

"Peace, be still": Learning Psalm 131 by Heart

by David Powlison

God speaks to us in many different ways. When you hear, "Now it came to pass," settle down for a good story. When God asserts, "I am," trust His self-revelation. When He promises, "I will," bank on it. When He tells you, "You shall... you shall not," do what He says. Psalm 131 is in yet a different vein. Most of it is holy eavesdropping. You have intimate access to the inner life of someone who has learned composure, and then he invites you to come along. Psalm 131 is show-and-tell for how to become peaceful inside. Listen in.

LORD,
my heart is not proud,
and my eyes are not haughty,
and I do not go after things too great
and too difficult for me.

Surely I have composed and quieted my
soul,
like a weaned child on his mother,
like a weaned child, my soul rests on
me.

Israel, hope in the LORD now and forever.

This person is quiet on the inside because he has learned the only true and lasting composure. He shares the details of what the peace that passes understanding is like (Phil. 4:7).

Amazingly, this man isn't noisy inside. He isn't busy-busy-busy. Not obsessed. Not on edge. The to-do list and pressures to achieve don't consume him. Ambition does-

n't churn inside. Failure and despair don't haunt him. Anxiety isn't spinning him into free fall. He isn't preoccupied with thinking up the next thing he wants to say. Regrets don't corrode his inner experience. Irritation and dissatisfaction don't devour him. He's not stumbling through the mine field of blind longings and fears.

He's quiet.

Are you quiet inside? Is Psalm 131 your experience, too? When your answer is No, it naturally invites follow-up questions. What is the "noise" going on inside you? Where does it come from? How do you get busy and preoccupied? Why? Do you lose your composure? When do you get worried, irritable, wearied, or hopeless? How can you regain composure? Do you need to learn it for the first time? We'll get to these questions, because they are what Psalm 131 answers. But let's dip our toes in the water before taking the plunge.

First, think a minute about who's talking to us in Psalm 131. We are listening to the inner conversation of someone whom God called "a man after His own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14). In other words, this man processes life the way a human being is meant to process. That makes him worth listening to.

David wrote the original words 3000 years ago. The psalm wears the heading, *A Song of Ascents, of David*. Like others of David's most memorable psalms—16, 23, 31, 32, 103, 139—Psalm 131 captures the

quintessence of one piece of human experience. We know many things about David, the youngest of eight brothers, a fierce protector of his flock, a young man with striking good looks and evident talent, a skilled musician and poet, a deadly soldier, a loyal subject even while a fugitive, a tender and faithful friend, a savvy military and political strategist who secured the throne, the husband of a harem and father of countless children, an adulterer who murdered by proxy, a broken-hearted penitent, a decrepit and dying old man. But two characteristics stand out, infusing all the particulars. First, the LORD chose David, anointed him, loved him, and blessed him. God was *with* David. Second, David knew this LORD. He referred his life to God; he walked *with* God. Such a man lets you into his stream of consciousness.

A millennium later, someone else lived this psalm even more fully. Update the heading: *A Song of Ascents, of Jesus*. Psalm 131 expresses Jesus' life experience, the inner workings of His consciousness. Think about that. The Father's chosen, anointed, loved, and blessed Son lets you listen in. God who became a man thinks out loud for you. Listen to Psalm 131 and you hear the internal operations of Jesus' mind. This isn't just a theory or exhortation about how to think with the mind of Christ. You catch the bird on the wing. Internal peace-making happens in front of your eyes.

Second, get a clear picture of what Psalm 131 is *not*. It does not portray blissful, unruffled detachment, a meditative state of higher consciousness. It's not stoic indifference, becoming "philosophical" about life. It's not about having an easygoing personality, or having low expectations so you're easy to please. It's not retreat from the troubles of life and the commotion of other people. It's not retirement to a life of ease and wealth, the quiet of having nothing to do and no worries. It's not the pleasant fatigue that follows a hard day's work or a hard workout. It's not the quieting of inner noise that a glass of wine or a daily dose of Prozac produces. After all, Jesus and David were both kingdom-builders in real life, real time. They expected—and achieved—huge things in the midst of commotion and trouble. They experienced pressure, joy, heartache, outrage, affection, courage. So Psalm 131's inner quiet comes in the midst of actions, relationships, and problems.

