

What To Do In Suffering

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 January 2014

Preacher: Jason Webb

[0:00] If you'd please turn your Bibles to Psalm 131. It's been a while, but in these afternoons, as I have opportunity, we've been making our way through the songs of ascent.

That's Psalms 120 through 134. You remember, these are sort of hitchhiker's guide, traveler's guide to the Christian life.

There's something of a progress from far away from Jerusalem until in Psalm 134 you end up in the temple worshipping God.

And that is a picture of your life, Christian. You begin it far away, and you end it right in the city of God, with God, in his temple.

And just to point out what a fantastic journey the Christian life is. So many people are not on this road, and it is a narrow road, and it's a hard road.

[1:07] But what a journey, because we're going to such a city, we're going to such a God. In Psalm 130, which we looked at a number of months ago, the question was, I have sinned, so what do I do?

And the answer was cry, and hope, and wait. Now Psalm 131, the question is now something different.

It is, I am suffering, and I don't understand. What do I do? So Psalm 131, it doesn't say what kind of suffering.

It's not specific at all. It might be big. It might be little. It might just be uncertainty about what to do.

And that, too, is a form of suffering.

But it's a perplexing suffering. It's confusing. There's these questions of, I don't understand why. But it is dark, and I hurt. So that's what Psalm 131 is about.

[2:15] What do I do in times like that? Let's read it, and we'll see what David says. My heart is not proud, O Lord. My eyes are not haughty.

I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have stilled and quieted my soul like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.

O Israel, put your hope in the Lord, both now and forevermore. Well, what do you do when you're suffering and you're in confusion?

I just have four points, and they all will be fairly brief. And the first is that you talk to God. You talk to God. What does David do in his suffering?

Well, you see, my heart is not proud, O Lord. I don't want to belabor this point, but sometimes I think we can complicate things. And when we're suffering, we spend too much time analyzing and too much time pondering and figuring and adding and subtracting and trying to get to the bottom line of understanding why, trying to make it all come out to our satisfaction.

[3:34] And we all do this. We can do this situational analysis, and we can do this self-analysis, and we do it because we think it will help us. And perhaps to a certain degree it will help us as long as we're thinking God's thoughts after him.

But the bottom line is that analysis is no substitute for prayer. It's no substitute for seeking God.

And so we sit there with our calculators, as it were, and we punch and we punch, and we never get to God. We think if we do more figuring, we'll be able to solve our suffering.

But the Bible again and again shows us that analysis is no substitute for prayer. David is now done analyzing, and now he is praying.

And so are you suffering? Are you perplexed? Well, put down your calculator, put away your flow chart, and kneel and pray.

[4:41] That's what David did. And David was a man after God's own heart. He shows us a good example. Now, that's our first point. Our second point is, humble yourself.

Humble yourself. My heart is not proud, O Lord. My eyes are not haughty. I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me.

So David is suffering, and now he humbles himself. He says, my eyes are not haughty. I'm not looking down on other people. I'm not looking into matters too high for me.

I've lowered my eyes. I'm not looking into things too wonderful for me. And the word there where it says, I'm not concerned myself, in the second part of verse one, I do not concern myself with great matters.

It's the word to walk. I'm not walking in these matters. Now, so that's a picture of what we can be like, and this is a picture of what David is not doing.

[5:43] So we have a tendency when we are suffering to, we pace over it. We can literally physically pace, or even in our minds.

We pace over the matters again and again. We start at it from one direction, and we look at it, and we walk through it, and we get nowhere. And so we put down that side of things, and we take it up from another side, and we walk through it that way.

That's what he's saying. I don't concern myself with these things. I'm done walking through them. And naturally, that's how we do things.

David, and David calls that pride. When you're not willing to say, this is too much for me. When you're not willing to say, Lord, I don't understand, and I don't need to understand.

I am in your hands. Proud hearts think they are always able to understand. And a proud heart demands out, and if they can't get out of this situation, they demand to know why.

[6:53] There's something of a forcefulness, of a personal, Lord, if you can't tell me, if you can't relieve me from the suffering, at least you owe me an explanation. And David has turned away from all that, and he's humbled himself.

He comes to grips with reality. God is God. He does not owe me an explanation.

He doesn't owe me an answer. He plants his footsteps in the sea, we sing. So the waves go over, and you can't see the footprints of the Lord.

And so David says, you don't owe me an answer, and I wouldn't necessarily understand if you told me. And so here I am, Lord. I am the potter. You are the clay.

