

Horsley Evangelical Church (www.horsleyec.org.uk)

Minister: Rev Ken McIntosh 5th July 2020

Psalm 36 The Lord's Keeping Grace

The title of this Psalm describes David as *the servant of the Lord*. It reminds us of the title given to Moses, Joshua and others in the Old Testament, and also the title given by Isaiah to the Lord Jesus who was *the servant of the Lord*, the suffering servant. David is acting as the Lord's servant in this Psalm because he is seeking to shepherd the people under his care. The Psalm begins with a description of the wicked - their shameful thinking and behaviour. David then moves on to describe the Lord and by contrast his goodness, love and faithfulness. But the Psalm finishes with the prayer of the Lord's servant that the people under his care may be kept from the power and influence of the wicked.

David wants us to understand that all blessing, prosperity and delight is found in the Lord and in him alone. The path of the wicked leads only to misery and destruction. Sometimes of course we can forget that because we are deceived, but the servant of the Lord wants to remind us of the goodness of the Lord and by contrast the godlessness of the wicked. The righteous have all things in the Lord, whereas the wicked have nothing. Their life is futile and their destiny, frightening.

For some, this Psalm acts as a wakeup call. "Reconsider the path you are on. Change your behaviour and ambition" it says. While for others, this Psalm is confirmation of what we already see all around us in terms of the emptiness of life without God. Whichever way, we pray that this Psalm may be a blessing to us all this morning.

In verses 1-4 we have **the godlessness of the wicked**. **Read verses 1-4**. The *oracle* (1) refers to an insight which the Lord gave his servant David. And this prophetic insight concerns the sinfulness of the wicked. David wants to expose for us the true character of the wicked. And he begins by telling us that there is *no fear of God before his eyes* (1). The wicked person has no respect for God and does not seek to honour God in his life. The wicked do not have any gratitude for the blessings God has given them, nor do they acknowledge any dependence on their creator. But the phrase also means that the wicked do not *tremble* before God - they are not afraid of him. James tells us how the demons *tremble* before the Lord, but David says the wicked man does not. There is no fear of God before his eyes.

His mind is on himself and not on God. He flatters himself too much to detect or hate his sin. The wicked man is wilfully blind to his faults and blind to his position before God. He lives in a world of fantasy because he has lost touch with the ultimate reality of the universe – God. The mind of the wicked is only on self. They are wrapped up in themselves and they cannot see their own errors. Verse 2 points especially to their smug assumption that they are accountable to no one – free to do and live as they choose. No one can tell *them* what to do.

And from that state which takes no account of God flows certain behaviour. **Read verse 3 again**. Because their no fear of God before his eyes, the wicked person lives a life of folly and evil. It's seen in the person's words which are careless - full of exaggeration and half-truths. It's seen too in their actions which display no wisdom or goodness because the person does not live for the glory of God.

Then verse 4 reminds us that the course they set in life is not accidental but deliberate. It is the intentional, planned course of their life. **Read verse 4 again**. All they do is quite deliberate and therefore they are fully responsible for their sinful actions.

Now at some point the reader asks the question, "But who are the wicked in verse 1-4? Is this only referring to a few, particularly nasty people? Who is David speaking about?" The shocking thing

is that the apostle Paul quotes from this section of our Psalm when writing Romans 3:18. And the point Paul is making in Romans 3 is that *everyone* is like this, before God rescues them and saves them through the Lord Jesus Christ. This is how we all are by nature. This is the state of fallen humanity. Yes, some people's wickedness is more developed than others. But this is what is latent in every person's fallen human heart. By nature, and outside of Christ, none of us desires or loves or knows the Lord. By nature, we think of ourselves as the centre of the universe. 'We' are all that really matters. By nature, none of us detects our sin or understands our true position before a holy God. And our behaviour does not show either the wisdom of God or the goodness of God.

