

FAITH AND HUMILITY

by Doug Goins

In all honesty I have to echo Martin Luther's confession about the struggle he had with this psalm when he preached through the Psalter in Wittenberg. He said, "It is one of the shortest of all psalms, but for me, its truth has taken the longest to learn." I have wrestled with this text all week. I knew this would happen when I chose these four psalms for this series. As a preacher I have to first put myself under the convicting authority of the Scriptures if I have any right to commend them to you, at least to maintain integrity in that commendation.

This is a psalm of humility, of confidence in God, and for most of my life I have wrestled with what the Scriptures call the sin of pride. I am grateful that my mom and dad raised four Goins kids with strong, positive self-images, but the flesh in us is very sneaky and deceptive. That strong self-image most of the time translates itself into incredible arrogance and self-confidence. I pretty much know what I think and what I ought to say, and I pretty much feel I know the same for everyone else around me. I trust my instincts a lot. John Bailey defined my dilemma and perhaps yours as well. He wrote, "Humility is the obverse side of confidence in God, whereas pride is the obverse side of confidence in self."

This is another of the Songs of Ascents we are studying together, and it is a song of David. Let's read David's prayer of humility:

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 quieted my soul,
like a child quieted at its mother's breast;
like a child that is quieted is my soul.

O Israel, hope in the LORD
from this time forth and for evermore.

David was the greatest king Israel ever had. He was revered, and still is, by the Hebrew people. He was a decisive military commander and a shrewd foreign policy strategist, a beloved king and a wise decision-maker. In this psalm David claims to be a man of humility, a man who enjoys a restful, trusting relationship with the Lord. But did he measure up to that? If you were to review his life by surveying 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, and 1 Chronicles, would humility be one of the central character traits you would recall of this man?

In rereading the accounts of David's life this week in all those historical passages, I found out that he really was a good model of humility; he lived out what he claimed for himself in these three verses. He never pushed himself forward in terms of leadership or calling. He spent 17 1/2 years waiting for God to put him on the throne of the nation after he had been anointed by Samuel to be the next king of the nation. Ten of those years he spent running from Saul who opposed him and threatened his life, and then for 7 1/2 years more he ruled in Hebron only over the tribe of Judah, while Ishbosheth, Saul's son, was ruling the tribes in the north. At the end of David's life and the end of his wonderful reign as leader of the nation, his son Absalom turned on him and led a coup d'etat, running David out of the country. David didn't stay to fight; he wanted to avoid bloodshed in Jerusalem. He left before his son arrived and waited in the desert again, back where he started, for God to restore him to the throne of the nation. Submission to God's guidance, acceptance of God's plans and purposes, and contentment with that which was allotted to him were distinguishing traits of David's character and hallmarks of his life. He was a man of humility. He enjoyed a restful, trusting relationship with

the Lord.

There is an intriguing example of David's humility and rest in the Lord in 2 Samuel 6. It is a response to the criticism of his wife. The ark of the covenant was coming up into Jerusalem, the tribes were finally united, and David with a total lack of inhibition danced with delight and excitement, thrilled at what God was doing. His wife Michal, the daughter of Saul whose place he had taken after Saul's death, was embarrassed and angry that all he was wearing was a simple linen robe such as common priests wore. He wasn't wearing kingly robes; he had forgotten his place of dignity and honor. David responded this way to his wife about his dancing before the Lord in 2 Samuel 6:21-22: "It was before the LORD, who chose me above your father, and above all his house, to appoint me as ruler over the people of the Lord, over Israel...I esteem myself still less than I now show it, and I appear common in my own eyes." David responded as a man who was very secure in his own identity. There was a sense in which he didn't care what people thought about him. He was comfortable with his own commonness; he didn't put on kingly airs. David never attributed greatness to himself in spite of his position of responsibility and leadership.

This attitude was graphically illustrated for me when I worked for a number of years with a man who lived out this same comfortable confidence in the Lord, who didn't put on airs. Twelve years ago, shortly after I had arrived at PBC, I was ministering in music and worship as Glenn Pickett does now. I had a music group, and we were rehearsing in the auditorium at about 11:30 at night for a concert tour. Except for us the place was totally empty, when Ray Stedman came in the back door. We were playing a gospel rock song at the time that had a heavy back beat; it really jumped. I'll never forget Ray dancing down the aisle all by himself in the empty auditorium, just boogalooing for all he was worth. It was funny, I have to admit. But it struck me that here was a man who was totally comfortable with who he was, who didn't care anything about the dignity of the pastoral office that we hear so much about. He was a man like David, who understood himself and his place before the Lord and was at rest.

