

# Good & Pleasant Fellowship

## A study of Psalm 133

- <sup>1</sup> “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!  
<sup>2</sup> 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.  
<sup>3</sup> It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion.  
For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life for evermore.”

Scripture quotations are taken from the NIV unless otherwise stated.

This Psalm is one of a group of 15 Psalms called “songs of ascents” or “songs of degrees” (Psalms 120-134). Why these Psalms are grouped together is not certain. A very probable proposal is that they were sung by worshippers as they travelled to Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish festivals. The theme of Psalm 133 would support this proposal.

King David, as leader of God's people, was a keen observer of social behaviour. He had personally suffered the effects of jealousy, gossip, envy, rivalry and conflict. But, as expressed in this Psalm, he also noticed that when the people of God dwelt together in unity, God would act and add something. This divine intervention made this social interaction special; he describes it as “good and pleasant”. We call this expression of unity fellowship.

Perhaps surprisingly, the word “unity” is used very few times in Scripture, only 3 times in the English Bible [King James and Darby translations]. These are:

- 1. Ephesians 4:3 – Positional unity:** Here we are urged to “keep the **unity** of the Spirit in the uniting bond of peace” (DBY). This unity among all born again Christians is Spirit made. It is a positional reality. It is a fact. We are encouraged to make every effort to keep it, to express it. But this is not always easy. Therefore, the apostle precedes this command with an exhortation: “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love” (Ephesians 4:2). Without these four virtues, this divine unity can never be experienced.

2. **Ephesians 4:13 – Future unity:** A few verses further on, we read that God gave gifted men to the Church to prepare His people for works of service “until we all arrive at the **unity** of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, at *the* full-grown man, at *the* measure of the stature of the fullness of the Christ” (DBY). This unity is a perfect goal we should work towards. This destination provides direction to every Christian ministry.
3. **Psalm 133:1 – Experienced unity:** Here David observes “how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in **unity!**” (DBY). It is not a positional unity caused by belonging to the same tribe or nation. Neither is this unity a future goal or destination. The unity David sings about is a practical experience that can be lived and enjoyed today, here on earth, by the likes of you and me. The Spanish translation RV60 translates the idea as dwelling “together in harmony”. Musical harmony is a pleasant sound made up of different notes - a delightful unity made up of diversity.

To help us understand “how good and pleasant” this fellowship is, King David then uses two pictures: that of oil poured on the head and that of dew falling on a mountain. Jewish figures of speech like these can be misunderstood. We can give them a meaning that was never intended. Modern readers may be tempted to ignore the less obvious figures. My wife, for example, has never been enthusiastic about beards, and even less about oily heads and oily beards! This could affect her appreciation of this Psalm. But about 3000 years ago, when this Psalm was written, these two figures conveyed clear and positive ideas. Let’s explore them.

### **Figure #1: Precious oil poured on the head**

Every Bible student soon discovers that oil has many uses in Scripture. For example, it is used in food, in medicine, socially and in religious ceremonies. It is used symbolically to represent joy, happiness, comfort or blessing. Oil is sometimes used as a picture of the Holy Spirit. Given the rich usage of oil, what could it mean in this Psalm?

The expression “precious oil”, suggest that it was not common oil. The author was not thinking about cooking oil. Given that there is no reference to sickness in this Psalm, this oil was probably not medicinal. We read that this oil was poured on the head. This practice was a social nicety (Psalm 23:5; Luke 7:46) and also a ceremonial rite (Leviticus 14:18). The reference to Aaron’s beard suggests that this Psalm was referring to the ceremonial oil used to consecrate Aaron and his sons as priests, that is, the “oil of holy ointment” or the “sacred anointing oil”. In Exodus 30:22-30 we find out how this oil was made and used.

A distinctive feature of this sacred anointing oil was its smell; it is referred to as a fragrant blend. It was made by a perfumer. Its base was olive oil and it included great quantities of liquid myrrh, sweet-smelling cinnamon, aromatic cane and cassia. Now imagine all that being poured onto the head of Aaron. Not just a few drops, but enough to run down his head, down his beard and reaching the “hem of his garments”. Perhaps we are now in better condition to understand the use of this figure in this Psalm.

