Sunday School Lesson

Psalm 133

by Lorin L. Cranford

Worship That Unifies

A copy of this lesson is posted in Adobe pdf format at
http://cranfordville.com under Bible Studies in the Bible Study Aids section
A note about the blue, underlined material: These are hyperlinks that allow you to click them on and bring up the specified scripture passage automatically while working inside the pdf file connected to the internet. Just use your web browser's back arrow or the taskbar to return to the lesson material.

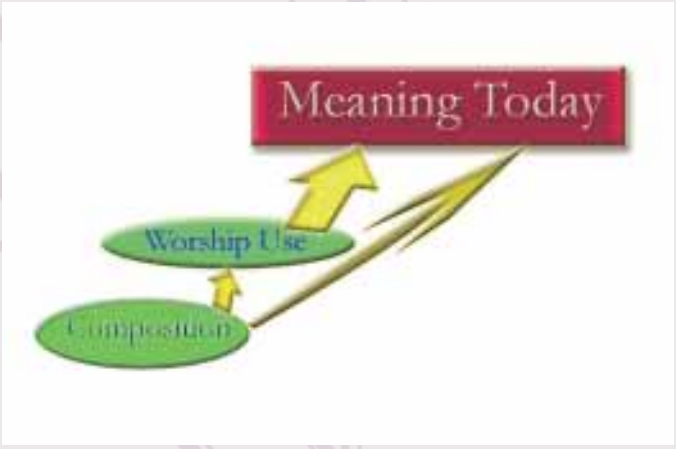
****

Quick Links to the Study

****

The lesson this Sunday jumps back to the Psalter of ancient Israel as we continue the study on worship. Psalm 133 is a part of the Songs of Ascent, which were included in the Pilgrim Psalms. Since much of the background is the same as the earlier lesson on Psalm 84, the relevant parts of that study will be reproduced here.

I. Context



Issues relating to context are more involved with a study of the psalms than with most other books of the Bible. As modern biblical analysis has demonstrated, the Bible student needs to deal with at least two levels of context: the original compositional context, and the later setting for the use of the psalm as a means of worship mainly in the temple but also in the synagogue. (See the chart to the right.) The original poems were often written hundreds of years before becoming a part of the sacred collection of psalms as a part of Hebrew scripture. Frequently the original historical setting for the composition is very different than the later historical use of the psalm in the Hebrew worship tradition. Sometimes this shift of setting between composition and later usage led to shifts in meaning of elements of a psalm. Frequently, these distinctions etc. are extremely difficult to discern with high levels of certainty, although at times these distinctions are rather clearly defined by the content of the psalm. Also fascinating, but beyond the scope of our study, is the later history of the use of individual psalms in the various streams of Christian tradition, particularly those traditions with more liturgical orientation in worship.

Modern study since the work of Professor Hermann Gunkel in the early 1900s has focused on the second tier, the worship use, with a preoccupation on the shape and use of the book of psalms as a tool of worship primarily in the second temple period of Judaism (post-exile to the destruction of the temple in 70 AD).

a. Historical

The beginning historical setting has to do with the composition of the psalm. With many of the 150 psalms, the challenge to identify the original compositional history is so great as to be impossible, because the content of the individual psalm provides few, if any, clues to such historical identification. A lot of the

