

Psalm 131

"I am meek and lowly of heart..." (Matt. 11:28-30).

1. Background

Compared to the boisterous crying out in Psalm 130 and David's strenuous labours in Psalm 132, Psalm 131 is quiet and composed.

"In general David is the model of the state of mind which the poet expresses here. He did not push himself forward, but suffered himself to be drawn forth out of seclusion. He did not take possession of the throne violently, but after Samuel has anointed him he willingly and patiently traverses the long, thorny, circuitous way of deep abasement, until he receives from God's hand that which God's promise had assured to him. The persecution by Saul lasted about ten years, and his kingship in Hebron, at first only incipient, seven years and a half. He left it entirely to God to remove Saul and Ishbosheth. He let Shimei curse. He left Jerusalem before Absalom. Submission to God's guidance, resignation to His dispensations, contentment with that which was allotted to him, are the distinguishing traits of his noble character, which the poet of this Psalm indirectly holds up to himself and to his contemporaries as a mirror" (Delitzsch).

"Individual believers are fond of the idea that they should seek to make a difference, and the church is fond of the idea that it should seek to bring in or further or extend the kingdom of God. The psalm suggests that the task of the people of God is rather to wait for the kingdom of God, and Jesus also takes this view. Instead of being lofty and looking high and going about thinking that we can do wonders that are actually too great for us, the suppliant invites us to relax like a child in its mother's arms" (Goldingay).

"It is one of the shortest Psalms to read, but one of the longest to learn... Happy is the man who can without falsehood use these words as his own; for he wears about him the likeness of his Lord, who said, 'I am meek and lowly in heart'" (Spurgeon).

2. Structure

The Psalm opens by invoking the name of the LORD, and it closes by calling on Israel to wait upon the LORD. This frame is important because it reminds us that the composure described by the psalmist is not the achievement of stoicism or mindfulness but the result of a good relationship with the living God.

Verse 1 is a threefold affirmation that the psalmist has rejected hubris. Verse 2 is a "twice doubled" affirmation that the psalmist has composed his heart. The first word of v. 2 is "surely not" – together with the three "no's" of v. 1, this completes a set of four negatives which might balance the "twice doubled" affirmation of v. 2.

A¹ (v. 1aα) *Invocation*

B¹ (v. 1aβ-b) *The psalmist has rejected hubris*

B² (v. 2) *The psalmist has composed his heart*

A² (v. 3) *The psalmist calls for patient endurance*

3. Notes

(a) Rejecting hubris (verse 1)

Hubris is the arrogance of humans who try to be God (Gen. 3:5-6). It leads inevitably to competition among humans (Eccl. 4:4) and corrupt ambition. God hates hubris (Prov. 6:16-19; Isa. 2:11-12) but gives grace to the humble (Ps. 18:27; Isa. 57:15).

"With *my heart is not haughty* the poet repudiates pride as being the state of his soul; with *my eyes are not high* ... pride of countenance and bearing; and with *I have not diligently walked*, pride of endeavour and mode of action. Pride has its seat in the heart, in the eyes especially it finds its expression, and great things are its sphere in which it diligently exercises itself" (Delitzsch, 3.351).

"...being lofty or high is dangerous because objectively, in itself, it suggests a challenge to the one who is lofty and high, and because subjectively it is almost impossible to be lofty and high without becoming people who see themselves as impressive and important, as godlets" (Goldingay, 3.535).

"Great things" are the great acts of God. "Wonderful things" likewise are the special preserve of God, cf. Judges 13:18-19. "The line is concerned with more than seeking to understand things that are too great for human comprehension. Rather the suppliant has avoided trying to go about doing great wonders, like God, rather than walking in faithfulness (Prov. 8:20)" (Goldingay).

(b) Learning submission (verse 2)

"I have soothed..." – "He has levelled or made smooth his soul, so that humility is its entire and uniform state; he has calmed it so that it is silent and at rest, and lets God speak and work in it and for it" (Delitzsch).

The simile of the weaned child divides commentators who cannot agree if it refers to an infant which has been pacified by feeding or a child which can sit with its mother and not demand to be fed. Either way, the psalmist is saying that he has learned how to contain himself in patience – he is not going to try and work salvation for himself (v. 1), and he knows how to wait on God's time and God's action.

(c) Calling for patience endurance (verse 3)

The lesson learned by the psalmist (v. 2) is now applied to the whole community.

"The last verse rouses us from contemplating David to following his example and that of his greater Son: not through introspection but through being weaned from insubstantial ambitions to the only solid fare that can be ours. 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work' (Jn. 4:34)" (Kidner).

The verb translated "wait" or "hope" is one of a number of synonyms which together express the Biblical idea of hope as a sure and certain expectation founded upon the utter reliability of God and absolute trustworthiness of all his promises. This expectation enables God's people to wait patiently.