

Psalm 133

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[0 : 0 0] This Wednesday, we are all invited to a joint time of worship, and very particularly prayer, at Hebron Evangelical Church. We've made mention of this in the intimation sheet, and indeed this evening we've prayed about that gathering already. As has been mentioned, this is an initiative of the West Central Church's fellowship, of which we form a part, a gathering, as many of you know, but for those of you who perhaps aren't familiar with this, a gathering of congregations in the city center that includes ourselves, our friends at Gilcomson South, at Crown Terrace Baptist, Hebron, of course, and a couple of other congregations. And over the years, as many of you know and have been involved, we have been working together in different ways, be it in the children's club annually, in the visitation, joint services, and other joint activities. And this is the first occasion where we are going to gather together to pray. We've done that at the level of the leadership of the congregations, but this is the first time that the invitation, quite rightly, is being extended to all. And so, that is this Wednesday at 7.30, just across the road. Now, such a gathering is good in and of itself. It's always a good thing that Christians pray, and that we would pray very particularly, given the occasion, pray for our city where God has placed us. So, it's good in and of itself, but it's also good with regards to what it represents and gives expression to, and that is the essential unity of the body of Christ. There is but one church of Jesus Christ. Christ is not the head of multiple bodies, but of one body.

But it's not enough to recognize that that's true. We might say in theory, to recognize the essential unity of the church. We are duty-bound to cultivate and to give expression to that unity, and that is something that is very clearly expressed for us in the Bible. It's a theme that Paul in particular returns to on a number of occasions. The importance of this duty to cultivate and to maintain and give expression to our unity is perhaps best illustrated or best emphasized by Christ Himself in His high priestly prayer on behalf of His disciples. We find that in John chapter 17. We won't look up the passage, but if we just remind ourselves of one thing, that Jesus prays to His Father on behalf of His disciples and on behalf of us, on behalf of Christians through the ages. May they be brought to complete unity, to let the world know that You sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me.

May they be brought to complete unity. Interesting that in the prayer that Jesus prays to His Father, while He, of course, was very much aware that as Christians there is an existing essential unity, something we find in Paul's language where He exhorts us to maintain our unity. Even though there is that essential unity, nonetheless, Jesus is able to speak of being brought to complete unity. And in that, we have a part also to play. Now, this evening I want to spend a little time considering a psalm that very famously describes the unity of God's people. We've read the psalm just a few moments ago, Psalm 133, how good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity. We've also read this evening a short passage from 2 Samuel in chapter 5. We read that passage because it's possible. We don't know. The psalm doesn't indicate the occasion on which David wrote the psalm. It's possible that it may have been on the occasion of him assuming his kingship, a time when, as we have read, there was a great unity that he enjoyed amongst the people. The tribes of Israel very much united under David's kingship.

That was not something that would persist throughout his kingship, but certainly at the beginning and for some time after David becoming king, the people enjoy a great measure of unity. And they gather around David and give very enthusiastic expression to their commitment to him, and as such, their unity one with another. So, perhaps that would have been an occasion where David might have penned words to the effect that we have in the psalm, but it may have been on another occasion. And what is certainly true is that the truths that we find within the psalm are truths that are not bound to any particular historic occasion, but that apply to us as God's people today. Well, as we think of the psalm, there are four aspects of unity in the faith that the psalm touches on that I want to highlight.

I should say that I want to highlight. It may be that you could discover more than four, but four that I want to highlight that we find in the psalm. The first that I want us to notice is the ground of unity, the ground of our unity as believers. There in the first verse we read how good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity. And here I want us to notice and focus on that word that David uses, brothers living together in unity. In employing this language, and employing this word of brothers, what David is doing is recognizing that an essential unity already exists between those so described as brothers, regardless of whether they actually live together in unity. Of course, what David is delighting in is the fact that the brothers do live together in unity, and that is a pleasant thing, a delightful thing, and he celebrates that. But the point I'm making here is simply to recognize that the fact that they are brothers means that there is a unity, even if it were the case that they found it very difficult to actually live together in unity, as they ought to do as brothers. They are brothers. In a family, if we think of our own families, on what grounds are we brothers? If we have brothers and sisters, what is it that makes our brothers or sisters brothers and sisters? Well, we know the answer. It's a very simple question. It's that we share a father, a mother, perhaps both, depending on our family circumstances. That is what makes us brothers and sisters. And of course, this reality applies to us as Christians. We are, as believers in