Third, understand rightly what Psalm 131 does describe. *This composure is learned, and it is learned in relationship*. Such purposeful quiet is achieved, not spontaneous. It is conscious, alert, and chosen. It is a form of self-mastery by the grace of God: "Surely I have composed and quieted my soul." And it happens in living relationship with Someone Else. You are "disciplined" into such composure. You learn it from someone. Listen

and watch carefully. You'll come to understand a form of self-mastery that arises only in relationship. Can *you* get to this quieted place, here and now, in your actual life? Yes, you can get there from here. This psalm is from a man who leads you by the hand. The last sen-

Faith delivers you from your biggest problem, a proud self-will.

tence of the psalm stops talking with God and talks to you. Psalm 131 aims to become your words as a chosen, anointed, loved, and blessed child. We'll look closely at the dynamic. Psalm 131 contains big things in a very tiny package, divided into three parts.

LORD, my heart is not proud, and my eyes are not haughty, and I do not go after things too great and too difficult for me. (Psalm 131:1)

Faith delivers you from your biggest problem, a proud self-will. David says to the LORD, "I am *not* self-trusting, opinionated, and headstrong. I am *not* superior to others. I am *not* attempting the impossible." The process through which he was tamed is still implicit (until verse 2). The reason for such astonishing composure and humility is still implicit (until verse 3). We see the results first, and are intrigued. David is quiet. He has consciously distanced himself from everything that rattles inside us. To be able to say "I am *not* something," you must learn to identify the something.

A pool of water in the stillness of dawn is highly sensitive to vibration. Watch the surface carefully. You detect the approach of the slightest breeze or a slight tremor in the ground. You locate the wriggling of a fish you cannot see or a minute waterbug skating over the surface. In the same way, this quiet psalm can make you highly sensitive to "noise." It is an instrument with which to detect gusts, temblors, thrashing, and insects in the soul. What makes us so noisy inside? Turn the psalm into its opposite, the anti-psalm:

Self,

my heart is proud (I'm absorbed in myself),
and my eyes are haughty (I look down on other people),
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 the time.

Noisiness makes perfect sense. You can identify exactly where the rattling noises come from.

Do you remember *Alice in Wonderland*, how Alice was either too big or too small? Because she was never quite the right size, she was continually disoriented. We all have that problem. We are the wrong size. We imagine ourselves to be independent and autonomous: *proud hearts*. We become engrossed in monstrous trivialities of our own devising. We pursue grandiosities

*Pride is not just about ME.
It's also about you. I must look down
on you in some way.*

and glories. We become afraid of our own shadows. One of the symptoms of the disease is that we become noisy inside.¹ Seventeenth-century English had a great word for how we stir up much ado about nothing: vainglory. Or, in Macbeth's bitter words: "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more; it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" (V:5).

Of course, this doesn't seem like much of a problem while we busily telemarket our pride both to ourselves and to others. "I just want a little respect and appreciation. Of course I want the home appliances to work and the car mechanic to be honest. That's pretty normal. I want approval and understanding, to be included. Is that too much to ask? I want the church to thrive, my sermon to go well, the worship to be biblical. It's for God, after all. I want satisfaction and compensation for the ways others did me wrong. If others would just own up, and then treat me right. I don't want much. If only I had better health, a little more money, a more meaningful job, nicer clothes, and a restful vacation, then I'd be satisfied. I want a measure of success—just a bit of recognition—as an athlete, a beauty, an intellectual, a musician, a leader, a mother. I want control. Who doesn't? Comfort, ease, convenience. Why not? I want to feel good. Doesn't God want me to feel good? I want to feel good about myself, to have more self-confidence,

