

The Pilgrim's Friends

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we're continuing, in fact, we're finishing this little series on the Psalms, the Psalms of a sense of people going up to Jerusalem.

And this is a very small psalm, and that would usually mean a very small, short sermon. And I'm hoping it'll be that. It will be not too long anyway.

But it is a short psalm that is very, very powerful and very important, in fact, central in our lives as Christians.

And if you are not a Christian and you are here, it really helps you to understand what is this group all about? What are we about? And the question that I ask you all that is, thinking of your Christian life, and many of you perhaps were thinking of it as you were hearing Callan's testimony.

When you think on your life, what is the thing of most value, the thing that is most precious that God has given you in your Christian life?

[1 : 0 5] And there might be all kinds of thoughts that come to you when you hear that question, things that have to do with the various blessings that you have received at his hand.

But this psalm, David says, the great and precious gift is the gift of unity. It's the gift of togetherness.

And this is what he writes about in this very short and joyful psalm. He starts out, if you look there on Psalm 133 and turn back to that. If you look there, it starts really what the whole sermon is about.

He writes, behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity. Now, in the original, brothers means all the people of God, boys and girls, men and women, all of them together.

And dwelling in unity was actually translated in the original as being really together. True togetherness is the way that it is literally.

[2 : 1 0] So he's saying, behold, how good and pleasant it is when God's people, with all their differences, are really together. And that means that we can be together without really being together.

You can be present without really being part of this gathering that is God's people. But this is what God's people sang about us. They journeyed up to the temple three times a year with many others from around the surrounding countryside.

Some of them were coming from a long distance away. And I love the fact that they sang this psalm because there were lots of reasons to not really be together.

Those long journeys, and I'm sure this is not the case with your families, but it is the place where tensions in the family can boil over, the tensions from before. It was also for them, there was stress on, and sort of competition as to how they would find food for their animals, how they find a place to live when they're in Jerusalem for these festivals.

There was competition as far as getting water in very, very dry place as well. All of this can cause division. But the togetherness that David is talking about is not the same as same opinion.

[3 : 33] It is people that have the same great purpose in their life. To love the Lord their God with all their heart, their mind, and their soul.

You know, to worship Him as the thing important over all things in their life. And to love their neighbor as themselves. It's that togetherness that brings a commitment to one another through the differences.

And so David is saying, and everybody is singing, what an amazing thing it is when there is that togetherness. It's incredible.

And this psalm speaks to us this morning as well. Because there may be lots of reasons why you might not have been here this morning. Your parents may have strongly encouraged you to come to church this morning, even though you didn't want to.

If you have children, they might not have been cooperative this morning in coming to church. There may have been a real temptation to just sit with a cup of coffee and just enjoy yourself.

[4 : 42] There might have been great busyness in your life. There may have been chronic pain. There might be a situation where you're going through hard things. You don't want to face people.

There might even be a disagreement with somebody in this church. Or an irritation with the way things are done in this church. So in one way, you know, we understand there's lots of things that can keep us away from the gathering.

So in one way, it's amazing that you are here. Behold what a good and pleasant thing it is. When God's people dwell together. When they are together.

But God speaks clearly to us. He says that in this gathering, you have come to something very good. You have come to something pleasant. In other words, something that is of incredible benefit to you.

So that this gathering and all the gatherings of God's people physically express a gift that God has given. It is a gift that is not natural.

[5 : 46] It's a gift that actually comes from God himself. So if you look at Psalm 133, you notice a word, an action that is repeated three times in this little psalm.

It says unity is like oil that runs down the beard. It falls very messily. It runs down to the collar. Like the dew of Hebron, it falls.

It runs down as well onto Mount Zion. And so that's saying that our togetherness is not like other types of togetherness in our world.

Which the world says is a very important thing as well. This togetherness is unique. It is something that must fall upon us with extravagant grace.

