

Psalm 36 seems a little strange at first. The stanzas do not seem to fit well together. The first stanza is a horrific condemnation of the sinfulness of sin, the second is an overflowing praise of the Fountain of Life, and the third is about the downfall of sinners. Is there a mistake here? Should we sing these parts separately as if they are separate songs?

No. David does not make a mistake. Rather, he uses opposites to teach us a vital truth about how God's light relates to sin's darkness and how God's "steadfast love" relates to mankind's sin. Keep the idea of contrast in mind as we consider this Psalm.

## David's View of Man

David begins by delivering a prophetic judgment against the sinfulness of sin. The prophetic character of David's message can be seen in three ways.

First, the inscription describes David as "the servant of the LORD," a title applied to David in only one other Psalm—Psalm 18. Not only is "the servant of the Lord" the same title that God gave to Moses and Joshua, but it is also reminiscent of the title that the Lord gave time and again to His prophets: "My servants, the prophets" (e.g., Jeremiah 7:25).

Second, David's message is an "oracle" (lit. "an oracle of transgression"). This particular construction is unique throughout the whole Hebrew Bible. Some Bible translations try to find another way to translate the opening verse. However, if we follow the more literal rendering of the NKJV, then the

prophetic nature of David's message is highlighted. This makes good sense, since "oracle" is a special prophetic term. It appears hundreds of times throughout the prophets, usually in combination with God's name. For example, the common prophetic phrase, "declares the Lord," contains this word. Also, the inscription to Psalm 110 is the only other place in the Psalter where the word "oracle" is used. This is significant, since Psalm 110 is both highly prophetic in nature and is one of the most frequently-cited Old Testament passages in the New Testament. Therefore, the use of this unique "oracle" in the first verse carries strong prophetic overtones.

Third, David is described elsewhere in Scripture as speaking oracles. In 2 Samuel 23:1–2 (ESV) we read, "Now these are the last words of David: The oracle of David, the son of Jesse, the oracle of the man who was raised on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the sweet psalmist of Israel: 'The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me; his word is on my tongue.'"

Do not let me lose you in all these details. The point is this—by paying attention to the prophetic nature of this Psalm, we see that it is not a sweet little ditty that we can sing around the campfire while strumming the guitar. Instead, David, "the servant of the Lord," *demand*s that we give our attention to his "oracle . . . concerning the transgression of the wicked."

David declares the *content* of this oracle at the end of verse one: "There is no fear of God before his eyes." David's judgment is devastatingly simple. There is only one thing that explains the way sin works, only

one thing that can be said about the irrationality, stupidity, and wickedness of sin, and that is this—*The sinner does not fear God!*

But why is this so? How could it be that the lack of fearing God is the root of all sin? David gives several reasons: First of all, when he finds out his iniquity, he flatters himself in his own eyes (v. 2). Simply put, the sinner lies to himself (lit. "He is smooth to himself"). Many times Scripture describes lying words as "smooth words." For example, Paul's warning in Romans 16:17 is to avoid those who speak "smooth words." Isaiah condemns prophets who speak "smooth" prophecies (Isaiah 30:10). The sinner is deceived by "smooth words."

But there is more. The lie in David's oracle is doubly heinous, for this sinner is not deceived by someone else. Rather, he lies "in his own eyes"—he lies to himself! This self-deceit of sin is a double death. For, to be blind and to know it is one thing, but to be blind and to insist that you see clearly is utter folly and shame! This is why sin never makes sense and can never make sense, for all sin is self-deceit.

Just think of some of the ways in which the Scriptures describe the sinner. Isaiah 1 describes the sinner as dumber than an ox, for even the ox knows his own master, but the sinner does not. In Jonah 4 God pities the Ninevites, who are so blinded by sin that they cannot discern their right hands from their left. In the Bible's view sin is inherently irrational; sin is stupid!

David says further that the sinner “flatters himself . . . when he finds out his iniquity.” In other words, at the very point when he should be most afraid of God—when he sees his own sin and senses his own guilt—at that very moment he lies to himself: “I’m okay.” In the sinner’s “smooth” words everything is upside down: vice becomes virtue, guilt becomes grace, and darkness becomes light. This is why sin is so foolish—the sinner thinks he sees, but his light is darkness and his darkness light! “He flatters himself in his own eyes.”

As bad as this seems, David’s oracle gets worse. The sinner is never content with his own “flattery”; rather, he insists on living out his foolish beliefs. David describes the sinner’s life in vv. 3–4: “The words of his mouth are wickedness and deceit; He has ceased to be wise and to do good. He devises wickedness on his bed; He sets himself in a way that is not good; He does not abhor evil.” In other words, the sinner is totally corrupt. Just as bad trees produce bad fruit, so also false sight yields a false life. Stupid is, stupid does!