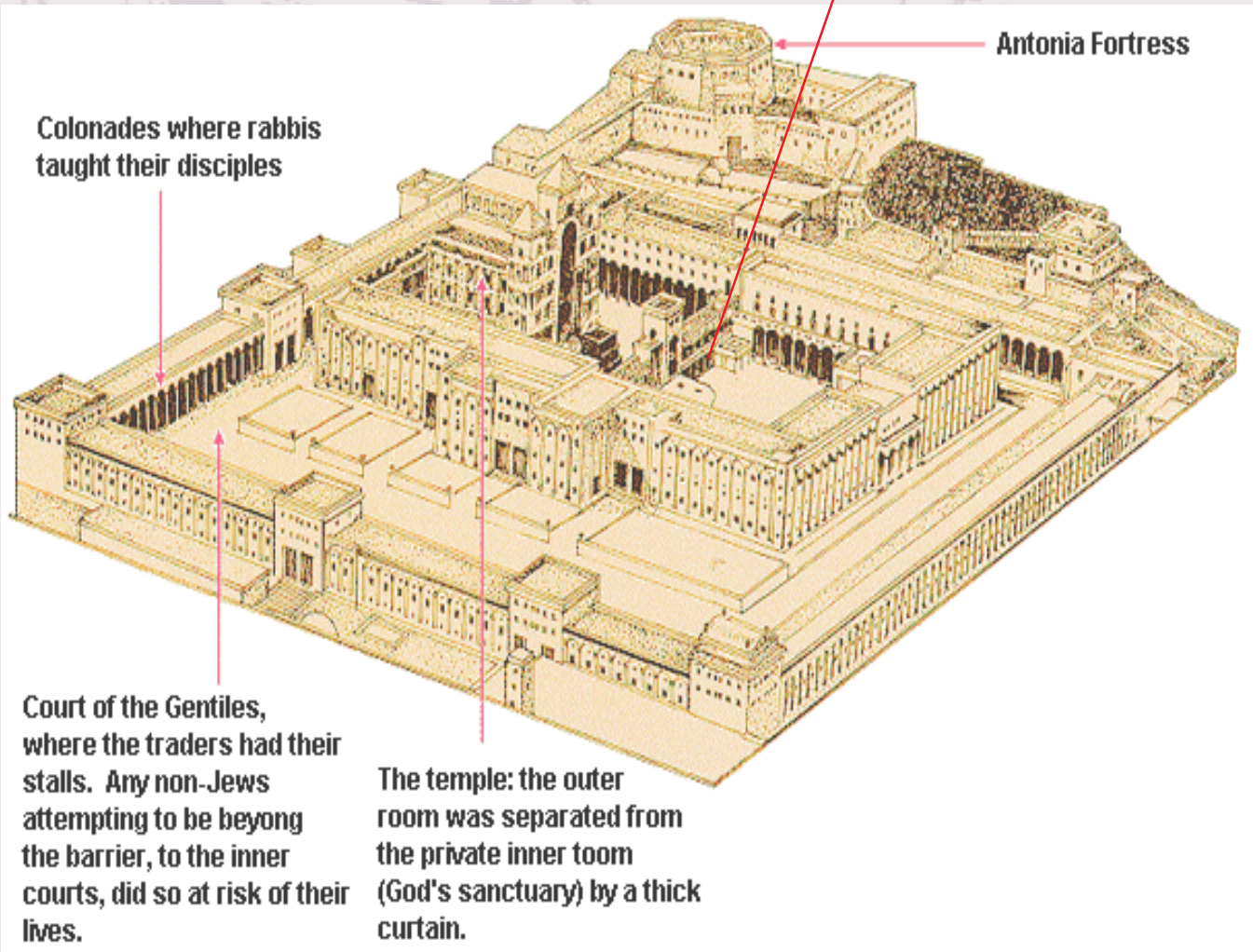
timeless quality and appropriately was used by festival pilgrims over several centuries prior to the destruction of the temple by the Romans in the first Christian century.

The dating of the original poems in the Songs of Ascent varies, as Leslie C. Allen (*Psalms 101-150* in the *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 21, p. 220) says, "122 and 132 seems to be pre-exilic, 123 exilic or post-exilic and 120, 124-126, 128-130, 133 post-exilic; while 121, 127, 131, 134 contain no clues for dating." Thus no clear cut original compositional history can be determined from Psalm 133, beyond the very general post-exilic origin. This in spite of the attribution in the heading as a Psalm of David, which doesn't appear uniformly in the ancient Hebrew and Greek manuscripts of this psalm. Some of the language and grammar structure of the Hebrew text argue strongly for a late date of origin.

