

**Big idea:** Where is my hope? Where is my rest?

**FCF:**

**Application:**

At times like this, as we close out a year unlike anything many of us have every experienced, it is worth pausing and asking, ‘What has sustained me? What has given me both momentum and rest? Where has my hope been established this year?’

The numerous articles that have emerged in newspapers and newsfeeds over the last few days, looking back over the year, have nominated all sorts of answers to these questions – humanity, science, co-operation, our national psyche, habits and routines, hobbies, familiar things, family, relationships, community. And the recent spike in COVID in Sydney has exposed some of these, and their frailty. As someone wise close to me said, ‘If your hope was in the holiday season to be..., well...’.

Well, where is our hope? Where is our rest? What sustains us?

PRAY...

### **1. The ascent... (title)**

Titles are so important. It is one of the things I love about decent crime fiction – the title is often as much fun to understand as the crime – and sometimes equally enlightening.

This is no different with a psalm.

Now, a psalm is a poem, and often a song. The poetry of God's people was compiled as a book sometime after they came to their land, from exile. But the psalms themselves seem to have been written across a vast amount of time – from the time of Moses, right into the period when God's people were exiled from their land, under God's judgement. Compiled after God's people returned to their land, the book of Psalms was meant to be used by God's people as they gathered in corporate community – to put it simply, this is the hymnbook of the Bible.

Organised into five books, the psalms range across the vast plain of human experience and emotion. At their heart, they are a response to the world lived in by dwelling with God, in refuge with him, dependent upon God's revelation of himself in his word.

Towards the end of the book are a set of psalms titled 'songs of ascents' – Psalms 120-134.

This title is debated, and discussed, but at least this much seems clear – they were sung by God's people as they walked up to the Temple in Jerusalem, gathering as a community in the presence of God. The Temple was the huge building that symbolized God dwelling with his people. It was also the place of sacrifice – the symbol that something significant stood between God and his people, stopping their dwelling together as they should. The walk to the Temple, in Jerusalem, was up a hill – hence, 'ascents'.

This image is one we need to capture in our minds – the image of God's people streaming in, for one of the key festivals in the life of God's people. As they come streaming in, from their homes, their

villages, stretched out on the roads, these are the songs that they would have sung. Lifting their eyes to the top of the hill, to that great symbol of God's desire to live his people, and the sin – the attitude and action that said in each heart, 'I am God and God is not' – that kept them separate, and the symbol of sacrifice that displayed both the cost of sin and the cost of God's forgiveness – lifting their eyes, they would have sung as they gazed at the Temple.

However, that is not all to the title, is it?

This psalm is ascribed to David – it is 'Davidic'.

Remember David? Described by God as 'a man after my own heart', he was chosen by God to lead his people. Taken from the humble place of the youngest son, shepherd in the paddock, showered by God's gracious promise to send the king of the universe from his own family line (someone who would be God's own Son!), David had been the greatest of the kings of God's people – brave, poetic, emotional, mercurial, violent and gentle, he was a man who had known the heights of kingly authority and success, and the depths of sin's consequences from his own life.

That is some title, isn't it?

A song composed by the greatest of God's kings of his people, to be sung as God's people gather together, in Jerusalem, at the symbol of God's desire to dwell with his mob.

## 2. Humility (vs.1)

The poem itself is quite simple – three short verses, with imagery that resonates deeply with our experiences in life.

The first verse gives an honest assessment of the psalmist, and of those singing the psalm – **look at verse 1... READ.**

We need to keep the image we have just been given by the title of the psalm – God's people singing this song as they climb the hill into Jerusalem, to gather as God's mob. As they climb the hill, they lift their gaze, and there stands this massive symbol of God's dwelling with his people, there stands the place of sacrifice, there stands the reminder of who God's people are.

And such a reminder creates a statement of humility in the psalmist – 'Now I am reminded of who I am'. It is expressed in a series of three 'nots' – 'not proud', 'not haughty' (arrogant), 'not involved with things too great or too difficult for me'.

In essence, this is a statement of limits – it is a recognition of the limits humans have. Faced by the magnificence of the symbol of God's place with his mob, the psalmist states clearly, 'I am limited'.

This is what humility is – a realistic assessment of who I am before God (REPEAT).

But this statement goes further than just, 'I am so little'. You see, the last 'not' literally means, 'I have not occupied myself with great matters, with things too wondrous for me'. Those words translated 'great matters' and 'wondrous things' are applied to the works of

God alone – in Psalm 86:10, 136:4, 145:5-6. I suspect the psalmist recognizes not just his limits, but also his tendency to think that he has no limits. I think that the psalmist here is confessing his sin – that he has the tendency and desire to seek to do the things of God, when they are the province of God alone. In this sense, he is confessing, confronted by the symbol of God dwelling with his mob, that he has stretched too far, seeking to be God instead of God.

### **3. Dependence (vs.2)**

This leads to a statement of repentance – **look at verse 2... READ.**

‘Instead’ – a statement of contrast, what follows is the result of this recognition of humility, this statement of confession. ‘Instead’ of attempting to be God, what does the psalmist decide?

Repentance is to turn from attempting to be God instead of God, and to turn to God being God (REPEAT). ‘Instead’ here displays that turning – what does it look like?

Images are so powerful when they touch on our everyday life. Paul Kelly’s song, ‘How to make gravy’, is heartbreaking in the way in which it uses the making of gravy to highlight the pain of Christmas separated by brokenness.

