

A Calm and Quiet Soul

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on January 2, 2021.

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 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 (Psalm 131).¹

It's hard to read the psalm and not want it. Take a deep breath...and imagine: a calm and quiet soul. Yet, modern life seems to deliver us anything but. Who can be calm when there are so many things that demand our concern, that warrant our worry? To be calm seems an unattainable ideal, a character trait of the unconcerned. Not us, we care—we'll busy ourselves with serenity when we're dead!

Besides, how can anyone calm down in such a noisy world? And it's not just the noise pollution of our modern machines but the maelstrom of our media. We are told to listen at full volume, but who can hear it all? Who can hear at all? I suppose we can't turn it down for fear of being left to the solitude of our own thoughts. Remember those?

Believe it or not, we were made for more than occupying ourselves with chaotic frenzy and deafening clamor. That a calm and quiet soul seems something wished for rather than known is telling of our fallen condition, both heart and soul. What then of our redemption and new life in Christ? Were we not promised an easier yoke, a lighter burden (Matt. 11:29)? Indeed, the grace and peace of the gospel is good news not just for tomorrow but today too, truth we believe and in believing live.

In Christ, we have been saved not only from the wrath of God but also from ourselves. We have been redeemed but also enabled to live not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:4). And by the Spirit we may enjoy a peace that transcends comprehension (Phil 4:7) and quietude that silences every voice but the Lord's. In Christ, we truly can enjoy a calm and quiet soul, which starts with a humble heart.

Humble Heart

Pride is one of those sins easily identifiable in others but deceptively difficult to discern in ourselves. It's also not easy to define. Often self-absorbing, sinful pride puts you in the center of all things, displacing others, even God. Pride, then, is idolatry of self, the likely root of all sin, ancient if not prescient. After all, the serpent's most persuasive argument was "you will be like God" (Gen. 3:5).

Remarkably insidious, pride rarely denies God's reality or even his superiority. It just numbs us to his relevance, especially when compared with the primacy of our self-preoccupation. When we do think of God it is almost always centered on us, as if to say, "I'm so important to me, why wouldn't God think so too?" So sinister is pride that it permeates our being, how we see

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

ourselves and the world and what we do. So convinced of this was Augustine that he believed if humility does not precede, accompany, and follow everything we do, then it is not a good work. He saw humility as the first, second, and third part of godliness.²

Understanding the danger of pride, and its subsequent presumptions, the psalmist starts with it, prescribing a three-fold denial: “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.” This isn’t bragging, as if to say, “Thank God I’m so humble!” It’s confession. He knows his susceptibility to pride, and precisely how and where it strikes.

He starts with his heart, for “from it flow the springs of life” (Prov. 4:23), proceeding to his eyes, which Jesus called “the lamp of the body” (Matt. 6:22). A proud heart produces haughty eyes that look not in submission to the Lord but in arrogance to the self, leading not only to overconfidence and a lack of contentment but an unhealthy perspective of one’s place in the world. It is a preoccupation with concerns of our presumed sovereign sphere. Those things which are beyond us become our concern, in our domain, even our responsibility.

Do you occupy yourself with things beyond you? Consider, for example, our modern inundation of information and media consumption. According to a Pew Center survey, almost seven out of ten Americans feel exhausted by the onslaught of so-called news.³ Yet, like a moth to a flame, we seem obsessed with matters outside our context, often beyond our comprehension, and typically problems to which we contribute no solution.

If the remedy to depression is action, then we may deduce that much of modern angst relates to consumption of information that is beyond us, demanding our emotional engagement to which we contribute nothing but our anxiety. The presumption is that it is our duty to know and fret, as if angst is doing our part. This presumption is misguided, as is the undiscerning belief that everything we consume is relevant. As Henry David Thoreau quipped about the invention of the telegraph, “We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas, but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate.”⁴

Some may consider such a position as callous unconcern, but in reality it is more often our concern over so much that numbs us to reality of what is truly important. Rather than leading a calm and quiet life we find ourselves trapped in, what Calvin called, “a labyrinth of perplexity.”⁵ There is a direct correlation between unnecessary concern and sinful worry. A prideful heart is presumptuous, denying or forgetting, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God” (Deut. 29:29a). Those who know their limits, as well as the sovereign care of their Lord, humbly serve

² Robert Rayburn, “Pride & Humility,” Ligonier, June 1, 2008, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/pride-humility>.

