

“Great and Wonderful Things”

Psalm 131

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Once when I was researching this psalm in the Calvin College library, I found a book by a man named Albertus Pieters called “Psalms in Human Experience” – copyright 1942. In his little chapter on this little psalm, he told about how he assigned this psalm to a group of seminary boys. The next day, when the class came back together, one student said, “I have looked over this psalm, but I see very little in it. Why was this assigned for study?” And Albertus said to him, “I did not expect you to find much in it, for this is not a young man’s psalm. /pause/ It is an old man’s psalm.” An OLD MAN’S PSALM?! I laughed out loud and took it to the check-out desk to see what else Mr. Pieters had to say! An old *man’s* psalm? This isn’t an old man’s psalm! This isn’t a man’s psalm at all! If this psalm belongs to anyone, it belongs to a mother! Being a mother who has now weaned three daughters, I would think that.

But it’s not just because I’m a mother that this strikes me as a mother’s psalm. There are several theologians who believe that this psalm – although attributed to David – may have originally come from the mouth of a woman who sung this song as a pilgrim on the way up to Jerusalem. Can you see her - walking slowly on the dusty road? Her little boy’s chubby legs are too short to keep pace. And so although he would like to waddle next to her – three steps to each one of hers - she scoops him up in her strong, familiar arms and she carries him – carries him to Jerusalem – carries him with her to worship God in the temple. In the heat of the afternoon, they rest beneath a tree and she sings (in the service, Kathryn Vilela sang the song she wrote based on this psalm):

*My heart is not proud, Lord,
my eyes are not haughty;
I do not concern myself with great matters
or things too wonderful for me.
But I have calmed and quieted myself,
I am like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child I am content.
Israel, put your hope in the Lord
both now and forevermore.*

Before a child is weaned, she is basically an extension of her mom, or her mom is an extension of her. Baby cries and mom jumps to change her or soothe or feed her. I remember how this was especially when my daughters were wee infants. Their cries could get me to do anything. And if she was hungry, their cries were especially unrelenting. She'd take one look at me and wail.

My friend, Meika, kept a blog of her adventures in mothering. When her daughter, Chloe, was less than 3 weeks old, she wrote a reflection on Psalm 131. The blog post started with this title and this picture.



This psalm came to mind in contrast with Chloe's typical feeding behavior, especially in the last few days. Another translation represents the last line of verse 2 as, "like a weaned child I am content." So far from that is Chloe! Her hunger cues aren't too demanding until she's in position. Then, it seems, she suddenly realizes that it's time to eat, and she's hungry, she's hungry, she's HUNGRY HUNGRY HUNGRY HUNGRY HUNGRY HUNGRY HUNGRY HUNGRY!!!!!!! And she always has been, she always will be, and she is starving nigh unto death!!! When the blessed breast, the Giver of Milk, does appear, she approaches it with such desperation that she nearly misses her meal - fists flying, she hits herself in the face and more often than not ends up latching onto a fist, only spit it out screaming when it refuses to provide her with the much-desired milk.

At not-quite-three-weeks of age, she has yet to learn to trust us. Of course we'll feed her; always. But she doesn't know this yet - and that's okay. She has plenty of time to learn. Will the same type of frantic desperation still be okay in six months, or a year? Well, no; in fact, it may be a cause for concern. Not because we're any less willing to feed her, but because by that time she can be reasonably expected to know that she can trust us to feed her and to calm herself accordingly.

Here is a picture of a weaned child. (Samara, just as she was being weaned, actually)



The Hebrew root word that ‘weaned child’ comes from in this psalm is *gamal* which means “to be dealt with bountifully.” A weaned child has been dealt with so bountifully, so fully, that she no longer needs to nurse. A weaned child has been so taken care of so completely that he is now content and he can sit on his mother’s lap – in peace. He sits there quietly – not demanding anything – just being there – with his mom – by choice.

