

A Simple Hope

Psalm 131

March 11, 2012

Introduction:

The year was 1501 when Michelangelo began working on what would become the most famous sculpture in the world, the towering masterpiece *David*. This amazing sculpture was carved out of a huge block of marble. For three years Michelangelo worked on his statue of David, chiseling away at the marble, removing the stone that was not part of his grand vision. When it was unveiled in 1504, all of Florence was in awe at this 14-foot image of David. It communicated David's perfect physique and his heroic strength. Here was the Renaissance image of the ideal man.

But Michelangelo is not the first to one to create a portrait of David. In Psalm 131, our text for today, we find another portrait of David, but in this case it is not an image fashioned in marble by a sculptor. Rather, it's a self-portrait for it is David himself who has written this psalm. And just like Michelangelo's statue of David communicated his vision of the idea Renaissance man, so also does David's autobiographical sketch in these few short verses communicates a message to us the readers about what the ideal godly man is like.

But before we can learn what that message is, before we can arrive at the main point of Psalm 131, we need to observe this image, this verbal sculpture as it were, which David creates. To use the sculpting metaphor, we need to enter with David into his workshop and watch him chisel away at the marble, removing the stone that is not part of this image he wishes to create. Then we'll observe his finished work, this sculpture he has created of himself. And then after we have reflected upon this self-portrait David has created, we'll be ready to hear the message which he is communicating to us.

So that's the roadmap for us this morning. Utilizing this sculpting metaphor to think about this Psalm, we will...

- #1 Observe David chiseling away at the stone
- #2 View the self-portrait that David has created
- #3 Hear the main message David image is communicating

So grab your Bibles and turn with me to Psalm 131, as we begin our first point where we see David chiseling away the stone from this sculpture he is creating.

1. Chiseling the stone (v. 1)

Look at v. 1 with me. **“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.”**

Do you hear the sound of the chisel hitting the marble here? *Not...not...not*. When you make a sculpture out of stone, you need to chip away all the stone that isn't part of the finished product. That's what David is doing here. He's chiseling away at this large

block of marble, removing all that is not part of this image he wants to present to us. So what are these blocks of marble that fall to the workshop floor? Let's reach down and pick up a few to examine them.

First, we find blocks of pride and haughtiness. He says, **“My heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high.”** David had quite a bit to be proud about: He had killed Goliath. He was a mighty warrior and shrewd military leader. He was known as Israel's greatest king. He wrote numerous psalms that became Scripture! And to top it all off, we're told he was handsome as well! David was the Tom Cruise of his day – he was popular, good looking, and wealthy!

Yet David had dealt with his pride. He didn't allow his achievements to go to his head. Perhaps those humiliating years on the run from Saul, living in caves as a fugitive had given him some perspective. No doubt Nathan's stinging rebuke that revealed his sin against Bathsheba and her husband was devastating to David's pride. David faced some hardships that knocked the legs out from under his pride.

That's the same way God works in us. Those hard times that we face may not be the worst thing in the world for us: difficult circumstances may be the chisel that God is using to debase our pride and arrogance and grant us humility. James puts it like this in the NT, *“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”* Painful trials are God's way of stripping us of our pride and sense of self-sufficiency.

I'm reminded of the character of Eustace in C. S. Lewis' Narnia series. In the book *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Eustace is a arrogant rude boy who eventually turns into a dragon, a condition which he does not enjoy in the slightest. Aslan the lion turns him back to a human again, but to do so Eustace had to endure the pain removal of layer upon layer of dragon skin. The point is when your sin has turned you into something monstrous, the transformation will be painful because sinful habits and attitudes are not always easily removed. The trials we face are God's methods of removing the dragon skin from us, as it were. Or to go back to the sculpting analogy, God has to chisel away the bad from our hearts before the good can be clearly seen.

But besides finding block of pride and arrogance being chiseled away here, we also find blocks that David describes as **“occupying myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.”** Now we might at first be tempted to think that David made a mistake here. Perhaps David chiseled too deep at this point and removed some marble essential to his sculpture. After all, David was king of Israel and as king he had many important matters which he needed to attend to. There were laws to be passed, armies to be raised, great building projects to undertake, and important decisions to be made. There were great matters that he as king needed to give his attention to! Furthermore, we're told that David was a man after God's own heart. The Psalms reveal his passion for God and his Word. We see David's heart as he reflects on God's sovereignty, God's power, and God's glory through the Psalms. Certainly David mediated on the great and wonderful things of God!

