

Psalm 36 starts out as a wisdom psalm like Psalm 1 with a four verse description of the wicked person. In the preceding psalm the wicked are described as vicious enemies of David. They bear false witness against him, repay evil for good, hate him without reason, maliciously mock him, and gloat over him in his distress. This description of evil calls for a theological response that clarifies the roots of human faithlessness. Psalm 36 answers that call efficiently and effectively.

David is intent on removing any doubt or ambiguity surrounding the evil he is up against. The revelation he received from God sweeps aside any mystery that might hide the truth about evil. A prime candidate for David's diagnostic description of evil is his archenemy King Saul. Ironically, the subject of David's concern is not a pagan Canaanite nor a rebellious Philistine, but the leader of Israel, King Saul. It was Saul who embodied the profile and exemplified the evil that masqueraded under the cover of privilege and tradition. The very fact that the wicked person in view is religious and not pagan complicates our understanding of life. We cannot make an easy division between believer and unbeliever. This is not an old western where the good guys are wearing white hats and the bad guys are wearing black hats. It's not that simple. David is describing not only his arch nemesis King Saul, but the guy next door and even himself.

A Christian reading of Psalm 36 starts with the apostle Paul's quote from the psalm in Romans 3. There Paul is making the case that Jews and Gentiles alike "are all under the power of sin." He draws from five psalms in rapid succession to drive home the truth that "there is no one righteous, not even one" (Rom 3:10; Ps 14:1-3; see Ps 5:9; 140:3; 10:7 (LXX); Ps 36:1). He ends with Psalm 36:1: "There is no fear of God before their eyes" (Rom 3:18). The Christian mind "assumes that the powers of evil will exploit every possible occasion" and in the name of morality seek to blur concepts and twist values.¹ The Christian mind is also sensitive to the extent to which evil pervades our own judgments. The tragedy of this world is not primarily social nor political, but personal. Evil begins with me. The prophet Jeremiah wrote, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure" and Isaiah likened our righteous acts to "filthy rags" (Jer 17:9; Isa 64:6). British author G. K. Chesterton was asked to write a magazine article on the subject "What's Wrong with the Universe?" He responded to the editor's request with two words, "I am."

No Fear Faithlessness

*I have a message from God in my heart
concerning the sinfulness of the wicked:
There is no fear of God
before their eyes.
In their own eyes they flatter themselves
too much to detect or hate their sin.
The words of their mouths are wicked and deceitful;
they fail to act wisely or to do good.
Even on their beds they plot evil;*

¹ Blamires, *The Christian Mind*, 102.

*they commit themselves to a sinful course
and do not reject what is wrong.*

Psalm 36:1-4

Human depravity is described seven ways:

1) “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” The word for “fear” is not the usual word. It is not the same word that is used in “the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 9:10). The word for “fear” means to live in dread, to be terrified, to be frightened. It is the fear that stops people in their tracks.² Far from living in reverence and awe of God, the wicked are indifferent and complacent. They’re “practical atheists” saying to themselves, “How would God know? Does the Most High know anything?” (Ps 73:11). They are dismissive of God’s will and cynical of God’s action. This does not mean that such a person lives without fear, far from it. King Saul was a case in point. He, along with his troops, quaked with fear (1 Sam 13:7). His paranoia resulted in a foolish loyalty oath (1 Sam 14:24) and he came to hate David out of jealousy and fear (1 Sam 18). In “great distress” he sought advice from the a medium at Endor (1 Sam 28) and in the end he committed suicide after falling critically wounded in battle (1 Sam 31).

2) “In their own eyes they flatter themselves to much to detect or hate their sin.” Danish Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard suggested that becoming aware of our sin is like trying to see our own eyeball. We have a natural inclination to pacify and placate our conscience. We tend to grade ourselves on a curve, like the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable, who looked down on the tax collector, and thanked the Lord that he was not like “this tax collector.”³ We excuse ourselves by judging others. The British abolitionist William Wilberforce in his treatise on Christian character and conduct warned that we have a “natural proneness to think too favorably of ourselves.” Selfishness disposes us to “overrate our good qualities, and to overlook or excuse our defects.” We are misled in our self-evaluation by “the favorable opinions of others” and by substituting good intentions for meaningful moral and spiritual change.⁴

