

# How to Trust in the Lord

Psalm 131

Three years ago, I experienced what I would describe as either a panic attack or something dangerously close to one.

I was driving home from work, and I remember careening into the driveway and slamming my car's engine into park.

My breathing was shallow and quick. I was hot and sweaty and felt like the car was closing in on me.

I flung open the door and hung my legs out, hunching over on my knees and sucking in as much fresh air as possible.

*What is happening to me?*, I wondered.

I re-traced my day and realized I had lost myself in a mental spiral about my career. I was a pastor at the time, and had been for the last five years. But I sensed the Lord moving me in a new direction.

So I knew I would soon be looking for another job, though I didn't know what kind, or if I would have to move my family, or what that would even look like.

One worst-case scenario after another flew through my mind:

- *What if I'm walking away from God's calling on my life?*
- *What if I have to move my family and they end up resenting me and hating our new life?*
- *What if I'm chasing my own feelings instead of the Spirit's leading?*
- *What if I can't find another job and we lose the house?*

The *worst* worst-case scenario of all to me was that the Lord wouldn't tell me what to do until I quit my job, just like he didn't tell Abram where to go until he left his family, home, possessions — everything familiar — behind.

I was spiralling further and further down the abyss of my mind.

Fortunately, I was seeing a counselor around that time. I told her what happened in the car that day, and she listened quietly and intently.

Once I was finished recounting the story, she paused very briefly, then said, “How's your prayer life?”

It was an insightful question, because it was basically non-existent. “It's . . . not very good,” I told her.

As we talked, it became clear that when my anxiety increased, my prayer decreased. As my inner world became noisier, I filled the prayer space with podcasts, music, and audiobooks — anything to keep me from dealing with my thoughts.

So, I decided to immediately stop listening to music, podcasts, audiobooks — anything — when driving, running, walking, or mowing the yard. Instead, I decided to fill that time with prayer and silence before the Lord.

But after nine days of fasting from distraction, my mind still felt pulled in a million different directions. My heart was anxious; my soul, discontent.

But in the midst of that season, God was gracious enough to call my attention to Psalm 131.

I'm sharing this personal story because we're in a series called Summer of Psalms right now.

When I was asked to preach one of the sermons, I knew right away that I wanted to teach on Psalm 131. I've drunk from its well so deeply over the last few years, particularly when I was going through what I just described.

As I first read the Psalm, I saw that it revealed a person who was handling similar emotions in a completely different way.

- I was anxious, but this person was calm.
- I was discontent, they were content.
- My soul was noisy, theirs was quiet.

But more than anything, this Psalm showed me that my emotions were just symptoms of the real problem: that I wasn't trusting God with my future.

Maybe you've had trouble trusting God with some aspect of your life before. Surely you've had a decision to make that was tying your stomach into knots. Maybe right now there's something keeping you up late or waking you up in the middle of the night.

Maybe you're not sure if that school is right for your kids: *They might excel academically, but who will be influencing them?*

Or maybe you're wondering what'll happen if you take that job in another state: *Will my family be upset? Will we regret it in a year?*

Or maybe it's the health of your spouse, parent, or sibling. *Will God answer my prayers to heal them? What will happen if they die?*

In times like these, you feel tired as soon as you wake up. You feel exhausted even though you aren't doing anything physically strenuous.

You're depleted, anxious, uneasy, discontent.

I'd like to show you through God's Word that those kinds of unceasing thoughts and a tumultuous inner life come from a lack of trust in the Lord. That means, if we want to experience the opposite — inner peace and a calm and quiet soul — then we have to trust the Lord.

And Psalm 131 is going to show us how.

So let's dig in.

## Background

It may not look like much at just three verses, but Psalm 131 is one of the finest gems in all the Bible.

Charles Spurgeon, the great English Baptist preacher, said, "It is one of the shortest Psalms to read, but one of the longest to learn."

He's right.

You can read the Psalm in just a few seconds and memorize it in just a few minutes, but learning its truths and putting them into practice will take a lifetime.

Here are those truths I want you to see from this Psalm: that **trust requires a humility, a hush, and a hope before and in the Lord.**<sup>1</sup> [repeat]

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Stephen J. Lawson for this [outline of the text](#).

Psalm 131 was written by David, the famous shepherd-boy turned king of Israel, who God himself continually refers to in the Bible as “a man after God’s own heart.”

David was a man that learned to trust God through the peaks and valleys of his life.

The usual Cliff’s Notes-version of David’s life goes something like this:

- He was plucked out of the fields while tending sheep to be anointed the next king of Israel;
- then he challenged the famed Philistine named Goliath to a battle, and killed him with a slingshot and stone;
- then he was king over Israel and became known as the greatest king to ever lead God’s people.