Your thoughts are too wonderful for me. I can't understand you, but I trust you. I'm trusting you. I'm in your hands. Jonathan Edwards was a forward-thinking man.

[7:55] He was fascinated with the new science that was starting to percolate in the world in his time. He loved that.

And when he heard the possibility of a smallpox vaccine, he thought, well, that's a good idea. And he wanted to encourage other people to take this vaccine. And so he was vaccinated for smallpox. And a few days later, he developed a sore throat. And a few weeks later, he entered his eternal rest.

He wasn't old. He had many children. He had many years of future usefulness apparently ahead of him. And Sarah, his wife, then was left with her family.

And she was left with the difficult task of writing to her children and telling them what has happened. So Sarah wrote a difficult note to their daughter, Esther, telling her of her father's death.

[8:55] And in that note, she wrote this. What shall I say? A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud. Oh, that we may kiss the rod and lay our hands on our mouths.

The Lord has done it. He has made me adore his goodness that we had him so long. But my God lives and he has my heart.

That's Psalm 131. That's a picture of it. And so let's learn a lesson from our sister Sarah Edwards. No endless questions. No endless words.

No endless analysis. The Lord has done it. My God lives and he has my heart. And so pray. And then humble yourself.

And then third. Calm yourself. Calm yourself. Verse 2. But I've stilled and quieted my soul like a weaned child with its mother. Like a weaned child is my soul within me.

[9:59] Now the second half of that verse, it tells us the state of his soul. His soul is still. It's calm. It's the picture of a toddler that's been weaned.

That is not fussing and flailing and crying for milk. It's a stilled soul. Now, how did David come to that place? How did he get to that condition in his heart?

Well, the first part of that verse tells us, I have stilled and quieted my soul. I have done it.

It doesn't say God did it. No, David says, I have done it. I have composed myself. I have calmed myself. Yes, I want something.

Yes, I want out. I want the suffering to end. I'm hurting. I want my demands met. But I'm like a child. I'm like a child who wants milk.

[10:57] But I'm not crying and fussing and angry because I'm not getting what I wanted. I'm sitting here on my mother's lap. And I'm not out of control.

I've stilled myself. And again, we're faced with this reality and this truth from the word of God. When we are faced in these painful situations, there is something for us to do.

And a lot of times in our immaturity, we think that our pain and our suffering excuses us from responsibility. That now there's been an excuse note written and I can do whatever I want and I can act and feel however I want.

And that is the natural reaction. To flail, to fuss, to cry, to scream, to let our desires control us. I want milk. I want it now. You owe it to me. You have to give it to me.

But, you know, all that flailing and all that fussing and complaining, it doesn't actually help. It doesn't actually help the situation.

[12:03] It only makes it worse. So you've seen a flailing, fussing toddler that wants milk. And now they're upset. And now they're really upset. And now they are unconsolable.

You can't talk to them. You can't calm them down. And if they keep going, they go into hysterics. And you can't just get it out of your system.

And so the Bible is very practical and very real and very clear. Remember, when we are in these situations, we have to take ourselves in hand.

We have to take ourselves in hand. We are responsible for ourselves. And no amount of throwing a tantrum and no amount of anyone saying, well, God understands and you need to get it out of your system is the answer.

The Bible doesn't say that. Is that mean? Is that harsh? Is that insensitive? No. It's for our good. Because only when we have calmed ourselves are we in a position to hear and to believe God's word for us.

[13:11] But when we're hysterical and out of control, then God's word bounces off of us. And it takes the spirit of God himself to penetrate and to subdue us when we're out of control.

But David isn't getting to that place. He is saying, no, I've calmed and stilled my heart. It's for our good. But it's also what it means to grow up.

To go from a baby who has no control over himself to being a young child who has controlled himself. And God doesn't want us to stay fussy babies forever.

He wants us to grow up. He wants us to learn self-control. He wants to give us an opportunity to practice those graces that we long for. The patience and the self-control and the holiness and the gentleness.

Those sort of graces, they need opportunities to be exercised. And so that's one of the great reasons why we suffer.

[14:16] And sometimes God doesn't give us the reason why we're suffering. God isn't on vacation. God isn't an absentee father at those times. God is actively parenting us in those situations.

That is God saying, now is the time to trust. Now is the time to exercise those graces that I've been telling you about. Now is the time to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now is the time to put those things into practice. Now is time to believe what you say you believe.

