

A PSALM OF SIN AND GRACE ABOUNDING

Psalm 36

Dr. George O. Wood

Psalm 36—another psalm of David. Let me take a moment to read the psalm. It's a very relevant psalm, it certainly fits our age.

“An oracle is within my heart concerning the sinfulness of the wicked: there is no fear of God before his eyes. For in his own eyes he flatters himself too much to detect or hate his sin. The words of his mouth are wicked and deceitful; he has ceased to be wise and to do good. Even on his bed he plots evil; he commits himself to a sinful course and does not reject what is wrong. Your love, O LORD, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your justice like the great deep. O LORD, you preserve both man and beast. How priceless is your unfailing love! Both high and low among men find refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light. Continue your love to those who know you, your righteousness to the upright in heart. May the foot of the proud not come against me, nor the hand of the wicked drive me away. See how the evildoers lie fallen—thrown down, not able to rise!” (Psalm 36:1–12, NIV).

There are two themes. The first four verses are a lament over the evil that is going on in human existence. It is very unflatteringly and realistically sketched out for us. Then the second part, beginning with verse 5 and extending through the end of the psalm, really, is a focus upon God and His magnificence.

Here is a psalm which looks at sin at its worst and God at His best. God in His fullness. Man in his lostness. Few of the psalms cover so wide a range of theme in so little a space. This psalm is

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somewhat unique compared to most of the other psalms we have looked at, in that it blends these two themes together—man’s need and his lostness, with God’s grace and His fullness.

There is, if you’re looking at some of the earlier psalms we’ve dealt with, some similarity between Psalm 1 and Psalm 10. Both join with this Psalm 36 in focusing upon those who live their life without the Lord. If you’re trying to connect themes and ideas and psalms together, then Psalm 1, 10 and 36 kind of flow together, when you’re wanting scriptural language to describe those who are living life without God, these psalms do that to a great extent.

I’ve called the first part of Psalm 36, “Sin Abounding.” Based on the phrase, “Where sin abounds, there also grace does more abound” (Romans 5:20). Verses 1–4 talk about sin abounding. The issue of wickedness and human evil is arising in David’s hall. To him, it’s not simply an intellectual concern—that there is so much deprivation and degradation in the human heart. It’s not a matter of intellectual curiosity for him. It’s a matter of soul and heart concern.

The people who really do the most about human evil in this world are the people who really have an oracle in the heart. The people who sit and talk about the terrible conditions and never really let them get to them, don’t ever really feel what David has.

David is saying something very valuable as we begin looking at sin abounding. The issue is really a deep issue with him. This tool is a paradox with David. There are moments in his life when he doesn’t appear to be all that concerned about sinfulness, especially when it occurs within himself. Which suggests to us there was a person who God used who, in many respects, was not all put together. Yet in his better moments, when he really did draw close to God, he really did have God’s heart.

“An oracle is within my heart, deep within me, concerning the sinfulness of the wicked.” How sinful are the wicked?

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I. David in verses 1–4 lists five characteristics of a person who is wicked.

A. The first thing he articulates is: no reverence for God. Obviously, the Scriptures again and again draw the theme that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The idea being that, if one does not have in his life a basic reverence for God, there is not a sufficient building block in life to build morals and ethics and proper behavior upon. One must start with a basic reverence for God. That's what the Scripture means when it says "the fear of the Lord." That doesn't mean shaking and trembling and being scared. But, by the way, if a person meets God unprepared, that's exactly what they will be.

Revelation 6 tells us that when the sixth seal is opened and judgment is poured out on the world, unredeemed humanity would rather be dead than meet God unprepared. Revelation makes a very incisive theological point by saying the basic fear of man is not death. The basic fear of man is meeting God unprepared. That's the basic fear when man is faced with the prospect of having to meet God, and if man can indeed escape meeting God by choosing death, he would rather—according to Revelation—meet death.

But this basic lack of reverence for God is part of the wicked. David was writing three thousand years ago, but you can find current illustrations to back up what he's saying.

B. The second characteristic—arrogance. "In his own eyes he flatters himself." Here is a rejection of moral standards, a third characteristic. "He flatters himself too much too detect or hate his sin" (Psalm 36:2).

C. The description of those without God is not only that they think a lot of themselves, but they find it impossible to detect sin. They do not see the sin so, therefore, they do not hate it.

D. Then, corrupt speech and actions. "Words of their mouth are wicked and deceitful and cease to be wise and to do good" (Psalm 36:3).

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E. Verse 4: a decisive commitment to do wrong. “Even on his bed he plots evil [a meditational thing], he commits himself to a sinful course and does not reject what is wrong” (Psalm 36:4).

So, no reverence for God, arrogance, rejection of moral standards, corrupt speech and action, and a decisive commitment to think and to do wrong.

Is there anybody like that in contemporary American culture? The problem is that there’s a little bit inside of us. The themes of contemporary culture and Psalm 36 go hand in glove. I don’t think we can omit the doctrine of sin from our Christian witness. The Scripture talks rather frankly about it. It’s the basic human problem—rebellion against God. Refusal to live by His absolutes and His moral code.

The mood of the psalm switches sharply. Where sin abounds, grace does all the more abound. Like southern California. You’ve got the worst things happening here culturally. We’re at the front of everything. But we’re also at the front of a lot of great things that God is doing in His kingdom today.

II. The grace abounding section, verses 5–9, celebrates the dimensions of God’s grace, first of all.

A. It’s height—look at the love of God. It reaches to the heavens. Look at its substance. It’s not vaporous like a cloud. But the love of God has great strength and stability and solidity to it. It is like the mighty mountain. And the love of God reaches to the depths. It is like the great deep in the ocean floor. God’s love—high, solid, and deep. That could be celebrated.

