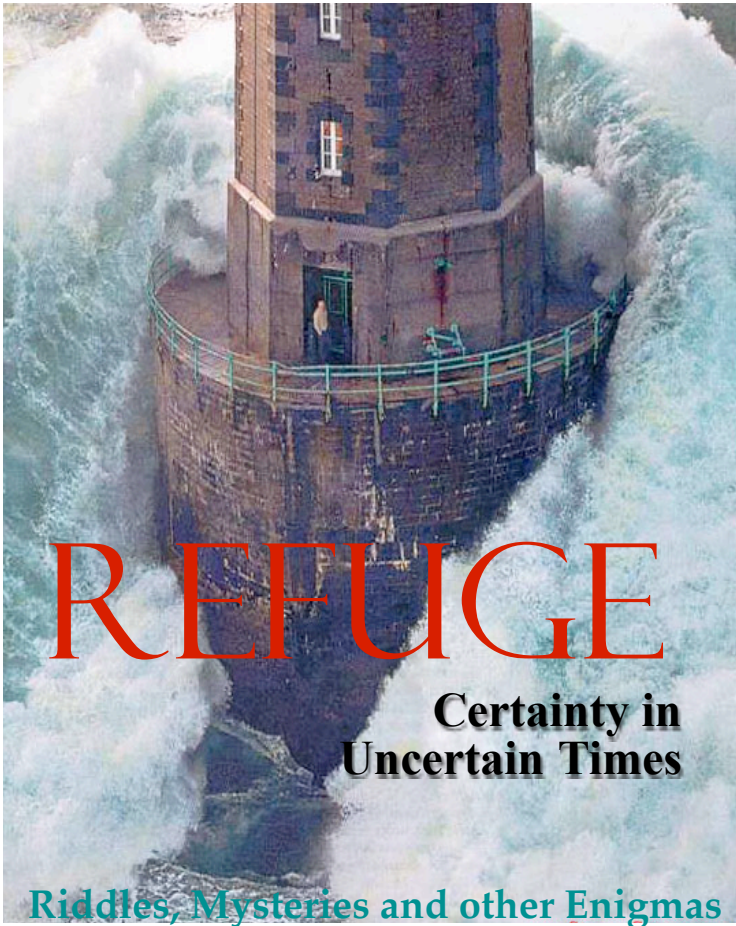


*The Covenant Pulpit*



**Psalm 131**

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Her struggles would sour most folks on life. Yet this star of the Metropolitan Opera was one of the sweetest people I've ever met.

For years she was ignored, even though her talent was unsurpassed. Opera houses refused to let her appear on their stage. Critics shrugged off her magnificent voice. She was rejected for roles when she was clearly the most qualified. It was only after she went to Europe and won over the toughest opera fans in the world, that American critics finally recognized her talent.

Even after *Time* magazine dubbed her "America's Queen of the Opera", life was still tough. She had two handicapped children—one of them severely retarded. She built a home in Martha's Vineyard to provide a place of nurture for her children. Two days before they moved in, it burned to the ground. When her husband collapsed with a stroke, she cared for him for eight years while raising two special needs children and juggling a career.

You might think that years of rejection and setbacks would make her bitter. But her friends nicknamed her "Bubbles." Barbara Walters called her the happiest person on earth. After interviewing her on *Sixty Minutes*, Mike Wallace said that she was the most impressive lady he had ever met. When he asked how she had overcome bitterness to be so bubbly, she replied, "I can't control the circumstances of my life, but I *can* choose to be cheerful."

I will always treasure the hour I spent in 2002 with "Bubbles"—known to the opera world as Beverly Sills, perhaps the greatest soprano in history.

And I'll never forget walking through a cemetery with Craig and Cheryl. A year before I had performed the graveside service for their six-month old baby. Now we had buried their two-year old son, Luke next to his baby sister. A week before, he had tipped over a jug of kerosene in the garage, igniting a space heater and engulfing himself in flames.

