

Psalm 133 - The blessing of unity

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[0 : 0 0] For the rest of us, we're going to read that whole psalm. Andrew Barnett is going to come and read it for us. So that is on page 625. If you grab your Bible and hold it open there, Andrew will come and read it for us.

All right, I'll read from Psalms 133. It reads, How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity.

It is like the precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down on the collar of his robe.

It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore. Amen.

Thanks so much, Andrew. Do keep our passage open. We're going to be looking at it together over the next few moments. As we do that, I want you to imagine a scene with me.

[1 : 0 5] I want you to imagine that you're in Jerusalem, something like 600 BC, something like that. And God's people are arriving in the city for a festival. So families, clans, individuals from the surrounding countryside are all walking into and gathering into Jerusalem, filling its streets, filling its hotels, filling its shops.

It's hot. It's dusty. But everyone is kind of in party mood. So think central London, New Year's Eve, without the rain and without the wind, and it's something like that.

Then on the morning of the feast, as that morning comes, people start to assemble together in the temple courts. The place is absolutely packed out. There are people everywhere.

Men, women, young people, older people, country folk, city dwellers, black, white, rich, poor. They're all there, and they're all there for exactly the same reason.

They're there for the festival. They're there to worship God. They're there to praise God for his mercy and for his grace. They're there to express their trust in his covenant promises.

[2 : 2 1] They're there to declare to anybody who would listen, anybody within earshot, that our God is the God. He's the one who made us. He is God, and there is no other.

He is the one who provides for us. He is the one who saves us. Now, that scene is the scene of Psalm 133. It is why it begins by calling itself a song of ascent.

It's one of the songs that was particularly put together for God's people as they gathered in Jerusalem. And it is imagining the scene which is the key to really understanding Psalm 133.

Our NIV translators have dropped the word, perhaps because it sounded slightly odd in English, but really the only instruction in the original Hebrew is a word at the beginning of the psalm, which is the word look or behold.

Literally, the beginning of the psalm reads something like, look, behold, how good, how pleasing. It is almost as if, and I know this is sort of a mix of generations, really, but if you imagine in that 600 BC Jerusalem, gathering with all of those people, gathering for the festival, imagine that you had a drone, right?

[3 : 36] And you flew it up and you looked down and you saw this great sea of people from all over the place. That is the essence of Psalm 133.

Just look at this. Look at all these people. Look at how brilliant it is. So many different people, but one God, one promise, one united voice. Now, the reason as leaders of the church that we decided to look at Psalm 133 together this morning is because our hope and our prayer coming to this morning is that you and I have a sense of Psalm 133, even before we read it.

That you looking around, and I guess if you're in the balcony, you get a particularly good view of this. You look around, we see it in a smaller scale, but we see the same thing. Look at this.

Young people, older people, not pointing at anyone in particular, black, whites, students, professionals, nurses, doctors, teachers, people who own their own businesses, tradespeople, country folk from small towns like Loughborough, like me.

City folks, all brought together in the providence of God to worship him, to say to one another and to anyone who would listen, our God, he's the God.

[4 : 53] We trust him. He has made promises to save us and we trust them. There's no one like him. Listen to him. Worship him. Now, I hope that you get a feeling of that this morning.

Maybe a little tingle down your spine. The truth is that many people in their Christian lives get to go to church, right? Going to church is an essential thing to do as a Christian. And down the generations, Christians have had to do that or got to do that.

Some Christians at some points in history have been part of starting a church. And that's been an exciting thing. Some people have gotten to be part of building a church building.

And that's been an exciting thing. Very few Christians in their Christian lives get to be part of what we're part of now, which is the bringing together of two different local churches, united despite cultural differences, to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

And I hope that that gives you a tingle because that's an amazing thing. And it's not just because it's cold in this room. The writer of the Hebrews kind of riffs off Psalm 133 in chapter 12.

[6 : 10] And he reckons that the experience of the local church is even better than the experience of those Jewish festivals. And he does a kind of compare and contrast to prove his points.

He goes like, they get to go to Jerusalem, he says. We get to join with the glories of heaven. They go to what essentially is basically a model of the real thing.

It's like what a Wendy house is to a real house. We get to come to the fulfillment, the real deal, the heavenly city. They come through animal sacrifices, which could never really take away sin.

We come through the blood of Jesus, shed on a cross for us. You know, if you like football, it's like the comparison. They are watching lower league football where people are just kind of thrashing around in the mud.

