

Unity Descending

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[0 : 0 0] Welcome back. Many of you weren't here last week, and it's really beautiful and sweet to reunite again in order to worship.

There's a unity that happens when we do that, and it's really great. We've kind of gathered from all corners of the earth, really. We've come from all the way around the globe back this Sunday.

It's really wonderful to be with you again. And this evening, we'll be looking at Psalm 133 and the subject of Christian unity. For those of us in this room who have grown up in a church, the phrase Christian unity can cause very different reactions.

For some of you who have come from situations so bad that you're tempted to think Christian unity is an oxymoron. Because you've come from churches that have gossiped, backstabbed, argued, and split over any number of issues.

For those of you who are skeptics of Christianity, the phrase is troubling for the opposite reason. Because you've seen how Christians have united for some pretty wrong and frightening causes.

[1 : 1 7] If you're not familiar with the Bible, you may be surprised that the Bible doesn't gloss over the failings of his people. That the Bible doesn't present God's people as unified, it seems, hardly ever.

It's brutally honest about how dysfunctional the family of God has been. A big chunk of the New Testament is made up of letters written to churches that were really, really screwed up.

Dealing with sexual immorality in a way that would make our modern culture blush. Getting drunk as they came to the Lord's table. Showing blatant favoritism to the rich.

And shunning the poor, making them sit on the ground. And that's nothing compared to stuff that you find in the Old Testament. For what it's worth, you might be wondering, am I preaching on this issue because Church of the Advent is dealing with unity issues?

No. Not at all. If I could grade the Church of the Advent on the issue of unity, I would give you a solid A+. Now, I know that's disappointing to you overachievers who are always looking for the A++, the star and the circle around it.

[2 : 2 6] But a solid A+. You guys love each other so well and are committed to worshiping God and are solidly committed to the good of the city of Washington, D.C. So would this meditation on this psalm, Psalm 133, be an encouragement to you, as it has been for me, this psalm, that's more of a painting than it is a song.

It paints for us a picture of what precedes unity, how unity comes, and then where we perceive it most clearly. What precedes it, how it comes, and where we perceive it.

The psalm is a poem. It's a song. So it's art, right? And by its very nature, art is elusive, and it requires work to understand it.

The psalm was also inspired by the very Spirit of God. So let's ask His help to understand it. Okay? Let's pray. God, yeah, we would seek to understand Your Word, not just to gain some knowledge or to know more than we did, Lord, but we want to receive Your Word.

We want to be changed. We want to be transformed. God, would this Word work in our hearts? Would You open our hearts to Your Word?

[3 : 47] Open Your Word to our hearts. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. I'm going to read the psalm once again.

This is Psalm 133. It is a song of ascents. The psalmist here, as a typical artist, he wants to tell us about unity.

But instead of telling us what it is, he tells us what it's like. But in doing so, he hopes we get a deeper understanding of it. With one word, he shows us what precedes unity.

He says, Behold. Okay? Unity is partly defined by what was in its place. Discord, disharmony, enmity. This is why the psalmist says, Behold, as if he had been awake through the dark hours of the night, and then suddenly and dramatically, the sun rises on the eastern horizon.

No one lies on the beach for hours getting a suntan, and then says, Behold, the sun is bright. The word signals a big change, right? So what was it like before the sun appeared to the psalmist, before brothers lived together in unity?

[5 : 30] Well, the person who would have been singing this song originally would have been an Israelite, right? The psalms were Israel's songbook. They're hymnal. And this Israelite would be thoroughly aware of how infamously brothers got along in Israel's history.

Cain, the firstborn son of humanity's parents, Adam and Eve, he murdered his brother Abel. Jacob, the father of the nation of Israel, deceived his father to steal his brother's inheritance and blessing.

Jacob's sons sold their brother Joseph into slavery. And when Israel became a nation with its own land, its tribes didn't get along and eventually split into two nations. So if there was peace and unity in the land, when the Israelites sang this, he would know that it's not always been the case.

And we too, as members of God's family, should know how unity hasn't always been a part of our story or our stories. Paul writes in Titus chapter 3, verses 3 to 5, at one time, we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived, and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures.

We lived in malice, envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.

[7 : 00] Malice, envy, hated, hating. Then, God intervenes. God shows up. Behold, he saves us from those things, and he saves us together.

God rescues his family. And that's our second point, that unity is not something we achieve. It's bestowed. It's given. Unity has a given-ness to it.

We read in verse 3 of Psalm 133, that unity is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. Now, dew was important in ancient Near Eastern agriculture.

The climate was so hot and dry, that often, only the dew kept vegetation alive during drought and heat. And so, all throughout the Old Testament, dew symbolizes the blessings of God given to his people, the gifts the king gives to his subjects.

What's Mount Hermon? The Toss Peak in Israel was Mount Hermon. It was, it's 9,000 feet. It lies in the north of the country, in what is today modern Lebanon.

