

HUMILITY

“I’ve Kept My Feet on the Ground”

*GOD, I’m not trying to rule the roost,
I don’t want to be king of the mountain.
I haven’t meddled where I have no business
or fantasized grandiose plans.
I’ve kept my feet on the ground,
I’ve cultivated a quiet heart.
Like a baby content in its mother’s arms,
my soul is a baby content.
Wait, Israel, for GOD. Wait with hope.
Hope now; hope always!*

P S A L M 1 3 1

*Humility is the obverse side of confidence in God,
whereas pride is the obverse side of confidence in self.*

J O H N B A I L L I E

Christian faith needs continuous maintenance. It requires attending to. “If you leave a thing alone you leave it to a torrent of change. If you leave a white post alone it will soon be a black post.”¹

Every spring in my neighborhood a number of people prune their bushes and trees. It is an annual practice among people who care about growing things. It is also one of those acts that an outsider, one who does not understand how growth works, almost always misunderstands, for it always looks like an act of mutilation. It appears that you are ruining the plant when, in fact, you are helping it.

We have a rosebush that hasn’t been pruned for several years. When it first bloomed the roses were full and vigorous. Last summer the plant was larger than ever. The vines ranged up to the roof on a trellis I had made. I anticipated more roses than ever. But I was disappointed. The blossoms were small and scrawny. The branches had gotten too far from their roots. The plant couldn’t grow a healthy blossom. It needed a good pruning.

Psalm 131 is a maintenance psalm. It is functional to the person of faith as pruning is functional to the gardener: it gets rid of that which looks good to those who don’t know any better, and reduces the distance between our hearts and their roots in God.

The two things that Psalm 131 prunes away are unruly ambition and infantile dependency, what we might call getting too

big for our britches and refusing to cut the apron strings. Both of these tendencies can easily be supposed to be virtues, especially by those who are not conversant with Christian ways. If we are not careful, we will be encouraging the very things that will ruin us. We are in special and constant need of expert correction. We need pruning. Jesus said, “[God] cuts off every branch of me that doesn’t bear grapes. And every branch that is grape-bearing he prunes back so it will bear even more” (Jn 15:2). More than once our Lord the Spirit has used Psalm 131 to do this important work among his people. As we gain a familiarity with and an understanding of the psalm, he will be able to use it that way with us “so that we will bear even more.”

Aspiration Gone Crazy

“GOD, I’m not trying to rule the roost, I don’t want to be king of the mountain. I haven’t meddled where I have no business or fantasized grandiose plans. I’ve kept my feet on the ground, I’ve cultivated a quiet heart.”

These lines are enormously difficult for us to comprehend—not difficult to understand with our minds, for the words are all plain, but difficult to grasp with our emotions, feeling their truth. All cultures throw certain stumbling blocks in the way of those who pursue gospel realities. It is sheerest fantasy to suppose that we would have had an easier time of it as Christian believers if we were in another land or another time. It is no easier to be a Chinese Christian than to be a Spanish Christian than to be a Russian Christian than to be a Brazilian Christian than to be an American Christian—nor more difficult. The way of faith deals with realities in whatever time and whatever culture.

But there are differences from time to time and from place to place which cause special problems. For instance, when an ancient temptation or trial becomes an approved feature in the cul-

ture, a way of life that is expected and encouraged, Christians have a stumbling block put before them that is hard to recognize for what it is, for it has been made into a monument, gilded with bronze and bathed in decorative lights. It has become an object of veneration. But the plain fact is that it is right in the middle of the road of faith, obstructing discipleship. For all its fancy dress and honored position, it is still a stumbling block.

One temptation that has received this treatment in Western civilization, with some special flourishes in America, is ambition. Our culture encourages and rewards ambition without qualification. We are surrounded by a way of life in which betterment is understood as expansion, as acquisition, as fame. Everyone wants to get more. To be on top, no matter what it is the top of, is admired. There is nothing recent about the temptation. It is the oldest sin in the book, the one that got Adam thrown out of the garden and Lucifer tossed out of heaven. What is fairly new about it is the general admiration and approval that it receives.

The old story of Dr. Faustus used to be well known and appreciated as a warning. John Faustus became impatient with the limitations placed upon him in his study of law, medicine and theology. No matter how much he learned in these fields, he found he was always in the service of something greater than himself—of justice, of healing, of God. He chafed in the service and wanted out: he wanted to be in control, to break out of the limits of the finite. So he became an adept in magic, by which he was able to defy the laws of physics, the restrictions of morality and relations with God and use his knowledge for his own pleasures and purposes. In order to bring it off, though, he had to make a pact with the devil which permitted him to act for the next twenty-four years in a godlike way—living without limits, being in control instead of being in relationship, exercising power instead of practicing love. But at the end of the twenty-

four years came damnation.