The relationship reaches a whole new level. Mom is not just a milk machine anymore. He knows his mom will meet his needs without him howling about it. There’s a different kind of love – a freer kind of love – a more peaceful kind of love.

The singer of this song says that she is like that. What is it like to be with God like a weaned child with her mother?

Like a weaned child with her mother, you are content with God. You have been dealt with bountifully.

Like a weaned child in his mother’s arms, you are quiet and calm with God. You are not yelling for more. You are not yelling for something else. You are not afraid.

Like a weaned child, you are just beginning to come in to who you are – you’re recognizing your limits. You know there are places that your heart and your eyes can’t reach. You know that there are things too great and too wonderful to comprehend.

Or do you? Do we? Do we know our limits? Do weaned children know their limits? You know, when a child has just been weaned, they’re at the point in life when they’re trying to

figure out who they are apart from their mom and dad. They're reaching for stuff... trying out their independence. Those of you in this room who are parents remember back when others of you in this room were becoming your own little people. It took forever to feed you because you were determined to feed yourself – pinching cooked carrots and little pieces of toast between your fingers. You let go of Mom's fingers and took your first steps towards Dad. You emptied all of the Tupperware out of the cupboard and found a wooden spoon to bang on pots and pans. You took the cordless phone off the couch and threw it in the toilet.



Weaned children are often looking above and beyond where their hands can reach. Even when a child is weaned, she is not always content to stay in the play pen, to walk next to her mother. There is always something else that looks pretty great and pretty marvelous - *just* around the corner.

And the same is true of adults – we occupy ourselves with great and wonderful things. After all, we were created in God's image by a creative God and he made us to create as well – to discover and invent and to take care of his world.

- Venters with their orthotics and prosthetics... inventing things to help people walk better.
- Our kids – track and field...
- Kathryn – writing music
- Courtney deKroon – coming up with ideas for how people in this community of all abilities can befriend one another
- Steve Ryan – restoring an old house

- Victoria White – a young mom with a beautiful little boy – wanting to become a funeral director.
- Vision 1 – becoming a restorative church.

Epic things! Great and wonderful things!

So we occupy ourselves with the great and wonderful – and we’ve been created to do so.

But you know what – there’s a limit. And it is so refreshing to be around people who know that limit. Some of my best professors in seminary and college were the professors who knew how to say, “I don’t know.” Now, sometimes they said ‘I don’t know’ because they hadn’t done the study or it wasn’t their area of expertise – that’s a perfectly good reason to say ‘I don’t know.’ But sometimes they’d say, ‘I don’t know’ because they didn’t know and they knew for certain that they’d never know. And they were OK with that.

Because, you see, as sharp as your mind is, it will never pierce the fabric of the future. And as clearly as your eyes can see – you will never be able to see the whole picture. And as deep as the well of your heart is, it will never be deep enough to hold all of the pain and all of the wondering and all of the questions in this world.

And do you know what the greatest and most wonderful thing of all is? God. God knows. God is there. God is out there beyond the edges of our human limitations. God is there in the future. God alone can see the whole picture. The well of his heart is deep. And high and long and wide. He is the creator and the sustainer and the redeemer and in Him all things hold together. That God is out there, in the beyond – in charge of and keeping track of all the great and wonderful things.

And that God is also right here in our midst. He is with us as we wean ourselves... as we try new foods and learn to chew, as we pull things out of cupboards and explore, as we throw things to see what will happen, as we scrape our knees and bump our heads.... And God is waiting for us to rest – to climb on God’s lap like a child – like a weaned child with her mom.



Psalm 131 – Hope Olsen

Perhaps Albertus Pieters was right. This psalm *is* for old men – for men who have been to the beyond and back and know that they can only go so far. But it’s also for young men and young women who are on the brink of the great and wonderful. And this song is for anyone who has ever been a parent – for anyone who has ever been a child – for all who know what it means to be a child of God... and for all who have learned from Jesus that in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, one must become like a little child....

O Israel, hope in the Lord. From this time on and forever more.