3) “The words of their mouths are wicked and deceitful.” The wicked have their own communication strategy and they do not care if God overhears. The importance of the tongue can hardly be overstated. “The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit” (Prov 18:21). Proverbs has plenty to say on the subject. “The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit” (Prov 15:4). Technology’s amazing reach and the ability to preserve everything has only accentuated the need for truth and the danger of deception. “The lips of the wise spread knowledge; not so the hearts of fools” (Prov 15:7). Proverbs believes in the power of communication for good and evil. “With his mouth the godless destroys his neighbor, but through knowledge the righteous escape” (11:9). “The words of the wicked lie in wait for blood, but the speech of the upright rescues them” (12:6). The daily demand to communicate, not only personally, but by cell phone and computer, has compounded the impact of both wisdom and perversity. The “reckless words” that “pierce like a sword” can be transmitted globally in seconds (12:18). Technology only intensifies the truth of Proverbs. “The

² Ross, Psalms, 785.

³ Lk 18:9-14

⁴ William Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*, ed. James M. Houston (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press,), pp. 114-115.

speech of a good person clears the air; the words of the wicked pollute it” (Prov 10:32, The Message). Proverbs insists that all communication is personal and reflects the heart. “The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but violence overwhelms the mouth of the wicked” (Prov 10:11). “The tongue of the righteous is choice silver, but the heart of the wicked is of little value” (Prov 10:20).

4) “They fail to act wisely or do good.” Deception paves the way for disobedience. By willfully ignoring the truth, sinful habits such as anger and apathy go unchallenged. It takes real effort to separate what God has united. Faith and practice belong together, but the wicked manage to hold to one and despise the other. Obedience falls victim to a thousand distractions and qualifications. Wilberforce identified the false comfort found in ambiguity. The wicked hide behind vague moral generalities which leave specific sins unchecked. “Instead of tracing and laying open all the secret motions of inward corruption, and instructing their hearers how best to conduct themselves in every distinct phase of the Christian warfare, they generalize about it. . . They will confess in general terms to be ‘miserable sinners.’ But it is an expression really of secret self-complacency.”⁵

5) “Even on their beds they plot evil.” Under the cover of theoretical niceness and a selective morality the wicked exploit self-rule to its maximum potential. They do whatever their hearts desire. They give themselves to their passions to keep at bay the painful thought that all is meaningless. They throw themselves into their work. They would like nothing better than to brag about their grand accomplishments, the way Solomon did: “I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards...I bought male and female slaves...I owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasures of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well—the delights of the heart of man” (Eccl 2:4-8). The wicked believe that they can generate meaning and significance for themselves. They reverse the apostle John’s admonition: “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 1:15-17).

6) “They commit themselves to a sinful course.” The overt sin of Philistine paganism is not the temptation identified in this psalm. The sin in question is more seductive and covert than overt and blatant. It is the kind of evil that is outwardly commendable and culturally attractive. It is the beautiful side of evil as opposed to the raunchy side of evil. King Saul chose sins befitting his office and power, sins that were consistent with his royal tradition and privilege.

City Church of Thyatira, one of the seven churches in the Book of Revelation, appeared to have it altogether (Rev 2:18-28). They were an active, growing, loving church known for their good deeds and faith. They were a “Welcoming Church” that prided themselves on their open-mindedness and tolerance. Temptation came to them as it does to the church today in the form of a consumer society’s norms on sexuality, finance, ambition, sports, and truth. They tolerated the

⁵ Wilberforce, p. 125.

teaching of “Jezebel” on sexuality and yield to what they undoubtedly thought were innocent and innocuous forms of idolatry. The temptation of “Baalism” today threatens the church with an easy acceptance of live-and-let-live pluralism, a reverence for the overindulged self, and a dismissive attitude toward the judgment of God. The devil knows the kind of wickedness and the type of depravity that he is working with and he tailors the temptation to fit the type. The psalmist describes a wicked person who is repulsed by the ugly side of evil, but seduced by the beautiful side of evil.

7) “[They] do not reject what is wrong.” If we were take these seven features of human depravity and apply them to post-biblical Christianity, we might be shocked to see how pertinent they are to our contemporary situation. Are we guilty of obscuring the “very real and irreducible element of sheer contrariness” involved in setting apart Christ as Lord? The Danish Christian thinker Søren Kierkegaard believed that Christians were assimilated into the culture so completely that there was no real difference between a Christian and a non-Christian. Everyone was a Christian, because no one was a Christian.⁶ Post-biblical Christianity is altogether different from the Christianity described in the New Testament. Popular Christianity reflects the spirit of the times, not the Spirit of Christ. It is compatible with and conformed to the prevailing culture. No one takes the Bible seriously anymore because the world is compatible with popular Christianity. Love is god; not God is love. Past perversions are celebrated as freedoms and tolerance trumps truth. Self-expression is the new sacred and a self-proclaimed “passion for Christ” is comfortably compatible with all other passions. No one discerns the difference between obsession and devotion, fandom and faithfulness, consultants and ministers. Everyone does what is right in their own eyes.