But if you know David’s full story, you know it’s much more colorful, much more real, than that. He experienced some very high highs and very low lows.

For example, David was anointed king when he was just a young boy, maybe as young as 10, but probably no more than 15 years old. Yet the Bible tells us that he didn’t become king until he was 30.

So for at least 15 years, and maybe as many as 20 years, David wasn’t calling the shots. Far from it, in fact.

During many of these years, David was on the run from the current king named Saul, who knew God had promised David the throne, and wasn't at all happy about it.

Saul pursued David all around the countryside, desperately hoping to snuff out the young, would-be king.

The pursuit grew so intense that, at one point, David took to hiding in caves to escape from Saul's forces.

Alone in those damp, dark caverns, he surely had to ask, *God, What are you doing? I thought I was supposed to be king, but here I am hiding from a madman. Will this ever end?*

We don't know if this psalm was written during this time period — and it probably wasn't from what I can gather — but we can discern that this time in David's life, like many others, was about teaching him to trust the Lord.

And isn't that what we're learning in our day?

Through this Psalm, we get a glimpse of what David learned about trusting the Lord throughout his life. And if we pay close enough attention, it will help us on our journey towards trusting in the Lord, too.

And the journey starts with humility before and in the Lord.

# A Humility Before and In the Lord

Let me re-read verse 1:

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.

David begins this Psalm where all of us must begin if we want to learn to trust the Lord — with humility.

Verse 1 shows us a man who was brought low by years of scrambling and surviving. His heart was no longer set on the throne. His eyes stopped gazing up as he daydreamed of ruling or being the one everyone looked to.

You can tell from his word choice — 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 — that David understood that his heart, eyes, and soul were all connected.

See, we set our eyes on what our hearts desire. If you want to know what you give your affection to, look at what you give your attention to. We look for those things our hearts most desire.<sup>2</sup>

David had been promised the throne, but the throne was never meant to capture his attention. God wanted David gazing up not at the throne, but at *him*.

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<sup>2</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, Treasury of David: Explanatory Notes and Quaint Sayings on Psalm 131, <http://www.romans45.org/spurgeon/treasury/ps131.htm>.

And so it is with us. God wants our gaze fixed not on the things of this world, but on him. Not on our cleverness, or our degrees, or our plans, but on him.

David stopped looking up to himself and started looking up to God. He stopped setting his heart on the world and started setting it on God.

And in the process, he quit trying to figure out what only God can know. That's what he means in that second part of verse 1 where he says, "I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me." [Production note: show verse 1 again here].

Another way of saying this is, "I don't worry about things that are above my paygrade."

Too often, I want to understand how the puzzle fits together. I want to know why things happen. I want all the information.

In other words, I want to know what only God can know.

Proverbs 16:9 says,

The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.

I want to plan my ways and establish my steps. I want to make the schedule and make it happen.

But I can't.

And when I fixate too much on planning my steps — when I focus too much on what I want to do and what I want to accomplish — I miss the God who establishes my steps. I just don't even see him.

I do that because I sometimes have a warped perspective of myself. But in this Psalm, David has a proper perspective of himself before God, and it humbles him.

When we see ourselves in proper perspective, we see the limits of our powers and abilities, and we stop worrying about what only God can control.

We don't think too highly of ourselves because we know we can't change people or our circumstances or life.

So we stop looking to ourselves and start looking to God.

We stop trusting in ourselves and start trusting in God.

Think about your own life. Where are you having trouble trusting God? You probably know exactly where.

Now that you have it in your mind, ask yourself if you've truly humbled yourself before the Lord to help you; if you've truly come to him knowing that nothing or no one else has the power to intervene like he does.

And remember, if you don't know what you're trusting in, follow your eyes. See what you're looking to for assurance and hope, and that will tell you who or what you're trusting in.

If it isn't God, tell him that, just be honest with him, and then ask him to change you.

We call that confession and repentance, in church language. You confess to God that you've sinned against him, then repent from your sinful behavior, which simply means you stop doing wrong and start doing right.

You turn from going in the direction of sin and start walking in the direction of God.

Christians do this — confess and repent — in part because it keeps us humble.

It reminds us that we're incapable of obeying God all on our own and that we need his help if we're going to be transformed.

Humble yourself before the Lord. Confess your sin, then turn from it and turn to God.

A humility like we've just talked about is the beginning of trust. The next thing trusting the Lord requires is a hush before and in the Lord.

# A Hush Before and In the Lord

In verse 2, David writes, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit,

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

The result of David's humility is a calm and quiet soul.

Doesn't that sound good?

Those are not the words I would use to describe my soul most of the time.

Instead, I would use words like "frenetic" or "chaotic." Much of the time, it feels like my soul is somehow tangled around itself.

David, on the other hand, describes his soul not as tangled, but as tranquil, which means "free from disturbance."

