



## Psalm 36 - Human Wickedness and Divine Goodness

To the leader. Of David, the servant of the Lord.

### Introduction

This is a lament that reflects on the wicked who oppose the faithful, and on the steadfast love of the Lord; it concludes with a prayer that God in his steadfast love will protect his people from the attacks of the wicked.

### Psalm 36:1-4 - The Wicked Act without Fear of God.

This stanza describes the wicked person, who has no fear of God before his eyes and who pursues evil courses, as one who particularly schemes to bring trouble to others, especially to the godly.

Wicked here, as generally in the psalms, does not describe faithful people who have moral flaws; it describes those given over to doing evil, even if they are nominally within the covenant people, as these verses make clear. Paul uses v.1b in Romans 3:18 as part of his charge that both Jews and Gentiles are under sin.

- 1 Transgression speaks to the wicked  
deep in their hearts;  
there is no fear of God  
before their eyes.
- 2 For they flatter themselves in their own eyes  
that their iniquity cannot be found out and hated.
- 3 The words of their mouths are mischief and deceit;

they have ceased to act wisely and do good.

- 4 They plot mischief while on their beds;  
they are set on a way that is not good;  
they do not reject evil.

Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in their hearts. The sense in the original is that this is literally an oracle of transgression, as if David were divinely taught by the sins of others, yet this is not the case: <<*Is not their prosperity indeed their own achievement? The plans of the wicked are repugnant to me*>> (Job 21:16).

There is no fear of God before their eyes. This may be obvious but is often forgotten. The foundation of the wicked man's character and deeds is a lack of the fear of God. He does not respect or reverence God as he should. In the end, such people will be judged for their error: <<*Your wickedness will punish you, and your apostasies will convict you. Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the Lord your God; the fear of me is not in you, says the Lord God of hosts*>> (Jeremiah 2:19).

For they flatter themselves in their own eyes that their iniquity cannot be found out and hated. The wicked man lowers his estimation of God and raises his estimation of himself. He thinks of himself much more highly than he should both in regard to his sins or iniquity, and his prejudices: <<*All who hear the words of this oath and bless themselves, thinking in their hearts, 'We are safe even though we go our own stubborn ways' (thus bringing disaster on moist and dry alike)*>> (Deuteronomy 29:19). The essence of flattery is found in words that say one is better than he or she actually is. Flattery is most often thought of as coming from others, but people are entirely able to tell themselves that they are better than they actually are.

They have ceased to act wisely and do good. The character of the wicked man is shown in his words, which are wickedness, mischief and deceit, in his plans he plots mischief, in his habits he is set on a way that is not good, and in his attractions he does not reject evil: <<*You love evil more than good, and lying more than speaking the truth*>> (Psalm 52:3). Paul's teaching on this is clear: <<*Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good*>> (Romans 12:9)

### Psalm 36:5-9 - God's Precious Steadfast Love.

This stanza has two descriptions of God's steadfast love: it extends to the heavens, so that God can save his created beings; and it is precious to those who know it from the children of mankind.

The pairing of steadfast love and faithfulness evokes: <<*The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation'*>> (Exodus 34:6-7), describing God's benevolence; this helps readers to see that the other terms, righteousness and judgements, also express God's enduring commitment to act kindly toward his creatures and to save them.

In view of this, people can take refuge under his wings and find themselves welcome guests at his table. Although the psalm is a hymn for Israel, it looks beyond Israel to the rest of humankind (vv.6-7); Israel's calling was to live in their land in a way that displayed the true image of God, with a view toward bringing its blessing to the whole world.

- <sup>5</sup> Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens,  
your faithfulness to the clouds.
- <sup>6</sup> Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,  
your judgements are like the great deep;  
you save humans and animals alike, O Lord.

#### Psalm 36:5-6

Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens. It can be sensed that David has thought long enough about the wicked man. Now he turns to the great mercy and faithfulness of Yahweh, the Lord, the covenant God of Israel. The translation of mercy here in some translations is inconsistent, for the same Hebrew word *hesed* is translated as steadfast love in both v.7 and v.10. This wonderful word speaks of God's love and mercy, but especially to his covenant people.

Steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, judgements. David can only describe these attributes of God with the biggest things he can think of, i.e. the heavens, the clouds that fill the sky, the mighty mountains, and the great deep of the sea.

To the clouds is the Hebrew phrase *'ad shechakim*, which also means 'to the eternal regions' or 'above all visible space'.

You save humans and animals alike, O Lord. The goodness of God is shown in the way he cares for his creatures. The ecosystem of his creation has enough to provide for the needs of those he has created, both man and beast: <<*And Ezra said: 'You are the Lord, you alone; you have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all*

*that is in them. To all of them you give life, and the host of heaven worships you'>> (Nehemiah 9:6), <<Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them>> (Luke 12:24a), and: <<Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy>> (Acts 14:17 NIV).*

- 7 How precious is your steadfast love, O God!  
All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
- 8 They feast on the abundance of your house,  
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.
- 9 For with you is the fountain of life;  
in your light we see light.

