

Precious Unity

Psalm 133

[Phil Johnson](#)

We come to Psalm 133 in our study of the Pilgrim psalms—"Songs of ascents." These are fifteen short psalms purposely grouped together coming immediately after the longest psalm in the psalter (Psalm 119—that's also the longest chapter in Scripture, as you probably know.) Psalm 119, a psalm entirely about the Word of God, is immediately followed by these 15 short psalms, all grouped together and labeled with the same inscription: "**A Song of Ascents.**" It's a small collection of choruses within the book of psalms that seems to have been collected for singing by pilgrims making the journey to Jerusalem for the annual feasts. Road-trip choruses.

We've already studied thirteen of the fifteen psalms in the collection, and the two that remain are both very short—three verses each. And here's something interesting. Both of the two final Psalms of Ascent begin with the same word. It's a Hebrew word the ESV translators have translated as "**Behold**" in psalm 133, and Psalm 134 in they render the same word as "**Come.**" The KJV, the New KJV, and the NASB all translate the word "**Behold.**" (The NIV in Psalm 134 seems to leave it out completely.)

But it's an important word for setting the tone of the psalm. It's like an exclamation. Grammatically, it's known as a *demonstrative particle*. And its purpose is to express surprise or delight, and to summon the immediate attention of the listener. Older English speakers might have said "Lo!"—as in, "**[Lo!] how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!**" The design of this first word, then, is to arrest our attention and direct our thoughts in a very focused way on whatever subject is being introduced.

In this case, the subject is unity. By the way, this is one of just four of the fifteen psalms that is specifically attributed to David. And let me remind you that the inscription is part of the inspired text. So we know with certainty who the author of this psalm was.

Furthermore, what we know about David's life gives us a solid clue about the context in which this psalm was written, and I'll show you that. But first, here's the whole psalm:

A SONG OF ASCENTS. OF DAVID. Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!

2 It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes!

3 It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.

I love the brevity and sharp focus we get from a simple psalm like this. The whole subject is given in the final word of that first verse. Again, it's a song about unity. The structure is very simple. *Verse 1 commends unity among brethren as a great blessing.* Verse 2 illustrates the blessing of unity with the imagery of anointing oil. And verse 3 illustrates the blessing of unity with an illustration of dew on the mountains.

So let's break this down and learn as much as we can about unity from these three simple verses.

First, I mentioned the context in which this psalm was written. That demonstrative particle that starts the psalm ("**Behold!**") gives it the flavor of a great sigh of relief, a prayer of thanksgiving, and a gentle plea—a subtle admonition to the brethren spoken of in verse 1, urging them to maintain the blessing of unity.

"Behold!" Here is a marvel rarely experienced! A blessing worth preserving! A benefit with no danger or downside. **"How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!"**

This is a that song apparently comes from the heart of someone who has been earnestly longing for unity, someone who has suffered greatly because of the conflicts created by *disunity*, and someone who is deeply grateful for the relief from his suffering now that unity has finally brought peace. This whole psalm perfectly answers a verse we saw in the

very first of these pilgrim psalms, Psalm 120:6: **"Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace."**

Since this psalm was penned by David, it's not particularly difficult to infer what era of his life may have produced this psalm. There is one moment in the life of David where this psalm would best fit. It seems to be David's song of celebration in response to the peace and harmony that settled over the nation when David, the rightful king, was finally installed on the throne. Scripture describes the years leading up to that event as a time of fierce division and turmoil.

David, of course, was anointed to be king shortly after Samuel prophesied that Saul and his heirs would be deposed. But David had to endure years of exile and torment from the hand of Saul, because Saul was obviously not happy to relinquish the throne. In fact, he never did step down. Saul continued to occupy the throne until he died.

Even when Saul died, David did not immediately take the reins of government. There was a long power struggle in Israel, which led to civil war. The kingdom was nearly torn in two. Here's how that happened.