[8 : 15] There's actually a ski mountain, now on Mount Hermon. The psalmist asks us to imagine the sun heating the snow on Mount Hermon, causing a mist to rise from the pines that surrounded the mountain, and a cool air carrying it all the way down to Jerusalem.

Not only does this dew sustain life, but it's pristine and refreshing. The writer is saying what John Calvin would later say on, that the life of man would be sapless, unprofitable, and wretched, and less sustained by brotherly harmony.

See how the psalmist is drawing the worshiper's attention to the descending movement of the dew. We know this because the downward mention has been, the downward motion has been mentioned before in verse 2.

Oil running down on the beard, running down on the collar, and now dew falls on the mountain. Hear that? Descending, descending, descending.

Unity on earth descends from heaven. It's a gift of God to his people. We see this descending motion in the New Testament as well, don't we?

[9 : 38] When Jesus is baptized in the Jordan, the Holy Spirit descends from the Father on Jesus in the form of a dove. And then later, in the book of Acts, God bestows himself, his very self, upon his church as the Holy Spirit descends on his disciples and flames of fire come to rest on them in that dark room.

God gives us himself. God descends. The Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 4, we heard this earlier, be completely humble and gentle, be patient, bearing with one another in love.

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Now, how does the Spirit keep us in unity? Right? Like, what's going on in our minds, in our hearts, when the Spirit is at work making us unified?

I think that in the Spirit of the Psalm we read, the Holy Spirit reminds us of our need, right? Jerusalem needs the dew for life to flourish.

[11 : 02] church. So what do we need? What do we need as the church? What do we need as children of God? We need to have our debt canceled.

That's what we need. That's why Jesus, the Son of God, descended to earth this Christmas season 2,000 years ago to live the life of full obedience to God's law that we could not live, to die the death on the cross that we deserve to die.

And He paid what we owed and we were raised to life in Him. We were made new creations.

And when the Spirit reminds us of that unfathomable need, we forgive others. We forgive each other.

Think of the parable of the, the parable that Jesus taught of the ungrateful servant, right? The servant didn't understand how much he had been forgiven, which was an insane amount, unfathomable.

[12 : 06] Because he didn't understand when a fellow servant owed him money, he had him punished and thrown into jail. When we understand how much we've been forgiven, we can be, as Ephesians said, completely humble, gentle, patient, bearing with one another in love.

Unity in the here and now doesn't mean we will always get along nicely with each other. We will wrong each other. Because though we are saved, we are still being saved.

We have been made whole, but we're still being perfected, right? We've been healed, but we're still very broken. Does this sound familiar? We talk a lot about living in the tension of the already, but the not yet.

So what does unity look like in this tension between the already and the not yet? Well, that's repentance and forgiveness. An example of God showing up and giving unity in the form of repentance and forgiveness happened to two former colleagues of mine who were serving as missionaries in Uganda.

They were driving to a remote village to share the gospel there and riding with them was a public health worker. His name was, or is, Singamon. Now this vehicle got stuck in the mud and the missionaries got into a very heated argument about what to do next because that's what missionaries do is argue about, you know, from personal experience stuff that really doesn't matter.

[13 : 31] So they got into a really heated argument about it, though. Eventually they were able to get out of the ditch and the two missionaries after that were convicted of how they treated one another and how they responded to the situation.

And so they repented to each other right there on the spot and they were warmly reconciled. Now, Singamon took this all in and was completely stunned, right?

Later, Singamon would become a believer in Jesus Christ. And at his baptism, he shared that witnessing that argument and the subsequent forgiveness played a key role in his conversion.

He said, I had never seen two people get into an argument like that and afterwards be reconciled. I know there had to be something different about this gospel they were speaking of. And if that gospel had the power to change sinners like them, then it had the power to change me, too.

Singamon had seen God show up in the already, in the not yet, in the tension. He had seen the spirit of peace supernaturally at work.

[14 : 47] He had seen God bestow his unity. on his children, on his family. And then Singamon became a member of that family. It changed his life.

So we see there's a change. There's a crossing over from disunity to unity. We see that unity is bestowed in the gift of his spirit. And now third, we see the psalmist tell us in what context we're to understand unity.

unity. We understand unity in the context of worship. We know this for two reasons. The first reason we know this is because of the purpose for which this song was written.

The song is called A Song of Ascent. There's a group of psalms called Songs of Ascent. They were sung by Israelites, Israelite pilgrims, as they approached the Temple Mount.

And as they ascended the mountain to the temple in Jerusalem, they would sing these songs. So what would an Israelite be thinking of when he was singing about oil running down the beard of Aaron?

[15 : 55] Well, his imagination would be transported to the scene of worship that awaited him at the top of the mountain. At the center of Israel's worship was sacrifice. The sacrifice for the whole nation would be performed by the high priest.

Aaron was Israel's first high priest. For the high priest to do his job, he needed to be anointed with oil. To be anointed means to be set apart. Being set apart for what?

