

A Portrait of Man Before the Holy One

A Sermon on Psalm 36

by

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1. Introduction

2. Man Is Utterly Depraved (vv. 1-4)

a. *The natural man's eyes are darkened (v. 1).*

i. Depending on what translation you use, this verse is rendered a few different ways.

1. The NASB, ESV, and the NET bible all render this similarly, where it says, "Transgression speaks to the ungodly within his heart, there is no fear of God before his eyes."
2. However, the King James, NIV, among a few others read something like, "The transgression of the wicked saith within my heart, there is no fear of God before his eyes."
3. This is actually the more accurate of the two because David is saying that this is a revelation of God given to him, concerning the nature of the ungodly, or the wicked.
 - a. These are not David's thoughts on the unbeliever, nor even the thoughts they might have of themselves in their heart of hearts.
 - b. In other words, whatever we might think of person who rejects Christ, this is how God truly thinks of them.

ii. There is no fear of God before his eyes.

1. This is the summary statement of everything he is about to say in vv. 2-4. But suffice it to say, at the heart of mankind's rebellion is this reality: they do not fear God.
 - a. This is the grand sin of mankind; this is the sin from which all other sins flow.
 - b. In the simplest terms possible, the way Scripture describes the natural man is that they live as functional atheists.
2. The apostle Paul pushes this reality even further in his letter to the Romans.
 - a. He speaks of the fact that God has made Himself known in all of creation so that every person is without excuse.

b. And that is enough, beloved, to send you to hell.

b. *The natural man's thoughts are delusional (v. 2).*

i. "For it flatters him in his own eyes concerning the discovery of his iniquity and the hatred of it."

1. Here David simply speaks to that part of the natural man that we call the conscience.

2. Without the fear of the Lord, the natural man literally smooths out his sins in his own eyes.

ii. The natural man thinks better of himself than he ought—if he didn't, he would see himself for who he truly is.

1. They flatter themselves by thinking, "I'm not as bad as so-and-so."

2. In everything, the natural man seeks to justify himself and push down their own conscience which accuses them of wrongdoing.

c. *The natural man's words and deeds are degenerate (v. 3).*

i. "The words of his mouth are wickedness and deceit; he has ceased to be wise and to do good."

1. Here, David simply confirms that the natural man's inward state is revealed in his words.

a. Notice his words are not merely wicked, that is, filled with malice—they are also filled with deceit.

b. Nothing he says can be trusted—and all of his lies are wrapped up under the guise of his self-deception.

2. The second half of v. 3 is then understood in light of the natural man's wicked and deceitful speech.

a. As Psalm 1 tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, this verse indicates much the same.

b. The point is simply that for the one who does not fear the Lord, his life will be characterized by a complete lack of wisdom.

ii. The problem is not simply that he is unwise and needs to learn better habits, but that he literally lacks the capability to be wise.

1. The natural man lacks the skill to apply wisdom in every facet of his life because his life is not arranged under God and His Word.

- a. As a wise man lives a life skillfully under the authority of the Word, the unwise man lives a life characterized by the very opposite of this.
 - b. His speech, his conduct, in other words, lacks any and all wisdom, and therefore, he lacks any and all skill to live well.
 - 2. There's a practical aspect to this where the person who fails to consider God in his decisions will inevitably just make poor decisions.
 - a. A person may make decisions that are wise in the world's eyes—but what does that really matter in the end when the world is just as unwise and godless as they are?
 - b. This is at the crux of the issue. They may show insight, understanding, and even skill in their decision making, but not in doing what is truly wise and right.
- d. *The natural man's steps are deviant (v. 4).*
 - i. "He plans wickedness upon his bed; he sets himself on a path that is not good; he does not despise evil."
 - 1. Here David focuses in on the plans that the natural man makes; we move beyond the mere external manifestations of his character to the very thoughts and intentions of his thoughts.
 - a. He lies awake at night to scheme.
 - b. He sets himself on the path of the wicked, because again, he is literally incapable of doing otherwise.
 - c. Finally, he does not despise evil.
 - 2. The point in vv. 2-4 is simply that a person who does not fear the Lord will be characterized by all of these things.
 - a. They flatter themselves and smooth out their sins, as if they aren't sins at all.
 - b. They are characterized by wicked speech and a lying tongue.
 - c. They devise evil plans and walk on evil paths because they do not reject evil.
 - d. In every conceivable way, they embrace their sin and live in this way because they love it.

- ii. This is, in its simplest essence, what the natural man looks like apart from the grace of God in Christ.
 - 1. This is why the Scriptures say, “There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one. Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving, the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness; their feet are swift to shed blood, destruction and misery are in their paths, and the path of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes” (Rom. 3:10-18).
 - 2. If you want a true portrait of the heart of man, look no further than this Psalm.
 - a. This is your son, your daughter, your spouse—this is *you*, in your best, natural condition apart from Christ.
 - b. David’s painted the picture of the natural man and now he moves to give an incredibly beautiful portrait of who God is.

3. God is Utterly Holy (vv. 5-12)

a. God’s love is infinite (v. 5).

