

Psalm 36

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[0:00] And if you have a Bible with you, open up to Psalm 36. If you don't have a Bible with you, you can grab one of the Bibles that we just sort of left scattered in the chairs there! And turn to page 465 in those Bibles, and you'll find Psalm 36 there. Or you can use your phone or device or whatever you've got.

Find Psalm 36, because we're going to begin this morning by reading through this great Psalm before we spend some time talking about it and meditating upon it. It's not as long as the Psalm that we read last week, but we do want to cover the whole Psalm this morning.

So if you're there, if you found Psalm 36, I encourage you to stand again to your feet in honor of God's Word as we read together. To the choir master of David, the servant of the Lord.

Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart. There is no fear of God before his eyes. For he flatters himself in his own eyes that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated.

The words of his mouth are trouble and deceit. He has ceased to act wisely and do good. He plots trouble while on his bed. He sets himself in a way that is not good.

[1:18] He does not reject evil. Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens. Your faithfulness to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the mountains of God.

Your judgments are like the great deep man and beast you save, O Lord. How precious is your steadfast love, O God.

The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house. And you give them drink from the river of your delights.

For with you is the fountain of life. In your light do we see light. O continue your steadfast love to those who know you.

And your righteousness to the upright of heart. Let not the foot of arrogance come upon me, nor the hand of the wicked drive me away. There the evildoers lie fallen.

[2:22] They are thrust down, unable to rise. God, again we ask that you would speak to us this morning through your word. Help us to rightly understand it and help us to live our lives in ways that reflect the truths that are present here.

We ask this in Christ's name. Amen. You guys can take a seat. The beginning of this psalm is actually a little bit confusing and a little bit difficult for English translators to render it.

Which is why, this morning, if you're reading another version, you might have read something different than what we have at the beginning of the ESV. Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart.

It's a difficult phrase to translate. But what is clear in verse 1 is that what David means by that phrase has to do with a lack of fear of God.

Because he goes on to say, there is no fear of God before his eyes. So these that he describes as the wicked in the beginning of verse 1, he says, what's wrong with them fundamentally at a core level is that there is no fear of God before their eyes.

[3:37] Now we don't often think of fear as a good thing. If you're a Star Wars fan, like I am and my boys are, then you know, right?

Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to death. It seems like it's all bad. And it seems like it all begins there with fear.

But what the Scripture teaches us is quite the opposite of that. What the Scriptures teach us is that fear is not the beginning of a path that you walk towards death and defeat and destruction.

Indeed, fear is the opposite. Fear is the first step you take on the path that leads to life and joy everlasting. In fact, the main point, I think, of this psalm is to teach us the necessity of fear on the way to drinking from the fountain of life.

That's what this psalm is really about. How is it that we cannot be counted among the wicked who have no fear of God and instead be counted among those who come and feast in the presence of God, who drink from this great fountain of life, who experience the delight of being in His presence.

[4:56] How can we move along that path? And the very first step is, indeed, a proper fear of God. But for those who do not know Him, for those whose lives move in the opposite direction, whose lives are lived more or less in defiance of the patterns and the truths set forth in God's Word, they can be summed up in one very simple way, and that is, there is no fear of God before their eyes.

It's a story that goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. What is it that Satan, what is it that the serpent, the tempter, does in the garden to convince Eve and then Adam to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil?

Well, the first thing he has to divest them of is the fear of the consequences of disobeying God's command. Because God had given them a very clear command, you can eat from any tree in the garden.

You can enjoy the good gifts that I've given you. But just don't eat from this one tree. Do not do it. Because if you eat from this tree, you will surely die.

And yet, what does the serpent say to Eve? You will not surely die. In other words, he's trying to remove the fear that would protect Adam and Eve from going near that tree that they were not to eat of.

[6:25] That's the first step away from the Lord, is to remove the fear of the Lord from your life. To say, that's not a good feeling. I don't want to experience that.

And there are even those who would twist and use Scripture to teach against a rightful fear of the Lord. To move people away.

But if fear of the Lord is the first step in the direction of rejoicing in the presence of the Lord, then a lack of the fear of the Lord is the first step away from the Lord.

And that's exactly what Adam and Eve did. That's what they experienced. First, the fear was removed, and disobedience soon followed, and the consequences, and they were driven out of the place where they could have experienced unending pleasure in the presence of God.

There was no fear of God before their eyes. And it led them into sin. Well, David says that the fundamental problem of the wicked is that there is no fear of God before his eyes.

[7:27] And if that sounds like a familiar statement to some of you, it should to a few of you at least who've read through the book of Romans on a number of occasions, because Paul quotes that half of verse 1 in Romans chapter 3.

