

Psalm 131

Matthew Williams

I don't know how our governor's stay at home until June 10 executive order hit you on Monday. It certainly knocked our present situation into a different mental category for me. For the last few weeks I had been thinking that, while the economic consequences of the coronavirus outbreak would be long-term, the social distancing requirement wouldn't last past April. I don't know why I thought that. I do know I've found my heart and mind switching gears this week from, "This is a relatively short-term thing," to, "No wait, this is going to impact our daily life for three months."

In a short-term crisis, there's a real sense of camaraderie in pulling together. We lock arms, we pray, we reach out to those in need. There's an initial wave of grace from the Holy Spirit to deal with the challenges at hand. I've felt that time and time again in my own life. But when days turn into weeks and weeks turn into months, our feelings start to change, don't they?

You start thinking, "Wait. This is the new normal? I'm not sure I like that, Lord. Actually, I am sure. I don't like this at all. I can't do things I love to do. People I love are suffering. Staying at home for a few weeks is kind of fun. Stay at home for 3 months? Not so cool." You feel progressively weary, discouraged, and agitated.

I might not say it aloud like a 5-year-old in the back seat, but internally, I'm thinking and feeling, "Why is this taking so long, Lord? I know you're the King of creation. I know you alone can ransom my soul from the power and fear of death. I'm genuinely grateful for all you've done for me. But can we please just go back to normal life?"

If our soul is like an oven range, discontentment can start simmering on the back burner. It has yet to boil over. You haven't gone completely crazy – yet. But who knows how you'll feel 6 weeks from now when your circumstances haven't changed? Maybe you've already noticed you're getting more irritable over relatively minor inconveniences. Disorientation is giving way to impatience.

I think it's at exactly this sort of moment we need the perspective, correction, and admonition of Psalm 131. It's one of the shortest psalms, but like Psalm 93 we looked at two weeks ago, it speaks directly to our looming struggle with discontentment.

We don't know the exact situation that prompted King David to write this psalm. We do know the guidance it provides is exactly what we need to hear as we settle into a new normal of sorts. Look back at verse 2. Isn't that what we desperately need in a time like this? A calm and quiet soul. A heart that is joyfully content come what may.

So how do we get there? If living in the good of verse 2 is the goal, then verse 1 tells us what we need to put off and verse 3 tells us what we need to put on. Together, all three verses teach us that contentment in God is the fruit of humility before God. Contentment in the midst of real trouble isn't the result of a carefree personality, or money in the bank, or an unlimited stash of personal protective equipment. It's the sweet fruit of humility. Let's begin by considering what we need to put off in verse 1.

1) RESTLESS ANXIETY IS ROOTED IN PRIDE

The three negative images in verse 1 – a heart that is not lifted up, eyes that are not raised too high, and a man or woman who is not occupied with things that are “too great and too marvelous” – express a similar confession. “Lord, no matter what situation I'm in, no matter how unnerving or frightful my circumstances, I refuse to embrace an attitude of pride or arrogance toward you.”

At first glance, that can seem like a strange thing for David to say. We don't typically contrast the contentment we glimpse in verse 2 with pride. We think of anxiety, worry, restlessness, or fear as the opposite of contentment, not pride. But therein lies the great deception of sin, doesn't it? We tend to think a little worry, a little anxiety, maybe even a little fear, is a good thing. It's what responsible people who care about how things turn out feel in the midst of tough situations like a viral pandemic.

That's not the perspective of Scripture, friends. From God's perspective, fear, worry, and anxiety are neither excusable nor responsible. They are, in many cases, expressions of pride. They're rooted in our sinful tendency to play God by exalting our desires, our assessments, and our wisdom above the Lord's. We tend to think of a “proud” person as someone who likes to talk loudly and often about themselves – what they've accomplished or the success they've achieved. But pride can manifest itself just as much in all kinds of other emotions and attitudes. Think about it...