Let's look carefully at the prayer in the first two verses. Remember, David is addressing the God who knows him inside out, and he can't fake anything. He says:

"O LORD, my heart is not lifted up,
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things
too great [too difficult] and too marvelous [too mysterious] for me."

Your Bible might say, "My heart is not arrogant," and, "I do not have haughty eyes."

OVERREACHING GOD'S PLAN FOR US

There are two things here that David has chosen before God to crucify, to give up. One is arrogance, the other ambition. The same root word for arrogance, or pride, is used in Proverbs 16:5, where Solomon writes, "Everyone who is arrogant is an abomination to the LORD...." It is a frightening thought that not only is pride ugly to all of us, but God sees it as abominable. Peter says God will oppose pride in us when he finds it (see 1 Peter 5:5). Solomon also wrote:

"There are those---how lofty are their eyes,
how high their eyelids lift!" (Proverbs 30:13)

That is a very graphic picture of looking down your nose at other people. And the spiritual reality is that when we overestimate ourselves, we always end up underestimating other people. Our own sense of superiority logically requires that everybody else be inferior. Self-aggrandizement results in looking down on others. Superciliousness undervalues others, unless they seem worth cultivating.

Arrogance is about power. It doesn't allow intimacy or real relationship because the arrogant, prideful person can't enter into a relationship with equals. Pride demands that we control, manage, and somehow motivate people because we're in charge of them by implication. That is a great temptation that I have battled even in pastoral ministry. I stand up here, you sit down there. I sit in my office as your pastoral counselor. I stand

behind a lectern and teach you in Sunday School or wherever. There is a great temptation to take too seriously the sense that you need me. But David says he learned to give that up. His heart isn't lifted up in pride or arrogance, nor are his eyes raised too high in haughtiness. He has made a decision, he says, to crucify fleshly arrogance within him.

The other sin addressed in the second two lines of verse 1 is the sin of fleshly ambition or presumption. It is attempting to do things in life that God hasn't prepared us for or called us to, things "too great and too marvelous" for us. Synonyms for those two terms would be too hard or arduous, and too wonderful or mysterious.

The prophet Jeremiah used this same term for "great things" when he was talking to his assistant Baruch, the scribe who had been taking dictation of his prophecies for him. Baruch had served Jeremiah faithfully and was just about the only person in Jeremiah's thirty-five years of ministry who stayed true to him and his calling. Jeremiah was basically an outlaw before Jehoiakim at the time, so Baruch had the privilege of taking what he had just transcribed from Jeremiah into the court of the king and reading it out loud to the king and all the princes. Let's look briefly at Jeremiah 45, the message of Jeremiah to Baruch:

The word that Jeremiah the prophet spoke to Baruch the son of Neriah, when he wrote these words in a book at the dictation of Jeremiah, in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah: "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, to you, O Baruch: You said, 'Woe is me! for the LORD has added sorrow to my pain; I am weary with my groaning, and I find no rest.' Thus shall you say to him, Thus says the LORD: Behold, what I have built I am breaking down, and what I have planted I am plucking up---that is, the whole land. And do you seek great things for yourself? [Here is the issue of ambition.] Seek them not; for, behold, I am bringing evil upon all flesh, says the LORD; but I will give you your life as a prize of war in all places to which you may go."

Baruch had been entrusted with much. He was the confidant of Jeremiah, he got to speak before kings, and he even became a property owner, for Jeremiah had deeded over to him a piece of property so that no matter what happened to him it would always belong to an Israelite. Those were pretty heady things for Baruch. But he was grumbling to God, "I wish things were better." And God said, "You want great things, don't you? You need to know that it's going to get worse. But I'm going to give you something better than any circumstances or position you could ask for---eternal life."

There is a danger of overestimating ourselves that can result in our overreaching God's plan. The problem that David recognized and Jeremiah saw in Baruch was selfish ambition, self-serving schemes to gain prominence and position. Again, that is very tempting for a pastor. I've been here a long time now (fifteen years), and over the years I've had friends who asked me seriously, "Why do you stay in that funky church that is so out of step? There are so many pastors and elders, and you're just kind of lost in the shuffle. Why don't you go to a real church where you can be a senior pastor in charge of the whole shooting match?" At times that is tempting, but the word of the Lord comes back to me: "Stay where I put you and be grateful for the circumstances you have. Don't set your eyes on things that are too big for you and that you can't understand."

You could probably summarize verse 1 with the question I remember Church Lady asking on *Saturday Night Live*: "We aren't getting too big for our britches, are we?" Each one of us has to face that question. John Calvin, the leader of the Swiss Reformation, said, "Those who yield themselves up to the influence of ambition will soon lose themselves in the labyrinth of perplexity."

