

## **Psalms for the Summertime: Psalm 131**

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

August 20, 2023 AM Sermon

Reverend Peter Jonker

Psalm 131

We continue our Psalms for the Summertime series, with another formative psalm. All the psalms at the end of this sermon series are used by the Holy Spirit to form us. These psalms are tools that the Holy Spirit uses to give our lives a godly shape. Today's psalm is one of my absolute favorites: Psalm 131. It's a short psalm, and, at first reading, pretty simple. But there's more to this little poem than you think. When Charles Spurgeon preached on this psalm he said this: "Psalm 131 is one of the shortest psalms to read, but one of the longest psalms to learn." It's a psalm you come back to again and again so that, through its words, the Holy Spirit can teach you its wisdom. Let's read it.

So this psalm has a lullaby feel to it. It has a gentle cadence like a lullaby, it's simple like a lullaby, and it has that beautiful, soothing image of a child, stilled and quieted and resting in the arms of her Mother. It's like an Old Testament 'Rock a Bye Baby.'

Actually, this psalm is more like "Rock a Bye Baby" than you think. "Rock a Bye Baby" is probably the best known lullaby around. If I asked you to name a lullaby, that's probably the one that would come to mind. Lots of mothers and fathers have sung "Rock a Bye Baby" to their infant children as a way to sooth them to sleep. Though why we use that song to sooth our kids is a bit of a mystery. "Rock a Bye baby" is a terrifying song! The tune is soothing but have you thought about the words? "Rock a Bye baby on the tree top, when the wind blows the cradle will rock, when the bough breaks, the cradle will fall, and down will come baby, cradle and all." If our children knew what we were singing to them, they wouldn't sleep a wink! Those poor little mites would be gripping the side of their cradle, waiting for catastrophe!

I don't know where the lyrics for "Rock a Bye Baby" came from, but when we sing it to our infants we do two things at once: we sooth them and we announce to them that the world is a dangerous place. Life doesn't always go in straight lines. It's a world where boughs break and cradles fall.

Psalm 131 has some of that same dynamic. On the surface, you have the soothing picture of the baby stilled and quieted with her mother, but read the poem carefully and you realize that this peace is complicated. This calm is the calm after the storm. This child is a weaned child, which means this is a child who has experienced loss. Mom has taken away her milk. That's a big deal for a baby. Mother's milk is what a baby yearns for, it's what she roots for. When a nursing baby is crying, when she's upset, mother's milk is the thing that calms her. Mother's milk stops the crying. Mother's milk is kind of central to the baby's world. The act of nursing is central to her emotional and physical life. And suddenly that has been taken away. And that puts babies into a state. "Mama why have you taken away this milk!? Why have you taken away this good thing?! Why are you doing this to me!?"

So underneath this sweet poem, there is a strong undercurrent of loss. When the psalmist says that he's stilled and quieted his soul, you get the sense that that stillness has come after a storm of pain and questions. Lord why did you take away that person from my life, how am I supposed to live without them? Lord why did you take away my health? Why did you allow this disease to come into my life!? How does this glorify you? Lord my child is struggling with anxiety, she used to be joyful and carefree, now she's sad and uncertain and distant. There is strong peace and contentment at the heart of Psalm 131, but that peace has come right after a storm of loss.

Seeing that helps us understand how this psalm is meant to form us. When we pray and meditate on this psalm, the Holy Spirit is teaching us how to deal with our seasons of loss. The Holy Spirit is teaching us how to face those awful times in our life when the thing that we we can't do without, that thing that is like Mother's milk to us, is taken away. How is the Spirit forming us for loss and disappointment through this psalm? Along a different path from the formation offered to us by our society. When our society forms us for anything it teaches us to do something. Our society sends the message that you meet your problems with hard work, technology, skill and effort. Our society trains us in habits of doing. Buy this safety equipment and you will keep your kids safe. Eat these foods and you will ward off cancer and disease. Follow this exercise regimen and your body will

stay strong and limber. You want a successful career, work hard and study hard. You want successful kids, get them in music, get them in sports, play Mozart to them while they're in utero. You want prosperity, follow this investment plan. Our society forms us in habits of doing.

While our society is really good at forming us in habits of doing, it's not so good at forming us in habits of being. Habits of doing are skills and capacities that we learn which help us get things done, which help us solve our problems, which help us find success. Habits of doing are driven by internal resources: our tools, our skills, our efforts. Habits of doing are good things. We teach them to our kids, and we should. Habits of being are different, when we practice a habit of being we open our lives to a strength that comes from outside us. Habits of doing build our strengths; habits of being anchor us in a life that come from outside ourselves. Habits of being include things like prayer, meditation, solitude, community (where you open yourself up and admit your need for other people's strength), and Sabbath. In all these habits you may be doing something, but the main energy is not coming from you; it's coming from outside yourself: from other people in community, but most importantly for Christians, the strength is coming from God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Habits of being do not build up your own strength; they anchor us in the one in whom we live and move and have our being (as Paul said).

