

“Heaven on Earth” (Psalm 133:1–3)

Have you ever used the phrase, “Heaven on earth?” If so, in what context did you use it? I’ve heard this phrase expressed in a variety of contexts. A mother might say, “A night without the kids would be ‘Heaven on earth.’” A couple might say, “A Caribbean cruise would be ‘Heaven on earth.’” A teenager might say, “A week at home without my parents would be ‘Heaven on earth.’” I might say, “A tub of bubblegum ice cream all to myself would be ‘Heaven on earth.’”

Obviously, all of these possibilities fall woefully short of “Heaven on earth.” But the Bible tells us that there is such a thing as “Heaven on earth.” What does God consider “Heaven on earth?” God’s idea of heaven on earth is when His people glorify Him by uniting together with their own church and Christ-honoring churches throughout the world.¹ In Psalm 133 we’ll discover that *unity is Heaven on earth.*²

The title of our psalm is, “**A Song of Ascents.**”³ Fifteen of the psalms (120–134) bear this description, and were likely sung by Jews as they made their way to Jerusalem for the feasts.⁴ David wrote this brief psalm.⁵ What better person to write this psalm than David. If there was ever a person who longed for unity it was David. For most of his life, David was dogged by the discord of a dysfunctional family life. It started in his formative years. David and his brothers lived together with their father, Jesse, but there was no unity. His brothers had a problem with David. It was manifested when he was about to slay Goliath. For Eliab, his oldest brother, told David that he had a pride-problem and a wicked heart. Now any time you live with your kinfolk and they think that you think you’re better than they are and that your heart is nasty, then there’s no peace and harmony in that home! I believe that David longed for unity among his blood brothers when he was growing up at home. But then, David was practically adopted into the family of the king while he was still young. Perhaps he hoped to find unity in the palace of the king. But that also was not to be. For even though he and king Saul lived together under the same roof, there was no unity for David in the palace. Saul kept constantly trying to kill him or to have him killed. Then later on when David had a family of his own, it was a dysfunctional and disunified family. His son Absalom tried to steal the crown and the kingdom away from him. David knew the pain and heartbreak of living in the midst of hate, confusion, and the threat of death from family members. Therefore, he longed for unity and got excited over its prospect.

Verse 1 begins with a thesis statement: “**Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell⁶ together in unity!**”⁷ The word “behold” or “look” (*hinneh*)⁸ calls our attention to an important truth that’s about to be announced.⁹ David is exclaiming, “Look, behold, pay attention, observe, study unity. It’s a sight worth seeing.” He calls unity “good” in the sense that it’s biblical and right. It’s “pleasant” because it brings about pleasing results. The Old Testament’s first reference of whether family can live as one is Gen 13:5–8, where scarce resources cause conflict.¹⁰ Furthermore, the only other occurrence of the phrase “when brothers live together” is in Deut 25:5, where the context suggests contention and conflict.¹¹ When you read the Old Testament it’s clear that brothers didn’t always live in unity. In the book of Genesis alone, Cain killed Abel (4), Lot bickered with Abraham (13), Jacob deceived Isaac and Esau (25), Joseph’s brothers hated him and sold him as a slave (37), and the brothers didn’t even along among themselves (45:24)! Brotherly love and unity is flat-out difficult.

Two porcupines found themselves in a blizzard and tried to huddle together to keep warm. But because they were pricked by each other’s quills, they moved apart. Soon they were shivering again and had to lie side by side once more for their own survival. They needed each other, even though they needed each other! There are many “porcupine” Christians running around. They have their good points, but you can’t get near them because the bad points prick too hard.¹² In such cases, we must be diligent to accentuate the positive. This means choosing as an act of our wills to focus on various strengths in our brother or sister. Even when they are hard to come by, we must seek to see that the good outweighs the bad.

