

In Your Light We See Light

Psalm 36

Psalm 36 sets the darkness against the radiant light. It contrasts the smallness and futility of man's rebellion with the greatness of God's grace that fills the world and the hearts of those who love Him.

Summary of the Text

The psalm breaks down into three parts. The first describes way of the wicked: his lack of godly fear, evil desires, and scheming plans (vv. 1-4). The second part extols God's mercy, faithfulness, righteousness, and judgments, and how these satisfy and delight the children of men (vv. 5-9). The last section is a prayer asking the Lord to continue His lovingkindness and not allow the upright to fall into pride with the workers of iniquity (vv. 10-12).

God & His Atheists

No trouble looms large on David's horizon in Psalm 36. He describes the state and decline of the wicked as a factual matter as he meditates on their transgression (v. 1). He begins with the root issue: "There is no fear of God before his eyes" (v. 1). Whether the man professes faith in God outwardly or not, inwardly he doesn't care. He flatters himself with false praise when he sees his own iniquity and hatred (v. 2). He speaks wickedness and deceit and then forsakes wisdom and good works (v. 3). He then actively plans to do evil on his bed and establishes himself in a way of life contrary to goodness; he won't despise iniquity (v. 4). Some people are flabbergasted by the depravity of wicked men and their commitment to selfishness. *How can they do this?* This is how—they forget God and banish fear of Him (v. 1). Atheists accuse Christians of creating God to fill a divine Father-hunger. Freud described God as the psychological equivalent to an earthly father. In reality it's the atheist who projects his desire to not have a God and Father over all, to be a cosmic orphan with no one to hold him accountable, upon the universe. His point is that there is no point and his truth that there is no truth. Some know what this will do if openly embraced, as Voltaire said, "There is no God, but don't tell that to my servant, lest he murder me at night." But their wish fulfillment does not go well. The new atheists want a society shaped by Christianity, but this is like wanting a car without the engine. We become like what we worship, so if you devote yourself to your small and fallen self, a downward spiral follows. The root is refusing to fear God, and the result is devising wickedness and callousness to evil. Here in pride month, we see what began with consenting adults now sexualizes children.

Expansive Goodness

David bluntly describes the decline of the sinner, pulling no punches. His downward spiral goes lower but also smaller because sin is parasitic and can't compete with the goodness of God. The Lord's mercy is in the heavens, the horizon-to-horizon expanse above us (v. 5). His faithfulness to keep of all His promises reaches all the way up to the clouds. Will it not reach you? His righteousness stands like mountains (v. 6). You can move and change Him the same way you can push the Cascades with your foot. God's judgments are a great deep like the ocean and its floor which we know so little about (v. 6). These metaphors don't do justice to God, but He created in order to communicate truly about Himself to finite creatures. The vastness of the sea is something like His judgments, which are past finding out: "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor? Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to him? For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen." (Rom. 11:33-36). David sees the character and glory of God flung throughout the world and concludes: "O Yahweh, You preserve man and beast" (v. 6). He made all of this, and we get to live here.

River of Delight

In Your Light We See Light

Psalm 36

God's mercy ("lovingkindness", *chesed*) fills the heavens, and it's precious like a rare jewel to the saints (v. 7; cf. Job 28:16). The children of men take refuge beneath the shadow of His wings. God provides us vigilant protection, but we're not in a confined state. To be in the Lord's protection is to be abundantly satisfied with the fullness of His house, drinking from the river of His pleasures (v. 8). God's pleasures are like a huge river and not a trickling gutter. Picture the Columbia River barreling through the eastern Washington desert. From it you can irrigate the whole place. These are *His* pleasures given to us to drink. Unlike our rivers, His water has no pests or problems, only blessings to delight and amaze. Spiritual pleasures are not confined to times of devotion. All the metaphors in this passage, what the character and gifts of God are like, instruct us to enjoy God in the world He made. We learn from the heavens, clouds, mountains, and oceans. You can jump in the water, bask in the sun, cook the food, drink the wine, cultivate the garden, and enjoy all of life like a fountain: "For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light" (v. 9). This is the serious business of living faithfully and gratefully before your Maker. One of the greatest slanders of God is that He is a fussy miser ready to yell at people to get off His lawn. That's us apart from His grace, not Him: "He causes the grass to grow for the cattle, and vegetation for the service of man, that he may bring forth food from the earth, and wine that makes glad the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread which strengthens man's heart. The trees of the Lord are full of sap, the cedars of Lebanon which He planted" (Ps. 104:14-16). Is this how you think of Him? Are you too worried about your life, what you will eat and drink, what will happen tomorrow, the sins of others and your own, the problems at work, the scoundrels running our country, *ad infinitum*, to notice the river of pleasures flowing right by you? Hopkins: *The world is charged with the grandeur of God. / It will flame out, like shining shook from foil; / It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil / Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?*

Believing and living this way shapes a person. In *The Horse and His Boy*, the Narnians are unmistakable: "And instead of being grave and mysterious like most Calormenes, they walked with a swing and let their arms and shoulders go free, and chatted and laughed. One was whistling. You could see that they were ready to be friends with anyone who was friendly, and didn't give a fig for anyone who wasn't. Shasta thought he had never seen anything so lovely in his life."

Relying on God

To recognize the light of goodness of God given without measure through the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus means you are already standing in that light. The wicked can't see past his own dark heart. Salvation is all of God, so to be with David understanding this psalm means He has given you eyes to see. You only see light because He has shined it into your once dark heart. The suspicion of those who feel uncomfortable with this psalm—abundant satisfaction, river of delight, the faith of children, not to mention Jesus making wine (and drinking it), forgiving immoral women, befriending tax collectors and sinners, and rebuking the disciples for keeping children away from Him—is that all this hedonism will lead people away from Christ. David knows it can, so he prays: "Oh, continue Your lovingkindness to those who know You, and Your righteousness to the upright in heart" (v. 10). Don't let pride ruin everything (v. 11). A faithful prayer: "Lord, please don't let me trust in myself and screw this up." Praying for more grace tomorrow is the antidote to pride, the hand that asks God for what only He can give: enduring faithfulness. It's not faith to assume that God can't or won't give this to us. The workers of iniquity fell because they didn't ask (v. 12). They trusted in themselves and not Christ.