

August 21, 2022

LOOKING TO THE LORD WHILE LIVING IN THIS WORLD

Psalm 36

(4 of 12 in a series of selected Psalms)

In Sam Mendes's 2019 film titled *1917* we follow two young British soldiers as they set out on a quest to deliver a message to the front lines of the battle in the First World War. And in one of the most painful scenes of the film the boys see a German biplane hurling toward them as it's been shot out of the sky. As the plane crashes, the boys avoid any harm to themselves but then quickly realize that the pilot's life is at risk. The plane is on fire, and if they do nothing, they'll likely witness this German soldier burn to death. Therefore, they quickly leap into action, acting less like soldiers toward an enemy combatant and more like medics rushing to save a life.

They drag the man out of the plane, literally pulling him from the flames that threaten his life and begin tending to him. Seeing that he needs water, one of the boys spots a spigot coming out of the ground where they can draw water for the man. And so he runs over to the ground spigot, hat in hand, pumping the water out of the ground and into his empty hat in order to bring relief to this suffering German soldier. But right as he's in the midst of this, he hears his fellow soldier yell, "Stop" and start screaming. He turns, just in time to see his friend standing up and holding his hands over his abdomen that is now bleeding. And yelling, "No, no, no," he pulls his gun and shoots the German soldier, who's sitting on the ground with the bloody knife in his hands, right before running over and trying (unsuccessfully) to save his friend's life.

As I said, it's a painful scene. Viewing the movie, you find yourself gripped by it, feeling the loss of this character you've become attached to, wanting to yell to the boys on the screen, "You've got to be more careful! You shouldn't have forgotten where you are! You can't lose sight that you're in the midst of war!"

It can feel like that's what David is saying to the reader in Psalm 36. It's as if he's writing to us, "Don't lose sight of where you are and the world you're living in. Don't lose sight of who God is. Don't lose sight of what we have in him. Don't lose sight of our need to cry out to him." You see, just like the two boys in that movie, you and I can lose sight of the most urgent matters around us and begin to drift through life, forgetting where we are and what's at stake. And Psalm 36 screams to us, in the midst of our day-dreaming, "Wake up! Don't lose sight of these crucial truths!" So I want to use this morning simply to highlight the truths that David wants us not to lose sight of as we go through this world.

Remember the world we're living in

Just as those two British soldiers forgot for a second that they were walking through enemy-occupied territory with all kinds of people seeking their harm, so David opens this psalm by reminding us of what the unbelieving world in which we're living is like. He uses verses 1-4 to

describe for us this unbelieving world, and so let's take it one step at a time as we walk through these verses.

First, he writes, "Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart (v. 1a). That line is actually quite difficult to translate and understand. Sometimes in translating you can actually determine what each word means and still struggle to make sense of it. It seems like the best translation is something like, "An oracle of the transgression of the wicked is in the midst of my heart."¹ You can probably hear why I say that even translated into English, it still is hard to understand. But I think I can simplify it for us. I think David is saying that God has revealed to him—in his heart—what the wicked are like.² God has given David insight about the wicked. What then has God revealed? David answers, "There is no fear of God before his eyes" (v. 1).

That is, if you want to sum up the basic problem with the unbelieving world around us, you can boil it down to the fact that for any one unbeliever, there is simply no fear of God in his heart. He doesn't care what God thinks. He has no regard for what God says. He does not fear God's judgment. And if one has no fear of God, then there is no restraint in that person's life. He will simply do what he desires, without regard for what is good, right, or God-honoring. David tells us that this is the world in which we live. And he continues as we proceed through these opening verses.

In verse 2 David begins to show how that absence of the fear of God manifests itself in the life of the unbeliever. He writes, "For he flatters himself in his own eyes that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated." This too can be a confusing verse to understand, but it seems that David is saying that the wicked man thinks so highly of himself that he can't accurately see his sin and hate it. He should be able to take assessment of his life and say, "Good grief, you're selfish, prideful, and on and on," but he can't see himself clearly. Rather, he flatters himself, telling himself that he's right and justified in all that he does—probably even thinking that he lives in a way superior to his neighbors—and so he is blinded to his sin altogether, not hating it as he should. So, as David begins, he tells us that the unbeliever has no fear of God and is blinded to his sin which he should hate. And he continues.

In verse 3 he writes, "The words of his mouth are trouble and deceit; he has ceased to act wisely and do good" (v. 3). When he speaks, he causes harm. He speaks in deceitful and untrue ways. He doesn't ask himself what is good or wise or best for others. He's lost the ability to think rightly and function accordingly. And so he is given over to his sin as in verse 4 David shows the man now actively planning evil, writing, "He plots trouble while on his bed; he sets himself in a way that is not good; he does not reject evil."