- What does worry say? “I’ve surveyed the scene, reviewed all the possibilities, and concluded every possible outcome of this situation is really bad.” Are you sure about that? It seems like the presence and power of God are strangely absent from your calculations.
- What does panic say? “This situation is completely out of control.” Are you sure about that? It seems like you’re assuming God is most definitely not in control. In both cases, we project ourselves into a godless future and begin to feel and act accordingly.
- Have you ever said or heard someone say, “If elected official A, B, or C would just start doing their job, then everything would be fine.” Notice how that kind of judgment sets up another human being, not God, as the ultimate authority in the situation.
- What does assumption say? “We have a 6-month emergency fund. We have state-of-the-art medical care. We have _____. We’ll be just fine.” Does that sort of person feel anxious? Maybe not. But notice how they’re enthroning something else besides God as their functional savior.
- When life gets hard, our prayers can become demands. “Lord, you have to move and work in this way. No other outcome is acceptable.” Who’s god in that scenario? I am, right?
- Simmering discontent is no better. What does that say? “I know what I really need right now and God has yet to deliver.”
- How about the justification that tries to excuse things we know are wrong like sexual sin or overeating because it’s a stressful situation and we feel like we deserve a little pleasure? Who’s making the rules in that scenario?

Worry, panic, judgment, assumption, demand, discontent, justification – we can flit back and forth between all of those attitudes and more when life is hard. They look different. They feel different. Some even masquerade as responsibility. But they’re all rooted in pride. In every case, we assign more authority to what we think is true about God than what God says is true about himself. We functionally deny his goodness, wisdom, power, presence, or all the above.

And in nearly every one of those situations, we’re either acting as if we are god or pretending someone or something else is god. That’s the definition of pride. We exchange, “Your kingdom come, your will be done,” for, “My kingdom come, my will be done.” When David says, “I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me,” he isn’t just saying, “I try not to think above my pay grade.” He’s saying, “I refuse to play God.”

That phrase – things that are “too marvelous” or “too wonderful” – shows up over and over again in the Old Testament as a description of who God alone is or what God alone can do. It’s not just things that are beyond human ability. Psalm 9:1, “I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart. I will recount all your wonderful deeds.” Psalm 139:14, “Wonderful are your works...” Isaiah 9:6, “His name shall be called, Wonderful Counselor...” Isaiah 29:14, “I will again do wonderful things with this people.”

To the degree you find yourself slipping into worry, fear, or some other form of restless anxiety, don’t just ask the Lord to comfort you. Ask him to give you the grace of repentance. Ask him to show you where your heart is “lifted up,” where your eyes are “raised too high,” where you’re occupying yourself with things “too great and too marvelous” for you. Ask him to forgive your pride.

Verse 2 is a beautiful description of the exact opposite of a clamoring, restless, self-exalting heart. It’s a picture of quiet contentment and shows us what we need to put on.

2) QUIET CONTENTMENT IS ROOTED IN HUMILITY

Instead of walking in pride and the restless anxiety that comes with pretending to be god or concluding someone or something else is god, what does David do? 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.”

We’ll look at just a minute at how we “calm” and “quiet” our own souls in the midst of trouble. First, however, we need to linger on the illustration, this picture of contentment that I don’t think I understood very well until I watched my wife care for our three boys. What does a child who is not yet weaned, which in David’s day meant a child who was still nursing, tend to do when they’re around their mother and they begin to feel hungry?

They start fussing. They start rooting around. And if mom doesn’t immediately feed them, they let the whole world know with a persistent, angry cry that has driven dad’s crazy and brought mom’s running for centuries. For an infant who’s not weaned, especially if they’re with their mother, there’s no gap between when they feel hungry and when they start loudly demanding food. Feed me now. Give me what I want now. I’m not sure I’ve ever heard a nursing mom describe her hungry child as patient.

In contrast, how does a weaned child behave with its mother? Here's where we do well to not push the illustration further than David intends it to go because some of you moms out there are thinking, "Nursing infants have nothing on my teenage boys. Forget eating every 3 hours. They're always hungry. Half of our conversations start with them opening the fridge door and hollering, 'Mom, is there anything to eat in here?'"

