

Psalm 36

Mankind's Wickedness and the LORD's Goodness

1. Background

The title of the Psalm identifies it with “David, the servant of the LORD.” This links it with Pss. 18 and 35. The penultimate verse of Psalm 35 says, “The LORD be magnified, who has pleasure in the prosperity of *his servant!*” And Psalm 18 is the only other Psalm ascribed to “David, the servant of the LORD”. Both Pss. 18 and 35 are associated with the period during which David was living as a fugitive from Saul. This casts some light on Ps. 36:11, which says, “Let not the foot of arrogance come upon me, nor the hand of the wicked drive me away.” We might imagine David praying words like these while he was being pursued by Saul in the wilderness of Maon (1 Samuel 23).

Psalm 36 is also associated with Psalm 1. Like Psalm 1, Psalm 36 is frank in its portrayal of the way of the wicked, and it concludes with a statement that “the way of the wicked will perish.” However, whereas Psalm 1 contrasts the way of the wicked with that of the righteous person, Psalm 36 contrasts the way of the wicked with the lovingkindness of God.

Delitzsch titles this Psalm “The curse of alienation from God, and the blessing of fellowship with him”; Craigie: “A meditation on wickedness and lovingkindness”; Goldingay: “Human faithlessness and divine commitment.” Kidner: “This is a psalm of powerful contrasts, a glimpse of human wickedness at its most malevolent, and divine goodness in its many-sided fullness... [T]he singer is menaced by the one and assured of victory by the other.”

2. Structure

The Psalm is in three parts: (a) the oracle of transgression (vv. 1-4); (b) the praise of God's lovingkindness (vv. 5-9); (c) the prayer of God's servant (vv. 10-12). The last section has positive and negative sides so that the whole has a chiasmic structure as laid out below:

A¹ (vv. 1-4) *The oracle of transgression*

B¹ (vv. 5-9) *The praise of God's lovingkindness*

B² (v. 10) *A prayer for God's lovingkindness*

A² (vv. 11-12) *A prayer for protection from the wicked*

3. The oracle of transgression (vv. 1-4)

The Psalm 36 literally “An oracle of transgression to the wicked man.” This is startling. The phrase “an oracle of so-and-so” is used more than 250 times in the OT for a word that comes from God through one of the prophets. This is the phrase that we normally translate “declares the LORD”. So Psalm 36 opens with a statement that would be shocking to Hebrew ears: not “The LORD declares to the wicked man” but “Transgression declares to the wicked man.” Transgression has

usurped the place of God; rebellion has become god or prophet to the sinner. Weiser: “The voice of sin which man hears speaking in his heart has for the wicked the same authority and power as the voice of God has for the prophets.”

The consequence is that the unregenerate man has the wrong view of God (v. 1b), the wrong view of himself (v. 2a), and the wrong view of sin (v. 2b). His speech is twisted (v. 3a); his thoughts are twisted (v. 4a); and his actions are twisted (v. 4b). He may indeed successfully carry out his plans, but he no longer understands how to do good (v. 3b) – indeed, he cannot reject bad (v. 4c).

CS Lewis: “The sensualist...begins by pursuing a real pleasure, though a small one... But the time comes when, though the pleasure becomes less and less and the craving fiercer and fiercer, and though he knows that joy can never come that way, yet he prefers to joy the mere fondling of unappeasable lust and would not have it taken from him. He'd fight to the death to keep it. He'd like well to be able to scratch: but even when he can scratch no more he'd rather itch than not.”

4. The praise of God's lovingkindness(vv. 5-9)

This section opens abruptly with the vocative “O LORD!” There can be no smooth transition – there is a vast chasm between wickedness and the living God.

Verses 5-6 show us God's greatness; vv. 7-9 his goodness. The imagery in vv. 5-6 is drawn from the Genesis 1 account of creation; the imagery of vv. 7-9 is drawn from the Genesis 2 account of God's planting of the garden of Eden.

God's steadfast love and faithfulness are without limit – they cannot be exhausted. His righteousness is like the mighty mountains – solid, secure, everlasting, and dependable. His judgements are like the great deep – the inexhaustible source of rich blessing. This is God's infinite goodness. He is like a whole world to explore.

Derek Kidner: “The word *precious* [at the start of v. 7] establishes at once the change of scale from the immense to the intimate and personal.” We are protected by his wings, satisfied in his house, watered from his river, revived by his fountain, enlightened by the brightness of his face.

5. The prayer of God's servant (vv. 10-12)

This is the crunch. There is no neutral territory – everyone is either unregenerate (the condition described by vv. 1-4) or regenerate (the condition described by vv. 5-9) – you either place yourself under the protection of the LORD (v. 10) and so have transgression as your mortal enemy (v. 11), or you serve sin and come under the judgement of God (v. 12).

The opposite of the way of the wicked described in vv. 1-4 isn't the way of morality(trying to think wise thoughts, speak truthful words, and do good deeds). That isn't the gospel – it doesn't go anywhere near deep enough to change a man's heart – and it isn't what this Psalm places in opposition to the way of the wicked. What this Psalm places in opposition to the way of the wicked is the knowledge of the infinitely good, abundantly generous God who invites us to drink from his river of delights, and calls us to come into his presence.