

## The Blessing of Brotherhood

A Sermon on Psalm 133

Pastor Knox @ Faith Tacoma

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This September we begin a new season of our church's small group ministry. In light of this, Pastor Nicoletti asked me to preach a sermon reminding us why our church has decided to make this a priority and encouraging us to support it.

A few months ago, one of our Small Group leaders, Marc Nance, also suggested that each year we focus on a theme, highlighting one aspect of the ministry for our meditation and prayers.

In this morning's sermon, I'd like to bring together Pastor's Nicoletti's request and Marc's suggestion by presenting you with a theme for the Small Group year. That theme is The Blessing of Brotherhood, and by that phrase I mean the enriching experience of fellowship and unity that should characterize the people of God.

This theme is drawn directly from Psalm 133. Look for it as we read the passage together.

This is the word of the Lord...

Please keep the text in front of you, and may the Lord help us to understand, believe, and obey His word.

Psalm 133 envisions and celebrates the fellowship of God’s people at its best: brothers (and, by implication, sisters, as well) united in the Lord’s worship and service, experiencing the fulness of His blessing.

This morning, we will zoom in on three aspects of this beautiful vision of brotherhood: its goodness, its source, and its goal.

First, consider with me the goodness of brotherhood. Look again at this psalm and notice that this idea is present in every single line of Psalm 133. There’s the simple statement of it in verse 1, amplified with the adjective, “pleasant,” a word which is used at other places in the Hebrew Bible to describe the beautiful woman of Song of Solomon,<sup>1</sup> the treasured friendship between David and Jonathan,<sup>2</sup> the loveliness of the Promised Land,<sup>3</sup> the most luxurious décor that money can buy,<sup>4</sup> the delightfulness of singing praise to Yahweh and even to describe the Lord’s own enchanting glory.<sup>5</sup>

There’s also the way David kicks off this psalm with the arresting, sole command, “Behold.” Seeing the command to look in such close proximity to the word “good” ought to draw us back to Genesis 1, and the chorus of “And God saw that it was good.” Throughout the Bible, the eye is the organ of judgment, and “good” is perhaps the most basic category of judgment.<sup>6</sup> Thus, we have a hint here in the opening words that David’s overall goal in this psalm is to shape how we think, to inform our values, to recalibrate our judgments.

Speaking of this initial word, Charles Spurgeon wrote, “Behold. It [*that is, Christian unity*] is a wonder seldom seen; therefore, behold it! It may be seen, for it is the characteristic of real saints – therefore fail not to inspect it! It is well worthy of admiration; pause and gaze upon it! It will charm you into imitation, therefore note it well.”

After the straightforward command and description of verse 1 are the two similes describing the goodness of brotherhood in verses 2 and 3. In that time and place, oil was symbolic of abundance. Not only did it have many practical uses like moisturizing the skin in an arid climate, and providing fuel for lamps, but it was also frequently mixed with aromatic spices and thus served as an ancient form of perfume. In this case, Exodus 30 specifies that the oil of ordination was mixed with myrrh, cinnamon, sweet cane, and cassia.

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<sup>1</sup> Song of Solomon 7:6

<sup>2</sup> 2 Samuel 1:26

<sup>3</sup> Gen 49:15

<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 24:4

<sup>5</sup> Ps 27:4

<sup>6</sup> Matt 6:22-23, 1 Kings 15:26, 2 Chron 16:9,

Speaking of this imagery, one preacher paraphrased the first half of verse 2 this way, “How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity...it is like walking past Cinnabon in the mall.”<sup>7</sup>

Because of the various uses to which oil was put in those days, it is associated throughout the Bible with joy,<sup>8</sup> light,<sup>9</sup> hospitality,<sup>10</sup> abundance,<sup>11</sup> and blessing.<sup>12</sup>

And dew, in that time and place, was symbolic of life. Just think about how fundamental water is for virtually every form of life, and then imagine how precious any form of water would have been for ancient Israelites, living as they did in an arid climate, long before modern forms of irrigation had been invented. Remember how frequently in the Hebrew Bible the people of God are desperate for water!<sup>13</sup>

Over 9000ft tall, Mount Hermon stood higher than any other mountain in Israel.<sup>14</sup> Because of its height and location, it consistently received more precipitation than the rest of Israel, even snowfall, making it one of the major sources of the Jordan river.<sup>15</sup> The dew which fell was heavy enough to sustain life in an arid environment.

