

The Wonder of Oneness

Psalm 133

¹How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!

²It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes.

³It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows His blessing, even life forevermore.

Clearly, the text as it was read speaks of a gentleness and peacefulness to togetherness, which eludes us in many of our relationships. Our culture is more violent than ever before. We live among most people, not restfully but cautiously. Ervin Gathings relates the following true event:

The two sons of a Fort Worth, Texas, woman of 90 were worried about her safety. "We are going to get you a pistol, mother, so you can take care of yourself. And we're going to teach you how to use it. There is too much violence out there."

So they bought their mother a pistol, which she dutifully packed in her purse. One day, when she left Ridgmar Shopping Center to get into her car, she found two young men sitting in the car. She took out the pistol, pointed it at them, and said: "Get out of my car or I'll shoot." They jumped out and ran off. She got into the car, put the key in the ignition - and it did not fit. It was not her car. She said she would have apologized to the two young men, but she could not find them.

Even in a unit as intimate as a family, the tranquility depicted in our text can be hard to find. Here's a multiple choice question. In what context did Winston Churchill utter this famous line: "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills"?

- a) ... to rally support for the war effort in World War II?
- b) ... the night before he embarked on a cross-country family vacation?

It is God's desire that His people live in oneness. Godly unity is not an agreement hammered out by negotiation. It is not a uniformity legislated and imposed by some governing authority. Biblical unity is oneness of spirit and purpose that flows from hearts in mutual agreement with God. Because we are sinners, we constantly find ways to miss the benefits of oneness that could be ours. Nothing could be more blissful than the lives Adam and Eve enjoyed in Eden. But the perfect harmony of the Garden flew apart when sin entered the picture. Since that time, a cosmic struggle has ensued whereby God has worked to destroy sin's disorder and to restore all things to His own perfect oneness. The final blow to this disunity was dealt when Jesus died on the cross:

... ⁹And He made known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Christ, ¹⁰to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment - to bring all things in heaven and earth together under one head, even Christ. - Ephesians 1:9, 10

Through the ages, God's people have had opportunities to enjoy some of the wonder of this oneness that He will one day restore to His whole creation. In the days before Christ, the Israelites could enjoy oneness with one another to the degree that they honored the Law of *YAHWEH*. The key for us today to enjoy this foretaste of the eternal kingdom is to love and to serve Jesus and, in turn, His other children. Psalm 133 gives us a glimpse of what we rob ourselves of when the rebellious and selfish "old man of the flesh" dominates our relationships.

I. The Beauty of Oneness (verse 1)

How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!

When a physician remarked on his new patient's extraordinarily ruddy complexion, the new patient said, "High blood pressure, Doc. It comes from my family."

"Your mother's side or your father's?" asked the doctor.

"Neither," the man replied. "It's from my wife's family."

"Oh, come now," the doctor said. "How could your wife's family give you high blood pressure?"

The patient sighed, and answered, "You ought to meet 'em sometime, Doc!"

A. The Jews Had Known Their Share of Discord

As far back as the patriarchs, there were times when living together seemed neither good nor pleasant. Abraham and his nephew Lot decided it was best to separate. Their growing flocks were causing discord among their respective servants. Jacob's life with his parents and brother was marked by deceit. There was a period when he fled for his life to escape His brother's wrath. Jacob's own family was torn apart by the jealousy of his oldest sons towards Joseph.

In the days of the judges, the struggle to maintain unity among the tribes was difficult. Pettiness, mistrust, jealousy, competition and hurt feelings existed from one tribe to the next. Some tribes were larger and stronger than others. Some were urban, some rural. Some were seen as more culturally backwards because of the region in which they settled or because of their accents. Others were rich because they were situated on the sea coast or along trade routes. At one point, eleven tribes almost wiped out the tribe of Benjamin. Only God's grace preserved them.

This psalm has David's name attached to it. David certainly understood the difference between the sting of discord and the delight of oneness. For seven and one-half years, only the southern tribes of Israel followed David as king. Finally, a spokesman for a united Israel declared: "We are your own flesh and blood." With that united commitment and in the power of God, Jerusalem was given over to David. The Ark of the Covenant was brought to Jerusalem. A united nation now had a central seat of worship. Some suggest that David wrote Psalm 133 at this time.

