

The Love Of God

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[0:00] Psalm 36, to the choir master of David, the servant of the Lord. Psalm 36, to the choir master of David, the servant of David, the servant of David, the Lord sets himself in a way that is not good.

He does not reject evil. Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens. Your faithfulness to the clouds.

Your righteousness is like the mountains of God. Your judgments are like the great deep. Man and beast you save, O Lord. How precious is your steadfast love, O God.

The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house. And you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life.

In your light do we see light. O continue your steadfast love to those who know you. And your righteousness to the upright of heart. Let not the foot of arrogance come upon me, nor the hand of the wicked drive me away.

[1:35] There the evildoers lie fallen. They are thrust down and unable to rise. Amen. There's been a great many attempts through the centuries to beautifully capture the depths of God's love in a song.

We've sung a few songs this morning that I've attempted to do that. My favorite song, perhaps, that really does that well was written by a man named Frederick Lehman.

It was published first in its completed form in 1919, a little more than 100 years ago. Lehman was a German immigrant. He was living in Pasadena, California at the time, working in a citrus packing plant.

And having written the first two verses and a chorus to the song, he couldn't find a way to complete it. A couple of years go by and he comes across a nearly thousand-year-old Hebrew poem that he felt perfectly fit for a third verse in this hymn that he had been working on for so long.

So he adapted it to the song and he added it in. Now, if you can imagine living just a few miles from the Pacific Ocean, you can imagine Lehman's unique vision of God's love as he writes, Could we with ink the ocean feel, and were the skies of parchment made, were every man on earth or every stalk on earth a quill, and every man a scribe by trade?

[3:08] To write the love of God above would drain the ocean dry, nor could the scroll contain the whole, though stretched from sky to sky.

Now, that is a beautifully, beautiful description of God's love for us. In Psalm 36, David is writing his own beautiful ballad of God's incomprehensible love.

It's a psalm intended for corporate worship from its very inception. We see that in the superscription of the psalm. It's sent to Israel's choir master.

It's meant to be sung by all of God's people as they gather together for worship. But it's sent by the servant of the Lord, a title that is teeming with messianic significance.

It's really only applied in the psalms and in the scriptures to a few unique individuals, Moses and then David, and of course, them pointing forward to God's servant, the Lord Jesus Christ.

[4:14] David writes it and sends it to the choir master so that God's people would always sing of God's saving love displayed ultimately in the work of his promised king.

Lots of people talk of God's love. Many people speak of God's love actually without seeming to truly grasp its significance, reality.

You don't really understand the depths of it. Cultural ideas of divine love is really more of a view of unconditional approval, unconditional kindness, universal kindness to all people.

And of course, God is kind to all his grace shows up to the righteous and the unrighteous. We know that that's true. But the cultural idea of God's love, those who would acknowledge it, is they picture more of a doting grandfather.

We spent the last couple of days with Julie's dad and stepmom. They brought all of the grandkids to the Great Wolf Lodge. And you can watch, some of you have met Charles, Julie's dad.

[5 : 25] You can watch him with his grandchildren. He dotes on them. In his eyes, they've never done anything wrong. And nor would they ever do anything wrong. They've never disobeyed.

There's nothing worth judging in them. He just wants to love them. He wants to give to them. He wants to provide for them in every way. Lots of people, when they're thinking of God's love, that's the picture that they have in mind.

Kind of this doting grandfather who sees no real wrong in you, but just wants to shower you with all the things that your heart might desire.

But that's not at all what so excited and moved the affections of King David in Psalm 36 or Frederick Lehman as he reflected on the love of God in his great hymn.

The love of God is actually far more profound than that. And this psalm, it gives us just a taste of the true significance of God's love.

[6 : 25] David takes us on a bit of a journey here. The first thing that he does for us is he paints for us a portrait of the human condition. A portrait of the human condition.

Look with me again at the first four verses. Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart. There is no fear of God before his eyes. He flatters himself in his own eyes so that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated.

The words of his mouth are trouble and deceit, and he ceased to act wisely and do good. He plots trouble while on his bed. He sets himself in a way that's not good.

He does not reject evil. What is this? It's a portrait of the human condition here. David begins the song of God's glorious love in a surprisingly sour place.

This opening stanza doesn't actually look to the Lord's beauty. It looks to the ugliness of human sin. And herein actually lies a key to recognizing the true wonder of God's love.

[7 : 36] You cannot truly value it until you've come to terms with the reality of your own depravity and corruption.

The portrait David paints here is not a picture of the worst of sinners. This is a picture of every sinner.

This is the every man. We can fiddle around with the language even. You'll notice probably there's a footnote even in the bottom of the page in your Bible on that first verse.

