

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

DECEIVED BY SIN OR DELIGHTED IN GOD?

Psalm 36

By

Steven J. Cole

March 8, 2009

© Steven J. Cole, 2009

For access to previous sermons or to subscribe to weekly sermons via email go to: www.fcfonline.org/sermons

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
Quotations are from the New American
Standard Bible, Updated Edition
© The Lockman Foundation

March 8, 2009
Psalms 2008-09, Lesson 11

Deceived by Sin or Delighted in God?
Psalm 36

God profoundly changed my spiritual life in the summer of 1970 when I first read A. T. Pierson's, *George Muller of Bristol* [Revell]. I have gone back to that book time and time again for spiritual encouragement and guidance. Muller was a great man of faith who trusted God to provide for over 2,000 orphans at a time in Bristol, England, in the 19th century. He refused to make any of the needs of the ministry known to any potential donor. Rather, he demonstrated that God hears and answers our prayers when we diligently seek Him by faith.

Roger Steer aptly subtitled his biography of Muller [Harold Shaw Publishers, 1975], "delighted in God!" Muller was a man who found joy in God. Muller emphasized that the first business of every morning should be to secure happiness in God through time in God's Word and prayer (Pierson, pp. 257, 315). Pierson said of Muller (p. 257), "He taught that God alone is the one all-satisfying portion of the soul, and that we must determine to possess and enjoy Him as such."

David was also a man who was delighted in God. In Psalm 37:4 he wrote, "Delight yourself in the Lord; and He will give you the desires of your heart." We see the same emphasis in many other psalms (e.g., 5:11-12; 16:11; 27:4; 31:19; 32:11; 33:1; 34:8). It is certainly a major emphasis in Psalm 36. We don't know what the circumstances were that prompted David to write this psalm. The title identifies David as "the servant of the Lord," which is only used elsewhere in Psalm 18. We can't be sure why it is only in these two psalms. But it is true that only those who are the Lord's servants, that is, submissive to Him as Lord, can be delighted in Him.

David begins the psalm in a rather unusual way, giving a succinct but profound analysis of the sinfulness of sin (36:1-4). Then he abruptly turns his focus on the delightfulness of God and the blessings that He bestows on His people (36:5-9). The psalm concludes with a prayer that the Lord will continue His lovingkindness to His people and protect them from the wicked. The final verse is

a prophetic look at the final judgment of the wicked. Thus David shows us in stark contrast two ways to live—in the deceitfulness of sin or in the delightfulness of God.

The deceitfulness of sin and the delightfulness of God should cause us to seek Him for a continuing experience of His love.

Charles Simeon has no less than seven sermons on different verses in this psalm, so there is much here that I cannot cover in depth. We will follow David's three divisions:

1. Sin deceives the sinner by flattering him so that he actively plans and pursues it (36:1-4).

Is David here describing only what may be called "the abandoned despisers of God" (John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], on Ps. 36:1, pp. 2-3), or does it refer to all sinners generally? I would agree with Derek Kidner (*Psalms 1-72* [IVP], p. 146), who comments on Paul's citing, "there is no fear of God before his eyes" (36:1b), at the end of his indictment of the human race in Romans 3. Kidner observes, "This is the culminating symptom of sin in Romans 3:18, a passage which teaches us to see this portrait as that of Man (but for the grace of God) rather than of an abnormally wicked type. All men as fallen have these characteristics, latent or developed."

In other words, Psalm 36:1-4 is a snapshot of the fallen human heart, apart from God's grace in Jesus Christ. It unfolds a progression, showing that sin begins in the heart and expresses itself in words and deeds. We can look at it in two parts:

- A. Sin deceives the sinner by flattering him so that he does not fear God or hate sin (36:1-2).

The first two verses contain some complex difficulties in the text, translation, and interpretation that go beyond my scholarly ability. One Hebrew scholar (J. A. Alexander, *The Psalms Translated and Explained* [Baker], p. 155) says of verse 1, "This is one of the most difficult and doubtful verses in the whole book of Psalms." The King James and NIV follow the reading "my heart," whereas the NASB and ESV follow the reading, "his heart."