For generations this story has been told and retold by poets and playwrights and novelists (Goethe, Marlowe, Mann) warning people against abandoning the glorious position of being a person created in the image of God and attempting the foolhardy adventure of trying to be a god on our own. But now something alarming has happened. There have always been Faustian characters, people in the community who embarked on a way of arrogance and power; now our entire culture is Faustian. We are caught up in a way of life that, instead of delighting in finding out the meaning of God and searching out the conditions in which human qualities can best be realized, recklessly seeks ways to circumvent nature, arrogantly defies personal relationships and names God only in curses. The legend of Faustus, useful for so long in pointing out the folly of a god-defying pride, now is practically unrecognizable because the assumptions of our whole society (our educational models, our economic expectations, even our popular religion) are Faustian.

It is difficult to recognize pride as a sin when it is held up on every side as a virtue, urged as profitable and rewarded as an achievement. What is described in Scripture as the basic sin, the sin of taking things into your own hands, being your own god, grabbing what is there while you can get it, is now described as basic wisdom: improve yourself by whatever means you are able; get ahead regardless of the price, take care of me first. For a limited time it works. But at the end the devil has his due. There is damnation.

It is additionally difficult to recognize unruly ambition as a sin because it has a kind of superficial relationship to the virtue of aspiration—an impatience with mediocrity and a dissatisfaction with all things created until we are at home with the Creator, the hopeful striving for the best God has for us—the kind

of thing Paul expressed: “I’ve got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I’m off and running, and I’m not turning back” (Phil 3:14). But if we take the energies that make for aspiration and remove God from the picture, replacing him with our own crudely sketched self-portrait, we end up with ugly arrogance. Robert Browning’s fine line on aspiration, “A man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?” has been distorted to “Reach for the skies and grab everything that isn’t nailed down.” Ambition is aspiration gone crazy. Aspiration is the channeled, creative energy that moves us to growth in Christ, shaping goals in the Spirit. Ambition takes these same energies for growth and development and uses them to make something tawdry and cheap, sweatily knocking together a Babel when we could be vacationing in Eden. Calvin comments, “Those who yield themselves up to the influence of ambition will soon lose themselves in a labyrinth of perplexity.”²

Our lives are lived well only when they are lived on the terms of their creation, with God loving and us being loved, with God making and us being made, with God revealing and us understanding, with God commanding and us responding. Being a Christian means accepting the terms of creation, accepting God as our maker and redeemer, and growing day by day into an increasingly glorious creature in Christ, developing joy, experiencing love, maturing in peace. By the grace of Christ we experience the marvel of being made in the image of God. If we reject this way, the only alternative is to attempt the hopelessly fourth-rate, embarrassingly awkward imitation of God made in the image of men and women like us.

Both revelation and experience (Genesis and Goethe) show it to be the wrong way, and so the psalmist is wise to see it and sing, “GOD, I’m not trying to rule the roost. . . . I haven’t meddled where I have no business. . . . I’ve kept my feet on the

ground.” I will not try to run my own life or the lives of others; that is God’s business, I will not pretend to invent the meaning of the universe; I will accept what God has shown its meaning to be; I will not strut about demanding that I be treated as the center of my family or my neighborhood or my work, but seek to discover where I fit and do what I am good at. The soul, clamoring for attention and arrogantly parading its importance, is calmed and quieted so that it can be itself, truly.

As Content as a Child

But if we are not to be proud, clamorous, arrogant persons, what are we to be? Mousy, cringing, insecure ones? Well, not quite. Having realized the dangers of pride, the sin of thinking too much of ourselves, we are suddenly in danger of another mistake, thinking too little of ourselves. There are some who conclude that since the great Christian temptation is to try to be everything, the perfect Christian solution is to be nothing. And so we have the problem of the doormat Christian and the dishrag saint: the person upon whom everyone walks and wipes their feet, the person who is used by others to clean up the mess of everyday living and then is discarded. These people then compensate for their poor lives by weepily clinging to God, hoping to make up for the miseries of everyday life by dreaming of luxuries in heaven.

Christian faith is not neurotic dependency but childlike trust. We do not have a God who forever indulges our whims but a God whom we trust with our destinies. The Christian is not a naive, innocent infant who has no identity apart from a feeling of being comforted and protected and catered to but a person who has discovered an identity given by God which can be enjoyed best and fully in a voluntary trust in God. We do not cling to God desperately out of fear and the panic of insecurity; we

come to him freely in faith and love.

Our Lord gave us the picture of the child as a model for Christian faith (Mk 10:14-16) not because of the child's helplessness but because of the child's willingness to be led, to be taught, to be blessed. God does not reduce us to a set of Pavlovian reflexes so that we mindlessly worship and pray and obey on signal; he establishes us with a dignity in which we are free to receive his word, his gifts, his grace.

