

Sunday Masonic Paper No. 800
Behold How Good and How Pleasant
by John L. Cooper, FPS

(In some jurisdictions), among the first things that an Entered Apprentice hears at his Initiation into Freemasonry is the beautiful 133rd Psalm. It goes like this:

*Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!
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;
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.*

This cryptic psalm is at once a challenge for us to enter into a profound mystery, and a promise that if we do so, the results will be a life-changing experience. Let me share some thoughts with you about the 133rd Psalm.

First, what it is not: This psalm makes no religious statement about our relationship to God. There is absolutely nothing in the psalm that implies a connection between “dwelling together in unity” and “life forever more.” The relationship between God and man is the proper province of a man’s own religion, and about that Freemasonry purposely has nothing to say. It cannot be said too often. Freemasonry is not a religion, and is not a substitute for religion; let there be no mistake about this. While a belief in God is a prerequisite for a man to become a Mason, he must work out his own relationship with God outside the context of Freemasonry itself. We do not have a theology; we do not lead anyone to a relationship with his God, and we do not in any way ask a man to substitute his own understanding of God, as taught by his particular religious faith, for anything he will learn in Freemasonry. Freemasonry deals with our relationships with each other, and the implications that such relationships have on our own lives, and the lives of those we meet along the pathway of life. We insist that a man is responsible before his God for what he does with his life, but we ask each one to seek the important and eternal answers from his own religious faith.

What, then, does the 133rd Psalm have to say to us as Freemasons? It must have meaning for us, or else it would not have such a prominent place at the beginning of our Masonic journey. What do we want an Entered Apprentice to know about the meaning of this beautiful psalm? And does that meaning have anything to say to us who have travelled far in our Masonic journey? I believe that it does, and let me share my reasons.

The first and last stanzas of this psalm are connected, and when read together without the intervening stanza, which is merely an explanatory phrase, the purpose of the psalm stands out much more clearly. Let me read to you the first and last stanzas as one thought:

*Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity [...] for there the Lord
commanded the blessing, even life forevermore.*

In the Bible, and in particular, in the part of the Bible which Christians call the Old Testament, a blessing is a unique act of conferring a special power upon another. Usually it is thought of as a divine act; that is to say, God granting His blessing upon an individual, or upon a people. But that is not the only usage; it was also a means of handing on power and authority from one generation to another. It was a way of guaranteeing the continuity of a community down through the ages. I believe that the Psalm 133 has this latter meaning for us as Freemasons, rather than any religious significance. And a proper understanding of this can help each of us practice the teachings of Freemasonry in a more effective manner.

The first stanza states the condition which will make the last stanza effective. Without the necessary condition of “brethren dwelling together in unity,” there will not be the necessary result of God’s blessing. If the first condition is not met, the second action will not occur. If a Mason cannot understand the mystery of “dwelling together in unity,” he cannot expect the consequence of God’s blessing upon what he does as a Mason. In simple terms, that is what we are telling the Entered Apprentice Mason when Psalm 133 is recited at his first step in Masonry. The lesson is a simple one, and yet one that will have profound implications. Much of what he will learn in the degrees of Masonry will explain to him how he can build the sense of brotherhood and unity within the Masonic fraternity. And much of what he will learn applies to those in the world at large who are not Masons, but who will also come within the reach of our understanding of “brotherly love.” But a blessing will not accompany it if he does not understand the necessary connection.

What, then, is “unity?” That is the operational word in the first stanza. First, “unity” is not “uniformity.” Freemasonry does not expect a man to cease to think when he becomes a Mason. Quite the contrary. One of the surest proofs that Freemasonry is not a cult, is that we insist that each man think for himself. Freemasonry is, by one definition, the search for truth, and each Mason is asked to work out the meaning of truth for himself.

Secondly, “unity” is not “conformity.” Conformity means going along with the rest of the world. In fact, Freemasons have always been non-conformists. In an age when men and women hated each other because of differing religious beliefs, Freemasonry insisted on acceptance and understanding as the foundation for a world-wide brotherhood. In an age when social rank and power determined a man’s station in life, Freemasonry insisted that all were created equal, and that each person should have an opportunity to be all that he or she could be, based upon merit and not upon title and wealth. And in an age when some knew the “truth,” and enforced it upon others with the point of the sword, Freemasonry insisted that truth would emerge on its own if we just were patient enough in seeking it.

What, then, is the “unity” which confers such a blessing? I would suggest that it is the same thing as seeking the good of others around us. If I am seeking what is good for you rather than what is good for me, I have transformed our relationship from one of selfishness into one of selflessness. The bond that holds us together is strengthened when we seek good for each other before seeking good for ourselves. And the practice of this brotherhood – for such it truly is – shapes our attitudes in all our relationships. If I can make the practice of brotherhood the standard of my daily life, then all my relationships are transformed. My relationship with my wife and my children is transformed. My relationship with my fellow-workers is transformed. My relationship with my community is transformed, and my life has suddenly become a blessing for those around me: A means by which God can bless others.

Listen again to the words of this beautiful psalm, but listen with this new understanding:

Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity [...] for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life forevermore.

This is a life-giving promise – not in a religious sense – but in a human sense. Freemasonry tells us that if we live our lives as if others were more important than we ourselves are, that our lives will be enriched by a blessing we could not otherwise know. It is a great mystery, and it was first taught to us when we became Entered Apprentice Masons. And through the years, if we have properly understood it, that mystery has grown in grace and in power until it shapes and blesses us every day, and in everything that we do.

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