

This beautiful three verse psalm celebrates the meaning of God’s ordained covenant community. The psalmist paints two powerful images that are distinct in meaning and comprehensive in scope. The first represents God’s redemptive provision – the moment of Aaron’s holy consecration. The second signifies God’s sovereign plan and purpose – the due of Hermon falling on Mount Zion. This psalm of assent was sung and prayed by pilgrims as they made their way to Jerusalem to worship God. Today we pray this psalm in the Body of Christ, the Church, in thanksgiving for our salvation in Christ, our great High Priest, and in gratitude for his promise of the abundant life – everlasting life. The portrait of Aaron is personal and intimate; the landscape of blessing from Hermon to Mount Zion is social and public. Both vivid images are meant to inspire worship, unite believers, and sanctify the people of God by the power of the Spirit of God.

Blessing In Community

*How good and pleasant it is
when God’s people live together in unity!*
Psalm 133:1

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote *Life Together* to guide twenty-five young pastors in their understanding of Christian community. The year was 1938 and the place was the Confessing Church’s illegal clandestine seminary in Finkenwalde, Germany. At a time of great uncertainty and danger, Bonhoeffer meditated on the privilege of Christians living together in unity. It was a gift, not to be taken for granted. He wrote, “The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer.”¹ He stressed that Christian community is a “divine reality,” not a human ideal. It is based on “the clear, manifest Word of God in Jesus Christ,” rather than the “dark, turbid urges and desires of the human mind.”²

Bonhoeffer reflected on the practical meaning of life together. He took the psalmist’s description of “good and pleasant” and elaborated on it in concrete terms. He envisioned believers praying the Psalms, showing hospitality at the kitchen table and the Lord’s Table, forgiving one another, working and playing together. This “goodness” goes all the way back to creation “when God saw that it was good.” It is a goodness that is productive and life-fulfilling. This “pleasantness” enhances the whole of life with delight and joy. These two words, “good and pleasant,” are the essence of human flourishing and recall the apostle Paul’s admonition: “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is worthy – think about such things” (Phil 4:8).

Blessing Running Down

It is like precious oil poured on the head,

¹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 19.

² *Ibid.*, 31.

*running down on the beard,
running down on Aaron's beard,
down on the collar of his robe.
It is as if the dew of Hermon
were falling on Mount Zion.*

Psalm 133:2-3a

The priestly consecration of Aaron and his sons is described in Exodus 29. There is a detailed description of priestly garments, ceremonial cleansing, and sacrifices. The sacred anointing oil was “a fragrant blend” of myrrh, cinnamon, calamus, and olive oil (Exod 30:22-25). The psalmist gives poetic expression to the sacred moment when Moses obeyed the word of the Lord, “Take the anointing oil and anoint him by pouring it on his head” (Exod 29:7). The oil running down on Aaron’s head, running down on his beard, and running down on his collar, is a picture of the blessing of God descending upon his people.³ The image symbolizes the essence of God’s ordained community. Life together is a gift based on the mercy of God. The atoning sacrifices made by priests were a reminder of our sins and the need for God’s mercy. The whole sacrificial system was an object lesson pointing forward to Christ and his sacrifice on the cross. “We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10:10).

Aaron foreshadowed Jesus Christ our great High Priest in whom we have become a kingdom of priests. The word of the Lord through the patriarch Moses, “You will be for me a kingdom of priests” (Exod 19:6), is now fulfilled in Christ. “You are a royal priesthood,” declared the apostle Peter (1 Pet 2:9). The followers of Christ are holy and set apart for priestly service to the King of kings and Lord of lords. There is no higher calling than this; no special designation that ranks anyone higher than this God-ordained responsibility. The biblical concept of the priesthood of all believers stresses the equality and body-life of the church as a whole. The Book of Hebrews roots our priesthood in the priestly sacrifice of Jesus Christ, our great high priest, who was “tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.” He “learned obedience by the things that he suffered.” (Heb 4:15; 5:8). Instead of the blood of sacrificial animals, he offered himself as a once for all perfect sacrifice. His blood “cleanses our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!” Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, rendering the old covenant obsolete, putting an end to the old sacrificial system, and giving us all the confidence “to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus” (Heb 8:13; 10:1-4, 19).

Community depends upon our vertical relationship with God in Christ. To speak in figurative terms, the blessing comes down from above. “Grace, like water, always flows downward, to the lowest place.”⁴ And we all embody this principle. We cannot achieve this unity; we must receive it. “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ,” wrote Bonhoeffer. “No Christian community is more or less than this. . . .The Christian no longer lives of himself,

³ Patrick Henry Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 266. Reardon makes a great deal of the beard. He writes, “The high priest’s beard is mentioned twice in connection with this bountiful anointing, portraying the accumulated saturation of the blessing into this supreme symbol of his manhood. (Indeed, Holy Scripture is very strict on the point. The priest may not shave his beard, and the man who can’t grow a beard cannot be a priest.)

