



## Psalm 133 - The Blessedness of Unity

### A Song of Ascents.

#### Introduction

This wisdom psalm celebrates the beauty of brothers in Israel dwelling together with two colourful similes that describe the blessedness of Israel being true to its calling: <<*when kindred live together in unity*>>.

Of the fifteen psalms in the series, Psalm 133 is one of the four attributed to King David, and so has the title 'A Song of Ascents. Of David' in many translations, although not in the NRSVA. It is not known exactly when David composed this song, but one likely occasion was when David was finally received as king over all the tribes of Israel, ending a terrible season of national division and discord.

<sup>1</sup> How very good and pleasant it is  
when kindred live together in unity!

#### Psalm 133:1

David draws the reader's attention to something good and pleasant - unity among the people of God:

- It is good because it reflects God's heart and purpose of unity among his people, something Jesus called: <<*I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me*>> (John 17:20-23), as did Paul: <<*If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live*

*peaceably with all*>> (Romans 12:18), and: <<*he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth*>> (Ephesians 1:9-10).

- It is pleasant because it makes life together as God's people so much more enjoyable than seasons when constant bickering and conflict dominate.

Not everything that is good is pleasant, and not everything that is pleasant is good. Unity among God's people is such a remarkable blessing because it is both good and pleasant – and both to a high degree, indicated by David's repetition of the word how.

Kindred live together in unity. This unity is tested, because these people lived together as a single community of believers. In many ways it is easier to have some kind of unity with those distant. To live together means the bonds of unity and peace will be at times tested.

Kindred live together in unity. The expression appears in Genesis 13:6 (Abraham and Lot), and Genesis 36:7 (Jacob and Esau), where a particular region could not support extended families dwelling close together. If this is the background for the psalm, then v.1 describes a situation in which the land is fruitful enough for brothers to live nearby, perhaps a family inheritance: <<*When brothers reside together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger*>> (Deuteronomy 25:5). Since this is a Song of Ascents, the kindred live together in unity would be the fellow Israelite pilgrims gathered in Jerusalem, abiding in peace with one another. The ideal Israel is a community of true brotherhood, where the members practice mutual concern for one another; if this were achieved, it would indeed be good and pleasant. This should be the goal of church life as Jesus prayed, refer again to the words of John 17:20-23 above.

- <sup>2</sup> It is like the precious oil on the head,  
running down upon the beard,  
on the beard of Aaron,  
running down over the collar of his robes.

### Psalm 133:2

The first simile is the ordination oil on the head of Aaron and his descendants; refer to Exodus 30:22-33. This oil made the priests holy, consecrated to God's purpose. The image means that when Israel is true to its ideal, it is displaying genuine consecration and carrying out its calling in the world.

In the ancient Middle East it was common to anoint one's head with oil, sometimes as a greeting entering a home: <<*You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment*>> (Luke 7:46). This was done to refresh the one receiving the oil, and to give a good smell from the fragrance that came from the perfumed oils. Among God's people, unity refreshes and makes a pleasant atmosphere for all. Derek Kidner commented, "The anointing oil intended for the head (Exodus 29:7) was not confined to it, nor could its fragrance be contained. Exodus 29:21 provided explicitly that after the pouring of the oil on the head, some was to be sprinkled on the robes: 'and he and his garments shall be holy'."

Running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron. The picture in words shows that unity is a rich and abundant blessing – as this oil overflowed the head and came down the beard. It also shows that unity is a rare and precious blessing, because the suggestion is that this was holy anointing oil, which was not to be imitated. Adam Clarke observed, "The composition of this holy anointing oil may be seen, Exodus 30:23; sweet cinnamon, sweet calamus, cassia lignea, and olive oil. The odour of this must have been very agreeable, and serves here as a metaphor to point out the exquisite excellence of brotherly love." Charles Spurgeon added, "What a sacred thing must brotherly love be when it can be likened to an oil which must never be poured on any man but on the Lord's high-priest alone!"

The oil upon the priest's head was good as an instrument of refreshing and greeting, as it would be for anyone else. Yet for Aaron as high priest it also was part of his consecration to priestly service, which led to so many other good things:

- Service unto God and his people.
- The atonement of sins.
- The offerings of peace, fellowship, and thanksgiving.
- Compassionate ministry to the people of God.
- To represent the righteousness and salvation of God to a watching world.

The illustration is wonderful. When there is unity among God's people, it is not only good and pleasant in itself, but it also leads to so many other good things. When the people of God struggle with each other, there are so many other good things they are not doing and enjoying.

Running down over the collar of his robes. What an abundant blessing unity is! It is like oil poured out so richly that it flows from the head, to the beard, down to the very edge of the priest's garments. There is some debate whether the edge of his garments refers to the collar (as Alexander Maclaren and others say) or to the bottom hem of his priestly robes. Either way, it was an impressive flow of oil.

Kidner observed, “In short, true unity, like all good gifts, is from above; bestowed rather than contrived, a blessing far more than an achievement.”

<sup>3</sup> It is like the dew of Hermon,  
which falls on the mountains of Zion.  
For there the Lord ordained his blessing,  
life for evermore.

### Psalm 133:3

It is like the dew of Hermon. King David used a second word picture to show how wonderful unity is among the people of God. It is also like the rich dew that covers Mount Hermon, making it green and moist. It is an almost complete contrast to the dry wilderness found in other parts of Israel. Unity among God’s people makes life thriving and healthy. Maclaren commented, “It refreshes the thirsty ground and quickens vegetation; so fraternal concord, falling gently on men’s spirits, and linking distant ones together by a mysterious chain of transmitted good, will help to revive failing strength and refresh parched places.”

Hermon is a high, snow-capped mountain at the northern end of the land (refer to the comment made on Deuteronomy 3:8-10); it is not clear exactly how its dew falls on the mountains of Zion: perhaps the clouds above Hermon are pictured as dropping their moisture on Jerusalem, or perhaps the dew of Hermon is an idiom for ‘a heavy fall of dew.’ In any case, the dew is crucial for the vegetation during the dry season (refer to Genesis 27:28, Deuteronomy 33:28, 2 Samuel 1:21, 1 Kings 17:1, Proverbs 3:20 and 19:12, Hosea 14:5, Haggai 1:10, and Zechariah 8:12), and the image conveys the thought of a fruitful land. This too was part of the covenantal ideal; refer to Deuteronomy 28:1-14.



Mount Hermon

Which falls on the mountains of Zion. This blessing comes upon Jerusalem, which David established as the centre for Israel's worship. There at Jerusalem would their unity be displayed and enjoyed.

For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life for evermore. The blessing of unity is something God commands, something the previously cited NT passages teach, i.e. John 17:20-23, Romans 12:18 and Ephesians 1:9-10. Since the people of God will have life for evermore, each one should work hard to enjoy unity with them now. Spurgeon commented, "O for more of this rare virtue! Not the love which comes and goes, but that which dwells; not that spirit which separates and secludes, but that which dwells together; not that mind which is all for debate and difference, but that which dwells together in unity."