[7 : 46] Jesus Christ, sons and daughters of the same heavenly Father. We all equally share Jesus Christ as our elder brother. We are family. That is simply an objective reality. It's the truth. I am a brother of anybody else who is trusting in Jesus. Whatever they are, whatever church they go to, however different it is to our own, however strange it might appear to us in what they do or the manner in which they do things, no doubt they think the same of us. But if they are believers, then they are my brothers and sisters. Why? Because we share one same heavenly Father. We are family. We are family. That is an objective reality. Whether we behave as family, whether we love each other as family, whether we live together as family, all of these things, important though they are, make no difference to the objective reality that we are family. The ground of our family unity is our shared, our one Father in heaven.

How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity. But that truth is one that really emerges almost in the passing. It's not really what David is particularly focusing on, though I think it's legitimate to draw it for the purposes of this first aspect that we're highlighting, the ground of unity. But David's greater concern really in this psalm is to celebrate and to describe the nature and experience of unity. That is really what he is about as he pens about, as he pens this psalm, the nature of and the experience of unity in the faith.

David, as he wrote, of course, was very much writing in the context of God's people as the nation of Israel. And things have moved on. We are spiritual Israel. But the fundamental truths are ones that can be drawn from then to now. Now, as we think about this second aspect of unity in the faith, the nature and experience of unity, there are two key words that David employs right at the beginning of the psalm. How good and pleasant. Good and pleasant. And they're really the two words we want to, in a moment, focus on as being fundamental because David considers them fundamental. They're the words he uses to describe the nature and experience of unity. But before we think about these two words, I want us to just notice that the unity that David is speaking of and celebrating in verse, in song, is unity that is practical and visible. I say practical because this unity, according to the psalm, involves living together. We remain there in verse 1. How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity. He doesn't just say how good and pleasant it is when brothers are united.

He could have said that. But no, what he says is richer. How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity. Where that unity is actually a practical matter. They live together. That unity is not just some formal acknowledgement of our essential unity in the Lord, though that is true and important. But the unity that David is describing and celebrating involves a unity that finds expression in concrete and practical ways. Coming under this umbrella of David's language, brothers who live together in unity. So, it is practical in that sense. It's real life. It's day to day. We can think of a home where people live together every day in all the ups and downs and the different activities. That's what's involved in living.

So, it's practical. So, it's practical. But as a result, we said practical and visible. And visibility really is a function of it being practical. But even in the language that David uses, he highlights the visible nature of this unity. In the original language in which David wrote the psalm in Hebrew, as we know, there is a word that he employs. The very first word, in fact, of the psalm that our version of the Bible that we're using in church this evening chooses not to translate. In the older versions and in the psalm as we sing it, certainly from the Scottish Psalter, we're familiar with what that word is. It's the word, behold. Behold how good a thing it is and how becoming well together such as brethren are in unity to dwell. And there is a wee Hebrew word that translated is the word, in slightly more old-fashioned language, behold or see. And the importance of that word is that it reminds us or it highlights that what David is doing is inviting people to observe, to see, to witness this unity. It is something that is evidently very visible. And so David can say, look, look, admire, celebrate, see how the brethren are living together in unity. It's visible. They live together, they work together, they serve together. You can see it. You can see it. It's visible. And that's important. You know, it really will not do for us to sit back and say, well, yes, we acknowledge that we're united in Christ and nobody can see it. The world doesn't see it. But well, we know it's there. The invisible church is one.

[13 : 54] It's not to be an invisible church. The church is to be visible. It's to be visible. Behold, see how good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity. So, I think we can draw that out as we think about the nature and experience of unity. But as I mentioned a moment ago, what we particularly want to notice are the two words that David very deliberately employs to deal with or to describe the nature and experience of unity in the faith. The first word is good, how good and pleasant it is. Now, the word we have here translated good carries the idea of the intrinsic goodness of the matter. In this case, the intrinsic goodness of unity, of brothers living together in unity. What David is saying is that it is a good thing. In and of itself, it is a good thing that brothers are united and live together in harmony. It is good. It is as it should be. It corresponds to God's purpose and design. It is good.