You probably remember that Saul's reign as king ended in utter disgrace. He died—or rather he took his own life—in a losing battle with the Philistines. Saul had been wounded by arrows shot from some Philistine archers, and he was about to be captured. So he committed suicide rather than face

mistreatment at the hands of the Philistines. The whole battle turned into a bitter defeat for Israel's army. According to 1 Samuel 31:6, "**Saul died, and his three sons, and his armor-bearer, and all his men, [all] on the same day together.**"

Now, that would seem to have been the end of Saul's dynasty. For years before he died, Saul had been nothing more than a trespasser on the throne—in effect, a usurper. Now Saul was dead, and so were his three eldest sons. If Saul had been the legitimate king of Israel, his eldest surviving son would have been heir to his throne—and these three sons were the best, most likely candidates. But now Saul's most capable sons were all dead. Samuel had already anointed David as the new king. That was way back in 1 Samuel 16—several years before Saul's death in chapter 31.

So you might think David would finally be able to occupy the throne. It was, after all, rightfully his. And that was no secret. It was common knowledge that God had appointed David to be the next king. But the transition from Saul to David led to bitter conflict. All but one of the tribes of Israel opposed David.

By the way, you see the character of David in the fact that he mourns the death of Saul. David even wrote a psalm for the occasion, and it's recorded in 2 Samuel 2:19-27. You'll recognize the most famous line in that psalm: "**How the mighty have fallen!**" The first and last verse of the psalm both include that line. It's a song of bitter lament, and despite

Saul's hatred for David, David's song is full of gracious praise for Saul.

Saul's son, Jonathan, was of course David's best friend, and Jonathan was also one of the three sons of Saul who died on the same day as their father, so perhaps that helps explain the depth of David's grief. Saul's determination to kill David made it impossible for David and Jonathan to enjoy any kind of fellowship or friendship. By now they had not been close companions for several years, and that was a deep heartache to David. That perhaps helps explain why David was so sick of conflict and so eager to see unity in Israel.

Anyway, shortly after Saul's death, a group of officials from the tribe of Judah came to David with the expectation of installing David as king. Second Samuel 2:4 says, "**The men of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah.**" David, of course, was from the tribe of Judah, so these men were representatives from his own tribe. Saul had come from the line of Benjamin, and this bid to make David king ignited a violent rivalry between those two tribes.

Now you have to remember, when Saul became the first king of Israel back in 1 Samuel 8, it was at the behest of the people Israel. In an act of rebellion against God's plan for the nation, representatives of the people came to Samuel and demanded a king. When Samuel tried to explain that God Himself was the rightful monarch of Israel, and that made

Israel unique among the nations, the people told Samuel (1 Samuel 8:19-20) **"No! But there shall be a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles."**

And as sometimes happens when God wants us to taste the consequences of our own sins, the Lord gave them what they asked for. First Samuel 8:22: **"The LORD said to Samuel, 'Obey their voice and make them a king.'"**

So the people chose their own king. Now note carefully what they said when they demanded a king. We want a king, they said, so **"that we also may be like all the nations."** And therefore the king they chose fit the bill perfectly. He was the tallest, most muscular, best-looking man in the nation. First Samuel 9:2 describes him this way: He was **"a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he. From his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people."** But his looks were pretty much his only qualification. His reign as king proved that he was not a man of any depth or character. He was strongly self-willed, lacking in discernment, and bereft of personal devotion to the Lord. But he really *looked* good. (In that regard, I think, Saul would have made a very appealing candidate for the American electorate today.)

Anyway, the people chose Saul as their king. And even Saul at first seemed to think it was a bad idea. When people started treating him the way you would treat a king, he said

(1 Samuel 9:21), "Am I not a **Benjaminite**, from the least of the tribes of Israel? And is not my clan the humblest of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin? Why then have you spoken to me in this way?"

And it was only *after* he became king that Saul became the living embodiment of that familiar saying: "Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely." Saul morphed into this self-willed, fleshly-minded, corrupt, capricious, and ultimately demon-possessed king. It could not have been a good and pleasant thing to live under a ruler such as Saul in his declining years.

