

An Uncommon Love

Psalm 36

We are drawing to the close of our summer series in the book of Psalms, called “Walking with God in the Meantime: The Christian Life through the Lens of the Psalms.” Next Sunday Pastor Daggett will wrap us up. And my hunch is, if you’ve been able to be around for part of this series, that it’s probably become pretty clear that the Christian life is not always easy. We’ve seen in these songs and poems of the Old Testament some pretty honest portraits of lives troubled by circumstances and faced with opposition. We’ve seen the war that sin wages in our own hearts, enticing us to throw off God’s rule and replace it with our own. And yet we’ve also seen the hope that comes from trusting God and resting in him, and the joy of being rescued and forgiven by God—a joy that can’t help but overflow in praise.

But if you’re anything like me, once your eyes are opened to the difficulties of walking with God in a world stained by sin and brokenness, once you begin to realize that suffering and sin, letting God down and being let down by others, are actually a common part of the Christian life, it’s really easy to become secretly pessimistic about the prospect of life on this earth as God’s people. It’s easy to begin dwelling on the worst of yourself, thinking the worst of others, or even the worst of God. As the bitter realities of life set in, it’s easy to begin to expect God to give me a stone any time I asked for bread (the reverse of Jesus’ parable in Matthew 7). It’s easy to be overwhelmed by this fallen world, and even driven away from God.

Psalm 36 is another one of these psalms that’s very honest about how messed up this world is, which could make for a relatively depressing sermon. It begins by describing the dynamics of rebellion common among all humanity and the pervasive threat this poses to us. But it does not stay there. Neither does it allow us to stay there, dwelling on the bitter realities of life. Rather what follows is one of the most breathtaking visions of the boundless scope and incomparable value of God’s steadfast, loyal love. The loyal love of God. The aim of this psalm and my aim this morning is that we would be caught up and captivated by this uncommon love of God, which is greater than our sin and the brokenness and trials we face in life, and which he has demonstrated for us in his Son, Jesus Christ.

The Pervasive Threat of Worldliness (36:1-4)

If there’s one thing we can expect to find, no matter where we go in life, it’s sinners. There is arguably nothing more common about life in this world than rubbing shoulders with sinners—especially, because each one of us makes up part of the population. So common is sin in this world that we often use the phrase “worldly” to illustrate the rebellious nature of humanity.

Psalm 36 begins by describing *the pervasive threat of worldliness* in vv. 1-4. Now v. 1 is a little difficult to translate; some of your English Bibles will read slightly differently. I think the NIV captures the idea well here: this is a prophetic oracle in David’s heart about the transgression or

rebellion or sinfulness of the wicked. The word translated “sinfulness” in the NIV or “transgression” in the ESV carries the connotation of *rebellion*. Disloyalty. High treason against the crown of God. This is what life looks like when we turn away from God and follow the ways of the world. This is worldliness.

What precisely do we mean by *worldliness*? David Wells, a scholar up at Gordon-Conwell, says this: “Worldliness is that system of values, in any given age, which has at its center our fallen human perspective, which displaces God and His truth from the world, and which makes sin look normal and righteousness seem strange.”¹ The system of values that makes sin look normal and righteousness seem strange. It’s tempting to say, “Welcome to New England.” But really we have to say, “Welcome to Earth.” This is the common plight of all humanity in a world stained by sin. It’s as common as a Boston accent at Fenway Park. And vv. 1-4 describe this dynamic.

Look first at *the fruit of worldliness*, in vv. 3-4. We have hurtful and deceptive speech—his words are “trouble and deceit.” We have foolish and sinful behavior—“he has ceased to act wisely and to do good.” His intentions are malicious—he goes to bed thinking about who he’s going to take advantage of tomorrow: “he plots trouble while on his bed.” He gives his allegiance and energy to a course of life that will only destroy him in the end, “a sinful course,” “a way that is not good.” In essence, “he does not reject evil.” Now why? Where does all this come from? This is the fruit; what is the *root*?

It all flows out of v. 2: “For in his own eyes he flatters himself too much to detect or hate his sin.” In a word: Arrogance. Pride. He thinks so highly of himself that he is unable to see his sin for what it is and treat it as it deserves to be treated—with hatred. He thinks he does a better job of discerning between right and wrong than God does. He loves himself and his way of life too much to even entertain the option that there might be something wrong with it. He’s like a person who looks into a mirror and sees a cancerous growth on his face, only to conclude that there must be a problem with the mirror—nothing could possibly be wrong with me. Such is what pride does—it fuels all sorts of ungodly behavior.

But *the essence of worldliness* comes in the second half of v. 1: “there is no fear of God before his eyes.” His eyes are too busy flattering himself in v. 3 to notice God in v. 2. So there is no fear of God before him. What does it mean to fear God? Fearing God is basically the opposite of worldliness. With worldliness, our own fallen, sinful perspectives give us the grid for evaluating life and living in this world. Fearing God means that we recognize first, that he is God and we are not; then second, that he alone has the right to decide what is right and what is wrong, and the authority to punish those who disagree. Fearing God means recognizing that he’s in charge, and treating him that way. Sometimes that means dread, as it does here, particularly for those who have thumbed their nose at him in their arrogance and wickedness. But fear also carries a sense of reverence and awe, being captivated by the weight and magnitude and awesomeness of God.

