

Contentment

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn to the book of Psalms, and we're going to read Psalm 131, and then we'll look at some of the detail in this very short psalm.

Psalm that has a title in common with the other psalms in this group, A Song of Ascents, and this one is also entitled Of David. Psalm 131.

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, but I have calmed and quietened 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 forevermore. But sometimes, indeed, it's always the case that whenever we've been lifted, as we've been in the blessing of the past few days, that we need to maintain a right perspective.

Someone used to pray in what was the Free Church College a long time ago. He was one of the professors there, and frequently he would say in his prayer, Lord, teach us to hold a full cup with a steady hand.

[1 : 26] That's what we need too. We very often think of the Lord's grace so much necessary for us to have the Lord's grace to help us in our times of difficulty and trial and anxiety and pain, and of course that remains true.

But we need the grace of God just as much for our times of prosperity, our times of blessing, so that we can still maintain a proper perspective and give the glory to God and still keep on depending entirely on him and on his grace.

And within this psalm, we know that this, we've mentioned this a couple of times when we looked at others of the psalms in this group of psalms that are entitled A Song of Ascents, beginning at Psalm 120, going right through to Psalm 134, where you find in that unit within the Book of Psalms, that's an obvious unit in itself.

They're called the Songs of Ascent, so they're obviously brought together in the Book of Psalms to exist together so that they form that unit. But it's suggested by one of the commentators that commentates on the Book of Psalms that within this unit in the Book of Psalms, there are also units that can be found of triplets of psalms, if you like.

And the interesting observation that he makes is that these triplets of psalms are such as begin with a psalm expressing sorrow or anxiety. If you go to Psalm 120, for example, where the Songs of Ascents begin, there's a song or a psalm that is crying to God out of distress, beginning with anxiety, pain of some kind or other, and he specifies some of that there.

[3 : 11] Then the second psalm in the triplet is a psalm of prayer. I will lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord.

And then Psalm 122 is a psalm of comfort. So you have the distress, the prayer, and then leading to comfort. And if you look at the psalm we're looking at tonight, Psalm 131, you can actually see that you have the same kind of thing from Psalm 129.

There's the distress there. Greatly they have afflicted me from my youth. And so on. Psalm 130 then is the psalm of prayer. Lord, for out of the depths I cry to you.

Then we're into Psalm 131 where you find not just comfort but contentment in God. And that is the pattern of life, isn't it? That's the pattern that we follow and are able to follow in our Christian experience where out of the depths, whatever depths we sometimes are in, whatever anxieties we come to have in God's providence, cry to him out of these.

We express them to him. We seek to lay that before him in prayer. And then frequently the Lord will lead us through to comfort. Even if it doesn't last for any length of time still, that's the pattern we're aware of in this life.

[4 : 31] The anxiety, the prayer, the comfort. And it's the comfort that we're looking at in Psalm 131 here. And it's the imagery really of a weaned child.

Now bear in mind that in those days children were not weaned just as early as we are used to weaning children off milk and onto solids. In those days that would not take place until they were some years old, two or three years old or something like that.

So that only then were they actually weaned completely off the milk or the liquids that they had started life off with. And so what he's got for us is a picture of a child that has come to that stage.

And because that child is weaned, he is no longer or she is no longer crying for the milk that used to be the means of their sustenance. They're now content to be without that.

They're content to lie in their mother's arms. And therefore, it's a picture of a weaned child, a child that's content and not cantankerous or crying out for what they were used to.

[5 : 40] It's a picture really of Christian contentment or believing contentment with God. And he begins by three negatives. We can call it three negatives in verse one.

Things that he is not or has not done. Oh Lord, my heart is not lifted up. That's the first one. The second negative. My eyes are not raised too high.

The third one. I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. Three negatives. Then he moves in verse two to one positive.

But I have calmed and quietened my soul. Then he uses the picture, the image of the weaned child. So the one thing that he has done in contrast to the three negatives is that he has calmed and quietened his soul.

He has come to rest content in God. And then thirdly, we find the final verse of the psalm, which we can call a closing appeal, where he appeals to the people that he belongs to.

[6 : 45] Oh Israel, hope in the Lord. In other words, he wants them to come to experience more of this contentment, if you like. And to use other words, he wants this contentment that he has individually to be spread throughout the people of God so that they all come together to rest in the Lord contentedly.

Oh Israel, hope, you hope in the Lord. Trust in the Lord. Come to know this contentment. Let's look at these just briefly. The three negatives, first of all.

Lord, my heart is not lifted up. Now we'll see here, and in the second one, his eyes not raised up, that there is a particular sin or type of sin that he is rejecting and not going back to and has actually put down or put aside as he's come to rest in God.

And the words actually mean my eyes are not raised above themselves or not getting above myself. And the sin that's rejected particularly there in these words is the sin of pride.

He is not lifted up in his heart. He has reckoned with pride that he knows is so much a part of his natural state, of a state of his heart.

[8 : 07] He knows that that is the case. You'll find, of course, in David's Psalms elsewhere much evidence of David expressing his awareness of pride, his need for humility, his prayer for forgiveness when he's aware of that pride and of that particular aspect of his heart and his life's sinfulness.

But he's saying here, Lord, my heart is not lifted up. I'm not getting above myself as I am just now. This is what I'm like. This is what I am. He's not boasting. He's not actually in any way saying this is something that earns the favor of God.

He's just dealing with a matter of fact. Thankfully expressing this is where he's at. Because the sin of pride, while it has many dimensions to it, as you well know yourselves, one of the things that pride always does is undervalue other people.

Pride always undervalues other people. Think of the Pharisee and the publican and the incident that Jesus mentions in Luke chapter 18 verses 9 to 14.

They went to the temple to pray. It speaks about the Pharisee first of all. The Pharisee prayed with himself. His thoughts were so grand and so large.

[9 : 27] But actually he was really confined to his own little world. He prayed with himself and said, Father, I thank you that I am not like other people. That I don't do the things other people do.

I'm not an extortionate. And I'm not even like this publican. He undervalues other people because he overrates himself.

Because he has the pride that sees himself above others. And this is precisely what David is not actually saying. And the counter to that is a counter that we saw not so long ago in Philippians chapter 2, when we're preparing and looking at the cross in that chapter.

But you recall, perhaps we finished that study by referring to the beginning of the chapter, or the opening verses there, which is really the counter to this pride and this self-elevation that the psalmist is here saying he is not at that stage involved in.

Now he's saying in Philippians 2, as you remember, do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. The Pharisee was thinking of himself as so significant above other people.

[10 : 41] Now Paul is saying, that's actually not the Christian way. It's the other way about. It's the opposite. You think of others above yourselves. You follow the example of Jesus. The death you remember, you remembered, we remember together on the Lord's day, in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, is in fact the greatest evidence that has ever been of someone putting others ahead of himself.

That's what it amounted to. And this contentment that we're going to see is really, as we go through the psalm, is really essentially what the psalmist is saying.

Contentment always has this twin, if you like, of humility. Where you find contentment of soul, contentment in God, contentment with God, you'll always find humility.

That soul is not looking above its station. It's not putting itself above other people. It's not undervaluing other people. It's not guilty of pride. It's just saying, I am honored to be a servant of God.

That's my dignity in Christian service. Just like my Savior, who gave himself for me and on my behalf.

[11 : 57] That's the first thing he's saying. Then he is setting aside, rejecting the sin of pride and the things of pride. Oh Lord, my heart is not lifted up. Then he says, my eyes are not raised too high.

Now that's obviously quite closely connected to the first part of the verse. But we could say that while the sin in the first part of it is pride, that he's rejecting the sin, here is presumption.

Presuming to be something when he really isn't. Or presuming that he should actually have access to things that he has no right to have access to. What he's saying is, I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.

And just as pride undervalues other people, so presumption overvalues yourself. Just as pride looks down upon other people from the height of pride, so presumption actually elevates yourself towards that position and overvalues ourselves.