So what does David mean by this. I think it means that while David of course gave proper attention to important matters, he didn't let them overwhelm and consume him. David didn't need to know all the answers to every question. He didn't need to have every theological "i" dotted or "t" crossed. That's not to say he didn't think about them; he rejoices frequently in his meditations on the Law and pondering God's Word, so we know David was certainly a great thinker but he never got lost in pondering the deep mysteries of God such that he forgot the God whom he was meditating on.

Consider Psalm 139 for example. After reflecting on God's sovereign knowledge and his inescapable presence in his life in the first part of the Psalm, David doesn't go on to ask, "So Lord, how can you hold me accountable for my actions if you are sovereign over all things? I mean, if you know all things, how can I be free to..." He doesn't go there. David doesn't get hung up on having to resolve those tensions. Instead, in response to his reflections on God's sovereignty and omnipresence, he says this at the end of the Psalm, "*Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*"

David knew it was more important to have a right relationship with God than to have all the right answers about God. He didn't allow these great and wonderful things to consume him so that he missed what was truly important.

There's a tragic example of this in the movie *Life is Beautiful*. The movie takes place during the Second World War and the main character is a Jewish man by the name of Guido who works as a waiter. One of his regular customers is a German doctor who loves riddles. They take turns trying to stump each other with new riddles, with the German doctor often obsessing over the riddle for days.

Later in the movie, Guido finds himself a prisoner in a concentration camp. To Guido's surprise, this German doctor friend works there. The doctor arranges for Guido to serve the Germans as a waiter in one of their mess halls. While there, this doctor arranges to pull Guido aside. Guido's eyes fill with hope as now he has a chance of getting free! But rather than giving Guido an escape plan, this German doctor begs for Guido's help to solve a riddle which has been consuming him. He can't figure the riddle out and he pleads, "Guido, you must help me!" What irony. This doctor was so consumed by his need to solve a riddle that he was completely oblivious to the real human need standing right before him.

We don't want to be so consumed with other things – important or as puzzling as they might be – and miss out on the most important thing of all. I think for any of us, this is a danger. I know it can be a danger for me as a pastor to be constantly thinking about deep theological questions and not moving beyond the questions about God to the one true and living God himself. Plus knowledge, as Paul says, has the potential to puff up. That doesn't mean we shouldn't gain knowledge about God and study doctrine and wrestle with deep theological questions, but we need to be cautious that in our learning about God, we are not getting puffed up with pride.

But even if you aren't much of a deep thinker and pondering theological mysteries really isn't your cup of tea, we can become preoccupied in thinking about more mundane things and those things can lead us to either neglect God or grow haughty and proud. Let me give a couple of examples of what this could look like.

First, we can become so preoccupied with an area of interest that we become proud and abrasive towards those who differ with us. We see plenty of this in our current political climate. People become so involved in taking sides in a political discussion that in their pride they can no longer have a civil discussion with someone on the other side of the political fence. Their ponderings over questions of taxes and government programs and military spending turn them into arrogant and insufferable debaters who vilify their opponents and resort to straw man arguments and ad hominem attacks to score points. This is especially disturbing when it's self-professing Christians who behave in such a manner. If you can't have a political discussion without you getting angry and defensive and resorting to name-calling, you might want to listen less to Rush Limbaugh and more to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Second, we can become preoccupied with life. Like the example of Jesus with the two sisters Mary and Martha, we can become so wrapped up in our jobs, our housework, our children, and our hobbies that we neglect to devote some time to Christ through prayer and the study of Scripture. We might find pride in a high-paying job, a clear house, children who succeed in sport and music, but those are all worthless if they were purchased at the cost of living in daily devotion to God.

So then, moving on now, we've seen David at work, chiseling away all that is not part of this self-portrait that he is creating. Now it's time for David to unveil his work and allow us to view this sculpture, this image of who David really is. So the second point this morning has us...

2. Viewing the image (v. 2)

Please follow along as I read v. 2. **“But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me.”** David has finished his work. His sculpture is ready to be revealed. The veil covering it is pulled off and what do we see? Do we see a great king, holding a scepter in hand with a jeweled crown upon his head, his deep wisdom reflected in his eyes? Or do we see a mighty warrior, triumphantly riding his war horse into battle, sword raised high as he rushes forth to slay his foes?

No. The image presented to us is that of little child with his mother. The child is only a few years old and he's resting quietly on his mother's lap, not restless or anxious, but relaxed and calm. His head rests upon his mother's shoulder and as we look into the child's eyes we see a peaceful surrender. His eyes reveal nothing of being worried about the matters of the day. He is not concerned with how he looks or how others see him. He shows no desire to strive for some personal gain or glory. Content, he has all that he needs right here in his mother's arms. This is the portrait David presents to us.

