

**PSALM 131:1-3 ESV**

1 A Song of Ascents. Of David. 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.

STRUCTURE

- I. **Restlessness rejected (1)**
 - a. Self-exalting pride (1a)
 - b. Haughty eyes (1b)
 - c. Overreaching ambition (1c)

- II. **Rest realized (2-3)**
 - a. The soul settled (2a)
 - b. The soul pictured (2b)
 - c. The people summoned (3)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

"It is one of the shortest Psalms to read, but one of the longest to learn."

–Charles Spurgeon

Psalm 131 is one of fifteen "songs of ascent." Just like Christmas songs fill the air in December, these lyrics filled the mouths of Jewish pilgrims trekking toward Jerusalem during feast times. As they grew tired from travel, they sang about rest—not for their bodies, but for their souls.

Bodies rest naturally, especially after long trips. But souls do not. Psalm 131 presents the default state of our souls: restlessness. The foundation of restlessness is pride, which cannot relax until it rises higher than enemies, neighbors, and even God Himself. Pride lifts the heart, raises the eyes, and eventually reaches for "things too great and marvelous for me." This line does not condemn holy ambition; Paul made it his ambition to preach the gospel (Rom. 15:19-20). Rather, it warns us of unholy ambition, borne of a proud heart and haughty eyes. The restless man of verse 1 thinks much of himself, little of others, and looks to extraordinary achievements to validate his ego.

In verse 2, the psalmist moves from prose to imagery. A weaned infant becomes the counter-image to verse 1. This is God's picture of a soul at rest. Anyone who has weaned a child knows the process can be painful: what once came immediately is suddenly withheld, and the child throws a fit. Yet verse 2 focuses less on the struggle of weaning than on its outcome. The child has learned to rest without constant gratification—not because Mom has disappeared, but because Mom herself is enough. The milk may be withheld; her presence remains. In the same way, God sometimes uses deprivation to teach us to rest not merely in what He gives, but in Him. A weaned child can lie quietly against its mother's chest. Picture those little eye-slits, the small back rising and falling with each breath. This is the picture of a soul at rest in God.

Because spiritual rest does not come naturally, the psalmist takes command over his soul. Other psalms illustrate how this often occurred: by literally commanding one's own soul. We often read phrases like, "Why are you downcast, O my soul... hope in God!" and "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not his benefits!" Restless souls need constant reminding.

But reminding is not enough. I can memorize Scriptures all day long, speaking them over myself in the mirror, but if I don't actually trust God for rest, I'll never find it. The image of the weaned child conveys confidence in God. This explains why verse 3 concludes with hope. Our hope is not in a constant stream of outward blessing. Like a mother's breastmilk, those can dry up. Our greatest hope is connection, not consumption; presence, not provision. Deprivation teaches us this. It produces a joy that rests on His infinite character, not His finite blessings.

This a joy that never dries up.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

1 *A Song of Ascents. Of David. 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.*

—"A Song of Ascents":

- Psalms 120-134 comprise the Songs of Ascents. Most are concise because pilgrims likely sang them by heart as they traveled to Jerusalem during the major feasts. They "ascended" up the temple mount, worshiping as they went.
- Worship is an "as you go" activity. It's not fixed to a structure or calendar. Israel worshiped as they went. They worshiped on their way to worship. Likewise, we must worship constantly, not just at church gatherings.

—"Of David": Numerous occasions from David's life intersect the message of this Psalm, as we will soon highlight.

—"O LORD, my heart is not lifted up":

- Proverbs 20:5 says, "The purpose of a man's heart is deep water, but a man of understanding draws it out." Have you ever observed the sandy bottom of the Pacific Ocean at its deepest point? Your heart is equally obscure. Only a unique person, one who receives God's wisdom and understanding, can draw from its recesses. David was one such person. He knew his own heart. Do you?
- The average person believes himself humble, despite evidence to the contrary. "The heart is deceitfully wicked above all things, who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9).
- Because David fears the LORD, he receives wisdom sufficient to know his own heart. Most people walk through life ignorant first of God, and second of themselves. To know God is to know yourself.
- "lifted up":
 - "haughty" (NKJV, NLT, NIV); "proud" (CSB, NASB, NET)
 - *Theological Wordbook of the OT*: "the root in its most basic sense describes the height of persons, objects, places, and natural phenomena... The usual nuance... is pride or haughtiness."
 - Pride is associated with height—height of heart, if you will. It is no coincidence that David slept with Bathsheba after spying her from his high palace roof—an image of his inward state. Pride came before the fall.
 - We are also reminded of the pride of Adam and Eve, trying to become like God (Gen. 3:5-6); the pride of Uzziah, performing priestly functions forbidden to him (2 Chron. 26:16); the pride of Hezekiah who flashed his treasury to Babylonian envoys (32:25-26); the pride of Tyre's prince, whose wealth, power, and beauty led him to think of himself as a god (Ezk. 28:2, 17). The language about this prince sounds like it doubles as a description of Satan and his fall, which is how many people (including me) interpret it.
- Spurgeon: "He begins with his heart, for that is the centre of our nature, and if pride be there it defiles everything; just as mire in the spring causes mud in all the streams."