But the whole point among the people was (in their own words) to "**be like all the nations.**" And the kings of other nations had dynasties. Their own sons succeeded them on the throne when they died—and it didn't matter whether they were benevolent or evil; the dynasty had to be kept intact, because a long dynasty was perceived as evidence of the nation's power and stability. So amazingly, the majority of Israel wanted the eldest surviving son of Saul to be the next king. This was a weak and incompetent man named Ish-bosheth. He was twelve years older than David, but not a man who was fit to lead.

The commander of Saul's army was a man named Abner. When Saul died, Abner "**took Ish-bosheth the son of Saul . . . and he made him king.**" Ish-bosheth probably would never have sought such an honor on his own, but Abner used him

as a political pawn. It's clear from the larger narrative that Abner was the ambitious one. Second Samuel 3:11 says Ish-bosheth was afraid of Abner. So Abner is clearly the one in charge here. He obviously did not want to lose his clout as commander of the king's army, and he needed a kind of puppet king who would keep him in that position.

Ish-bosheth was the perfect choice—a man with a credible claim to be heir to Saul's legacy. But it's clear that Abner was the true power behind the throne.

So we read in 2 Samuel 2:10 that **"Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, was forty years old when he began to reign over Israel, and he reigned two years. [Only] the house of Judah followed David."** All eleven other tribes remained loyal to the dynasty of Saul.

The result was a bitter civil war. At first, Abner (now Ish-bosheth's commander) and Joab (David's commander) agreed to choose twelve champions from their respective armies and have a contest among these elite fighting men in lieu of an all-out war. But 2 Samuel 2:16 says, **"Each caught his opponent by the head and thrust his sword in his opponent's side, so they fell down together."** In other words, all 24 men from both sides' special forces killed each other, so the contest immediately gave way to an all-out war. Scripture says, **"The battle was very fierce that day. And Abner and the men of Israel were beaten before the servants of David."**

The details of this civil war are chilling—especially when you realize these are Israelites fighting their fellow Israelites.

Brothers against brothers. You can read about it for yourself in the early chapters of 2 Samuel. Second Samuel 3:1 sums it up this way: **"There was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David. And David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul became weaker and weaker."**

Then it all gets really ugly. Ish-bosheth accuses Abner of fornicating with one of Saul's concubines. So Abner turns against Ish-bosheth and tries to make peace with David. Joab, commander of David's army, assassinates Abner in revenge for the fact that Abner had killed Joab's brother. Without Abner propping him up, Ish-bosheth is too weak to maintain the illusion that he was the king. Scripture says, **"When Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, heard that Abner had died . . . his courage failed, and all Israel was dismayed."**

A couple of wicked men in Ish-bosheth's army then decided to try to ingratiate themselves to David by killing Ish-bosheth. So they snuck into Ish-bosheth's house while **"he was taking his noontime rest."** They stabbed him to death, beheaded him, and took his head to David, expecting to be rewarded for their treachery. Instead, David had them killed, their feet and hands cut off, and then he hanged their corpses.

I told you it was ugly. But bear in mind, what those men did was treachery, couched in dishonesty, against someone whom they had no right to kill. What David did, he did as king, with all the authority God gives to a rightful ruler to punish evildoers. In the words of Romans 13:3-4: **"Rulers are**

not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer."

And thus with the death of the men who killed Ish-bosheth, the civil war and all its ugliness suddenly ended. Completely. There was no man left in Israel who had an illegitimate craving for kingly power. And 2 Samuel 5:1-4 describes how—

all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said, "Behold, we are your bone and flesh.

2 In times past, when Saul was king over us, it was you who led out and brought in Israel. And the LORD said to you, 'You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel.'"

3 So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron, and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the LORD, and they anointed David king over Israel.

4 David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years.

David established the nation's capital in Jerusalem for the first time and began to build the region around Mount Zion into one of the world's great capital cities. He still fought

wars against the Philistines and defended Israel against other foreign threats, but from the time he ascended the throne until his own son Absalom led a short-lived revolt, unity and peace reigned throughout Israel. The nation then prospered and grew under Solomon's leadership without wars of any kind for another whole generation.

And then to illustrate just how fragile and precarious unity can be, the nation split into two kingdoms after Solomon died, and Israel and Judah were never united again.

