



TOGETHERNESS

We're going to kick off today's message with a song – only it's not an English song. It's a traditional Hebrew folk song, and it's pretty easy to pick up.

It goes like this:

*Hiney mah'tov umah'na'im
Shevet achim gam yachad*

You might be thinking, "What are we singing?" It's the opening line of a psalm, and it's one that has a lot to say to our often individualistic (even in church) culture:

Psalm 133

This is a song all about unity. It's also one of the Songs of Ascent – psalms that would be sung as the Israelites made their way up the slopes of Mount Zion to worship God in the Temple in Jerusalem. So, there's a sense in which the closer we get to God, the more we should be drawn together (it works the other way round, too: the more we draw together, the closer we get to God).

Today, we're going to reflect on the words in the opening verse, to think about what God is saying to us through it:

1) Behold. No, it's not there in the NIV, because it's not really a word we use anymore. E.g. when you walk into work tomorrow, or into your

classroom or a coffee shop to meet a friend, I can guarantee they will not greet you with the word, "Behold!" But it is there in Hebrew.

So, *hiney* or 'behold' – what exactly does that mean? Basically, it means, 'to see what is there.' To be precise, 'behold' refers to what you need to do in order to grasp hold of something – you need to 'see' the thing. Too often unity is nothing more than a theory; a word we read on the pages of our Bibles. But unity, if done properly, is something that has to be visible. It has to be *seen*.

2) Good. Or *tov* in Hebrew. Now 'good' is a word we use a lot. We'll say, "Wow, that was a good film / good album / good game / good time." But in reality, there's only one thing that is truly bona fide good, and that's God – because He is the only one in a position to define it. Jesus Himself made that point to a Jewish nobleman in Mark 10:17-18.

But what this psalm seems to be saying is: we are closest to seeing the goodness of God when we're together. It's true that you can get a glimpse of God's power and genius in nature, but it is only in community that you can know and show grace, mercy, forgiveness; only here that we can really get a glimpse of the goodness of God, in us.

3) Pleasant. *Na'im* means pleasing or satisfying. Now I want to make a point here – church is not always going to make you happy. Some of you might be thinking, "Steve, should you really be saying that?" Yes, I should – because if you're thinking church exists to make you happy, at some point that bubble's going to burst! Even the disciples, the early church, argued over things. No, if you're looking for a joy that never fades, you need to look to? Jesus.

In what sense is unity 'pleasant', then? Perhaps it's because, as we work through our differences and divergences, we grow to become the people He wants us to be. And that is a pleasing thing – not just to us, but to Him.

4) Brothers. And sisters, too. 'Brothers' or *achim* is just a generic way of saying, "We're all related to each other."

In what way are we related? Well, we're all children of one Father, and we're all called to be a part of His family. I have never (remove pin and throw grenade into the room) met anyone who was wholly committed to God and His Kingdom who was not wholly committed to a local church. Why do I say that? Because being a child of God means being part of a church family, in a real, physical, tangible sense – because family is a real, physical, tangible thing, not just a hypothetical thing. If your concept of family is merely hypothetical, something isn't right!

5) Live. 'Live' here implies more than just meeting up occasionally on a Sunday morning. It might sound almost blasphemous to some people, but there is more to life than a Sunday morning service. Singing to God, praying to God, studying His word as a church – these are all vitally important things. But God created us to live our whole lives for Him, not just the bits labelled 'super-holy.'

Shevet means sharing our *whole* lives. That's why the NIV adds 'together' – because that's what the Hebrew verb implies. And that means openness, honesty, vulnerability; it means letting others in and allowing them to be a part of you, and you, them. On more than just 1 day a week!

6) Unity. Or *yachad*. Another way of translating *yachad* is 'as one.' How many Gods do we worship? One – as the *Sh'ma*, the Jewish declaration of faith in Deuteronomy 6:4, tells us: "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one." At the same time, that one God is made up of 3 persons, 3 'points of consciousness' – Father, Son, Spirit – a community in unity. And the closer we get to reflecting that unity, the stronger our witness will be.

That's why Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another" (John 13). And why the Epistles emphasise the need to *be* church.

Because the greatest advert for the Gospel is ... *us!*

Oil And Water

The rest of the psalm unpacks the implications of verse 1:

"It is like precious oil poured on the head ... running down Aaron's beard." I.e. unity is being compared to the anointing of the High Priest, which was a symbol of God's presence and power in his life. It is also compared to the dew of Hermon "falling on Mount Zion." Hermon is the tallest mountain in Israel, to the north, and can even be snow-capped in winter, whereas Zion is in the south, more a hill than a mountain, and it's a bit dry and arid. I.e. unity is a refreshing thing, a life-giving thing.

"For there the LORD bestows His blessing, even life for evermore" or *chayim ad ha'olam* – life to everlasting. Where's 'there'? Mount Zion? Aaron's head? Neither. 'There' is the place this psalm has been focusing on all along – a place of unity. It is when we are united in the way this psalm describes that we truly experience the blessing of God – and get the closest glimpse of glory.

To end on, here's a challenge. Draw a circle; imagine it represents MFC. Where would you put yourself? Inside? Outside? On the edge?

To truly experience Psalm 133, to sing it for yourself, you have to put yourself *inside* of the circle. But like the Israelites making their way up the slopes of Mount Zion, you have to take the steps to make it a reality.

So ... what do *you* have to do?