

## Prayer

Sovereign Lord, bring Your miraculous power to bear on the lives of those who need you most. Heal those who suffer, liberate those who are in bondage, raise up those who are dead in their sins and speak out Your Good News for all. May we be ready to hear Your Word and do Your will, O Lord: AMEN.

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Personal Relationships

Pray and give thanks to the Lord for the wonderful friends you have, and for the great blessing of sharing your life with those who are close to you. Ask the Lord to bless your relationships, and ask Him give you the courage to endure any difficult times which arise, so that the greater good of genuine love and friendship will prevail and be a means of happiness for everyone.

## Meditation

I said:

What must I do to have a vibrant and effective faith?  
 What are the conditions of discipleship? How do I measure up?  
 What do I do to be worthy servant and follow the path of Jesus?  
 What must I do to live a life of peace that witnesses to the truth?  
 What does God require of me so that my life fits into His eternal plans?  
 What is going on in my life which is unworthy, and how can I overcome it?  
 What is the best way for me to serve God's people, the Church?

And You said:

Just love me, and love all the people you meet;  
 Then all your questions will be answered.

## Bible Study - Psalm 36

*For the director of music.*

*Of David; the servant of the LORD.*

- <sup>1</sup> *Rebellion reveals itself to the wicked deep within his heart;  
for there is no fear of God in his eyes.*
- <sup>2</sup> *He flatters his opinion so much he cannot detect or hate his own sin.*
- <sup>3</sup> *The words of his mouth are devious and deceitful;  
he has ceased to act with wisdom or do good.*
- <sup>4</sup> *He schemes evil whilst lying on his bed;  
he is set on a path of wrongdoing and does not reject evil.*
- <sup>5</sup> *Your faithful love reaches to the heavens, O LORD,  
Your faithfulness up to the clouds.*
- <sup>6</sup> *Your righteousness is like the great mountains,  
Your justice like the ocean deep.*

*O LORD, You save both people and animals alike.*

- <sup>7</sup> *How priceless is Your faithful love!  
Everyone can find refuge in the shadow of Your wings.*
- <sup>8</sup> *They feast on the wealth of Your house;  
You give them drink from the river of Your delights.*
- <sup>9</sup> *For with You is the fountain of life;  
and in Your light we see light.*
- <sup>10</sup> *Continue Your faithful love to those who know You,  
your righteousness to the upright in heart.*
- <sup>11</sup> *Do not let proud feet trample over me,  
nor wicked hands drive me away.*
- <sup>12</sup> *This is where those who do evil lie fallen;  
thrown down, and unable to rise!*

## Review

Psalm 36 is a masterpiece of reflective poetry; its words compare wickedness and sin (36:1-4) with the Covenant faithfulness and love of God (36:5-8), before concluding with a prayer request (36:10-12). The whole psalm is full of memorable phrases and contains profound theology about sin and the human condition, and about the nature of evil itself. Because of this, Psalm 36 is an important text from which we can learn and study both the way that evil works and also the way that God's salvation overcomes all the evil that stands in its way! The focal point of the whole psalm comes in verse 9 with these words; 'for with You is the fountain of life; and in Your light we see light.' This verse captures the perception and integrity of the psalmist who has clearly spent time thinking through both the problems create in his own world by the presence of evil, and the way that the light of God overcomes it.

The whole of psalm 36 is very personal. It is clearly a personal prayer from someone who asks the Lord to be faithful and overcome an enemy. Even the enemy is spoken of as an individual (see verses 1-4). In some translations of the Bible, the personal feel of the psalm is diluted because in an attempt to use language that shows no sex-bias, the plural is used rather than the singular. Hence, for example, verse 2 in the NRSV reads 'they flatter ...' rather than the singular 'he flatters ...' as it is in the Hebrew original. I prefer to keep close to the Hebrew and use the singular 'he' when referring to the evil person in the psalm because this enables us to feel the full force of what the psalm has to say. Evil, it says, is real and personal, and the Bible wants us to understand that it is not an abstract issue but something that affects real people all the time.

There is a helpful balance in the psalm, for it gives equal space to commenting on the nature of evil and to the characteristics of God's faithful love. This adds to the feeling that the whole psalm has been carefully composed. It is a very considered and thoughtful poem with a wealth of information about its subjects. It has a store of advice about the characteristics of evil which are often ignored or glossed over today, and it also presents the covenant faithfulness of God as the logical antidote to all evil. It is as if the writer's main concern is expressed in the prayer for God's continued love and protection in verses at the end of the psalm (36:10,11), but he has taken time to meditate before God about the whole matter, and this psalm is the result of that careful, and prayerful, concern.