Or actually what this literally reads as is, transgression speaks into my heart, deep into my heart, David writes. This is every one of us.

It's a poetic display of the human condition. This is a picture of you here. It's a picture of me.

[8 : 39] So as we were carefully examining a portrait in an art gallery, let's just take a moment and soak in what it is that David says about this.

Because this is actually the key to really understanding God's love. Five things stick out to me here. First, sin comes from within us.

Sin comes from within us. Look again at verse 1. Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart. Transgression here is a crossing of a moral boundary.

Speaks is interesting because this is typically the term that's used for the oracles of God. It's as if David is taking transgression, sin. He's personifying sin and letting sin take the place of God as it speaks.

And where is it that this transgression and this sinfulness speaks? Deep within us. Deep within our hearts. The popular idea is that with maybe just a few exceptions, people are basically good.

[9 : 47] That if we just reach down deep inside of us, there's something good there and we can all be better and do better and make things better.

The scriptures actually teach the opposite of that. It says in Jeremiah that our hearts are deceitful, that they're wicked beyond what we can even really understand.

They're desperately sick, incapable, apart from grace, of being healed. And that's what David's on about here.

Sin personified enters deep in our hearts, meaning it comes from within us rather than being foisted upon us from an external source.

You see, we could go back to that 1 Peter chapter 5 and verse 8 that we read a few moments ago. And we could say, okay, that's where sin really comes from. Sin is not something I do.

[10:47] Sin is something that the adversary forces me to do. It's that great devil made me do it that you use when you're finally getting in trouble as a kid, right? Wasn't me, mom.

Satan made me do it. No, the scripture actually says the opposite here. No, it's actually coming from within you. James clarifies this for us in James chapter 1 when he says that each of us is tempted when we are, Lord and enticed, not by an external source.

We are Lord and enticed of our own desire, of the own lust that's in us. When we want what we want, we are then enticed to sin against the Lord.

That's our nature. In other words, we sin because it's in our nature to do it. We're not sinners because we sin. We sin because we're sinners.

That's what David's on about here. Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart. Sin comes from within us. The second thing that sticks out to me here is this. Our nature has no fear of God.

[11:54] This is our human condition before Christ apart from grace. We have no fear of God. Get the second part of verse 1. There's no fear of God before his eyes.

Paul quotes this. Some of you will remember in Romans chapter 3. Paul strings along a number of different Old Testament passages. He's asserting that all people are sinful before God, that we're all sinners.

This is the one he concludes with. He quotes this very phrase. There is no fear of God before their eyes. That's why we come back to this passage, and we say this isn't really about highlighting the extreme wickedness of a select few.

No, this is every man. This is the human condition. Paul affirms that for us in Romans chapter 3.

What is he talking about? But this is not the typical Hebrew word for fear, that reverential fear.

It's a different kind of word that's being used here. This is abject terror that is meant here. David says, Christopher Ashe says, It's not simply that they have not learned reverence, but they have not learned to be properly frightened of God in his majesty and holiness.

[13:15] To be frightened of God is the necessary precursor to grace. Not to tremble before God is both the root and the result of transgression, he writes.

And that's helpful. If we take the popular idea that God's love really is just like this doting grandfather who doesn't really see much wrong, all he wants to do is shower us with the deepest desires of our hearts, then we're completely missing a huge piece of this.

In order to really understand his love, we have to understand his holiness. That's one of the biggest problems with that popular view. It minimizes, sometimes outright denies God's holiness and his just wrath against sinners.

That's a fatal error. Until you tremble before his holiness, you cannot understand the fullness of his love. Third thing that sticks out here.

In our human condition, our fallen nature apart from grace, we are self-deceived. Self-deceived.

Verse two. He flatters himself in his own eyes so that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated.

[14:38] I'd encourage you to go and look at what Jonathan Edwards has said about this. He's written so many ways that we flatter ourselves in our sin. We're self-deceived, but the sense of the verse is simple.

The sense of it is that we are so self-deceived that we're blind to our own lostness, never able to learn to hate our own sin.

That's a common picture of us in the Bible, isn't it? That we're blind. We're in darkness.

Self-deceived.

The New Testament says that until the Lord returns, people will go on being deceived and deceiving themselves and deceiving others. It will just continue again and again and again.

That's the human condition. Fourth thing. We're totally corrupted. Totally corrupted. Verse three. The words of his mouth are trouble and deceit.

[15:35] He has ceased to act wisely and do good. It's that common dual paradigm of word and deed. What's David saying?

He's saying everything about us is touched by sin and depravity and corruption. There's no part of our lives where our corruption is not evidence.