—"my eyes are not raised too high":

- What begins with the heart proceeds to the eyes. Proud hearts look down through proud eyes.
- By "raised too high", the Psalmist does not contradict the lyrics that appear elsewhere:
 - Ps. 25:15: "**My eyes are ever toward the LORD**, for he will pluck my feet out of the net."
 - Ps. 34:5: "**Those who look to him are radiant**, and their faces shall never be ashamed."
 - Ps. 123:1-2: "**To you I lift up my eyes**, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!... as **the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master...**"
 - Psalm 141:8 — "**But my eyes are toward you, O GOD, my Lord**; in you I seek refuge."
- When the psalmist claims to not raise his eyes too high, he's not condemning the one who looks to the Most High God. "eyes" that are "raised too high" refers to "haughty eyes" like in Proverbs 6. From their lofty position, haughty eyes look down on everyone else.

—"I do not occupy myself with things too great and too wonderful for me":

- "I do not occupy myself": "I do not concern myself" (NKJV, NLT, NIV, NET); "I do not get involved with" (CSB, NASB); NASB footnote: "Literally, go after, walk."
- The same Hebrew verb (*hālak*, "walk/go"), though used in different stems, frequently describes the course or direction of a person's life: negatively, Israel "walks/goes after" other gods (Deut. 6:14; 8:19); positively, Enoch "walked with God" (Gen. 5:22).
- As before, the context of "things too great... wonderful" is not heavenly but earthly things. Enoch walked with God so closely that he lived everybody's dream: to go to heaven without dying. God is greater and more wonderful than any earthly thing. We absolutely must occupy/involve ourselves with him, walking with Him like Enoch.
- Therefore, the psalmist is claiming not to occupy/concern/involve himself with earthly things that are beyond his scope and domain. He is not like proud Uzziah who made animal sacrifices, a role reserved for priests. Pride inevitably drives us beyond our appointed station—to become like gods, to be "great" and "wonderful" like the empty pursuits of this world. God alone is infinite, unbound by hours and eras, heaven and earth.
- Ross, commenting on "too wonderful [or extraordinary] for me" says this: "it describes something that is... beyond human abilities, and not just too hard to do."
- This verse does not suggest that the Psalmist is anti-ambition entirely. Romans 15:19-20 says, "So that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; and thus **I make it my ambition** to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation." Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles. The church in Jerusalem gave him "the right hand of fellowship" to reach them. Paul aspired toward a larger-than-life goal because he had a bigger-than-life God. And he did not transgress the domain of God's calling. He pursued it with great ambition.
- Unholy ambition is trying to make your name great through superhuman endeavors. Holy ambition is trying to make God's name great through faithfulness to a great God. See Gen. 11-12: Babel's builders seek to make their own name great; God promises to make Abraham's name great.
- Kidner: "It would be easy to make this verse an excuse to avoid the challenges of life. But the sin rejected in 1a is pride... while the sin of 1b is presumption."
- Ross: "There is nothing wrong with wanting to do great things; but in the psalm with its emphasis on 'proud' and 'haughty' in the first line, the word here refers to acts of hubris—great activities that are beyond one's abilities."
- Spurgeon: "As a private man he did not usurp the power of the king or devise plots against him: he minded his own business, and left others to mind theirs... As a secular person he did not thrust himself into the priesthood as Saul had done before him, and as Uzziah did after him. It is well so to exercise ourselves unto godliness that we know our true sphere, and diligently keep to it. Many through wishing to be great have failed to be good: they were not content to adorn the lowly stations which the Lord appointed them, and so they have rushed at grandeur and power, and found destruction where they looked for honour."

—Thus, there is a flow from the heart, to the eyes, to the direction of one's life. People with a "lifted up" heart set their "eyes" on lifted-up things—persons, projects, and possessions beyond their grasp. Refusing to humbly admit their limitations, they insist on grasping for "great" and "wonderful" things so people will perceive them as great and wonderful.

