

EXEGETICAL GUIDE

# PSALM

# 133

THE BEAUTY OF UNITY



**BE UNITED  
IN CHRIST**

# BE UNITED IN CHRIST EXEGETICAL GUIDE

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## *Psalm 133: The Beauty of Unity*

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# Be United in Christ

## Exegetical Guide

### Psalm 133

#### The Beauty of Unity

Psalm 133 celebrates the unity of God's people. The Israelites sang this psalm while journeying to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feasts of Passover, Weeks, and Booths. As God's people reunited, they celebrated the fact that living together in unity was good and pleasant like oil coming down Aaron's beard, like dew coming down from Mount Hermon. Unity is God's enduring blessing upon His people.

Psalm 133 encourages unity by presenting its beauty and blessedness. David's delightful images of unity encourage God's people to promote healthy relationships among themselves. This psalm reminds believers that unity is God's good gift, and this should motivate Christians to Be United in Christ.

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## HOW TO USE A BE UNITED IN CHRIST EXEGETICAL GUIDE

An exegetical guide models how to study a passage of Scripture. The Introduction provides the context, while **Connection to Be United in Christ** highlights the text's importance for Christian unity. The Passage presents the Biblical text being studied.

We begin by **Studying the Passage** because God's messengers must convey God's words accurately. The Passage Comparison presents the text in its original Greek or Hebrew alongside seven English translations. Comparing translations allows for a better understanding of the passage and provides insight into the intent of the original Biblical manuscripts. The Structural Layout divides the passage into its component parts, because to understand what God said we must understand how He said it. It is an essential step in Bible study, but do not be discouraged if this section seems unfamiliar or daunting. The Narrative Flow explains the Biblical author's flow of thought through the passage. The Passage Overview then presents a simple outline that will form the foundation of subsequent outlines and the sermon manuscript itself. The Passage Focus distills the text into a statement that will be the main idea of the sermon. We then identify several Resources to further your study.

Having studied the passage, we are ready to begin **Preparing the Sermon**. Good preaching feeds God's people on God's Word, so our messages must be both healthful and appetizing.

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This is why this section begins by laying out several Sermon Ingredients that will be used to prepare a nutritious and appealing message. We must present God’s Word accurately and clearly so that God’s people will understand it with their minds, embrace it in their hearts, and apply it to their lives. The Passage Outline presents the structure and flow, while the Passage Details provide the grammatical, historical, and theological information needed to understand and teach the passage. The message is then fortified with Applications and seasoned with Illustrations. These ingredients are combined to prepare a spiritual meal to feed God’s children. The Sermon Outline rephrases the Passage Outline to make it more understandable to an audience. The Sermon Manuscript for Your Use then offers an example of how the passage might be preached. Then we identify several Sermon Examples that model good preaching on the text.

We continue by **Exploring the Classics**. In this section we provide examples of classic commentaries, sermons, and other resources so that the insight and eloquence of the past can bear fruit in the church today.

We conclude the exegetical guide with **Experiencing Unity**. In this section, we explore what Scripture says about what it looks like to experience the kind of unity that Psalm 133 encourages.

An exegetical guide thus presents both a comprehensive analysis of one particular Bible passage and a model for studying and preaching any passage of Scripture. We pray that God will use this guide to promote love for Him, fidelity to His Word, and unity in His church.





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## Connection to Be United in Christ

“Nowhere has the nature of true unity—that unity which binds men together, not by artificial restraints, but as brethren of one heart—been more faithfully described, nowhere has it been so gracefully illustrated, as in this short ode.”<sup>1</sup> God’s passion for unity among His people is found here in Psalm 133 and throughout the Old Covenant. God extended His blessing of unity beyond Israel when Christ established the New Covenant. Like God’s people in Psalm 133, Christians are redeemed, connected by covenant, and together ascend to the city of God. This sweet psalm encourages God’s people to travel well together, to Be United in Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> J. J. Stewart Perowne, *The Book of Psalms: A New Translation with Introduction and Notes Explanatory and Critical*, 3rd ed. (Andover, MA: Warren F. Draper, 1882), 2:394.