Because of its inclusion in the Songs of Ascent collection, it appears to have been used primarily as a part of the worship in the second temple period. Leslie Allen, p. 220, has a helpful summation of how these psalms were probably used in the temple worship:

> The first three psalms are individual ones and were presumably sung as solos. Psalm 120 is a thanksgiving for heard prayer concerning persecution: it was reinterpreted as a song for Diaspora Jews from hostile environments. Psalm 121 is a liturgy associated with the end of a festival. Psalm 122 is a Song of Zion sung in procession to the temple: this psalm and Ps 133 may represent the nucleus of the processional collection to which psalms from other cultic settings were attached...."

Thus the pilgrims coming to Jerusalem to worship would sing this song both on their way to the temple and as a part of the liturgy when worshipping in the temple. An old Jewish tradition in the Mishnah (2nd century AD) asserts that the fifteen Songs of Ascents were linked to the fifteen steps leading up from the court of the women to the court of Israel in the temple complex (*Mid*. 2:5; *Sukk*. 5:4). The tradition links the singing of these psalms to the Levites on the first day of the Feast of Tabneracles. But the accuracy of this tradition



can't be clearly established.

b. Literary

The Book of Psalms in the Old Testament is the first document in the third section of the Hebrew Bible. In the Jewish tradition tracing itself back before the beginning of Christianity what we Christians called the Old Testament and what Jews for the past several centuries have called the Tanak, which was divided up into three sections: the Law (Torah), the Prophets (Nevi'im), and the Writings (Ketuvim). Jesus and the apostles referred to the Old Testament in this threefold division, mostly using the first two sections. Although the content between the Christian Old Testament and the Jewish Tanak or Hebrew Bible is identical, the arrangement and division of the various 'books' is very different.

The following quote from the Free Encyclopedia on the internet provides a accurate, helpful summation:

> **Ketuvim** is the third and final section of the Tanakh books. The Christian Old Testament (excluding the deuterocanonical books/apocrypha) counts them as thirty-nine books. This is because Jews often count as a single book what Christians count as several.
>
> As such, one may draw a technical distinction between the text used within Judaism, the Tanakh, and the similar, but non-identical, text used within Christianity, the Old Testament. Thus, some scholars prefer Hebrew Bible as a term that covers the commonality of the Tanakh and the Old Testament while avoiding sectarian bias.
>
> **Hebrew Bible**
>
> Hebrew Bible refers to the textual canon of the Jewish Tanakh, which contains books that were originally written mainly in Hebrew. (There are two books, Daniel and Ezra, that have parts in Aramaic, but even they are written in the same Hebrew script.) Nearly all Hebrew Bibles since the middle ages reflect the Masoretic Text.
>
> The Hebrew Bible includes the same books as the Protestant Old Testament, but not the deuterocanonical portions of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Old Testament. The term Hebrew Bible does not impose a particular ordering of its books (as opposed to Tanakh and the Old Testament, each of which orders the books in different ways).

Psalms stands as the first and perhaps most important book of this third section, the Writings. Additionally, it served as the hymn book of ancient Israel by the time of the temple. Comprised of Hebrew poems set to music for singing first in the temple then later additionally in the synagogues, the book itself is divided into five sections modeled after the five 'Books of Moses,' that is, the first section called the Law. Most English translations will preserve the markers: Book 1, Pss. 1-41; Book 2, Pss. 42-72; Book 3, Pss. 73-80; Book 4, Pss. 90-106; Book 5, Pss. 107-150. This is explained in a helpful summary in the Wikipedia Online Encyclopedia:

> The Psalter is divided, after the analogy of the Pentateuch, into five books, each closing with a doxology or benediction:
>
> 1. The first book comprises the first 41 Psalms, all of which are ascribed to David except 1, 2, 10, and 33, which, though anonymous, were also traditionally ascribed to him. While Davidic authorship cannot be relied on this probably is the oldest section of the Psalms
>
> 2. Book second consists of the next 31 Psalms (42-72), 18 of which are ascribed to David and 1 to Solomon (the 72nd). The rest are anonymous.
>
> 3. The third book contains 17 Psalms (73-89), of which the 86th is ascribed to David, the 88th to Heman the Ezrahite, and the 89th to Ethan the Ezrahite.
>
> 4. The fourth book also contains 17 Psalms (90-106), of which the 90th is ascribed to Moses, and the 101st and 103rd to David.
>
> 5. The fifth book contains the remaining Psalms, 44 in number. Of these, 15 are ascribed to David, and the 127th to Solomon.
>
> Psalm 136 is generally called "the great hallel." But the Talmud includes also Psalms 120-135. Psalms 113-118, inclusive, constitute the "hallel" recited at the three great feasts, at the new moon, and on the eight days of the feast of dedication.
>
> Psalms 120-134 are referred to as Songs of Degrees, and are thought to have been used as hymns of approach by pilgrims.

Our psalm, Psalm 133, occurs in the fifth book of the psalter, as a part of the remaining forty-four psalms, beginning with Psalm 107. J. Hempel in "Psalms," Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, provides a helpful summation of the five books:

These 150 psalms are divided into five books by doxologies (perhaps after the analogous partition of the Pentateuch): 1-41; 42-72; 73-89;90:106; 107-50. Their limits fall sometimes together with the end of ancient smaller collections. So Pss. 3:1-41 are bound together by the dwdl and by the use of "Yahweh" as the name by which God is invoked.

The second collection prefers the designation "Elohim" for God (cf. the doublet Ps. 14:1=Ps. 53:1). It contains six psalms connected with the "sons of Korah" (44-49), twenty again with David (51-70), and an appendix to this Elohistic David psalter: Ps. 72:1, introduced by hml`l, "from[?] Solomon." Ps. 50:1, now an Asaph psalm, may have been originally a Korah psalm. Pss. 42:1-43; 71, songs of a man persecuted (in his old age) by his enemies, are without superscription. They may belong together and have their origin in the Diaspora outside the city of the sanctuary (42:5, 7; 43:3-4). For this reason they did not belong to any Jerusalem collection, and they became the framework of 42-70 before Ps. 72:1 was appended.

The third book is in its main part Elohistic too. It contains the Asaph collection (73-83), four Korah psalms (84-85; 87-88) and one David psalm (86) left aside by the former collections, and a hymn of Ethan (89). Pss. 84:1-89, which are Yahwistic, were appended to the Asaph collection after its Elohistic redaction.

The division between the fourth and the fifth books is purely artificial, as may be seen by a comparison of Ps. 106:1 with Ps. 107:1. The fourth book starts with the prayer of Moses, the man of God (Ps. 90:1), and embraces: (a) canticles with various titles, mostly of hymnal character and celebrating Yahweh's kingship (93 [95-96]; 97 [98]; 99); (b) Davidic psalms (101; 103; 108-10; 138-45); (c) Hallelujah psalms (104-6; 111-12; 146-50); (d) Hallel (113-18; see HALLEL); (e) songs of ascent (120-34, from which 122; 124; 131; 133 are again Davidic; see ASCENT, SONG OF).

The other psalms show no certain principles of ordering. Even from this rapid survey it may be seen that books IV-V are not the work of a single redactor but result from a slow growing together of smaller collections with single songs. It may be that an older book of Psalms contained Pss. 3:1-110, with Ps. 2:1 as an introductory counterpart to 110, as Ps. 1:1 forms the later Introit to the whole collection.

Psalm 133 is a part of the Songs of Ascents, which are well summarized by J. Clinton McCaan, Jr. in "Psalms" *New Interpreter's Bible* (vol. 4, iPreach version):

Psalms 120 is the first of fifteen consecutive psalms that bear the title "A Song of Ascents." While certainty is not possible, it is likely that this collection was originally used by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem or as part of a festal celebration in Jerusalem. Each psalm is relatively short (except Psalms 132) and thus capable of being memorized, and a variety of types and themes is represented. The noun translated "ascents" (twlm[ma (alôt) is from a Hebrew root meaning "to go up" (hl[(Alâ); as Ps 122:4 points out, it was decreed that "the tribes go up" regularly to Jerusalem (see Deut 16:16; see also 1 Kgs 12:28; Ps 24:3; Isa 2:3). The noun can also mean "steps" or "stairs," and it is elsewhere used for the steps of the Temple (Ezek 40:6) and the steps to the city of David (Neh 3:15; 12:37).