The portrait of human wickedness that David profiles in Psalm 36 is the evil that is close at hand and resides in the neighborhood. It is the evil that gloats in our hearts and parades down the street. It is not so much the evil that lurks in dark alleys nor hides from the police; it is the evil that has gained public respectability and cultural acceptance. David’s seven attributes of evil show us how easy it is to be caught up in its ways.

Loving Faithfulness

*Your love, Lord, reaches to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the skies.
Your righteousness is like the highest mountains,
your justice like the great deep.
You, Lord, preserve both people and animals.
How precious is your unfailing love, O God!
People take 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.*

Psalm 36:5-9

⁶ Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon 'Christendom,'* 42.

David abruptly ends his description of evil and breaks into doxology. In Psalm 1 the wicked are compared to the righteous, but here they are contrasted with the immensity of God's covenant love. Evil's gloating look, deceitful voice, indifferent shrug, and bedtime plotting, are transcended in a moment by the unsearchable, impregnable, inexhaustible, and hospitable steadfast love of the Lord.⁷ Over and against the small-minded pettiness of evil is the spaciousness of God's "commitment, truthfulness, faithfulness, authority, and deliverance."⁸ Eugene Peterson captures the contrast in his translation:

*God's love is meteoric,
his loyalty astronomic,
His purpose titanic,
his verdicts oceanic.
Yet in his largeness
nothing gets lost;
Not a man, not a mouse,
slips through the cracks.*

Psalm 36:5-6 MSG

There is no verbal link between David's doxology in Psalm 36 and the apostle Paul's doxology in Romans 11:33-36, but there is an echo of psalmist's inspiration in the apostle's hymn. Both doxologies celebrate the heights and depths of God's wisdom and love; both praise God for his unsearchable judgments and untraceable ways. And both doxologies answer the description of evil with the immensities of God's love and wisdom.⁹

The psalmist attributes the ecology of the universe to the Lord's unfailing love. People and animals alike are preserved by the Lord. We find our refuge under the shadow of his wings. Jesus used the image of a hen gathering chicks under her wings and he referenced "your house" (Ps 36:8) in Matthew 23:37-39. He used these images immediately following his caustic and prophetic rebuke of the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees. Jesus' description of their wickedness parallels the description of evil found in Psalm 36:1-4. The religious leaders refusal to enter into the kingdom of heaven was a refusal to embrace God's covenant love.

David's description of feasting in the house of God and drinking from the fountain of the life paints a picture that points forward to the Garden City of God in Revelation 21. His line, "In your light we see light" is echoed in the prologue of the Gospel of John. The Word that was made flesh was the light of the world. "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not over come it. . . .The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world" (John 1:4-5, 9).

⁷ Kidner, Psalms, 147.

⁸ Goldingay, Psalms, 509.

⁹ Mark Seifred, "Romans," in Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, 678. Seifred writes: "To ascribe the depth of riches, wisdom, and knowledge to God is a reversal of human rebellion, the surrender of the claim that we ourselves are wise (Rom 1:21-23)."

A Prayer for Mercy

*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 36:10-12

When we pray this psalm in the light of the gospel of grace and with the discernment of the Holy Spirit we realize that it is not about human morality in general but about our own sinful depravity and our need for salvation. It is about “the metaphysics of mercy” and we know that the “sole cure for this rebellion in our hearts is the divine gift of mercy.”¹⁰ We look to Christ and pray with the psalmist for the continuation of the Lord’s loving mercy and for his imputed righteousness to cover our sin. David is ready to fight the evil described at the beginning because of the grace he describes in the middle.¹¹ But he can only enter the fray with the Lord’s protection. He prays to be kept from being kicked around by the proud and pushed around by the wicked. “It is only a matter of time before those who are wicked will be destroyed.”¹²

¹⁰ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 70.

¹¹ Kidner, *Psalms*, 148.

¹² Ross, *Psalms*, 795.