It is a good thing. But he doesn't just say that it's a good thing. That in itself would be important. It would be reason sufficient for us to celebrate it and to value it and to preserve it. But he goes further. He says, it is both good and pleasant. Now, the second word that David uses, it complements the idea, the reality of unity being a good thing, but it introduces another aspect to the unity, especially as we experience it. And that is that it is pleasurable. It is pleasurable. It is a pleasant thing. Unity is a pleasant and delightful thing in our experience. Is that not true? We thought of unity in our families, in our homes. Is it not a pleasant, a delightful thing when we are united as families? Is it not a delightful thing when we are united as a congregation? How difficult, how unpleasant, how burdensome, how painful it is when we're not united. It's not pleasant at all. It's very unpleasant.

But David says it is a pleasant thing. It is a delightful thing when brothers live together in unity. It's difficult for me to read this psalm, and especially these opening words of the psalm, without bringing to mind the word that is used in the Spanish Bible to translate the word that we have translated pleasant. And the word that is used in Spanish, I don't know why the translators opted for this word, but the word that is used is the word delicious. Behold how good and delicious it is when brothers live together in unity. And there's something about that word of unity as being something delicious that you can savor. It's pleasant to the palate. It is a delicious thing.

It's a delightful thing. It's a pleasant thing. It is a matter that we can enjoy the unity that exists, or the unity that exists is good and pleasant. Now, David goes on to illustrate how unity is both good and pleasant, and we're going to notice how he does that. He does that in the following verse, in verse 2 and into verse 3. We're going to do that in a moment, see how he illustrates these truths, or this truth that unity is good and pleasant. But before we do that, let's just pause for a moment and consider at what levels we are to seek and enjoy this Christian unity. I think I've touched on it in one way or another already, but just perhaps for a moment to explicitly notice at what different levels, if that's the best word, that we are to enjoy and experience and cultivate Christian unity. Certainly, I think it is something that we must do and seek to do as families, as Christian families, as covenant families. It is right and proper that we should know something of what David is describing of how it is a good and pleasant thing for brothers to live together in unity.

Now, for those of you who have a household full of boys, literally brothers, you might find that that's quite a challenge to live together in unity. But that's the challenge. And of course, no doubt it's true with girls as well, and moms and dads. We all have this challenge of living together in unity, and as we do enjoy how good and pleasant a thing it is. So, at that level, and I won't develop it any further, just really mention it and move on, but also obviously a very obvious space where we are to give expression to this unity is as a congregation. As this congregation, we are part of a congregation of Bon Accord, Free Church of Scotland. This is where God has placed us, and it is important as a congregation that we live in this manner, that as brothers we live together in unity, and as we do know something of how good and pleasant it is so to do. So much could be said there, but we move on. Another level, which I think is important for us to just notice, if not to consider in any depth, and that is as a denomination, we are part of a larger body, the Free Church of Scotland. And no doubt, as we would perhaps have the opportunity to travel and visit different congregations, we might find that we're not all exactly the same, each congregation with its own particular characteristics and distinctives, perhaps. And yet, we are in the main things united, and that is something that we are to cherish and cultivate, that essential unity in the faith that we enjoy. Now, we have to recognize when we speak of unity as a denomination that we don't have a great track record on this matter. We can't pontificate or lecture to others on this.

[20 : 47] In fact, we have a very poor record, one that we should be ashamed of. We have not been united as we ought to have been. We have not made every effort to maintain our unity. We have too easily and too carelessly allowed ourselves to divide, and that is nothing to celebrate at all. Even if we sometimes try cover it up with pious reasons and justifications. In that regard, as I was just preparing for this sermon, in one of the commentaries, it mentioned how this psalm was adapted by the hymn writer Isaac Watts. Really, more than an adaptation, it was...if you find the hymn, you'll find that he really follows the psalm very much, very faithfully as it's found in the Bible, but in his own language. And the language he employs, given when he was writing this hymn or this adaptation of the psalm, is somewhat antiquated.

And the first line in Isaac Watts' hymn...I hadn't ever come across this hymn, maybe some of you have, but the first line in the hymn is rendered by Isaac Watts in this way, lo, what an entertaining sight, our brethren that agree. And I have to say I found that rather ironic how maybe it is the case that we are often an entertaining sight to the world as they look on and see not our unity, but our disunity, a reason to laugh and to mock and to scoff, an entertaining sight in that sense. Well, that was just a thought that came to me as I was made aware of how this psalm had been rendered by the hymn writer.

