

Ascend:
A Short Lesson that Seems to Take a Long Time to Learn
Psalm 131

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Introduction to Text: This morning we are continuing a series called, "Ascend." This series is an expositional study of Psalms 120-134. Each of these Psalms has the heading "Song of Ascents." Most believe that these are songs that worshippers sang as they made their way to Jerusalem for thrice annual special times of worship. If this is so, then we learn a great deal about what was on their hearts as they approached worship and thus understand what should be upon our hearts as we prepare to worship or just give attention to the subject of worship. We are considering one each Sunday for the weeks of this summer. Today, we are studying Psalm 131. This is not a very long Psalm but I think it has plenty for us to think about this morning.

Text: LORD, my heart is not proud;
my eyes are not haughty.
I do not get involved with things
too great or too difficult for me.
² Instead, I have calmed and quieted myself
like a little weaned child with its mother;
I am like a little child.
³ Israel, put your hope in the LORD,
both now and forever.

Introduction: Why is it that seemingly the simplest of lessons are sometimes the hardest to learn? C.H. Spurgeon, a preacher of the 1800's and so-called "Prince of Preachers" said of this Psalm, "It's the shortest of the Songs of Ascent but takes the longest {amount of time} to learn."

Here is my assignment today. There is nothing in this Psalm that you do not already know. So, there is nothing in this sermon that you do not already know. And yet, if these things were easy to know and more importantly implement and apply to our lives, we would already be doing these things and knowing these things.

Let me jump into the text here with you and show you what I mean. We've got three verses. Each of the verses seem to make a point and actually build upon one another.

The Pride We All Need to Lose

In verse 1, we have a statement of the place of the Psalmist. He recognizes that in a right relationship with God, we must lose our pride. We know what the Scriptures say about pride. Proverbs 16:18 for example says, "Pride comes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall." Proverbs 8:13, "To fear the Lord is to hate evil. I hate arrogant pride, evil conduct, and perverse speech." Jesus said in the Beatitudes, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." That speaks of our elimination of pride.

I love the Olympics for the sport, but also the story lines. What about Michael Phelps? One of my favorite moments of these Olympics has been the rivalry between Michael Phelps and Chad Le Clos of South Africa. If you have been paying attention at all, surely you know about the “taunting” that Le Clos apparently wanted to try to do to Phelps during the preliminaries to the 200 butterfly. But, when all was said and done, Phelps won gold and Le Clos did not medal. The ancient Proverb applies, “Pride comes before destruction or the fall.”

In this text, in verse 1, there seems to be different layers of pride.

- Pride in relationship to our attitudes—“my heart is not proud”
- Pride in relationship to our appearance—“my eyes are not haughty”
- Pride in relationship to our abilities—“things too great”
- Pride in relationship to our knowledge—“things too difficult”

The short lesson that seems to take a lifetime to learn is that there will always be things that I want to change, but I cannot; things I want to do that I cannot; things I want to know, but I cannot; things I want to control, but are beyond my control.

Now, this does not mean that we do not try, but that we learn to live as though it is ok when we cannot.

It is I think that thought established in the so-called Serenity prayer, made widely known by AA, but original to the pastor, Richard Niebuhr.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can (and here is the most important part) wisdom to know the difference.

The Peace We All Need to Have

In verse 2 we see the peace that we all need to have. Notice the way this peace is introduced. “Instead” links back to verse 1. Because I have relinquished pride in my life, now I have calmed myself. Understand, we can’t do verse 2, if we have not done verse 1. There is a link to trusting God and not trusting ourselves. This is why John Piper says, “The alternative to pride is a wonderful, peaceful, contentment of soul in God.” The conviction of verse 1 leads to the contentment in verse 2.

Jesus used a similar metaphor. As usual, the disciples were arguing about greatness. “Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Jesus gave them an object lesson. He called a little child and had the child stand among them. Then He said, “I assure you. Unless you are converted and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself like this child—this one is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven.” (Matthew 18:1-5)

We sang a very old hymn a few weeks ago. It dates back to the 1700’s. The name is “Be Still, My Soul.”

1 Be still, my soul: the Lord is on thy side.
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.
Leave to thy God to order and provide,
who through all changes faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul: thy best, thy heavenly Friend
through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

2 Be still, my soul: thy God doth undertake
to guide the future surely as the past.
Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake;
all now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know
his voice who ruled them while he dwelt below.

3 Be still, my soul: the hour is hastening on
when we shall be forever with the Lord;
when disappointment, grief, and fear are gone,
sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored.
Be still, my soul: when change and tears are past
all safe and blessed we shall meet at last.

The Position We All Need to Take

Now in verse three, having seen the pride we must lose and the peace we must have, we see the position we all need to take.

If we have seen in verse 1 the conviction to lose pride and in verse 2 the contentment when we are at rest with God, now in verse 3, we see a simple conclusion. Put your hope in the Lord. And it comes in a way of an invitation. "Israel, put your hope in the Lord." We could say today, "Those gathered at FBC, Lafayette, put your hope in the Lord."

Note well, that this is both now and forever. I have often thought how tragic it is for us to put our hope in the Lord for eternity, but not be willing to put our trust in Him now.

So What?

Think of these three points of application as daily declarations that we all need to make.

I am not God.

Since I am not God, I need God.

Since I need God, I must trust God.

Why is it that what seems like the simplest lessons are the hardest to learn?

Anselm of the 11th century wrote:

"I do not seek, O Lord, to penetrate thy depths. I by no means think my intellect equal to them, but I long to understand in some degree thy truths, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe that I may understand."