If the first reading is correct, the NIV translation makes good sense, "An oracle is within my heart concerning the sinfulness of

the wicked: There is no fear of God before his eyes.” David would be reporting an oracle or word from God about the wicked, that their sin is rooted in the fact that they have no fear of God. If the variant behind the NASB and ESV is correct, transgression is personified as speaking to the hearts of the ungodly. That is, sin speaks to and entices them in their hearts.

The second verse is also difficult. It may mean that sinners flatter themselves into thinking that their sin is not so bad, even though others grow to hate them for it. The sinner is blind to what everyone else plainly sees, namely, that his sin is repugnant. Or, it may mean that sin flatters the sinner so that he cannot see his own sin or hate it for how evil it is. He is so deluded by his sin that he thinks he is right, or at least that he is no worse than everyone else.

If we can get beyond the interpretive difficulties, there are some profound insights here regarding sin and how it works to deceive us through flattery. First, at the heart of sin is a complete lack of understanding of who God is, so that sinners do not fear Him. They do not understand God’s absolute holiness. Therefore, they do not believe that He will judge all sin. Invariably, sinners think that God is a good old boy upstairs, who winks at sin, or at least who is tolerant of all but the worst sins. They view God as loving, but not as just and righteous. So He will be lenient on judgment day. This is verified by polls, which show that most Americans think that they will go to heaven when they die.

Second, sin flatters the sinner into thinking that he isn’t a really bad sinner, and so he does not hate his sin. He thinks, “Well, at least I’m not a terrorist or a child molester or a serial murderer.” So he excuses his lying, lust, greed, gossip, and other such sins, because these are more acceptable sins.

Harry Ironside (*Illustrations of Bible Truth* [Moody Press], p. 71) tells of asking a man after a gospel meeting, “Are you saved, sir?” The man replied that he was not, but he would like to be. Ironside asked him if he realized that he was a lost sinner. The man replied, “Well, I suppose I am, but I’m not what you could call a bad sinner. I am, I think, a rather good one. I always try to do the best I know.” Imagine that—a *good* sinner! We should rather agree with Puritan Ralph Venning, who wrote, “Consider that no sin against a

great God can be strictly a little sin" (cited by Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints* [Zondervan], p. 219).

Jonathan Edwards has an insightful sermon on verse 2 in which he spells out eight ways that sinners flatter themselves ("Self-Flatteries," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], 2:218-219):

1. Some flatter themselves with a secret hope, that there is no such thing as another world.... 2. Some flatter themselves that death is a great way off, and that they shall hereafter have much opportunity to seek salvation.... 3. Some flatter themselves that they lead moral and orderly lives, and therefore think that they shall not be damned.... 4. Some make the advantages under which they live an occasion of self-flattery. [He is referring to those living in a Christian country or raised in a Christian home, who think that they are thus right before God.] 5. Some flatter themselves with their own intentions [they intend to seek God later].... 6. There are some who flatter themselves, that they do, and have done, a great deal for their salvation.... 7. Some hope by their strivings to obtain salvation of themselves.... 8. Some sinners flatter themselves, that they are already converted [when they are not].

Since sin is so deceitful through its flattery, how can we know whether we are being deceived by it? Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- ü Do I fear God, before whom all things are open and laid bare (Heb. 4:13)?
 - ü Since God knows the very thoughts and intentions of my heart, am I in the habit of judging my own sin quickly on the thought level?
 - ü When I read the holy standards of God's Word, do I apply them to my own heart, or do I just skim over them or apply them to others?
 - ü Am I growing to identify and hate my own sins more and more through God's Word?
- B. Sin deceives the sinner so that he plans and pursues it (36:3-4).

David shows how enveloped in deceit the sinner really is. First, sin deceives him so that he cannot see and hate his own sins (vv. 1-2). But, then he uses wickedness and deceit in his own words toward others (v. 3). The second half of verse 3 indicates that this person is in a downward spiral. He used to have some semblance of common wisdom and good behavior, but he long ago abandoned it. Now, rather than despising evil, he lies awake at night thinking about his next sin, planning how to do it and plotting a path to get there (v. 4). So he is not just inadvertently drifting into sin. Rather, he is deliberately planning it.