So I think it's pretty clear that our psalm, written by David, must pertain to that season in David's life when (after decades of conflict and internal strife) he was able to unite the twelve tribes of Israel into one tranquil and harmonious kingdom. This psalm is the inspired reflection of a royal heart finally at rest: "**Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!**" And the psalm divides easily into three parts. Each verse is one piece of the whole. Each verse describes a unique blessing that unity brings. Verse 1 is about how unity is good for the soul. Verse 2 is about how unity sanctifies the body. And verse 3 is about how unity refreshes the land. Let's look at each verse individually.

VERSE 1: UNITY IS GOOD FOR THE SOUL

"Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!" Let's talk first about why unity is such a virtue, as well as what genuine unity looks like. People today, I think, have a totally skewed idea about what unity means and what it is supposed to achieve. There's a true unity (that's what this psalm celebrates), and there's a false brand of artificial unity that is actually harmful rather than beneficial.

True unity is a reflection of God Himself. Unity is embodied in his very nature. Here is what we confess, together with all Christians from the beginning of the church age: "We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, is all one, the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal."

That's a quote from the Athanasian Creed. Here's how the Baptist Confession of faith says it:

The Lord our God is the one and only living and true God; whose subsistence is in and of Himself . . . In this divine and infinite Being there are three subsistences, the Father, the Word or Son, and Holy Spirit, of one substance, power, and eternity, each having the whole divine essence, yet the essence undivided . . . one God, who is not to be divided in nature and being, but

distinguished by several peculiar relative properties and personal relations; which doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of all our communion with God, and comfortable dependence on him."

In other words, God embodies unity. And the unity of God entails a perfect, absolute agreement. It's a *spiritual* union, not an organic or organizational alliance. That spiritual union is expressly the kind of unity Jesus prayed for in John 17:21. He prayed "**that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us.**" And again in verse 22: "**that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one.**" So the unity of the godhead is the model for the unity Christians are supposed to seek and maintain.

Now, I preached a message here about eight years ago on unity from John 17, and I made the point that what Jesus describes in that prayer is not denominational unity. That's what Roman Catholics tend to think—no matter how much they disagree among themselves or how vastly different is the assortment of worldviews that you will find represented by various leaders in the Roman Catholic Church. They think by all being members of the same organization they have somehow achieved the unity Jesus prays for here.

That's clearly *not* the case, and the very words of John 17 prove it. In John 17:17, just a few sentences before He prays for unity, Jesus says, "**Sanctify them in the truth; your word is**

truth." So at the very least, some shared commitment to *truth* must lie at the heart of what Jesus prayed for.

Denominational boundaries are not necessarily a hindrance to that kind of unity. But above all, the unity Christ sought hinges on the spiritual union of all believers with Christ. Ephesians 5:30 says, "**We are members of his body.**" And Romans 12:5: "**We, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.**" In that sense, Christ's prayer in John 17 has already been answered and is being answered as the church is being built up in that spiritual union that all true believers enjoy. At its root is a shared belief in certain fundamental truths, and as we are being sanctified and perfected, our unity with one another is being perfected as well.

Perfect unity is also one of the central promises of the New Covenant. Jeremiah 32:39: "**I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them.**" When we are glorified, the unity Christ prayed for will finally be absolutely perfect, and all true believers look forward eagerly to that day. We have a taste of it now, but we look forward to an absolutely perfect unity. It's part of our birthright as believers.

I won't develop that point any further this morning, except to say that even while we await the perfection of our unity, we already enjoy a tremendous amount of unity with all the true people of God right now, and we seek a greater unity,

which we gradually attain as we gain a more perfect understanding of God and His Word. That is why we put so much emphasis on the necessity of sound and accurate teaching.

True unity is actually undermined, not advanced, by people those who think we should set aside all concerns about sound doctrine. What they think we need is basically just a group hug with everyone who claims to be a Christian, regardless of what they teach. That's a recipe for error and ultimately division. It is not a path to true unity.