And after these two poetic descriptions, there is the closing statement of verse 3, which parallels the opening statement of verse 1: the good things we have in this life are blessings, and the blessings that we have come from God’s goodness.

Step back for a second and think about the structure of this psalm. It opens and closes with clear statements about the goodness of brotherhood. Sandwiched in between are two poetic descriptions of that goodness.

Obviously, David wanted to make an impression on us! Brothers dwelling together in harmony is as life-giving as a dew-fed oasis in an arid landscape, as refreshing as a cool mist on a summer’s day, as charming as a beautiful woman, as heartwarming as a green landscape, as fragrant as perfume, as healing as lotion in a desert, as moving as a choral anthem, as luxurious as antique furniture, as enlightening as a lamp in the dark.

But there’s one more detail along these lines that we should notice. Look again at the second half of verse 1 and consider how David states the subject of this song. The ESV, along with most other

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<sup>7</sup> Spratt, Kenton “Unity and Life Eternal” A Sermon on Psalm 133. Christ Church, Spokane WA. 12/5/21.  
<https://www.wordmp3.com/details.aspx?id=40834>

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 45:7

<sup>9</sup> Lev 24:2 and Matt 25:1-13,

<sup>10</sup> Luke 7:46

<sup>11</sup> Psalm 23:5

<sup>12</sup> Num 6:25 cf Psalm 23:5-6

<sup>13</sup> E.g. Ex 15:22, 1 Kings 17:1-7,

<sup>14</sup> Kidner 489

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.myascent.org/about-2/about-tzfat/north-of-israel/the-jordan-river-and-its-sources/>

English translations, uses the word “unity” to bring out the focus of Psalm 133.<sup>16</sup> And while I think that’s a faithful and helpful translation, it’s worth noting that it’s more of an interpretation than a strict translation. As the Geneva 1599 acknowledges in its translation, the Hebrew literally reads something like, “Behold how good and how pleasant; brethren dwelling even together.”

As many commentators note, this opening verse has a proverbial ring to it, and it may have originally been a proverb in praise of extended family living close by.<sup>17</sup> Along those lines, many commentators point out that virtually the same phrase appears in both Genesis 13:6 and 36:7, both of which describe close kin parting ways.<sup>18</sup>

Obviously, David here in Psalm 133 has more in mind than the natural family. It’s clear that the scope of this psalm extends to the entire nation of Israel, which was a spiritual brotherhood, united in the covenant and worship of Yahweh, just as we are in Christ.<sup>19</sup>

But that background of the natural family is helpful for us to note as we contemplate the goodness of Christian fellowship, because it ought to remind us of how rare and precious genuine unity between brothers really is.

Search the Bible for stories of brotherhood, and you will find it far easier to come up with examples of animosity, division, and murder than examples of unity, fellowship, and nearness. I’ve already mentioned the irony that the other two times the Bible uses virtually the same phrase about “brothers dwelling together,” it’s in the context of relatives parting ways. But even more fundamentally, think back to the very first story of brotherhood in the Bible: Cain murdering Abel out of jealousy. Or think of the sermon we heard just last Sunday about Jacob and Esau, a story of jealousy, favoritism, deception, rage, murderous scheming, and division. Or think about Joseph’s brothers selling him into slavery, or the rivalry between Isaac and Ishmael. Or think about the evening sermon series we just finished, where we have seen Paul rejected, maligned, attacked, persecuted, and pursued by the very people he repeatedly calls his brothers: the Jews.

Or more immediately, think about the author of this very psalm, King David: overlooked by his father Jesse, criticized and suspected by his older brother Eliab, betrayed and pursued by his own king, Saul, temporarily overthrown by his own son and fellow countrymen.

David was no stranger to conflict, division, hatred, schemes, jealousy, fighting, and disunity of every kind. Indeed, the Lord would describe him in 1 Chronicles 28 as a “man of war.”

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<sup>16</sup> The Wycliffe Bible, (“*Lo! how good and how merry it is; that brethren dwell together*”) and the Geneva 1599, (“*Behold, how good and how comely a thing it is, brethren to dwell even together*”) follow the Hebrew more exactly (which doesn’ necessarily make them better) <https://www.biblegateway.com/verse/en/Psalm%20133%3A1>

<sup>17</sup> E.g. Allen 215, Ross 746

<sup>18</sup> In Genesis 13, Lot and Abraham part ways because their herdsmen are quarrelling. In Genesis 36, Jacob and Esau part ways, ostensibly, because their possessions are too great to dwell in the same place. Of course, there was quite a history of conflict between the two of them!