When Paul is describing in vivid detail the sinfulness of mankind, he begins in Romans 1 by painting a picture of those who do not possess his written word.

That is, at that time, those who are outside of the Jewish people, the Gentiles. And he describes them as those who have rejected the truth about God revealed in nature, who have bowed down to idols, who have rejected God's order in nature, and they have pursued wholeheartedly their own course rather than the parameters set forth by God, even revealed in nature and within us.

And then he goes on to say, But, by and large, the Jewish people are no better, because even though they have God's commands, they don't live according to those commands. They violate those commands over and over until he comes to his conclusion in Romans 3, where he says in verse 9, What then?

Are we Jews any better off? Not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin. And then he quotes Old Testament passage after Old Testament passage to prove that all people are, as he says, under sin.

[9 : 02] And how does he finish? This long list of Old Testament quotations, beginning in verse 10, finishes up in verse 18, by quoting Psalm 36, verse 1.

There is no fear of God before their eyes. It is an apt summary of what lies in the hearts of those who do not know the Lord.

There's no fear of God before their eyes. And the psalmist David doesn't leave it at that, because that's a negative statement, right? We're told what's not in their heart, what's not before their eyes, or in their minds, the fear of God.

But he goes on to say, what stands in the place of that? Because something takes the place of the fear of God. What stands in the place of it? Take a look at verse 2, and you'll notice that phrase, in his eyes, again, showing us what is it that is before him that has his attention, that drives his decision making.

He says, for, so this is why there's no fear of God in his eyes, for, he flatters himself in his own eyes that his iniquity, his sin, his law-breaking, cannot, not simply will not, but cannot be found out and hated.

[10 : 29] In other words, that there will be no judgment for his sins. He flatters himself he becomes arrogant in his own sinful behavior.

He convinces himself that there is no final judgment. There is no place where hatred of sin and wrath will be revealed upon me.

The exact opposite of what Paul says in Romans 1, right? For, the righteousness of God is revealed, and then we learn that this righteousness is revealed as God's wrath is poured out.

And yet, those who do not know him will convince themselves that their iniquity cannot be found out.

Hatred, divine hatred or wrath cannot be poured out upon them. How many times have you struggled in a conversation with someone whose lives are bound up in sin, whose lives are headed in a sinful trajectory, and you've tried to explain to them why what they're doing is not good, it's not right, it's not wise, and yet the thing that you cannot convince them of is that there will be consequences for what they are doing.

[11 : 48] We have a way of self-deception, of flattering ourselves, where we convince ourselves that there will be no ultimate consequences.

Things may not always go well in life, but that certainly has nothing to do with my moral choices. That just has, that's just the way life goes. It's bumpy, it's rocky, but as far as actual consequences and final ultimate consequences for the decisions that I make, that doesn't exist.

We convince ourselves so easily that we can live life on our own terms, that we can define right and wrong for ourselves. Does that sound familiar?

Again, it goes back to the garden. That you'll know good and evil. You'll be able then to determine right and wrong for yourselves.

You'll have autonomy, self-rule. David says that characterizes the life, the inner life of the wicked.

- [12:55] He hasn't even gotten to their outward actions. He's just saying, this is what's going on in their hearts. No fear of God. Instead, self-flattery, self-deception, that there will be no consequences.

And when you've done the work of self-deception, removing the fear of God and consequences for your actions, when you've removed that from your life, then the actions follow.

Verse 3, The words of his mouth are trouble and deceit. He has ceased to act wisely and to do good. He plots trouble while on his bed.

He sets himself in a way that is not good. He does not reject evil. He does not reject evil.

We have a way even of reading a passage like this and saying to ourselves, well, David's talking about the really, the really bad people. David's talking about the people that are really, really far gone.

- [14:07] And I don't think I know anybody personally in my life who would be described in these kind of very stark terms. But remember, Paul quotes from this very passage in order to prove that all people fall into this category.

All people fall into this category. Even his Jewish kinsmen who, apart from Christ, may outwardly at times appear to live very upright in moral lives, Paul says, but at the end of the day, still within their heart, there's no fear of God.

This describes everyone. We are all of us, apart from Christ, among the wicked, to whom transgression speaks and declares this oracle.

This does involve us. This does involve the people that we love. This does involve the people that we encounter, whether at work or at the grocery store or as we walk in the evenings through the neighborhoods.

This does involve us and the people that are in our lives. There is no fear of God before their eyes. So, how do you move from that description of humanity to what we find in the latter portion of the song?

- [15:32] If you just glance down, skip a few verses, and you get to verse 7, or verse 8 rather, he describes another group of people. He says, they feast on the abundance of your house.