The likelihood that Psalms 120–134 were used by pilgrims on the journey to Jerusalem or during a celebration in Jerusalem is increased by the frequent references to Jerusalem and Zion (see Psalms 122; 125–126; 128–129; 132–134). Also, the alternation between singular and plural references to the people suggests group participation, as do the frequent liturgical elements, such as invitations for response (124:1; 129:1; 130:7; 131:3), professions of faith (121:2; 124:8; 134:3), and benedictions (125:5; 128:5-6; 134:3). These elements also represent verbal links among the psalms that suggest the unity of the collection. Even if some of these elements are redactional, as several scholars suggest, this in itself suggests that an editor provided further indications of unity to a collection that he or she already recognized as a unit.

Scholars frequently observe that Psalms 120–134 deal often with matters of daily life —place of residence (120:5-6), routine activities (121:8; 127:2; 128:2), the importance of spouse and children (128:3-4), as well as larger family and friends (122:8; 133:1). This, too, increases the likelihood that the collection was originally used by ordinary persons on the way to or upon arrival at Jerusalem. The juxtaposition of psalms reflecting daily concerns with those reflecting national concerns (Psalms 123–126; 130–132; 134) also makes sense in the context of festal celebrations, where individuals and families from all over would have been brought together by loyalties that transcended the personal and familial.

Several scholars also detect evidence of a pilgrimage orientation in the shape of the collection, especially the beginning and end. Psalms 120:5, for instance, has the effect of locating the speaker outside Jerusalem and even outside the land, even though the geographical references may have been intended metaphorically. The imagery of Psalms 121 makes especially good sense in the context of a journey — seeing mountains in the distance (v. 1), the concern with stumbling and with safety in general (vv. 3-4), the need for protection from the heat of the sun and the dangers of darkness (vv. 5-6), the mention of departure and entrance (v. 8). The joyful tone of Psalms 122 gives

the impression of just having arrived at Jerusalem, and Psalms 134 would have served well as a benediction upon departure. To be sure, this arrangement may be coincidental, but in conjunction with the above considerations, the shape of the collection increases the likelihood of its use by pilgrims.

This understanding of the literary and historical settings for Psalm 133 will be the basis for the following interpretation.

II. Message

The internal structure of the Hebrew text is simple, although English translations blur this substantially. The single sentence for the entire psalm has its main clause in verse one, and dependent clause expressions in verses two and three. The meter of the Hebrew text amplifies this: In verse one it is 3+3, while in the remaining verses it is 3+2. A beatitudinal blessing is pronounced in verse one, and then compared via two metaphors, i.e., oil on Aaron's beard and the dew of Herman, in the subsequent two verses.

The poetic structure of the psalm has been illustrated by Leslie Allen's (WBC, v. 21, pp. 211-212) translation of the Hebrew text:

[1]One of the processional songs. Davidic.
How good, to be sure, how fine it is (3+3)
for brothers to stay together!
[2]*It is like the sweet oil upon the head* *(3+2)*
coming down upon the beard.
Aaron's beard which came down (3+2)
over his body.
[3]*It is like the dew of Herman which comes down* (3+2)
upon the mountains of Zion.
That is where Yahweh (2+2+2)
has ordered the blessing to be,
life for evermore.

Thus we can see more clearly the introductory assertion in verse one with its expansion in the following verses that lead up to the climatic declaration of blessing at the end of verse three. The numbers in the right column in (..) indicate the Hebrew meter.

a. Blessedness of Unity, v. 1

NASB

1 Behold, how good and how pleasant it is For brothers to dwell together in unity!

NRSV

1 How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

NLT

1 A song for the ascent to Jerusalem. A psalm of David. How wonderful it is, how pleasant, when brothers live together in harmony!