This unity, this fellowship, this happy interaction between God's people, is something that smells very, very good. This smell is attractive. "Perfume and incense bring joy to the heart" (Proverbs 27:9). Like any parent, God enjoys seeing happy interaction among His children. As members of His family, we know this fellowship is sweet. Even non-Christians feel attracted to the scent of healthy, godly relationships. Perhaps the apostle Paul had this thought in mind when he wrote "we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing" (2 Corinthians 2:15). What do your family and Christian assembly smell like? Do you contribute towards this nice smell? Bitterness, selfishness, a critical attitude and an unforgiving spirit are like dead flies - and "dead flies give perfume a bad smell" (Ecclesiastes 10:1).

## **Figure #2: Dew of Hermon falling on Mount Zion**

This image is a bit more obscure, especially if unfamiliar with Bible geography. Mount Hermon is over 2800 meters high and is situated in the northern border of Israel. Snow and ice can be found on its peaks. Mount Zion is only 800 meters high and is situated in the southern half of Israel. It is one of the hills on which the city of Jerusalem is founded. King David wishes to illustrate "how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity", and said that it is like the "dew of Hermon that descendeth on the mountains of Zion" (DBY). What could this mean?

Some suggest that since Mount Hermon was in the Northern kingdom and Mount Zion in the southern kingdom, this image is used to encourage unity among these two kingdoms. Perhaps it could have this effect. But the nation of Israel divided into two kingdoms after David died. This motivation would not exist when he composed this Psalm. Some suggest that it is impossible for the dew of Hermon to fall on Mount Zion – because they are many miles apart. They suggest this figure points to a miracle. It is true that fellowship among God's people is a miracle, something of divine origin, but perhaps the dew image has a more natural interpretation.

The dew of Mount Hermon is cool and abundant. How would it feel for those living near Mount Zion to wake up to the dew of Hermon? It would be refreshing and invigorating. That is what true fellowship feels like. That is why David sings that the experience of unity among the people of God is "good and pleasant". Many years later, the apostle Paul also noticed how fellowship refreshed a tired saint: "we were especially delighted to see how happy Titus was, because his spirit has been refreshed by all of you" (2 Corinthians 7:13). He wrote to Philemon: "your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints" (Philemon 1:7). Does the fellowship at your Christian assembly refresh and invigorate? How do others feel after spending some time talking with you or visiting your home? Like cool dew, true fellowship refreshes and invigorates.

## **Common features: Oil and Dew**

Having explored the distinctive features of oil and dew, we notice that these two figures share some common secondary ideas.

- 1. Abundance:** The oil is poured freely. From the head it reaches the garments. The dew is cool and plentiful. Both figures depict generosity and abundance. With

more oil, the smell is stronger. With more dew, the refreshment is greater. It has never been the Lord's desire for Christians to live in isolation. There is a time for solitude and there are Biblical reasons for separation. But the experience of this divine abundant unity within the Body of Christ will be either corrupted or hindered if we adopt conditions for fellowship looser or tighter than those observed among the apostles and saints in the New Testament.

- 2. From above:** The oil is poured from above and runs down. The dew falls or descends from above. Similarly, the type of fellowship King David was excited about was more than natural comradeship. Its source was divine. It is different in nature from the fun football fans have together. Christian fellowship is more than happiness because we form part of the same assembly, the same denomination or the same circle of fellowship. It is more than having intellectual affinity or agreeing with some set of religious procedures. There is something divine that unites all the people of God, and when it can be expressed, it smells good and refreshes the soul.

## Conclusion

Our Lord Jesus thought of us and prayed for us: "Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name--the name you gave me--so that they may be one as we are one... Sanctify them (*set them apart for sacred use*) by the truth; your word is truth... that all of them may be one, Father... May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:11-21, words in italics added). For the world to believe, they must see something. Clearly the Lord Jesus had in mind a unity and some evidence of that unity. Is this an impossible prayer? It presents us with a serious challenge. Naturally we feel more at ease with those who sing like we do and share our social and religious customs. Our consciences are at peace when dealing with Christians we totally agree with. Is this the expression of unity our Lord was praying for? May the Lord grant us the wisdom and the courage to know when He would have us separate and when he would have us cooperate. Where Christian unity can be rightfully expressed "there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life for evermore". And we desperately need that blessing.

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