¹ Allen Ross translates it this way. *A Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), p. 784.

² Again, this is the suggestion of Ross, 784.

Whereas the righteous is described in Psalm 1 as meditating on the law of the Lord day and night, the wicked man lies in his bed at night plotting evil. Perhaps he thinks of pursuing schemes to get back at people who have hurt him, or how he will aim to commit sexual immorality, or how he can make himself look better than others, but there is no mere stumbling into evil. He's plotting it, planning it, and setting himself off toward it. He's in no way rejecting evil but aggressively pursuing it.

This is David's description of mankind outside of knowing and belonging to the Lord. This is his description of the unbeliever around us. And it's not exceptional in the Bible. When Paul describes the unbelieving world in Romans 3:10-18, he writes in a very similar way, noting that there is none righteous and none who does good, noting that men use their mouths to speak great evil and use their feet to swiftly pursue sin. In fact, David ends his description of one outside of Christ by explicitly quoting David in Psalm 36, writing in Romans 3:18, "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

But why does David do this? What is the benefit of starting a psalm just launching into a description of mankind in their wickedness? I think it's because he wants to remind us of the world we live in. There are many reasons it's important for us to remember this. For one, without remembering the lost and sinful condition in which unbelievers live, we might lose sight of our need to speak the gospel to them. But I think the other reason is because when we lose sight of what the unbelieving world around us is like, we can be overcome by them. And I mean that in two ways. One, we can be overcome by them by being conformed to them. And according to the Bible, we are to remain distinct in this world. But we can forget that the things we see in the culture in large measure are coming from hearts of people who do not fear God, and so we can begin to mimic their ways, aiming to fit in with those around us—forgetting all the while who they are and forgetting Paul's warning not to be conformed to the world but to be transformed. This is something we always need to be aware of.

In Revelation 17, John sees the harlot, representing the culture of this world. And his first reaction is to marvel at her (17:6b), but the angel tells him not to marvel. After all, she is drunk on the blood of the martyrs of Jesus (17:6a). Isn't that an astounding picture? John is tempted to marvel at one who is seeking the death of his fellow saints. It would do us well to remember that as we look at the culture around us. We may well want to marvel and mimic what we see, but it's seeking our demise. And that brings us to the second way we can be overcome. We can grow lax and forget we have an enemy.

Interestingly, when Paul wrote to the Ephesians, he told them in 6:12, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." It wasn't that Paul was unaware of human beings seeking his harm. After all, he'd been stoned, beaten, and imprisoned. But he knew ultimately that the unbeliever is simply following "the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience" (Eph 2:1-3). We must not lose sight of this reality either.

And when we remember this, it keeps us vigilant, doesn't it? It reminds us that we have an enemy who is like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Therefore, we do not engage the world in a lax way, but we equip ourselves with the truth of God's Word, crying out to the Lord in prayer, and remembering what is true of him. It seems that David's reminder to us of who the unbelieving world is, is given to us so that we might remember not to be conformed to them nor to be lax as we engage them. This morning, remember the world we're living in. Second, remember who our God is.

Remember who our God is

Obviously David doesn't show us what characterizes the unbelieving world in order that we might feel hopeless. Rather, in verses 5-6 he reminds us of what God is like. It's interesting because after verses 1-4 you might anticipate David providing a description of the righteous *person*, right? I mean, that would make sense, wouldn't it? Describe the wicked and then describe the righteous. But that's not what he does. Rather, he begins to describe what God—who is himself righteousness—is like. And I think there's a reason for that. In the midst of this world, we're not going out alone. We're not attempting to be transformed instead of conformed to the world in our own power or facing the devil who'd love to devour us on our own. We have one for us—and in us—who is greater than the world (1 John 4:4). And so David reminds us of who our God is. He writes in verses 5-6, "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."

Our God is one who exercises steadfast love and is righteous. As David begins to describe who our God is, he uses spatial imagery. If you want to declare how vast—or, in God's case, infinite—something is to a finite person, you can point out how deep and wide it is. That's what David does here. He speaks of God's steadfast love, which is a way to speak of God's love and faithfulness. He loves and he is loyal to those whom he loves. He shows grace and mercy to those upon whom he sets his affection. That's the idea of God's steadfast love. And David wants to remind us that God's love for us extends all the way from the earth to the heavens, showing that it is infinite. His righteousness and judgments go from the highest points of the mountains into the depth of the sea. And he is good, caring for his people and even the animal world, which fits with Jesus' reminder to us that our Heavenly Father feeds the sparrows and not one of them falls to the ground apart from him.