One application of these verses is to recognise that these verses *confirm* what we see in people's lives all around us. This is how people are. This is how *we were* if we are now Christians. But another application of these verses is to contrast them with what other Psalms say about the *righteous* and their life before God. For in the Psalms we are told that the righteous do fear the Lord. The righteous do respect God and tremble before him. Their eyes are not on self but on the Lord. The righteous do detect their sin (remember how David describes himself in Psalm 34 as 'spiritually poor' for example). And because the righteous do fear the Lord, their words and their actions do honour the Lord and display something of his wisdom and goodness.

The righteous of course are far from perfect, but there has been a *change* in their lives – they are not what they once were. And it's interesting to note the reference to what the wicked think about during the night, because again there is a contrast with the righteous. On his bed, the righteous meditates on God's word (Psalm 1:2), receives the Lord's instruction (Psalm 16:7), thinks of the Lord and praises him through the night (Psalm 42:8 and 63:6) and meditates on his promises (Psalm 119:148).

So, even in the Psalms, there is a marked contrast between the life of a believer and the life of an unbeliever. But before we start congratulating ourselves, we know why this is – it's only because we have been shown God's mercy. Perhaps you can think back to a time before you became a Christian (if you are a Christian). At times, the Lord reminds you of things you said or things you did as an unbeliever, and you cringe. You can hardly believe what you did. But that is because of God's grace in your life. God has given you a new life through the Lord Jesus Christ. You are not what you were. You are not what you should be, but you are not what you were. God is at work in our life and he is changing you. Thank him. Praise him.

So here is an insight, a prophetic insight which the Lord gave his servant David to help us. Perhaps it will help us to be more realistic about people we know and their behaviour. This is what the human heart is without God. The person is lost spiritually. This is what people are like until God finds them and saves them. Perhaps these verses will also comfort us in an odd sort of way. Or perhaps these verses will rebuke us because they show us how we have slipped back in our walk with the Lord who has shown us mercy.

But then in verses 5-9 we find by contrast **the goodness of God**. And it is a great contrast – one of the greatest contrasts that can possibly be made - the contrast between the godlessness of the wicked and the goodness of God. **Read verses 5-9**. Here is something else which David the *servant of the Lord* would remind us of – the goodness of the Lord. Why would we ever seek satisfaction or pleasure anywhere else? All we ever want, and infinitely more is found in the Lord himself.

What dominates this section is *the love of the Lord* – that love which is unfailing. **Read verse 5, 7**. It's also there in the prayer– **read verse 10**. Some question whether this 'love' is the Lord's love for all humanity or whether it's his special covenant love for his people. The answer is that it's both!

The servant uses the creation to help us appreciate the scope of God's love to all he has made. **Read verse 5, 6, 7a**. How 'high' is the Lord's love? It's as 'high' as the heavens, as 'high' as the most distant star. More than *we* can comprehend – that's for sure. What a contrast to the 'love' of the wicked. The wicked love only themselves. But the Lord loves all his creation.

There is nothing that the Lord has made which is not ‘covered’ by his love. He does not love sin as we shall see, and indeed he will punish and destroy all sin. But the love of the Lord *reaches out to all*. Both high and low among men find refuge in the shadow of your wings (7b). And this is echoed in other Psalms. Psalm 145 for example tells us that the Lord is “loving toward all you have made” (Psalm 145:13).

Then – **read verse 6**. God’s righteousness is as great and immovable as the mountains. He never changes - unlike the wicked who are so fickle and unreliable. They *are* changeable and unpredictable. But the character of the Lord does not change. And that character is perfect.

Similarly, the Lord’s justice is like the great deep – again, too deep for us to comprehend. The Lord’s knowledge of all things is complete. We know perhaps the surface truth, and are so easily deceived and led astray. But the Lord knows all things. And so his judgment is perfect.

And in his goodness, he preserves both man and beast (6b). Yes, his love is especially towards human beings who are made in his image. But his care also extends to all living things. **Read Psalm 104:25-28**. But in their folly, the wicked put no value on God’s love. They show no gratitude and reject his love.

Yet his love and salvation is offered to all people – **read verse 7 again**. Finding refuge under the Lord’s wings is a lovely expression which speaks of the special love, the covenant love which the Lord has for all who trust him. His love is protective and parental – like the mother bird caring for her young. But the wicked reject it. And the Lord Jesus seems to remember this verse when he looked out on Jerusalem once and said – **read Matthew 23:37**.