# STUDYING THE PASSAGE

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Psalm 133

*The Beauty of Unity*

## PASSAGE COMPARISON

### Psalm 133

HEBREW	NASB	ESV	KJV
שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת לְדָוִד	A Song of Ascents, of David.	A Song of Ascents. Of David.	A Song of degrees of David.
<p><sup>1</sup> הִנֵּה מֵה־טוֹב וּמֵה־נֶּעִים שְׂכֵת אֶתִּים גַּם־יַחְדָּ:</p>	<p><sup>1</sup> Behold, how good and how pleasant it is For brothers to dwell together in unity!</p>	<p><sup>1</sup> Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!</p>	<p><sup>1</sup> Behold, how good and how pleasant <i>it is</i> for brethren to dwell together in unity!</p>
<p><sup>2</sup> בְּשֶׁמֶן הַטּוֹבוֹ עַל־הָרֹאשׁ יֵרֵד עַל־הַזָּקָן יֵאָזֵר אֶתֶּרֶן שֵׁיֵד עַל־פִּי מִדֹּתָיו:</p>	<p><sup>2</sup> It is like the precious oil upon the head, Coming down upon the beard, <i>Even</i> Aaron's beard, Coming down upon the edge of his robes.</p>	<p><sup>2</sup> It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes!</p>	<p><sup>2</sup> <i>It is</i> like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, <i>even</i> Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments;</p>
<p><sup>3</sup> כְּטַל־חֶרְמוֹן שִׁירָה עַל־הַרְרֵי צִיּוֹן כִּי שָׁם צִוְּהָ יְהוָה אֶת־הַבְּרָכָה חַיִּים עַד־הָעוֹלָם:</p>	<p><sup>3</sup> It is like the dew of Hermon Coming down upon the mountains of Zion; For there the LORD commanded the blessing— life forever.</p>	<p><sup>3</sup> It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.</p>	<p><sup>3</sup> As the dew of Hermon, <i>and as the dew</i> that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the LORD commanded the blessing, <i>even</i> life for evermore.</p>



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## STRUCTURAL LAYOUT

The Structural Layout shows how the passage fits together. The left column contains the Biblical text divided into its structural elements. Main clauses are aligned left and related elements are highlighted in color. The right column explains how the various elements function in context.

A Song of Ascents, of David.

The title identifies the psalm's setting and author.

<sup>1</sup> Behold,

The opening interjection directs attention and introduces an exuberant tone.

how good and  
how pleasant

The two adjectives describing unity are intensified by the two *hows*.

it is

This is the subject and verb of all three verses in this psalm.

For brothers to dwell  
together in unity!

This phrase identifies the focus of David's praise and the theme of the psalm.



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# PREPARING THE SERMON

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Psalm 133

*The Beauty of Unity*

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## SERMON INGREDIENTS

### PASSAGE OUTLINE

#### I. UNITY COMMENDED (133:1)

- A. Unity is very good
- B. Unity is very pleasant
- C. Unity is family living together

#### II. UNITY COMPARED (133:2–3)

- A. Unity is like Aaron’s oil
- B. Unity is like Mount Hermon’s dew
- C. Unity is God’s enduring blessing

### PASSAGE DETAILS

#### Psalm 133

#### A Song of Ascents, of David

Over three-quarters of the psalms include titles that provide information about the author, historical setting, type of psalm, and musical directions. These titles are part of the original, inspired text and offer valuable guidance regarding the psalms’ original settings.

Psalm 133 is titled “A Song of Ascents.” These songs are a collection of fifteen psalms (Psalms 120–134) that the Israelites would sing as they traveled to Jerusalem to

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celebrate the Festivals of Passover, Weeks, and Booths (Exodus 23:17; 34:21–24; Deuteronomy 16:1–17; Psalm 122:4). Because Jerusalem was surrounded by mountains (Psalms 125:2; 133:3), the final stage of the journey involved a literal ascent. One always went up to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:3; Zechariah 14:17; Mark 10:32–33).

“Of David” identifies the author as “the sweet psalmist of Israel” (2 Samuel 23:1). The text does not indicate when David wrote this psalm. However, some have suggested that the end of the civil war following Saul’s death (2 Samuel 5) and David’s return to Jerusalem after Absalom’s rebellion (2 Samuel 15–19) were two situations that could have prompted David to write this song praising Israel’s unity.<sup>3</sup>

## Psalm 133:1

### Behold, how good and how pleasant it is

The word “behold” conveys emotion and directs attention. It occurs seven times in the Songs of Ascent (Psalms 121:4; 123:2; 127:3; 128:4; 132:6; 133:1; 134:1) and more than 400 times in the Old Testament. David enthusiastically draws his audience to the theme of the psalm.

“How good.” “Good” communicates value and beauty. A good object is admirable and attractive and therefore appealing and desirable. These qualities are intensified by the adverb “how.”

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<sup>3</sup> William S. Plumer, *Studies in the Book of Psalms* (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1872), 1137.



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“How pleasant.” The word “pleasant” conveys the idea of loveliness and delightfulness as in a person (Song of Solomon 1:16), a song (Psalm 81:2), or God’s name (Psalm 135:3). This adjective is also intensified with the adverb “how.” Solomon used a similar phrase to describe his bride: “How beautiful and how delightful you are” (Song of Solomon 7:6).

### **For brothers to dwell together in unity**

“Brothers” can refer not only to relatives but also to fellow countrymen (Exodus 2:11; Leviticus 19:17; Deuteronomy 17:15). The New Testament uses similar language for the family of God (Mark 3:31–35; Romans 14:10–15; 1 Corinthians 8:13).

“Dwell” literally means “sit,” though it commonly meant “reside” (Genesis 4:20). It refers to a multigenerational family sharing a residence (Deuteronomy 25:5) or to an extended family living closely together (Genesis 13:5–8; 36:7). Psalm 133 refers to Abraham’s descendants living life together as God’s covenant people. Their gathering in Jerusalem highlighted the reality of their shared identity.

“Unity” means “together.” David is not merely praising a vague relationship at a distance but rather the close fellowship of those living together in community. The primary sense of unity in Psalm 133 is life lived harmoniously with others. The “sitting together” of those assembled in Jerusalem symbolizes the “living together” that should occur the rest of the year.



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# EXPLORING THE CLASSICS

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Psalm 133

*The Beauty of Unity*

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## INTRODUCTION

Christians have a proud heritage. The great saints of old have left a lasting legacy to the church through the centuries. Their holiness and zeal are motivating, their sacrifice and commitment are inspiring, and their Scriptural insights are rich resources from which to draw. Several such treasures are offered here: three classic commentaries, three stirring sermons, and six sweet hymns inspired by Psalm 133. Together they help Christians examine, proclaim, and celebrate the good and pleasant unity that God commands for His people.<sup>14</sup>

The first of the commentaries was written by “The Prince of Preachers,” Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892). His best known work is his exploration of the Book of Psalms, which was issued in weekly installments over two decades and then collected in the *Treasury of David*. Spurgeon’s notes on Psalm 133 inspire readers to value unity as God does.<sup>15</sup> The second commentary comes from Matthew Henry (1662–1714). Henry was a minister in England who authored the well-known *Commentary on the Whole Bible*. His clearly outlined comments on Psalm 133 offer deep and devotional insights into this central passage on Christian unity.<sup>16</sup> The third commentary is by J. J. Stewart Perowne (1823–1904), a Hebrew scholar respected for his notes on the Book of Psalms.

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<sup>14</sup> These public domain texts have been altered in places to make them more understandable for modern readers. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations of Psalm 133 in this section are taken from the King James Version (KJV), while quotations from other Scriptures are taken from the New King James Version (NKJV).

<sup>15</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (New York, NY: Funk & Wagnalls, 1886), 7:121–129.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of the Book of Psalms* (London: Henry Bohn, 1853), 647–648.

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His insights on Psalm 133 offer a refreshing view of unity that draws from Hebrew culture and history to add richness and depth to our understanding of David’s psalm.<sup>17</sup>

The first of the sermons is by Archibald Brown (1844–1922), a London minister whose powerful preaching drew crowds of thousands. His passionate, practical presentation of Psalm 133 is as engaging and applicable today as when it was first preached.<sup>18</sup> The second sermon comes from Henry Van Dyke (1852–1933), best known as the author of the lyrics to “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee.” He was a prolific writer, a diplomat, an educator, and a preacher. Speaking to an audience living in the aftermath of the Civil War, Van Dyke knew well the need for unity in the body of Christ.<sup>19</sup> The final sermon was preached by a Scottish pastor named Neil MacMichael (1808–1874) whose exposition of Psalm 133 is as beautiful as it is convicting.<sup>20</sup>

Having studied the passage and proclaimed its theme of unity, we close our reflections on this psalm in song. Published in 1854, these six sweet anonymous hymns based on Psalm 133 end this section on a note of praise.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> J. J. Stewart Perowne, *The Book of Psalms*, 3rd ed. (Andover, MA: Warren F. Draper, 1882), 2:394–397.

<sup>18</sup> Archibald G. Brown, “Church Unity (An Exposition of Psalm 133),” *East London Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons* (London: Francis & Sons, 1873), 261–268.

<sup>19</sup> Henry Van Dyke, “Brotherly Love (Psalm 133),” *The Story of the Psalms*, 5th ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1896), 234–246.