- i. “Your lovingkindness, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness reaches to the skies.”
 - 1. Herein is the foremost difference between the natural man and the Holy One; it is man’s world which is dim and limiting, but God’s covenant-keeping love and faithfulness know no boundaries.
 - a. His “lovingkindess” here is that rich Hebrew term “Hesed,” which speaks of that love of God which is always and ever faithful to His covenant promises.
 - b. We think of terms like mercy, compassion, love, grace, loyalty, kindness, forgiveness, and faithfulness to describe God, but even if you lumped all of these things together, it still wouldn’t describe the fullness of what Hesed means.
 - 2. But even here, David says that this enduring, steadfast, immovable love born out of God’s own nature is without limit.

- a. It is not a mere emotion, but a reflection of the very character and nature of God Himself.
 - b. God’s faithfulness then is the natural parallel to His covenant-keeping love, as it too reaches to the skies.
 - ii. Yet it is in Christ where this beautiful truth is revealed in all its fullness.
 - 1. It is God’s covenant love and faithfulness which brought Him to make good on the promises given to Israel.
 - 2. This same covenant love and faithfulness is on display when we consider the fact that God has, for His own sake, remembered our sins no more.
- b. *God’s justice is immovable (v. 6).*
 - i. “Your righteousness is like the mountains of God; your judgments are like a great deep. O Lord, you preserve man and beast.”
 - 1. Here David simply joins the attributes of God’s righteousness and His justice to show that God is upright in all He does and everything He does fair, right, and good.
 - a. Everything that God is and does conforms to the true and righteous standard of perfect justice because He is the Standard.
 - b. The terms “the mountain of God” and the “great deep” are showing that His righteousness and His judgments are the greatest possible expressions of these things to the sons of men.
 - 2. Hand in hand, His righteousness and judgments testify of the greatness of God who stands above all Creation.
 - a. From the highest of heights to the deepest of depths, His righteousness and justice knows no bounds.
 - b. And the evidence of this? David says that God preserves, or saves, both man and beast.
 - ii. Yet again, in Christ, we find the fullness of this most beautiful truth about who God is.
 - 1. Christ is the perfectly righteous and just One.
 - 2. The evidence of all of this, according to this Psalm, is that He is the Sustainer and Savior.
- c. *God’s goodness is incomparable (vv. 7-9).*

- i. “How precious is your lovingkindness, O God! And the children of men take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They drink their fill of the abundance of your house; and you give them to drink of the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.”
 - 1. David now moves from God’s general provisions for all the earth to those special blessings found for those who are His children.
 - a. What David expresses in v. 7 is that beautiful truth, that in God Himself, there is safety and security.
 - b. Then in v. 8 David takes up priestly imagery to speak of all the good things they enjoy in Him.
 - 2. The climax of this section unfolds then in v. 9, where it is God Himself as the giver of all good gifts, especially to His children, that is drawn to the forefront.
 - a. In God Himself is the fountain of life and in Him we see light.
 - b. He alludes to the Creation account in Genesis, where we see firsthand that God is the very source of life.
- ii. Once more, we see the superlative proof of God’s goodness to His children in the person of Jesus Christ.
 - 1. In Him was the life, and the life was the light of men (Jn. 1:4).
 - 2. Christ further promised that anyone who believes in Him will drink of living waters.

d. God’s vengeance is inescapable (vv. 10-12).

- i. “O continue your lovingkindness to those who know you, and your righteousness to the upright in heart. Let not the foot of pride come upon me, and let not the hand of the wicked drive me away. There the doers of iniquity have fallen; they have been thrust down and cannot rise.”
 - 1. The first prayer David makes is that God would continue in His steadfast covenant love and righteous dealing to those who know Him.
 - a. He recognizes that God is the very source of every blessing we have, and so his heart cry is that God would continue to pour out these blessings all the more.
 - b. The simple reason for this is that David is enthralled with who the Lord is.

2. Then, David asks that the Lord keep the upright from the harm of the natural man in v. 11.
 - a. It is little wonder why he asks this, given vv. 1-4.
 - b. The imagery here is of the natural man placing his foot upon the neck of the righteous.
3. David prays with the expectation that God will deliver the righteous and judge the wicked, just as He has promised to do.
 - a. He looks with eyes to see that the wicked have already fallen; they've already been cast down and cannot rise.
 - b. And this simply depicts the utter hopelessness of the natural man as they stand before the Holy One.
- ii. Once again, we see the nature and character of Christ shine forth clearly in this.
 1. The book of Revelation perhaps gives us the clearest depiction of this truth.
 2. Remember, it matters not what they see themselves as, but how God sees them.

4. Conclusion

Small Group Questions

1. When you consider how God truly views mankind, how does this inform how you look at people? How does this inform how you understand world events unfolding around you?
2. How does God's view of the natural man inform your evangelism and why?
3. Recall how God has been so incredibly gracious to you, as you once fit the description of the natural man. How does this move you to praise?
4. Have you prayed a prayer like David in vv. 10-12? How would you go about doing so if you haven't?