

Psalms 131

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[0 : 00] There is a great and powerful partnership that operates in our lives.! These two, they are there in your life and in my life.

They are a great double act. They go together like fish and chips and jelly and custard. The two of them, they are what's known as worry and pride.

Pride and worry. This great partnership. The two of them, they thrive off of each other. They're always working together.

They're close by each other, side by side all of the time. Feeding one another. If you want to be worried, be proud.

And if you want to be proud, then prepare to be worried. That is the lesson of Psalm 131. Psalm 131, we really love it, don't we?

[1 : 06] It's one of those kind of fridge calendar psalms. And maybe when you saw that we were looking at it tonight, you thought, Psalm 131.

Sit back and relax. This is going to be a nice warm bath, isn't it? David speaks of a newfound contentment, a rest, a relaxing in God, the image of the child and the mother.

It warms us inside. It's like a big, warm gospel cuddle. And those things are true. But before we get to that point, do we know what this psalm is really about?

I'm not suggesting it isn't about those warm things. I hope you do get a gospel cuddle tonight. But I think there's more to it than first meets the eye.

Because as David reflects on his life and his faith, he comes to terms with this partnership that is there operating in him.

[2 : 09] That his worry is fed by his pride. And his pride was fed with worry. And as we come to terms tonight with our own fretfulness, we're all like it, aren't we, to some extent, and our own worry and our own disquiet, it's so obvious to us a lot of the time, isn't it?

And we're annoyed with ourselves that we are like that. But David says to us, as you come to terms with that part of you, you've got to come to terms with the other side of the partnership, which is less obvious to you.

You've got to face your pride. You've got to come to terms with your selfish ambition and with your goals to get to the top.

Because those two things are so close. And worry grows along with it as you feed pride. But if you kill pride, the other worry dies away.

What David does here is he faces up to the goals that he has made for himself in life. He looks at his ambitions and what he thinks of himself and what he's capable of, what he imagines himself doing and achieving in his life.

[3 : 30] And he's going to shift his ambitions. He makes two points here about ambition, which kind of mirror the two sides of that partnership.

First of all, what he says is here, he shows us the pride and worry of vain ambition. The pride and worry of vain ambition.

Just drop your eyes up to verse 1 there. He says, My heart is not lifted up. My eyes are not raised too high. Imagine David's life.

Imagine your life. It was like a big file of paper. And on that paper, on those sheets of paper in this big kind of lever arch file, it's full of your hopes and your dreams and your ambitions and goals.

And on the front page is your name at the top. Imagine that. And underneath your name is the subtitle of this file.

[4 : 35] And the subtitle is Project Me. And in this verse, David gets a backwards look at what was in that file once upon a time.

He realises once upon a time that everything in that file had been about him. It was about feeding his pride. The language of verse 1, His heart lifted up, eyes raised too high. That is solely about that issue. A heart lifted up, in the Bible, is a proud person. And Proverbs 30, it talks about the proud person whose eyes are lofty and their eyelids lift up. It's true, isn't it, that what the heart seeks, the eyes look to. And so they were raised up. And his life, it was about striving and desiring to raise himself up, to be significant in some way, to big himself up.

Setting his eyes on the goal of selfish ambition, of personal praise. And he speaks to the Lord now and he says, I've changed all of that, Lord.

[5 : 50] He's humbled himself. It was the thought that I'm the only one that counts. Project me.

And there was pride there. And that pride caused an overextended presumption on what he thought he could achieve in his life. Look at verse 1, halfway through.

Now he says, I do not occupy myself with things too great for me and too marvellous for me. It kind of means that I used to do that, doesn't it?

In the past, that's what he used to do. He occupied himself with things too great for him, too marvellous for him to do. Kind of reading that verse, I always used to think that David was talking there about conceptual stuff, like his grasp of thoughts and ideas about God.

I thought he's kind of saying the things he's referring to are the things that he doesn't understand about God and about life. And it's as if he's saying, isn't it, I'm not going to worry about those things.

[7 : 05] I'll just leave those great things to you to know about. You know, I just don't know. I'm going to give up and I'm going to trust in you, God.

And I've kind of thought of the verse like that. I'm not saying it doesn't mean that, but I think he means something else here. There is a right sense where the secret things belong to the Lord, as Jutonmi says, and we admit some things we can't know fully, but that's not what he's on about here. The question we've got to ask is, what are the things that are too marvellous for David? What's he talking about here? Well, actually, what he's talking about is not his thoughts, but his occupation, isn't it?

He says, I do not occupy myself with these things. He's talking about his endeavours and his achievements, his work, his projects, if you like, his personal projects.

He's talking about his ventures. And he's thinking about the marvellous work and ventures and projects of God. And he's saying, isn't it, that there is a point where my ambition and my work and my role in that has a limit.

[8 : 34] Only God can do those things, the marvellous and the great. Only God can do that. I hope you realise what David is not saying here.

He's not giving us an excuse to disengage with life if it gets hard, as if we would just say, well, I'll just let you, God.