If you are thinking about how you can get your girlfriend into bed, or how to sneak your next view of Internet pornography, or how to get your next drink or hit of drugs, then David is describing you! You do not despise evil; rather, you're planning how to do it. You may profess to be a Christian, but your secret thoughts reveal that there is no fear of God before your eyes! Take heed!

Then, without any transition, as if this contemplation of how sin flatters and deceives is too horrific, David abruptly shifts focus:

2. The delightfulness of God attracts us to seek Him as the source of every blessing (36:5-9).

From the depths of depravity, David leaps to the heights of God and His abundant blessings towards those who seek Him. Note five things:

- A. God's lovingkindness and faithfulness are immense (36:5).

"Your lovingkindness, O Lord, extends to the heavens, Your faithfulness reaches to the skies." David mentions God's lovingkindness three times in this psalm: in verse 5 with regard to its immensity; in verse 7 with regard to its value; and, in verse 10 as a prayer that the Lord will continue dispensing it.

The Hebrew word that the NASB translates "lovingkindness," is *hesed*. It is often coupled with "faithfulness," and thus has the nuance of "loyal love," or "covenant love." The Septuagint usually translates it with the Greek word for "mercy." The Hebrew word for "stork" comes from *hesed*, because the Hebrews observed the tender care that the stork has for its young. It flies into the high fir trees to make its nests secure from predators (Ps. 104:17). If you've ever seen a baby bird, there isn't much to be attracted to! They are

scrawny and ugly and spend all their time with their mouths open, squawking for food. And yet the stork parents show loyal love for their young, providing for all their needs. That's how God's loyal love is towards us.

God's "faithfulness" means that He always keeps His promises. He is consistent, never changing. By saying that God's loving-kindness extends to the heavens and His faithfulness to the skies, David means that these qualities are immense or inexhaustible. We can keep coming to Him for more of His love and He never runs out of it!

B. God's righteousness and judgments are impressive (36:6).

"Your righteousness is like the mountains of God; Your judgments are like a great deep. O Lord, You preserve man and beast." The Hebrew word for "righteousness" means "conformity to an ethical or moral standard" (*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. by R. Laird Harris, Gleason Archer, and Bruce Waltke [Moody Press], 2:752). God Himself is the standard for what is righteous. He always wills what is right and does what is right. To say that His righteousness is like the mountains of God (or, the mighty mountains) is to say that His standards are impressive and immovable, because they stem from His holy character.

God's judgments in this context refer to His providential governance of His creation. By saying that God's judgments are like a great deep, he means that they are unfathomable. God's ways are not our ways. We cannot understand all that He does or why He does it. We cannot understand many of the trials that He brings into our lives. Why does the Lord allow a drunken Herod to chop off the head of the godly John the Baptist? Why does He allow another Herod to execute James, while God delivers Peter from the same fate? All we can say is, it was His sovereign purpose.

When David adds that God preserves man and beast, the meaning is that since he takes care of irrational animals, surely He will care for our needs (Calvin, p. 10). When Paul considered God's impressive judgments, he exclaimed (Rom. 11:33), "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!"

C. God's lovingkindness is precious and inviting (36:7).

It's as if David can't contain himself as he thinks about how delightful God is, so he exclaims, "How precious is Your loving-kindness, O God! And the children of men take refuge in the shadow of Your wings." Derek Kidner (p. 147) observes, "The word *precious* establishes at once the change of scale from the immense to the intimate and personal. *Steadfast love* ... needs both emphases: that of verse 5 as too great to grasp, and of verse 7 as too good to let slip." The idea here in contrast to verses 1-4 is, how stupid it is of the wicked to disregard God and His ways! To miss out on God's immense and intimate love in order to pursue sin is the height of folly! God's love invites us to take refuge under His protective wings, as baby chicks hide under their mother's wings.

D. God's provisions for His people are abundant and delightful (36:8).

"They drink their fill of the abundance of Your house; and You give them to drink of the river of Your delights." "Abundance" is literally, "fatness." It pictures the best portion of meat from the sacrifices offered at the temple. In modern terms, picture prime rib or a delicious steak. To drink their fill literally is to be drunk with. So it mixes metaphors, but communicates having all of something delightful that you want or need.