And if we don't have those times of suffering, if we don't have those times of I'm in the dark, then we don't have the times to grow.

And God wants us to grow. That's what he's after. He's more committed to our holiness and our sanctification than we are. And so he puts us in these situations. So God isn't on vacation.

He's present. He has purposes. He's at work. He has reasons for what he's doing. And you can trust that they're good. So the word is then, if those things are true, don't lose control.

[15:27] Calm yourself. I've still quieted my soul, taken myself in hand. Yes, I have desires. But they are not controlling me. I am controlling them.

Now fourth, hope in the Lord. Hope in the Lord. Verse 3, O Israel, put your hope in the Lord both now and forevermore. So it's dark. You're confused.

You're in pain. You're unsure of the future. You understand the situation. You've humbled yourself. You've calmed yourself. Now is the time to actively act hope in the Lord.

Not just wait for hope to arise in your soul, but to look actively to the Lord for deliverance, for help, for mercy. It says hope in the Lord.

When the Old Testament uses all capital letters for the name Lord, that is his covenant name, Yahweh. It's the name that he gave himself when he took Israel to be his people.

[16 : 31] And when he said to Moses, tell them that Yahweh sent you. So David here is saying, put your hope in the Lord. And so dear Christian, through Jesus Christ, you are in covenant with the same God.

Through Jesus Christ, you can call on the name of the Lord as your covenant God. And what that means is he has promised to be your God.

He has promised that whatever he is, he will be for you. Whatever attribute he possesses, it will be for your good.

That's what it means to be in covenant and friendship with God. And so there's everything in God that would encourage us, that would inspire us, that would bring out and call forth our hope.

So he's strong. He is strong. And so when we are weak, and we look at ourselves and we don't have any strength, those situations, those circumstances are calling for us to look to the Lord, to find that he is strong when we are weak.

[17 : 44] And so your Father can save you. Your Father can protect you. Your Father is in complete control. Nothing crosses your path. Without his permission, he's strong.

But he's also wise. Just because you don't see the reason for the suffering, doesn't mean that God doesn't see the reasons for it. He's wiser than we are. And so you can be sure that he has reasons, he has purposes, he has ends, he is achieving in your sufferings.

But strength and wisdom are one thing. But what puts the sweetness into his strength?

What puts the sweetness into his wisdom is his goodness. And so, dear Christian, it's also the gospel that calls us to hope in the Lord.

Because Jesus Christ, because of Jesus Christ, you are at peace with God. And now, he has nothing but grace for you. He has nothing but goodness and love for you.

[18 : 53] Now, sometimes that goodness and love will take the form of discipline and displeasure for your sin. But it's always the Father's displeasure. When we sin, we sin against our Father.

And you can come to a Father and ask for forgiveness. And parents, you know that. You might be displeased with your children. But what you long for them to do is come back and be reconciled to you.

And that is God, the Father's heart. He wants the prodigal son to come home. So what am I saying? Is this, that there's every reason in who God is and what he has done in Jesus Christ for us to hope in him.

And so, let me ask you, as we conclude, can you relate to David in Psalm 131?

Could you take these words and you could say, yes, I know what it means. I know, I know what these words are. I've experienced them. I've lived them. And by the grace of God, I've understood what it means to take my eyes off myself and turn my eyes on the Lord.

[20 : 08] Or are you still stuck on self? Someone rewrote Psalm 131 and put it into the words of a person that was stuck on themselves.

That their eyes were still stuck on who they were. And this is how he wrote it. Instead of addressing the Lord, this is how he begins. Self, my heart is proud.

Lord, I'm absorbed with myself. And my eyes are haughty. I look down on other people. And I chase after things too great and too difficult for me.

So, of course, I'm noisy and restless inside. It comes naturally like a hungry infant fussing on his mother's lap. Like a hungry infant, I'm restless with my demands and my worries.

I scatter my hopes onto anything and everybody all the time. Is that you? Restless in your demands.

[21 : 13] Forever unhappy. You will stay that way. Both now and forever. You'll be unhappy in life and unhappy in death.

Restless in life and restless in death. Nothing will ever satisfy you until you turn your eyes away from yourself and look to the Lord who sent the Lord Jesus Christ to be our Savior.

St. Augustine said, That our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee. And so, for your own sake, humble yourself. Calm yourself.
And hope in the Lord. Come to God, believing in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ.