

Life Together

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Preacher: Guest Preacher

[0 : 00] Please be seated. So if you're with us this morning, we were looking at the SAMs of Ascent, the SAM 120 through SAM 134.

We were focusing on SAM 125. This evening for a short time, I want to look at the SAM we read, SAM 133. SAM 133 is one of my own favorite SAMs.

And I want to just study it together with you just for a few short minutes this evening. Now this morning we were thinking about how the SAMs of Ascent, these songs for the journey, were songs that God's people would sing as they made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem three times a year.

They were songs for the journey. And these songs, as I was saying this morning, capture a wide range of human emotion and human experience from fear and anguish and suffering to joy and delight and confidence in God.

Now this evening, SAM 133, I think it's one of these SAMs where the theme is fairly clear. Some SAMs you have to do a bit of digging and you should go really deep to figure out what's going on. But SAM 133 hits you right away.

[1 : 07] Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity. Unity. So this evening we're going to be thinking about Christian unity.

And I want to unpack what God is saying to us through SAM 133 about Christian unity. I want to think about it under three brief headings. First of all, the problem of division.

And secondly, the power of unity. And then finally, the promise of life. So the problem of division, the power of unity, and then the promise of life.

So first of all, the problem of division. Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity. The reality is that so often that's not happening.

Unity is something in the church that we take for granted. I think it's a substance, it's a commodity that we really tend to notice more when it's not there.

[2 : 05] For example, there are many things in our lives we take for granted when they work. I'm sure you can think of certain things in life you only really notice when they stop working or when they break.

An example is from, he's my car. I get in my car every day. I put the key in the ignition, turn the ignition, put it into gear and drive off. I don't really stop and think about the pistons and the fuel pumps and the head gasket and all the things that are essential to a car moving.

You just tend to get in and drive. It's only when you start to hear that worrying rattle or that ominous light comes on in your dashboard that you start to think about what might be going wrong.

You start to think about the inner workings of the engine. Another example that comes to mind is oxygen. I doubt very much if most of us have spent much time contemplating the oxygen in the air around us this evening.

But you take in a breath and oxygen fills your lungs. Apparently, the average human adult takes between 12 to 18 breaths every minute. I'm not great at maths, I choose a calculator, but apparently that means around 20,000 breaths a day.

[3 : 14] You don't consciously think about every time you take a breath, but it's absolutely vital, absolutely critical to your existence as a human being.

I'm pretty sure if all the oxygen in the air around us this evening suddenly evaporated, we'd be pretty quick to notice. Now, in a similar way, I think we have a kind of similar attitude to the unity of the church.

It's something that's here, something that's important, something that's critical, but we don't really value it. We don't really cherish it and protect it until it's gone, until there are problems, until division pops up.

Unity is absolutely critical for God's people. Think a bit about the context of this Psalm, Psalm 133. You notice at the top, it's a Psalm of David. Now, David is a man having written the Psalm about unity who experienced incredible division, who experienced unparalleled conflict.

There were times when the unity of God's people was absolutely shattered in his lifetime. David's own children are a powerful illustration of this. You have Absalom and Adonijah, Amnon, people who divided against each other and split the kingdom.

[4 : 30] God's people, eventually, in the Old Testament, is split into a North Kingdom and a South Kingdom. We read in the Bible that the roots of that disunity is sin. Sin brings division.

Sin sets people against each other. Sin sows seeds of discord and opposition. Sin in the church leads to gossip. It leads to people becoming tribalistic.

It leads to all sorts of other things that disrupt unity. As we trace those seeds in the Bible, we can trace them all the way back to the Garden of Eden, to Genesis chapter 3.

What's the first thing that human beings do after disobeying God? They turn on each other. They divide. They split.

Human history illustrates this. Our world has, in every era of human history, been in conflict. It's been at war. It's been in opposition.

[5 : 28] Despite the best endeavors of the United Nations and the Peace Corps and all kinds of attempts at peacemaking, there's never been a time in history where humanity has united back together as one people.

We've had pictures of it. We've had glimpses into what a united world might look like. The Roman Empire, the Pax Romana, the Roman Peace, where most of the known world was united under one empire.

But even that was flawed. Even that was imperfect. It was a unity built by force and brutality. Even today, we live in a world where division is a constant reality.

And I think that's true in our own lives today as well. Many of you this evening will have experienced division within the family, division within the workplace, division amongst friends.

And the problem of division is increasingly, increasingly relevant for the church. We know that in recent times in the free church, even here in the island of the Lewis, division has wracked us and Satan has been attacking us through disunity.

[6 : 38] And the problem really is that human beings are naturally divisive. So that's the first thing. Before we jump into Psalm 133, the problem of division. Now, what all this means is that unity is something extremely valuable.

It's extremely precious. And David knows that. As he's writing this Psalm at the back of him, he knows how precious it is, how wonderful it is when God's people are united.

Verse one comes from someone who knows what they're talking about. Someone with a background of terrible division and conflict. Behold how good and how pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity.

Now, secondly, Psalm 133 teaches us about the power of unity. Read verse two. It is like the precious oil on the head running down on the beard, on the beard of Aeron running down on the collar of his robes.

It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. There is real power in unity. Maybe over the summer you followed the World Cup.

[7 : 49] Maybe not. Maybe you know what the World Cup is. Football tournament happens every four years. And this summer the World Cup was excitingly unpredictable. It was a story of the underdog.

We saw teams that were full of incredibly talented individuals. You have teams like Germany and Brazil and Spain and Argentina. And all these great teams crashed out of the tournament early on. And you had teams like Russia, who would not stand out as a particularly significant team before the tournament. I think they were ranked like 80th in the world. And they performed extremely well. They got far in the tournament. And the reason they did that is because they clicked. They had a fantastic team spirit. They weren't particularly amazing individuals.

But they bonded together. They united. They were on the same page. They supported each other. That is a limited illustration because it applies to football. But it is true that there is power in working together.

[8 : 43] There is power in unity. And I think the Bible is telling us here in Psalm 133 that there is a similar power when it comes to Christian unity. And I want to think about that in two ways.

First of all, that it is distinctive. If you look at verse 2, it says it is like the precious oil on the head running down on the beard of Aeron. Now, I wonder if someone stops you on the street and storn away and asks you to describe what is the unity of the church like?

If that is what you would say. It is like the oil that runs down the beard of Aeron. Perhaps not. So I think that requires a little bit of thinking about and unpacking.

See in the ancient Near East, precious oil was fragrant. It was considered attractive and distinctive. And I think the part of the point in verse 2 is that when you have true unity, when God's people are on the same page and they are working together and they are living in peace, there is something about that.

There is something that is attractive. There is something that is different. There is something that is appealing. True unity when it happens is distinctive because it stands out in a world that is divided, a world that is full of people turning on each other.

[9 : 58] So it is distinctive. Secondly, God's people are set apart. We know this in the Old Testament. We have the priests, the Levitical system. That is what the beard of Aeron is referring to.

We are set apart to represent God in his world. Just like the priests in the Old Testament. The New Testament picks up on this kind of distinctive unity in John chapter 17.

Jesus is praying here, I pray for those who will believe in me through their message that they may all be one just as you, Father, are in me and I in you. That they also may be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

The glory you have given me, I have given to them that they may be one even as we are one. I have given them and you and me that they may become perfectly one so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

In other words, there is an incredible power to this kind of distinctive Christian unity. The point is when we are united, we point people to Jesus. We demonstrate his love.

[11 : 05] Jesus is saying that when people are brought to complete unity, then the world will know that you sent me and I've loved them even as you loved me. It's distinctive, it stands out, it's attractive, it's like this fragrant oil.

And our hope, our prayer as God's people here in Carlyway, wherever we are, is that people will see something different about us. When they look at us as a church community, they'll see God working in us to bring us together.

People from different backgrounds, different life stages, different interests, united together through Jesus Christ.

Some people say that for the sake of unity, Christians should be compromising. We should compromise for the greater good of unity. Perhaps that means we should be just like everyone else around us, that we should embrace the values and the morals of this world for the greater good of unity and togetherness.

But the point here again in Psalm 133 is that true unity doesn't compromise, true unity is distinctive. There's something different about it.

[12 : 11] So unity is not just becoming like the world, unity is standing out from the world, a unity that is anchored in Jesus Christ and the truth of His word.

Secondly, Christian unity is diverse, and I think this is what verse 3 is getting at if you look at verse 3. It is like the dew of hermon which falls on the mountains of Zion.