It's in the way that we talk. It's in the things that we do. It's everywhere. It shows itself in everything. And then the fifth thing we find in verse four that our sin is all-consuming.

He plots trouble while on his bed. He sets himself in a way that's not good. That is, he digs his heels in. He digs his heels in in these things that isn't right.

He doesn't reject evil in his life. He pursues his own sinfulness. Think about this picture here. He plots trouble while on his bed.

[16 : 32] There's a reason that stress and anxiety affect our sleep. We lay in bed at night. Life is quieted. Distractions are removed unless you have a three-month-old.

You're alone in the privacy of your own thoughts. It's often in those moments that those thoughts begin to rage with various anxieties in our life.

We're laid in your bed at night and you thought about those who crossed you or those who you're unhappy with and you began plotting, boy, if they just said this to me, this is what I would say back. Or if they just did this, this is how I would get my vengeance or this is how I'm gonna deal with this thing. It's in our nature, isn't it? It's in our nature to do it. It's in that stillness that we ought to pray, that we ought to repent.

Instead, our nature plots and our hearts are further hardened in that self-deception. What's David doing here at the beginning before he ever mentions the first thing about God's love?

[17 : 37] He has to set the proper stage for that love. By saying, here's who we actually are. This is what's true of our nature, true of our human condition.

And this is an essential backdrop to the dramatic description of God's love that we find in the next stanza. So that we not only see a portrait of the human condition, then we come to see the preciousness of God's steadfast love.

The preciousness of it. Look at verse five. Your steadfast love, O Lord, it extends to the heavens. Your faithfulness to the clouds.

Your righteousness is like the mountains of God. Your judgments are like the great deep. Man and beast you save, O Lord. How precious is your steadfast love, O God.

The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life.

[18 : 43] In your light do we see light. Standing in stark contrast to man's nature is the nature of God. David lists four divine attributes here.

The capstone of those, the most preeminent of those in this psalm is steadfast love. God's steadfast love, it refers particularly to his covenantal love.

Throughout the Bible, we see a series of covenants that God makes with his people. All of them are pushing forward to something. They're pushing forward to a promised salvation through a savior king.

And that covenant, again and again, it is steadfast in that it's unchanging. He will never renege. Even more than that, it's rooted entirely in love.

How is God's covenant rooted entirely in love? In this sense, nothing else compels God to make a saving covenant with man except love.

[19 : 58] It's the only possible explanation for God's desire to provide any salvation from this sinful state at all. There's no other explanation.

We can offer him nothing. We bring nothing to the table. One old preacher said, we bring nothing to our salvation except the sin that makes it necessary.

He can get nothing from us that he cannot create in a moment. Why would he do it? Why would he make this covenant? Because he loves us.

It's the only explanation. Flowing out of that steadfast love is seeing all of these other attributes that David mentions here.

Because he loves us, because that love is steadfast, he will always be faithful to do what he's promised. Because he loves us and because that love is steadfast, he will be righteous in executing this promise.

[21 : 04] Because he loves us, because that love is steadfast, he's perfect in his judgments to establish that promise. And we see it unfolding progressively through the scriptures.

Step by step by step, more and more and more of God's love do we see. Because he never changes his promise. He is faithful to it even when we are unfaithful.

And all of those attributes, we're told in verse six, are working toward the salvation of those hopelessly described in the first four verses.

Notice what he says. The end of verse six is amazing. All of these attributes are working to this salvation. Man and beast you save, oh Lord. What does he mean by that?

He only means to say that God's salvation, what all of this is moving towards, is total in its scope. That God in salvation is doing a greater work than just providing you forgiveness.

[22:05] He is pushing forward to a great recreation of all things in the new heavens, in the new earth. This salvation that he provides out of his divine love is total.

It's complete in all things. Paul reminds us in Romans eight, the world itself, nature itself, it groans under the curse of sin and it's awaiting the great revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ in his return when he sets all things right.

Not only are you forgiven, but God is making all things new. This salvation he provides out of his divine love, it is a total and complete and precious salvation.

And who is it for? It's for the people that David described in verses one to four because that's the only people that there is.

That's why God's love is so great. Do you see how the psalm is now beginning to take shape? Do you see why David began where he did?

[23:11] Though we are wretched and totally corrupt in our nature, God is faithful and his love compels him to rescue us from sin and death.

great emphasis is given in verses five and six to the extent of this covenantal love. Look at how David describes it.

This steadfast love, it extends to the heavens. His faithfulness goes to the clouds. His righteousness is like the great mountains of God.

His judgments are like the great deep. He's using nature as a picture of the extent of God's love. He's saying it, it's limitless.

