

Psalm 36 “A Song of the LORD’s Steadfast Love”
Psalm 36
Luke 1:26-38

December 4, 2016

To the choirmaster. Of David, the servant of the LORD.

Psalm 35 has *just said* that the LORD delights in the welfare – in the peace – of his servant.

We saw last week that the reason why “servant” is singular
is because the LORD delights in the King as *his son* –
God delights in Jesus – and therefore in all who belong to Jesus.

And now Psalm 36 opens “Of David, the servant of the LORD.”

This exact title is given to only three people in the Old Testament:

Moses, Joshua, and David.

(God refers to a few others as “my servant” – like Job, Isaiah, Nebuchadnezzar;
He also speaks from time to time of Israel or of the prophets as “my servants”)

But very few people are *named* directly as “the servant of the LORD.”

So when Psalm 35 says that the LORD delights in the welfare of his servant,
the singular is important.

The LORD delights in the welfare of the King – the Servant of the LORD –
because when the King establishes righteousness and justice,
then there is joy and peace in all the earth!

And Psalm 36 is a song of the servant of the LORD.

Psalm 36 opens with an oracle regarding the wicked.

The problem with the wicked is that “there is no fear of God before his eyes.”

The song then turns to give praise to God for his steadfast love –
and concludes by praying that God will continue his steadfast love to his people.

Sing Psalm 36

Read Luke 1:26-38

Luke tells us that Mary was betrothed to a man named Joseph, “of the house of David.”

Psalm 36 tells us that it is “of David, the servant of the LORD.”

Like we just saw –

there very few people *named* as servants of the Lord.

So when Mary says, “I am the servant of the Lord,”
she is not merely being polite.

She is rejecting the path of the wicked.

She is accepting the call of God to be the only woman in scripture who is *named* as a servant of the Lord.

We heard the unbelief of Zechariah last week when he asked, “How shall I know this?”
We hear the faith of Mary when her only question is “How will this be?”
Zechariah isn’t convinced that this is going to happen.
Mary accepts that it is going to happen –
she is simply curious about *how* a virgin can conceive and bear a son!

And indeed, Gabriel’s answer to Mary is rooted in the same premise as Psalm 36’s answer to the problem of the wicked:
“The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you;
therefore the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God.”

What does Mary, the servant of the Lord, do to get pregnant?
Well, what does David, the servant of the LORD, do to defeat the wicked?

Nothing.
Well, not quite nothing!
Two things:
Praise the LORD,
and ask God to continue to do what he has promised.

“Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”

A very different response is seen in Psalm 36:

1. Hear an Oracle Concerning the Wicked (v1-4)
a. There Is No Fear of God Before His Eyes (v1-2)

*36 Transgression speaks to the wicked
deep in his heart;^[a]
there is no fear of God
before his eyes.*

Psalm 36 opens with a very odd first four verses.
Transgression speaks.

There are parallels with Psalm 14 –
in Psalm 14, “the fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’”
But that is what the fool says.

Here we have *transgression* speaking.

In Proverbs 9 we hear from *Wisdom* and *Folly* – so there are other parallels.

The ESV footnote points out that “deep in *my heart*” is a better attested reading.

It may sound strange to say that Transgression is speaking to the wicked deep in my heart,
but as one translation renders it

“I know what Transgression says to the wicked!”

What is going on here?

The opening word of the Psalm is ordinarily translated “the oracle” or “the utterance” –
and is regularly used by the prophets in the phrase “the oracle of the LORD.”

This is an oracle.

We are used to the “oracle of the LORD” – and this follows a similar pattern.

The difference is that this is the oracle of transgression.

An oracle concerning the wicked.

As one commentator puts it:

“Personified transgression speaks in oracular form (as prophets do).

To the wicked this voice is authoritative.” (JPS 1321).

In other words, the wicked listen to the voice of transgression

with the same reverence as the righteous listen to the voice of the LORD.

Indeed, when you think of verses 1-4 as the “oracle of transgression”
it makes more sense of the rest of the Psalm.

If the problem is that we are in danger of listening to the wrong voice,
then the solution is not to *do* something.

The solution is to *listen to the right voice*.

² *For he flatters himself in his own eyes
that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated.*

Verse 2 reads literally,

“For he flatters himself in his own eyes,
concerning the discovery of his iniquity and hatred of it.”

It is *possible* that it could mean what the ESV says –

that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated –

but it is more likely that he flatters himself (or even that *transgression* flatters him)

that he *has* found his iniquity and hated it.

No one (or at least, hardly anyone) ever thinks that he is a monster.