The image that the psalmist chooses here to describe the life of repentance is one we are so familiar with – the image of a satisfied and quieted child crawling into its parents’ arms, and snuggling in – dependent, filled, secure. That is what the psalmist commits to – ‘instead’ of aspiring to, grasping at, what only God alone can do and be.

#### **4. The LORD (vs.3)**

The psalmist, confronted by their own limits, confessing their aspirations that are beyond what they are made for, humbled, and now repentant, turns to dependence in God alone – and urges those with him, God’s mob, to do the same – **look at verse 3... READ.**

Faced by the Temple, and all that he has bared in his soul, the psalmist calls God’s people to join him in depending upon the LORD alone. His choice of God’s name is purposeful, and revealing – ‘the LORD’ is the covenantal name of God.. It is meant to cast the minds of the readers and listeners back to the history of God across time – the God who made humans in his image (Genesis 2), the God who came into the Garden as humans sinned and rejected him (Genesis 3) and confronted their sin in grace and justice and committed to crushing the snake, the God who came to Abraham as he worshipped an idol and committed to rolling back sin and bringing blessing through his family (Genesis 12), the God who rescued his people so that they could be his people and represent him to the world (Genesis 19), the God who took David from the paddock to the palace and committed to making him a ‘house’ for his name through David’s descendant who would be God’s Son (2 Samuel 7).

The track-record of the LORD is one of complete and utter consistency, in commitment and dependability. It is into the arms of this LORD that the psalmist has crawled as a dependent child. And the Temple has reminded him, as he walks up to it, of this consistent commitment. His personal response leads to the corporate call – God’s people should hope in the LORD alone,

because the LORD alone can be depended upon – just look at his works!

## **5. BUT...**

That is such a marvellously simple statement of truth – a statement of humility, of confession and repentance, of dependence and of a call to God's mob. But, can I sing this song?

On a number of levels, I struggle to know how this song can be mine?

On a purely superficial level, I am not with the psalmist as he walks up that hill to Jerusalem. I am separated by culture and climate and geography and time.

On a slightly deeper level, I know that even the author to whom this psalm is attributed struggled with singing the very psalm he wrote – just look at David's life! At significant moments, this man aspired to 'great works' – to be God instead of God. And it destroyed so much. If even the psalmist struggled with singing this psalm in their life, what hope do I have?

On the deepest level, I know that my heart is constantly seeking to be God instead of God – it is my natural instinct. And it is so tiring, but so irresistible – I want to bother myself with 'great works' and 'wondrous deeds', so people know how great I am, how I can do God better than God.

This year, of all years – and it is a reality every year – the agitation that comes from such pride, such misplaced hope, has been stark and clear – and never more clearly revealed as futile.

It is the perennial problem we humans face – and it is the problem stated by the mere presence of the Temple – we want to be God, and it fails consistently, and God wants to dwell with us so we can be whole, and these clash and we are separated from him.

So, how can I sing this psalm? How might this problem be dealt with...?

## **6. Jesus...**

The reason anyone can sing this psalm is because God kept his promise to Abraham and David... **listen to Matthew 1:1... READ.**

Jesus is the one promised by God to both roll back sin and bring blessing, and rule the world as God's chosen king. And in that, he is the end-point of what God speaks throughout the Old Testament. Let me even blunter: Jesus IS Psalm 131.

In humility, Jesus knows his place in the world, his place before God – **listen to Mark 10:45... READ.**

In dependence, Jesus constantly threw himself into his Father's arms... **Matthew 14:23... Matthew 26:39... Luke 23:46... READ.**

In his trust in God, Jesus always committed his way to the LORD – think of his baptism and then his temptation in the wilderness – Luke 3-4...

On every level, Jesus was what God's people should have been. More deeply, Jesus is what we humans should be: he understood that, before God, he was dependent upon his Father, and so he lived by trusting in the LORD. His hope was in the LORD alone.

This took him from heaven to earth, from the cradle to the life we should have lived, to the cross, where he died for sinners, to the resurrection where he showed that everything that God promised (that was symbolized by the Temple) had been achieved. God could dwell with his people because Jesus had been his people for them – he had borne their sin by depending upon the Father as they should have.

This is why anyone can sing this psalm: because Jesus is this psalm.

## **7. So... you/us...**

Listen again to Jesus' statement about the type of people who will dwell with God, in his presence – **Matthew 19:13-15... READ.**

In essence, Jesus is inviting people to come to him because he is the one who is Psalm 131 – to come to Jesus, is to recognize our sin, to recognize our need to depend, and to hope in him alone, like a child in the arms of their parent, quieted, and satisfied.

How can I sing this psalm? By dealing with Jesus – by depending upon him because he IS Psalm 131 for me.

That, in turn, takes us back to our opening question – what do we depend upon? What do we hope in? What sustains us?

This psalm lays out two very clear options.

On the one hand, we have the option of agitation – of seeking the ‘great words’ and ‘wondrous deeds’ that God alone can do. We can exercise the pride that walks before God, and says, ‘God, I can do a better job’. And this will bring with it all the agitation, stress, and failure that comes from trying to be God when we are not.

On the other hand, we can be humbled, confess, repent, and throw ourselves upon Jesus, who is the one who lived this psalm for us so that he could die for us, and rise.

Only this second option will navigate all that life in this broken world delivers and lays at our feet. Only this second option will deal with who we truly are, and what this world is truly like. Only this second option will lead to rest in this restless world.

What does this look like?

Well, I think it is as simple as three simple things:

- Time in God’s word
- Time praying God’s word
- Time with God’s mob

The consequence will be a constant humbling, a constant refreshing, a constant resting, a constant trusting...