Literally, it is, they feast on the greatness of the fat of your house, which sounds strange to us, but to the ears of David's original listeners, they would understand, oh, he's talking about the kind of person that goes to a banquet put on by a very wealthy person to feast on the fat of someone's house, is to enjoy the very best of what they have to offer.

And David speaks of those who feast on the abundance of God's house. And then he goes on to say that you, speaking directly to God, you, you give them drink from the river of your delights.

For with you is the fountain of life. And in your light do we see light. How do you move from David's description of those who have no fear of God before their eyes to his description of those who drink from the river of God's delights?

For those who experience the goodness of the fountain of life and see light before God rather than wrath. How do you move from one category to the other?

[17:11] What really, what really is the secret to that? Well, most people would not choose to take the path of fear.

But we've already seen that the lack of fear lies at the heart of the problem of those who do not drink of the fountain of life. Came across this sermon was preached in the mid-1800s.

You may never have heard of George MacDonald, but he preached a sermon called The Fear of God. And he talks about how essential the fear of God is. How much we need the fear of God so that we don't fall into the category of the wicked?

Listen to what he says. He says, Where it is possible that fear should exist, it is well it should exist. It should cause continual uneasiness and be cast out by nothing less than love.

In him who does not know God and must be anything but satisfied with himself, that's he flatters himself, fear towards God is as reasonable as it is natural and serves powerfully towards the development of his true humanity.

[18:23] In other words, his point is that fear is a powerful tool that God uses to move us to be the kind of people that we ought to be.

In fact, MacDonald goes on to warn, he says, If you persuade men that fear is a vile thing, that it is an insult to God, that he will have none of it, while they are yet in love with their own will and slaves to every moment of passionate impulse, what will the consequences be?

That they will insult God as a discarded idol, a superstition, a thing to be cast out and spit upon. To reject the fear of God is to reject that crucial first step towards drinking from the fountain of life.

We need that fear. We need fear to drive us away from our self-sufficiency and to recognize that the God of the universe has set standards in place and our disregard of those standards, our violation, our disobedience comes with great consequences.

It will be found out and God will pour out His wrath on those who live their lives without regard to His word and His will.

[19:51] And the fear of God would protect us from walking down that path. The fear of God would put up a giant do not enter sign to the broad way that leads to destruction.

We need the fear of God to protect us from who we are apart from Christ. We desperately, desperately need it.

But it's only a first step. It's only the beginning. How do we move from that initial step of yes, I see the consequences of my sin and I'm afraid.

I'm not going to soften fear by turning it into just a mild form of respect. That's not what David means. I'm afraid.

That's how we should feel. When we see our sins and we see God's holiness, we should be afraid and that should move us to say, I don't want that anymore. I'm turning.

[20:58] I'm repenting. I'm moving away from that life. Step one. But how do you move from that step to being the one who feasts and the abundance of God's house and drinks from the fountain of life?

How do you get there? And the answer is spelled out for us very clearly in the middle of this song. There is a word that is repeated three times in this song that I think is the key to understanding the move from fear to the fountain of life.

It's translated in the English Standard Version that I'm reading from this morning. It's translated as steadfast love in verses 5, 7, and 10. But in some of your English translations, it may be translated as loving kindness or it might be translated as mercy.

And we've talked about this word actually fairly recently because it comes up in the Psalms all the time. It's a Hebrew word that's pronounced hesed. I don't usually give you Hebrew words, but it's one that you might hear in various Bible studies, so it's helpful to know it.

It's hesed, and it's a word that we can't really render very easily into English, which is why we come up with these longer phrases like loving kindness or steadfast love.

[22:19] It is the kind of love that is tied to God's own covenantal promises. That's the kind of love that it is. It is the extension of mercy that is not giving to us what we deserve for our sins.

It's the extension of mercy toward us purely on the basis of God's love. that he displays towards his people. Again, it's a word you can't just translate it.

You really have to describe it. And thankfully, we get a description of this hesed. Look again in verse 5. Verse 5 begins with sort of an eruption of praise.

Right after this description of the wicked, he erupts in praise before he gets to the changed person, to the man who delights in God. He praises God for the very thing that leads to that change.

He says, Your steadfast love, there it is, your hesed, O Lord, extends to the heavens. It doesn't know boundaries.

[23:30] It's limitless. And then he goes on and uses two key words that would help us to understand what he means by this term. He says, Your righteousness is like the mountains of God.

And he says, Before that, Your faithfulness extends to the clouds. So these two terms, righteousness and faithfulness, help us to better understand what he means by this term translated steadfast love or mercy.