The problem for the wicked is that they have been deceived into thinking

that they *do* know their sin – and that they do hate it.
When in fact, they do not.

Think of Adam and Eve in the garden,
blame-shifting and pointing fingers –
“the woman *you gave me* offered me the fruit”
“the serpent deceived me and I ate.”

Because he listens to the voice of Transgression –
therefore there is no fear of God before his eyes.

Augustine says this well:

“All the sinner has in his sights is fear of other people;
he does not dare to make a public declaration of his iniquity,
lest he be rebuked or condemned by others.
He withdraws from human observation, but where to?
Into himself!...
There within himself no one watches him
as he plans his trickery, his ruses, and his crimes...
Because there is no fear of God before his eyes,
he thinks he has no one to fear once he has withdrawn from human view
into his own heart.

But God is present there, isn't he?
Certainly, but in the sinner's outlook there is no room for the fear of God.” (279)

I want you to think about that.

The reason why we are so careful to protect ourselves from the eyes of others
is because we don't fear God.
We fear man.

If we lived our lives before God – if we acknowledge that everything is open to him –
then we would be less afraid of others.

Do you want to find and hate your sins?

It is easy to deceive yourself into *thinking* that you do!
“Many are dishonest in the way they look for their iniquity;
they go about it without sincerely wanting to find it and hate it.
Consequently, because there is dishonesty in their search,
there will be an attempt to defend the iniquity when it comes to light.
Once it is found, its true character will be out in the open,
and the sinner will not be able to deny that it is iniquity indeed.
'Don't do it,' you say.
And what do they reply, these people who faked the search

and now that they have found the sin do not hate it?
'Oh, but everybody does it,' they say.
'You won't find anyone who doesn't do that.'" (Augustine, 279)

Haven't you heard that before?

Perhaps from your own lips!

(Or at least from your own heart!! – as you flatter yourself that you *do* hate your sin)

I hate my sin – but I don't have any intention to do anything about it!

My sin is okay.

My sin is one of those “respectable sins” that no one objects to.

I just spend too much time watching TV – or playing computer games –
or listening to music.

Transgression tells you that God doesn't care about that.

As long as you stay away from the big sins,
you can have lots of little sins!

Or maybe you are the sort who normally does really well at doing the little things,
and then occasionally falls into some spectacular sin.

And you flatter yourself that your regular pattern is fine –
so you don't need to worry about your sin.

In Romans 3, Paul quotes from verse 1 and says that this is part of man's condition:
“there is no fear of God before his eyes.”

Verses 3-4 describe the inward life of the one who walks in this path:

b. His Words, Deeds, and Thoughts Are Set in a Way that Is Not Good (v3-4)

³ *The words of his mouth are trouble and deceit;*

he has ceased to act wisely and do good.

⁴ *He plots trouble while on his bed;*

he sets himself in a way that is not good;

he does not reject evil.

When we do not fear God, then we become disoriented.

We were created to be in fellowship with God.

We were created to fear and worship *him*.

So when we do not fear him –

when we become more concerned with what others think of us,
than with what God thinks of us –

then we lose sight of who and what we are.

What sort of being are you?

What are you *for*?

When we listen to the oracle of Transgression
then we cease to act wisely – we cease to do good.

But the pattern of the wicked shows us the true path as well.

The problem is that the wicked man “plots trouble while on his bed”
We *should* be repenting of trouble while on our beds –
We should be seeking the LORD and meditating on his great deeds.

The wicked man “sets himself in a way that is not good.”
Psalm 1 said “blessed is the man who walks *not* in the way of sinners.

The wicked man “does not reject evil.”
Plainly, we *should* reject evil.

But how do we do this, when we are so compromised by sin?
Augustine says this well:

“If we cannot be free from wickedness, at least let us hate it...
Hate sin and iniquity, so that you may unite yourself to God,
who will hate it with you.” (280)

The problem with the wicked is *not* that he sins.
Everyone sins.

The problem with the wicked is that he has made peace with his sin.
He *thinks* that he hates his sin – but in fact, he continues to pursue it.

What, do you suppose, is the solution to this?

You might expect the Psalmist to give us a discourse on how to hate sin and obey God.
But David understands what we need to hear.

Many have found the transition from verse 4 to verse 5 to be rather abrupt and disconnected.
Others have more rightly seen the connection to be glorious.

As J. Gresham Machen said:

"What I need first of all is not exhortation, but a gospel,
not directions for saving myself but knowledge of how God has saved me.
Have you any good news?
That is the question that I ask of you.
I know your exhortations will not help me.
But if anything has been done to save me,
will you not tell me the facts?"

