

Psalm 133

“That they may all be one...” (John 17:21)

1. Background

Calvin takes the attribution of the Psalm to David seriously: “I have no doubt that David in this Psalm renders thanks to God for the peace and harmony which had succeeded a long and melancholy state of confusion and division in the nation, and that he would exhort all individually to study the maintenance of peace... The hand of God was wonderfully seen, and most unexpectedly, in the concord which ensued among them [after the unification of the kingdom], when those who had been inflamed with the most violent antipathy cordially coalesced.”

Wilcock suggests an application to the time of the restoration of Jerusalem under the governorship of Nehemiah. Nehemiah 12:27-43 “describes one final, literal, ‘going up’, as two processions climbed to the top of the new wall, went round it in opposite directions, met on the far side, re-entered the city, and together moved into the temple for a united service of praise.”

The importance of the subject of the Psalm cannot be overestimated. “So long as animosities divide us, and heart-burnings prevail among us, we may be brethren no doubt still by common relation to God, but cannot be judged one so long as we present the appearance of a broken and dismembered body. As we are one in God the Father, and in Christ, the union must be ratified amongst us by reciprocal harmony, and fraternal love” (Calvin). “Christian kinfolk live in breathtaking disharmony. This devastates their witness as it removes the goodness and the loveliness from them; it removes their joy and surrenders their blessing. The psalm invites us to consider the loveliness of kinsfolk living as one and to meditate on the images of this that it offers, to see if this inspires us to live as one” (Goldingay).

This Psalm should be read in conjunction with the prayer of Jesus in John 17:20-26 (“that they may all be one...”), and the exhortation of Paul in Eph. 4:1-6 (“be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace...”).

2. Structure

The Psalm makes extensive use of “terrace” or “staircase” parallelism, i.e. it repeats words and phrases, such as “how good... good”; “It is like... It is like”; “the beard... Aaron’s beard”; “upon the head... upon the beard... upon the collar”; “descending... descending... descending”. The “staircasing” of the Psalm is also suggested by the way in which the three verses get progressively longer.

The effect of this is to draw our attention to the final words (the climax that stands at the head of the “staircase”), i.e. “For *there* the LORD has commanded the blessing – life forevermore!”

This blessing of “life forevermore!” is not to be conceived of without brotherly unity. The Psalm telegraphs this by using words at the ends of vv. 1 and 3 that sound similar, i.e. brothers (“*achîm*”) and life (“*chayîm*”) – the loveliness of brothers living in unity is essential to the experience of the blessing of life.

The inner portions of the Psalm (vv. 2-3a) then depict this blessing as sacred oil poured on the high priest, and refreshing dew descending on Zion.

3. Notes

Verse 1

Does the exhortation “Behold!” call us to look at and admire an excellent state of affairs that exists, or to contemplate a desirable, but absent, state of affairs?

“Good” – right, proper, even delightful. The repetition of the word “good” in verse 2 (“the precious oil” is literally “the good oil”) recalls the repeated assessment of Creation week, e.g. “And God saw all that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). What does that suggest about brotherly harmony?

“Pleasant” – related to the name “Naomi”. Life was “pleasant” for Naomi (David’s great-great-grandmother) in Bethlehem before famine drove her away to Moab. The opposite of “pleasant” for Naomi was “a life that had been made empty and bitter”.

Verse 2

“Oil” can connote both gladness and sanctification. In this case the notion is probably that of sanctification since the oil is the anointing oil poured on the head of the high priest when he is ordained to office.

Aaron (the high priest) was a key figure in the communal life of Israel. It is appropriate that he should be seen as a central metaphor for unity as something sacred, and therefore something in which God himself delights.

The collar of the high priest’s robe was woven so that it would not tear (Exod. 28:32). It seems fitting, then, that it should appear in this picture of untorn unity.

Verse 3

Dew plays a central role in the ecology of Canaan. It is crucial to harvest (Zech. 8:12) and absence of dew is as devastating as absence of rain (1 Kings 17:1; Hag. 1:10). Isaac’s blessing of Jacob begins with reference to dew from heaven (Gen. 27:28). A king’s favour is like dew on grass (Prov. 19:12). Dew brings new life (Isa. 26:19), and the LORD will be like dew to Israel, causing her to blossom and flourish (Hos. 14:6).

“The second half of verse 3, with its strong accent on God’s initiative (*commanded*) and on what is only His to give (*life for evermore*), clinches another emphasis of the psalm, which is made by another threefold repetition, partly lost in translation: literally, ‘descending (2a)... descending (2b)... descending’ (3a). In short, true unity, like all good gifts, is from above; bestowed rather than contrived, a blessing far more than an achievement” (Kidner).

“For *there*” – “*there*” is the mountains that surround Zion (cf. Ps. 125:2). Perhaps the picture of dew descending on the “mountains of Zion” is meant to suggest that they find their unity in the central, sacred mountain.

“*There*” could also be a reference to “brothers dwelling together in unity” (the “life” of verse 3 [*chayîm*] looking back to the “brothers” [*achîm*] of verse 1) – recall the image of Jerusalem, “built as a city that is bound firmly *together*” (Ps. 122:3).