This tranquil state of David's soul didn't happen on its own, though. David says, "I have calmed and quieted my soul." Which means doing so was an act of his will.

The word translated "*calmed*" can also be rendered "*composed*."

David Powlison writes, “To *compose* your soul means literally to level it. [To] bulldoze the building site.”<sup>3</sup>

So that’s what it means that David “calmed” his soul — he leveled it.

But we won’t fully understand what this meant for David’s soul unless we also know what it means that his “quieted” his soul.

Powlison, again, said, “To *quiet* your soul means to silence the noise and tumult [inside it]. [To say] ‘Sssshh’ to your desires, fears, opinions, anxieties, agendas, and irritabilities.”<sup>4</sup>

David stopped trying to control the uncontrollable, hushed his manic thoughts, and was left with a peaceful soul.

**A peaceful soul is only possible when it has been hushed into submission.**

This surely rubs us the wrong way in 21st century America, but luckily David gives us a word-picture to better explain what he means.

He says he has calmed and quieted his soul “like a weaned child with its mother.”

As a father of four, I’ve learned that an unweaned child, especially an infant, frantically roots around for milk when they’re anywhere near their mother.

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<sup>3</sup> David Powlison, “Peace, be still”: Learning Psalm 131 by Heart,” The Journal of Biblical Counseling, Vol. 18 No. 3, Spring 2000, [https://www.ccef.org/wp-content/uploads/archive/sites/default/files/pdf/dp\\_psalms131\\_1803002.pdf](https://www.ccef.org/wp-content/uploads/archive/sites/default/files/pdf/dp_psalms131_1803002.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

When my children were on my wife's lap at this phase and they couldn't nurse for whatever reason, they were definitely not calm or quiet. They weren't at peace. They weren't content.

Eventually, it comes time to wean every child, and as you they go through the process, they cry their little hearts out when they can't have their mother's milk, and it breaks their mother's heart.

My wife Maggie has gone through this with three of our kids, and we'll soon go through it with our fourth, a precious little girl named Ella.

And this time, just like the others, there will be times when both Maggie and I will want to give in and just let Ella nurse.

But one of us will remind the other to stay the course because we know it's necessary if our child is ever going to learn to rely on solid food, which she needs to do in order to grow into a healthy child that will one day learn to care for herself.

After a while, Ella will move on and will no longer be overcome by her former desire. She will learn to hush that desire.

She will be able to enjoy sitting in her mother's lap or being held in her mother's arms without crying for milk.

She will be calm, quiet, content — not because she got something *from* her mother, but because she has learned to be satisfied *solely with her mother's presence*.

If the nursing illustration doesn't resonate with you, picture someone who's recently quit smoking. Someone who used to crave a cigarette after meals or on breaks at work.

If you've quit smoking yourself or you've witnessed someone else go through it, you know that certain events, or times of day, or people trigger a craving for nicotine.

After first quitting, a person often finds it incredibly difficult to resist the urge to smoke. Their mind and body races, desperately searching for the familiar routine.

But if they stick with it, resisting becomes a little easier, then a little easier, then a little easier, until one day, the urge is altogether gone, and they're able to enjoy meals, breaks, and social gatherings on their own, without having to smoke.

Regardless of the illustration, the point David is making here in verse 2 is that arriving at a place of trust in the Lord involves taking action to hush our minds and souls.

So how are you doing with this?

Do you feel hushed, or at peace? Or are your thoughts running a million miles an hour as you try to solve your own problems?

If your inner life is anything but calm and quiet, you might find the disciplines of silence, solitude, or fasting to be of some help.

Sometimes by intentionally abstaining from noise, people, or some desire like food, you can clarify your thinking and quiet your soul long enough to hear from God and to be still before him.

That might mean you stop watching an extra TV show at night and spend the time in silence with an open Bible, listening to and hearing from the Lord.

Or it might mean you get up 30 minutes early so you can be alone in the stillness of the morning, when it's often easier to hear to sift out all the noises inside your heart and mind.

Or it might mean fasting from food or TV or music, and replacing that time with prayer.

A great way to do that is by memorizing this Psalm, and just praying it back to God. It's just three verses and only takes you a few minutes to memorize.

But I have found such comfort from doing this over the last year or so.

The key here is less *what* you do and more that you actually *do something*. Remember, David calmed and quieted his own soul. He took action to wrestle it into submission to the Lord.

We must do the same.

Trust, as we have seen to this point, requires a humility and a hush before and in the Lord. But there's one more thing trusting the Lord requires, and that's hope.

## A Hope Before and In the Lord

David closes Psalm 131 with these words from verse 3:

O Israel, hope in the Lord  
from this time forth and forevermore.

The subject in this verse changes from David to his people, the nation of Israel.