³ Danny Heitman, “What Would Thoreau Think of Our 24-Hour News Cycle?,” *Humanities*, <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2018/summer/what-would-thoreau-think-our-24-hour-news-cycle>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ John Calvin, “Psalm 131,” Sacred Texts, accessed December 29, 2021, <https://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/calvin/cc12/cc12014.htm>.

within their sphere of influence and enjoy “a life of tranquility and assurance.”⁶ For, a humble heart leads to a content soul.

Content Soul

In a world pleading that we occupy ourselves with its worries, the psalmist confesses, “I have calmed and quieted my soul.” It is not a passive statement. He is fully engaged in calming and quieting himself. From his heart to his eyes to his actions, he knows that he must actively engage or fall victim to worldly worries.

We don’t typically think this way, do we? We are told that active engagement means worrying over circumstances, fretting over situations, carrying ever-increasing anxiety. If you *really* care, you worry. We typically think of the carefree as dropouts, those unwilling to accept responsibility. It really is remarkable how far the prideful heart can lead us from the truth.

In contrast, “like a weaned child with its mother,” the psalmist says, “is my soul within me.” Nursing her child from birth, a mother teaches her child to be satisfied with her care and provision. A nursing child cannot feed herself but is fully dependent upon her mother, and even once weaned she is satisfied in her mother’s arms. So is the child of God to be, calm and quiet in the sovereign care of his heavenly Father.

But the psalmist teaches us that this doesn’t just happen to us. By God’s grace we learn active submission, complete dependence, godly satisfaction. What are practical ways to encourage such submission, dependence, and satisfaction? Here are a few recommendations, three words to remember: crucify, clothe, cast.

First, *crucify*: Crucify your pride, humbling yourself “under the mighty hand of God” (1 Pet. 5:6). Rather than calm and quiet, your prideful flesh is unsettled and loud, loving nothing more than to exalt you, convincing you that worldly worries are your vocation. Shut your flesh up with the truth that you are a sinner saved by grace (Eph. 2:8), crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:20), and a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). And renew your mind on the Word of God and what pleases him, reminding yourself that he who rested calmly and quietly on a boat in the eye of a storm is your Lord.

Second, *clothe*: “Clothe yourselves,” Peter commands, “all of you, with humility toward one another, for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet. 5:5). Unlike your clothes on January 1st, humility always fits and is fitting, especially in the company of others. Considering others more important than yourself is a perfect fit (Phil. 2:3). A practical way to clothe yourself in humility is to humbly serve others, for Christ’s sake. In doing so, you’ll discover an actively engaging way to dethrone arrogance.

Third, *cast*: “Cast all your anxiety on [the Lord] because he cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:7 NIV). We were neither created nor redeemed to carry life’s burdens, worrying over what God ordains. As that old hymn reminds us,

⁶ Ibid.

Whate'er my God ordains is right:
his holy will abideth;
I will be still, whate'er he doth,
and follow where he guideth.
He is my God; though dark my road,
he holds me that I shall not fall:
wherefore to him I leave it all.⁷

We may and are commanded to transfer our cares and concerns to the One who created and sustains all things. Pride carries; humility casts, entrusting today's worries to him who holds the future. And fourth, *hope*: "O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forevermore."

Eternal Hope

Interestingly, a psalm that begins with personal confession becomes an invitation to the church: "O Israel, hope in the LORD." Far from selfish and self-absorbed introspection, the psalmist invites us to join him, with humble hearts and content souls. We hope not in apprehensive expectation but in full assurance, because our hope is rooted and rests not in ourselves (gone is pride!) but in God.

It is also an invitation to begin today, "from this time forth," and to carry on, "forevermore." Yes, it is time, today, to crucify your pride. Let God be God, and concern yourself with him, his kingdom, his righteousness. Yes, today, clothe yourself with humility. Stop considering yourself and your opinions above others, and instead look, listen, and learn how to serve others. Yes, today, cast your cares on the One who cares and cares for you, yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

And in hope, what you practice today by God's grace, do it tomorrow, and the days that follow. Because hoping in the Lord never gets old nor does living life with a calm and quiet soul. Indeed, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope" (Rom. 15:13).

⁷ Samuel Rodigast, "Whate'er My God Ordains Is Right," Hymnary, accessed December 29, 2021, https://hymnary.org/text/whateer_my_god_ordains_is_right_holy_his.