We can't plumb the depths of God's love any more than we can plumb the depths of the great deeps. His steadfast love, in other words, it has no end.

[24:16] I want you to think about that in relationship to the first four verses. The first four verses, we have a picture of total corruption. our sin that is in our nature, it affects every part of our lives, our thoughts, our words, our deeds, everything.

It's there, it's present. But even still, God's love is greater. His steadfast love is more profound.

Calvin says this, this is so good. However great the depth of wickedness which there is among men and though it seem like a flood which breaks forth and overflows the whole earth, yet still greater is the depth of God's providence by which he rightly disposes and governs all things.

And what is that providence working toward? Romans 8 tells us it's all working for the good of those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. it's all working for the salvation of his people promised in his covenant.

As great as your sin is, God's love is greater still. Isn't that amazing? A few of us this week had an opportunity to visit with the community pregnancy center in Lake Norman.

[25:44] We pray for them on a regular basis. I know you pray for them regularly. If you ever get an opportunity to go and visit at one of their open houses, I'd really encourage you to do that. Sarah Lynn kind of works as a liaison between our church and that ministry and I'm sure she has some of those dates in her mind she could share them with you and I would encourage you to do that to hear about what they're doing.

In their building, the lady that gave us a tour the other day, there's a room in there where there's a giant tree painted on the wall and coming out from that tree are just a bunch of branches and the branches are extending around the other walls in the room.

It's almost to the point where it begins to surround whoever comes in the room. On those branches are individual leaves and on the leaves are names, all kinds of names.

Each of those names represents a child who was murdered in his or her mother's womb. they're on the wall because at some point after the abortion she said sometimes it's days, sometimes it's months, sometimes it's decades.

Mother has come to them for counsel, has repented, trusted Christ, given her baby a name, given her baby a burial and they put that name up on the wall.

[27:11] and what has that meant to communicate to us? It's the wonderful extent of God's love. There is no sin so great that God's love is not greater still.

There is no sinner so corrupt that his faithfulness is any less sure. you think of the greatest sin that you've ever committed, the greatest sinner that you know.

God's love is greater still. His mercy is faithful and it's true and it's there for those women and those men who do such things.

It's there for those who do even greater things than that. that's the extent of God's love. And then we get to verses 7 and 9 and we see David begins to drill down even a little further to describe the benefits of God's love.

So glorious is his love that the faithful finds shelter beneath the shadow of his wings. How precious is your steadfast love, O God!

[28:28] The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house. You give them drink from the river of your delights for with you is the fountain of life and in your light do we see light.

How can this be? Sinners were condemned in verse 1 for not trembling in abject fear before the Holy God. Is it not then a contradiction to just a few verses later say that we may then run to him like little chicks run beneath the wings of a mother hen?

That's the picture. Is that not a contradiction? No, it's no contradiction at all. It's the benefit of God's steadfast love.

Because of his limitless love those who tremble before him may also rest beneath the shadow of his wings. those who seek refuge in him feast at his table.

They drink deeply of his delights. God makes his enemies to be his children and their inheritance is life and light.

[29:46] Those who were once self-deceived in darkness and blind now have seen light. those who were once dead in their trespasses and sins have now in his shelter been given life and life eternal.

By nature we're in darkness we're deceived we're destined for death but those who seek the Lord by faith are brought to life they're delivered from darkness into his marvelous light of truth and righteousness.

And thus with David we sing that the steadfast love of the Lord is not just wonderful it's precious to us. It's precious and the preciousness of that love is then to drive everything in our lives which brings us to the final section of the song.

David shows us a portrait of the human condition he speaks of the preciousness of God's steadfast love and then he provides for us a prayer for the faithful a prayer that the faithful can pray together. At the end of the song he brings those other two truths together the truth that we are dreadful sinners and God's steadfast love is precious he merges them now as he calls us to action this is a prayer we're to pray but it's not a prayer that just anyone can pray or that anyone would pray it's a prayer that only those who quote know you and the quote upright in heart would ever pray they're not upright in heart because they're without sin they're upright in heart in this context because they fear the Lord and they trust in his steadfast love for salvation the prayer sounds three notes that should be routine in our own prayers first the prayer seeks God's steadfast love anew it seeks it anew look at verse 10 oh continue your steadfast love to those who know you and your righteousness to the upright of heart why ask God for something that is by definition enduring and everlasting and limitless this isn't a prayer of anxiety this isn't coming from the heart of someone who is worried that maybe