What a beautiful image of trust and dependence. There is no pride, no arrogance, no striving after great things in this portrait. David tells us this child is weaned and is thus at an age where he knows well enough that his mother will provide for him and so he simply rests in that knowledge. It is a picture of child-like trust and dependence.

We can all understand what this portrait is like. If you have children of your own, or young nephews or nieces, or have had held little babies or spent time with small children, you know exactly what David is talking about here. I've had plenty of times with my kids when they would contently sit on my lap as I read a book to them or we'd cuddle up together during a movie or something else we were watching.

And what's amazing about this is that of all things, this is how David describes himself. This is the sculpture he creates. Let me let me ask you a question: if you had all the skills of Michelangelo and were commissioned to make a sculpture of yourself as you are right now, what would it look like? Would it communicate something about you're your great wisdom and insight? Your various skills? Your accomplishments and successes? Your interests? Would it be smooth and polished, or would it be rough and unfinished, with large pieces still needing to be chiseled away?

For David, his portrait is not one of greatness, of might, or of boasting in his knowledge or accomplishments. David's has chiseled away his pride, his haughtiness, and his need to have all the answers. What is left is a self-portrait of a still and quiet child, humbly content with his mother.

So we've seen David chisel away at the parts that are not part of this sculpture and have gazed upon the final work, this image of a weaned child with his mother. Now we must find out why David has presented this image to us. What is it that God, through David, wishes to communicate to us through this sculpture? To get that answer, we need to turn our attention to the third point of our sermon today which concerns...

3. Hearing the message (v. 3)

Follow along once again as a read v. 3, **“O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forevermore.”** David moves from describing himself to calling God's people to imitate his child-like hope in God. David created this image, this sculpture of him as it were, not to impress us with who he is but rather so we might model our lives after him. We're called to hope in the Lord just as David did - with faith like a child.

Our Heavenly Father longs for us to place our hope in Him just like a child with his mother. This hope is not a vague uncertainty. It's not a, “Well, perhaps God will take care of me, perhaps he loves me, but maybe he won't. I hope he does, but I can't be sure.” Instead it is a hope that rests on the certainty of God's love and provision for us, shown in Jesus Christ and revealed throughout Scripture. God loves His children with a deep and tender love, the kind of love reflected in the love between a child and its mother. Because he loves us, he says to us today, “Trust me.” “Depend on me.” “Place your hope in me.”

This call to a simple hope, of trusting in God's tender love and provision for us, is repeated again and again in the Bible:

- Jesus says in Matthew 11:28-29, *“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.”*
- In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reassures us of our Heavenly Father's care for us by saying, *“Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”*
- The apostle Peter calls us to the same kind of humble faith and hope in God we find here in Psalm 131 when he says to us, *“Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.”*

Grace Brethren Church, believe that God the Father loves you deeply, tenderly, with a love that richer than any love you could ever know, even the love between a mother and her child. David is inviting us here to join him in this simple hope of trusting God's power and promises in our lives. We are to see this image, this sculpture David has created, and model our lives after it. David, the mighty king and warrior, is in his heart nothing more than a child who rests content on his Father's lap, trusting in his care for him. We are to follow in David's footsteps and do the same.

Conclusion

So today we have watched as David chiseled away those things which were not part of this image he was creating. The sculptured image that remained was that of a weaned child resting quietly with his mother. The message this image communicates to us is one simple yet so profound: God wants us to have a child-like hope in Him.

But before we turn away from this text and more back into the busyness of our lives, we need to ask ourselves: where must we take the chisel in our lives to carve out that which is not this image of child-like hope so that a simple trust remains? Like David, we are works in progress and there is often sinful attitudes and behaviors that need to be chiseled away if we are going to resemble the child-like faith that David had.

For some of us, pride is an issue. We have found ourselves haughty and full of arrogance and like David that needs to be chiseled away. There are other sins as well: selfishness, lust, greed, bitterness, anger, unforgiveness – I could go on but we all know what it is in our own hearts that needs to be chiseled away if we are going to reflect in our own lives the simple hope and trust that David presents to us in the Psalm.

So as we close this morning, let's spend a little time in prayer, coming to our Heavenly Father and asking him to chip away at those sinful places in our lives that prevent us from reflecting the kind of child-like faith he would have us demonstrate. We all have those rough edges that we need God's skillful hands to smooth out and some places that God may need to hammer away at! I want to have this kind of faith in God – a trust that does not worry or fear but like a child simply rest in the love and protection of my Heavenly Father. Let's ask God together to make that image ever more evident in us by chiseling away the bad and leaving the good. Let's pray.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Brethren Church of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2012.