Again, it's an illustration you probably wouldn't go to if someone stopped you and asked you, what's Christian unity like? Well, it's like the dew of hermon that falls on the mountains of Zion.

It's initially quite hard to get our heads around what this means and requires a little bit of unpacking. Mount Hermon is a mountain north of Israel in what's now modern-day Syria.

It's where the city of Jerusalem is. You have Mount Hebron, Mount Hermon in the far north and Mount Zion in the south. And really, they're a picture of opposites.

[13 : 04] One commentator says this, the unity of God's people brings opposites together, and this is symbolized by Tall Mount Hermon in the north and Little Hill Zion in the south.

So for Hermon's dew to fall on Zion would be a miracle. In the same way, so is the supernatural bond that brings people far divergent in culture, race and class together in Jesus Christ.

In other words, the gospel breaks down barriers. It brings people who should be divided together. And we see this throughout the New Testament. This is Paul's begonness kind of unity.

Galatians 3 verse 28, there is neither Jew nor Gentile. There is neither male nor female, neither slave nor free, for you're all one in Christ Jesus.

And when you stop and think about the different people that surround you on a Sunday at church, I think that's true. Some of us are similar to one another, but many of us are different.

[14:02] Many of us are very different people, different backgrounds, different personalities. But we're united together through the gospel as one people in an incredibly distinctive and diverse way.

And this is kind of diverse of unity. It's not just true here in the local church, but in the global church across the world. We believe in one church, in one body. I think it's helpful to read a few verses from 1 Corinthians chapter 12 and verse 12.

It says here, for just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one spirit, we were all baptized into one body, Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and all were made to drink of one spirit.

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, because I'm not a hand, I do not belong to the body, that would not make it any less a part of the body.

And if the ear should say, because I'm not an eye, I do not belong to the body, that would not make it any less a part of the body. And so on and so forth. God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.

[15:20] If one member suffers, all suffer together, if one member is honoured, all rejoice together. Now you are all the body of Christ and individually members of it.

We are all the body of Christ. And the point in 1 Corinthians 12 is that true unity is something that comes from God. God has put the body together.

And we have this tune in Psalm 133, the idea that unity comes from God. There's a word that keeps popping up in the Hebrew. It doesn't come through so much in the English, but if you look at verse 2 and verse 3, you have the running down on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes.

It's like the dew that falls on the mountains. It's the same word, running down, running down and falls. And the point here is that unity is something that's descending. It's something that's coming down.

It descends. It's a blessing given to us by God. And what this means is that at some level, we don't have to work hard to become one body.

[16:22] We don't have to set our goal on, well, maybe one day we can become one body. Maybe one day we can be united. The Bible reminds us of our status in Jesus Christ. We are the body of Christ.

We are one people. We are never told to become one, to try hard that we somehow might become one one day. We are the body of Christ.

Unity is given to us by God, but it's something that we have to cherish, something we have to protect and safeguard. So maybe you look at the church, maybe locally, maybe worldwide, and you just don't see that unity in action.

Maybe you feel that the church is just a bunch of splinters. It's broken. It's divided. It's a horrible witness.

Maybe you look at the world and you don't see this kind of unity that Sam Wunthersley is talking about. And it's true that despite our status objectively as one body, we so often in the practical outworking of that fall short.

[17:23] We divide. We have denominations. We split. And David, the guy who wrote this Sam, who said, behold how good and pleasant it is when we dwell in unity.

There's a tragic irony to his own context. Together his reign as king, the kingdom divided, God's people split up. Maybe you've heard of a guy called Martin Luther, a Protestant reformer in the 16th century.

A lot of people think of Martin Luther and they think of division. They think of a man who split away from the church and started his own sect. But this is the way he said, he said, to gather with God's people in united adoration of the Father is as necessary to the Christian life as prayer.

It's as necessary to the Christian life as prayer. In other words, unity is of paramount importance. We absolutely need each other as Christians.

God has not called us to a solitary, lonely walk, following him on our own, me and my Jesus, me and my Savior. We're called as a people. We're called as a family.

[18 : 29] We're called as brothers and sisters. The New Testament is full of this language. Paul's constantly urging us as brothers and sisters in Christ.