Imagine losing any child—let alone two in less than a year, and in such horrible ways! Yet Cheryl squeezed my hand and spoke through her tears: "Pastor, Craig and I have peace. We won't allow our pain to make us bitter. We'll trust in God to see us through to better times." I'll always treasure that afternoon in an Oklahoma cemetery with Craig and Cheryl.

And I'll always remember an evening with Robert Reed. He sat hunched over in a wheelchair. He could barely hold his head up, and his crippled fingers labored to open the Bible that had been placed in his lap. When he spoke, it was painfully difficult to understand his garbled speech.

Robert has a severe case of cerebral palsy. He can't bath or feed himself, brush his teeth, comb his hair, or put on his underwear. His clothes are held together with Velcro. But all that hasn't kept him from graduating from college with a degree in Latin or going on five mission trips overseas.

Cerebral palsy didn't keep him from becoming a missionary to Portugal. Each day he would maneuver his wheelchair to a public park in Lisbon and pass out gospel tracts. In six years he led 70 people to Christ, including Rosa who later became his wife. Most people would have given up on life if they had his handicap, but Robert loves to say, "I have everything I need for joy." I treasured sitting with hundreds of other pastors at the feet of Robert Reed.

All of us want to be on top of the world. But sometimes life takes us down. Beverly Sills, Craig and Cheryl Ulmer, and Robert Reed have taught me that God often does his best work in valleys rather than on the mountaintops.

This past week I spent hours with another old friend, King David. Few people have experienced more valleys than David. Yet it was out of life's lowest places that he soared highest. What was his secret to going up when most folks would have stayed down? You can discover it in Psalm 131. In three short verses David gives us his simple secret:

### **You can only get to the top by going down.**

Notice the title to Psalm 131: "*A song of ascents. Of David.*" The Psalms of Ascent are written to encourage Jewish pilgrims as they climbed the steep mountains to Jerusalem. Every Jew in the world dreamed of making at least one pilgrimage to their holy city, and then climbing up the Temple Mount to make a sacrifice at the highest pinnacle of Judaism. The ancient rabbis taught that to be in the temple courts was to stand on top of the world. In the Jewish religion you couldn't go up any higher than this.

But there is great danger in going up. Pride lives in high places. In their high temple the Jews felt very superior to the Gentiles down below. The Roman Caesar Octavian once said, "Jerusalem stinks of religious snobbery." If pride is the mother of all sin, then religion is her ugliest child. British novelist, Samuel Richardson was right when he wrote, "Spiritual pride is the most dangerous and arrogant of all pride."

Ascending to the mountaintop in any area—whether you have the top grades in your class, or your sports team is number one, or you hang with the most popular kids in your school, or you belong to the most prestigious

country club, or are more successful than your business competitors, or your church is the biggest, or your doctrine the most sound, or your lifestyle is holier than your neighbors, or your kids are on the honor roll. Proverbs 16:18 says, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall...”

In his play, *The Spanish Pride*, John Dryden calls pride, “The Lord of humankind.” Remember, it was pride that brought the great archangel, Lucifer down. We read his boast in Isaiah 14:13&14:

“I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.”

David understands that there’s danger in ascending to the top. That’s why he begins his *Song of Ascent* with these words: “My heart is not proud, O Lord; my eyes are not haughty...” St. Augustine wrote, “It was pride that changed angels into devils; it is humility that makes men as angels.”

David is speaking of a restless pride that craves for more. From the time we were babies on our mother’s breast we have been graspers. As children, we always wanted the thing we were told we couldn’t have. As infants, we demanded to be the center of attention. One of our favorite playground games was “King of the Mountain.” Immaturity is wrapped in pride. But God wants us to ascend to maturity. How does he do it? By making us go down before we go up—the same way he turned Beverly Sills into Bubbles, and transformed Craig and Cheryl, Robert Reed and King David. We grow up from our infantile pride by understanding that:

### **1. The perpetual infant is always grasping for more.**

In Psalm 139 David uses the metaphor of a child. He speaks of three phases of life. In verse one, the baby on the breast who is never satisfied. In verse two, the weaned child who has learned to be at rest. And, in verse three, the mature adult that we can be some day. He starts in verse one by describing the baby he used to be. Every one of us who are “born again” started out as babies in the faith. Unfortunately some of us have never grown up. People who have been Christians for years are still wearing diapers, crying like babies when they don’t get their way and making messes for themselves and others. They still drink milk when they ought to be eating meat. Our moments of immaturity are all sparked by pride. David speaks of three kinds of pride in perpetual infants:

