

Unity
Psalm 133
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A Song of Ascents. Of David.

¹ Behold, how good and pleasant it is
when brothers dwell in unity

² It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down on the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down on the collar of his robes!

³ It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion!
For there the LORD has commanded the blessing,
life forevermore.

Introduction: Peace and Unity

You don't need me to tell you we live in a world plagued with division and hostility. In fact, that's where we began our series on the Songs of Ascents. Our journey began back in early June with Psalm 120, which ended with these words:

Too long have I had my dwelling
among those who hate peace.

⁷ I am for peace,
but when I speak, they are for war!

We have seen over the past several weeks that the Songs of Ascents are, in many ways, the soundtrack for a journey in pursuit of peace. The word peace is repeated at key places in the Songs:

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!
"May they be secure who love you!"

⁷ Peace be within your walls
and security within your towers!" – Psalm 122:6-7

Peace be upon Israel! – Psalm 125:5

May you see your children's children! Peace be upon Israel! – Psalm 128:6

Even where the Songs don't explicitly mention peace, they paint a picture of peace, as in the central line of the central psalm in this collection, the last line of verse 2 in Psalm 127 – "he gives to his beloved sleep."

We saw in Psalms 130 and 131 that the keys to peace are found in the full and perfect redemption God provides for His people through Christ and the contentment that we can find by satisfying our souls in

Him alone. Psalm 132 shows us that the redemption purchased by Christ brings great benefits to God's people as the promised Son of David takes His place of His glorious throne forever and all of God's people are made into priests, clothed with righteousness as they are clothed with Jesus. Psalm 133 continues to paint the beautiful picture of the benefits and blessings of redemption and the accomplishment of peace, in the blessing of unity among God's people.

I. The Great Blessing of Unity

*Behold, how good and pleasant it is
when brothers dwell in unity*

Psalm 133 opens with a call for us to pay attention to something wonderful – “Behold!” This little word can also mean “Look!” or “See!” In the older English, we would say, “Lo!” and in the newer English, we might say “Check this out!” It's the same word that begins Psalm 134, although the ESV translates that one as “Come.”

What are we called to see and pay attention to? How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity. “Good and pleasant” – many things in life are good, but not pleasant, like going to the dentist or exercising or watching your diet. Many things in life are pleasant but not necessarily good, like ice cream and chocolate. The rarest and best things in life are both good and pleasant, like love.

What do the psalms say is both good and pleasant? Well, in just two psalms, Psalm 135, and then again in Psalm 147, which we read earlier, praising God is said to be good and pleasant –

*Praise the LORD, for the LORD is good;
sing to his name, for it is pleasant! – Psalm 135:3*

*Praise the LORD!
For it is good to sing praises to our God;
for it is pleasant, and a song of praise is fitting. – Psalm 147:1*

So, unity among God's people is put in the same category as praising God, as something that is both good and pleasant.

Psalm 133 says “*when brothers dwell together in unity*” but we know “brothers” here refers to the people of God, the family of God.

Psalm 133 is a Psalm of David, the 4th and final of the Songs of Ascents to bear that title, and probably the 5th to be written by David, if we include Psalm 127. So, each of the 5 trios of psalms in this collection has a psalm written by David.

Since we know David wrote Psalm 133, we can guess pretty well when he wrote it. Remember David was anointed king by Samuel as a young man, in his teens, but then he didn't become king until he was 30 years old. He spent years on the run from King Saul, who wanted to kill him, and then had to endure years of civil war after the death of Saul, when only one tribe, Judah, chose David as king and the Abner led the other tribes to follow Ish-Bosheth, the oldest surviving son of Saul, as king. Well, after years of division, the tribes finally united after the death of Ish-Bosheth and anointed David as king. So either as the tribes came together to anoint him as king or later as the tribes came together to celebrate the ark of the covenant being brought into Jerusalem, David wrote this psalm celebrating unity.

Unity is always good and pleasant, but we get a deeper appreciation for its goodness and pleasantness after a long period of division and hostility. David describes the goodness and pleasantness of unity among God's people with two remarkable and unusual word pictures:

² *It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down on the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down on the collar of his robes!*
³ *It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion!*

The "precious oil" is the oil of anointing, a special fragrant perfumed oil used only to anoint the priests. The formula for this anointing oil is given in Exodus 30:23-25 –

Take the finest spices: of liquid myrrh 500 shekels, and of sweet-smelling cinnamon half as much, that is, 250, and 250 of aromatic cane, and 500 of cassia, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, and a hin of olive oil. And you shall make of these a sacred anointing oil blended as by the perfumer; it shall be a holy anointing oil.