Exceptions aside, what's the general principle? Does a weaned child tend to be more or less calm and quiet around their mother? More calm, right? More quiet, even when they start to feel hungry. Why? Because they know at the right time, in the right way, their mom will give them what they need. They've learned they can trust her. They've learned that even if no food is in sight right now, at the right time, it will come. She knows them and she will provide for them.

They're not so demanding. They're not so insistent. They don't say, "If I sense you're near, you have 4 seconds to hook me up to the milk truck or else I'm going to scream bloody murder." A weaned child is able to wait without going ballistic. They have more patience than a child who is not weaned. Whether they choose to do so or not, they're constitutionally able to be with their mother and not demand food immediately.

A weaned child with its mother is a picture of what our relationship with the Lord should be like, friends. When we begin to feel hungry, when we start longing to get out of the house and be with other people, when we feel relationally thirsty, financially thirsty, eager to enjoy life as it was before the coronavirus outbreak, what do we do?

We calm and quiet our soul, we choose to be patient, and wait for the Lord to provide for all our needs at the right time and in the right way according to what he knows is best. We choose to be content instead of grumbling, complaining, and in a thousand other ways arrogantly accusing God of not living up to his end of the bargain. We choose the path of humility.

But that kind of humility is only possible if we heed the admonition in verse 3. Remember, if verse 2 is the goal, verse 1 is what we have to put off and verse 3 is what we need to put on to get there. So what do we need to put on? How do we calm and quiet our souls, how do we choose the path of humble contentment and wait on the path of humble contentment?



“O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forevermore.” How does a weaned child calm and quiet their soul? “Mom knows and at the right time in the right way mom will provide.” How does a Christian calm and quiet their soul when anxiety is knocking at the door, grumbling and complaining have moved into the bedroom upstairs, and impatience is cooking in the oven?

By the grace of God, we make a choice. We choose to hope not in what we see, or we understand, or what we think is best. We refuse to play god or act like someone or something else is god. We choose to hope in the Lord. By grace, we confess the truth of 1 Kings 18:39 even as we wait for his provision. “The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God.”

Then we heed the words of God himself in Matthew 6:30-33. Jesus said, “But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

Pride tries to build our own kingdom and winds up worried, anxious, and fearful. Humility seeks first God’s kingdom and ends up calm and quiet, even in the midst of great sorrow and disappointment. How does humility seek first God’s kingdom? It recognizes day after day that the Lord is God. I am not, you are not, and he alone is worthy of all our hope and all our trust.

David didn’t calm and quiet his soul through some sort of mind game where he forgot his needs and desires. It wasn’t a yoga thing or a mindfulness thing. He calmed and quieted his soul by choosing the path of humility, hoping not in himself or what he could see or what seemed right or necessary in his own eyes, but in the Lord and him alone. He invited Israel to join him. Today, the Lord invites you to do the same. Quiet contentment is rooted in humility.

CONCLUSION

Friends, all the limitations of our present circumstances, everything you can’t do that you really want to do because of the viral outbreak is an invitation from the Lord to walk in humility. We need to remember restless anxiety is rooted in pride. Quiet contentment is rooted in humility.



Our Heavenly Father, through the power of the Spirit, is eager to help us reject the former and embrace the latter for Jesus' sake. He will help you. He will empower you. He will enable you to calm and quiet your soul by choosing to hope in him. He lived for you. He died for you. He rose from the grave so that you would always have better reasons to trust than reasons to fear.

So don't lift up your heart. Don't raise your eyes too high. Don't occupy yourself with things too great and too marvelous for you. He alone is God. We are not. He alone is worthy of your trust. And that, my friends, is an exceedingly good thing. No matter what the next few weeks hold, no matter how long we have to wait for normal life to return, let's fight for quiet contentment in God by walking the path of humility.