## 1) The perfectionist

David begins verse one, “My heart is not proud, O Lord.” Literally, the Hebrew says, “My heart does not seek higher places...” When Scripture speaks of the heart it is talking about the inner person. Here David is talking about peace within. He’s satisfied with who he is. He’s no longer inwardly driven to go higher. David is saying that he’s not a perfectionist. Some of us *are* perfectionists. A perfectionist is never satisfied. Perfectionists drive themselves and others crazy with their obsession to get everything just right. If a perfectionist wrote a book it would be titled *Never Good Enough*.

Perfectionists are not to be confused with healthy achievers. Perfectionists believe that mistakes must *never* be made and that the highest standards must *always* be achieved. Those who strive for excellence in a healthy way take genuine pleasure in trying to meet high standards. Perfectionists are motivated by self-doubt and the fear of disapproval or rejection. The healthy striver has drive, while the perfectionist is driven. The healthy striver wants to help the situation, while the perfectionist is driven to save it.

David has a word for those of us who are recovering perfectionists: an inward drive to get to higher places is a mark of self-centeredness and self-importance. It is vanity to think more highly of ourselves and our efforts than we ought. Graveyards are full of indispensable people.

We don’t have to be driven to ascend because Christ has already ascended the only hill that matters. On a hill outside Jerusalem, he bore all our sins and mistakes. He doesn’t mock us from the Cross: “Keep on climbing until you manage to get high enough.” Instead he cries out to his Father, “It is finished!” He’s finished for us the work of our salvation. We are given his righteousness, purchased by his perfection. We are now free to rest in him. Hebrews 4:10 says, “There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rests also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.” We can rest from that inner drive to perfect ourselves, to fix others, and to save every situation. Christ is the Savior, and we aren’t. We will never grow up until our hearts rest humbly in Him.

## 2) The snob

David goes on in verse one: “...my eyes are not haughty.” Literally, you could translate the Hebrew, “My eyes don’t look down from on high.” Perfectionists deal with their insecurity by striving *upward*. Snobs deal with their insecurity by looking *downward*. The perfectionist feels bad because

others are higher than him on the ascent. The snob feels good because others are lower than him on the ascent. A 14<sup>th</sup> Century monk etched these words on a monastery wall: "Comparisons are odious." We feel smug when our strengths outweigh others' weaknesses. We gossip about others to feel better about ourselves. We focus on their sins and refuse to look at our own. We criticize others and fail to see our own flaws. C.S. Lewis wrote, "A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and, of course, as long as you're looking down, you can't see someone who's above you."

Not only does comparing ourselves to others lead us to deception about ourselves, it is odious to those watching. This past spring we visited a missionary's home in Central America. One of their little boys was playing with puzzles. We applauded him for his clever ability to solve them. His older brother was watching with envy. Looking down at his little brother, he said, "He's good at puzzles, but he's a very bad boy. He leaves his room dirty and doesn't do his homework like I do." He wilted under the attack of his haughty older brother. I think that all of us wanted to slap that arrogant little Pharisee silly. I thought at the time, "Unless he changes radically, this boy will grow up to be just another critical, judgmental Christian. In the same way we were turned off by the pride of this nasty boy, watching world finds our religious pride to be odious.

### 3) The fixer

David ends verse one with this statement: "I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me." From the time we were little children we pestered our parents with questions: "Why?" "Why this?" "Why now?" "Why not?" "Why me?" Inquiring minds had to know. Philosophers try to unlock the mysteries of the universe. Theologians try to unlock the mysteries of God. Somehow we think that, if we figure out the mysteries of life, we can fix the problems. Thank God for the advances of science and medicine. Our lives are better for the fact that thinkers and inventors have concerned themselves with "great matters too wonderful..."