We have a difficult time with this temptation in twentieth-century America. Our culture encourages and rewards ambition without qualification. We are surrounded by a way of life in which personal growth or betterment is understood as expansion, acquisition, and fame. Everybody wants to get more. To be on top, no matter what it's the top of, is admired by everybody around us. Our whole society, our educational models, our economic expectations, even popular religion in the church are committed to ambition. It's really difficult to recognize pride as a sin when it's held up on every side as a virtue, urged as profitable, and rewarded as an achievement. But we are called to be spiritual sons and daughters of King David, to understand that we have to crucify the temptations to prideful arrogance, ambition, and self-assertion.

The psalm doesn't address this directly, but there is an alternative. You might be wondering, "But isn't there a place for godly ambition?" Yes, it is described in the Scriptures as "holy zeal" or passion for the Lord. King David himself wrote eloquently of his desires to be used by God, to make his life count in Psalm 69. He spoke of his "zeal for God's house." Psalm 69 is a messianic psalm about the shame and suffering that David endured, and also the shame and suffering that the son of David, the Lord Jesus Christ, our Messiah-King, had to endure. It is a song of humiliation. David said in verse 9, "...The insults of those who insult thee have fallen on me." But then he went on to say in verse 29, "...I am afflicted and in pain; let thy salvation, O God, set me on high!" He was saying, "I won't elevate myself. I won't fight my way out of these painful, humiliating circumstances. Lord, you have to set me on high, and then I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving." The apostle Paul expressed the same kind of godly aspiration in Philippians 3:14: "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

This desire to make our lives count for God will make us impatient with opposition to God's kingdom. We won't be satisfied with dull, mediocre, boring Christianity. And because we live in a fallen world, it will result in our dissatisfaction with everything created. Even the things we create won't be totally fulfilling; they won't come out totally right because of the limitation of the sinful world that we live in. Heaven will be perfect, but this life will never be perfect. That will frustrate us because of our zeal for the Lord, our wanting things to count for his honor and glory. But that frustration will be tempered by confidence in him. He is the Creator, we are not. He is the Savior, we are not. He is absolutely sovereign over circumstances, we are not.

How will God teach us humility, or confidence in him? He will give us humility by humiliating us. Have you ever thought about that? We have a God who will confront our ambition by allowing failure. Think of the apostle Paul: Part of what he learned about the upward call of God in Jesus Christ was the total humiliation of being lowered over a wall in a basket in the city of Damascus because his life was threatened. It was humiliating, but he said that it was the greatest thing he learned in life (see 2 Corinthians 11:30-12:10). Not too many months later Paul was preaching in Jerusalem, causing nothing but trouble. There were no converts, just a lot of controversy. The elders of the church in Jerusalem had to whisk him out of town for his own safety and for the good of the church. Once Paul was gone there was peace in the church (see Acts 9:28-31). That is failure in ministry! Yet God used that to teach Paul. We have a God who, out of love, deals with our presumption or ambition in life by allowing limitation and loss, by not letting us have everything we want or think we need. Remember Paul's thorn in the flesh that he begged God to get rid of. God never did; he left the limitation in Paul's life.

Let me paraphrase verse 1 for you this way: "I will not try to run my own life or the lives of others. That is God's business. I will not pretend to invent the meaning of the universe. I will accept what God has shown its meaning to be. I will not noisily strut about demanding that I be treated like the center of my family, my neighborhood, or my work; but I will seek to discover where I fit and do what I'm good at. I will not cry out for attention and arrogantly parade my importance."

WEANED FROM SELF-CONFIDENCE TO GOD CONFIDENCE

Now verse 2 talks about growing out of infantile dependency on God into childlike trust in him. Look at the direct contrast between the arrogant ambition defined in verse 1 and these words in verse 2:

"But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a child quieted at its mother's breast;
like a child that is quieted is my soul."

The calm and quieted soul is one that has come to terms with itself. This is someone who knows who they are in God's sight, who has disavowed ambition, no longer entertaining selfish delusions about what they could be if God would just allow it. And the result is rest, quiet, contentment, and even self-discipline. Jesus talked about that lifestyle in the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). The blessing Jesus was describing is a calm confidence and a quiet strength that will qualify us for kingdom responsibility here on earth.

