalm 130. And there also is this double image. I wait for the Lord. My soul waits. And in His word. I hope my soul waits for the Lord. More than watchmen for the morning. More than watchmen for the morning. You see, at night city was especially vulnerable to an enemy's attack and so the watchmen was stationed atop the wall to be on the lookout. And the watchmen was especially eager to see the sun rise in the morning because the sun signified safety. I want you to imagine it's 3 a.m. somewhere off, away from downtown Birmingham. No city lights. Not a cloud in the sky. It is dark and the stars are twinkling. And just imagine for a moment that every one of those twinkling stars expresses something that is tempting you to anxiety. It's got your attention. You can't let it go. The 3:00 turns to 4:00, and 4:00 turns to 5:00. And about this time of year at 5:15 the sun begins to rise and outshine all of the things that have your attention and that tempt you to anxiety. A sure hope. A sure and certain hope begins to outshine all of the iffy things that you and I are tempted to trust in. Do you see it? All Israel, hope in the Lord.

The stars are still there. The circumstances that still tempt you. They're still there. They just don't have the controlling power that they had previously. As David puts it in Psalm 94, when the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul. Into this hope he calls you. From this time forth and forever more.

Let me close this in prayer.

Our father, we thank you that you don't leave us in the dark. But you speak and your words orient us when we are so disoriented. And your words not only reorient us to reality, but you also. You promised grace. And you not only promised grace, but you also invite -- You summon us to believe. Would you help us see what a much better hope that we have in Jesus, when the cares of our hearts are many? Would your consolations in Jesus -- All of your promises that find there? Yes and Amen in him -- would you make these truths shine? We pray that they would not only be clear to us, but that by your spirit they would be very real to us. That we would calm and quiet our soul by believing what you say. And this we ask in Jesus name.



Amen.