The failure to fear God is the essence of worldliness and rebellion. This is how the Apostle Paul summed up his description of the universal guilt and sin of all humanity in Romans 3:18. In 3:10-18, Paul cobbles together a laundry list of Old Testament Scriptures to describe how wicked

¹ David F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 4.

everyone on this earth is, and the capstone is Psalm 36:2: “there is no fear of God before his eyes.” Paul’s point is that what Psalm 36 says about the rebellious is true of everyone on this earth: all of us have turned our backs on God in one way or another; all are guilty before him; every one of us has in some way allowed the world to shape our thoughts and our lives at the expense of God’s holy Word, and are thus deserving of God’s holy wrath. There is arguably nothing more common on this earth than sin. This is a dreadful and depressing reality. It’s pretty dislocating to realize the depth of your sin and the extent to which this world is messed up. And it’s easy to get stuck in that depressing reality, to be overcome by it or driven away from God (cf. v. 11), as though the reach of God’s love is too short to save sinners, or the value of his love too little to provide what we need in life (and so we turn to the world). But again, though Psalm 36 is honest about the pervasive threat of worldliness, it does not leave us there. Instead, it is over against the darkness of this fallen world that we can see the brilliance of God’s immeasurable, uncommon love, even for sinners and worldly people like us.

The Immeasurable Hope of God’s Loyal Love (36:5-9)

This is the focus of vv. 5-9—the unfailing, ever-present, loyal love of God that is so uncommon among people on earth, but is abundantly available from heaven. We see much of God’s character on display here—there are several attributes being described. But the one that rises to the top over and over is God’s steadfast love. Simply translated “love” or “unfailing love” in the NIV; often rendered “steadfast love” or “lovingkindness” or even “mercy.” We see it at the beginning of v. 5: “Your *steadfast love*, O LORD, reaches to the heavens.” It’s at the beginning of v. 7: “How priceless is your *unfailing or steadfast love!*” And we see it at the beginning of v. 10: “Continue your *steadfast love* to those who know you.”

Over against the ugliness of worldly rebellion we have the unparalleled beauty of God’s love. And the sense of this word is more than just affection—it is that, but it also carries the idea of God’s loyalty. His *covenant* loyalty. His affection and commitment to do what is best for his people as expressed in passages like Exodus 34:6-7: “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in *steadfast love* and faithfulness, keeping *steadfast love* for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty . . .”

Or in passages like Isaiah 54:10: “‘For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my *steadfast love* shall not depart from you, and my *covenant of peace* shall not be removed,’ says the LORD, who has compassion on you.” This is God’s steadfast, loyal love for his covenant people, the people whom he has rescued and with whom he has made a special promise to be their God and for them to be his people. It is a “love that will not let us go,” as we sang earlier. Think of a toddler crossing the street with a parent. If the toddler is the one holding the parents hand, he or she can let go at any moment and run to trouble. That’s not unlike our love for God sometimes. But when the parent grips the toddler’s hand, that child can struggle and squirm all he wants, but we’re not letting go. Because we know what’s best for them. We love them and are committed to protecting them and bringing them safely to the other side of the street. That’s what God’s loyal love for his people is like—a love that literally will not let us go, but will guide us, protect us, keep us near to him, and bring us to where he wants us to be. God’s steadfast, loyal love.

And vv. 5-6 describe *the boundless scope of God's loyal love*, along with other qualities of God that express his commitment to do what is right in accordance with his covenant, with his promise. Look at the imagery here. Notice the reach of God's character—the majesty and grandeur of it. You have his loyal love extending clear up to the heavens—the highest heights—and his faithfulness up there in the clouds. You have his righteousness—his commitment to do what is right and make right what is wrong—and it's massive like the mighty mountains, like the mountains of God. And then down in the deep of the ocean we have God's judgments—his right rules and verdicts. Heavens, mountains, oceans, all of creation filled with the worthy character and steadfast love of God.

And here's the point: if God's love is so expansive in scope and majestic in grandeur, then it's able to reach down and rescue a lowly human or even a lowly animal from trouble. Look at the last part of verse 6: "O Lord, you preserve or save both man and beast." What's that doing there? That's the tangible expression of God's massive loyal love. His love is not too short to save. And not just from earthly trials, but from our own spiritual bankruptcy.