For God. Being set apart for worship. The oil that Aaron and all high priests were anointed with was a special oil mixed with incense and spices that was only used in the temple of Jerusalem.

You may remember hearing, as we read from Exodus, that this is the only place in Israel this incense was allowed to be used. Right? The psalmist is using imagery but not just visual imagery.

He's using olfactory imagery to convey an idea. He's really hammering it home. To be unified is to worship God. And to worship God is to be unified.

[17 : 04] Unity comes through worship. Through our common declaration that we love and serve God alone. So integral is worship to our unity that any unity without worship is vain.

John Calvin said, any concord it is thus insinuated which may prevail amongst men is insipid if not pervaded by sweet savor of God's worship.

Now that's a pretty exclusive claim, right? I mean there's a lot of things, a lot of really good things to be united over and for. I mean, if you're a skeptic you might be wondering can't true unity exist without this?

Couldn't it exist through uniting around something else? Something good? Well, there are many good things to unite around. And I would agree that there are many good things to come together for, but we must be careful not to make them our ultimate good.

You see, in declaring together our allegiance to God, we turn our backs on every other God that demands our loyalty. Disharmony occurs, discord occurs, enmity accords, envy accords, occurs when we worship other things.

[18 : 26] If I make something besides God my chief purpose, I will sow division. for instance, if money and success are my main ambition, I will begin to use others and even trample on them.

I will withhold money and charity from those who are in need. If my children are my chief purpose, and I know this from experience, I will react furiously when I perceive that they are being not just harmed but suffer even the slightest unfairness.

I tell a story about my son but it's really about me. He was playing right field in Little League and the field was a complete disaster and it just rained but they decided to play the game anyway and he was playing right field and it was completely muddy.

It was a swamp and the ball was hit into right field and it got by my son. This happens inevitably in Little League and right as it went by him it got stuck in the mud and it was the same color as the mud so he didn't see it.

He turned around and just kept running and running and running and so like the coaches and the, yeah, there wasn't an umpire so the coaches got together and decided what to do and I mean, if you know anything about baseball, right, it's a ground rule double.

[19 : 49] The ball gets stuck but the coach decided it would be a home run and I felt like my son was being punished for, um, for like the, the field being muddy.

Um, he's, he's colorblind so he can't really distinguish like the different tones of brown. Um, it, it could have been just a ground rule double and everyone was saved face and my son wouldn't have been like persecuted so I got so angry I started yelling at the coaches both sides but my, my own team's coaches and the other team's coaches and then I just kept it going like after, um, um, it's Little League in Vienna, Austria so, so the parents bring beer and wine I don't think you can do that here but that probably wasn't a good idea in this particular situation either and like, so afterwards like with all the kids around with my son I was just laying into the other team's coach it's like you're doing anything even trampling on my son to, to make sure your team lost and you know he was like dumbfounded um, I was being cheered by our team's uh, parents but I was completely completely in the wrong completely in the wrong and what was happening it was like

I had made an idol out of my son right I was trying to live life vicariously through him to experience his success and to avoid um, failure it wasn't even failure it was just you know it's a mistake but um it's really embarrassing showing that story but that's what happens right when we make something even as good as our own children our chief purpose in life our chief good we end up idolizing them and it just it was uh discord enmity division um and you know if that doesn't happen even if they succeed in everything in life I uh you know parents can place too much pressure on them uh to succeed and when they become adults they become resentful of us um I mean history tells us that even the noblest things that when idolized can cause disharmony even to a violent degree as the French revolutionist Madame Roland reminds us having fallen out of favor with other revolutionists she's sentenced to death right do you know this story before placing her head on the guillotine block she kneels before the clay statue of liberty and says liberty what crimes are committed in thy name even the noblest things when made our chief purpose when worship can cause discord enmity so what should be our chief purpose it's the chief purpose of human beings to glorify God and enjoy him forever in doing so we will experience a holy unity you know

I had in mind to as I was praying and reading the psalm and studying I had in mind a still from one of my favorite films I thought oh maybe I should I should show you guys and talk about it this photograph and then I realized that the perfect illustration of all of this is the drama that we participate in every week we're reminded of the debt we owe to God when we confess how we ascend against him in thought word and deed we are reminded how we've been forgiven of our sins and given new life in Christ when we eat the bread and drink the wine together we will be reminded later of the peace that exists among us when we speak the peace to each other the peace of the Lord be with you and also with you and in just a moment when two of our children are baptized and we see the water poured and flowing down down their heads down their robes we'll be reminded of our own baptism that we've been given his Holy Spirit who's brought us from death to life from enmity and discord to peace and unity that he has made us his children we'll be reminded that we are members of his family let's pray

God we know that every good and perfect gifts every good and perfect gift comes down from you oh Lord Father of heavenly lights who does not change like the shifting shadows so bestow your blessing on us make us one Holy Spirit make us humble gracious and affectionate let us know how much the Father loves us so that we can show that love to each other and to the world we pray all of this in Jesus name Amen