And if you squint and concentrate hard, you can get a rough idea of what the game of football is all about. We, on the other hand, are on the pitch of the World Cup final, surrounded by the world's best ever players and joining in with the game.

[7 : 12] That's the comparison. And so says Hebrew 12, if that was an occasion of joy for them, an occasion of great reverence for them, well, then this is an occasion of joy for us, an occasion of great reverence for us.

We know that we're part of something amazing, something bigger than us, that God is doing something by his grace, which is remarkable. And you and I get to be a part of it.

Now, as David writes his song in Psalm 133, there are essentially three threads of his praise to God. And I just want us to look at them together. The first one is this, that unity spreads joy.

Unity spreads joy. I don't know whether you noticed when Andrew read it, but the passage contains basically two pictures, two similes. I think they're similes. I'm never quite sure of the difference between a simile and a metaphor.

You can explain that to me afterwards, but I warn you that people have explained that to me in the past, and I'm still none the wiser, but I think they're similes. They're both given to explain why unity is such a good thing.

[8 : 15] And the first picture is this one of Aaron and his beard and his head being anointed with oil, running down his beard and onto his garment. Now, I think it's probably fair to say that that image doesn't sort of scan super well now.

We don't pour oil on people's heads quite as often as they used to in Old Testament Israel. But here's the idea that we were trying to communicate to the children in the family Bible slot, that if you pour fragrant oil on Aaron's head, what happens is it runs down.

It runs down. It's repeated that, isn't it? It runs down, running down on the beard, running down on the beard, down on the collar of his robe. Now, that might, to you, sound sort of vaguely annoying, mightn't it?

To protect it if you were kind of precious about your robe, and now it's covered in greasy oil, and you didn't really want that. But actually, the image is a good thing. It's a good thing. The point is that the blessing of the unity is spreading.

It's flowing down and down, making everything smell of the fragrant oil. And so it is with the unity described in Psalm 133 that we are getting to experience this morning.

[9 : 24] It is like a sweet-smelling fragrance to everyone who touches it, so that all of us get to be part of the joy of the good and pleasantness of verse 1, because unity spreads joy.

That was the experience of the worshippers in Jerusalem, and it's our experience this morning. Of course, those words, if you really grapple with them, are kind of like dynamite, aren't they, in our highly individualistic world.

You and I are sold a lie by our individualistic generation that actually the best thing to be is to be your own person and to be an individual outside of everybody else.

But the uncomfortable truth for individualism is that it's kind of lonely and kind of miserable, because joy, you will discover, is actually not something that you are able to have on your own.

Joy is, by definition, a community pursuit. Let me just try and prove this to you. There are some people in the world, I'm not really one of them, but there are some people in the world who enjoy the game of golf.

[10 : 31] I'm not going to ask you to put your hands up if you are one. It's a strange idea, isn't it, really, hitting a small ball around a field. But anyway, imagine that you're one of those people who love golf. If maybe you do, I'm not judging you, that's fine.

You're welcome to love golf, right? We're united in Jesus. But imagine if you love golf and you're playing a game of golf on your own, right? You have been told that the solitude of the golf course is a place of real renewal and refreshment.

And so you play this game of golf all by yourself. And the remarkable thing happens on a par three, right, where you hit the sweetest tee shot that you have ever hit.

And the ball goes in, in one. A hole in one. And you are, like, overwhelmed by what has just happened.

And you look around and there's no one there. There's no one even on the next tee. There's no one queuing behind you to give you a round of applause. You're there on your own because you've been told that solitude on the golf course is the key to joy and refreshment.

[11 : 37] You see, the point is you only really get to enjoy that hole in one when you tell somebody else about it. That's when you start to enjoy it.

And that really is Psalm 133. You don't get to enjoy unity, the blessing of being one of God's people, on your own at home.

Actually, you only get to enjoy it as you gather with God's people. Of course, alone time with you and the Lord is really important. It's important that you spend time reading God's word and praying, consciously in his presence, repenting and trusting and loving.

But there is a sense that you only really get to enjoy that individual relationship with God that you have as you gather with other Christian believers and rejoice in the fact that you, like them, know the Lord.

It's good and pleasing. It's like oil flowing down Aaron's head and beards. It means, doesn't it, that if you're a Christian and your Christian life is mostly just a personal affair, it's mostly just about you and Jesus and maybe a few YouTube preachers that you like, the truth is you're missing out.