Psalm 36 was clearly well known and used in the time of Jesus and the early church, and its words occur in several places in the New Testament. Paul echoes the psalm in his letter to the Romans 3:18 and 6:12ff where he talks of the all encompassing power of sin from which Jesus Christ has saved us. The picture of the river of God in verse 8 is used frequently in John's Gospel 1:4, 4:10, 8:12 and also in the Revelation of John 21:6, 22:1-5; the last of these references being to the New Creation of God at the conclusion of the last 'age' when sin and evil will be defeated. Also, the original idea of talking about God's love as being like the heights of the heavens and the depths of the oceans (36:5,6) is taken up in Romans 11:33 and Ephesians 3:18ff, as well as being an inspiration for many Christian hymns and songs!

## Going Deeper

Psalm 36 is a Psalm that will loose its power, however, if we simply take its well known phrases and do not look beyond them to the messages that the whole psalm is bringing, and that is what we shall now do. We will follow through the well thought out structure of the psalm; the nature of evil, the love of God and the Lord's protection of His people.

### The Nature of Evil

The beginning of the Psalm is quite sensational, using the Hebrew word for 'a revelation'. This word is usually used in the Old Testament for the prophetic words of God, but in this case, it is a revelation of wickedness. It is hard for translators to find a way of conveying this at the beginning of the psalm, and some versions of the Bible read simply 'transgression speaks to the wicked ...' (NRSV). This completely misses the point made by the psalm which is supposed to be radically clear right at the beginning; which is that where there is no fear of God which will hear His voice, then evil will raise its head and be revealed. There cannot be a vacuum in the heart and if it is not filled with God then evil will become evident. Psalm 36 says quite clearly that this evil is deeply rooted within the heart of men and women; 'rebellion reveals itself to the wicked deep within his heart ...' (36:1)

In the following verses, the nature of sin is outlined, starting from the essential rebellion of humanity spoken of in verse 1; 'there is no fear of God in his eyes'. In other words, sin starts with

a lack of acknowledgement of God the Creator, and this leads to denial. Verse 2 follows logically and explains that without external reference to God, the focus is on 'self' as the centre of everything. It is unlikely that people will see themselves as the source of sin if they are the centre of their own universe 'he flatters his opinion so much he cannot detect or hate his own sin.' Once this has happened within any human soul, then the distinction between good and evil becomes blurred and it is impossible to see truth with any clarity; "he has ceased to act with wisdom or do good" (36:3).

I find it strange that those who deny the existence of God often claim to have a 'bigger' view of the Universe than those who are religious; when the centre of their universe is, to put it bluntly, human self consciousness and human science. The humanist denies the possibility that we can have any other view on the Universe other than what our own senses and perceptions allow, and this seems to me to be profoundly limited. A Christian has the opportunity to access the mind of the Creator and observe the vastness of Creation from the standpoint of its Creator; giving glory to what lies above and beyond (see v6 for example), and not merely within their own experience or consciousness. Science is a powerful tool, but it is only an extension of physical human faculties and despite its immense achievements it cannot satisfy the human heart, let alone its spirit.

Evil of course develops and builds upon itself, and the way that this happens is developed in verse 4. Sin grows firstly by thinking about it ('he schemes evil whilst lying on his bed') before it affects the will ('he is set on a path of wrongdoing') and then overtaking the mind, which is unable to perceive what is wrong at all ('and does not reject evil'). Have a good look at this progression, because it can teach us a great deal. Sin takes many forms, but it nearly always follows a path just like this. Satan will put every opportunity in front of us to think about the benefits of wrongdoing and will tempt us in every way; from his point of view, all else flows from there. If we are to make our stand, then we need to know this truth and face it; and we need the power and guidance of God's Holy Spirit if we are to stop such evil at its root.

### **The love of God**

Verses 5 to 9 contain a rich mixture of pictures of God. It is therefore easy to read over them too quickly so that they lose their power. These verses are designed to be dwelt upon and each small stanza tells us something to keep our minds busy. This itself is significant, because it reveals the first line of defence against evil, which is to be busy with what is right and good. If our minds are busy then we do not give Satan the opportunity to divert us to mischief and wrongdoing. Certainly, if we spend time with Scriptures such as this, perhaps memorising them and thoughtfully dwelling on each section, then our minds will be fully occupied!

