

## G. Psalm 133 – The Fellowship of Sonship

Once again, the Psalms were composed as songs of worship and devotion – songs that expressed and celebrated Israel’s sonship. Thus many of them celebrate the singular privilege and blessedness of the Israelites’ intimacy with their covenant God and Father. Out of all the earth’s peoples, the Creator-God granted to Abraham and his descendents to enjoy a unique relationship of sonship. But He did so, not to single out the Abrahamic family, but to use them as His instrument for realizing His ultimate goal to fill His covenant household with people from every tribe, tongue and nation. Israel’s sonship had its goal in a global family of sons and daughters.

Thus the people of Israel weren’t to retreat from the world around them, let alone exalt themselves above the Gentiles who didn’t share their election and privilege. Rather, Yahweh directed them to fulfill their election of sonship by being His light shining into the surrounding world. It was precisely by living faithfully as the Creator’s covenant son that Israel would fulfill its vocation of mediating His blessing to all the earth’s families. The sons of Israel were called to love their Gentile neighbors by bearing faithful and truthful testimony to them – testimony of their God and Father, who is the God of all mankind, and so also testimony of His intent that His human image-bearers should attain to their created design as image-children.

The great commandment of Israel’s covenant *Torah* was the obligation of undivided love and absolute devotion to their God, but this implied a corollary: The sons of Israel were to love their neighbor as themselves (cf. Leviticus 19:18 with Matthew 22:35-40; ref. also Romans 13:8-10). This latter obligation pertained most directly to the relationship between Hebrew countrymen, who were covenant brethren. But it also reached beyond the bounds of the covenant household to include the “alien” and “stranger.” Israel would demonstrate its love for God by fulfilling its sonship, and this meant truthfully testifying to the people around them of the divine Father and His loving intent for mankind. Loving God, then, meant loving one’s fellow Israelite, but also loving Gentile neighbors through demonstrated faithfulness in word and deed (ref. Deuteronomy 10:12-19; also Exodus 23:9; Leviticus 23:22; Deuteronomy 1:16-17, 24:17; etc.).

If love for God and neighbor were the two great, overarching obligations of Israel’s covenant sonship, it’s not surprising to see *brotherly fellowship* extolled in Israel’s psalms, alongside the celebration of Father-son intimacy. Various psalms allude to this fellowship, but none speaks of it as directly and joyously as Psalm 133. It is one of the shortest psalms in the Psalter with only three verses, sharing that distinction with two other *Songs of Ascents* (Psalms 131, 134), and is surpassed in its brevity only by Psalm 117.

1. As noted, Psalm 133 is one of the Psalter’s *Songs of Ascents* (Psalms 120-134), which psalms are distinguished by their ascending character. (Various traditions associate them with the three pilgrim feasts, the Levitical ministration, and the return from exile.) They are marked by an upward movement in their argument and/or sentiment (joy, hope, faith, zeal, etc.). In the case of this psalm, it begins and ends on a high note, ascending from a joyous *assertion* to a joyous *affirmation* that clarifies and substantiates the assertion. This psalm is ascribed to David, and he opened by lauding the goodness and delight that attend brotherly unity. His climactic closing, then, suggests that the virtue and value of this unity derive from its relation to the God who reigns from Mount Zion, and who has, from there, directed (“commanded”) His blessing of life to flow down to His people.

The brotherly unity that David extolled has Israel's God and King at its center, and is associated with the life He has decreed and dispenses from His throne on Mount Zion. This closing statement can be interpreted two ways, depending on whether the Hebrew expression "unto the ages" modifies the verb *commanded* or the noun *life*. Thus David could have meant that this life that God has decreed endures forever (arguably suggested by the Hebrew syntax and reflected in most English translations), or that the decree itself stands forever. His statement would then be rendered, *for there Yahweh has decreed forever the blessing that is life*. Both meanings are possible, and both are consistent with the overall perspective and teaching of the Hebrew scriptures and the Psalter in particular: Yahweh has decreed life as the everlasting destiny for His creation, and this decree is sure and steadfast, enduring forever (ref. Psalm 16:7-10, 73:21-24, 105:8, 119:89, 111, 144, 152, 121:8, 125:1-2, 148:1-6, etc.). And so, while David may have been speaking about *life* that endures forever, he equally understood that the divine decree behind it is also everlasting, enduring "unto the ages."