<sup>20</sup> Neil MacMichael, “Brotherly Love (Psalm 133),” *The Pilgrim Psalms* (Edinburgh: W. Oliphant & Co., 1860), 315–335.

<sup>21</sup> Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, *Church Psalmist* (New York, NY: Ivison & Phinney, 1857), 223–256.



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## CHARLES SPURGEON

*A Song of Degrees of David.* We see no reason for depriving David of the authorship of this sparkling sonnet. He knew by experience the bitterness caused by divisions in families and was well prepared to celebrate the blessing of unity for which he sighed. Among the songs of degrees this hymn is certainly the most well known, and even in common literature it is frequently quoted for its perfume and dew.

In this psalm there is no ironic word. All is sweetness and light. It is a notable ascent from Psalm 120 with which the travelers set out on their holy journey. That psalm is full of war and mourning, but this one sings of peace and pleasantness. The visitors to Zion were about to return, and this may have been their hymn of joy because they had seen such unity among the tribes who had gathered at the common altar. The previous psalm, which sings of the covenant, had also revealed the center of Israel's unity in the Lord's anointed and the promises made to him. No wonder that brethren dwell in unity when God dwells among them and finds His peace among them.

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## COMMENTARY<sup>22</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!
- <sup>2</sup> It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments;
- <sup>3</sup> As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the LORD commanded the blessing, even life for evermore. (KJV)

### Verse 1

*Behold.* Unity is a wonder seldom seen, therefore behold it! It may be seen, for it is the characteristic of real saints, therefore fail not to inspect it! It is well worthy of admiration, therefore pause and gaze upon it! It will charm you into imitation, therefore note it well! God looks on unity with approval, therefore consider it with attention.

*How good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!* No one can tell the exceeding excellence of such a condition, and so the psalmist uses the word “how” twice: “Behold, how good and how pleasant.” He does not attempt to measure either the good or the pleasure but invites us to behold it for ourselves. The combination of the two adjectives,

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<sup>22</sup> “The exposition [commentary] here given is my own. I consulted a few authors before penning it, to aid me in interpretation and arouse my thoughts, but can still claim originality for my comments, at least so I honestly think. Whether they are better or worse for that, I know not. At least I know I have sought heavenly guidance while writing them, and therefore I look for a blessing on the printing of them” (C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, 2nd ed. [New York, NY: Funk & Wagnalls, 1882], 1:v).

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good and pleasant, is more remarkable than the joining of two of the brightest stars. For a thing to be good is good, but for it also to be pleasant is better. All men love pleasant things, and yet it frequently happens that the pleasure is evil. But here the condition is as good as it is pleasant, as pleasant as it is good, for the same “how” is set before each qualifying word.

For brethren according to the flesh, to dwell together is not always wise. Experience teaches that they are better a little apart, and it is shameful for them to dwell together in disunion. They had much better part in peace like Abram and Lot than dwell together in envy like Joseph’s brothers. When brethren dwell together in unity, their communion is worthy to be gazed upon and sung of in holy psalms. Such sights should often be seen among those who are close relatives, for they are brethren and therefore should be united in heart and aim. They dwell together, and it is for their mutual comfort that there should be no strife. Yet how many families are torn by fierce fights and make a spectacle of themselves, which is neither good nor pleasant!

As to brethren in spirit, they should dwell together in church fellowship, and in that fellowship, one essential matter is unity. We can dispense with uniformity if we possess unity, oneness of life, truth, and way; oneness in Christ Jesus; oneness of object and spirit. These characteristics we must have or our Sunday gatherings will be synagogues of strife rather than churches of Christ. The closer the unity the better, for the more of the good and the pleasant there will be.

Since we are imperfect beings, some unpleasantness is sure to intrude, but this will readily be neutralized and easily ejected by the true love of the saints, if it really exists. Christian unity



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# HYMNS

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Psalm 133

*The Beauty of Unity*



# Brotherly Love

Lo! what an entertaining sight  
Are brethren who agree;  
Brethren, whose cheerful hearts unite,  
In bands of piety.

When streams of love, from Christ, the spring,  
Descend to every soul,  
And heavenly peace, with balmy wing,  
Shades and bedews the whole:

'Tis like the oil, divinely sweet,  
On Aaron's reverend head;  
The trickling drops perfumed his feet,  
And o'er his garments spread.

'Tis pleasant as the morning dews,  
That fall on Zion's hill,  
Where God His mildest glory shows,  
And makes His grace distill.