It's easy to think when we come face to face with how ugly our sin is, how utterly insufficient we are before God, when we get caught in a pattern of sin and weighed down by guilt and shame, or even when we are drowning in a trial, whether it's financial or emotional or relational or physical (illness and injury)—it's easy to think that we are beyond the reach of God's loyal love and grace. That he can't see us or his arm is too short to do something about it, and we're stuck in our trouble and the bitter reality of this world. And while it's true that sin does separate us from God, such that he hides his face from us and will not listen to us if we remain in our rebellion (Isaiah 59:2), for his covenant people—for those who have recognized their sinfulness and the weight of their offense against God, but have looked in faith to Jesus, who stood in their place—who lived the life we couldn't live and died the death we deserved to die—for those who through faith in Christ have become part of the covenant people of God, there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Listen again to Paul in Romans 8:

Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? . . . For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:33-35, 38-39)

Think about your sin. Think about the argument you had this morning trying to get the kids out the door to church. Think about the bitterness in your heart toward a parent who broke one too many promises. Think about the weight of that sin you've kept secret because you can't bear the shame and implications of letting someone else know. Think about your trials, all the ways this world reminds you that we are not yet in heaven. Think about the ungodly effect of this world on your life and now think of Jesus—of his sinless life, think of his cross—the pain, the shame, the sin poured out on him. Think of his resurrection and victory; think of his intercession for you at the right hand of God at this very moment, defending us from the accusers in our lives, in our hearts, and the Accuser himself, Satan, saying "No, this one's mine. I bought him with my own

blood.” Think of the salvation we have in Jesus and know that nothing can stand in the way of God’s love. That is the boundless scope of God’s loyal love for his people. A love that will not let us go!

Not only is God’s love massive and expansive, it is also of *incomparable value*. And that’s what vv. 7-9 show us. “How priceless is your unfailing love!” You can’t quantify the value of God’s love, and that value is described in several ways. First, by *the protection and security* we find in God’s loyal love. He is a shelter for his people; they find refuge in the shadow of his wings—like a mother bird covering her children to protect them from the wind and the storm, so God covers us, protects us from all this ungodly world throws at us. No other love can do this. This is an uncommon love. No other love—the love of a spouse, the love of a parent, the love of friend, is able to shelter us amid life’s storms. Only God is both powerful enough to control the storm and compassionate enough to carry his people through it, such that all his purposes are accomplished for our good and his glory.

Second, we see the priceless value of God’s love in terms of his *abundant provision*. The imagery here is lavish. “They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights” (v. 8). And this portrait of God’s loving provision takes us both back to creation and forward to God’s new creation. The word translated “delights” here is the word, “Eden”—the same name given to the garden of God at creation. What a picture of God’s abundant provision—everything the man and woman needed for life at their fingertips. And the imagery of feasting on the abundance of God’s house is a picture often associated with the great feast of God at the end of the age when Christ returns and evil is finally defeated and we will celebrate God’s victory and our salvation in his glorious presence. Listen to Isaiah 25:6-9:

On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The LORD has spoken. In that day they will say, “Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the LORD, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.” (Isa. 25:6-9)

No other love can provide for us like this love. No other love was active when God formed humanity at creation; no other love knows the deepest needs and desires of our hearts, no other love is able to satisfy us, to never let us down, or to keep its promises to the very end of the age. Only the loyal love of God in Jesus.

And the reason God is able to protect us and provide for us in his love is that he himself is the source of both life and light. Verse 9: “For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.” There is no life apart from God, the Creator and Sustainer of life; and yet he shares it abundantly with us. There is no wisdom apart from his wisdom and guidance, no light for walking in dark places apart from his light, his revelation. And in his grace he shone his light upon us, to guide us and give us all we need, to give us himself, as an expression of his priceless covenant love.

And what's remarkable about the value of God's love in vv. 7-9 is that so much of the imagery here is explicitly ascribed to Jesus Christ in the New Testament. 2 Corinthians 4:6: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." John 1:4: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men." John 6:35: "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." John 4:14: "The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

Jesus is the greatest, most beautiful, and costliest expression of God's loyal love for us. It is through sending his eternal Son, Jesus, that God has made good on all his covenant promises of life and blessing. And though it is true to say that God's love is priceless, it did indeed come with a price—the life of his only Son, given for us on the cross to rescue us from our sins. As 1 John 4:10 says, "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation [or atoning sacrifice] for our sins." This is the boundless scope and incomparable value of God's loyal love, even for sinners. It's not for people who are good enough, or who work hard enough to try and make it up to God. It is for bankrupt, hopeless sinners, who've let God down in every way, but who have found their hope and placed their faith in Jesus, who was good enough for us, who cleanses us from our sin through his death in our place, and who strengthens us and gives us new life by his Spirit in the power of his resurrection.

The Necessity of God's Loyal Love (36:10-12)

So as we find ourselves standing between two opposing but equally true realities of life in the meantime: the pervasive threat of worldliness and sin, and the immeasurable hope of God's loyal love, may the steadfast love of God take pride of place in our hearts. May we see how beautiful and how necessary it is and so cry out to God for him to continue in it. In other words, may we join the psalmist's prayer in vv. 10-12: "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!"

Despite the very real threat that this world poses in its arrogant irreverence for God—to overcome us or drive us away from him, v. 12 shows us how the worldly program will end—in judgment and death, like corpses strewn on the ground after battle. But the uncommon love of God for his people will never fail, will never be defeated. It is more abundant and far reaching than the sin and brokenness of this world, more valuable and costly than anything this world can offer, and it has been made available to us, even disloyal sinners like us, through faith in Jesus Christ. "For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations" (Psalm 100:5).