

Notes on Psalm 36—41

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Psalm 36

The breaking of God's law is no light matter. It ferments in the heart of the wicked who arrogantly think that there is no-one to find out and punish them. But Paul quoted this psalm to show that the whole world was caught up in this web of evil (Rom. 3:18–20). Where can one stand to be able to be objective about sinning.

This psalm writer knew. He stood within the covenant of God where he could be sure of God's steadfast love and faithfulness. That is why Christ is the one in whom we stand. He came to be among us and was full of grace and truth (John 1:14, parallel to steadfast love and faithfulness). Through him, and through the Holy Spirit (John 4:14; 7:38f.) we feast on the abundance of God's house and discover the fountain of life. We also pray that God will deliver us from evil. Only as the beloved of God may we escape the entanglements of sin.

Psalm 37

We all have trouble when ungodly people prosper and the godly do not. Is God governing justly? Does it matter that we live for God? This writer was persuaded that the righteous would prosper—eventually. Help had not come at the time of writing but he has called us to live in hope. How can we do this when all seems hopeless?

37:1–11 He calls us to consider that the righteous are in the hands of the Lord. They should not give way to frustration but should entrust themselves to God. The wicked are unprotected by God and may incur his judgement, but Israel, living under God's covenant promises, can expect to receive the desires of their hearts, and vindication.

37:12–20 He calls us to consider that the wicked in the hands of the Lord. They are not measured so much by their deeds as by their opposition to God in the persons of his people (12, 14). They should be seen as those over whom God laughs (13) and who will fall on their own swords (15). Better to have little (16) and to live in the promise of God (18).

37:21–33 He calls us to consider the character of the wicked and the righteous. The righteous are generous—the good that God does for them (22, 25, 33) has entered their hearts (21, 26). They are made firm footed (23) even though they may slip (24). They speak wisdom and justice (30) because God's law is in their hearts (31). The wicked are grasping and unwilling to pay their debts (v. 21). They seek to kill the godly—as they did with Christ (32).

37:34–40 He calls us to consider the coming salvation. God's people are called blameless and peaceable (37). This comes because they wait on God and keep his way (34). They will be part of the enduring kingdom of God. For Israel, this was through their children (37), but believers in Christ have the hope of resurrection and personal participation in all the good things God has in store for this creation. God is our refuge and salvation. He will not fail us because our hope is in him (39–40).

Prayer

Lord, do not give me up to the sin of my own heart. Lead me again today into the riches of your grace, to feast on you and to be satisfied. Keep my heart when it is tempted by the ease and prosperity of godless people. I know that it is good that I learn to trust in you and wait for the deeds that you do in the earth. May the love of Christ who died and now reigns, and the promise of Christ for our welfare be sufficient to keep me in faith and hope and love, and to busy me with the deeds that reveal your grace, for his name's sake. Amen.

Psalm 38

It is easy to imagine oneself justified by successes and human approval when all is well, but sickness reminds us of our mortality and of what our life before God really is. Now, friends are not so eager to be near. More potently, those who feared our strength do not pity our weakness and see their opportunity to oppose us openly.

This man did not heed these taunts but set his heart to have God's favour. He had become aware of his sins. Accusations came more from himself than from others. But he could deal with God from within the covenant promises made to Israel. He did not want the testimony of those who did not trust in God to prevail, and, contrary to the testimony of his enemies, there was forgiveness with God.

Psalm 39

There is a contrast here between the chastenings of God and the scorn of fools. The writer had tried not to respond to the latter but finally spoke his mind. But to what purpose? His end would be the same as those he spoke against. The taunts of his enemies were as futile as his objections to them. All stood in the presence of God. Little enough of his life was left but he had hope in God and so, he prayed. These chastenings were not all there was to God.

Prayer

Father, through the grace of your Son, I am assured that there is forgiveness in you, and by the resurrection of your Son, I am assured that you have preserved a living hope for all who trust in you. Though my heart and flesh fail, with accusations, with illness, or with the futility of all things, I come to you, living God. May my brief life not be spent reacting to those who hate you. Have mercy on me, forgive me, heal me. May I live in your presence, and live to give witness to the grace you have revealed in your Son, in whose name I pray. Amen.

Psalm 40

Psalms are best read from three perspectives. The Spirit of Christ stirred true faith in the first worshipper. But there is no true human faith without the coming of Christ to give it validity. Then, there is ourselves who live in Christ and may pray the prayer in its completed meaning.

So, happy is the person whom God has delivered from a 'miry bog' and who now sings to God from a position of assured faith. Through Jesus Christ, we have been delivered from sin and death and the devil and the world and a host of situations into which these powers had delivered us.

Sacrifices were prescribed by God but were no replacement for obedience (I Sam. 15:22; Isa. 1:11). Whatever obedience this ancient worshipper had given, it anticipated the obedience of Christ who alone could bring to an end the need for sacrifices (Heb. 10:5–10).

Now the writer linked his problem to his past sinfulness (v. 12) and he felt overwhelmed. But he was not removed from God. When a Christian is troubled and his conscience says there is good reason why he should suffer, let him ask God to deliver him. Let him ask God to remove the accusers and to wait for God to raise him up.

Psalm 41

What is so special about considering the poor? Could this obliterate that fact that this man had sinned? Rather, he had come to know that the Lord was gracious, and he bore witness to this in the mercy he showed to others. So, he could not be terrorised by accusers.

But he was desperately sick, and his enemies and one former friend took the opportunity to wish the worst for him. Here is the terror of our mortality, that we know we deserve death, and all who echo this haunting fear do the devil's work. God's grace in Christ has taught us better things. We are already justified and have access to God's grace in which we stand. Satan has been defeated when Christ died, and therefore, we may rest our case in the hands of our gracious God.

Prayer

Father, when my life is complicated by illness and enmity, and then, by my own conscience reminding me of my sins, show me again your Son who has made atonement for us forever. Let me rest in his perfect obedience, dismiss the taunts of accusers and await your deliverance. Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner. Amen.