But as we move on, as we're thinking of the different spaces or levels at which we are to seek this unity as families, as congregations, as a denomination, and also very importantly as a Christian community in the city in Aberdeen. Now, we can't know and live together with all the Christians in the city, but we can, as opportunity affords and is sought out, live in unity with our brothers and sisters in other congregations. And one opportunity, one of many perhaps, one opportunity that we have is this Wednesday as we're invited to come together to pray with our brethren from other congregations. That's important. It's also important at the level of the worldwide church of Jesus Christ. We can do that in different ways. We won't visit all the nations of the world.

We won't know all the churches of the world, but we can pray. We can pray for the persecuted believers, perhaps especially. We can maintain and seek to develop a missionary interest and involvement in different ways, and by those means give expression to our unity as the worldwide church of Jesus Christ.

But having just noticed some of the areas in which these truths are applicable, let's return to the psalm and the illustrations that David employs, and let's just notice them briefly.

[24 : 05] At first sight, they may appear unintelligible. It 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. It is as if the hue of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. It's one of these psalms, or a part of a psalm that maybe if we're thinking, well, we'll sing it. You're thinking, well, if there's any visitor in church, and indeed not just visitors, perhaps ourselves, you know, what will they make of that? Now, we're not doubting that this is the Word of God. We're not doubting there's a great value in it. But for somebody who's not familiar with the psalm, then it just does appear so unintelligible. You say, well, the start's so nice, and the end's so nice, but this bit in the middle, that's a bit difficult to really understand. What is being said here? How is David illustrating the truth that he is getting across by these pictures that he paints? Well, let's just notice them, the two illustrations that he uses. First of all, he says that it is like precious oil. Brothers living together in unity is like precious oil poured in the head, running down on the beard, onto Aaron's beard, and down upon the collar of his robes. The picture is one of the anointing of Aaron, of a priest, with oil. And it's important to be aware that this oil was, and was intended to be, and deliberately produced in such a way that it was a fragrant oil. It carried a fragrance. If you're interested, you can look up in Exodus chapter 30 and verse 23, where we're told how it was made up to be, this fragrant oil.

And so, this oil that is poured on the head of Aaron flows down, not just onto his head, but down onto his robes. And so, by means of this picture, David is demonstrating or illustrating how unity between the brethren involves the whole of God's people as the oil covered the whole of Aaron and his robes. But perhaps especially and crucially that this unity is a fragrant and a pleasant experience.

As Aaron was anointed with this fragrant oil, all could enjoy the fragrance. Though only Aaron was being anointed, all present could enjoy the fragrance of it. And so, it is with unity. It is something for all to experience and enjoy. But David employs another illustration. He says that the unity of a brethren is as the Jew of Mount Hermon falling on to Mount Zion. Now, what is being got a cross by this illustration? It may be a little more difficult to tie down. But the explanation that I find most convincing involves appreciating that Mount Hermon, referred to there in verse 3, it was the highest mountain in Israel, and it was to the very north of the land. What has Mount Zion?

was in the south. But the Jew from heaven descends on both. And as the Jew from heaven descends on both, it grants life-giving moisture to all the land. All the land enjoys the Jew and the life that springs from this Jew. And so, David says, so it is when brothers live together in unity. Perhaps as he did take the rule over Israel and was able to enjoy the unity of all the tribes from north to south, all united. And so, he has this picture of Jew descending across the land, granting life to the nation.

One suggestion, and it is only a suggestion, but it's an intriguing suggestion. I share it with you to see what you make of it, but it is that each of these illustrations is tied to one of the two words that David uses. David speaks of this unity as being good and pleasant. And it's suggested, I'm not sure if I'm persuaded, but it's suggested that the Jew is to illustrate unity as being a good thing.

[28 : 22] We know that the Jew is good and necessary because without it, life is not possible. That moisture is required for life. So, it is good, just as being united is a good thing. Whereas the fragrance, the oil, that is something that is pleasant. It brings in its train, this oil, a delightful fragrance.

Well, it may be that that is the intention. It's not that important, really. We can understand both of them simply to be illustrating the whole truth of unity as a good and pleasant thing.