And so rather than provide moral exhortations,
the Psalmist instead *praises God* for his steadfast love:

2. Praise the LORD for His Steadfast Love (v5-9)

a. The LORD's Faithfulness: the Heavens, the Earth, and the Deep (v5-6)

⁵ *Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds.*

⁶ *Your righteousness is like the mountains of God;
your judgments are like the great deep;
man and beast you save, O LORD.*

The Oracle of the Wicked was hidden deep in the heart – trying to hide from God.
But the praise of the LORD's steadfast love "extends to the heavens."

The heavens, the earth, and the seas all proclaim the righteousness of God.
There are four characteristics used in verses 5-6 to describe God:
steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, and judgments.
Steadfast love and faithfulness was the central theme of Psalm 33.
Righteousness and justice have also been prominent in recent weeks.

God is faithful in his deeds – he is merciful and just in all his acts.
And that faithfulness and righteousness is expressed in creation as well.

"Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens."
In Genesis 1, God gave the sun, moon, and stars to be for signs and seasons.
And God has been faithful to his covenant promises –
and the sun and the moon and the stars
have continued to serve as signs and seasons throughout all generations.

"your faithfulness to the clouds" –
When you see the clouds above,
remember that our Lord Jesus ascended with the clouds –
and that he will one day return on the clouds of heaven, as he promised.

"Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains" –
the mountains reflect the might and power of God.

"your judgments are like the great deep" –
Just as we cannot fathom the great deep, even so are God's judgments.

But notice where all this is going:
"man and beast you save, O LORD."

Transgression is deceiving man into death and destruction.
But the steadfast love of the LORD – his faithfulness, his righteousness, his judgments –

are all oriented toward salvation of man and beast.

Psalm 36 includes the “beasts” in salvation.

Why?

Because God’s purpose in salvation does not *end* with man.

Paul will go on to say in Romans 8 that the creation itself *groans*
as it eagerly longs for the revelation of the sons of God.

This text is *not* saying that animals have eternal souls –
rather it is saying that animals (with all of creation)
participate in the salvation that God brings.

b. The Feast and the Fountain: In Your Light We See Light (v7-9)

After all, the *focus* of the passage is on “the children of Adam”:

⁷ *How precious is your steadfast love, O God!*

The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

Verse 7 turns from the majestic glory of the steadfast love of God
seen in the heavens, the mountains, and the deeps –
and gives us the intimate picture of the children of Adam taking refuge
under “the shadow of your wings.”

And what happens when we take refuge in the LORD?

What happens when we come into the presence of God’s precious steadfast love?

⁸ *They feast on the abundance of your house,*

and you give them drink from the river of your delights.

With as much creation imagery as we’ve seen here,
we should definitely hear echoes of Eden in this Psalm.

Eden is the word meaning “delight” –

as in “the river of your delights” here in verse 8 (the river of Eden).

Verse 8 pictures a glorious feast – the abundance – the fatness – of your house.

The river of Eden – the river of *your* delights.

I want you to linger here!

I want you to taste the delight of fellowship with God.

The Psalmists help us to see that the Christian life is full of toil and suffering.

But even as we say that “man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever,”
that joy – that delight – is not merely for the distant future!

Even here, in the middle of history –

in the midst of the toil and suffering of this age –
the LORD offers to sustain us with the abundance of his house!

Even as we saw in Psalm 23 –

“you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies...”

The abundance of God’s house was celebrated at the Feast of Booths every year.

I don’t pretend to know when they sang this song –
but it would have been a perfect song for the Feast of Booths –
because all Israel would have been feasting,
rejoicing in the steadfast love of the LORD,
eating together of the peace offerings –
drinking wine and strong drink.

Several of the early fathers commented on how Psalm 36 uses the language of inebriation
to talk about how we should be spiritually intoxicated, as it were.

The apostle Paul said it best when he said that we should not be drunk with wine,
but rather filled by the Spirit.

That’s really the point of verse 8 – this spiritual feast – the abundance of God’s house,
the river of God’s delights that bring an intoxication with no hangover!

And all of this finds its culmination in verse 9:

*⁹For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light do we see light.*

A few weeks ago we heard Psalm 27 speak of how “the LORD is my light and my salvation.”
Light is often a picture of salvation in the scriptures.

But here in verse 9, David connects the *fountain of life* with *light*.

The term “fountain of life” is used four times in the book of Proverbs
to speak of how the fear of the LORD is a fountain of life.

But here, the Psalmist says that the fountain of life is *with you* (with God).

This is closely connected to what Jeremiah 2:13 will say:

“They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters,
and hewed out for themselves broken cisterns that can hold no water.”

