

THE PILGRIMAGE BEGINS

WEEK ONE

THEME: Psalm 131 is contained in a selection of Psalms known as the Psalms of Ascent, or Pilgrimage Psalms. These songs were often sung by the people of Israel as they journeyed to Jerusalem to celebrate the festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Psalm 131 is a part of a spiritual pilgrimage that moves us from our own self-reliance to our confident hope in Jesus.

WATCH VIDEO: *Calm. Quiet. Hope. Trust. Episode 1: A Personal Introduction*
Watch this week's video before the small group gathering.

Consider these questions:

- Do you relate to Dave's experience? Have you ever felt burned out, dried up, or numb in your faith?
- What significance does the concept of calm have in your life?
- As you listened to the reading of Psalm 131, what words, phrases, concepts, or emotions resonated with your soul?

SMALL GROUP SESSION ONE: THE PSALM OF ASCENT

ICEBREAKER: Each week the discussion begins with a question that allows the group to share from their own personal experiences.

Main Question: What is your favorite movie soundtrack?

Follow-up Questions: How does a soundtrack set the mood for the film? How does it enhance your experience in the film?

VIDEO DISCUSSION: Discuss themes found in this week's video.

Discuss:

- How does Dave's admission of being on the verge of burnout relate to your spiritual journey?
- What, if anything, brought you out of the dry wilderness?
- How does the theme of *Calm. Quiet. Hope. Trust.* resonate with you?

INTRODUCTION TO THE PSALMS

The Psalms are the worship hymnal for the people of Israel during the time of Jesus. It contains 150 songs written by a variety of authors including David, Moses, Solomon, Asaph, Herman and more. "The psalms, which were meant to be sung, are a timeless resource for the people of God in their worship."⁴

Discuss:

- What is your favorite Psalm? What makes this Psalm significant to you?

NOTES: Jot down other people's favorite Psalms. Take some time over the next week to read them.

QUOTE: Melissa Cousins

The Psalms invite us into an experience of conversing with God, and with one another about God, and it is from this conversational experience that theology is shaped."⁵

Discuss:

- How have Psalms enhanced your prayer life?
- How have Psalms molded your interactions with other Christians?
- How have Psalms shaped your theology?

QUOTE: Melissa Cousins

Psalms are not intended to be merely read, recited or sung. They are to be performed, or perhaps better enacted there to be embodied. Those who participate in their use thereby have their understanding of the world in which they live reframed or reshaped."⁶

Discuss:

- What is the difference between "read, recited, sung" and "performed, enacted, embodied?"
- How would experiencing the psalm "performed, enacted, embodied" reshape or reframe your faith?
- How can you perform, enact and embody psalms in your life?
- How can they be performed, enacted and embodied in your church community?

THE PSALMS OF ASCENT:

The Psalms of Ascent are a special collection of fifteen Psalms, 120-134, also known as Pilgrim Psalms. They were used as a soundtrack for the Jewish people going on spiritual pilgrimage. Families would travel to Jerusalem for the three Jewish festivals: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles, and sing these songs on their journey.

⁴ CSB's Everyday Study Bible: Introduction to Psalms. Pg 672

⁵ Cousins, Melissa. Conversing with the God of the Pilgrim Psalms. Pg 35

⁶ Ibid. 37

Campfire Songs: A pastor once shared that the Psalms of Ascent can be compared to campfire songs.⁷ Since it would take days, even weeks, families would travel together to Jerusalem for these celebrations. These families might gather together around the campfire for an evening devotional and sing these songs before settling in for the night.

Songs of the Steps: The Psalms of Ascent can also be called the Songs of the Steps. Along with being sung on the journey, these songs were used as a preparation for worship as worshipers made their way to the temple during these festivals. They are called Songs of the Steps because there are 15 “steps” heading into the temple. The priest and pilgrims worshipers would sing a song at each step, so of these fifteen psalms would be sung as they ascended to the temple.

Discuss:

- Imagine you were to assemble a playlist for a spiritual pilgrimage with your family. What are some songs that you might include?
- How would singing these songs together as a family help prepare you and your family for a worship celebration?
- How would singing these songs as a congregation enhance the worship experience?

QUOTE: David Baker

*We must learn to recognize and honor the pilgrimage. We must talk about departure, the anxiety of the journey and the joy of the arrival.*⁸

Discuss:

- Have you ever been on a spiritual pilgrimage? If so, briefly share your experience.
- What is the purpose of a pilgrimage?
- Why do people say that the journey is as important as the destination?