Well, that is what we can say concerning the nature and experience of unity, but we'll draw things to a close by just noticing and closing with a comment on the consequences of unity. You see, that is how the psalm ends. In the second half of verse 3, we read, for there, where there is unity, where brothers dwell together in unity, there the Lord bestows His blessing. The word that is translated, bestows, and those of us familiar with the older versions of the Bible and certainly the metrical version of the psalm are familiar with the word commands there. There the Lord commands His blessing. And I have to say, the language of God commanding blessing is one that I find very attractive. God commanding blessing.

Do we want to be blessed? Seems a foolish question. Who does not want to be blessed? Well, imagine the Lord commanding blessing. You see, when the Lord commands, it is.

The thought that comes to mind is to the very beginning, as God created the universe. The Lord spoke, and it was. When God commands, things happen. And so, if the Lord commands blessing, then blessing we will enjoy. And so, there we have a, if you wish, an encouragement, a spur to maintain and cultivate our unity, because where brothers live together in unity, there God commands blessing. This is the great consequence of unity. As we think about this consequence of unity, of God commanding blessing, of pouring out blessing from on high, it also highlights that in this psalm, there is an interesting and quite fascinating symmetry. I'm not sure if symmetry is quite the right word, but it's something that is lost a little in translation, but it relates to this matter of

[31 : 01] God commanding blessing. Let me try and explain what I'm saying. This psalm, you'll notice in the title, is entitled, A Song of Ascents. It was one of the psalms that the people of Israel would sing as they ascended to Jerusalem for the festivals to worship God on Mount Zion. And as a united people, they ascended to Jerusalem. And so, the title, A Song of Ascents. And yet, it's an intriguing thing that in this Song of Ascents, we have a repeated reference to that which descends, and that which descends from God. You have the precious oil, in our version it's translated running down the beard, but the language is of descending down the beard. And so, this anointing from on high, descending on God's people. You have the language of the Jew of Hermon falling on Mount Zion, descending on Mount Zion, this life-giving Jew descending from God for His people. And then, the psalm closes with this idea of blessing descending from God for His people. So, the people ascend as they would worship God together united, and as they ascend united, so God descends, sending the oil of anointing, the Jew that brings life, the blessing that He commands.

These are the wonderful consequences of unity. And so, that allows us to close by just noting, saying that all of these things bring to us the challenge to unity. Now, the challenge to unity is implicit in the psalm, if not expressly stated. The unity David describes and delights in must be cultivated and preserved and fought for. And this is a reality that Paul, as I've commented already, often touches on in his letters. If we just remind ourselves of one occasion when Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus, and he uses this language, and it's language that I've already used on more than one occasion this evening, make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

The unity, the essential unity of God's people is something that exists, but we are to keep or maintain or preserve it. And this will, Paul assures us, involve effort. It will involve every effort.

It's not an easy thing. It's a difficult thing. It's one that involves commitment and will on the part of all of us in our families, in our congregation, in the Christian community, in the city where we are. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for those occasions when we have been able to experience what the psalmist describes, of how good and pleasant it is as brothers live together in unity.

[34 : 17] We also are conscious that there are times when we have experienced the reverse, when we have been part of a fellowship or a church that has been divided and where what has been so evident and painfully evident is division and suspicion and resentment. And we are sinners and we are guilty often of contributing to such circumstances. But we pray that you would help us to be grateful for and appreciate the unity that we do enjoy, but also to not be complacent, but rather, as Paul exhorts us, to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, let's close our service by singing the psalm that we've been giving some thought to this evening. Let's stand to sing on page 175. And we'll sing Psalm 133. We'll sing to the tune, Eastgate, how excellent a thing it is, how pleasant and how good, when brothers dwell in unity and live as brothers live as brothers should. Let's stand to sing the song.

Let's stand to sing the song. Let's stand to sing the song. Let's sing the song. Jeff anduth TasTraff with singing in jazz God plays the song.

The thick it is, the pleasant and the blue, When brothers fall in unity, and live as brothers should.

For it is like the precious heart, o'er the top of the rock's head, Bloods running over down his feet, upon his solar strength, Up on his solar strength.

[36 : 58] Like her must do upon the hill, all side of his feet says, The Lord besouces blessing there, the life that never ends.

Life that never ends. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, now and always.

Amen.