David tells us that he made a choice to calm or quiet himself. It is an act of the will. First he made the choice of where to place his confidence: not in himself but in the Lord. Then he acquired the behavior that flows out of the meekness that Jesus described: strength under control, objectivity, stability. The best picture David could think of to illustrate this kind of calm and quiet was a small child who is resting in his mother's lap, his head on her breast---a beautiful picture of a wonderfully attractive relationship. The Jerusalem Bible has probably translated this verse more accurately than some; it has kept the literalism of the Hebrew metaphor better. It says, "Enough for me to keep my soul tranquil and quiet, like a child in its mother's arm, as content as a child who has been weaned." That last phrase, "a child who has been weaned," ties back to verse 1. The weaning that is described here is from the bondage of self-seeking to the freedom of trusting and resting in the Lord for everything, from self-confidence to God-confidence; it is growing beyond an infantile, demanding attitude to one that is grateful, accepting, and content. David was saying, "This is enough. I am content." It didn't mean that life wasn't swirling around him with great difficulty and confusion, sound and fury.

Think about an infant who isn't weaned. Instinctively they expect everything on demand; they expect their mother to indulge every whim, to cater to all their felt needs for comfort. We all recognize the howl from that little tiny baby. It's saying, "I am the center of the universe. Feed me, change me, hold me, comfort me!!!" In an infant we will accept the demanding howl of the unweaned. But when the child has grown beyond the point when it's appropriate, it becomes very unattractive.

A few years ago my wife Candy was with an old college friend of hers, and she saw this illustrated powerfully. Candy's friend was still breast-feeding her boy when he was three years of age. You can make your own judgments about. But the thing that was unattractive was that this boy walked into the middle of their conversation and demanded his mother's breast in one word, which I won't repeat because it's not appropriate. Candy was struck by the jarring, discordant inappropriateness of that three-year-old boy's demanding his mother's breast.

A child who has grown through the difficult weaning process learns contentment and a different relationship with his mother. He chooses voluntarily to sit quietly in his mother's lap, not demanding but just enjoying the relationship, happy to be there by choice. That child has learned to understand the mother's love, to trust that the mother cares and will meet his needs. He learns that he is not the center of the universe; he learns not to be demanding. Three times David says in that verse, "I have quieted my soul." He means, "I choose to quit talking, to quit howling and screaming and demanding that God fix this and fix that, especially the people around me. I've learned to be quiet, to rest."

The Lord Jesus focused the truth of these two verses in his response to the disciples when they asked him how to measure spiritual greatness in Matthew 18:2-4: "And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them, and said, 'Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children [again, an act of the will; turn means to repent] you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child [again, an act of the will, a choice for humility], he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.'" The Lord Jesus gave this model of Christian faith not because of the child's innocence or cuteness or helplessness, but because the child was willing to be led, taught, and blessed. The child was trusting, willing to submit to God's sovereign leadership. This kind of humble, childlike trust is what David has confessed in these first two verses.

LEARN TO LIVE HUMBLE

Now David calls us as a congregation of individuals who love God to the same kind of lifestyle. He says, "O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and for evermore." In the words of the old spiritual, he is saying to us, "Learn to live humble." That is what we are called to. This exhortation in verse 3 rouses us. We can't just say, "Yes, that's a great concept." He calls us to a radical lifestyle change, to learn to live life as he does, to follow his example of humility and trust in the Lord, living life out of restful optimism and God's sovereign care and direction.

Living out humility, resting in the Lord, is most difficult in the specifics, not usually in the abstract or general, particularly when we are opposed by people. Think of David again. For ten years Saul opposed him. God had made a promise to David, and then Saul did everything in his power to keep it from coming true. Yet David, as I said before, would never lay a finger on Saul, God's anointed. He was learning to wait...and wait...and wait for God to give him what he promised. And then at the end of his life, his own son, someone he had poured

his life into and loved unconditionally, turned against him, violating his loyalty and betraying the love relationship. Again, David didn't fight back. He waited for God to turn things around.

I struggle, as I'm sure you do, when I'm confronted with people like that. I can think of people in my years of ministry who I would consider Sauls; to me they represented limitation and kept me from becoming what God promised I could become. And they seemed to have the power, to have an edge on me. I've been in ministry long enough to be betrayed by a couple of Absaloms, people I loved a lot and gave myself to, and it was used against me. I know the hurt and the sense of betrayal in that. This psalm speaks to me very directly about my calling as a shepherd, a pastor, and a leader to trust God.

King David had a spiritual son who was much greater than he, the Messiah, Jesus, our Savior and Lord. The Lord Jesus calls us to the same eternal commitment and hope that David does. Jesus said of himself, and the invitation is for each one of us personally, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30.) We can learn gentleness, meekness, and humility from him. He will reproduce his own life of humility in us if we ask him, and we will find rest. We don't have to battle circumstances anymore, and we don't have to battle people who oppose us. What Jesus wants to give us doesn't come through all kinds of self-absorption or mystical introspection. David says it comes through being weaned from personal ambition and self-effort to a restful, contented lifestyle of hope and optimism in the Lord, "learning to live humble."

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