Then verse 8 and 9 speak about the abundance of life that is found only in the Lord. The water and light are symbols of the abundant life he alone gives. **Read verse 8**. All humanity is invited to the Lord’s banquet. His house is the whole creation. Both only those who respond and find *refuge in the shadow of his wings* feast on the abundance of the Lord’s provision. There is every delight available to anyone who will seek him – and the imagery here reminds us of the garden of Eden. But men and women by nature do not seek him. They will not receive these delights that could be theirs. They reject the knowledge of God and reject God himself. They would rather drink from their own polluted cisterns than come to him who is the living fountain of life.

But for those who do come, their spiritual darkness is taken away. **Read verse 9**. And for us, we know that this offer of abundant life and eternal delights is found in the person of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. Indeed the love of God is seen supremely in the gift of Christ and his death on the cross. And the Lord Jesus picks up some of this same symbolism in his ministry. **Read John 4:14, 8:12**. And at the end of the Bible, these same symbols of water and light describe the abundant life which God gives to all who love him. **Read Revelation 22:1-5**.

And so David, the servant of the Lord is showing us not only **the godlessness of the wicked** but **the goodness of the Lord**. We move on from the first to remember and rejoice in the second, for we are prone to forget the goodness of the Lord. Have we? Have we forgotten his unfailing love, his protection and the fullness of life which is in him alone?

But after **the goodness of the Lord** we come finally to **the prayer of the servant** in verses 10-12. **Read verses 10-12**. David’s prayer is for those who know the Lord and are upright in heart. And his prayer is that the Lord’s people will continue to know the love of the Lord and his righteousness. The fact David prays this reminds us of the deceptiveness of evil and the way temptation can drag us away from God.

When things are set out as they are in this Psalm, the path we should take seems fairly obvious: we are to avoid the path of wickedness and instead seek the Lord in whom is abundant life. Yet David

the servant prays that evil will not deceive us, that we might be kept from it and kept in the love of the Lord.

Verse 11 reminds us of the attack of evil on those who know God. The foot of the proud may come near. Evil approaches us in order to harm us and destroy us. The hand of evil seeks to drive us away from the Lord. And so the servant prays for us, that we (and he too) may be kept by the Lord. And David's prayer reminds us of the intercession of our Lord Jesus who is at the Father's right hand. Christ's intercession keeps for ever those to come to God through him.

Then in the final verse we find another insight. This time not into the sinfulness of the wicked, but instead into their final fate. The wicked and their schemes will not last forever. In the prophecy of the Revelation, John tells us how 'Babylon the Great' fell, never to rise again. And David has a similar vision. **Read verse 12 again.** Evil does think they stand. They assume they are invincible and are answerable to no one – not even God. But in the end, they will fall, never to rise again. And it will be the righteous who will shine in the kingdom of their Father. The righteous will reign with their Saviour in the kingdom of light, while the wicked will be destroyed and cast into the lake of fire.

How does this Psalm find you this morning? How is you walk with God? What is the state of your heart before God? Is the hand of the wicked in some way trying to drive you away from the Lord? Have you been taken in by the subtle temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil? Are you doubting the Lord's love in some way? Have you forgotten the final destiny of the wicked, in spite of all his pride and confident words.

If you know God and know the salvation of his Son Jesus Christ, then you have all things. His love for you reaches the heavens. His love for you is priceless. In Christ you have refuge from the terrible storm to come. And in Christ you will have the fullness of life which he died on the cross to bring you. But you must persevere. You must keep trusting. You must accept his word. With him is the fountain of life. In his light we see light. Cry out to him. Ask him to restore you if you have forgotten your first love. Ask him to restore the years perhaps that the locusts have eaten.

Do not let this word of the Lord pass you by. Confess your sin, seek the Lord again with all your heart. Remember the deceitfulness of sin and the seriousness of sin. And remember the goodness of the Lord.