I mentioned there's a *false* kind of unity, and I've just described it for you. It's the notion that is so popular today that truth and doctrine are obstacles to unity. *As if you could have unity among people who really don't agree on anything.* But lot's of people think precisely that way. They believe we might all be able to get along if only we would all refuse to make truth an issue. Just accept (or ignore) all the lies, the heresies, the false prophecies, the pagan superstitions—don't contradict any of those things; don't worry about them—just get along with everyone. That's how many (perhaps *most*) people today think "unity" must be achieved.

That's not unity. It's confusion, and 1 Corinthians 14:33 says, "**God is not a God of confusion but of peace.**"

Again, the spiritual union and perfect agreement among the Persons of the Godhead are the perfect example of true unity. And that means agreement with the Word of God an

absolute essential—the single most obvious fruit—of true unity.

But real unity is not only about being of one opinion. As Christians, we are driven by one affection: our love for Christ. We share one loyalty: to the lordship of Christ. And we have one duty: love. Love for God and love for our neighbor.

Ephesians 4;2-6 starts at that very point and goes on to describe all the essential elements of Christian unity. Paul says we pursue unity by:

bearing with one another in love,

3 eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

4 There is one body and one Spirit--just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call--

5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism,

6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

So we enjoy unity as brothers and sisters in Christ, even while we find it necessary wage ideological battles against the false doctrines and the superstitious beliefs of Philistines who pretend to be Christians but are not in any way united with Christ. They represent a serious threat to true unity among our brethren if they try to encroach on the fellowship of believers—because they lack that vital connection to Christ.

By the way, that image of simultaneous unity among the brethren and war against the Philistines mirrors the actual situation in Israel when David penned this psalm. While David was celebrating "**how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity,**" he was in the process of waging war against fierce foreign enemies who threatened the peace of Israel.

Now back to our text. Notice the two adjectives there in verse 1: "good and pleasant." Have you ever noticed that lots of things that are *good* are not *pleasant*; and lots of things that are pleasant are not good. Unity is *both* good and pleasant—and therefore it's one of the finest of all virtues, not only good for the soul, but also pleasing to the heart.

Unity is "**good,**" because it reflects the very nature of God. It is virtuous, honorable—an expression of righteousness. It's an extreme wickedness to undermine unity. Proverbs 6:19 says this is one of seven things God hates with a holy passion: "**one who sows discord among brothers.**" A few verses before that (Proverbs 6:14), we read: "**A worthless person, a wicked man . . . with perverted heart devises evil, continually sowing discord.**" Proverbs 16:28: "**A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends.**" In other words, someone who seems to think there's something compelling about causing division must have a mind totally given over to evil. Scripture uses very harsh language: Anyone who delights in setting brothers against one another

is worthless and wicked. But conversely (James 3:18): "**a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.**" So unity is honorable, and noble, and holy. It's "good."

More than that, unity is "**pleasant.**" That means, first of all, that it's pleasing to God. He takes pleasure in it. He delights in it.

But also, in a very practical way, unity is pleasant to those who experience it. You know this, I hope, in your own household. It's a truly pleasant, joyous, exhilarating thing to dwell in unity with your wife and kids—loving one another, serving one another, and creating a home environment that is free from strife. That's perhaps the easiest, most immediate path to tranquility and earthly bliss that's available to any of us. I frankly don't understand people who seem to have a perverse need to cause strife in their own families. But I know there are lots of people like that, because it seems like they always end up seeking counsel. But they are also the kind of people who are resistant to counsel. I think some people are so addicted to conflict that they simply cannot abstain from picking fights with their spouse and family members. Again, I don't understand that, and I certainly don't sympathize with it. It's absolutely vile; the textbook definition of sinful foolishness.

But it's a sin that creates its own painful consequence. Scripture clearly highlights this repeatedly. It's a simple

principle: Unity is pleasant; living with conflict is unpleasant. Proverbs 21:9: **"It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife."** Same chapter, verse 19: **"It is better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and an angry woman."** Proverbs 25:24 repeats verbatim Proverbs 21:9, so I gather Solomon must have felt pretty strongly about this: **"It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife."** I'm guessing he had a specific axe to grind.