To see ourselves more important than we really are in the big scheme of things. And you can see from that, of course, he's saying, I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.

[13 : 19] By occupying myself, he's really saying preoccupied. Taken up with them so much that I actually think I have a right to know things that I don't know.

The Deuteronomy chapter 29 and verse 29. It's a verse very easy to remember in terms of the two 29s. Deuteronomy 29, 29. The secret things or the hidden things belong to the Lord our God.

But those that are revealed belong to us and to our children. And what Moses is saying there to the people of Israel, God, through Moses, he's saying, Look at the abundance of things that I have revealed to you.

And how much more is that the case with us since the days of Moses, when you have the whole of this Bible, where God has revealed himself to us and revealed so much else to us besides. And he's saying to us, Why would you want to try and penetrate things that are unknowable to you?

Why would you want to concentrate on the things that actually you cannot, without presumption, enter into anyway?

[14 : 25] The unsolvables, the unanswered questions, the things that really in this life cannot be divulged, whether it's to do with the creation or certain areas of theology, and especially of God himself and of God's dealings with us.

That's where we so often enter into the heart of pride or the heart of presumption, as if we had a right to know. Well, if God had wanted to reveal certain things to us that we don't know, he would have done so.

Everything that we require to know has been specified in the Word. There are things in the Word, of course, in the Word of God, that are impenetrable or hardly penetrable.

But what is important is that every single thing that you and I need to know for our salvation has been clearly revealed. There is no dubiety or doubt about the resurrection of Christ, about justification by faith, about the work of the Holy Spirit, about sanctification, about adoption, any of those things, about God's presence with his people, all the things that you know of are essential to know in your Christian experience.

They're all there for you. And we don't need the presumption that seeks to go beyond that. Look at all of what he's revealed. Is that not enough for us to be getting on with?

[15 : 49] Well, that's what the psalmist is saying. My eyes are not raised too high. I do not occupy myself with things too great or too marvelous for me. Remember in Romans chapter 12, that as Paul there begins to apply the great teaching of previous chapters in Romans, where in Romans 12 he comes to verse 3, especially there where he says, For by the grace given to me, I say to every one among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

Then you see he moves into speaking about the whole body. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ.

In other words, that along with what's in Psalm 31 there is reminding us that when we occupy ourselves with things that are not really available to us, when we do not reign in our pride or our presumption, it affects the whole body.

We don't live for ourselves only. We're part of a fellowship. We're part of the body of Christ, as Romans 12 is putting it. The various parts of the body function together, not in isolation, not in individualistic presumption or pride.

And so the three negatives that he's saying here, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high, and I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous.

[17 : 28] That's how he begins, to explain to us how we get into the spirit of contentment. What sort of route is there to have that spirit of contentment in God and with God?

Well, he's saying you have to lay aside the things of pride, the things of presumption, the things of seeking things which really are impenetrable and that God has kept to himself.

That's not just in theology, but as we say very often in his dealings with us as well. Because that's where we often actually do go astray, isn't it?

We think that somehow God's got it wrong. And that if only God had dealt with us in some other way, things would have turned out differently. Or perhaps even if only we had done things differently, things might not have ended up as they did.

All of that is really saying, I'm not content with the way that God has arranged my life. We have to look at Psalm 131 and say, no, I'm not going to go into the elements of pride or presumption or try to understand the things that only God understands.

[18 : 42] I leave that to him so that I will know contentment and the strength of contentment that I have from these three negatives.

And then the one positive, he says, I have. Instead of this, he says, but I have calmed and quietened my soul. Now, you see, that's what he's saying.

I, he still has, he's going to move on in the final verse to speak about Israel, but he's still talking about things personally and individually. I have not lifted up my heart. My eyes are not raised too high.

I do not occupy myself, but I have calmed and I've quietened my soul. Responsibility and the duty of that is our self, just as it is with regard to the overall health of God's spiritual body, Christ's body, the church.

It's our individual responsibility to see that our part in that is contributing to that healthiness, to that growth, whatever word we want to use. How often do you find, well, I find some people saying, why doesn't the church do something about this?