to believe in myself. I want...well, I want MY WAY. I WANT THE GOODIES. I WANT GLORY. I WANT GOD TO DO MY WILL. I WANT TO BE GOD...Doesn't everybody?" Our slavery to the corruption that is in the world by lust (2 Pet. 1:4) seems so plausible. Our restless disorientation seems so natural. So desirable. But it's noisy. The noise tips us off to what's going on. The static of anxiety, irritation, despondency, or ambition makes sense from within the logic of a proud heart. If you are *not* proud, then quietness and composure make sense.

It also comes with the territory that we are opinionated, routinely judging and belittling others: *haughty eyes*. Pride is not just about ME. It's also about you. I must look down on you in some way. I must establish my superiority in some way. Some people wear their arrogance and superiority openly, and even boast of their boasting. But our absorption in judgmental opinions runs very deep. Pride says, "I'm right in myself." Haughty eyes say, "I'm right compared to you." Have you ever noticed that even people who feel lousy about themselves are judgmental towards others? When you feel inferior to others, you don't admire and respect them, or treat them with merciful consideration. Instead, you envy, hate, nitpick, grumble, and criticize. Even self-belittling tendencies—"low self-esteem," self-pity, self-hatred, timidity, fearfulness, diffidence, fears of failure and rejection—fundamentally express *pride* failing, *pride* intimidated, and *pride* despairing. Such pride, even when much battered, still finds someone else to look down on. It is no accident that the church fathers discussed fear of man as a subset of pride when they contemplated the "seven deadly sins" besetting every soul.

A friend of mine once vividly described this problem. She said that she had almost no true peers, people with whom she related eye-to-eye. Her relationships were not characterized by generosity, candor, or trust. There were a few "pedestal people" in her life, people she thought walked on water, who could do no wrong. There were many, many "pit people" in her life, people she looked down on for one reason or other. The two categories were connected only by an elevator shaft! A person could fall off the pedestal and end up in the pit. But no pit person had ever been rehabilitated. She had a long history of disappointment in every relationship. Family and former friends lodged in her mental doghouse. Unsurprisingly, she was a woman with a lot of inner noise: fretful, self-preoccupied, easily offended, depressive, competitive. But as she grew in Christ, she grew in composure. She gained an inner gyroscope. As she learned to live in the way of peace, lo and behold, she began to discover peers and to build friendships.

¹Isaiah wrote, "The wicked are like the tossing sea, for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up refuse and mud. 'There is no peace for the wicked,' says my God" (57:20-21).

Another way of putting this is to say that she stopped *pursuing impossibilities*. That's the third phrase in Psalm 131:1: not going after things that are beyond you, "things too great and too wonderful." Even the small, everyday things that everyone races after are, in fact, "beyond us." From your daily bread to your abilities and opportunities, these are gifts from God that you don't control. What happens when you attempt to control another person's attitudes and choices, to bend them to your will? You set yourself up for all sorts of ugly things. Despair or rage, anxiety or short-lived euphoria, suspicion or manipulation. What happens when you attempt to ensure that you will not get sick and die? You become obsessed with diet and exercise, or litigious towards doctors, or plagued with fear that any nagging pain might be the big one that finally gets you. What happens when you are obsessed with getting people to like you? You become flirtatious or artificial, a coward or a deceiver, a chameleon or a recluse. What happens when you live for success in sports, career, or your physical appearance? You get injured. You finally retire. Someone comes along who is better than you or better looking. You get old and wrinkled. You die. But when you pursue what you are called to pursue, it makes sense you'd have composure. You've discovered what you're made for. Paul once put it this way, "Flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart" (2 Tim. 2:22). When you go after the right things, you'll find what you're looking for.