2. The middle part of the psalm, then, has David drawing on two distinct images intended as metaphors to depict the goodness and blessedness of brotherly unity. The first draws on the anointing of Aaron, Israel's first and great high priest (v. 2), and the second is the dew that appears in the morning on Mount Hermon and the mountains of Zion (v. 3a).
  - a. Anointing with oil was a key aspect of Aaron's preparation to serve as Yahweh's chosen high priest. Anointing symbolized a person's consecration to a particular task, and was employed in Israel in the consecration of kings, priests, and other significant figures in the nation's covenant life. The first mention of such anointing concerned Aaron and his sons as part of God's instruction to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 28:46), which anointing is recounted in Leviticus 8. The text records that Moses poured the anointing oil on Aaron's head, so that it would have run down his face and into his beard, then dripping down onto his priestly garment. This is the imagery David drew on, and so he must have had Aaron's anointing in mind. But this raises the question of why David made this connection; *what was there about the event of Aaron's anointing as high priest that, for him, spoke to the goodness and delightfulness of brotherly unity?*

Of course it's impossible to be absolutely certain, but David clearly penned these words as a Jew thinking from an Israelite perspective. That is, the unity he had in mind is that which was to exist among the members of Yahweh's covenant household. This unity was *covenant* unity – the unity deriving from Israel's mutual sonship, the unity of covenant brethren. The unity David lauded was grounded in and expressive of the nation's covenant status as Yahweh's corporate "son," *but it was precisely this Father-son relationship that Aaron was ordained to administer*. Thus the imagery of Aaron's anointing points to the unique and privileged nature of Israel's brotherly unity: The children of Israel were brethren because Yahweh had taken them to Himself to be His sons and daughters. It wasn't merely genealogy that bound them together as one unified family, but divine purpose and election. The Israelite *brotherhood* reflected Israel's mutual *sonship*, and this defining relationship between Father and children stood upon the good and blessed mediation of Yahweh's ordained priests (Hebrews 7:11-12).

- b. The second image is very different, yet parallels the first one in that it speaks of dew “*coming down*” onto the mountains of Zion. David depicted this dew as descending from heaven onto the high places of Yahweh’s habitation, which echoes the imagery of the priestly anointing oil, which also had its source in heaven as God’s ordination, coming down onto Aaron’s head, beard and robes.

As with the first image, there is the question of what led David to think of the morning dew when he considered the goodness of brotherly unity. Was it simply a sense of general *pleasantness* he associated with both? If so, why connect this dew with Hermon and the mountains of Zion as the place from which Yahweh dispenses life? Beyond that, how does this understanding explain the clear connection between the two images, i.e., the oil and dew both “coming down”?

David seems to have had more in mind than generic pleasantness, and once again finding his meaning depends upon treating the psalm in its Israelite context. David penned these words as a Hebrew, chosen by Israel’s covenant God and anointed as His king to administer His rule over His people. Scholars recognize this, and so some believe David wrote this psalm with an eye to his unification of the nation under his kingship. He accomplished this goal after conquering Jerusalem and making it the settled site of Yahweh’s sanctuary. Thus David ruled over all Israel and Judah from Jerusalem, the precious jewel of the mountains of Zion and the place from which Yahweh exercised His own rule as Israel’s King enthroned between the wings of the cherubim (ref. 2 Samuel 5:1-6:19).

David’s imagery drew on the fact that the dew that fell on Mount Hermon, Israel’s tallest peak located at the country’s northern border, evaporated under the rays of the morning sun to make its way south to fall again on the Judean mountains, including Mount Zion itself where Yahweh had His throne. Thus the morning dew marvelously united God’s covenant land with its life-giving moisture, and so bore its own witness to the goodness of the covenant sons living in unity, united in the life Yahweh bestowed on them (Deuteronomy 30:15-20).

3. David’s two similes reinforce his opening assertion by alluding to the basis and nature of the unity he praised as good and pleasant. It is a brotherly unity that is *covenantal* rather than biological. It derived, not from shared Abrahamic descent, but participation in the covenant God made with him; it is the unity of *mutual sonship* that belonged to Yahweh’s covenant children. David likely penned this song in celebration of God’s accomplishment through him in uniting His covenant household under His own established reign in Jerusalem. In that sense, David understood that he had been the instrument for realizing what Aaron’s anointing anticipated: a family of covenant sons intimately united with their covenant Father and one another. And yet, the preceding psalm – perhaps composed centuries later during Judah’s exile – sets the tone for David’s song by underscoring that what David achieved and celebrated was not ultimate, and so fell short of God’s decree of perpetual life. Psalm 132 reminded the sons of Israel that the object of David’s rejoicing was yet unrealized. *What David exulted in – what Yahweh purposed through him – awaited David’s elect Son. He would unite Yahweh’s children in accordance with the unending life He decreed from Mount Zion.*