<sup>19</sup> 2 Sam 5:1, Matt 12:50, 1 Cor 1:10, Phil 4:21

But perhaps that is why he, of all people, could write a psalm like this...because David knew from the most painful of experiences how rare and how precious is genuine unity among brothers.

We don't know exactly which set of life circumstances occasioned this psalm of David, but imagine David writing this psalm with loyal gratitude after Jonathan had saved his life by signaling to him to flee from Saul.<sup>20</sup> Or imagine him writing it with happiness and wonder when all the tribes of Israel united under his rule, anointing him king at Hebron in 2 Samuel 5. Or imagine him writing it with joyful celebration after taking Jerusalem and bringing the ark of the covenant there, anticipating the day when all of Israel would worship together in this city.

But perhaps nothing more powerfully illustrates how rare and precious the fellowship of brothers is than to realize how deeply David himself violated it. After seizing Bathsheba and plotting Uriah's death, David would hear these words of judgment, "the sword shall never depart from your house."

Even David, who had so patiently refused to seize the throne from his persecutor, Saul, even David who here in Psalm 133 wrote so beautifully about unity among brothers, even David who invited Mephibosheth, the grandson of his enemy Saul, to dine at his table...even David failed to live up to the vision of brotherhood presented in this psalm.

Surely that ought to be a sober warning to us. It is easy to talk about community, relationships, friendship. It is easy to sing about love, peace, and unity.<sup>21</sup> But the reality of living in harmony with our brothers and sisters is hard, because it requires a level of sacrifice, self-denial, humility, forgiveness, and persistence that doesn't come naturally to us.

In her article, "Confessions of a Loner," Sophia Lee describes coming to the realization that she didn't truly have a local community, despite being a church-going Christian. She said this: "I didn't think much about community until I really needed one and it wasn't there." She goes on in the article to analyze how and why she ended up in this lonely place. Some of it was circumstantial, but she acknowledges that much of it came down to a failure to value and prioritize fellowship. She writes, "It was formed by months of seeking only what felt convenient and comfortable.... Yes, we were busy. But to be 'too busy' for community is simply to prioritize things other than community."<sup>22</sup>

Here in Psalm 133 David is saying to us, "This is where it's at, y'all. This is the good stuff. This is what makes life worth living."

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<sup>20</sup> 1 Samuel 20. Cf 2 Sam 1:26

<sup>21</sup> I am reminded of the lyrics "I hope someday you'll join us, And the world will be as one," from John Lennon's song "Imagine." I regard it as a bitter irony that this song suggests that Marxist ideology (no nations, no religions, no private property) will produce a utopia, when in fact Marxism has been one of the worst banes of the postmodern world, impoverishing, murdering, and dividing millions!

<sup>22</sup> Lee, Sophia. "Confessions of a Loner." Christianity Today. July/August 2024

Christian, is this your vision of the good life? To know and be known by your brothers and sisters in Christ...to be united in the worship and service of God...to dwell together in brotherly love?

The Goodness of Brotherhood.

Secondly, the Source of Brotherhood.

Thinking about how rare and precious is genuine unity among brothers naturally leads us to wonder...in a world that is filled with selfishness, jealousy, rivalry, and every other vice, how is it that love, harmony, and unity exist anywhere? How can such beautiful and fragile things prevail in a world so marred by sin, suffering, and war?

Look again at Psalm 133 with me and notice how David points us to the Lord as the source of these rare and precious blessings.

David does this in several ways. For starters, it's implied simply in his use of the word "blessing" in verse 3, for, ultimately, all blessings come from the Lord.<sup>23</sup>

And while that alone would have been enough to make the point in a general way, David chose to press the point by integrating it into the poetic imagery of this psalm. Notice, for example, the parallel downward movement of these two similes. The ESV obscures this in translation, but the Hebrew uses the same word three times here in verses 2 and 3 to describe the downward movement of the oil and the dew. Listen to these same verses in another translation, the Legacy Standard Bible:

It is like the good oil upon the head,

Coming down upon the beard,

Aaron's beard,

Coming down upon the edge of his robes.