Unity between brothers is like oil and water. You can put oil and water together, but don't expect them to unite. You can put brothers together with their families on the same patch of land, but don't expect them to be happy about it. You can put believers into a church but don't expect them to agree with each other or to even get along. They're oil and water. They won't mix. They won't unite. Yet, oil and water can mix if something else is brought into the mix. One example is mayonnaise, which mixes soybean oil and water. For the oil and water to mix they need an emulsifier, an ingredient that can reach out to the water and oil and bind them together so that they don't go their own way. The emulsifying ingredient in mayonnaise is eggs, which grab the water and the oil and say to them, "You aren't going your own way, because we're going to make mayonnaise today."¹³

The emulsifier of divergent believers is Christ.¹⁴ Unity among believers comes from union with Christ. Through faith in Jesus, we've been united with brothers and sisters in Christ in our county and throughout the world. Through His life, death, and resurrection, Christ creates unity out of diversity. This means we must appreciate diversity in God's family. Unity is not uniformity or unanimity. Fortunately, God isn't looking for cookie-cutter Christians. We might not all like the same things. We might not like the same songs or the same style of music. We might not agree on raising hands or clapping in worship. We might disagree on certain doctrines. But we can still find unity in our worship and service of the risen Christ. Also the differences in our body round us out and allow us to learn from one another.

It's critical, therefore, to unite around essentials. Essentials are those basic doctrines that Christians agree on (e.g., the Bible is God's Word, Jesus Christ is the source of eternal life, and salvation is by grace alone). These beliefs are essential for eternal life, and true Christians share these convictions. At EBF, we remain firm on the essentials, but we allow freedom in the nonessentials (e.g., the end times, the charismatic gifts, the creation debate, predestination/election, etc.). We refuse to allow unnecessary debates to keep us from being united. Hence, we should focus on what unites us, not on what divides us. The reality is: We have more in common than we have in contradiction.

After putting forth his thesis, David uses two illustrations to drive his point home. In verses 2–3a, he uses two similes: oil and dew. David's first comparison is that unity is like **"the precious oil upon the head, coming down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard, coming down upon the edge of his robes."** The first question that we must ask is: What's the deal with "precious oil?" First of all, what kind of oil is this? Is it Valvoline or Quaker State? Is it 10/w30 or 10/w40? Or perhaps it's olive oil or canola oil? Exodus 30:22–23 removes the suspense. The oil consisted of olive oil blended with costly and aromatic spices like myrrh, cinnamon, and cane.¹⁵ The word "precious" (*tob*; cf. "good" in v. 1) suggests that use of this oil was likely uncommon and even exceptional.¹⁶ This proves true for the priest was not anointed with oil everyday; he was anointed once for his commissioning to the priesthood.¹⁷ "Aaron," the brother of Moses, was the first high priest (Exod 4:14). As the "head" of the priestly clan, Aaron's name is representative of all the priests. Therefore, the specific reference to "Aaron" shouldn't be limited to him, as the whole priesthood was anointed with oil. David compared brotherly unity to the oil that Moses poured over Aaron's head when he anointed him as Israel's first high priest (Lev 8:12). That oil flowed down over his head and beard, down onto the robe and breastplate that bore the names of the twelve Israelite tribes. As the consecrating oil covered everything and bound it together (Lev 8:30) so unity among believers makes them acceptable to God as a kingdom of priests (1 Pet 2:9; cf. Exod 19:6). The point of comparison doesn't lie in the costliness, the fragrance, or even in the sanctity of the oil. Instead, the comparison lies in the fact that the oil was poured on Aaron's head. But it didn't stop there; the oil continued to run down Aaron's beard, all the way down to the edge of his robes. Thus, the whole person was sanctified by it: the whole body and all its parts. Just so, all the members of Christ's body participate in the same blessing. In Exod 19:6 God told Moses that Israel would be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." This very same promise is also given to the church in 1 Pet 2:9–10. Unity is to service what the anointing of oil was to the priesthood. This is why God says: *Unity is Heaven on earth.*