God's righteousness is his commitment to always do what is right and good. And of course, right and good is defined by the standard of what brings God the most glory.

And so we could say that God's righteousness is his commitment to uphold the worth and value of his own name or his own glory. So whatever God does in showing mercy, it never detracts from his glory.

In fact, it highlights his glory. That's his righteousness. righteousness. But his faithfulness or his trustworthiness tells us that in his righteousness, in his commitment to uphold his glory, he will yet be faithful and true to all of his promises.

[24:51] That creates a little bit of a conundrum because the essence of sin is a refusal to give God the glory that he deserves.

That's what sin is. And if God is righteous, then he is bound to defend and uphold the honor of his name and therefore to punish those who do not glorify him.

But he has made promises to the very people who have sinned against him. He has made promises to those who have slighted his name and who have not given to him proper glory.

He has promised to rescue and deliver and to redeem them which creates a tension. God's steadfast love, God's chesed involves both his righteousness and commitment to uphold his glory and his faithfulness to his promises to redeem those who have not upheld his glory.

Can you see the tension that is present there? All in that one simple term? And the solution as always is found in Jesus.

[26:04] Because God upholds the righteousness of his own name by sending his son into the world to pay the price to take the penalty upon himself for our failure to glorify God.

So that God's righteousness even when he forgives is always upheld because no sin will ever go unpunished. If you feel confident in the forgiveness that you have and the freedom that you have then the only rightful foundation of that sort of confidence is to know that your sins have already been paid for by Jesus.

It is no comfort to be told that God's going to wipe the slate clean and just not count our sins against us. We need to know that they have been counted against someone because I don't want to be rescued by an unrighteous God because I can't trust him and I don't know what the future holds if he is not righteous.

And yet Christ came into the world. Paul tells us this in Romans chapter 3 that God set forth his son as a sacrifice a propitiation to receive God's wrath so that he might both uphold his righteousness and justify those who have faith in Christ.

The tension that is created by the bringing together of God's righteousness and his faithfulness to his promises is resolved in Christ and in Christ alone.

[27 : 47] and when we begin with fear because we see the reality of our sin and we take that first step of wanting to move away from it because we fear God's wrath the very next step must be one of faith in God's loving kindness put on display in Jesus.

We must put our faith and trust in Christ who is the one in whom God displays his chesed his mercy his steadfast love.

He goes on he says your righteousness is like the mountains of God your judgments are like the great deep and man and beast you save oh Lord.

There's no other arm that can save you. There's no other way that you can be rescued from the trouble that hangs over you. Only God at work in displaying his mercy through his son can rescue you.

He alone saves. And in light of that reality the praise continues. How precious is your steadfast love oh Lord.

[29 : 17] It is beyond value. It's worth more than gold and diamonds. It's worth more than the most precious metals. How precious is your steadfast love oh God because the children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

We take refuge in Christ. We are shielded and protected from the consequences of our own sin beneath the shadow of the cross. And then and only then do we begin to feast.

if you have not turned from sin and put your faith in Christ you will never feast from the abundance of all that God has to offer. But if you have then you are promised that you will feast forever in his presence.

This is why Jesus is able to say come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.

I will give you rest from the crushing weight of your own sin. I will give you rest from the weight of the worries and anxieties and cares of this world.

[30 : 34] I will give you rest he promises. Come to me and feast feast in my presence he says.

He tells the woman at the well in fact that anybody who drinks of the water that I give him it will become in him a well springing up to eternal life. Sounds a lot like the fountain of life or those who drink from the river of God's delights.

This is what's promised. This is what's held out for us. The Christian faith is not simply a matter of believe in Jesus and do what's right. The Christian faith is trust in Jesus and delight in him.

Treasure him. Pursue him. Experience all the joy that is to be had in his presence so that the Christian life really becomes not a pursuit of external obedience.

checking off all the boxes making sure you're not breaking any of the rules or the commands that's not what it is. The Christian life is a pursuit of more joy.

