



Text: Psalm 36¹

Series: A Summer at the River

Title: Part 3 – The River of Steadfast Love // The Two-Sides of God’s Grace

Date: September 5, 2010

Place: First Baptist Church, Olds, AB

This morning I want to talk with you about God’s grace and about what I’m calling “The Two Sides of Grace.” There is a line in John Newton’s famous hymn, *Amazing Grace*, that talks about the two sides of God’s grace and it’s always cried out for an explanation. Newton wrote...

**“Twas grace that taught my heart to fear
And grace my fears relieved
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.”**

What does Newton mean by saying that grace both teaches us to fear and also relieves our fear? I can understand why he would call fear-relieving grace “precious,” but why would he also consider fear-inducing grace to be precious? But clearly he does. He viewed fear-inducing grace and fear-relieving grace as two sides of the same grace that God used to draw him in to him into relationship. In his understanding, fear-inducing grace was just as “Amazing” as fear-relieving grace.

Writing many centuries before Newton ever penned his famous hymn, King David provided one of the Bible’s best explanations of this beautiful paradox of grace. This morning I’m reading from the English Standard Version but I’m going to fiddle with the first verse. The ESV footnote attached to verse one contains, I believe, the better translation of the passage. The NIV translation of this psalm agrees with that footnote and so I’m going to graft the first verse of the NIV translation onto the ESV rendition and I hope to do justice to God’s Word in the process.

David wrote in Psalm 36...

For the director of music. Of David the servant of the Lord.

**¹ An oracle is within my heart
concerning the sinfulness of the wicked:
There is no fear of God
before his eyes. (NIV)²**

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- ² For he flatters himself in his own eyes
that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated.
- ³ The words of his mouth are trouble and deceit;
he has ceased to act wisely and do good.
- ⁴ He plots trouble while on his bed;
he sets himself in a way that is not good;
he does not reject evil.
- ⁵ Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds.
- ⁶ Your righteousness is like the mountains of God;
your judgments are like the great deep;
man and beast you save, O LORD.
- ⁷ How precious is your steadfast love, O God!
The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
- ⁸ They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.
- ⁹ For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light do we see light.
- ¹⁰ Oh, continue your steadfast love to those who know you,
and your righteousness to the upright of heart!
- ¹¹ Let not the foot of arrogance come upon me,
nor the hand of the wicked drive me away.
- ¹² There the evildoers lie fallen;
they are thrust down, unable to rise.

David has captured both sides of the paradox of God's grace. In the first four verses David describes necessity of fear-inducing grace. The essence of the rebel's heart against God, he tells us, is that...

“There is no fear of God before his eyes.” Psalm 36:1

But on the other hand, David exalts in the preciousness of the fear-relieving grace of God in the rest of the psalm as he sings the praise of God's “steadfast love,” over and over again...

“How precious is your steadfast love, O God!” Psalm 36:7

²*The Holy Bible : New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996, c1984), Ps 36:1.



What struck me when I first read this psalm was how unexpected the second focus was. Follow me in this. If David believed that the essence of wickedness lay in the absence of the fear of God then wouldn't we expect him to identify the essence of righteousness as the presence of the fear of God? At least, that's what I expected. That makes logical sense, doesn't it?

May I suggest something? I would suggest that many of us think that way. It seems to me that many of us live our spiritual lives according to what seems right in our own eyes and not by what God has told us in His Word. We tend to live by logic, rather than by revelation. We relate to him according to what seems right to us, not according to what He has told us. And I think this problem affects us in at least two ways.

On the one hand, there are Christians who live with an unrelieved fear of God. They've gotten stuck, some how, on the fear-inducing side of grace and struggle to make it to the flip side of relief. Despite their faith in Christ who died to bear their punishment for sin upon the cross, some people live with an ongoing fear that God is just waiting to catch them and punish them. They try to live just close enough to God to keep out of his reach because if they get too close to him they fear that he'll smack them.

My prayer this morning is that if you came here today stuck in the unrelieved fear of God that you will leave today saying...

“How precious is your steadfast love, O God!” Psalm 36:7

On the other hand, there are Christians who live without an appreciation of the necessity of fear-inducing grace. In fact, I would say, not just the necessity of fear-inducing grace, but of its preciousness. They'd like to forget about that other side of the coin of grace and only want to think about the wonder of God's "Amazing Grace" without thinking too much about why it's amazing!