[12 : 54] You're missing out on joy. You can put it negatively as well, can't you? You can put it the other way around. It kind of helps get the focus on it. You can say, can't you, that if you want to be a miserable Christian, then withdraw from God's people and that should do it for you.

Withdraw from Christian fellowship. You know, Christian fellowship is honestly, it's a bit difficult, isn't it? Churches are disappointing. Churches are full of strange people. They're led by strange people, people who will expose themselves as sinners at some point.

But if you withdraw, you will be miserable. Good and pleasing Christianity is an experience that we have in a community. I think there's one other thing that we can say about this, though, before we move on to the next picture.

And that is there is even greater joy in the greater distance that unity flows. That's the repetition of the downward, isn't it? The joy on the head and the beard is not as good on its own as it is with the joy of it being on the collar as well.

It's the running down, down, down that's part of the joy. It's the fact that it's on his clothes as well as his hat that's the good and pleasing thing. You know, the miserable Christian then is not just someone who withdraws from Christian fellowship for glorious isolation on their own.

[14 : 11] The miserable Christian is also someone who only hangs out with people like them. If you want to put it in the image of the passage, really, miserable Christianity is all beard and no collar.

All head and no beard. Homogeneous Christianity, where you hang out with people like you and your unity is really that you're from the same place.

You like the same things. You're the same age. Well, it's miserable. Because God is doing something bigger than uniting you with people like you.

He's uniting you with people who are not like you. And that's the huge blessing. It's the distance that it travels. I hope. It doesn't mean that we're all going to be best mates in this room and all hang out and go away on holiday together.

Necessarily, we might do, but that would be great. But we might not do that. But what you get at the end of church is an opportunity to go and speak to someone who's not like you. Go and speak to a collar or a beard or a head and say we're united in Jesus.

[15 : 18] And it's full of joy. I put up this week our picture of our joint leadership team. What a great joy it is to have a joint leadership team from so many different places and backgrounds.

Brazil, Jamaica, Greece, the UK, South London even. A remarkable thing. So let me encourage you this morning.

Go and speak to someone who's not like you. Second picture. Second picture is unity brings fruit. If the first simile is wasted on us a little bit, then this one I think is even more of a stretch.

You are told in verse 3, if you look down at it, that unity is like the Jew of Hermon falling on Mount Zion. Now, David's crowd would have understood this, and we probably don't, but Mount Hermon is the highest mountain in Israel.

It's renowned for its morning dew. Dew that was so abundant that it irrigated the ground and it brought fruitfulness not just on the mountain, but to the lower lands as well as the water flowed down.

[16 : 18] And here David is saying it's like that fruitfulness has been taken from Hermon and he's been put in Jerusalem because of the unity. Fortunately, David gives us a little bit more of an expanded meaning in the second half of verse 3.

He says, For, or because, there, as in where the unity is, there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore. Here then is the picture.

Unity is like a watering dew to dry ground. Unity brings life, vitality, growth. So living together in unity brings God's blessings to his people.

And as I read those verses, I think, well, the blessings that God brings to his people through unity are blessings like joy that we've talked about, blessings of kind of thankfulness or maybe even spiritual growth.

But actually, as you look down at the verse, you realize that the blessing that you receive through unity is actually the blessing of life forevermore until eternity. The astonishing thing here is that the blessing of eternal life, the blessing that John 3.16 talks about, the eternal life of not perishing because our sins are forgiven, the eternal life of knowing Jesus Christ, our Lord, and God, our Father, through the Spirit.

[17 : 39] That life, that life is at the heart of the gospel message. It's the heart of what our church is about. That life comes as a blessing of unity, we're taught. Now, if you think about that, I would suggest to you that that sounds kind of iffy.

Maybe a bit wrong. I think you would expect the psalmist to say that the blessing of eternal life is experienced through faith in Jesus Christ.

You'd expect him to say that, wouldn't you? The blessings of the Christian life are received by faith. That's true, isn't it? We know that's true, and we'd expect the psalm to say that. But he doesn't.

Now, is that because David is kind of going a bit wonky here? Is he suggesting that you get to be a Christian just by hanging out with other Christians? No, he's not saying that at all. David is not saying that faith is unimportant.

We're going to think about that some more in a moment. But what he is saying to you is this, that the blessings of the Christian life, even and especially the blessing of eternal life, via the atoning work of Christ on the cross, that blessing is received, experienced, and enjoyed in Christian community.