David's second simile is that unity is like **"the dew of Hermon coming down upon the mountains of Zion."** In ancient Israel there was very little rain from May to October, but there was much dew.¹⁸ The dew was essential for the flourishing of vegetation during the dry season. In addition, dew was the primary source of water in the drier areas of the country. Hence, dew symbolized prosperity and blessing.¹⁹ Because of the high altitude of Mount Hermon (nearly ten thousand feet above sea level) and the precipitation in the forms of rain, snow, and dew, Mount Hermon was proverbial for its lush greenery even during the summer months (cf. Ps 89:12) and for its dew that sustained the vegetation.²⁰ Mount Hermon was known for its copious moisture (Jer 18:14) so the image is not just of blessing and prosperity but of superabundant blessing and prosperity.²¹ The "mountains of Zion" are those surrounding Zion (see Pss 87:1; 125:2). The psalmist does not intend to suggest that the dew from Mt. Hermon in the distant north (approx. 100 miles north of Jerusalem) actually flows down upon Zion. His point is that the same kind of heavy dew that replenishes Hermon may also be seen on Zion's hills.²² The Hebrew emphasizes a three-fold repetition of the word "descending" (vv. 2a, 2b, 3a). Similarly God's blessings flow down to His people. The point being, true unity, like all of God's good gifts, is from above (Jas 1:17).

Verse 3 closes with these powerful words: **"for there the LORD commanded the blessing—life forever."** The adverb "there" may refer back to the dew's effect on the grapes and olives in Israel.²³ Earlier in the Old Testament, the Lord commanded that blessing be on the dew when God's people obeyed (Lev 25:21; Deut 28:8). The Lord ordered Zion to be a place of blessing *for others*. Zion is to be the source of blessing for its immediate environment and for the land as a whole.²⁴ It's also possible that the word "there" refers back to the unity described in verse 1. There when believers are in unity with one another, the Lord "commands" His blessing. This is so important! The best that man can hope for is to fight, scratch, claw, and beg for blessing. Yet, God will "command" it when we just unite as God's children. What a powerful concept.

The blessing that David refers to is "life forever." This is the first place that eternal life is mentioned in the Bible.²⁵ The blessing that flows from Christian unity is that eternal life will abound. In John 17:21–23, Jesus prays that we may all be one "so that the world may believe." Preaching may not change the world. Worship may not wow the world. Apologetics may not win people over. But a unified church will. People believe in proportion to our unity. Jesus said so! Acts 2 and 4 are first evidences of Jesus' prayer for unity. These passages are the first manifestations of Jesus' prayer being answered. People believe in Christ when they see the church experiencing unity. Unity is God strategy. It determines the credibility of the gospel message. One of the reasons that the world doesn't believe that God sent Jesus is because there is so much disunity in the church. Yet, *unity is heaven on earth*. We must maintain our unity and guard it with all that is within us. How much unity is enough? It depends on how much blessing you want!

We can experience greater unity by implementing two key principles:

Prioritize our vision. Our vision is "transferring truth to the next generation." This is a compelling vision that should motivate every person in our body. When we keep in mind the big picture, it keeps us from becoming myopic. We must avoid asking, "What's in it for me?" We must not value our own comfort and conveniences more than equipping our youth and reaching others. Our vision is a God-sized vision and it requires our entire church to work together to accomplish it. Let's unite and bring a little bit of heaven down to earth.

Focus on the future more than the past. We must celebrate our past, but fixate on the future. We must not use the phrase, "That's the way we've always done it." Looking to the past is like trying to drive your car while only looking out the rearview mirror. We must press on and believe God for even greater things. This requires stretching ourselves and learning to welcome change, even when it makes us uncomfortable. God wants our church to welcome different worship styles and various ethnicities. He wants our church to be the representative of His people and our heavenly home.