Comments:

This first verse is the foundational thought for the entire psalm. The original expression mostly likely related to the ancient Israelite family structure where sons continued living for the first few years at least in their father's home after getting married (cf. Deut. 25:5). Thus, in the extended family with several sons and their wives living in the home of the sons' father, tension and conflict could easily develop among the various family units. In these larger extended family units of a couple of dozen or so people living under "one roof" it was indeed a happy time when everyone got along with the others. Usually the sons would move into their own homes once children began coming along, but the exact point when they would move out of their father's house is not clear from ancient records.

In the second tier of worship use (see diagram on page one), the meaning of the psalm changed to emphasize the cultic worship experience of Israelites from differing backgrounds who met in the temple to worship. Perhaps, early on the stress was upon those from the old northern kingdom coming to Jerusalem to worship with their brethren in the southern kingdom. By the post-exilic period the meaning very likely

stressed unified worship among the Jews of the Diaspora who made pilgrimages to Jerusalem to worship. At this stage of Jewish history, the diversity of views, customs etc. among the Jewish people was enormous. Ancient Jewish sources outside the Bible indicate that tensions were sometimes very high and on occasion erupted into violence. Thus the psalmist paints a wonderful picture of people dressed differently and speaking different languages even coming together for common worship, bound to one another by race and divine covenant. Indeed, how blessed and wonderful such an experience would have been. I suspect the pilgrims on their way back home after such a festival worship experience would talk of the joy of such an experience for years to come.

What lessons are here for us? The first thought that comes to mind is the Baptist World Alliance meetings every five years. Every five years several thousand Baptists from the 110 million Baptists in over 200 countries will gather for a time of worship, study and fellowship. The next one will be July 27-31, 2005, in Birmingham England, and will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the BWA. The opening night worship service when each group marches in, dressed in local custom carrying the flag of their nation, is a marvelous experience. Structures like this help foster unity and cooperative relationships among the 211 member Baptist unions and conventions. To be able to worship together with fellow Baptists from all over the world in one place and time is indeed an unforgettable experience that dramatically underscores the unity that can be shared when Christians come together in love and acceptance of one another. The above picture of the last BWA meeting in Melbourne Australia in 2000 is but one illustration of this. One of the really dumb mistakes that SBC leaders have made recently is ramming through the decision for the SBC national organization to sever ties with the BWA. Everything about that goes contrary to scriptural principle in both testaments of the Bible.

But to attend Baptist organization meetings at the national level such as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship meeting (the next one is June 24-26 in Birmingham, AL) is a somewhat similar experience. Or in many state conventions one can find a somewhat similar worship experience. The point is the same: when fellow Christians come together in a spirit of harmony and love, what a wonderful time of worship it becomes. Just think for a moment about our own Sunday morning worship service. There is no way that people of such diverse backgrounds and interests would come together for a common objective of worshipping God outside of a church service. We sing the hymn, "Blessed Be The Tie that Binds," often and when you pause to think about it we really do have a strong tie that binds us together: our common love of the Lord and desire to please Him.

But the mostly likely original setting of this wisdom saying in the ancient Israelite family has a word to say to us about the importance of family harmony and unity. To be sure, such isn't always achievable today but the goal of harmony and shared commitments should ever be our goal as a family unit.

Jesus summarized this same point from the later Christian perspective with his declaration in John 13:35 (NRSV): "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

b. Elaborations, vv. 2-3

NASB	NRSV	NLT
2 It is like the precious oil upon the head, upon the head, Coming down upon the beard, *Even* Aaron's beard, Coming down upon the edge of his robes. **3** It is like the dew of Hermon Coming down upon the mountains of Zion;	***2*** It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes. ***3*** It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the	***2*** For harmony is as precious as the fragrant anointing oil that was poured over Aaron's head, that ran down his beard and onto the border of his robe. ***3*** Harmony is as refreshing as the dew from Mount Hermon that falls on the

For there the LORD commanded the blessing -- life forever.