That's what David is describing. It falls on us. It comes to us because God has extravagantly loved us in Jesus Christ. He has entered into your life as Lord.

[6 : 49] God himself has revealed his love to you by Jesus dying on a cross for your sins so that you are reconciled to him.

So that you love God as your heavenly father. You love him now and his truth because he has first loved you. That's all of our stories.

That's Callan's story. And the circumstances are all different the way that happens in our lives. But all of us, God has descended upon us by his grace.

And so now when you love and worship Jesus, there is an extraordinary change that takes place in your relationships with other people. With the people of God particularly.

Because you immediately enter into the people of God. And God calls that, calls us a family into which we have been adopted.

- [7 : 43] He calls us a body of which you are an integral part. He calls us a temple. And we are living stones in that temple being built up and actually inhabited by the Holy Spirit.
- All of these images reveal people who are deeply united to each other. They love each other indiscriminately because God has loved them in Jesus.
- That's the basis of that togetherness. It's a gift from God. When we finally had rain Friday, and what a difference this service is, isn't it, from last week.
- Hot and sunny, cool and very wet. On Friday, Port Moody police had a little fun with the rain that we haven't had for so long. And they tweeted, Please do not panic.
- The moisture falling from the sky is natural. However, it can make roads slippery. And I think that like rain that hasn't been around for a long, long time, the gift of togetherness falls supernaturally on us from God because he has brought us into his people.
- [8 : 56] And we can react with that, not necessarily with panic, but it is something that we're not accustomed to in our life. It's a different kind of unity. It's about God's truth breaking into that.
- And so there is a messiness about it. It makes us uncomfortable a bit as well. But Psalm 133 says, Rejoice in this gift. It is God's purpose for his people, for you.
- It is good. It is pleasant. And he wants us to know that in our hearts, in our minds. And he actually brings that home to us by showing us two pictures of two very precious commodities in the Middle Eastern world.
- The first picture is of oil, that ordination oil that David was describing, that had incredibly costly spices in it.
- Very heavy, too, as he said, 50 pounds worth. It had cinnamon and sweet cane and myrrh and caseabark, which is stronger than cinnamon. And as you can imagine, this had a beautiful and very strong aroma.
- [10 : 06] And there was a lot of it. David sings in verse 2, It's like the precious oil on the head, this togetherness. It runs down on the beard.
- On the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes. And David is telling us this is because there is an extravagance about that gift.
- And unity is like oil that flows gently into every hair of Aaron. Not just on his head, but all the way through his very full beard.
- It's a goodness of immense value that permeates every part of our life together. This is what David is saying by that picture. Even into the unexpected places in our lives.
- All the parts of our lives are affected by this gift of unity. At the last synod in Ottawa, the Annex Synod, which was last November, we were given oil, little things of oil.
- [11 : 12] Not big, huge gallon jugs of it. Little vials of oil to bring back to our church for uses of anointing people with oil. For healing.
- And those spices smelled strong. They were nice. And I put it in my laptop case. And, you know, started coming home. Now, the thing I didn't realize is that the seal on that bottle was not very good.
- And I went to the airport and I kept smelling this unusual fragrance. Sort of following me around. And it followed me right into the airplane as well.
- And I thought, it smells sort of familiar. I can't figure out what it is. And by the time I discovered the problem, my computer bag was soaked with oil.
- It didn't affect the computer, but outside. It was all just very moist with this anointing oil. And so for weeks afterwards, everywhere I took my laptop with me, which was pretty much everywhere.

[12 : 15] The office, the car, church, coffee shop, home. This sweet aroma followed me everywhere. And it really did just about affect every aspect of my life.

Now, I think your unity with other Christians is like that fragrant oil that spilled so generously on my bag. Because it brings goodness that affects your family, your work life, your social life, your life here at church as well.

And the question is, how does that happen? How does that goodness come into our lives? Well, in many different ways. In ways that are unexpected, as with Aaron's oil.