[18 : 47] Not on your own. Think about that. Revelation 21, at the end of the Bible, it pictures the glorious eternal state, doesn't it?

How does it picture it? Forgiven sinners are welcomed into what? Little tiny houses all on their own, dotted out at equidistant from one another? No.

They are welcomed into a city. In Hebrews 12, as we talked about earlier, we come to thousands upon thousands gathered in the glories of heaven.

In Revelation 7, we are gathered with a great multitude that no one can number. As knowing God comes with this glorious blessing of knowing and being known by others.

So that in the gatherings of the local church now, in the company of other believers, what we have here is a mini foretaste of what eternal life feels like. I don't know whether anyone has done a bungee jump.

[19 : 49] Put your hand up if you've done a bungee jump. I think bringing Redeemer Queens Park and West Kilwam Baptist Church together ups our chances of having some people in the room who might have done a bungee jump. Has anybody done a bungee jump?

No? Nobody? Yeah, Camden, you've done one, right? Why did you do a bungee jump? It looked fun.

Wow, there you go. Right, okay, so I thought that people do bungee jumps to make them feel alive, right? There is something about you know that you're alive when you're afraid of something and you kind of throw yourself off and the adrenaline and everything makes you feel that you're alive.

You want the thrill of the drop. That kind of heart in your mouth feeling. Not many of us in this room want it. Only Camden wanted it. And he wasn't sure why he did it anyway. But if I can put it this way, the gatherings of the local church are like the bungee jump of Christianity, right?

It's here in this room, gathered with these people, that you get the thrill of feeling alive. I'm alive.

[20 : 58] I'm alive. Forevermore with the Lord Jesus. And I know that not just because I'm imagining it in my head, but because I'm gathered with a company of other people who are also experiencing that very same thing.

We're alive forevermore. We're experiencing new life in Christ. One of the things that we've been saying at West Kilburn over the last 18 months or so as we started out on this journey of revitalization is that corporate revitalization and individual revitalization, they go hand in hand.

In other words, that desire that we have to establish a vibrant gospel witness in this community, that doesn't happen without us growing individually as Christians.

But we don't grow individually as Christians without the corporate witness of the gathered church. Both go hand in hand and go together. Psalm 133 is telling us that we will not grow.

We will not enjoy the blessings of the Christian life without the corporate life of the church. Those things are woven together. So with that in mind, let me perhaps apply this directly to you this morning.

[22 : 13] If you're maybe just thinking, I'm sitting on the edge of this this morning. I'm just kind of wondering whether maybe I will, maybe I won't be part of this and what's going on.

Well, let me say to you this morning, this is your invitation to do the spiritual bungee jump and throw yourself not off but in, right? In to what God is doing in this community of people.

Because it's here together in this united mix of people from all different backgrounds and circumstances that you will experience the joy and vitality of your Christian life. It doesn't have to be in this church, but it does have to be in a local church.

Because you don't experience this on the edges, but only in the midst. Final point then is this. Unity is God's work.

I want just to finish here and I want us to notice this unwritten assumption in Psalm 133. You see, it would be wrong to go away from Psalm 133 and to think, well, unity is such an important part of church life.

[23 : 18] What we really need to do is work very, very hard to build unity. That would be the wrong application. Because David's assumption is not that we build unity, but that God builds unity and we enjoy it, right?

That's why the instruction at the beginning of Psalm 133, which I think if you've got a pen you can write in on your Bible, is behold or look. Look at what God is doing and we are experiencing.

Unity is God's doing. It's the oil poured on Aaron's head. It was not because of the works of righteousness done by him, but it's a sign that the Lord's undeserved blessing is pouring down onto him.

It's God's doing. The smell on his head and his beard and his collar was received by him. The Jew on Mount Hermon was not kind of instructed by Mount Hermon itself.

It comes from heaven. And so here, unity, this gathering together of people from all nations and backgrounds is not something that we have manufactured. It's something that God is doing through the gospel.

[24 : 21] We started this morning with this image of God's people gathering into Jerusalem to celebrate a festival, to bring sacrifices, to rejoice in the covenant of God with his people.

That's in David's mind as he writes. And when the Psalms are put together, it gets labelled as this psalm of ascents, literally a song to sing as you gather. And it's because it's the work of God to build the people of God.