Jeremiah 2 says that God himself is the fountain of living waters.

But Psalm 36 says that the fountain of life is “with God.”

You can see why John will say in John 1:1-5 –

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God.

All things were made through him,
and without him was not any thing made that was made.
In him was life, and the life was the light of men.
The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

John is simply harmonizing two different statements (Jeremiah 2 and Psalm 36).
Is God himself the fountain of life?
Or is the fountain of life “with God”?
Well, the incarnation of the Word has explained that it is truly *both*.

As Augustine put it:
“So the Father as fount begot the fountain;
but begetting fountain and begotten fountain are one fountain.” (Augustine 285)

I’m not saying that David understood this.
The Psalmist may have thought that he was just “personifying”
the fountain of life and light –
just like he personified Transgression at the beginning of the Psalm.
But when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us –
when the living water began to flow from the heart of Jesus to his people –
then all the shadows and types found in the Scriptures became clear.

“In your light do we see light.”

If you are looking at the world apart from Jesus,
then you are only seeing half-truths.
You are walking in darkness – in a half-light that distorts reality.
But Jesus is the true light.
As John says:
“The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.
He was in the world, and the world was made through him,
yet the world did not know him.” (John 1:9-10)

If you would see the world clearly –
then you need to see everything in the light of Jesus.
Because “in your light do we see light.”

The created light of this world was designed as a visible picture of the uncreated light
that is in God himself.

And we only see truly when the uncreated light illumines our minds.

3. Pray for God's Continued Steadfast Love (v10-12)

And so, having praised God for his steadfast love and salvation,
we go on to *pray* that God will continue his steadfast love and salvation to us –
and that his just judgment would come against the wicked.

The prayer of verses 10-12

includes both of the themes of the first two parts of the Psalm.

Verse 10 focuses on praying for God's steadfast love to the upright.

Verses 11-12 pray for God's judgment on the wicked.

a. Continue Your Steadfast Love to Those Who Know You (v10)

¹⁰ *Oh, continue your steadfast love to those who know you,
and your righteousness to the upright of heart!*

Even as we praise God for his mighty deeds in sending his Son into the world,
we also pray that would *continue* his steadfast love to his people.

Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

As we have seen many times,

righteousness has to do with the way that you order your community.

In verse 10, we pray that God will order his community in a way
that brings righteousness for the upright of heart.

The upright heart is the heart that knows God, fears God, and seeks first his kingdom.

The upright heart is the one who is more concerned with what *God thinks of you*
than with what others think of you.

b. The Just Fate of the Wicked (v11-12)

And we also pray that God's righteous judgment will come upon the wicked:

¹¹ *Let not the foot of arrogance come upon me,
nor the hand of the wicked drive me away.*

¹² *There the evildoers lie fallen;
they are thrust down, unable to rise.*

Psalm 36 ends with the evildoers fallen – unable to rise.

But notice the curious way that the Psalmist says this.

Unlike previous Psalms, he does not ask God to do anything.

He puts it in the passive voice:

“Let not the foot of arrogance come upon me,
nor the hand of the wicked drive me away.”

There is no reference to *who* is acting here.

This connects with what we have seen already in the Psalms
about how God's judgment of the wicked is *in accordance* with their deeds.
They fall into the pit that *they dug*.
God does not need to *do* anything to the wicked.
He simply leaves them to their own devices –
and their own devices destroy themselves.
“There the evildoers lie fallen; they are thrust down, unable to rise.”

He does not want God to hear him – so God does not hear.
He plots trouble on his bed – so God leaves him to his trouble.

Where does God leave him?

“There” –
he did not wish to fear God – so God leaves him “there” –
far from the fountain of life – far from the river of delights.
If you follow the oracle of transgression –
then you will end “there.”

The Psalmist never quite gets around to telling us what to *do*.

After all, if you are praising God for his steadfast love –
and if you are praying for God's continued steadfast love
then you will be doing quite enough!

Indeed, that would be my exhortation to *you*
as you are busily running around trying to *do* all sorts of things.

As Ed Clowney put it so well years ago –

“Don't just do something,
stand there!”

And while you stand there, praising God for his steadfast love,
and praying that his steadfast love will continue to those who know him,
God will bring his salvation to the ends of the earth.

(Because as you praise God – as you seek first his kingdom and his righteousness –
you will fear *him* more than you fear anyone else –
you will be more concerned with what *he* thinks of you,
than with what anyone else thinks of you –
and thus you will genuinely *hate* your sin,
turn from it in true repentance,
and love God and neighbor from the heart!)