A hin is about a gallon and an half of olive oil. To this would be added about 12.5 pounds of myrrh and about 6 pounds each of cinnamon and aromatic cane. This is expensive and heavily fragrant oil. It was used only to anoint the sacred things of God, the priests and the Tabernacle (and later Temple) furnishings. Here in Psalm 133, so much anointing oil is being poured over the head of the high priest (Aaron) that it is cascading down off his head onto his beard and then onto his garments. The outer garment of the high priest was the ephod, which contained 12 stones on the shoulders and on the chest, representing the 12 tribes of Israel, so we can picture this oil being so abundantly poured out on the high priest that it spills onto the representation of the people of God.

The second picture of abundant blessing is the dew of Hermon coming down on the Mountains of Zion. Hermon was the northernmost mountain in Israel. Today, it is in Syria, near Damascus. It is over 9,000 feet in elevation and usually covered in snow. The dew on Hermon is heavy. You get soaked on a mountain that tall, because you're in the clouds. Mount Zion is only about 3,000 feet tall and is very dry. So, this verse is really picturing something supernaturally impossible. These mountains are 115 miles apart and 6,000 feet different in elevation. The dew of Hermon does not run down onto Mount Zion. So, the verse is really saying, "It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Zion" – in other words, a supernatural blessing of abundant refreshing.

Now I have a question for you: Who is represented in the Bible by both anointing oil and refreshing water? The Holy Spirit!

So the unity of God's people is pictured here as something so good and so pleasant it is like an abundance of anointing oil on the high priest, overflowing and spilling onto the people of God, and like an abundance of refreshing water, spilling down to refresh the people of God gathered for worship on Mount Zion.

2. The Great Obstacles to Unity

Before we go any further in exploring this psalm, I'd like to pause to consider some background: What causes disunity among the people of God? What causes divisions and quarreling among the family of God? God tells us: Factionalism, selfishness and worldliness.

Factionalism: The Corinthian church was torn apart by factionalism, which the Apostle Paul addressed in I Corinthians 1:10-13 –

¹⁰ I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. ¹¹ For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. ¹² What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." ¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

Selfishness: The book of James addresses this root cause of quarreling and fighting among God's people –

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ² You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. – James 4:1-3, ESV

Worldliness: And yet, even as James calls out the people of God for their selfish desires, he also names this as the sin of worldliness, for he goes on to say –

⁴ You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? ⁶ But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." ⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. – James 4:4-7, ESV

The same basic causes of division have plagued God's people for centuries and continue to plague us today. Prior to David's unifying coronation, the civil war in Israel was caused by these same issues: factionalism in the form of tribalism, worldliness in the form of wanting a hereditary dynasty just like the nations instead of picking the man whom God had chosen, and selfishness in Abner's decision to support Ish-Bosheth because it meant he would be able to command the army, and not Joab.

Today, Christians divide against each other when we identify more with our denomination, political ideology or ethnic background than we do with Jesus Christ. Within churches, people can divide up into factions by age or by educational choice – the homeschoolers vs the Christian schoolers vs. the public schoolers. Tonight, we will start youth ministry at the Wood's house for both high school and middle school students. We need to have all high school and middle school students come out, regardless of where you go to school, so we can avoid this kind of factionalism and seek to live out the unity of the body of Christ together.

People also start conflicts and divisions within churches over their selfish desires. They get angry when they're not getting their way and the things they value are not getting the priority they think they deserve in the church. Or worldliness can infect the church's unity when we quarrel over wanting the church to be more like the world – more driven by entertainment and pragmatism and not driven by worship and love.

3. The Great Accomplishment of Unity

The good news is that, while we are constantly tearing at our unity through our factionalism, selfishness and worldliness, Psalm 133 is describing the blessing of unity which Christ accomplished for us. So, we've already seen that Psalm 133 describes abundant, unexpected blessing of unity using word pictures of anointing oil and refreshing water, two images for the Holy Spirit. Why use these images for unity? The end of verse 3 tells us –

*It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion!
For there [that is, on Mount Zion] the LORD has commanded the blessing,
life forevermore.*

The Lord has commanded the blessing of eternal life to be accomplished on Mount Zion. For years, I think I misunderstood this psalm, thinking that the blessing of life forevermore was commanded for unity, so that when God's people achieved unity, God would pour out eternal life. But I think that perspective misses the Gospel in Psalm 133 and makes unity something we achieve, rather than something God gives because of what Christ achieves.