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.

—"But": Unlike the proud lot of humanity, David approaches life differently. It is the key to contentment. Pride is inherently restless; humility rests in God.

—"I have calmed and quieted my soul":

- Augustine: "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." Jesus: "Come to me all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. For I am meek and lowly of heart, and you will find rest for your souls."
- By default, the soul is a screaming infant. I remember when my kids were that small. At times, they would cry so desperately, their clenched fist would vibrate. This is a picture of man's restless soul.
- Our soul hungers, but we have capacity to move beyond this state. Refusing to be mastered by our cravings, we can instead master our souls. We can calm and quiet them like the psalmist. Imagine how useful this would be! To place your struggling soul at rest! To quiet the noise that rings in our ears. The whole world is chasing this solace—somewhere over the rainbow. God offers it on this side of the rainbow.
- Some people think if you just believe in God, your soul will default to rest. It won't. Just read Romans 7:15-25 about Paul's own inward battle. Or read 2 Cor. 11:28 about his "daily pressure" and "anxiety for all the churches." Our default state is restlessness. Christ gives us rest, but we must keep coming to Him for it. As we observed in Matthew 11 earlier, Jesus exhorts us to take His yoke—His teaching—upon us in order to find rest for our souls. Continually walking with Jesus, continually coming to Him for rest, continually calming our soul like the psalmist: this is how we live in a state of rest. As Jesus says elsewhere, "Abide in me..."

—"like a weaned child with its mother":

- This is a picture of the soul at rest.
- A "weaned child" no longer scream-cries for instant gratification. This child has learned that Mom loves him enough that he doesn't have to throw a tantrum to seize her attention. The child who once came primarily for milk can now simply rest against her.
- The mature child of God knows this too. Some Christians think that if they only throw a big enough fit—with enough fasting, enough sacrifice, enough protests—they can finally twist His arm into answering their prayers (these can be good things, but not as leverage against a reluctant God). Immature Christians, like infants, begin with an image of God as a miser. The more we grow in Christ, the more we realize how ready He is to bless us. We rest because we know He loves us and answers our cries even more than a mother does her child: "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Surely she may forget, but I will not forget you. See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands" (Isa. 49:15-16). This makes me think of Christ's palms, which still have holes.
- In a sense, we must be weaned from the world: its satisfaction, security, and significance. Its pleasures, possessions, and powers. Or, as John calls it: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. Our restless soul craves another dopamine hit to calm us, but as soon as we get it, we scream for more. This is not rest, but restlessness.
- But there's a deeper layer to this image. We are not just being weaned from the world but from the need for constant spiritual provision. A mature Christian, like a weaned child, learns to live without such a constant flow: answers to prayer, displays of power, divine encounters, revivals, and more. Some Christians try to convince you this is real life, that we can create a "revival culture" with practically on-demand spiritual experiences. But it's a lie. This theology produces un-weaned spiritual infants who scream for stimulation. Since God doesn't work that way, these spiritual infants either become disillusioned or else they pretend life is easier and less painful than it truly is. The mature believer, in contrast, learns to rest in God, not just His blessings; in connection, not just consumption. Weaned children learn to rest in Mom, not just milk, and we must learn to rest in God even if He doesn't give us what we ask for right away. Our deepest satisfaction is not blessing but the fount of all blessing: God Himself.
- Gill: "Weaned from the world, the riches, honours, pleasures, and profits of it; as well as from nature, from self, from his own righteousness, and all dependence upon it; and as a child that is weaned from the breast wholly depends on its nurse for sustenance, so did he wholly depend upon God, his providence, grace, and strength; and as to the kingdom, he had no more covetous desires after it

than a weaned child has to the breast, and was very willing to wait the due time for the enjoyment of it. The Targum has it, 'as one weaned on the breasts of its mother, I am strengthened in the law.' This is to be understood not of a child whilst weaning, when it is usually peevish, fretful, and froward, but when it is weaned, and is quiet and easy in its mother's arms without the breast."

- Kidner: "the psalm emphasizes the word 'weaned', thereby drawing an analogy between the child which no longer frets for what it used to find indispensable, and the soul which has learnt a comparable lesson."