[32:18] God will change his mind and therefore must plead with him and beg him not to change his mind and to continue in that steadfast love that's not what this is this is a prayer of faith it's a prayer of faith that God will indeed do what he said he would do Spurgeon said although a continuance of mercy is guaranteed in the covenant we are yet to make it a matter of prayer the real prayer of faith asks God to do what he's promised to do do your prayers look that way what is your heart of prayer in moments like this are you praying because you're just worried that God won't be faithful or are you crying out for God simply to fulfill his promise because your heart is sure that he will be faithful that's the difference that's what David calls us to hear he seeks God's steadfast love anew but then he does something different he acknowledges the weakness of his own flesh verse 11 let not the foot of arrogance come upon me nor the hand of the wicked drive me away drive me away from what the steadfast love of the Lord from trust in his grace what is this part of the prayer

it's a prayer for sanctification it's a prayer that God will sanctify us through that steadfast love so that we will not be driven to abandon the faith again says

Christopher Ash at one level this is a prayer against being conquered by an ungodly power at a deeper level it's a prayer against all the forces of sin the world and the devil that wage war against our souls for the greatest danger to the church and to the individual believer is not so much that we will be persecuted by an enemy but that we will be seduced or pressured by the power of sin into denying faithfulness to Christ that's what this prayer is don't let the sin that is in me drive me away from you that's a humble prayer we read it earlier humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God what is that about it's about recognizing your own tendency prone to wonder Lord I feel it prone to leave the God I love we sing no one ever left the faith who didn't first cease to acknowledge their continued susceptibility to sin's persuasive power spiritual pride is what leads to this abandonment and it's only humility and humility and prayer that tethers us tightly to faithfulness to Christ behooves us then to remain steadfast in this acknowledgement seeking always that God hold us fast in his covenantal love why because the third note sounded in the prayer verse 12 it recognizes the end for the impenitent wicked it recognizes their end you have verse 12 there the evildoers lie fallen where is there it's wherever the place is that has driven the singer away from God's steadfast love it is the place outside of the covenant there evildoers lie fallen they are thrust down and here's this amazing phrase they're unable to rise the prayer envisions a final judgment in which

God's wrath will be poured out on them in eternal death notice the contrast between the wicked and the faithful as we've studied several psalms in a row now those who trust in God's steadfast love will be raised to life those who continue in sin are rendered unable to rise their judgment is decisive it's eternal and remembering their end is a safeguard against joining them and it's a great motivation for sharing the gospel with them would you just flip a few pages to the right to psalm 73 this was Asaph who wrote psalm 73 this was something of his plight there in the beginning of the psalm he tells us that his feet had almost stumbled his steps had nearly slipped and the reason in verse 3 is because he was envious of the arrogant when he saw the prosperity of the wicked in other words he looked at those who did not love the

Lord who lived! the way they wanted to live and he realized that life seems to be better for them you ever felt that way of course you probably have and he becomes nigh he's very nigh to just leaving the faith altogether his feet are about to slip but then look what he says verse 16 but when I thought how to understand this it seemed to me a wearisome task until I went into the sanctuary of God and then I discerned their end and what is it that he discerned verse 18 truly you set them in slippery places you make them fall to ruin how they are destroyed in a moment swept away utterly by terrors like a dream when one awakes!

[38:23] oh Lord self you despise them as phantoms and when my soul was embittered when I was pricked in heart I was brutish and ignorant I was like a beast toward you but because he seen their end he says nevertheless I am continually with you because you hold my right hand you guide me with your counsel and afterward you will receive me into glory it's the same thing we're seeing in Psalm 36 recognizing and acknowledging the end of the wicked is a great motivator to live and remain in holiness and faithfulness to the Lord God as he holds us fast!

God has actually proven this steadfast love and he has proven it he proved it by himself taking on human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ so that he might die in our place that's how it's proven Romans 5 God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us 1 John 4 in this the love of God was made manifest it was displayed among us that God sent his only son into the world that we might live through him in this is love not that we have loved God but that he loved us and how was that love proven John he says he proved it because he sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins that's such an important word his son completely satisfies his wrath against sinners described in the first four verses of our psalm that's how

God proves the love he doesn't just state the love but he himself becomes a man in order that he might die our death Tim Keller said it this way we are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe and yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Christ than we ever dared hope!

who just doesn't want to do anything but tell us how great we are and give us all the things that we ask him for. That's not love. No, the beauty of God's love is that all of us are undeserving of it.

And yet he goes to tremendous lengths in order that he might redeem us and forgive us. And that's why it's so precious. That's why it's so precious.

[42 : 14] And so we should never stop writing songs about it. And we should never stop preaching sermons about it. Because if David's right, and I think he is, we'll never be able to exhaust the glorious love of the Lord and his steadfast love for his people.

Let's pray together.