But he doesn't just single out bickering wives. Proverbs 22:24-25: **"Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare."** Proverbs 20:3: **"It is an honor for a man to keep aloof from strife, but every fool will be quarreling."** Bottom line, a lack of unity makes everything in the household unpleasant. Proverbs 17:1: **"Better is a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife."**

Here's the point: unity is a pleasant thing, pleasing to the heart and good for the soul. In a family, it makes the household pleasant; in a nation, it fosters prosperity and civic congeniality; in the church, it pleases God, honors Christ, cultivates joy, stimulates love, and nurtures the welfare of the flock. **"Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!"** It is good and pleasant in every way—good for the soul. That's the whole point of verse 1. Here's—

VERSE 2: UNITY SANCTIFIES THE BODY

The imagery of verse 2 is vivid, and bear in mind that the subject is still *unity*: **"It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes!"**

If you're reading a different translation, it might speak of the oil running down to the hem of his garment. The Hebrew expression literally means **"going down to the mouth of his garment"**—so it suggests the idea of an opening in the garment. The same Hebrew word was used to speak of both the lower and the upper opening of a garment, so the text really isn't as specific as most of our translations make it.

Some commentators think this a reference to the lower hem, so you'd have the oil literally saturating the whole garment. Others say, no, this is speaking of just the collar—because, let's be honest, the idea of a priest literally soaked from head to foot with oil doesn't make a very pleasing mental image. John Gill says, for example, *"[It wouldn't] have been decent to have his clothes . . . greased from top to bottom."* The fact is, the outer garment of the priest's outfit was a sleeveless smock called the ephod. Here's what Exodus 28:31 says about how the ephod was made: **"Make the robe of the ephod all of blue. It shall have an opening for the head in the middle of it, with a woven binding around the opening, like the opening in a garment, so that it may not tear."**

So in other words, there *was* a band of woven cloth encircling opening at the neck, and one class of commentators say that's what this means—not the lower hem of the priest's robe, but the collar.

But other commentators say, *No, this is oil all the way down*. Here's one who says, "The oil was poured upon the head of Aaron so profusely as to run down upon his garments. It is customary in the east to pour out the oil on the head so profusely as to reach every limb."

I don't know whether it's vitally important one way or another. Either way, it's a picture of the oil copiously flowing down, being diffused over a long distance. And the idea both here and in verse 3 is to suggest that the liquid flows from the height to the depths, so I'm inclined, I think, to agree with those who think the imagery does picture the high priest being anointed literally from head to foot.

This wasn't normally done. Priests were routinely anointed by just a sprinkling of oil. But this specifically mentions Aaron, and when the first Tabernacle was inaugurated and Aaron was anointed, Leviticus 8:12 says Moses "**poured of the anointing oil upon Aaron's head, and anointed him, to sanctify him**"—implying a large amount of this special, fragrant oil was used on that occasion. It's reminiscent of John 12:3, where we are told that "**Mary . . . took a [whole] pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her**

hair. The [whole] house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."

Now "the precious oil" in our psalm refers to something very specific and unique. It's the anointing oil that was prepared for the Tabernacle, and set aside to anoint the priests and sacrificial furnishings. It was made from a God-given recipe, and that recipe was not to be used to make oil for any other purpose.

It wasn't a *secret* recipe, though. It's recorded for us in Exodus 30:22-25. Listen to that passage:

The LORD said to Moses,

23 "Take the finest spices: of liquid myrrh 500 shekels, and of sweet-smelling cinnamon half as much, that is, 250, and 250 of aromatic cane,

24 and 500 of cassia, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, and a hin of olive oil.

25 And you shall make of these a sacred anointing oil blended as by the perfumer; it shall be a holy anointing oil.

That's a large amount of very aromatic oil—about a gallon and a half. The Lord goes on to instruct Moses to anoint all the sacred instruments in the Tabernacle, as well as Aaron. And he says this (verses 29-30): **"You shall consecrate [the priestly implements with this oil], that they may be most holy. Whatever touches them will become holy. You shall anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, that they may serve me as**

priests." And furthermore (verse 31): "This shall be my holy anointing oil throughout your generations. It shall not be poured on the body of an ordinary person, and you shall make no other like it in composition. It is holy, and it shall be holy to you. Whoever compounds any like it or whoever puts any of it on an outsider shall be cut off from his people."