—"is my soul within me":

- First, the psalmist calms/quiets his own soul (2a); as a result, his soul is quiet (2b).
- You cannot expect a calm soul just because you're a Christian. You must take command over your soul.
- An example of this occurs in Ps. 42-43, where we observe the refrain: "Why are you downcast, O my soul, and why are you disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God."
- Or, like we see in Ps. 103, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not his benefits..."
- Our soul is prone to forget God's benefits. Our soul is prone to be disturbed. But our soul must not become a leaf blown about by the currents of this world, or the agitations of our community, or the lust of our eyes and flesh. We can master our own soul. We can take command and see results.
- This "command" is not arbitrary. A godless person can't just say, "I command you, soul, to stop worrying." A godless person should absolutely worry! He is standing on the precipice of death and judgment! God could say to him, as He did the man in Luke 12, "Fool! Tonight your soul is demanded of you!" Furthermore, the godless do not have a loving God to rely on and relieve them from all worry.
- When the psalmist takes command over his soul, he reminds himself that God is a savior, worthy of hope; that He is not just a distant being, but MY Savior and MY God; that He is covenantally bound to us; that His benefits are beyond counting even if we forget them. In short, He reminds Himself of GOD'S WORD. He rinses his angry, irrational, fretful mind—with TRUTH.

—This section makes me think about the terminology popularized by therapists and psychologists. To be "dysregulated" means your nervous system is living in fight or flight. You're agitated and terrified. The amygdala fires. Cortisol floods your body, and your mind feels flooded as a result. You can't swim in a flood. All you can do is find a piece of driftwood, hang on for dear life, and wait until you drift ashore naturally. Therapists advise that you breathe deeply, touch grass, and count physical objects in the room until the feeling subsides—until your body returns to a "regulated" state. In the long-run, they counsel you to exercise, eat and sleep well, talk it out, and possibly try medication. They might also try therapeutic tools, particularly if your frequent dysregulation is caused by trauma: exposure therapy, Internal Family Systems (IFS), EMDR, and more.

—I have benefited from some of these tools. And there are forms of dysregulation that have genuine physiological and psychological causes and require appropriate care. But Psalm 131 draws our attention to another dimension of human restlessness: the soul itself can be restless. Breathing exercises can calm the body; they cannot by themselves teach the soul to rest in God. The psalmist does something profoundly spiritual: he takes command over his soul—even when the blessing dries up like a mother's milk. Our soul is not truly at rest until we desire "Mom over milk"—presence over provision. A weaned child can rest without that constant supply. He has learned not to let disappointment trigger a total freak-out. The more we grow in Christ, the more we learn to rest in God, not just His blessings.

—I'm going to be very honest and say I feel more like the screaming infant than the weaned one. If I expected a blessing of comfort or provision but instead received the opposite, I am more likely to throw a tantrum, at least inwardly, than to rest calmly in God.

—This is where I think it's important not to read too much into this psalm, as if David had learned the secret of never being agitated or fretful or irrational. This is the default state of our souls. David never says, "My soul always rests calmly in God." Instead, he says, "I have calmed and quieted my soul"—which suggests it had not been calm or quiet before. Don't beat yourself up for departing from that state. We all do. Just know that God sees your restlessness, and like a concerned mother, is eager to comfort you.

—But does it work? To "command" our soul?

- Consider an analogy from the world of sports. On May 23, 2012, *Time Magazine* released an article titled, "Talking to Yourself, Not so Crazy." They cited a review of more than two dozen studies on the subject. For example, elite sprinters who spoke verbal instructions to their bodies—"push" when they needed to accelerate, "heel" when they hit max speed, and "claw" during the endurance phase—performed better than those who didn't talk to themselves. This same principle applied across many disciplines. According to the Psalms, it also applies spiritually.
- I doubt anyone has studied this on a spiritual level, but I can share from practical experience. When I feel "flooded" and overwhelmed, the last thing I want to do is "command" my soul; I want to drift: to let the flood of anger or anxiety carry me, to rage or fret or gripe or wallow. But when I find the strength, by the Spirit, to take command, something shifts. I feel less like a victim. A sense of agency comes over me. This doesn't mean the bad feelings go right away. In Psalm 42-43, he commands his soul three different times, piling on laments and petitions, because the soul can be every bit as stubborn as a hungry baby. Calming our soul takes repetition—a repeated standing on God's Word.

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

—Suddenly, the psalmist shifts from personal prayer to exhortation, from individual comfort to collective hope. Why this sequence?