Surely I have composed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child on his mother, like a weaned child, my soul rests on me. (Psalm 131:2)

Having seen the result, now we see the process. Quiet your noisy self to know the peace that passes understanding. To gain composure is to go through a weaning process. Something that once meant everything to you comes to mean nothing. What is this composing, this quieting, this weaning?

Notice that you are definitively different at the end of the process. You aren't "sort of composed, sort of quiet, sort of weaned." You once were noisy, and now you've learned quiet. We always learn through a process, but in principle there are not gradations. You either have it or you don't. You either know how to quiet yourself or you stay noisy. You're either a nursing infant or a weaned child. In the first word in Psalm 131:2, translated as *Surely*, David comes close to taking an oath: "If I don't...If this isn't so, then...I swear that..." David means it. He is bound and determined to have wrestled down his unruly soul.

Dying to your restless, fretful, and irritable ways does not come easily. There is no technique, automatic formula, or pat answer. To *compose* your soul means literally to level it. Bulldoze the building site. Run a harrow across the rutted, bumpy field. Get a grip. When Jesus said, "Peace, be still" to the stormy lake, he smoothed the turbulence. To *quiet* your soul means to silence the noise and tumult. "Sssshhh" to your desires, fears, opinions, anxieties, agendas, and irritabilities. We looked in detail at the assertions David made about

*From your daily bread to your
abilities and opportunities,
these are gifts from God that you
don't control.*

himself in the first verse. Now we see that David had gone about unplugging the noise machines and knocking down the ladders. This sort of composure and quietness is not apathy, but alertness. It is conscious, not unconscious. It is the equanimity of self-mastery by grace, not the equanimity of sleepy ease.

How do you purify your heart? How does a proud heart become a humble heart? You do not wrestle yourself down by doing penance. You can beat on yourself, resolve to mend your ways, wear a hair shirt, and still be proud. You do not destroy the tumult of self-will by sheer will: "I will stop being irritable. I will stop being fretful. I will stop imposing my will on the universe." Can the leopard change its spots? You are not strong enough; you are too strong. You only wrestle yourself down by the promises of God's lovingkindness. You need the invasion of the Redeemer, the hand of the Shepherd. You need great help, the way a drowning man needs great help from outside himself to rescue him. Only one thing is strong enough to overpower and slay unruly cravings and a stormy life: what God promises to do in and through Jesus Christ. It is by precious and very great promises that we escape the corruption that is in the world by lust (2 Pet. 1:4). From God's side, we escape ourselves by being loved by Jesus Christ through the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit Himself. From our side, we escape ourselves by learning a lifestyle of intelligent repentance, genuine faith, and specific obedience.

In the 1700s, Katarina von Schlegel wrote a hymn about wrestling to compose and quiet her soul. It is an extended personalization of Psalm 131:2, presumably written in the context of some great loss.

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.
In every change, He faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul. Thy best, thy heavenly Friend
through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

Think about that, and still yourself. Remember the Lord's favor, control, fidelity, and friendship. Remain patient in your sufferings.

Be still, my soul. Thy God doth undertake
to guide the future as He has 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.

Why does she have to keep reminding herself, "Be still, my soul"? We need to be stilled. Who is strong enough to rule the unruly things that wail, rattle, or shout within us? God is purposively active in His children. He will have final say. Christ ruled the storms, rules them still, and will rule them. You can trust Someone Else amid your present uncertainties.

Be still, my soul. When dearest friends depart,
and all is darkened in the vale of tears,
then shalt thou better know his love, his heart,
who comes to soothe thy sorrow and thy fears.
Be still, my soul. Thy Jesus can repay
from His own fullness all He takes away.

Perhaps irreparable loss is the hardest thing to face. A loved one dies, and will never again walk through the door to greet you. You retire, and can never again return to the work into which you poured your talent, time, and concern. You will never again be young. No second chance to do your college years or that failed marriage over again. The daylily bloomed, and it is no more. Such things devastate us. Can you quiet yourself? Jesus gives you Himself.