He's certainly not giving us an excuse to disengage with thinking and kind of theology and asking questions about him. And so often, I think we abuse that verse in Deuteronomy 29, that the secret things belong to the Lord.

And as soon as we kind of get stumped on something that we don't understand about God and about the world, we kind of shrug our shoulders, don't we, and say, oh well, God knows.

Well, he does. But he has revealed an awful lot. And we are so, yeah, we are too slow often to leave the shallow ends of the scriptures because even on the things that we can't know fully, we can know more about why we don't know.

[9 : 53] Like on the Trinity or something like that. He's not talking here about his ability to think but to do. He's saying, isn't he, I've learnt to keep to my job and let God do his work, the great marvellous things that only he can do.

I've learnt to stop trying to do God's job for him. People say, don't they, there's no such word as can't. You can do anything.

But David's saying here, I've learnt you can say, I can't. I've learnt that I can't make a world.

I can't control the weather. I can't send a flood. I can't rescue a whole nation. I can't change a man. I can't do the great and marvellous things that God has done.

I can't. But pride for him was linked with a presumption of overreaching himself and overestimating himself.

[10:57] And by implication, verse 2, that is a very worrying and fretful life to live. When pride is up, so is his blood pressure.

It is, isn't it, when any king or anyone thinks that they are great enough to be in control and to do what only God can do, to do the marvellous and the great.

That's when the worry comes. The worry comes when we realise in reality we are not in control of our lives. But we've got to kind of keep the pretense up, haven't we, with ourselves and to others. And the moment anything comes along that is outside of our true ability, fears arise. You could paraphrase the title of this psalm, How I Gave Up Trying to Fix Everything.

That's what David is saying. He says, I realise that while there is much I can set my hand to do, there are some things in this world and in the life of God's people that I, as an individual, am powerless to achieve.

[12:09] I cannot solve everyone's problems. Isn't it funny, isn't it, that Christ, in the Old Testament here, David, God's chosen king, the anointed king of God's people, realises I cannot be the Christ.

That role is kept ultimately for Jesus Christ. And if we're honest, it's so often the case that proud people are not always the ones who seem most arrogant on the outside.

But actually, we, as proud people, can be the ones who seem least secure. proud pride is not just for the outwardly arrogant, but it is in those, it is in us, who are arrogant enough to think that we can be God of everything.

It's in us when we worry at the prospect, at the weight of the marvellous things that we cannot do.

The proud people can be worrying people, can't they?

And the insecure, and the weak amongst us, sometimes. Psalm 131, we read it along with Psalm 130 for a reason, the two are kind of in a pair, and some of the same themes come up, don't they, that the theme of waiting is there in both.

[13:38] And in Psalm 130, if you kind of glance back to that psalm, David has an issue of sin that he brings before God, so verse 2 and 3, let your ears be attentive to my pleas for mercy.

Oh Lord, if you should mark iniquities, he would stand. He's conscious of wrongdoing there before God. There's a bad issue between him and God that he wants to get sorted out.

So what he does is he decides to sort it out himself. No, he waits upon God for forgiveness. He waits more than watchmen for the relief of the safety of the morning light.

He humbles himself in confession and waits for assurance. He waits for forgiveness. And Psalm 131 seems to flesh out that waiting period.

It is the coming to terms with the I can't of life. Especially with our own sin and our own selves.

[14:44] I have to wait for God. It's a funny thing isn't it? Pride says that it can deal with sin in our lives.

Even stranger pride in us says that it can deal with the sin of pride. Makes no sense does it? The flesh our human pride thinks no no I can put down my own pride.

pride fights pride either way pride is going to win. Because at heart I cannot do the great marvellous things of even dealing with myself.

Pride says I'll grab I'll assert myself aggressively but David had to wait for God in that work in his life. He discovers selfish ambition vain ambition was a nonsense he needed to throw project me in the bin and all the worries that were there in the small print in that file.

The pride and the worry of vain ambition but by way of contrast secondly he discovers the peace and humility of holy ambition.

[16:03] the peace and humility of holy ambition. What's the opposite of constant worrying of maintaining a God-like level of ability to achieve?

David gives us the image of the child and the mother doesn't he? He speaks of his own soul as if it were a child. He kind of personifies his own soul. He says the way to end worry is to kill off the pride to get down off God's throne to get out of his office and off his chair and become like a child who's been weaned.

It's that time isn't it in a child's life where they've learnt not to depend on milk when they're on solid food. It's the part where the baby becomes a toddler and it stops nagging for milk.

The child no longer frets for what was once indispensable. a weaned child is a satisfied child isn't it with a full tummy.

Looking at Raphael today you could envy him couldn't you? You could envy a child like that. Don't we long to be like that? Don't we long to be like the toddler who just plays with their toys?

[17 : 24] They're not worried about where their next meal is coming from. children. They don't concern themselves with things too great and too marvellous for them. Something cathartic about that image isn't there?