The height and depth of the righteousness and justice of God are the inspiring subject of verse 6. These majestic loving qualities of Almighty God 'save both people and animals alike', and as such may be thought of as the glue that holds creation together. When you think that people commonly consider the Old Testament as the part of the Bible that describes God as legalistic and wrathful, this Psalm contradicts that misperception incredibly well. Certainly, the love of God is described as 'priceless' and equally available to all Creation; indeed, the brooding image of finding 'refuge under the shadow of Your wings' is a powerful, and deeply emotional picture, conveying a sense of God's love as caring, nurturing, strengthening and enabling. Jesus Himself spoke of His great passion for Jerusalem by extending the picture of this Psalm 'how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings ...' (Matt 23:37).

God's love is at heart a love of pure and complete generosity, as is clear from the sumptuous picture presented in verses 8 and 9 'they feast on the wealth of your house ...'. Again, the picture of a feast is one that Jesus uses many times over in His ministry (Matt 22:1f., Luke 14:8), describing the superabundant generosity of God. Of course, the love and generosity of God is the one thing that evil has no defence against, for all the evil in the world cannot stand against the joy, fulfilment and happiness generated by pure love. These verses open our minds and hearts to greater things, and if you will allow Him, the Holy Spirit will guide you through a wealth of other riches which burst out of them as we consider what may be meant by 'the river of delights' and the 'fountain of life'. Certainly, 'in Your light we see light!'

### **The Lord's protection of His people**

Right at the end of the Psalm comes the prayer that may well have been the original reason for this Psalm. It is a prayer asking the Lord to persist in His faithful Love for the righteous, and by

implication, for the one who says the prayer. It is simple prayer, but perhaps that is the kind of prayer that the Lord loves; honest, and to the point. Evil is real and unless we keep close to our Lord, it is easy to feel that we are trampled underfoot by the terrible things that happen in this world both to others and to us (36:11). But where the Lord's people turn to Him in prayer, all evil is defeated; 'this is where those who do evil lie fallen ...' (36:12), for when we submit to the Lord and the great wealth of His love, then Satan has no place.

All of us need the help of the Almighty, because we can never avoid the evil influences of the world that Satan uses to bring trouble and distress into the world. But we can be protected; and a Psalm such as Psalm 36 is a powerful Scripture that helps us stand our ground as those who have faith in God. Living in New Testament times, our faith is enlightened by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has demonstrated all the truths of this Psalm. This prayer is simple, but out of it flows profound truth and if we dwell on this, we can benefit from the amazing wonders of God's love.

## **Application**

How can we 'apply' a Scripture such as this? Certainly we can spend time with it, perhaps even learn it and benefit from allowing some of its glorious phrases to inspire our hearts and minds. The psalm itself is however, a model of reflection. It shows us the merits of thinking through difficult subjects such as the nature of evil and its consequences, and doing so by inviting the Holy Spirit to guide us and reveal to us the truth. I do believe that the writer of this psalm did just this; he waited on the Lord for inspiration that would counter the revelation of evil that takes places in the heart of the wicked (36:1), and the result was a truly wonderful psalm which has inspired generations, including our Lord.

We can give no space to Satan or any evil. He will fill any vacuum that is left for him and pollute any Christian endeavour where people wander from the pathway of the Lord. Psalm 36 points us firmly to the sole answer to the problem of evil faced by Christian disciples, and that is to be focussed, indeed totally consumed, by the love of God which overcomes all evil and sin. This, you may think, is easy to say and not easy to do. I disagree. There is no reason why any of us who profess faith cannot make sure that our words and actions are constantly centred upon the love of Christ who saved us. This work is hard but not impossible, even though we may make mistakes. If love is our guide, then this is true liberation, and a way of life that all of us can find, however different we may be in culture, birth or status. There is no substitute for the Love of God in Christ Jesus.

## **Questions** *(for use in groups)*

1. Psalm 36 describes a way that evil takes a grip on people. Can you give examples of this from your experience?
2. Do you see Jesus within this Psalm? Where?
3. Which of the many picture of God in this Psalm are the most important to you? Can you explain any reasons why this is so?

## **Discipleship**

As you may suspect, I strongly suggest learning this psalm. You may attempt this but find that after a week, you have forgotten it. Do not despair, its words will still affect your soul, and the more you spend time trying to learn Scripture, the easier it will eventually become. I find it very hard, but amazingly, I find that I can recall all manner of useful Scriptures at a moment's notice. This Psalm helps us to fight evil and live by the light of the love of God. What more could any of us want from a Psalm?

## **Final Prayer**

Lord of silence and Lord of speech, help me to use words carefully. Help me to think carefully and address my thoughts to you. In this way, safeguard my tongue and my whole life from unnecessary trouble and distress, allowing the enemy to laugh at my faith and pull me down. This I ask through Jesus Christ, AMEN.