David tells us that as we consider the world, don't stop there. Otherwise, you might be overwhelmed. Consider God. Remember what he is like and remember who he is. The creator and ruler of all loves us, judges perfectly, and has made us the objects of his goodness and mercy. Well, I've already gotten us into the next point because it's hard to speak of the goodness of God without noting that we get to be the object of his goodness, but that's what he shows us in verses 7-9, telling us to remember the blessings that are ours in the Lord.

Remember the blessings that are ours in the Lord

As David begins verse 7, he doesn't simply acknowledge God's steadfast love but declares the blessing that God's people receive because of it. He writes, "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" (vv. 7-9).

As he unfolds the blessing that you and I have by being the objects of God's steadfast love, David reminds us, first, that we have security in the Lord. That's what he means by taking refuge in the shadow of God's wings. You and I get to live our lives as believers knowing that we're protected and cared for by our God. He loves us and is for us and cares for us. Now, this doesn't mean that nothing bad will happen in our lives or that we won't feel pain or loss. I think all of us know that the Father loves his Son and so there is no doubt that Jesus was the object of his Father's steadfast love in the days of his earthly ministry. And yet we see what Jesus suffered, ultimately going to the cross and dying. And yet, don't we also know that everything in his life was for his good and ours? This is what the devil tried to tempt Jesus not to believe as we saw in the gospel of Luke recently. The devil was suggesting that the Father wasn't treating him like a Son and was holding out on him. But the Father loves the Son and was treating him as his beloved Son every step of the way. So it is with us. We get to live our lives in the shadow of our Lord's wings. Of course we'll know pain, loss, suffering, affliction, and heartache. But we also know that everything is measured out in the hands of our Father who loves us dearly, withholds no good thing from us, and is working everything for our good. We have security in him.

And we also have satisfaction in him. That is, he fills us. He supplies for us what we most desperately and deeply need. He cares for us. In fact, I've no doubt understated that because David doesn't just say that God feeds us and gives us drink but that we feast on an abundance in his house. We drink from his river, which suggests it does not dry up. In the Lord, there is a limitless supply of God what we need to be filled, cared for, and whole. This is why Jesus can say in John 4:34, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work." There is a satisfaction that we can know in the Lord. He satisfies our souls. And, he gives us life.

As David ends, he speaks of the Lord having the fountain of life and then writes, "In your light do we see light" (v. 9). Now, I think that's simply another way of speaking of life. Light and life are often brought together in the Scripture. For example, in John 1:4 John writes, "In him was life, and the life was the light of men." And the idea of seeing light is the idea of opening one's eyes, of being alive. So, I think he's simply noting that the Lord gives us life. Therefore, we can say that in the Lord we have life, satisfaction, and security. And in verses 10-12 David gives us the application of that truth, reminding us to cry out to the Lord in prayer.

Remember to cry out to the Lord in prayer

Now, this is the application that I wanted to say even if verses 10-12 weren't a prayer. After all, it's one thing to acknowledge that in the Lord we have life, satisfaction, and security and another thing to seek him in prayer, fellowship with him, and know these things to be true in our lives. Prayer is the means by which we experience perhaps our most intimate fellowship with the Lord

and find our souls nourished and satisfied in him. And so David ends the psalm by himself praying. It's as if describing who God is and the blessings that we have in him have moved David to erupt in prayer himself. It's like talking about how good the steak is in front of you and then saying, "Good grief, I can't contain myself; give me that steak."

David describes God's steadfast love and then erupts in prayer in verse 10 saying, "Oh, continue your steadfast love to those who know you, and your righteousness to the upright of heart!" He prays that the Lord would be to his people all that David has professed that he is. Then, he asks for the Lord to protect him in the midst of this unbelieving world, saying, "Let not the foot of arrogance come upon me, nor the hand of the wicked drive me away" (v. 11). It probably is the case the foot is an imagery of conquering another, where you might put your foot on the throat of one whom you have conquered. David is asking God to protect him from the arrogant and wicked that he's describe in verse 4. And then he reminds himself that the evildoers will be defeated before his Lord, saying, "There the evildoers lie fallen; they are thrust down, unable to rise" (v. 12). The unbelieving world will not have the last word.

Psalm 36 screams to us, "Remember the world you're in." We're not taking a neutral stroll. We have an enemy. We are like sheep in the midst of wolves. And yet it's as if David says, "Isn't this all the more why you should make prayer a regular pattern and earnest practice in your life?" After all, we have a God who is full of steadfast love and righteousness and who is our security, satisfaction, and life. Cry out to him. Ask him to help you not to be conformed to this world nor to grow lax, forgetting we are at war, but to go out equipped. And if we wonder if the Lord will hear and answer that prayer, we need only remember that while we were his enemies he met our greatest need, sending his Son to live, die, and be raised for us. So let us remember him now as we come to the table. Amen.