⁴ Philip Yancey quoted in *John Newton*, by Jonathan Aitken, 11.

by his own claims and his own justification, but by God's claims and God's justification."⁵ The global impact of Bonhoeffer's Life Together is in itself a testimony to the priesthood of all believers. What was intended for a small group of pastors-in-training has resonated with the priesthood of all believers around the world. We can identify with Aaron's consecration. We are the holy possession of God in Christ, personally chosen by God, predestined for communion with God, adopted into the community of God's people, recipients of God's grace, redeemed by his personal sacrifice on our behalf, and signed, sealed and delivered by the promised Holy Spirit.

"The gospel is never for individuals but always for a people," writes Eugene Peterson. "Sin fragments us, separates us, and sentences us to solitary confinement. The Gospel restores us, unites us, and sets us in community."⁶ Believers know nothing of a "secret, individualized faith." "Christ is not seen apart from the gathered, listening, praying, believing, worshiping people to whom he is Lord and Savior. It is not possible to have Christ apart from the church."⁷ Following Jesus without being in the church is like a soccer player without a team, an actor without an audience, a symphony conductor without an orchestra, a teacher without students—you get the point.

David's second simile lifts our imagination from the shared act of priestly consecration to the miraculous breadth of God's blessing. Images of redemption and creation converge. Propitiation and providence are in concert. At nine thousand feet Mount Hermon is the tallest peak in Israel. It is located over one hundred miles north of Mount Zion which is in Jerusalem. Hermon is known for its alpine climate with its cool, moist air, in contrast to the dry arid climate of Jerusalem. The climatic impossibility of the dew of Hermon falling on Mount Zion triggers the praying imagination and opens up poetic possibilities. The proverbial heavy dew of Hermon is a metaphor for God's blessing that extends from the heights to the depths ("High and low drink in the same sweet refreshment" (Perowne)).⁸ "The unity of God's people," writes Tim Keller, "brings opposites together, symbolized by tall Hermon in the rural north and the little hill of Zion in the urban south. For Hermon's dew to fall on Zion would be a miracle – and so is the supernatural bond that brings people far divergent in culture, race, and class together in the Lord."⁹

The blessing of God coming down reaches its climax in the descent of the Son of Man. This is the crucial coming down out of heaven into history that is absolutely critical to the Gospel.¹⁰ Bruner writes, "*No one has ever gone up into heaven except the Son of Man who has come down out of heaven.*" Jesus is the exclusive *personal* bridge between heaven and earth, between God and human beings."¹¹ Our Savior's coming down is highlighted throughout the fourth gospel. Jesus is the Bread of God "that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (John

⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 21-22.

⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John & the Praying Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 42.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁸ Quoted in Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 453 (*The Psalms* by J. S. Perowne (G. Bell), 1864).

⁹ Keller, *The Songs of Jesus*, 340.

¹⁰ Bruner, *John*, 191.

¹¹ Bruner, *John*, 192.

6:33).¹² And the Spirit of Christ comes down to lead us “upward to and through Jesus ‘*the Truth*’ to ‘*the Father*’ into ‘*true worship*’ (John 4:16-26) and then will lead us outward immediately into authentic mission in the neighborhood and the world (John 4:27-42).”¹³

Blessing On Command

*For there the Lord bestows his blessing,
even life forevermore.*

Psalm 133:3

These two distinct images share a common place. “For there” knits these metaphors together. “The immediate reference would be to Mount Zion, the place of the sanctuary and the Aaronic priesthood, and by implication the place where the unity of the people would be the most noticeable.”¹⁴ The promise of redemption and the promise of the land converge in Jerusalem. The psalmist leaves no doubt as to the means and meaning of God’s blessing when he writes, “For there the Lord bestows his blessing.” By God’s command salvation is rooted in a specific time and place. Christians see the “for there” promise of the sacrificial system and the promise of the land fulfilled in Christ. The image of “running down” is echoed in the apostle John, when he wrote, “I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, *coming down* out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.” The people of God have become the bride of Christ and the temple has become the holy city. These two metaphors establish an inclusion that runs from the intensity of relational intimacy to the full extent of human flourishing in community. John’s vision of the New Jerusalem is deeply personal and fully relational. What comes down out of heaven is not just a place, but a people. Human flourishing and everlasting life are not up to us on our own. The Lord commands his blessing which only he can give. To God be the glory. Amen.

¹² Bruner, John, 213.

¹³ Bruner, John, 257.

¹⁴ Ross, The Psalms, 751.