The oil was highly fragrant, with a very pleasing fragrance. It was unique and holy. But most important, it was such an important symbol of holiness that anything it touched (among the things it was *meant* to touch) was thereby deemed holy; and anything it touched *illegitimately* was thereby fit only for destruction. The oil belonged to the Lord, and it had just one purpose: to sanctify the instruments of worship and sacrifice.

So when our psalm compares unity to the oil running through Aaron's beard and down to the hem of his garment, the message is that unity has a sanctifying effect. The church, the body of Christ, is sanctified by our unity in a way that even exceeds the mere symbolism of Aaron's oil. We are truly and literally sanctified—made holy—through the cultivation of unity with one another. That's why Jesus' prayer for our sanctification in John 17 focused so much on unity. Unity sanctifies the body in a profound and singular way. That's what verse 2 is about: the special sanctifying influence of brotherly unity. So again: Verse 1: Unity is good for the soul. Verse 2: Unity sanctifies the body. Now, finally,

VERSE 3: UNITY REFRESHES THE LAND

Verse 3 paints the picture of "**the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion!**" That statement is a little bit hard to unravel, because Mount Hermon is 120 miles north and east of Jerusalem (as the crow flies), nowhere close to Zion. And given the geography of the region, there is no way the dew of Hermon could literally run downhill and end up on Mt. Zion. It might flow all the way to the Dead Sea, but to get to Jerusalem from Hermon, it would have to go thousands of feet downhill, then thousands of feet back up.

One commentator I read claimed there was another hill just above Mt. Zion nicknamed Hermon, but no one else agrees with that. Another commentator says verse 3 doesn't really mean to say Zion, but Sirion, which is another name for one of the lower peaks on the Mt. Hermon range. I'm not buying that, either.

Mt. Hermon is a very high range. (It has three peaks all more than 9,000 feet high.) And Hermon has the heaviest dew and the greatest amount of rainfall in that sector of the middle east. And for much of the year, the peak of the mountain is covered with snow. There's a famous ski resort on eastern slope of Hermon. So it's true that Hermon is a major source of water for the Golan heights and all the regions further south. A lot of that water runs down into the sea of Galilee, and from there, past Jerusalem to the Dead

Sea. But there's no way (aside from evaporation and then new rain) that "**the dew of Hermon**" could run down onto "**the mountains of Zion.**" Skeptics sometimes cite this passage as an example of an egregious geographical error in the Bible.

But the solution to all this is really quite simple. The psalmist is describing a hypothetical a scenario where heavy dew gathers on Zion and runs down. Zion doesn't generally get that kind of dew. But the psalmist is comparing brotherly unity to what it would be like if Zion got the same kind of heavy dew and rainfall Mt. Hermon gets. You could literally translate the Hebrew that way: "**It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion.**" That's precisely how the NIV has it, and in this case, I think the NIV gets it right. "**It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion**"—refreshing the land, watering and enlivening the barren ground around Jerusalem, causing the whole land to be refreshed and invigorated.

We know what that's like in Southern California after a period of drought. We wish for a long and steady rain, and we rejoice when it comes. That, the psalmist says, is what unity among brethren is like.

There's a similarity between verse three and the illustration in verse 2. Both verses picture unity as flowing down, diffusing, and dispersing blessings. In verse 2, it's the blessing of holiness and a sweet-smelling fragrance. In verse 3 its the blessing of refreshment and life-giving hydration.

The whole idea of the psalm, then is that unity is a uniquely rich blessing, filled with a plethora of affiliated benefits. It's a fountain of happiness and pleasure, and it is sheer folly to spurn the pursuit of unity in a family, in a nation, and above all in the church. A lack of unity in any kind of family or community only makes every aspect of life exponentially harder and more unpleasant.

Romans 14:9: "**So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.**" And 1 Peter 3:8: "**Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.**" That's the same message as our psalm.