

Psalm 131: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Psalm 131, 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 marvellous 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.

O Israel, hope in the Lord, from this time forth and for evermore. Psalm 131, one of the shortest psalms, has at its heart a most arresting image, one of a child nursed by its mother.

The psalm begins with a fourfold disavowal of the pride, the hubris and the ambition that can drive us. His heart is not lifted up, his eyes not raised too high, he does not occupy himself with things that are too great for him, nor does he occupy himself with things that are too marvellous or beyond him.

His life and horizons are in the right perspective, he has a sense of dependence upon the Lord, and a keen awareness of his own finitude and limitations, starving both the pride and the ambition within him.

We might think here of the instruction in Deuteronomy chapter 29 verse 29, the secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.

[1 : 24] Conrad Schaefer writes, The language encompasses both the vertical axis, too high, and the horizontal plane, occupied, is literally warped. The poet neither entertains too lofty illusions, nor spreads himself or herself too thin, meaning one has moderated the relation with God and others.

The meaning of heart, eyes, occupied and soul, scopes out both interior attitudes and external actions. The method is clear. The poet first mentions the heart, the seat of thought, intention and decision.

He or she next mentions the eyes, which open to the world around and mirror the interior, as they look after desires and seek things small or great. Next is how to proceed or walk.

Rising from the heart, led by the eyes, the person's conduct takes shape. The psalmist, then, is someone who has taken concern to master his own spirit. He expresses this in the most arresting imagery in verse 2.

He has calmed and quieted his soul, like a weaned child with its mother. Commentators debate the meaning of the child here. A weaned child would likely be around three years of age.

[2 : 34] However, John Goldingay remarks that the Jewish commentator Rashi and others have taken this expression not as a reference to a weaned child, but to a child that has just been nursed.

Such a child is satisfied and at rest. The psalmist compares his soul to the child, but perhaps the surprise of the image is found in the identity of the mother. The psalmist is both child, his soul, and mother, the one who is calming and quieting his soul within him.

On several occasions within the psalms, the psalmist personifies or gives an image for his soul. His soul is like a deer panting for streams of water. His soul is like a bird looking for rest.

And here, his soul is like a child, satisfied with the milk of its mother. In such imagery, the psalmist can express the vulnerability, the dependence, and the pre-rationality of the soul.

The soul needs to be protected and tended. The soul needs to be calmed and quieted, much as you might deal with an infant or with a frightened animal. The imagery also encourages us to think in terms of a self-relationship, neither to identify ourselves completely with the soul, with its immediate feelings and instincts, nor, for that matter, to identify ourselves completely with that voice of calming truth that is given to the soul.

[3 : 52] It is important that we recognize our vulnerability, our dependence, our susceptibility to fears and various weaknesses. However, we must also play the role of the mother that brings

calming truth and reassurance to that frightened soul.

The psalmist encourages a gentle and understanding, calming and addressing of the fears and anxieties within us, something achieved in large measure, as verse 1 would suggest, through the practice of humility.

The calmed soul is a soul that recognizes its limitations, but faced with those limitations, has learned to depend upon the Lord. As in the preceding psalm, the experience of the individual is used as a basis for exhorting the people as a whole.

Here, the soul that has been given rest and quieted, as it has learned to accept and acknowledge its own limitations, and to depend upon the Lord in its situation, exhorts the nation to take the same posture.

This should not just be a temporary posture looking towards some horizon in the near future.

Rather, this posture of humbling of pride, curbing of ambition, and moderating of plans is one that should characterize Israel's life from this time forth and forevermore.

[5 : 03] Faced with its own fears and anxieties, the motherly truth that will comfort the troubled soul of Israel is the fact that the Lord is greater than all of their struggles. A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which, following the example of the psalmist, we can calm our own souls?