An assured abandon and trust that mum and dad will provide. But that process is not an easy one. You mothers know that more than anyone else in the room. It's probably likely in the ancient world that children would have been weaned around the age of three or four.

Now mothers, can you imagine wrestling to feed a four-year-old? There's a struggle as the child refuses solid milk with that kind of dissatisfied whining.

And it gives us a picture of the struggle it is to be weaned off of pride. It is in the humbling of his pride and the shifting of personal ambition though that contentment was nurtured in his life.

[18 : 30] If you boil it down, contentment for David comes in the realisation that there is something to be achieved in this world that is beyond his reach. The great and the marvellous things that only God can do.

And that is counter intuitive. It's not how we normally think because contentment is not in having no ambition whatsoever. if you don't aim for anything you'll never be disappointed.

It's not that kind of thing. It's not even about lowering ambitions. But actually it's in having much higher ambitions. It is in the humility of having ambitions that reach beyond project me.

Much, much higher. so high in fact that it becomes obvious to everyone and to us that those ambitions can only be brought about by God himself.

It's about holy ambition. An ambition to see God at work in the great and the marvellous things that he does of conversion and of atonement and of redemption and of changed lives of neighbours coming to believe in the Lord Jesus.

[19 : 53] Of enemies becoming friends. Of death turning to life. Of the blind seeing. Robert Murray McShane said, it has always been my aim and it's my prayer to have no plans with regard to myself.

That is truly radical isn't it? People noticed about McShane how content he was. Contentment is the fruit of having the highest of ambitions to see God at work and to see him doing his job.

And that is a humbling experience isn't it? Of having to say I can't do this. But you can Lord. Having ambitions like that puts us in our place.

But God puts God back in his place. Jeremiah Burroughs wrote a book in the 18th century called The Rare Jewel of Contentment and contentment is still a very rare jewel today isn't it?

He talks about the difference between contentment based on things going well around you and an inward disposition of the soul. And he illustrates talking about warming clothes by a fire.

[21 : 17] He says to be content as a result of some external things like warming a man's clothes by the fire but to be content through an inward disposition of the soul is like the warmth that a man's clothes have from the natural heat of his body.

A man who is healthy in body puts on his clothes and perhaps at first they're cold in the morning they feel cold. After he's worn them for a little while they become warm.

Now how did they get warm? They weren't near the fire no this came from the natural heat of his body but when a sickly man the natural heat of whose body has deteriorated puts on his clothes they don't get warm for a long time.

He must warm them by the fire and even then they will soon become cold again. It is a great commentary isn't it on the feeling of warmth that we get from pride and doing something that we get praise for.

It makes us feel content for a while isn't it in Project Me if that is all life is about. when we can do one over on someone else or when someone else falls and make us look good or when we achieve some great thing but Project Me in the end will leave us cold until the next achievement comes along.

[22 : 47] But holy ambition looking to God for the marvellous things that only he can do kills that off and it warms us from the contentment of a childish soul looking to him for these great and marvellous things.

It is funny isn't it as you reflect on who wrote this psalm and when and why we're told it's a psalm of ascents a psalm sung on the way up to the temple in Jerusalem getting us ready to worship in God's presence going up the mountain of the Lord and who wrote it the great king himself king David but even the great man himself realises that to go up and ascend to the mountain of the Lord in the right fashion as the king is stepping up the steps towards the temple he is bowing down he is

refusing to lift his heart and eyes up for himself and he says I can't and isn't that the perfect description of the Christ the Lord Jesus Christ David's greater son who ascended to the throne of his father in heaven who ascended on top of the mountain of glory where he is now ruling and he ascends doesn't he by bowing he bows his head in death on the mountain he humbles himself and in bowing he is raised entrusting himself into his father's hands he waited for God didn't he he waited for the great and marvellous work of resurrection and of

Pentecost for the deliverance and redemption he himself was given his ambition was holy and it was faithful and in submission to his mighty father and he raised him up and he is content and settled as the eternal son so it reminds us of him and because we did it we know that this is the path we need to follow David finishes by showing that this is how it's going to be for God's people it's going to be like this for you and for me for quite a long time verse 3 oh Israel hope in God from this time forth and forever more this attitude this posture of bowing as we ascend is a long term thing this is a long haul thing sometimes

I think it's really helpful in a psalm like this to rewrite the psalm but in the opposite way of what it's saying and someone's done this in a really helpful way so just listen to this oh self my heart is proud my eyes are haughty I'm absorbed in myself and I chase after things too great and too difficult for me so of course I'm noisy and restless inside it comes naturally like a hungry infant fussing on his mother's lap like a hungry infant I'm restless with my demands and worries I scatter my hopes onto anything and everybody all of the time let's throw project me in the bin shall we let's set our heights so high let's set our ambitions so high that we know we cannot reach them and then we won't worry will we because we know that only

God can and God will let's bring the full tithe into the storehouse that God might open up the windows of heaven and do marvellous things things that are too great for us let's pray God