[19 : 51] People within the church I'm talking about saying, why doesn't the church take on this? Why doesn't the church say something about this? Why doesn't the church make a statement? Why doesn't the church take some action? And you have to say to the people who say that, you are the church.

You belong to the church. You're a member of the church. You're part of the body of Christ. Don't look to others to do things that really is your own responsibility to do.

That's what you have to say to these people. Because that's where the overall health of the body comes really down, just like an inverted triangle, if you like, to the very point of individual responsibility and action and thought.

I have calmed and quietened my soul. If every soul in the church has calmed and quietened themselves, then the church has peace.

That's what he's saying as he goes on to address Israel in a moment, as we'll see. So it's our own responsibility to that, and it's the same in regard to contentment. And when we think about what we read in Philippians chapter 4, because you recall that Paul is there speaking about contentment in one of the passages there in chapter 4 of Philippians.

[21 : 10] And if you read verses 11 to 13 again, you can see what he's saying there. Not that I'm speaking of being in need. He's saying the Philippians, there was some delay in what the Philippians had gathered together as a gift to Paul or something practical to help him.

There had been some delay in that. Not, he says, because they didn't care for him, because that's what he's saying in verses 14 onwards. It's not, it wasn't due to that, and he knows that.

And now that the gift has come with Epaphroditus, what he's saying in verse 10 is, you were indeed concerned, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatsoever situation I am to be content.

I know how to be brought low. I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.

I can do all things through him who strengthens me. And one of the important words repeated twice there is the word learned. I have learned contentment.

[22 : 25] Contentment does not come to ourselves just by not thinking about things too much, or by somehow thinking it's just going to come automatically. We'll just let God get on with his work in our lives.

I have learned, it says the apostle. I've had to face these difficult issues. I've had to really wrestle with certain big questions in my experience. I've had to sometimes puzzle over what God is doing in my life.

Why he did not actually open the way for me to go to one place, and why he'd open to another instead. why there was so much persecution in my life.

I didn't come, he's saying, to an answer to these questions instantly. It wasn't something that came instantly with my conversion. I had to work at it. I have learned.

And of course, as we saw in Hebrews, in chapter 5, even the Lord Jesus Christ had to learn obedience through the things which he suffered.

[23 : 26] Our contentment in God does not come about overnight. It doesn't come about without many wrestlings with his providence. It doesn't mean we reject it, or sometimes even, although we may sometimes have very deep questions, and even find ourselves speaking accusingly of God.

We are all guilty to some extent of that. But as we work at it and realize the wisdom of God, the greatness of God, the glory of God, the preeminence of God, the rights of God, the more we get into the knowledge of God, the more we then realize that contentment comes about as something that you learn, something that you need to educate yourself in, taking account of his providence and his word in particular.

So that's what Paul was saying. I have learned, and that's what the psalmist essentially is saying as well. I have calmed and quietened my soul. It's something that I worked at, something that I had to apply myself to.

And he didn't do it reluctantly. It's something that came about by a process of applying himself spiritually. So it is for you and for me. We want to know a heart that's content, a heart that rests with God and in God.

But to do that, the way towards that is to come, yes, the three negatives, we have to follow the psalmist in that. But we have to quieten and calm our soul, or in the words of another psalm, to be still and know that he is God.

[25 : 09] That he is God. We don't rule our own lives. And in all our responsibilities, God is still in charge of all that takes place in the world and in our world individually as well.

And then you have this wonderful image to just expand on us. Like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me. And literally, as we said, the weaned child in those days would be somewhat older than you have nowadays and would be crying out until the child had learned to be in a weaned state.

It's sometimes obvious when you're weaning a child off milk that it cries for the milk that it was used to when you're trying to get the child used to solids. Somebody once said that one of the advantages of having grandchildren is that you can hand them back to their parents when they start crying and when they make a noise and when they start being fretful.

Well, of course, that was said with some sort of amusement and it is somewhat amusing but the children and grandchildren are so rich and experienced. And here is a picture of contentment with a child newly weaned or having been weaned and it's content to lie in its mother's arms or on its mother's lap.