Eventually, Psalm 133 was collected with fourteen other brief psalms called the *Songs of Ascents*, which companies of Israelites sang as they traveled to Jerusalem three times a year for their great religious feasts. Seasons of such unity were rare. No wonder they seemed "good and pleasant."

B. Not Everything that is "Good" Seems "Pleasant"

"Good and good for you," became a successful marketing cliché several years ago. The premise was that if something is good for you, then like medicine, it probably isn't very enjoyable. None of my favorite foods are "good for me" according to the health experts. Few that are do I find pleasing to eat. But this living together of which the psalmist sings is both "good and pleasant."

A magician was working on a cruise ship in the Caribbean. The audience was different each week, so the magician did the same tricks over and over again. There was one problem: The captain's parrot saw the shows every week and began to pick up on the magician's secrets. Eventually, he started shouting in the middle of the show:

"Look, it's not the same hat!"

"Look, he is hiding the flowers under the table!"

"Hey, why are all the cards the Ace of Spades?"

The magician was furious but couldn't do anything. It was the captain's parrot after all. One day the ship had an accident and sunk. The magician found himself on a piece of wood, in the middle of the ocean, with the parrot of course. They stared at each other with intense hatred, but did not utter a word. This went on day after day after day. After a week the parrot finally asked: "OK. I give up. What'd you do with the boat?"

Obviously, there can be times when togetherness is good in that it is safe, but that does not insure that it's pleasant. Unity can be good in terms of meeting some objective, but for whatever reason, it can seem far from pleasant. It can even be galling. Perhaps the strong have overpowered the weak. Perhaps, the majority of 51% has voted down a minority of 49%. Perhaps, a nation must ally itself with unsavory characters to face a common danger. There can be union without pleasantness: just tie two cats together by their tails and throw them over a clothesline.

There can also be unity that is pleasant but not good. Because the call to oneness in the Bible is so prevalent, some conclude that every professed believer of every doctrinal shade must come together. Such teaching can be reckless for it is truth that must determine our alliances. It is true that unfortunate lines have been drawn in the sand over many issues that never warranted such rigidity. Differences over issues of personal preference, culture and tradition have done great damage. But truth matters. Truth is the basis of real unity. In Christ's prayer for unity from John 17, one must not overlook verse 17: "Sanctify them by your truth. Your word is truth."

II. The Bliss of Oneness (verses 2, 3a)

A. Authentic Oneness Is Like Precious Oil ...

²It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes.

Aaron, Moses' brother, was the first high priest of the Hebrews. Aaron's name became representative for all his successors. This "precious oil" has an interesting history. The recipe for anointing oil in Exodus 30 called for 12 pounds of liquid myrrh, six pounds of ground cinnamon, 12 pounds of cassia, one gallon of olive oil and six pounds of fragrant cane sugar. It was a big batch, for it was poured out liberally. It flowed through the man's beard and covered his robes. Anyone who ever attended the anointing of a priest would understand David's imagery. The reason it was precious is because it was very costly. God forbade its use for any other purpose:

... ³¹Say to the Israelites, This is my sacred anointing oil for the generations to come. ³²Do not pour it on men's bodies and do not make any oil with the same formula. It is sacred and you are to consider it sacred. - Exodus 30 :31, 32

God's people are united in a spiritual way that we cannot destroy. However, through self-sufficiency, arrogance and ambition, we often fail to realize that oneness in our mutual experience. That is unfortunate, for the oneness of God's people is one of the most sacred experiences we can know. This allusion back to primitive Israel in the days of the wilderness reminds us of just how sacred and precious unity is. A priest was anointed with a costly, one-purpose oil that was so sacred and unique that it could not be used for any other purpose.

It was in the wilderness that the children of Israel were the most intimate with each other, because their vulnerability as a nation compelled them to be most dependent on God. Oneness with God created oneness among the nation. But, when life became comfortable, that sense of common dependency on a common God faded. The people ventured off in diverse directions because of their diverse interests, values and aspirations. The precious unity was lost.

B. Authentic Oneness Is As the Dew of Hermon ...

³It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion.

Most mountains, particularly those that are part of ranges, ascend to their recorded altitude from some already elevated tableland. (picture) Mount Hermon rapidly rises to 9200 feet from a base at nearly sea level. The melting snows of Hermon feed the Jordan River. Hermon is 40 miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee, but its snowcaps are visible from over one hundred miles away up and down the Jordan valley. Its geological characteristics cause its base to be surrounded by a thick dew even during times of year when most of the surrounding territory is parched and dry. Hermon became proverbial for its lush greenery even during the hottest summer months.