Be still, my soul. The hour is hast'ning 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.

Katarina von Schlegel was the ultimate realist. Most of the noise in our souls is generated by trying to control the uncontrollable. We grasp after the wind. We rage, fear, and finally despair. But this wise sister refocused onto a hope more enduring than fragile, destructible hope-so. Be still, my soul. All that is hard now will be forgotten amid love's purest joys. This slight, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison (2 Cor 4:17). Psalm 131 faith lives with eyes open.

David drives this home with a wonderful metaphor: *like a weaned child on his mother, like a weaned child, my soul rests on me*. The original sentence emphasizes the parallelism and does not even contain the verb "rests": "Like a weaned child on his mother, like a weaned child on me my soul." Most of us have seen a nursing child before the weaning process begins. For those of you who are mothers, this image will be particularly evocative. When a hungry child is placed on his mother's lap, he is agitated. He roots around,

*Haughtiness lowers its eyes as the
dependency of hope lifts up its eyes.*

squirming anxiously. If he doesn't get immediate attention and satisfaction, he frets and fusses. He is frustrated and peevish because he wants something. He needs something. Mother's milk means life, health, satisfaction, joy. If mother doesn't deliver right now, he'll thrash about. His emotions range over the whole spectrum of noisy, negative emotion. You witness the childish versions of things that destroy adults: anxiety, depression, anger, jealousy, discontent, and confusion. We've all seen that. But then have you ever seen that same child two weeks later, when he is successfully weaned? The difference is amazing! A dramatic change has taken place. Now when that child is placed in his mother's lap, he sits quietly, giving his attention in a different direction. The child rests upon his mother, at peace (assuming she's spooning in the mush!). The child has *changed*. Envision your own soul as a small child sitting on your lap. You used to be noisy, squirmy, and demanding. Now you sit still. That's the picture of learning peace.

Israel, hope in the LORD now and forever.
(Psalm 131:3)

We looked first at the result, and then at the process. This last line gives the reason. The LORD, Jesus Christ, is your hope. Pride dies as the humility of faith lives. Haughtiness lowers its eyes as the dependency of hope lifts up its eyes. You stop pursuing impossibilities when you start pursuing certainties. This simple sentence distills wonders. Consider the command and invitation you are now receiving.

First, you are called by name. *Israel* originally named an insignificant family group of roaming Bedouin. Later it identified a mildly significant buffer state in the ancient Near East. But now the scope of

Psalm 131:3 extends to call every nation, tribe, tongue and people. That includes you. We are all called to set our hope in the Lord now and forever. Sometimes Jesus applies the old name to His new people: “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16), or “the Jew inwardly, with a circumcised heart” (Rom. 2:29). But now we are more commonly called by other names:

Beloved,
chosen,
holy ones (set apart to the Holy One; “saints”),
sons and daughters,
brothers and sisters,
slaves,
called out ones (“church”),
disciples.

Disciple is the most commonly used name to describe you. You consciously, intentionally are about the business of learning and changing as you live with your teacher-for-life, Jesus Christ.²

Second, you are called to *hope in the LORD*. Who is this person who topples all the ladders to nowhere and gives you something better? He is the true God, the only Redeemer from the idols we construct. Your hope is in “I AM,” who becomes known simply as “the Lord.” Eventually, He more immediately and personally names Himself: Jesus Christ is Lord.

What exactly are you to hope for? Psalm 131 is very condensed, stating the general principle without any specifics beyond the Person. You are free to particularize the content of hope with promises from throughout the Bible. But it would probably be wisest to start in the immediate vicinity. Psalm 131 is intentionally paired with Psalm 130, which gives details about what exactly we are to hope in (italicized).

Out of the depths I have cried to *You, LORD*.

Lord, *hear my voice!*

Let *Your ears pay attention* to the voice of my supplications.