And that means literally, the words are actually literally with its mother, there in the middle of verse 2, like a child, a weaned child with its mother, the Hebrew, there is literally upon its mother.

[26 : 47] And that gives you this great image of a child that's newly weaned or just used, has been used to weaning, to being weaned and being off the milk for some time and has got used to doing without it.

It's lying there contentedly. It doesn't actually fret itself looking to get some more of the milk it was once used to and it's a picture really of lovingly wrapped in the mother's arms as it lies there contentedly and without fretting.

That's what the psalmist is saying is an illustration of a contented soul. You're as it were lying back in the arms of God. You realize that within these arms is your safety.

Within these arms is your progress. Within these arms is your security. Within these arms is your direction and your guidance for life. Within these arms actually as you lie upon the arms of God is everything you need.

It's all there as he holds you up, as he wraps his arms around you in his love. What else do we need outside of that? Why should we fret?

[27 : 58] Why should we be anxious? Why should we doubt that we don't have enough in Jesus Christ? That we don't have the fullness of blessing and salvation we require in him?

And that means that in the light of verse 1 that's exactly what he's saying. He's not raising his heart up too high. He's not lifting up his eyes. He's not occupying himself with things too big for him.

He's happy to lie there in the arms of God. And for David to say that is really quite something because this man had many incidents in his life where he was far from being comforted.

Where he was in fact being chased for his life. Where he was himself in such a bad spiritual state and a state of decline and a state of backsliding. A state of being untrue to God.

He had no peace and he had no comfort in that. And he came to realize it and he came in repentance back to God. But here's the man who's now saying I have calmed and quietened my soul.

[28 : 57] I'm like a weaned child upon its mother. And in some senses you can even see how the psalm itself in the structure of the psalm fits with that idea.

Because it begins O Lord and it ends hope in the Lord. Or if you like O Israel hope in the Lord. But it's the Lord at the beginning and it's the Lord at the end and everything else is inside that.

Just like a child wrapped in its mother's arms so David is saying here I am actually wrapped up in the Lord. Because that's the case. Why should I be anxious?

Why should I fret? Philippians 4 again has it and maybe Paul was even looking and thinking of such passages as Psalm 131 where he says he had learned in all things he had learned to be content.

But not only that but you remember there as well that he says that he could do all things through him through Christ or through the Father who strengthens him.

[30 : 02] And he says my God shall supply every need of yours according to his riches and glory in Christ Jesus. And where he's saying don't be anxious about anything.

That's over anxious he means. But in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God and the peace of God which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

And the thoughts just occurred to me that that's really in a sense a pattern of that little group the grouping of these triplets within this section of the book of Psalms that we mentioned distress prayer contentment or comfort that's what Paul is saying there isn't it where he's saying don't be over anxious about anything that's where he's beginning the anxiety the over anxiety the worry but then he moves to prayer prayer and supplication with thanksgiving make your requests known to God and the third thing the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep will guard your hearts and minds so that's the pattern he's setting as well when you have your anxiety and your anxiety moments and you move to prayer and you seek that by the blessing of God he will lead you into his lap to lie there contentedly and to realize actually he is looking after my life he does know what's best and I can be content and then his closing appeal

O Israel hope in the Lord that's very like the previous verse previous Psalm in the final verse as well in verse 7 at least O Israel hope in the Lord for with the Lord there is plentiful redemption Psalm 130 of course speaking about sin and the Lord being addressed there is one who if he should mark iniquity who could stand but there is forgiveness with you and he moves towards this contentment of Psalm 131 out of these depths but as Israel is called on in Psalm 130 to hope in the Lord for redemption so Psalm 131 O Israel hope in the Lord for this comfort for this comfort of lying in the arms of God it's the same route isn't it towards redemption as it is towards contentment in God the route of coming to trust in the Lord coming to lean our weight upon him coming to acknowledge his right over us and that's why why it's important to David to begin to end the psalm rather with this emphasis on Israel it's really an interesting point in itself and again it just occurs to me that Psalm 51 of David which is his great prayer of repentance having come to God with this individual request with his personal needs and God being assured that God will indeed forgive the penitent who comes to him in repentance but he's saying restore to me the joy of your salvation in verse 12 and uphold me with a willing spirit then will I teach transgressors your ways and sinners will return to you deliver me