It is like the dew of Hermon

Coming down upon the mountains of Zion;

For there, Yahweh commanded the blessing—life forever.

Just as Hermon's dew comes down from heaven, just as the anointing oil came down from the hand of Moses, the man of God, onto the head of Aaron, and then again came down onto his beard and robes, so the blessing of unity between brothers comes down from the Lord. In other words, it is a heavenly gift.

But David hints at the same point in another way here in this psalm. Knowing how rich the associations of oil and dew were in his time and place, David could have settled for generic images of

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<sup>23</sup> James 1:17, John 3:27

oil and dew here in this psalm. Instead, notice how he zeroed in on extremely specific kinds of oil and dew: the oil used for anointing priests, and the dew which fell on Hermon/Zion.

In Exodus 30 the Lord gives detailed instructions about the oil of anointing. Not only does He include the formula I mentioned earlier (*olive oil mixed with myrrh, cinnamon, sweet cane, cassia*) but He specifically says ‘This shall be a holy anointing oil to Me throughout your generations. It shall not be poured on anyone’s body (*that is, except for the priests*), nor shall you make any like it in the same specifications; it is holy, and it shall be holy to you. Whoever shall mix any like it or whoever puts any of it on a layman shall be cut off from his people.’”<sup>24</sup>

Think with me about what this means. This oil in Psalm 133 not only carries all of those lovely associations I mentioned earlier; it also represents the holiness of Yahweh. Even making an imitation of this aromatic oil was strictly forbidden in Israel. This means that the only time a layman of Israel would have smelled this fragrance would be when he was in the presence of a priest, having come into the Lord’s house to worship.

Think about the power of smell. Your husband’s cologne or your wife’s perfume, freshly baked bread or mown grass, crisp air after rain, an ocean breeze, pine needles, lavender, burning wood, flowers...each conjures up a scene with a range of emotions and memories.

When David searched for an image to describe the fellowship of God’s people, he didn’t just choose a delightful smell, he chose a holy smell, one that immediately would have conjured up an entire scene in the memory of Israelite worshippers: the tabernacle or temple, a priest being ordained to the service of Yahweh, making atonement with the blood of bulls and rams, prayers ascending to the Lord like incense, the sounds of praise and benediction.

David chose this oil to describe the fellowship of God’s people because he wanted us to remember that our fellowship is holy. One commentator put it this way: “Unity among brothers, then, according to the simile, is from God and sets their relationship apart as spiritual and useful to God.”<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, the dew of Hermon falling on Zion’s mountains is oddly specific. Remember that Mount Zion was located in Jerusalem, which, according to Google directions, is a 5.5-hour drive from Hermon in the north, approximately 194 miles away. Clearly this is a metaphorical description, not a literal one. So why the combination of these specific hills?

We’ve already considered how Hermon was known for its heavy dews, snowfall, and constant supply of water, so remember that Zion was known for being the city of God.

Although there are many places we could go in the Bible to flesh this out, the most relevant for our purposes today would be the psalm right before this: Psalm 132. As many commentators have

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<sup>24</sup> Ex 30:31b-33

<sup>25</sup> Ross pg 749

pointed out, there are several connections between these psalms, chief among those being the emphasis on Zion.

Near the end of Psalm 132, just a few verses before our sermon text, the Psalmist describes Zion this way:

For the LORD has chosen Zion;

he has desired it for his dwelling place:

This is my resting place forever;

here I will dwell, for I have desired it.

I will abundantly bless her provisions;

I will satisfy her poor with bread.

Her priests I will clothe with salvation,

and her saints will shout for joy.

There I will make a horn to sprout for David;

I have prepared a lamp for my anointed.

Geographically, Zion was an unimpressive hill: only 2500 feet tall, often brown and dry. But spiritually, Zion was the heart of God's kingdom, for on this hill sat Yahweh's house, Yahweh's city, Yahweh's king, Yahweh's blessing.

You see, by imagining the dew of Mount Hermon falling on Mount Zion, David is saying poetically, "This is the place where you can find the richest blessing...this is the place where you can find a constant source of refreshment...this is the place where you can find life: in the worship and fellowship of God's people.