To appreciate the river metaphor, you have to remember that David was writing to people who lived in a desert. For them, a flowing river was especially wonderful. It meant life and refreshment. You could have all that you needed to drink. You could cool off by bathing in it. You could irrigate your crops with it. The word "delights" is "Eden" in Hebrew, so it may be a reference to the original Garden, with the four rivers flowing from it.

Is this your concept of God towards you? Do you see His lovingkindness and faithfulness as immense? Do you think of His righteousness and judgments as impressive and awesome on the personal level, because He cares for you? Is His love precious and inviting to you? Do you see His provisions as abundant and delightful? But, there's more!

E. God Himself is the source of life and light (36:9).

"For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light." *Life* means not only that physical life comes from God, but

also spiritual life. This verse sounds like John 1:4, which says of Jesus, "In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men." Or, as Jesus claimed (John 5:21), "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes." Jesus is the source of eternal life for His chosen ones. The *fountain* of life suggests an unending supply. He never runs dry!

God through Jesus is also *light* for His people. Adam Clarke writes (*Clarke's Commentary* [Abingdon-Cokesbury Press], 3:335), "No man can illumine his own soul; all understanding must come from above." Spiritually, we are all like the man born blind (John 9). In our natural state, we can't see the beauty and glory of God and His many delights, because Satan has blinded our minds (2 Cor. 4:4). Only God can open blind eyes to see "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."

Jonathan Edwards has a wonderful sermon on Matthew 16:17, where Jesus tells Peter that he did not arrive at his understanding that Jesus was the Messiah through human reason. Rather, the Father revealed it to him. Edwards' sermon is titled, "A Divine and Supernatural Light, Immediately Imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God, Shown to be both a Scriptural and Rational Doctrine" (in his *Works*, 2:12). He argues that this divine and supernatural light is not just the rational belief that God is glorious and holy, but also a sense of the loveliness and beauty of these qualities.

So David begins by showing how sin deceives the sinner by flattering him so that he plans and pursues it, rather than hating it. Then he abruptly contrasts the immense delightfulness of God, to make us want to seek Him as the source of every blessing. Finally,

3. The delightfulness of God should cause us who know Him to pray for a continuing experience of His love (36:10-12).

"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."

David's prayer is for those who know God (36:10). Even though we who have come to know God through Jesus Christ have

experienced His grace and love, we need a continuing, steady flow of it. Even though He has promised it (Rom. 8:35-39), we still need to ask Him for it.

Also, David asks for God's righteousness to continue to be given to the upright in heart. We might think, "If they're already upright in heart, why do they need more righteousness?" But we are never fully sanctified in this life. We will not be completely like Jesus until the moment that we see Him face to face (1 John 3:2). And so we must continue to ask God to give us His righteousness. Also, this isn't just outward behavior, but uprightness of *heart*. We need to seek God for a pure heart, or thought life. All outward sin begins with corrupt thoughts that are not judged. If your righteousness is outward only, it is only a matter of time until you sin outwardly, because you haven't cut off the source.

In verse 11, David asks that the Lord protect him from the proud and wicked, who would try to bring him down to their level. Evil people feel convicted by righteous people. So they want to see the righteous fall so that they can justify their own sin. In the final verse, David prophetically looks ahead and sees the place where the wicked meet their final demise. David is so confident of God's righteousness and justice that he sees this yet-future event as if it has already happened. God will surely judge the wicked or else the Bible is false!

Conclusion

Have you cried out to Jesus Christ for life and light? Has He opened your eyes to the deceitfulness of sin, so that you hate it? Are you delighted in God and His abundant love? As John Piper points out, it is your duty to delight in Him (*The Dangerous Duty of Delight* [Multnomah Publishers]). As he also says (p. 21, italics his), "*God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.*" I encourage you to join George Muller in making the first business of every day to find happiness in God.

Application Questions

1. Why is the fear of God the foundation for a holy life? Why is fearing God *not* opposed to experiencing His love?
2. Edwards mentions eight ways that sin flatters the sinner. Can you think of other ways?
3. Why are so many people who were raised in church turned off towards God? Do we properly emphasize His abundant goodness and delightfulness in our homes and in the church?
4. How would you advise a Christian who said that he wanted to hate sin more and love God more? What should he do?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2009, All Rights Reserved.