If we read David’s explanation of the sinner’s life within the context of the Psalms as a whole, we get a fuller sense of the total corruption in view here. The righteous man says, “The LORD is . . . to be feared above all gods” (Psalm 96:4), but the wicked man has “no fear of God before his eyes.” The righteous man says, “My eyes are ever toward the LORD” (Psalm 25:15), but the wicked man “flatters himself in his own eyes.” The righteous man prays, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer” (Psalm 19:14), but the smooth words of the sinner’s mouth are all “wickedness and deceit.” The righteous man declares, “I will behave wisely in a perfect way” (Psalm 101:2), but the wicked man “has ceased to be

wise and to do good.” The righteous man prays, “When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches” (Psalm 63:6), but the sinner restlessly “devises wickedness on his bed.” The blessed man does not “stand in the path of sinners” (Psalm 1), but the sinner “[sets] himself in a way that is not good.” The righteous man prays, “I hate and abhor lying, But I love Your law” (Psalm 119:163), but the sinner “does not abhor evil.”

In summary, David’s oracle is a perfect school of depravity. He strings together these contrasts from the Psalms in order to announce a condemnation that is as devastating as it is total: Though the sinner thinks he sees correctly, his *whole life* is a wicked lie! If we further allow Scripture to interpret Scripture, David’s oracle here reminds us of God’s own judgment against the sinfulness of man in Noah’s day. “Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. So the LORD said, ‘I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them’” (Genesis 6:5–7). Moses highlights not only the totality of man’s wickedness, but also that it deserves total punishment.

Paul uses David’s oracle to make a very similar universal condemnation of humanity’s sin in Romans 3. Paul’s horrifying list of charges begins “There is none righteous, no, not one,” and ends with David’s oracle “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” The connection, then, between Genesis 6 and Psalm 36 is Romans 3. For just as God universally condemned the sinfulness of mankind in Noah’s day, so Paul—using David’s oracle—declares a universal condemnation on

mankind’s sin. For all these reasons David’s oracle is therefore totally devastating.

## David’s View of God

Yet, lest we lose all hope, we come next to David’s great and surprising contrast. Directly juxtaposed to this devastating oracle is a most beautiful, gracious, heartening catena of praise to God’s “steadfast love”: “Your mercy, O LORD, is in the heavens; Your faithfulness reaches to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the great mountains; Your judgments are a great deep; O LORD, You preserve man and beast” (Psalm 36:5, 6).

Note the radically new focus. No longer does David speak of man and man’s sin, but of God, God, and more God. Seven times he directs our attention to God: “Your mercy,” “Your faithfulness,” “Your righteousness,” “Your judgments,” “You preserve,” “Your lovingkindness.”

David further contrasts God’s bigness with the sinner’s smallness. Even though the sinner is totally corrupt, he is limited. He is on his bed. God’s light, however, shines much brighter than man’s puny darkness, for God’s mercy shines all the way into the heavens, His faithfulness to the clouds; His righteousness is as mighty as the mountains, His judgments as terrible as the deepest sea.

Through these contrasts David wants us to see that where sin abounds, God’s “steadfast love” abounds even more! This is the reason why David did not make a mistake in placing this praise of God’s faithfulness just after the horrible judgment against man’s sin. In fact, *the contrast is the message*. Why? Because God’s mercy, His faithfulness, His righteousness, His judgments are greater than man’s sin, and God preserves man and beast despite, against, and contrary to man’s sin. Sin’s lie cannot conquer God’s light!

Let me show you why this contrast is such wonderful news by calling your attention back to Noah. The Lord was prepared to destroy His creation. Man's sinfulness was so extreme that God poured out His horrible judgment waters on all of creation—man and beast were judged together. Later in the story, as God's judgment waters begin to cover the earth, it looks like sin is winning the day. But then God causes the judgment waters to recede, and He reveals a *renewed* creation. God then makes a covenant with Noah and with "every beast of the earth"; never again will God judge the earth with a flood (Genesis 9:10). God put His rainbow in the cloud as the sign of His covenant faithfulness. The point is this—*despite the overwhelming sinfulness of sin*, God has preserved man and beast!

Such good news calls for praise! No wonder, then, that Noah's first act after leaving the ark is an act of worship. Likewise, returning to Psalm 36, in light of God's preservation of "man and beast," David sings God's praise: "How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God! Therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of Your wings. They are abundantly satisfied with the fullness of Your house, And You

give them drink from the river of Your pleasures. For with You is the fountain of life; In Your light we see light" (Psalm 36:7–9).

David praises God for His "lovingkindness." This word can also mean "steadfast love," "mercy," or even "covenant faithfulness." He repeats the word in verses 5, 7, and 10 to highlight God's "steadfast love" toward His entire creation. The faithful Father hovers over all the children of men as a strong defender, and He feeds His children with the overflowing abundance of His creation. The children of men drink, as it were, out of the Father's tender hand. In contrast to the sinner, who is a fountain of lies, the faithful Father is the Fountain of Life—all life is His gift. Just as the sun fills the whole earth with light, so the Father's life-giving light enlightens everything.