But there's still one more hint that's worth our attention. Think again about the structure of this psalm. Notice that this is a psalm of 3 verses, and 10 lines. In typical Hebrew form, these 10 lines neatly break down into 5 sets of parallel lines: 1 and 2, 3 and 4, 5 and 6, 7 and 8, 9 and 10.

I mentioned earlier how verse 1 (which consists of lines 1 and 2) parallels the second half of verse 3 (lines 9 and 10) since both are straightforward statements of the goodness of brotherhood. I also mentioned how the two similes of verses 2 and 3 match each other.

What I didn't mention is that this psalm is a chiasm.<sup>26</sup> Notice how lines 3 and 4 (which are the first half of verse 2) neatly match lines 7 and 8 (which are the first half of verse 3).

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<sup>26</sup> Ross 747

That leaves us with lines 5 and 6 (the second half of verse 2) as the center of this symmetrical structure. Like any good chiasm, the middle lines here are unique and the focal point of the text.

Notice what these central lines feature: Aaron, the high priest of Israel, covered in this oil of brotherly unity, dressed in his priestly robes.

Surely, it's not an accident that at the heart of this psalm is the man whose office was the central institution of Israel. This was the man who would confess Israel's sins over the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement. This is the only man who could enter the Holy of Holies to sprinkle blood on the mercy seat. And this was the man who was appointed to wear the breastplate engraved with the names of all 12 tribes of Israel, thus representing the entire nation.

Look again at this central image and think about the holy oil running down onto Aaron's robes, covering the names of Israel's tribes. One commentator interpreted the imagery this way, "This reminded them that they were not only a nation with a priesthood, but of priests (Ex 19:6), for the oil spilled out on to the high priests' robes on which the names of the twelve tribes were woven. This was a model for the church's great High Priest, on whom God poured His Spirit as oil was poured on Aaron, and who himself poured the Spirit on the members of his church. The Holy Spirit flows from head to body."<sup>27</sup>

Christian, Psalm 133 is a reminder, that we have been anointed by the Holy Spirit who unites us to Christ, and thus, to one another. The only question is...do we live like it's true?

The Source of Brotherhood.

Finally, the Goal of Brotherhood.

In principle, we are already united as brothers and sisters in Christ. And yet, the full realization of what that means awaits the day when our fellowship will no longer be obscured by the tears of a fallen world, twisted by our sin, or interrupted by death.

The closing words of this psalm hint at that hope, associating this blessing of brotherhood with eternal life. Speaking of the way this psalm closes, one commentator said this, "heaven is like...a good party. Assemble in your imagination all the friends that you enjoy being with most, the companions that evoke the deepest joy, your most stimulating relationships, the most delightful of shared experiences, the people with whom you feel most completely alive- *that* is a hint at heaven."<sup>28</sup>

The only thing I would change about that quotation is that I would replace "good party" with "holy party," for that is what countless singers of this song were on their way to do in Jerusalem. Remember that this is a Song of Ascents, which means that Israelites sang it as they traveled to the

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<sup>27</sup> Lane 180

<sup>28</sup> Peterson 177

temple where they celebrated the holy festivals of Israel's liturgical year: Passover, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Booths.

Of course, there were serious and somber matters to attend to during those times: there were sins to confess, guilt to be atoned for, commands to be heeded, and warnings to be feared.

But, at the heart of it all, was Yahweh's gracious hospitality,<sup>29</sup> His desire to bless and draw near to His people.

As Israelites took a break from the normal routines and stresses of daily life to travel to God's city, as they received His forgiveness and blessing in His house, and as they gathered together to remember and celebrate His great acts of salvation, they got a little foretaste of eternal life.

And I hope that gathering together here for worship on the Lord's Day can play a similar role in our lives as well.

Small groups, of course, are not worship services. And if you asked me which was more important, then I would tell you, hands down, there's no comparison...corporate worship is more important.

But, my hope and prayer is that small group, at its best, can be an extension of worship, a way of lingering in the holy smell of what happened here as we imitate something of the Lord's hospitality, as we discuss recent sermons, as we pray for and bless each other, and as we cultivate and maintain the blessing of brotherhood which He has lavished upon us in Christ.

Whether you participate in a small group or not, may the sweet smell of Christian fellowship and love keep all of us on the path to the heavenly Jerusalem! Amen!

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<sup>29</sup> Thanks to Peter Leithart for the idea that hospitality stands behind the entire sacrificial system of Leviticus. From a class I took at Theopolis institute.

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