A father had a family of quarrelsome sons. One day he called his sons before him and picked out the strongest son. He gave him a stick and told him to snap it. The son grabbed the stick and snapped it with a gesture of contempt. The father handed him two sticks and told his son to snap them. Again, the son did so. The father handed him a bushel of six sticks and finally the son had to admit defeat. The father responded: "Unity is strength. A house divided cannot stand. Anyone can overthrow you one by one."²⁶

EBF is a wonderful church. I love this church family. However, like any church, we are fragile. Despite our near sixty year history, we're capable of a great fall. It would only take a little division, pride, gossip, and slander, and everything that so many people have worked for so many decades could come toppling to the ground. We must recognize that God will not bless our church the way He might like apart from unity. Unity is God's design for health and growth. Unity is the way that we make a difference in our county. *Unity is Heaven on earth.*

Scripture References

Psalm 133:1–3
Exodus 29; 30:22
John 17:21–23
Romans 15:5–6
Ephesians 4:1–3, 12–13
1 Peter 2:9
2 Corinthians 2:14

Study Questions

1. Am I currently experiencing community with other believers? If so, who am I having intimate fellowship with, and in what context? How would I describe my current small group experience, or perhaps other previous experiences? What can I do to cultivate a greater sense of brotherhood and sisterhood in my church or small group?
2. When have I witnessed a particularly beautiful expression of Christian unity either inside or outside my church? How did this make me feel? How can I ensure that this type of unity occurs more frequently? In what way(s) did this expression serve as a witness to others? Read John 17 and Ephesians 4:1–3.
3. Please read the following statement: “Unity among believers comes from union with Christ.” Do I believe this? If so, how does this impact my relationships with other believers in my county? What are the essentials that I share with other brothers and sisters in Christ? How can I focus more intentionally on these similarities?
4. Why is unity so important to God? Why does His blessing seem to depend upon unity? How can I walk in accordance with His will in this area? This week, will I pray for a supernatural ability to love the body of Christ?
5. In what way(s) have I built up my church and the city church this past week? What particular church or pastor have I spoken well of? How have I built up my church? Who has been blessed by what I have shared about the church or another brother or sister in Christ?

Notes

¹ The theme of Christian “unity” runs through the Scriptures. In Gen 11 the construction of the tower of Babel led the Lord to exclaim, “Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them” (11:6). The Lord’s point seems to be: if that is what sinful men can do without the Holy Spirit, how much more can godly men and women do when they are filled with His Spirit. In the NT Christian unity (oneness) will result in people believing in Jesus (John 17:21–23). Paul prays that God will grant Christians to “be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 15:5–6). The Holy Spirit is called “the Spirit of unity” (Eph 4:3) and we are exhorted to “preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” The goal of the church is that every Christian is equipped “for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:12–13). Elsewhere Paul writes, that love tops the list of Christian conduct because it is “the perfect bond of unity” (Col 3:14). The epistles stress the theme of unity with the following categories: believers as the body of Christ (Rom 12:3–5; 1 Cor 6:15–17; 10:16–17; 11:29; 12:27; Gal 3:28; Eph 1:22–23; 4:11–13, 4:22–25; Col 1:24; 2:19); believers as the bride of Christ (2 Cor 11:2–3; Eph 5:22–33); believers as one new man (Eph 2:14–16) and believers as the temple of God (1 Cor 3:16–17; 6:19; Eph 2:19–22; 1 Pet 2:5). Very likely the finest example of human beings living in unity is the Jerusalem Church (Acts 4:32). Clearly, unity is an essential, non-negotiable part of the Christian life.

² Ps 133 utilizes an A–B–B–A structure (see vv. 1, 2, 3a, 3b). For more insight into the Psalms see Mark D. Futato and David M. Howard Jr., *Interpreting the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007).

³ The book of Psalms is a collection of songs, prayers and poetry. These 150 psalms were songs for public worship in the temple of ancient Israel. They were similar to our modern day hymnal (see 1 Cor 14:26; Eph 5:19; Col 3:16). So important were the psalms to the worship and spiritual life of the church that, during several hundred years of church history, a man could not get ordained unless he could recite the whole book of Psalms *perfectly*.

⁴ During the pilgrimages, the Jews enjoyed fellowship on their way toward and in Jerusalem. The pilgrims came from many different walks of life, regions, and tribes, as they gathered for one purpose: the worship of the Lord in Jerusalem. Their unity was in conformity with the regulations for the three annual feasts (see Exod 23:14–17; Lev 23:4–22, 33–43; Num 28:16–31; 29:12–39; Deut 16:1–17). During the feasts the Jews celebrated their common heritage: redemption from Egypt and their encampment around the tabernacle in the wilderness (cf. Num 2).