We need each other for support. We need each other for encouragement. We need each other for a sense of community. And most of all, we need to worship together, gathered before God as his people.

So problem of division, the power of unity, thirdly and finally, I want to think about in the Psalm, the promise of life. Just very briefly, look at the last line of the Psalm. For there, the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.

And it's interesting this promise of life comes in the context of unity. I think a lot of people today believe in eternal life.

They believe in life after death and heaven and hell. But it's so often a very individualistic idea. It's very much a, I've been saved by Jesus and it's just going to be me and him.

[19 : 28] But we are saved collectively as a people. We are saved as the family of God. And what that means is that this eternal life we're called to, this promise of life we have here, it's a life together.

Life forevermore is eternal life together. The new heavens and the new earth we were thinking about this morning with Jesus our Savior, but also with each other.

The focal point for the promise of life in Psalm one through three is Mount Zion. It's Jerusalem. It's the place in the Old Testament where God meets with his people. It's the city of the living God.

And people make pilgrimages to Jerusalem today. They travel a vast journey to go there and be refreshed and find spiritual encouragement and so on and so forth. My own grandfather drove to Jerusalem in a mini and there's a wonderful story behind that.

But when my grandfather got to Jerusalem he got there, he looked around, he prayed, spent some time there. But he came home. He came back. He came back to the reality and to the busyness of life.

[20 : 32] But the Christian journey is a pilgrimage to a final destination, to a new Jerusalem that will be our home forever. And there are Psalm one through three promises us that the Lord has commanded his blessing, life forevermore.

That's our great hope as Christians. That's what we look forward to. Whatever bumps we come across in the road in this life, whatever hurdles might come our way we have this wonderful promise, this wonderful hope, life with God, life with each other in perfect, undisrupted unity.

So how do we apply the Psalm this evening? Well I think there's several things we have to take on board. First we have to really consciously value unity. Value unity here in Carlisle Way.

Value it, cherish it, protect it, pray for it. It's something that's so easy to take for granted when it's there. But you look at other congregations that are going through difficulties and division and disruption and we have to acknowledge that we are all fallen human beings.

We are all capable of dividing and turning on each other. So guard your hearts against things that disrupt unity. Guard your hearts against gossip and pride, jealousy, unkind words.

[21 : 45] Pray for the leaders of this church, for your elders and your deacons. Pray for those who are engaged in different forms of leadership. Pray that they would guard their hearts and that they would be protected by God.

We also need to make a conscious effort to spend time in church with those who are different to us. We have to make a point of looking out for our brothers and sisters even if they're not particularly like us.

Maybe it means taking time to really pray each and every day for other people in the church. Pray for that kind of unity, both collectively here in Carlisle Way and globally worldwide.

Unity is incredibly, incredibly precious. Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity. I want to just conclude this evening with these words from the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 4.

He says, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle. Be patient, bearing with one another in love.

[22 : 50] 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, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is in all and overall and through all.

Let's pray together. Dear God, we thank you this evening that you are a God who is building your church.

You are a God who is at work here in Carloway. You're at work here on this island of Lewis. You're at work in our country of Scotland and our continent of Europe and our world.

You are building your church. And Father, we recognise how easy it is to take unity for granted.

Father, we pray that we would have a burden to care for and protect and cherish the unity of Carloway Free Church.

We pray for the church leaders here, for the elders and the curksession for the deacons. Lord, we pray that you would keep them on the same page, that you keep them united together through the gospel.

[23 : 57] We pray for all the members and adherents here, for those who come along. Father, we pray that they'd be conscious of the fact that there's a family here, brothers and sisters, united together through Jesus Christ.

We pray, Father, in our own lives that you'd help us guard our hearts, help us not to be jealous or proud, help us not to be angry or bitter. But Lord, help us to love with the kind of love that Jesus Christ has shown us, a love that lays down his life for his friends.

Father, go before us and all the rest that we do this evening and the week to come, help us Lord, to share the desire of the Sammest, that not to us Lord, not to us, but to you be the glory. We pray as all in Jesus' name.

Amen. Well, we're going to close our time of worship together by singing the Psalm we've been looking at, Psalm 133. How excellent a thing it is, how pleasant and how good, when brothers dwell in unity and live as brothers should.

Let's stand together and sing Psalm 133 to the praise of God. Amen.