- Once you experience God's comfort, you can't help but call others to it. Think of it like this: If you discovered a cure to cancer, would you keep it to yourself? David has discovered a cure for the soul. Divine consolation. How can he not share it?
- Spurgeon: "See how lovingly a man who is weaned from self thinks of others! David thinks of his people, and loses himself in his care for Israel. How he prizes the grace of hope! There is room for the largest hope when self is gone, ground for eternal hope when transient things no longer hold the mastery of our spirits. This verse is the lesson of experience: a man of God who had been taught to renounce the world and live upon the Lord alone, here exhorts all his friends and companions to do the same."

—For David, the nation of Israel was more than a political entity; it was the covenant people of God. Our modern equivalent would be to cry out not, "O Israel," but "O church!" When God meets you in the valley, restores your soul, comforts your pain, or answers your prayer, you should be eager to share it with your brothers and sisters. They need the encouragement!

—"hope":

- I have defined hope before as "the joyful anticipation of what God will do." Gratitude is similar, but it runs backward. Gratitude is "the joyful recollection of what God has done." Gratitude draws joy from the past; hope pulls it from the future.
- Imagine you are stuck on a desert island. You spy a ship in the distance and blast a flare gun. Suddenly, the ship alters its course and heads straight for you, indicating with a loud horn and signal light, "I'm coming for you." Despite its distance from the shore, you would not wait to celebrate until it arrived. You would jump, shout, and dance. These are gestures of hope. Hope is a joyful anticipation. It pulls gladness from what WILL happen, even if your current residence is still a desert island.
- In the Psalms, hope has two horizons.
 - One horizon is the afterlife.
 - Ps. 17:15: "As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness."
 - Ps. 49:15: "But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol [the place of the dead], for he will receive me."
 - The afterlife was not as clearly revealed in the Old Testament because Jesus "abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Tim. 1:10). However, the psalmists had some sense of spending eternity with God. They believed that "goodness and mercy"—that is, God's covenant kindness—would

not end with the grave, but they would “dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (Ps. 23:6).

- Likewise, Christians can hope in the afterlife: that God will restore what was lost, redeem what was suffered, and reward our faithful endurance.
- “from this time forth and forevermore” in the present psalm could imply blessing that extends into eternity.
- Another horizon is God’s blessing in this life.
 - Ps. 27:13 –14: “I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.”
 - Ps. 57:2–3: “I cry out to God Most High... He will send from heaven and save me.”
 - Ps. 59:10: “My God in his steadfast love will meet me; God will let me look in triumph on my enemies.”
 - Ps. 71:12–16, 20–21: “O God, be not far from me... You will revive me again... You will increase my greatness and comfort me again.”
 - I could multiply examples. The predominant hope of the psalmists is for the near horizon: deliverance in this life.
 - In my observation, most Christians have allowed the pendulum of hope to swing too far toward eternity. Since Jesus enlightened us about the afterlife, it seems we have placed all our hope there. Praise God for this hope—but it’s incomplete. Like the psalmists, we must learn to hope not just for the age to come but for the age that is here. These two hopes consist of the same fabric. In fact, I question whether someone truly has hope in the afterlife if he does not also hope for this life. How can we trust God to conquer the grave but not our lesser trials that precede the grave?
- Healthy hope considers both horizons: this life and the next. We joyfully anticipate God to rescue, heal, answer, and deliver in this life (without dictating which form God’s tangible care will take). And we joyfully anticipate that He will restore, redeem, and reward us in the life to come. Together, these complementary joys bring comfort to the soul.
- How does the hope of verse 3 flow out of the image of verse 2 (a soul like a weaned child)?
 - An infant begins by “hoping” for milk, secured by loud screaming. The weaning process is painful, as it has grown accustomed to instant gratification. Gradually, however, the infant learns to rest not in the steady flow of blessing but in its source: Mom. At this point, some deprivation has served its purpose. Now the baby can rest without constant stimulation. It is enough to know that Mom is lovingly present.
 - Likewise, tribulation weans us from the world and our own fleshly cravings of constant stimulation. It teaches us to rest not in “getting what we want right now” but in wanting—and enjoying—God Himself.
 - But again, how does this image (v. 2) relate to hope (v.3)? It clarifies the true source of our hope. There is nothing wrong with hoping for healing, deliverance, and answers to prayer. The psalmists do it often. But we must remember: this is just milk. Just as Mom is the source of milk, God is the source of our provision and comfort. Therefore, when we hope for blessings in this life, we must: (1) calm and quiet our soul for a period of waiting, and (2) remember that God is present for us even in the waiting—He is the true source of our hope.
- Ross: The line about hope encourages people “to put their full trust in the LORD rather than delude themselves into thinking they have the ability to solve all the problems of life.”



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