God's "steadfast love" toward His creation in Psalm 36 is similar to the faithfulness that God displayed to Noah. For just as the Father shields the children of men with His protective wings, so also God faithfully preserved Noah in the ark. Just as the Father provides abundant food and drink for His children from the bounties of His creation, so God provided abundantly for Noah in His

promise at the end of Genesis 8 that the earth would continue to provide its seasonal harvests.

Genesis 9:3 highlights God's abundant provision even further. God tells Noah, "Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs." After the flood, God—the Fountain of Life—poured out superabundant bounties on Noah, his family, and all of mankind, and He covenanted with Noah to uphold the renewed creation.

The key connection is this: In both Genesis 6–9 and Psalm 36, God's "steadfast love" toward His creation triumphs over the horrible corruption of creation caused by mankind's sin. In both passages God teaches this by means of a stark contrast: in Noah's case God's horrible judgment in Genesis 6:5–7 is the backdrop for God's overflowing provision for mankind after the flood; and for David in Psalm 36, the oracle against the sinfulness of sin sets the stage for the praise of the faithful Fountain of Life.

For this reason the strange juxtaposition of judgment and praise in Psalm 36 is not a mistake. These two stanzas are not separate songs; rather, the contrast between them is the main point. It shows us the nature of God's grace: grace, by definition, is contra-conditional; it is de-merited favor. Grace must contradict and conquer sin since grace is the very



thing that sinners do not deserve. David's contrast is therefore our school of grace.

With confidence in God's "steadfast love," David offers his pleas: "Oh, continue Your lovingkindness to those who know You, And Your righteousness to the upright in heart. Let not the foot of pride come against me, And let not the hand of the wicked drive me away. There the workers of iniquity have fallen; They have been cast down and are not able to rise (Psalm 36:10-12).

David asks God to continue His "steadfast love" in a special sense "to those who know You." Then he narrows his scope even further by asking God for personal protection against the arrogant and the wicked. He also confidently affirms that the sinner has been defeated and cannot be victorious. David's two pleas prompt us to ask how God answered David's prayer. How has God continued His "steadfast love" specifically toward His church and toward His anointed king?

### God's Answer

Looking to the Scripture, we see that God has answered in two ways: by sending His Son and by sending His Spirit.

We see how God answers David in relation to Christ when we follow how Paul applies David's oracle in Romans 3. After Paul uses the oracle to condemn mankind's unrighteousness, he continues with a great contrast of his own: "But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His

blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:21-26).

"But now," says Paul. In other words, there is something radically different about the way in which God demonstrates His righteousness now than before Christ came. A great change has taken place. Remember that in Noah's time God demonstrated His righteous judgment against mankind's sin by destroying all men except one—Noah and his family. "But now," says Paul, God demonstrates His righteousness by judging one man to save all.

What a magnificent answer! David prayed that God would continue His "steadfast love" and His "righteousness" to the church, and God has answered David's request by sending Christ, Who is Himself God's "steadfast love" and "righteousness" to reveal the "righteousness of God apart from the law." Therefore, because of "the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" through "propitiation by His blood," Christ himself is our Fountain of Life; He is the Light by which we see light.

What is more, Christ is our Light *despite* and *against* our darkness. Paul highlights this contrast later in Romans 5:8: But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that *while we were still sinners*, Christ died for us. This is the reason why Psalm 36 is one song and not two: the strange contrast does not confuse the message; it *is* the message. Just as in Noah's day and David's day, so also in our own. God's Light always shines *in the darkness*; grace is always de-merited favor; "*while we were still sinners*, Christ died for us."

God answers David's plea not only by sending His Son, but also by

sending His Spirit. In relation to David's oracle—"There is no fear of God before his eyes"—there is another great reversal, one that we see primarily in the book of Acts: *Since the sinfulness of sin erases man's fear of God, the righteousness of faith restores it.*

Throughout the book of Acts, the Spirit is the primary restorer of the fear of God. In Acts 2:42-43, for example, the Spirit-empowered doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers took root in the church, "fear came upon every soul." After Ananias and Sapphira were judged for lying to the Spirit, "great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things" (Acts 5:11). In Acts 9:31 the bountiful peace and prosperity of "the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria" went hand in glove with "walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit." In these and many other places in the New Testament we find that wherever the Spirit-empowered gospel of Christ spreads, there the fear of God spreads, too. In this way the Spirit reverses David's oracle by restoring the fear of God in the church.

God's message in Psalm 36 is this: God is faithful despite your sin. God's Light in Christ and in the Spirit contradicts and conquers all your darkness and restores the fear of God in you. So, set your feet firmly in the way of Light and enjoy all the bounties of your Father's house, to the praise of His "steadfast love." All other sight is blindness; all other life is death. Put away your darkness, and worship the triune God Who is your Fountain of Life, the only Light that gives true sight.

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