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# EXPERIENCING UNITY

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Psalm 133

*The Beauty of Unity*

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## EXPERIENCING THE GOODNESS AND PLEASANTNESS OF UNITY

The finest foods often taste foreign at first. The senses need to become accustomed to the nuances of flavor and scent. In a similar way, enjoying a symphony or jazz ensemble rarely comes naturally. We need help comprehending the movement and structure. Over time we develop an ear for them. Many of the finer things in life follow the same principle. While wonderful in their own right, we only experience their wonder after acquiring a taste. We could say the same about Christian unity; it takes time and training to truly appreciate this wonderful gift of God.

Though already united in Christ, we need help comprehending the glory of the reality. We need commitment, effort, and training to appreciate it. Unity is a real creation of God through the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is a marvelous gift. Yet, like so many gifts of God, we learn to savor it through faith and obedience.

The body of this exegetical guide considers the meaning of the words: “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!” (Psalm 133:1). This section considers *how* to carry the truth into practice. *How* do we, as Christians, experience unity as good and pleasant? In order for us to receive unity as a truly wonderful gift from God, how should we live? In the pages to follow we aim to answer these questions.

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## BROTHERS AND SISTERS INDEED

Scripture says, “How good and how pleasant it is for *brothers* to dwell together in unity!” The truth applies to brothers and sisters in Christ. It does not apply to those outside the covenant community. If we try to force unity onto those from the outside, then we attempt something beyond our Lord’s design. If we allow people to enter our fellowship apart from Jesus Christ, then we compromise the gospel and confuse the nature of the church. Even then, our foolish union will ultimately fail, for God did not intend sheep and goats to occupy the same fold. They answer to very different shepherds. They eat different spiritual food and seek different kingdoms.

Our church services should be open to anyone. Our dinner tables should be places where we host and serve Christians and non-Christians alike. The membership of the church, however, belongs to those who are born again by the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ.

Unity only exists and expresses itself in the church when the members are actually born again. Any claim to unity with enemies of the gospel is imaginary. Whatever supposed unity we aim to enjoy will be delusional and short-lived. “What harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?” (2 Corinthians 6:15). Perhaps we could join together for a common social cause, but that is a separate matter. It is temporary cooperation, not unity. Without the Holy Spirit, we are not united in Christ, nor can we truly live united in Christ. In order to believe and think in one accord, we must all possess the mind of Christ.

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Only brothers and sisters in Christ share the same promises, depend upon the same grace, belong to the same God, live for the same King, and move toward the same eternal destiny. They *are* one and therefore can enjoy the blessings of their oneness. We can love the people of the world. We can serve and proclaim Christ to them. To be united to them, however, requires the regenerating work of God in them, the same work He brought about in us.

- Are you born again? Have you turned from your sin, looked to Christ as your Savior, and received the forgiveness of sins in Him? If so, what evidence do you see in your life?
- Are those with whom you're attempting to unify born again? Not merely in their words, do they show evidence of saving faith such that you can call them a brother or sister?
- Are you willing to love unbelievers, but not unite to them? How are you learning to share Christ with the world without becoming one with the world?

Once we rightly identify our brothers and sisters in Christ, who share faith in Christ with us, we must live out our faith in order to enjoy unity with them. Simply claiming to have faith will not cause us to express and enjoy our unity in Christ. An active faith, on the other hand, brings unity to visible life in our relationships with other Christians. Unity *is* good and pleasant. Unity *is* a beautiful gift from God. We do not need to make it lovely because it is already lovely. Seeing, enjoying, and displaying the beauty of unity is the hard part. Scripture shows us the way. The Word of God teaches us how to enjoy and preserve the unity Christ died to create.





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**B**lessing. Peace. Eternal life. These words attract us, but what do they really mean? What do they look like from God's perspective?

King David, the psalmist of Israel, sheds light on these important topics as he sings of the goodness and pleasantness of God's children living in harmony. He reminds us that the beauty of unity has always been the Lord's desire and design for His family. Unity is God's great blessing. Every Christian deeply desires it, and every community desperately needs it.

This encouraging and rewarding exegetical guide provides you with a Biblical perspective on God's blessing. Come discover the satisfying life that God desires for you.

**Editor's Note:** This exegetical guide includes a rich "Exploring the Classics" section that brings fresh insights from great Christian minds of the past to help you enjoy this sweet psalm.

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The Be United in Christ Outreach Ministry's mission is to teach and promote Christian unity in accordance with God's Word. Visit [BeUnitedinChrist.com](http://BeUnitedinChrist.com) to find more life-changing resources!