Derek Kidner, in his wonderful short commentary on the Psalms, writes this –

The second half of verse 3, with its strong accent on God's initiative (commanded) and on what is only His to give (life forevermore), clinches another emphasis of the psalm, which is made by a threefold repetition, partly lost in translation: literally, 'descending' (2a)... 'descending' (2b)... 'descending' (3a). In short, true unity, like all good gifts, is from above; bestowed rather than contrived, a blessing far more than an achievement.

“Unity is bestowed rather than contrived, a blessing far more than an achievement.”

The blessing of unity was commanded by the LORD to come down on Mount Zion in connection with eternal life. Now, recall that the two images of the blessing of unity are also images of the Holy Spirit. What happened when the blessing of the Holy Spirit was poured out on the believers at Pentecost? The Spirit descended on the believers and they were empowered to speak in other languages. Why? So that the people who had come from many foreign lands could come together and hear the Gospel in their own language. It was a supernatural reversal of the curse of the Tower of Babel, as God gathered in the various languages and created unity by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Unity is a blessing bestowed rather than an achievement contrived. Like all the blessings of God, unity was secured for God's people by the work of Christ in His atoning death and victorious resurrection. This is what Paul says in Ephesians 2:13-18. Listen how the unity of God's people was achieved by Christ Himself and is tied to the gift of the Holy Spirit

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷ And he came and preached

peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. (ESV)

Christ Jesus Himself is our peace, for He has reconciled us both in one body through the cross and through Him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. Paul was here addressing the major division between Jews and Gentiles in the early church, but the same message of unity accomplished and applied is true for all of our divisions in the church today.

Because of Jesus Christ, all Christians have true unity in Him. As Paul says later, in Ephesians 4: “*There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*” (vv. 4-6, ESV) It’s not that there should be one body and one Spirit, and we should try to achieve one faith, but “there is.”

4. Maintaining Unity as We Await Its Perfection

So, what do we do, then, when the church seems so divided and Christians seem so quick to quarrel? Well, as with everything in the Christian life, we are not called to achieve our own salvation or any of the blessings and benefits which flow from it, but we are called to live out the salvation Jesus has purchased for us and that the Spirit has applied to us. We are called to work out that which God works in us, even while we wait for the day when our salvation in all its aspects is perfected in glory.

So, with unity, Paul writes in Ephesians 4:1-3: “*I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*”

With humility and gentleness and patience we are to bear with one another in love. We are to be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit – not create, but maintain – in the bond of peace. We can choose to be prideful and harsh and impatient, and we can choose not to bear with one another, and instead try to tear at the unity of the Spirit and try to disrupt the bond of peace. We cannot destroy it, because Christ’s salvation and the Spirit’s application of it are unbreakable, but we can certainly damage our experience and enjoyment of it.

So, how do we maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace?

In the broader, universal church, we never let the things that divide us – baptism, gifts of the Spirit, church government – have higher priority or rank as more important than the things that unite us – faith in Christ for salvation, worship of the triune God, reliance on the Scriptures and the Spirit. We look for ways we can work together on kingdom priorities – missions, evangelism, mercy ministry, etc. Organizational unity is a cheap substitute here for a true spiritual unity, focused on Christ and empowered by His Spirit.

In the local church, we commit to worship, fellowship, prayer, and discipleship together. We live life together in worship every Lord’s Day, but also in Sunday School, at Bible studies, over meals in one another’s homes, serving each other, reaching out to our community together. We seek to crucify the factionalism, worldliness and selfishness that will tear us apart, and we love one another, treating one another with patience and respect. We also need to be praying for and submitting to our leadership, our elders and deacons, as they seek to shepherd and serve the Christ faithfully.

But most of all, I think we need to remember that our spiritual unity in Christ is as much an accomplished Gospel reality as the forgiveness of our sins and our adoption as children of God. If we

are members of the Body of Christ, then we are members of one another. We have unity in the Spirit. We are family. Jesus accomplished this. Will we receive it as the good and pleasant blessing it is and live it out in our daily lives?