Do you know why God's "steadfast love" is so amazing? Do you know why grace is grace? Because it's for sinners who don't deserve it! God's love and mercy is for people who actually deserve his wrath and punishment. You see, when we ignore the message of fear-inducing grace we end up cheating people of the true wonder of God's fear-relieving grace. Listen to what Paul wrote to the Romans about God's steadfast love.

“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5:6-8

It's only when we come to the realization that we aren't godly, that we aren't righteous and that we aren't good, that God's love for us "sinners" becomes



“Amazing Grace.” If you’ve lost sight of the preciousness of God’s fear-inducing grace, my prayer for you this morning is that you will leave here thanking God for the day he opened your eyes to enable you to see the wickedness of your iniquity before Him. That was a precious day of grace in your life because it was on that day that you saw your need of a Saviour. And either on that day or, I hope, very soon after it you turned to God and called on him for mercy and forgiveness and he answered you and poured on you his fear-relieving grace as you trusted in Jesus who died for your sin. My prayer for you today is that if you came here without an appreciation of the fear-inducing grace of God that you will leave here this morning able to personalize Paul’s declaration and say with peace and joy...

“God showed his love for me in that while I was still a sinner, Christ died for me.” Romans 5:8

It’s often said that...

“In the Gospel we are told that we are more sinful than we could ever have imagined and more loved than we could ever have believed.”

So how sinful are we? How bad is it?

Let’s think together for a few minutes about what David can teach us about ...

The Necessity of God’s Fear-Inducing Grace

“An oracle is within my heart concerning the sinfulness of the wicked: There is no fear of God before his eyes.” Psalm 36:1 (NIV)

I want you to know that this translation of the Hebrew original isn’t unique to the NIV translation. This is how the venerable King James Version handles the work of rendering ancient Hebrew into the English language...

“The transgression of the wicked saith within my heart, *that there is* no fear of God before his eyes.” Psalm 36:1 (KJV)

Something was speaking to David’s heart about the nature of sin and wickedness. Was it a logical deduction based on observing spiritually rebellious people? It seems to be something more than that. Something is speaking into David’s heart. The NIV calls it “an oracle.” The Old Testament scholar, H.C. Leupold, translated the passage this way...

“A divine oracle about transgression has been heard in my heart with reference to the wicked: There is no dread of God before his eyes.” Psalm 36:1 (Leupold)

Leupold wrote...



“The psalmist means that deep down in his heart insight was granted to him about what really is wrong with the wicked. He saw the roots of the thinking of the ungodly laid bare, not by reasoning out what they were; nor by intuition; but by divine revelation, even as the enormity of any or all iniquity can be discovered only by divine revelation.” (Leupold, Exposition of the Psalms, 294)

The Spirit of the living God spoke into his heart and revealed to him the essence of what it means to be out of step with God’s will. And the Spirit of God must do that. It takes the work of God’s Spirit to reveal to us our need for grace. Jesus said that the work of the Holy Spirit was to...

“convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment; concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you no longer see Me; and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged.”

John 16:8-11

The ability to see the nature of deep need before God is one of God’s greatest gifts to us. Our minds refuse to accept the depth of our problem. We need the Spirit of God to show us the depth of the darkness within because without His intervention we simply will not go there! It’s just too ugly!

The word “wicked” tells us that the person David has in mind is someone who is guilty of violating God’s revealed will. He is out of step with God’s will for life and he has no understanding of the seriousness of his situation before God. Although he regularly violates God’s will he hasn’t the least concern about his situation...

“For he flatters himself in his own eyes that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated.” Psalm 36:2

Perhaps he “flatters” himself by thinking that he’s such a smooth talker and smart operator that in the end he’ll be able to make a deal with God to overlook his sin and let him off.

Or perhaps he “flatters” himself by thinking that he is really the god of his own world and that he isn’t accountable to anyone else for his behaviour. You know, the *“I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul”* kind of thinking.

Or perhaps he “flatters” himself by saying: “I’m not that bad! I’m a good person. At least, I don’t think I’m as bad as the kind of person described here in this psalm.”