If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?

But *there is forgiveness with You* so that You may be feared.

I wait for the LORD,

my soul waits,

and in His word I hope.

My soul waits for the Lord more than the watchmen for the morning,

indeed, more than the watchmen for the morning.

Israel, hope in the LORD,

for with the LORD there is lovingkindness,

and with Him is abundant redemption,

and He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

The things in italics invite your hope. You will not go wrong if you fulfill Psalm 131:3 by living out Psalm 130. The sense of need, the eager anticipation, and the inner tension of waiting effectively illustrate what Psalm 131's composure is like. We are racehorses, not

*We are racehorses, not milk cows,
called to equine alertness and focus, not
bovine placidity and apathy!*

milk cows, called to equine alertness and focus, not bovine placidity and apathy!

Third, you are called to such hopes *now and forever*. David speaks in a generality, literally, “from now until forever.” That pretty much covers the territory! But the time frame of our hope is even more clearly defined than David could have known. We hope in a specific: set your hope fully on the grace to be given you at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:13). Both *now* and *forever* shine with newer, brighter meanings for us who read Psalm 131 in the light of Christ. The clarinet solo has been picked up by the full orchestra. Transpose this last line, at least mentally, as you personalize the psalm. In Christ the Lord, disciples have more details to inform intelligent faith.

Your biggest problem is proud self-will. That's the noise machine inside you. And there is a way to gain composure through the Lord who is the Way. What should you do now so you can honestly say, “My heart is not proud”? How do you go about making this psalm your own? How do you quiet yourself?

Personalizing

First, identify the ladders to nowhere that pride erects.

- Where do you raise up ladders of *achievement*? How do you go for it, go for victory, go for grades, go for promotion, go for the big church, go for the idealized devotional life?

- Where do you clamber up ladders of *acquisition*? If only you get a little bit more, get the goodies, get the security, get the recognition.

- Where do you race up ladders of *appetite*? Gratify your need for ease, gratify hunger or lust or superiority.

²Interestingly, the name we most often use, “Christian,” is used only three times in the Bible. It is a more impersonal name, not so much a name you'd use for yourself. It is a name someone else might use to label you (Acts 11:26; Acts 26:28; 1 Pet. 4:16). But these other names are intended to resonate more with your internal sense of identity-in-relationship.

ty, gratify your need to control or to be understood.

- Where do you scuttle up ladders of *avoidance*? Get away from poverty, get away from rejection, get away from suffering, get away from people.

Pride sets up these ladders and climbs on high. The inner static gives away the secret. You feel nervously happy when you climb up a few rungs. You feel bitter and despairing when you land in a heap at the bottom. Haughty eyes look down on anyone below you on the

*Psalm 131 overthrows the
powers-that-be in order to establish the
reign of Him-who-is.*

particular ladders that you most cherish. You freely criticize others about some things, not everything. Those particular ladders from which you gaze down in disdain are *your* precious and proud aspirations. You feel envy or despair when anyone else rises or threatens to rise above you in some things, not everything. You chase after impossibilities, matters too great and too wonderful. No wonder you are noisy inside. Stairs of sand look so good. They promise to take you someplace good, but they collapse beneath the weight of your life.³

Second, come to know Jesus. He never climbed the ladders to nowhere. He's the iconoclast, the ladder-toppler, the idol-breaker, the lie-piercer, the pride-smasher, the eyes-lowerer, the mouth-stopper. He gives life, makes peace, gives joy, and makes you over. Seek Jesus, carrying your sins in your hands. Psalm 131 is His consciousness: quieted but not placid, composed but not detached. His composure is a communicable attribute, something He willingly teaches and gives away. Psalm 131 embodies a radical, violent, contrarian dynamic. It issues in utter delight. It goes against everything we innately cherish. It gives us something worth cherishing forever.