This shift is a natural progression for someone who's been humbled and hushed, because a humble person, no longer burdened by the weight of their own desires, is freed to love and care for others.

As David's pride died, his humble faith began to live, and the overflow of his contentment was to plead with his people to learn from his mistakes: "O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forevermore," he says.

It's as if David is saying, "Don't put your hope in things that won't last. Stop pursuing impossibilities and start pursuing certainties. Hope in God, who we know is unchanging and good and loving. Don't get impatient and move forward without him."

Eugene Peterson paraphrased verse 3 this way: “Wait, Israel, for God. Wait with hope. Hope now; hope always!”

God gives us hope for the next phase, the next doctor’s appointment, the next meeting, the next day, even the next life.

But we can’t have God’s hope if we trust the world more than him.

What do you trust more than God?

What is it you look forward to and long for?

In whatever circumstances you find yourself, is your hope in the situation getting resolved, or is it in Christ’s promise to work all things for the good of those who are in him?

Is your hope in your own comfort, or in Christ’s promise to make all things new?

Is your hope in self-help books and strategies, or the God who calls us to die to ourselves so we can live in him?

Whatever worldly things you’re trusting more than God, lay them down at Jesus’ feet, and take up the easy yoke of following him instead.

Because his burden is light, and he is lowly and gentle in heart.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 11:29

Doesn't that sound better than anxiety and stress and carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders?

David's words, here in verse 3, show us that he has given up hope in the things which are seen, and therefore he values those things which are *not* seen, except by the eyes of hope.

In his notes on Psalm 131, Charles Spurgeon writes,

**"When we cease to hanker for the world, we begin hoping for the Lord."**

What the Holy Spirit is telling us through David's words is that the man or woman of God will learn to trust their Lord when he or she renounces the world and lives by and for God alone.

## Look to Jesus

There is only one man who never hankered, never longed, for the world; only one man who completely renounced the world and lived by and for God alone.

That man was Jesus.

No one has had a humility before and in the Lord like Jesus, who was lowly in heart and, though he was God in the flesh, came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life away as a ransom for many<sup>6</sup> — including you.

No one has hushed themselves before and in the Lord like Jesus, who, though terrified of the agony that awaited him in crucifixion, said to his Father, “Not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22:42), then allowed himself to be led silently towards a Roman cross, like a sheep to the slaughter, so he could pay the price for your sins and mine.

No one has hoped before and in the Lord like Jesus, who professed multiple times throughout the gospel accounts of his life that he would be condemned as a criminal, killed on a cross, and buried. But his hope was in his resurrection, which he continually told his disciples would take place three days after his burial — and spoiler alert: it did.

The only way for you to stop trusting the world and start trusting God is to do what Jesus did: pick up your cross every day and follow the Lord of hope wherever he leads you.

That daily dying requires a humility, a hush, and a hope before and in the Lord.

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; John 13:1-17

# Conclusion

Remember my story earlier about how I was fasting from different sources of distraction, and that I had gone nine days and nothing had changed?

Well, everything changed on day ten.

That day, I was driving to work in silence, just as I had the previous nine days, when the problem I was terrified to address — telling my boss it was time for me to move on without knowing where I was going — resurfaced in my mind.

Just a day before, that thought sent my blood pressure through the roof.

But this time, the thought wasn't unwelcome. And as soon as it arose, I felt a peace about it like I hadn't experienced before.

I didn't hear the audible voice of God, but I knew at that moment exactly what I was going to do: I was going to schedule a meeting with my pastor and tell him what was going on; tell him that I was ready to move on, but I didn't know where I was going or what I would be doing.

That was usually the point where I started getting cold sweats and a racing heart. But this time was different.

None of that happened, because I knew that whatever happened, God would have me. That he would care for me. That he would be *with* me.

For the first time, I trusted the Lord with the outcome of that situation.

I didn't fret that I would be unemployed and go broke and lose my home. I didn't turn over a million possible scenarios in my mind about what I or some other person might say.

I just trusted God.

I wish I could say that tranquility has lasted, but I've relapsed many times since then. I am calmer and quieter than I've ever been, but I have a long way to go in trusting the Lord in every area of my life.

But what about you? What do you need to trust God with today? What are you trying to control on your own?

- Do you trust God with your work situation?
- Do you trust God with your children's future?
- Do you trust God with your health?
- Do you trust God with your marriage? Or your singleness?

Whatever it is, trusting God with it will require a humility, a hush, and a hope before and in the Lord.

Spurgeon wrote that Psalm 131 is like a pearl that will beautifully adorn the neck of patience.

Be patient, church. Hope in the Lord from this time forth and forevermore.

Trust in Jesus — surrender to him whatever it is you're trying to do without him — and let Jesus adorn you with a calm and quiet soul.