⁵ Psalm 133 is one of four psalms of ascents attributed to David (see also Pss 122; 124 and 131).

⁶ Heb. *yashab*: “to dwell” (see Gen 4:20; 13:6; 34:30; 36:20; 1 Sam 27:8; Isa 9:1; Jer 12:4; 46:9; 48:18ff; Hos 14:8; Mic 5:3, see HALOT s.v. *yashab* 5).

⁷ Heb. *yachad*: “community, together” (see HALOT s.v. *yachad* 2). There seems to be a play-on-words between *yashab* (“dwell”) and *yachad* (altogether, unity”).

⁸ Some English versions translate the particle interjection *hinneh*: “behold/look” (e.g., NIV, HCSB, NLT) with an exclamation point at the end of the sentence.

⁹ See HALOT s.v. *hinneh* 5: “emphasizes the whole of the following phrase.”

¹⁰ John Goldingay, *Psalms: Psalm 90–150*. Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 565.

¹¹ James L. Mays: *Psalms*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 413; Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*. Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 212–15.

¹² Michael P. Green, *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), Electronic ed.

¹³ Tony Evans, *God’s Glorious Church* (Chicago: Moody, 2003), 193.

¹⁴ It is important to note that Ps 133 is to be read in light of Ps 132. The unity that is referred to in Ps 133 is an expression of the blessing that the Promised Seed of David will bring to his people. When He [the Messiah] comes and establishes His kingdom, true unity will take place. John Sailhamer, *The NIV Compact Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 345.

¹⁵ Throughout Scripture oil is a symbol of God’s presence and Spirit. Oil was used when individuals were set apart for service: prophets, priests and kings. “Christ” (who was all three) is a name and a title that comes from the Greek word *christos* which refers to anointing oil. His name means, “Anointed One.” He was anointed to provide us salvation. Paul writes, “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place” (2 Cor 2:14).

¹⁶ God forbade His people to make any oil with the same formula and use it for common purposes. To merchandize it or to duplicate it would result in excommunication. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Journey Isn't Over* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 144.

¹⁷ Through the priestly institution, the Lord assured His people of forgiveness and blessing (see Exod 29:44–46; Lev 9:22–24; Num 6:24–26).

¹⁸ The word translated “dew” is also used of light rain or drizzle.

¹⁹ Dew is an OT symbol of blessing and prosperity. When Isaac blessed his son Jacob, he stated, “Now may God give you of the dew of heaven” (Gen 27:28a). In contrast, Isaac told Esau that his dwelling would be “away from the dew of heaven” (Gen 27:39b). Moses prayed that his speech would “distill as the dew” (Deut 32:2). Proverbs describes the favor of a king “like dew on the grass” (19:12). Isaiah compares dew to the resurrection of our bodies (26:19). And God declares in Hosea, “I will be like the dew to Israel; He will blossom like the lily” (14:5).

Blessings descend to us, but we ought to receive them together. We are blessed individually and collectively.

²⁰ Willem A. VanGemeren, *Psalms*. Expositors Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan,), Electronic ed.

²¹ Futato and Howard, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 196–97.

²² NET Study Notes: www.netbible.org.

²³ “The referent of ‘there’ is ambiguous. . . Yet it makes little difference whether ‘there’ refers to those having fellowship or to Jerusalem, because in both cases ‘life’ is enjoyed, not as an end in itself, but in communion with the people of God.” VanGemeren, *Psalms*.

²⁴ Goldingay, *Psalms: Psalm 90–150*, 568. This seems to be in keeping with the Psalmist’s use of “blessing” (e.g., Pss 128:4–5; 132:15; 134:3).

²⁵ The other place is in Daniel 12:2. See Kaiser, *The Journey Isn't Over*, 147.

²⁶ John Phillips, *Exploring Psalms: An Expository Commentary Volume 2* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, [1988] 2002), 537.