Have you seen the bumper sticker that says "Question Authority"? This psalm shows the only way to do that without yourself falling into the hypocrisy and tyranny of "every man did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). Jesus is the supreme interrogator of every instinctual, habitual, and self-arrogating authority. Let Him question your authority, too, and

then liberate you. You need Jesus to pull off a coup-d'état in your heart. Psalm 131 overthrows the powers-that-be in order to establish the reign of Him-who-is.

This is a very quiet little psalm, but it contains a revolutionary dynamic. Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud have been well described as "masters of suspicion." They rip veils off civilized, self-righteous complacency. They rattle the cage with countercultural analyses of the human condition. *Calvin and Hobbes*, *The Far Side*, and *Non Sequitur* give suspicion a touch of whimsy. Beats, hippies, existentialists, punks, and Goths make a run at giving suspicion a viable lifestyle. They see something of what's wrong, and aim for something truer. But how can you criticize pride in others without immolating yourself in your own pride? How do you not fall into the darkness of seeing darkness? When it comes to suspicion, only one person really pulls it off. Jesus is the Master of masters of suspicion. And He's master of the lifestyle alternative, too. The Psalm 131 person engages in self-suspicion and social-suspicion, toppling vain-glory at every turn. But such a person ends in mirth and frolic, not cynicism and hypocrisy. Jesus gives you His own joy. His counterculture refreshes itself over the long haul. It has a principle of self-renewal: the demolition of pride, the creation of not-pride. This is eternal life, that they know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent (John 17:3). Jesus unveils the inner worlds, each and all, and floods hearts with light. He exposes both the self-righteously complacent and the self-righteously suspicious. He turns all the inner worlds upside down. He disassembles the noise machines. He saves you from yourself. He teaches you quiet. He gives you Himself.

Third, live the mindset of Psalm 131. When you set your hope in the right place, you become just the right size. No pride, no looking down from on high, no hot pursuit of pipe dreams. The soul-storms meet their Master, and He says: "Be quiet. Ssssh. Peace. Be still." What is this? He commands even the demons, and they obey Him? Who is this that wind and sea obey Him? (Mark 1:25-27, 4:39-41).

A final word

Psalms are meant to be read and quoted verbatim. Read Psalm 131 again. Read it slowly. Take in each sentence.

LORD,
my heart is not proud,
and my eyes are not haughty,
and I do not go after things too great and too difficult for me.

Surely I have composed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child on his mother,

³In a wondrous image, Shakespeare's Bassanio speaks of all the deceptive show that arises because "hearts are all as false as stairs of sand." (The Merchant of Venice, III:2)

like a weaned child, my soul rests on me.

Israel, hope in the LORD now and forever.

Memorize these words. It will take you only a few minutes to make them your own. You can memorize a whole chapter of the Bible in five minutes!

Then turn these words over in your mind before drifting to sleep. Before counseling someone else. As you drive in your car. When you approach God to talk. When you get noisy inside for whatever reason. Read these words together in public worship. Preach or teach this psalm. Get the music, and sing this psalm with your brothers and sisters.⁴ Psalms learned verbatim teach you to play “classical music,” compositions practiced from the score, memorized, and played note-perfect.

Psalms also intend to teach you how to play “jazz.” Memorization serves extemporization. Psalm 131 is a model as you improvise within your life experience. Most of life you make up as you go along. You’ll probably say thousands of words out loud today. And that’s nothing compared to the audio and video streaming continuously within your soul. What’s playing in *your* theater? Are you noisy or composed? Most of daily life is extemporaneous speech, not read from a manuscript. Few scenes in daily life are scripted, rehearsed, and recited by rote. Life and ministry don’t usually happen in boilerplate text. Psalm 131 is for jazz as well as classical. It gives a “for instance” for the rest of your thinking. It sketches the general contours of a God-related life of dependent faith. You color in the living details, playing out personal variations on the Bible’s theme. Create such inner conversations moment by moment. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, because this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus (1 Thess. 5:16-18). The Holy Spirit works in you to form a psalm-generating heart and lifestyle. As you live in Christ in all circumstances, Jesus teaches you to think the way He does.

