

NCIS has been a long running hit television show. Mark Harmon plays “Gibbs” on the show. He leads a team that investigates crimes against naval personnel, coming up against murderers and terrorists regularly. Over the years, Gibbs has been kidnapped, imprisoned, and tortured. Through it all, he’s been the iron man of television. But now we have learned that NCIS is closing production early because of coronavirus.

I don’t know of a television character who is more self-reliant than Gibbs. He lives alone, builds a boat in his basement alone, and deals with a lifetime of trauma alone. In many ways, he is the quintessential hero of our day. There is much to commend hard work, and self-reliance, and entrepreneurial creativity.

But, as John Donne noted, “No man is an island.” None of us was made to live without the rest of us. When God created Adam, the only person who was truly alone in the world, the Creator soon stated, “*It is not good that the man should be alone*” (Genesis 2:18).

On Tuesday, Jim Denison wrote, “I am praying that one way for God to redeem the pandemic is to use it to show us the folly of Gibbs-like self-reliance. That’s because depending on God and working with others requires a kind of *humility* that is usually learned the hard way. Our culture elevates pride and self-promotion. One consequence of our technological and medical progress is that we think we are masters of the world in ways no previous generation did.”

Generations before us had to live with polio, smallpox, influenza, and cholera outbreaks. They lived through world wars and in danger of nuclear holocaust. They knew that if war broke out, they would likely serve in some sacrificial way. They had less control of their world than we think we do. The coronavirus pandemic shows us that we are just as dependent, just as much creatures as were our parents and grandparents. So what is our pathway to true *humility*?

Listen again to these three short verses. “*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*” (Psalm 131).

In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis noted: “In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that—and, therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison—you do not know God at all. As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.” Which way are you looking today?

Pride is a virtue, not a sin, in our current culture, a profitable proposition; a personal achievement. But Scripture identifies pride as the basic sin: the sin of taking things into our own hands, of being our own god, of grabbing all we can get. Pride is practically accepted wisdom today. Improve yourself by whatever means; get ahead at whatever price; take care of yourself first.

It’s equally difficult to see *ambition* as a sin because it has a kind of superficial relationship with “aspiration” (an impatience with mediocrity and a striving for the best God has for us). That’s the sort of thing Paul wrote about in his letter to the Philippians: “*I press on toward the goal to win the prize for*

*which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus*” (3:14). But if we take the energies that drive our aspirations and take God out of the picture, replacing him with our own crudely sketched self-portrait, we end up with selfish pride and arrogance.

Eugene Peterson notes that, “Our lives are lived well only when they are lived on the terms set by our Creator, with God initiating the loving and us being loved, with God doing the making and us being made, with God revealing truth and wisdom and us understanding, with God commanding our actions 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 [recognize] the marvel of being made in the image of God. If we reject this, the only alternative is to mimic an awkward imitation of God, made in the image of men and women like us” (p. 153).

Not the pathway to humility, is it? So the psalmist is wise to see pride for what it is and to sing about it: “*My heart is not proud, LORD, my eyes are not haughty*” (v.1). Verse 1 is translated in *The Message Bible* in this way: “*GOD, I’m not trying to rule the roost.*” I will not pretend to be the inventor of the meaning of the universe; I will accept what God has shown its meaning to be. I will not demand to be treated as the center of my family or my work, or the world.

“But if we are not to be proud, arrogant persons, what are we to be? Mousy, cringing, insecure ones? Well, not quite,” says Eugene Peterson. “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 is then discarded.” But nor does God expect us to rush in and save the day like Leroy Jethro Gibbs on NCIS.

In fact the Lord gave us the picture of a little child as a model for Christian faith, not because of the child’s helplessness but because of the child’s willingness—to be led, to be taught, to be blessed. Psalm 131 verse 2 describes a relationship that is childlike: “*But I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child I am content.*”

Those who have traveled this way of faith have described the transition from infantile faith that grabs at God out of desperation to mature faith that responds to God out of love, “*like a baby content in its mother’s arms.*” When we think in the midst of a global pandemic that God has abandoned us, or that we have done something terribly wrong, we need the transforming power of *humility* to assure us that God is near. We are simply being weaned. We are free to come to God or not to come. We are, in a sense, on our own with an open invitation to listen and receive and enjoy our Lord, or not. The last line of the psalm addresses this new freedom: “*Israel, put your hope in the LORD both now and forevermore*” (v. 3). Choose to be with God; aspire to God’s ways; respond to God’s love.

When Charles Haddon Spurgeon preached this psalm, he said “It is one of the shortest Psalms to read, but one of the longest to learn.” Amen to that!

At one turn in the road of faith we may face enormous problems and terrifying pandemics. We decide to take things into our own hands to become master of the situation, telling God, “Thanks, but I’ll handle it.” At the next turn in the road we are overwhelmed and we run to God to solve all our problems. We are, alternately, rebellious teenagers and whining babies. We need to grow up.

There is a better way, the way of authentic Christian *humility*. Confident *humility*, true *humility*, is not thinking less of ourselves. It’s thinking of ourselves less.

When we learn all of this Psalm (all 3 verses!) we will discover the quietness of the weaned child, the tranquility of trust in God’s provision. Many Bible readers overlook Psalm 131. Yet for all its brevity and lack of pretense, it has an essential message: “*My heart is not proud, LORD*” (v. 1). In Luke 14 Jesus adds a new chorus to the song: “*For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted*” (v. 11).

Be humble. “*Put your hope in the LORD both now and forevermore*” (v. 3). Amen.