David isn't telling us that humility means getting a frontal lobotomy. What he *is* saying is what his son, Solomon writes years later in Ecclesiastes 1:15, "What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted." There are some things that are beyond figuring out. There are some people that we can't fix. There are some problems that are too big. There are some questions that will never be answered. In the words of that great philosopher, Kenny Rogers, "You have to know when to hold them and you have to know when to fold them." It is childish pride that drives us to fix

things that are beyond fixing. Humility is Beverly Sills saying, “I can’t change the circumstances of my life, but I *can* choose to be cheerful.” Craig and Cheryl could never figure out the death of their children, but they could say, “We trust God to see us through to better times.” Robert Reed never figured out why he was born with cerebral palsy, but he was able to say, “I have everything I need for joy.” UN Ambassador, Andrew Young described these folks when he said, “We rise in glory as we sink in pride.”

## **2. We will never ready for meat until we are weaned off milk.**

David now goes on to describe how he has gone on from infant pride to mature humility. He says in verse two:

“But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.”

Here’s the mark of maturity: “a stilled and quieted soul.” David has willed to quiet his soul. Immature people are governed by feelings. They want instant gratification. If it feels good, they do it. But St. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:11, “... when I became a man I put childish ways behind me.” What is it the mark of maturity? Galatians 5:22&23 says, “But the fruit of the Spirit is...self-control.” Mature people know when to swallow their pride, and keep their mouth shut. They bridle their emotions and stay cool when everyone around them is cursing. They know how to keep still when others are running around crazy. They know that they can’t fix everything, and remember that God is on the throne. They never forget that Jesus is Savior, and they aren’t.

David says that he is like “a weaned child with its mother.” He repeats it again: “...like a weaned child is my soul within me.” A nursing child is the most selfish of humans. That child doesn’t care what time of the day or night it is, or how tired mom is, or how inconvenient his hunger is for everyone else. That child demands to be fed immediately, and screams incessantly until its needs are met. It doesn’t matter if his parents are in a church service, or dining out at a \$200 dinner, or on a crowded airliner. That child will scream until his needs are met, and then scream some more. There are a lot of adults like that. Some of them have been Christians for years. Their needs are paramount. They think that the world revolves around them, and that everyone should stop whatever they are doing to kowtow to their needs.

But one day the infant is weaned. It’s a painful thing. The infant fights it. He can’t understand why he is now forced to eat strained carrots, and

pureed cauliflower. But his mother knows that her breast milk no longer has enough nutrients. The child now comes to grips with one of the most difficult lessons of life: Mom and Dad determines what's best, not the child. There will be lots of times when the child will pout, and kick, and scream, and threaten to hold his breath until he turns blue. They will tell him to eat his vegetables when he wants to gorge on ice-cream and cake. They will insist that she goes to bed when she wants to stay up watching television. They will set rules and regulations that will cause this child no end of consternation. The battle that every child has with parents over who's going to control the home, is the same battle we have with God over who's going to control our world. If only we could come to peace, like a weaned child. If only we could humble ourselves under the mighty and good hand of God, even when he feeds us on a diet that is distasteful or takes to places that are distressful. If only we could choose to be cheerful in the circumstances that we didn't choose.

### **3. We will only find rest in restlessness by resting in God alone.**

David has shared what he was as a proud infant grasping for more and what he is as a weaned adult who has come to peace with God's sovereignty. Now he tells us in verse three where he is heading in his ascent to maturity: "O Israel, put your hope in the Lord, both now and forevermore." The Hebrew word for "hope" means a sure certainty based on an immutable promise. We can trust God's promises because we can trust his character. His word never changes because he never changes. 1 Samuel 15:29 says, "He who is the glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind, for he is not a man that he should change his mind." The God of the mountaintop does not change just because we are down in the valley of despair. The God who parted the Red Sea will not disappear when we get to the desert places where there is no water or food. What are you going through today? You can't try to fight it, or fix it, or get frustrated about it. Or you can quiet your soul and accept the change in circumstances. You can ever choose to be cheerful. Above all else, you can rest in his promises, knowing that sometimes the best way up is the way down.