The psalm shows great genius at this point and describes a relationship that is completely attractive. The translators of the Jerusalem Bible have retained the literalism of the Hebrew metaphor: "Enough for me to keep my soul tranquil and quiet like a child in its mother's arms, as content as a child that has been weaned." The last phrase, "as a child that has been weaned," creates a completely new, unguessed reality. The Christian is

not like an infant crying loudly for his mother's breast, but like a weaned child that quietly rests by his mother's side, happy in being with her. . . . No desire now comes between him and his God; for he is sure that God knows what he needs before he asks him. And just as the child gradually breaks off the habit of regarding his mother only as a means of satisfying his own desires and learns to love her for her own sake, so the worshipper after a struggle has reached an attitude of mind in which he desires God for himself and not as a means of fulfillment of his own wishes. His life's centre of gravity has shifted. He now rests no longer in himself but in God.³

The transition from a sucking infant to a weaned child, from squalling baby to quiet son or daughter, is not smooth. It is stormy and noisy. It is no easy thing to quiet yourself: sooner may we calm the sea or rule the wind or tame a tiger than quiet ourselves. It is pitched battle. The baby is denied expected com-

forts and flies into rages or sinks into sulks. There are sobs and struggles. The infant is facing its first great sorrow and it is in sore distress. But “to the weaned child his mother is his comfort though she has denied him comfort. It is a blessed mark of growth out of spiritual infancy when we can forgo the joys which once appeared to be essential, and can find our solace in him who denies them to us.”⁴

Many who have traveled this way of faith have described the transition from an infantile faith that grabs at God out of desperation to a mature faith that responds to God out of love, “like a baby content in its mother’s arms.” Often our conscious Christian lives do begin at points of desperation, and God, of course, does not refuse to meet our needs. Heavenly comforts break through our despair and persuade us that “all will be well and all manner of things will be well.” The early stages of Christian belief are not infrequently marked with miraculous signs and exhilarations of spirit. But as discipleship continues, the sensible comforts gradually disappear. For God does not want us neurotically dependent on him but willingly trustful in him. And so he weans us. The period of infancy will not be sentimentally extended beyond what is necessary. The time of weaning is very often noisy and marked by misunderstandings: *I no longer feel like I did when I was first a Christian. Does that mean I am no longer a Christian? Has God abandoned me? Have I done something terribly wrong?*

The answer is, neither. God hasn’t abandoned you and you haven’t done anything wrong. You are being weaned. The apron strings have been cut. You are free to come to God or not come to him. You are, in a sense, on your own with an open invitation to listen and receive and enjoy our Lord.

The last line of the psalm addresses this quality of newly acquired freedom: “Wait, Israel, for GOD. Wait with hope. Hope

now; hope always!” Choose to be with him; elect his presence; aspire to his ways; respond to his love.

The Plain Way

When Charles Spurgeon preached this psalm, he said it “is one of the shortest Psalms to read, but one of the longest to learn.”⁵ We are always, it seems, reeling from one side of the road to the other as we travel in the way of faith. At one turning of the road we are presented with awesome problems and terrifying emergencies. We rise to the challenge, take things into our own hands to become master of the situation, telling God, “Thank you, but get lost. We’ll take care of this one ourselves.” At the next turning we are overwhelmed and run in a panic to some kind of infantile religion that will solve all our problems for us, freeing us of the burden of thinking and the difficulty of choosing. We are, alternately, rebellious runaways and whining babies. Worse, we have numerous experts, so-called, encouraging us to pursue one or the other of these ways.

The experts in our society who offer to help us have a kind of general-staff mentality from which massive, top-down solutions are issued to solve our problems. Then when the solutions don’t work, we get mired in the nothing-can-be-done swamp. We are first incited into being grandiose and then intimidated into being infantile. But there is another way, the plain way of quiet Christian humility. We need pruning. Cut back to our roots, we learn this psalm and discover the quietness of the weaned child, the tranquility of maturing trust. It is such a minute psalm that many have overlooked it, but for all its brevity and lack of pretense, it is essential. For every Christian encounters problems of growth and difficulties of development.

A number of years ago Peter Marin made an incisive observation very much in the spirit of Psalm 131:

There are cultural conditions for which there are no solutions, turnings of the soul so profound and complex that no system can absorb or contain them. How could one have “solved” the Reformation? Or first-century Rome? One makes accommodations and adjustments, one dreams about the future and makes plans to save us all, but in spite of all that, because of it, what seems more important are the private independent acts that become more necessary every day: the ways we find as private persons to restore to one another the strengths we should have now—whether to make the kind of revolution we need or to survive the repression that seems likely . . . what saves us as men and women is always a kind of witness: the quality of our own acts and lives.⁶

And that is what Psalm 131 nurtures: a quality of calm confidence and quiet strength that knows the difference between unruly arrogance and faithful aspiration, knows how to discriminate between infantile dependency and childlike trust, and chooses to aspire and to trust—and to sing, “I’ve kept my feet on the ground, I’ve cultivated a quiet heart. Like a baby content in its mother’s arms, my soul is a baby content.”