Our society is not very good at teaching habits of being, and it's harming us. About a month ago, I read an article in the *Atlantic Magazine* called, "The Misunderstood Reason Millions of Americans Stopped Going to Church". It was written by a guy named Jake Meador and it was based on a book coming out from the Tim Keller Center called "The Great Dechurching". Two scholars at this institute analyzed data from lots of Evangelicals and they said that while there are many reasons given for the decline of the American Church, a huge part of the problem is that modern people are addicted to work and achievement. Here's a quote: "Contemporary America ... is designed to maximize individual accomplishment as defined by professional and financial success. Such a system leaves precious little time or energy for forms of community that don't contribute to one's own professional life or, as one ages, the professional prospects of one's children. Workism reigns in America, and because of it, community in America, religious community included, is a math problem that doesn't add up." Another way of saying this: contemporary America is addicted to the math of doing and achievement; not the math of being, and soul and Spirit. It's not good. It's killing us. Our world is full of people who are really good at doing, but whose being is starving. They're really good at matters of success, but really bad at matters of soul.

This psalm was written 3000 years ago, but it is the perfect word for a world addicted to doing. "My heart is not proud, my eyes are not haughty, I do not concern myself with great matters, with things too wonderful for me." 'Lord, I have tried the way of doing. I have tried the path of doing. I have tried to control my world through study and hard work and achievement, but it didn't work. I couldn't control my future. I couldn't figure out all the answers. I couldn't stop trouble from coming to my door.' But now "I have calmed and quieted myself; I am like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child I am content. O Israel put your hope in the Lord, both now and forevermore." 'Lord, I've learned contentment. I've stopped all my striving and all my attempts to figure everything out. I've learned to rest in you like an infant child with its mother.' 'Lord, I don't get it, and I can't fix it, but I'm learning to rest my soul in you.' It's a new kind of trust. A nursing baby trusts her mother, and that's relatively easy to do while the milk is still flowing. A weaned child trusts Mom and rests in her, even when the good thing has been taken away and it makes no sense. That's a deeper kind of faith. That's the kind of faith that can stand the light of day and endure the dark of night. That's the kind of faith that the Spirit forms in us through habits of being.

There will be lots of moments in your future where you will be in the position of the weaned child. The thing you thought you needed most of all will be taken away and there will be nothing you can do about it. When we were young we dreamed of meeting someone and getting married, but somehow that never happened and now it looks like God has a life of singleness in store for us. And there's nothing we can do about it. We dreamed about having children and having a happy family of smiling healthy kids. But then one of our children has a special challenge and we realize that parenting that child will require lifelong attention. And there's nothing we can do to change that. We dreamed about things we would do in our retirement – travel, leisure. But then our health takes a sudden turn and it's clear that most of our travelling will be to the doctor's office. And there's nothing we can do about it. But in those moments of powerlessness, Psalm 131 forms our being, forms

us in deep habits of being. Through this psalm, the Holy Spirit reminds us that our Father is holding us in our loss. He's holding us as tightly as a mother holds her infant child. And more than that: in a way that's far too wonderful for us to understand, he's gone ahead of us into our future to prepare a way, to work all things for our good. So someday our night of weeping will give way to everlasting joy.

In his book "Standing on the Promises", Lew Smedes tells the story of his Mother. She and her husband immigrated to the US from the Netherlands, from Friesland, way back at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They were going to build a better life for them and their 5 kids in America. But then, when his mom was only 30, Smedes' dad died. Dropped dead on a Monday morning. Here she was in a strange country whose language she barely spoke with 5 children and limited skills. For no good reason that she could see, the good future she had imagined was suddenly gone.

Smedes describes how his Mom survived through that loss. "Every night when she had finally got us to bed and the lights were out, she would get on her knees in front of a wobbly kitchen chair and lift her Frisian prayers to heaven." Smedes slept in a small room within earshot of the kitchen, so he heard those nightly prayers and he knew that they ended the same way every night. "She named each of us, beginning with Jessie the oldest, running down through Peter, Katherine and Wesley, all spoken in Frisian, and [finally], mine – Lubbert – at the tail end, as if she were holding all of us kids up for God to see what He had left her with. Especially me. My name, I thought, did not drop from her mouth as the last syllable of a series, it sounded more as if she were blowing it out to make sure it got up to him. When, night after night, I heard my name being blown up to heaven, it gradually dawned on me that I was stuck with God for life."

I don't know that Mrs. Smedes had learned to quiet her soul like a weaned child with its Mother, but she was learning. In her prayer, the Spirit was moving both her and her son in that direction. In this habit of being with the Lord in whom we live and move and have our being, was pulling her close and stilling her soul. And so I end my sermon with a strong promise and a gentle prompting. Here's the promise: whether or not you have come to terms with the way your life is headed, God is with you and his arms are around you as you go into that future. And here's the prompting. It's the same prompting as this psalm. People of LaGrave, put your hope in the Lord, both now and forevermore.

©Rev. Peter Jonker