* * * *

The last issue of *JBC* sought to define a positive biblical perspective and *modus operandi* for pastoral counseling with depressed people. This issue carries on the discussion of depression, developing some significant subtopics.

Jeff Black’s “Making Sense of the Suicide of a Christian” tackles one of those puzzling problems that we all might wish to avoid, but cannot escape if we are to minister God’s grace and truth with integrity. He examines the thoughts, feelings, intentions, gestures, and actions

⁴See the versions in various Psalters. See Katarina von Schlegel’s hymn, “Be still, my soul,” cited earlier.

that go into suicide, seeking to help us understand and intervene.

Some might think that old theological and exegetical debates have little to do with how one chooses to help a depressed person. But in “Dichotomy or Trichotomy? How the Doctrine of Man Shapes the Treatment of Depression,” Winston Smith shows that your answer to a very old question has immediate and wide-ranging effects. The hugely influential Minirth-Meier

The Holy Spirit works in you to form a psalm-generating heart and lifestyle.

New Life Clinics advertise that they minister to the “whole person” in treating depression. They typically offer their patients three things: Prozac for the body, Christian truths and disciplines for the spirit, and popular modern psychologies for the soul. Smith describes a truer and better way to define and minister to the whole person.

Charles Spurgeon wrote candidly and encouragingly about depression—dark valleys that he knew firsthand. “The Valley of the Shadow of Death” (abridged and adapted by Peter Masters, current pastor of Metropolitan Tabernacle) is intended for the struggler.

“Christian Doctors on Depression” interviews four medical doctors, Addam Masri, Andy Smith, James Schaller, and Bob Smith. Each discusses how he thinks about the physiological component in depression, and about medical treatments that seek to alter mind, mood, and behavior.

Ed Welch’s “Medical Treatments for Depressive Symptoms” gives a brief, practical synopsis of symptom-alleviating medications and their relationship to the diverse causes of depression.

In *Let Me Draw a Picture*, Tim Bryant helps people to get off the treadmill of their immediate emotional experience of the “101 things” that come at us. It’s a picture you’ll use or adapt to get to know people, to build bridges of understanding, to point people to the freedom of faith and obedience.

We have seen in these articles on “depression” that God often speaks relevantly by seeming to change the subject! A familiar truth applied in a new way opens up unexpected riches of help and hope. Dean Ulrich’s sermon, “Lines in Pleasant Places: Joshua 15-19,” is an example. It’s not “about” depression. It’s about how God once gave land, villages, and homes to some wandering tribesmen. It’s about how mundane things are

not really mundane. When life comes to seem pointless and depressing, God's working in the mundane offers a tremendous encouragement and anchor.

Anne Skinner reviews *The Freedom from Depression Workbook* by Les Carter and Frank Minirth, perhaps a typical representative of popular books on depression by evangelical psychotherapists. Marc Davis reviews *Listening to Prozac* by Peter Kramer. Kramer (also the author of *Moments of Engagement*) has long been one of my favorite psychiatrists to read, along with Robert Coles (*The Mind's Fate*, and others). Both Kramer and Coles come from what might be called the humane and

humble tradition within psychiatry. They are stimulating to read because they ask good questions, criticize psychiatric dogmatism and fads, state things freshly, and are charmingly self-critical.

Our back cover comes from Psalm 69. This could well be called "a psalm of Jesus." It is often directly quoted in the New Testament (verse 4 in John 15:25; 9a in John 2:17; 9b in Rom. 15:3; 21a in Matt. 27:34; 21b in Matt. 27:48). The entire psalm maps onto Jesus' sufferings and the joy set before Him—even the confession of sins in verse 5, by identification with our sins (2 Cor. 5:21).