People pray for you. And you may not even realize they're doing it. But people are praying for you in your life with Christ. People hold you accountable in a lot of different ways, even just by their presence.

They help you in the depths. You know, we heard last week that of one crying from the depths to God. But you're crying to a God who is with you. And you are crying to God with other people in that pit with you as well.

[13 : 32] They encourage you, that unity, that togetherness. In fact, in every part of your life, no matter what you do, what your occupation is, what your family is like, your fundamental identity is a child of God who has been adopted into this family, into this togetherness.

This follows you everywhere. But you know, this fragrance does not just affect the local gathering. It affects the world around us.

And the Bible is very clear about this. There's a reason why David chose the oil poured on Aaron, because that oil was used to set people apart to be priests.

People whose special purpose it was to bring the knowledge of God, the blessings of God, to bring people into relationship with God. And in the same way, the Bible teaches that we are a royal priesthood.

That our great purpose is to deeply bless the world by helping other people to know God through Jesus, who is the high priest.

[14 : 42] This is what our priesthood is for all of us. And this is what our unity does as well. Jesus says this very, very clearly.

There's an incredible passage in John 17 where we are allowed to listen in to Jesus' prayer life. We hear him pray for us, for each of us that are here in this room.

And here's what he prays for you. He says, You see, Jesus is praying for oneness so that the world might believe.

It is for the sake of the world. It affects the world. Our love for God, our obedience together, our love for the gospel, makes the gospel clear to the world so that they can love and know God.

You see, there is a togetherness that God brings to us that attracts people, because it reflects the truth of God, who is the perfect loving unity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

[16 : 00] There is deep blessing in the world in this. And that's why our vision at St. John's, the one you're probably familiar, the part of it you're very familiar with, is that we want to be a community of contrast gripped by the gospel of grace.

But there's a second part of it, and that is so that we might reach and serve our multicultural society for the glory of God.

You see, we want to be a community that's united for the sake of the world around us. So at St. John's, we want people outside the church to see the life God has given to us and actually share in that life.

And so one practical way that will be worked out is that in the fall, our small groups that meet in people's homes and in other places, we'll be praying for ways that each of our small groups, as a little community, can reach into the world to live out the prayer that Jesus has prayed here.

So there's the first picture of the benefits and the goodness of unity. It's oil. Now the second picture is one of water. And when I brought this up at the 8 o'clock service, it all, the floodgates just opened up, and there was a big rainstorm.

[17 : 18] But that water is a precious, precious gift in the Middle East, another precious gift. And David says, togetherness is like the dew of Mount Hermon, which is the highest mountain in that area.

It's over 9,000 feet high. It's on the border of Lebanon and Syria. Just, you know, the Golan Heights to northern Israel go up against it. And it is in the middle of a very dry climate, arid region.

But because it is so high, all of the moisture gathers around that mountain and the mountains that are around it. And its dews are heavy.

And the result is beauty. Beautiful, lush landscape. If you Google Mount Hermon, you will see lush green fields.

You'll see wildflowers. You'll see incredible forests. It looks like it could be the Canadian Rockies. And David says, imagine that the heavy dew that comes in that mountain is actually poured out on the people of Israel in dry Jerusalem.

[18 : 26] Imagine that. He said, well, that's what that togetherness, that real true togetherness from God is like here in Jerusalem. It brings real life.

It brings growth. It brings a renewal into your life in your relationship with God and with other people. And this is a gift that is very easy to take for granted.

This is why that psalm was sung over and over again. That's why we need this psalm. We cannot grow and flourish in our faith if we are not really together with other Christians.

We do become spiritually dry. We become lifeless. I don't know if you read this. This was a shocking headline. I was struck this week by the headline of the Vancouver Sun on Friday.

And it said this. It said, Metro Vancouver rejoices at the potential for rain this weekend. I've never seen that headline before in Vancouver.