QUOTE: Melissa Cousins

*Pilgrims are on a journey, but it is not a simple or linear path. Along the way there is a broad range of possibilities and a full range of experiences of life and relationships, resulting in emotional highs and lows. There is, moreover, a sense of forward motion even throughout the ups and downs of life. Being a pilgrim means seeking rather than being comfortable, continually looking to and for something more. It also means having a destination in mind, anticipating that there is something yet to come and to be.*⁹

Discuss:

- Why is it important to know that the journey is not simple or linear?
- How do the highs and lows make the journey meaningful?
- What is the downside of being comfortable rather than seeking and continually looking?
- Why is a destination important?

⁷ <http://sherwoodfriends.org/sermons/thinking-of-others-humility>

⁸ Baker, David. Voices for the Pilgrimage: A Study in the Psalms of Ascent. Pg 116

⁹ Cousins, pg 46

QUOTE: David Baker

*The Christian faith is a pilgrimage. It is a journey from earth to heaven, from curse to blessing, from judgement to salvation, from the earthly city to the city of God.*¹⁰

Discuss:

- Have you ever considered the Christian faith as a spiritual pilgrimage?
- How might embracing this imagery help you navigate your life and faith?

OUR PILIGIRIMAGE TOGETHER:

Each week will include six elements.

The Video: The week begins with a video that introduces the theme and invites you into part of Dave's journey through Psalm 131.

The Weekly Gathering: Each week we will come together to discuss what God is teaching us, and to learn from each other along the way.

The Weekly Devotional: We dive deeper, by engaging in a five-day devotional. Each day you are invited to listen to music, engage with God's word, and spend time with Jesus through various prayer exercises.

Psalm 131 Soundtrack: I have compiled a selection of five songs, called Psalm 131 by John Michael Talbot, The Orchardist, Sarah Sparks, and Waterdeep. The songs will often begin and end your weekly devotional. Feel free to put them into your regular music rotatation.

Artistic Expression: You are invited to express what God is teaching you by stretching your creative muscles in worship. Engage in a style that connects with you or try a new form of expression. Draw, paint, write, compose, or way you feel God leading you. You will be invited each week to share your artistic expression, but you are not required to do so.

Spiritual Practice: Each week you will engage in a different prayer practice. Many of these expressions have been done for centuries as a way to connect a person's heart with the heart of God. Our practices are breathing prayer, centering prayer, Ignatian Contemplation, Ideaphoria, and lectio Divina.

THE WEEK AHEAD

Weekly Devotional:

This week we will ask you to journey through the Psalms of Ascent. For the first three days you will read five Psalms of Ascent, interacting with the verses, looking for repeated words, phrases and themes in individual psalms and the entire collection. The last two days you will meditate on Psalms 131, in order to start gaining a feel for it, which we will journey through in the weeks to come.

¹⁰ Baker, 109

As you dive into the Psalms of Ascent, you will be asked to interact with scripture by highlighting, circling, underlining, and writing in your Bible. If you do not feel comfortable doing this in your own Bible, consider printing out the passages off of the internet. You also are encouraged to write out your thoughts inspired by the day's prompt.

Artistic Expression:

Each week you are invited to process what God is teaching you through creative expression. This week, consider how the imagery of the pilgrimage inspires your personal spiritual journey. Put pencil to paper, paint to canvas, thread to needle, whatever medium you choose.

Breathing Prayer:

This week's spiritual practice is a breathing prayer. Breathe in, asking God to calm your heart. Breathe out, releasing quiet into your soul. Breathe in, filling yourself with the hope of the Lord. Breathe out, releasing control by trusting God. This practice will become a regular part of our daily devotional.

Breathe in, asking God to calm your heart.
Breathe out, releasing quiet into your soul.
Breathe in, filling yourself with the hope of the Lord.
Breath out, releasing control by trusting God.

Breathe in: Calm my heart.
Breathe out: Quiet my soul.
Breathe in: Hope in the Lord.
Breath out: Trust now and always

Breathe in: Calm.
Breathe out: Quiet.
Breathe in: Hope.
Breath out: Trust.

Calm. Quiet. Hope. Trust.

CALM, QUIET, HOPE, TRUST:

We are about to embark on a pilgrimage through Psalm 131. It is a journey of discovering who we are (proud and arrogant), who God is calling us to be (humble and content), and how to live out our faith (full of hope and trust in God). It invites us into the daily journey of surrender as we calm our hearts, quiet our souls, hope in the lord, and trust now and always.

CLOSING PRAYER: Psalm 131 (CSB)

Lord, my heart is not proud;
my eyes are not haughty.
I do not get involved with things too great
or too wondrous for me.
Instead, I have calmed and quieted my soul
like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like a weaned child.
Israel, put your hope in the Lord,
both now and forever.
AMEN!