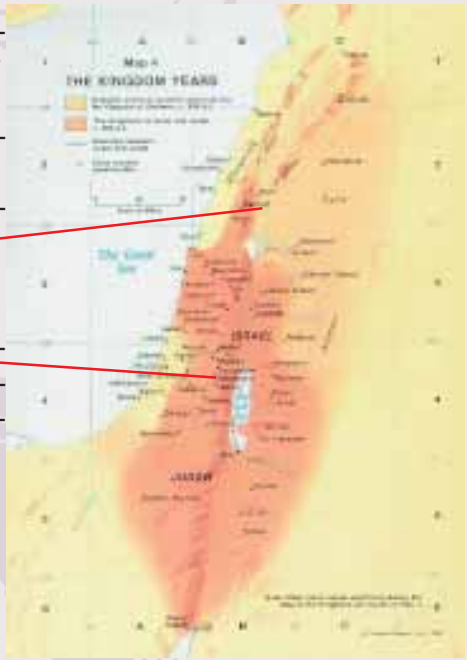
Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore.

mountains of Zion. And the LORD has pronounced his blessing, even life forevermore.

Comments:

These two verses underscore the depths of the joy and happiness that harmony can bring. The vehicle for this is a couple of comparisons to customs and places in ancient Israel, both of which are very far from the world that we live in. So let's see what we can learn from these.

The first metaphor is "oil coming off the head on to the beard." J. Clinton McCann (*Psalms*, *New Interpreter's Bible*) offers this helpful insight: "The pouring of oil over the head seems to have been an act of hospitality, signaling joy and relatedness (see Pss 23:5; 92:10; 141:5), as well as an official act of consecrating kings and priests. Both senses would be appropriate here, but the mention of Aaron especially calls to mind the latter (see Exod 28:41)." The consecration of Aaron involved the pouring of olive oil on his head and letting it run down into his beard. This points to the experiencing of harmony in worship as sacred, as an act bringing the approval of Almighty God, along with the concept of acceptance that the ritual of anointing signaled as a gesture of hospitality. Perhaps the point is dual: our acceptance of fellow Christians brings God's acceptance.



Certainly, when we come together in unity and harmony to worship our God, the sense of acceptance and approval is important. Few experiences can inspire more than to know that other people, as well as God, accepts you and affirm you. Recall those moments of profound worship in your experiences and see whether or not a sense of holiness and acceptance wasn't an important aspect of those experiences.

The second metaphor is "the dew of Hermon" which trickles down to Mt. Zion. Although a physical impossibility, the psalmist is stressing the extensiveness of divine blessing bringing refreshment. The worship of God in the temple in Jerusalem (Mt. Zion) is the divinely ordered place of worship, that can bring God's spiritual renewal and refreshment that can eclipse even the plentiful dew that fell on Mt. Hermon in northern Palestine. The psalmist reflects the central position in the Old Testament that the temple in Jerusalem was the exclusive place for sacrificial worship of the God of Israel. The pilgrims traveling from all over the Mediterranean world in the post-exilic times would have understood and accepted this view. Harmonious worship in God's house brings spiritual renewal -- this was the psalmist's point.

Certainly there's a lesson in this for us. Public worship is essential to spiritual health -- that we picked up from the previous lesson on Psalm 84. Psalm 133 advances the idea to stress the joy of harmonious worship and the spiritual renewal that it can bring. We Christians need renewal often. Worship is an important channel that God uses for renewal. The inspiration of beautiful music, a thoughtful exposition of God's Word through a sermon by the preacher, a meaningful prayer expression offered up to God -- all these elements and more become channels of spiritual renewal that brings life and life abundantly. When we share these experiences with brothers and sisters in Christ who are different from us in so many different ways yet bound to us through a common faith and love of the Lord, truly such worship is joyous and wonderful. Adequate comparisons to the levels of this joy and blessedness are difficult to find.

May we never be guilty to taking worship lightly or causally. Or a partner in disunity and disruption that shatters the harmony of God's people over trivial, unimportant issues!