Lord from blood guiltiness and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness Lord open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise and he ends by saying do good to Zion in your good pleasure build up the walls of Jerusalem then you will delight in right sacrifices and so on he's finishing with this great note upon the people of God and he's moving from his own personal needs to the needs of the people to the well-being of the people just as you find in Psalm 131 O Israel hope in the Lord let me just finish with an incident which I hope will somehow bring to a conclusion illustratively this wonderful little psalm which itself is so illustrative one time a mother was seen pushing a buggy with a child of some three or four years old who had become tired walking around a shopping mall and as the mother was pushing the buggy the mother was obviously tired as well and frustrated and she had another child older than that a boy who was running about and really just teasing the little girl in the buggy because the child the boy had chocolate and he was running around the buggy and jumping around and saying to his little sister

[34 : 59] I've got chocolate and you don't I've got chocolate and you haven't and she wasn't saying anything and just left him and eventually she too got fed up and she said so what I've got mummy so what I've got mummy and we're surrounded with a world that jumps around in its worldly excitement and flaunts its pride at us don't we which says to us we've got the freedom to do what we like and you don't because you're confined to this old book and you're restricted in your life because you want to be true to a God who really probably doesn't exist and we're not restricted in pursuing happiness in our lives and you are and we have so much in the world and we want you people to leave that Bible and to leave your religion and all that you do and join us in the pursuit of happiness because there's far more of it where we are than where you are what do you say to them they'll say so what we have

Jesus Christ and we have everything we need and a much bigger supply of happiness than you have in your world and we have his fatherly care God's fatherly care and as we walk through the shopping mall of this world we know we're heading home and when we get home we'll be with our father and we'll have all the happiness we need for all eternity aren't you glad that you're a Christian that you're one of the Lord's people that you have a basis of contentment that the world knows nothing about whatever it has and it doesn't have anything more than you know because you've been there whatever it has you have far more and you can do all things as Paul said through Christ who strengthens you and you have learned to be content yes I know

I want more of that spirit and so do you I want to be more perfectly content than I presently am I want to lay aside more of the sins of my pride and my presumption and my fretting than I presently have done and I want to get more like the psalmist and David in Psalm 131 but I know whom I have believed and I know that he is able to keep what I have deposited with him against that day may God bless his word to us let's pray Lord our God and our Heavenly Father we thank you for the care that we know you have for your people Lord forgive us we pray for our discontentedness at times in all the frustrations of this life forgive us we pray when we come to you in a spirit that is not a spirit of quietness and calmness and help us we pray to move onwards towards being still and acknowledging that you are

God we thank you for your comfort every measure of it that reaches our lives from day to day we bless you for the assurances that you give us that we are safe in your hands we pray that you would help us Lord to learn contentment more and more each day that we too might be able to say with David that our soul is like a wind child leaning upon its mother receive our thanks hear the prayers of your people here and elsewhere for Jesus sake Amen our final singing tonight is in Psalm 138 138 that's also sing Psalms page 180 sing in the last three verses verses 6 to 8 of Psalm 138 although the Lord God dwells on high the lowly person he protects whereas the proud and haughty one he knows afar off and rejects although I walk a troubled path your tender care preserves my life you raise your hand against my foes your right hand saves me from their strife the Lord will certainly fulfill for me the purpose he commands your love endures forever

Lord preserve the works of your own hands these verses although the Lord God dwells on high although the Lord God dwells on high the lowly person he protects where us the proud and all he wants he knows how far all and reject although I walk a troubled path your tender care respects my life you raise your hand against my foes your right can save me from their strife the

[41 : 08] Lord will stand and be fulfilled for me the purpose he commands your love endures forever Lord we set the works of your own hands own manhelp