### Psalm 36:7-9

How precious is your steadfast love, O God! Considering the care of God for his people and his creation, David felt the mercy or steadfast love of God to be a precious and personal thing: <<Turn, O Lord, save my life; deliver me for the sake of your steadfast love>> (Psalm 6:4).

All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. The merciful God is a place of rest and protection for the people of God. God invites everyone to find this refuge of trust in him: <<For I will surely save you, and you shall not fall by the sword; but you shall have your life as a prize of war, because you have trusted in me, says the Lord>> (Jeremiah 39:18).

There are two main ways that commentators understand the figurative expression shadow of your wings. Some take it to mean the wings of the cherubim that are over the throne of God and represented in his tabernacle and temple, including the Ark of the Covenant, the very representation of his throne. Others take it in the sense that a hen covers her young chicks under her wings to protect, hide, and shelter them.

**Boaz used this expression as a blessing towards Ruth when they first met in one of his fields:** <<May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!>> (Ruth 2:12), **and Jesus used it when he approached Jerusalem:** <<Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!>> (Matthew 23:37). It shows an aspect of salvation which is as humbling as it is reassuring.

They feast on the abundance of your house. God cares for and protects those who trust in him as a gracious and honourable host would for anyone in his house. The fullness of God's house is enough to satisfy anyone, offering a virtual river of delights in him.

Spurgeon cited a story by Arnot regarding a man who moved his family to a much larger and better equipped home. His young son kept running through the house yelling, "Is this ours, father? And is this ours?" Arnot observed: "The child did not say [Is this] 'yours;' and I observed that the father while he told the story was not offended with the freedom. You could read in his glistening eye that the infant's confidence in appropriating as his own all that his father had, was an important element in his satisfaction." This will be one of our great joys in heaven when we come to our Father's house. With unmeasured satisfaction we will have the right to roam heaven and say, "Is this ours? And is this ours?" and say it unto eternity.

The fountain of life is a source for all that refreshes and sustains life: <<*The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence*>> (Proverbs 10:11), <<*The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, so that one may avoid the snares of death*>> (Proverbs 13:14), <<*The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, so that one may avoid the snares of death*>> (Proverbs 14:27), and: <<*Wisdom is a fountain of life to one who has it, but folly is the punishment of fools*>> (Proverbs 16:22). Ultimately, this refers to Jesus, who is the source of all life: <<*Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water'*>> (John 4:10), and: <<*On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water"'*>> (John 7:37-38).

To see light is an idiom for 'experience life', for example: <<*He has redeemed my soul from going down to the Pit, and my life shall see the light*>> (Job 33:28), and: <<*they will go to the company of their ancestors, who will never again see the light*>> (Psalm 49:19); in Isaiah 9:2 it is light that shines into darkness: <<*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined*>>, and this depends on God's light that illuminates the world for his people.

### Psalm 36:10-12 - Show Your Steadfast Love by Protecting Us from the Wicked.

The final stanza is a prayer in response to the reflections of the first two stanzas. It follows the topics in reverse order: God's steadfast love (v.10), and the wicked (v.11). It is an appeal to God's reliable love for his faithful ones: <<*those who know you*>>, i.e. the upright of heart (v.10), in the face of the scheming of those who would harm them.

- 10 O continue your steadfast love to those who know you,  
and your salvation to the upright of heart!
- 11 Do not let the foot of the arrogant tread on me,  
or the hand of the wicked drive me away.
- 12 There the evildoers lie prostrate;  
they are thrust down, unable to rise.

### Psalm 36:10-12

O continue your steadfast love to those who know you. Having received the good mercy and righteousness of God, David rightly prays that it would continue for himself and all those who know God in right relationship: <<*Thus says the Lord: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, the Lord appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you*>> (Jeremiah 31:2-3). The parallelism should be noted between those who know you and the upright in heart. David naturally thought that those who genuinely knew God would be upright in heart.

Do not let the foot of the arrogant tread on me. David earlier praised God as the one who protects and blesses his people (v.7). Now David prayed that God would fulfil this aspect of his character, protecting his servant against both the foot and the hand of the wicked: <<*Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel*>> (Psalm 71:4), and: <<*Guard me, O Lord, from the hands of the wicked; protect me from the violent who have planned my downfall*>> (Psalm 140:4).

There the evildoers lie prostrate; they are thrust down, unable to rise. David considered the end of the wicked men that he thought of at the beginning of this psalm. They are fallen, and so much so that they are not able to rise. Unlike the righteous who may fall seven times yet rise up again in Proverbs 24:16, the workers of iniquity remain in the dust as God protects his servants. There is some emphasis on the word there in this phrase. Some think it refers to the pride or arrogance mentioned in the previous verse, others to the place where the evildoers practiced their sin.