B. Then David not only celebrates the dimensions of God’s grace but he celebrates, in verses 6–7, the availability of God’s grace. “Lord, You preserve both man and beast. How priceless is Your unfailing love. Both low and high among men find refuge in the shadow of Your wings” (Psalm 36:7). David does two things in showing the creation under the loving care of God. God

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cares for both man and beast. He protects both—preserves both. There is a sense, and Paul picks this theme up in Romans, where he talks about the whole creation groaning until that day when the children of God enjoy their liberation, their glorified bodies. The Scriptures see that the suffering that is in the animal world is directly related to the sin that is in human life. When humans finally enjoy the deliverance that God brings, the animal world itself breathes a huge sigh of relief. God preserves both man and beast. In other words, even in spite of all the sin that David is lamenting in verses 1–4, God has preserved man.

C. David not only talks about the dimensions of God’s grace and the availability of God’s grace—that it’s for the high and the low among men—but he also celebrates the enjoyment of God’s grace (verses 8–9). He compares our relationship with God with having a wonderful meal. Having a drink from the best water there is. “You give me to drink from Your river of delights. With You is the fountain of lights. With Your light we see light.” In other words, as we come to the Lord and enjoy His fellowship and live in His light, it’s when we live in His light that we are clearly able to perceive life as God wants it to be lived.

David, one time, says that when he regarded iniquity in his heart, his senses were dulled.

Suggesting times in our own life when we do not live in God’s light, when we do not see things clearly. That’s why it’s so important, when we’re going through relational difficulties with people, that we take some moments, first of all, to examine what’s in our own heart. If there’s rebellion or unforgiveness, or anger or sin of some kind, we need to take some moments to discover whether we’re living in God’s light or God’s darkness. Because if we are indeed living in the dark in our own personal life, it’s going to explode our own personal relationships and make healing and reconciliation extremely difficult. “In his light, we see the light” (Psalm 36:9).

III. David closes this psalm with a prayer for God’s grace to continue (verses 10–12).

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Really the third part of the psalm. It's really an extension of the second part, but it's more directly a prayer. "Continue your love to those who know you, your righteousness to the upright in heart. May the foot of the proud not come against me, nor the hand of the wicked drive me away" (Psalm 36:10–11). David, in praying this, does not take the Lord for granted. He's still asking for the Lord's protection. David doesn't take for granted that the Lord's love will continue to shine upon him. He expresses the desire for that love to continue.

The Lord often uses family relationships to model His love for us. God calls himself "Heavenly Father." He has to enjoy it when we don't take Him for granted and when we periodically reaffirm, "Lord, You're good to me. Thank You. Keep Your love coming."

David's very last phrase in this psalm is, "See how the evildoers lie fallen—thrown down, not able to rise!" (Psalm 36:12).

This little verse reflects something often happening in the psalms. Where the confession of faith is different from the expression of reality. The reality is when you look at the world today—David's or ours—the wicked are in places of power, the nerve centers of communication, the media, economics. It looks like the people who have really got the power are not the righteous, God's Christian flock. Yet David closes the psalm by saying, "See how the evildoers are fallen, thrown down, not able to rise." He's not expressing a present reality. But he's expressing reality from the window of faith. There will come a day when those who set themselves against God will be in a far different position. The Scripture that Jesus preaches, to begin his ministry, "I've come to bring good news to the poor" (Luke 4), that is, those who are without. Those who have recognized their need for God. I've come to change their condition. So the psalm kind of ends that way. It ends on a note of, "Put your faith in the Lord, live for Him and He'll bring you

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through.” But it’s no good to be powerful now only to wind up impoverished and fallen in the ages to come.

God’s grace and human sin—both abound. But God’s grace will abound more and more.

We talk about human evil, and we want to avoid any sense of smug self-righteousness, somehow putting ourselves on a pedestal in comparison to others. We hear again and again in the Scripture that it is not on the basis of our own righteousness that we are redeemed, but it is on the basis of Christ’s righteousness alone. That if there is any righteousness in our lives, this evening, it’s because it’s come as a free gift from God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Closing Prayer

So we may not boast except in the glory of the cross. Except in the wonderful salvation, Lord Jesus, that You’ve provided for us in life. We do not sit in judgment on the wicked, for in the higher sense, You sit in judgment upon those who do not know You. We’re simply told by You to pray for the lost and to bring the gospel as a witness, by our words and by our deeds, into the world, so that those who are really hungry might have bread and those who are really thirsty might have water. Help us to be that kind of witness for You, which treasures the righteousness You’ve given us in life, which seeks to earnestly follow You with all of our heart. And that seeks, if You tarry, to bring about a new generation—within our family and within our community, and within this country—a generation that will serve You with their whole heart. We pray, Lord, for all those on the cutting edges of society today that are ministering to the tremendous hurts and needs and problems within our culture. We of the church have been remiss of not praying and interceding in this area of culture and life. We ask that You give us strength and courage in our lives for the personal choices we make. Every day we face right and wrong choices. Every day, in so many ways, we’re deciding anew whether we’re going to follow You

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or be disobedient to You. We need the power of Your Holy Spirit, Lord, to cause us to be obedient from the heart. To live a life that satisfies You and therefore is a joy to others and to ourselves. Give us that power, Lord. Thank You for this people this evening. Thank You for sending us Your Word. Bless us, Lord, as we go from this place. We ask in Your name. Amen.