[19 : 26] Never before. And of course, it is because our water rationing and our brown lawns and soon-to-be wilted gardens has made us remember how precious water is to us, how essential it is for life.

And this is a helpful picture for us because there's a great temptation in our West Coast life to forget how precious true togetherness is with brothers and sisters in Christ.

There are many substitutes to being in church or in small groups together. There are many pressures to neglect being actively involved with one another. There's entertainments.

There's investments. Lots of things. But if you are feeling lifeless or very dry spiritually, David is calling you today to embrace this grace of God's togetherness in our lives.

To actually physically put yourself in the place of that grace that he is falling down upon us, pouring out on us. It's not like rain, you know, that's powerfully coming down on us and forcing itself on us.

[20 : 39] It's like dew, David says, that forms on you, that transforms and changes you very gently. It is about putting your place in that grace and under that grace by being physically present.

Today, as we speak, in this service, the Tour de France is ending. The finish line probably has just been passed.

And I don't usually watch much of the Tour de France, but I'm very fascinated by bicycle racing because I think it's a marvelous picture of the Christian life.

It's an amazing sport because individuals seek to win long races. But it's actually impossible to win or finish well unless you have a team of fellow riders working with you.

And your team is involved in all kinds of strategies of catching those people who are ahead of the person on your team, of going before you so that you can go in the slipstream and be pulled along by them.

[21 : 46] Your team is doing all kinds of things to allow you to finish well. But you know, one of the biggest things is simply the physical presence of a teammate racing with you.

The winner is almost certain to be, in fact, it's certainly to be, a man named Chris Froome from Great Britain. But yesterday was a terrible day for him.

This is one of the most grueling parts of the Tour de France because they go up a very high, steep mountain. and it is notorious for how difficult it is. And he said, and it's after, you know, weeks of riding and thousands of miles on the road.

And when he finished that stage last night, he said, there was a moment when I felt this could go the other way. I'm in difficulty. I'm in difficulty. I was on my absolute limits.

I felt like I was dying a thousand deaths up that mountain. But being with teammates makes it a lot more manageable. Those teammates were all had different skills of being sprinters or being climbers or being people who had great knowledge of strategy.

[23 : 02] And each of us as individuals are in a race that is similar to that. We are racing to a finish which is Jesus himself who will one day die for us or one day come for us having died for us.

But you and I can't flourish. We can't even finish that Christian race without a real togetherness with those who have very different gifts from what we have like those riders.

We need each other. We each will face mountains and maybe are today that are great challenges to your faith. But being with brothers and sisters in Christ make it more than manageable.

it actually allows us to flourish to be refreshed and to grow as we face that mountain. Many times it's just the physical presence of other Christians that is the greatest encouragement.

But there are many other ways we bless each other by our prayers as we talked about by our example of life by hearing grace like in Callan's life by our sharing God's word in the way that we are serving him in the world.

[24 : 09] These are deep encouragements to one another. And I think this is what Paul talked about when he actually urges us in Ephesians 4 to and I'll actually read it to you.

He says walk in a manner that's worthy of the calling to which you have been called with all humility with gentleness with patience bearing with one another in love eager to make the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

And so God calls us in this to maintain that gift that he has given to us to actually come under its grace over and over again.

This is the calling that we have the action from today. How are we going to maintain that unity that God has given to us? And the psalm ends with maybe the greatest encouragement of all.

It ends by saying that God commands a blessing in that place where there is that real togetherness where you put yourself under that grace.

[25 : 19] In that presence of God he says there is life forevermore. This is the blessing that God commands. And I take this to mean that we actually begin to experience the life of the new heaven and the new earth in our togetherness now.

The life to come will be life together where we are in God's presence where we know God loves us and we love one another and we are constantly refreshed and always growing serving one another joyfully loving and being loved in ways that we cannot imagine.

Well what greater incentive is this? that life that is together that is really together is a blessing in which we are beginning the life of heaven now.

God grant us the grace to receive his grace that falls upon us in this way. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.