So in the Bible, it's God who is gathering people. It's sin that is scattering people, right? God in the gospel is calling people together, gathering them together as a community of people.

And it is our sin that scatters them. God breaks down barriers. Sin puts up barriers. God builds churches full of all sorts of people and says, that's where you're going to grow and experience life and joy.

It's people who build churches by gathering just students or just young professionals or just people like them. God doesn't gather churches like that.

[25 : 22] Now, I think that means there are two really important lessons for us as a church this morning, and we're going to finish with these. One is that our experience of unity as a church will be directly proportional to our emphasis on the gospel of Jesus Christ.

What do I mean? Well, I mean, if the gospel is all about what God is doing for people in the person of the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, if you're not a Christian this morning, this is what you need to hear, that God is taking sinful, weak, broken, isolated people like me and like you, and through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, dying in their place, he is gathering them into companies of God's people like local churches now to take them to a city where he will dwell with them for all eternity.

That's the gospel. And it is the extent to which we emphasize that message that we will experience unity, joy, and blessing. You know, if we emphasize that message as a church, we will find that we are surrounded by a whole group of people who are not like us.

We'll be surprised at the kind of people that the church gathers. If you de-emphasize that message or if you cloud it in other things, if you build a church mostly based on demographics or cultural appeals, if you talk mostly about how much we love God and not how much God loves us, if you find yourself doing that, you will surround yourself by people who are just like you.

Because unity is the work of God and not man. It's due from heaven. It's not irrigation that we do. It's water from heaven. So the question for us this morning is will we commit ourselves as a church not just to believe the gospel of Jesus Christ, but to emphasize the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[27 : 19] Will we look at one another through the eyes of the work of Christ? That each saint in this room is a precious individual for whom Jesus shed his blood. And even though they don't look like you, even though they don't sound like you, even though they don't enjoy the same things as you, even though they might support Tottenham, you will still love them.

No one's quite sure exactly when David wrote Psalm 133. If you know the story of David's life, you'll think it was probably in a very narrow window of time because the story of David's life, we've been looking at it actually last year, is the story of David's sin smashing apart God's people over and over again.

The unity in David's Jerusalem was destroyed by his sin, the work of the devil and the hostility of the world around him. And that means that our second thing is not only emphasize the gospel, but we need to realize that unity has an enemy.

Unity has an enemy. The unity of our church is such a blessing of God, a work of God, that its enemy is our sin, the devil, and the lure of the world around us.

And so we need to be aware, be on our guard. Just before Christmas, I was on the phone to a friend who's the pastor of a church who'd just gone through a church merger quite similar to ours.

[28 : 38] I said to him, have you got any advice? What should we be looking out for? Quite a really helpful conversation. And he said one thing at the end that really struck me. He said, listen, there's something weird about merging a church or two churches.

He says the devil hates it. He said we have had some really weird fallings out in our church since we merged. And we expected it almost to be from people from different churches, but actually that's not been the case.

It's been from people within their own groups who've fallen out with one another. He said, and as I look at it and as I look at what they've fallen out over, the only conclusion I can come to is that the devil is at work because he hates the unity of God's people.

And of course he's right, isn't he? The devil, my sinful, selfish desire to put myself ahead of anybody else, the lure of the world around us which tells us to build success based on anything else, those things pour water onto the flames of the blessing of God, breathing death into the life that we enjoy.

So the call on us this morning is to guard against that. Will we keep turning from our sin? Will we make sure that this is a community of grace and forgiveness, not individualism and selfishness?

[29 : 54] Will we bite our tongue? Will we pray for our brothers and sisters? Will we know that the spirit and the flesh are at war with one another? Will we trust that God is doing something glorious and we get to be part of it?

Well, let's pray. I'll have a moment of quiet for you to pray on your own and then I will pray for us. Heavenly Father, we acknowledge before you this morning that you are doing something that we could never do.

Not only through the work of the Lord Jesus are you saving us from our sinful, selfish desire, rescuing us for an eternity with you that we don't deserve and could not earn, but also in your great loving kindness to us, you are uniting us with one another so that we become brothers and sisters together in Christ.

Thank you that together this morning we get to be part of something really special. We thank you that's your doing, not our doing. May we look away from individuals and may we look to you and put our trust and our hope in you.

We pray, please, that you might help us to emphasise the gospel and to guard ourselves against the devil's attacks, that we might experience joy, life in the unity of our church.

[31 : 28] In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.