[31 : 49] More joy tomorrow in Christ than I experience today. More joy by next year than I'm capable of experiencing now in Christ. Drinking continually from the river of his delights.

which is why when we come to the end of the book in the book of Revelation there's a river that runs through the city of God and there's a tree that grows the tree of life taking us all the way back to the garden and the leaves of the tree we're told are for the healing of the nations that there is a perpetual unending healing and satisfaction in the presence of God that we will someday receive and that in this life we can receive tastes of you can't have genuine joy in Jesus even in the midst of a world that would constantly knock your feet out from under you you can still have joy in him but we know if you've walked with Christ very long you know that the picture painted here is not one that's easy that we actually do sometimes have to fight with ourselves and fight with temptation to come to the fountain of life the prophet

Jeremiah chided the people of Israel in his own day and God spoke to him and said that the thing that he held against them more than anything else is that they had rejected him the fountain and that they had hewn out for themselves cisterns that were broken and not even capable of holding the water that they needed to quench their thirst and we are tempted even as followers of Jesus we are constantly tempted and drawn away from the fountain of life to put the shovel in the ground dig our own cisterns and think I can drink from this for a while this will satisfy me we think that the right job will bring us the satisfaction that we want if you're single you can convince yourself that if you can just meet the right person then everything will click and fall together in your life or if you could just have a family with children everything will you get all the things that you want broken cisterns and they don't hold water children are wonderful and heartbreaking and they don't hold water they don't marriage can be incredible and devastating and difficult and it won't hold water for you no matter how wonderful your spouse may be they're broken and so we have to at all times drink from the one true source the fountain of life and all those other things then begin to have their proper worth and value in our lives but if you think that you can be satisfied in those things and not in Christ it's self deception and a large part of the

Christian life is the fighting of self deception and the fight to draw ourselves continually back to drink of the fountain of life which brings me back to the idea of fear because fear is not only the first step in the direction of drinking from the fountain of life but so long as we are in this world fear will be necessary at times to remind us that these things over here can never satisfy and I've got to return to the fountain of life when a lot of people think about fear and its role in the Christian life the only passage they often think about is 1st John chapter 4 verse 18 which tells us that there is no fear in love but perfect love casts out fear for fear has to do with punishment and whoever fears has not been perfected in love and so there are those who would teach that fear has no place in the life of a

Christian because you've experienced the love of God but how many of you have been perfected in love have you have you risen to that level of sanctification because I have not oh there are times when my motives are driven by love for God and I'm not drawn away in that moment to other things but most of my life is this back and forth and whenever I'm drawn away from the fountain what turns me back fear because I'm going to starve to death out here I'm going to die of thirst out here trying to drink from dry wells and I'm afraid and fear has a proper place in the life of the believer to draw them back to the fountain I think that's why when we come to the end of this psalm we suddenly after all of this language extolling and praising

[37 : 39] God's steadfast love and talking about the believer as the one who experiences that we get a prayer in verse 10 that begins with steadfast love but ends talking about the wicked again look at verse 10 and we'll read down to the end oh continue your steadfast love to those who know you draw us back keep it coming right continue it and your righteousness to the upright of heart and then there's a sudden turn in the midst of this prayer let not the foot of arrogance come upon me I think he's referencing the arrogance of verse 2 where the wicked flatters himself in his own eyes don't let that happen to me again don't let me go back to that let not the foot of arrogance come upon me nor the hand of the wicked drive me away don't let me be pulled!

by temptation because there verse 12 there over there where they would seek to pull me there the evildoers lie fallen there they are thrust down unable to rise so suddenly at the end of this psalm after all of this wonderful language about God's steadfast love fountain of life river of delights all of those things all of a sudden now we're presented again with a stark picture of the future of the wicked and the evildoer why would he end like this because David knows all too well from his own life and others around him that you have tasted the fountain of life does not mean that you will never be drawn away from it and that when you are drawn away sometimes fear needs to take its proper place once again when you move away from the motive of perfect love and you wander off fear comes back in to save the day and to push you back toward the place where fear is not necessary there will come a time where fear of

God's discipline and judgment will no longer be a part of our experience because we will be raised we will be set upon the new heavens and new earth we will drink forever from the fountain of life there will be no more death no more tears no more pain no more temptation no more drawing away to other false sources of sustenance no more in that day perfect love will have cast out fear from us forever until that day our experience as followers of Jesus will not be day after day perfect love where fear has no place it will be drifting and fear coming in by God's grace and mercy to turn us back here's how Jonathan

Edwards describes this I want you to listen carefully to what he says he says God has so constituted things toward his own people that when their love decays and the exercises of it fail or become weak fear should arise for then they need it sometimes we need it to restrain them from sin and to excite motivate them to care for the good of the soul and so to save them up to watchfulness and diligence in religion he goes on to say God has so ordered things that when love arises and is in vigorous exercise then fear should vanish and be driven away for then they do not need it because they have a higher and more excellent principle and exercise to restrain them from sin and stir them up to their duty would be rather than fear in your pursuit of

Christ but it is a great mercy of God that when our love grows cold and weak his word will instill within us a proper fear to turn us back do not run from the fear of God embrace the fear of God and know and understand that he has set his word before you sometimes in threatening ways to turn you back to the fountain of life let's pray