Mount Hermon is nowhere near Mount Zion, which is the site of Jerusalem. This translation treats the passage as a hypothetical desire: "It is **as if** the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion." This is akin to our saying, "Lancaster could sure use some of the rain they're getting out west." Other translations portray Hermon's dew as more generally feeding mountains throughout the land of Zion. The basic point remains quite clear. Hermon was known for its moisture year-round in a land that could get pretty hot and dry. It was a symbol of refreshment.

Two of the three great feasts for which the Jews traveled to Jerusalem fell during the dry season. One of their walking songs reminded them that in spite of the harshness of life, sweet fellowship with brothers was as refreshing **"as if** the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion."

III. The Benefits of Oneness (3b)

For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.

A. This Blessing Is a Unique Gift of God

The theological reality is that God is omnipresent. He is everywhere. But our experiential truth is that when believers live with one another, honoring the unity He commands, then, He is most conspicuously present with His people. Where love reigns, God reigns. It is interesting that the psalmist would make reference to "life forevermore." Those times when God's people collectively keep their eyes on Jesus and abandon their own selfish agendas are the times more like Heaven than any others we experience. When we are more attentive to the praise and glory of God than to anything else, those moments become our most accurate rehearsals for eternity.

There is nothing but upsides for brothers living in unity. Still, the wonder of oneness is elusive, and for no other reason than that we fail to guard and maintain unity. Our fleshly natures vie for preeminence not only over God, but over all with who we should be in fellowship. A deliberate commitment to "keeping unity" is required on the part of God's people if we are to advance as one man in the work of the kingdom, much less enjoy the pleasantness of one another.

B. So, Why Do We Resist the Blessings of Togetherness?

We celebrate our independence. America was born out of a hunger for freedom, but that was a freedom from despotism, not a freedom from mutual accountability and dependency. No founding father would have proclaimed the virtues of a man isolating himself from others. But, our culture has twisted the pursuit of the American dream so that we have as little as possible to do with one another. In a study, *Pursuit of Loneliness*, sociologist Philip Slater observed:

It is easy to produce examples of the ways in which Americans attempt to minimize, circumvent, or deny the interdependence upon which all human societies are based. We seek a private house, a private means of transportation, a private garden, a private laundry, self-service stores, and do-it-yourself skills of every kind. An enormous technology seems to have set itself to the task of making it unnecessary for one human being ever to ask anything of another in the course of going about his daily business.

We need community even when it is not at its best. We thrive on community at its highest. There is no higher community than God's people centered on His plans, His purposes and His nature.

We still battle selfishness and ambition. Every man for himself! Survival of the fittest! Such creeds make it impossible for us to really understand the value of others or our sense of responsibility to them. We are too easily hurt. Turning the other cheek goes against our grain. Loving an enemy is a topic that can drive discussion in a Bible School class for an hour, but we are remiss at just doing it. We cannot even let a loved one have the last word. How do we expect to shrug off an offense? Nothing in our culture supports such a peacemaking demeanor. We are like the little boy who explained the fight on the playground: "It all started when he hit me back."

We are unforgiving by nature. James Alexander Thom wrote:

Once armies carried cannonballs with them, afraid they would meet the enemy somewhere and have nothing to shoot at it. In terms of specific gravity, grudges are about as heavy as cannonballs. But it makes little sense to carry them. Most likely, the "enemy" is unaware of your enmity, and surely would be surprised to learn that you've been stalking him with a cannonball in your pocket. So examine your grudges. Do what armies do when hostilities are over: unload the cannonballs and stack them on the courthouse lawn. Then marvel at how much easier it is to get around.

I could go on indefinitely as to why we squander the blessings of togetherness. The most inclusive answer is that we are sinful. We are more accustomed to flying apart than we are to adhering together. Disunity is a part of our fabric. This alone is why we each must guard that our eyes are on Jesus. Ask yourself: "How many of my agendas am I certain are also His agendas? How many of my severed relationships would he validate? Are the things that upset me in His church the things that would upset Him? German theologian Jurgen Moltmann put it as concisely as it can be worded: "The nearer we come to Christ, the nearer we come together."

To the degree we understand that, we will also discover the goodness and the pleasantness - the value and the refreshing - the blessing and the wonder of godly oneness.