What the Spirit describes here is a way of life lived in opposition to God that has its root in a simple mistaken idea. In the mind of this person there is no one



standing above him who would hold him accountable for the conduct of his life. The Spirit of God has crystallized the essence of the problem of the wicked with these words...

“there is no fear of God before his eyes.” Psalm 36:1

The Spirit of God told David that this central idea lay at the heart of those living against God. And the same Spirit of God told the Apostle Paul that this mistaken notion was carried in the heart of every human being. Paul, writing under the inspiration of God’s Spirit, understood that the Spirit was speaking about the entire human race. Paul wrote...

“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one...There is no fear of God before their eyes.” Romans 3:10-12, 18

The absence of the “fear of God” is not just a problem for “super sinners.” It’s a problem for the entire human race, you and me included. It takes the work of God’s Spirit to get us to see it and believe it.

To what kind of “fear” is the Spirit referring? It’s not the “fear” of Proverbs 1:7 which tells us that...

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” Proverbs 1:7

The kind of “fear” that the writer of Proverbs is referring to is more like reverence, or respect that is due to God as God. That kind of fear is a healthy reverence for God that we need to cultivate throughout our lives. No, the kind of “fear” that the Spirit has in view here in Psalm 36 is reverence; it’s terror. It’s the dread of God’s wrath against sin. This is a different Hebrew word entirely from the one used in Proverbs. The prophet Isaiah used this word to describe those who knew that God’s judgment was coming against them. He wrote...

“Enter into the rock and hide in the dust from before the terror of the Lord, and from the splendor of his majesty.” Isaiah 2:10

This “dread” or “terror” or “fear” is the awareness that God’s wrath against sin is coming for me! I’m accountable, I’m guilty and I deserve what’s coming to me. And what’s coming to me, according to God’s Word is death and eternal punishment, sometimes described as fire, sometimes described as darkness and sometimes described, as the Apostle Paul did, as...

“the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.” 2 Thessalonians 1:9



Separation from God for eternity. Eternal destruction. We are in more danger than we could ever have imagined! And it's God's gift to us, by the work of His Spirit, to show us how much trouble we're really in. That's the necessity of fear-inducing grace. Have you experienced it? I hope you have. Because until we do, we'll never appreciate the wonder of fear-relieving grace.

Let's think about ...

The Preciousness of God's Fear-relieving Grace

David declares...

"How precious is your steadfast love, O God!" Psalm 36:7

Once the grace of God has shown us our sin, how do we get to the fear-relieving side of grace? David was someone who understood the way in which sin affects us all and he knew it affected him, too. He didn't speak about sin without knowing that he, too, was afflicted with the disease. Here is David's testimony of his experience of God's fear-inducing grace leading him to experience God's fear-relieving grace. In Psalm 32 he wrote...

"Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. *Selah*

I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. *Selah*" Psalm 32:1-5

And with our confession of sin comes the blessing of God's "steadfast love." This phrase, "steadfast love," translates just one Hebrew word, the word chesed, which is difficult to express in English. Some translate it as "mercy" (KJV), others as "lovingkindness" (NASB), some as "constant love" (GNT), and others as "unfailing love" (NIV). It's a word that is full of rich meaning and one of the best passages that presents the fullness that it contains is found in Exodus. God appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai and revealed to him his essential character. Moses recorded the event for us:

"The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty,



visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.” Exodus 34:6-7

God's "steadfast love" contains his grace and mercy, his love and forgiveness, but it also holds his righteous judgment against sin. It's very close to the New Testament word, "grace," so close, in fact, that Martin Luther used the German word for "grace" (gnade) to render it in his German Bible translation.

Remember, the Gospel tells us how sinful we are, but it also tells us **"that we are more loved than we ever could have believed."** So, how much does he love us? David tells us of...

The Immensity of God's Steadfast Love

"Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds." Psalm 36:5

It's as high as the highest heavens above and deep as the deepest ocean below. It's so immense that words fail. It's so vast it's impossible to measure except by one standard and we'll get to that in a moment.

David tells us of...

The Intimacy of God's Steadfast Love

"How precious is your steadfast love, O God!" Psalm 36:7

The word "precious" moves from considering how immense is God's love to considering how personal God's love is. What David tells us about the immensity of God's love in v.5 means that God's love is too great to grasp, but what he tells us about the preciousness of God's love in verse 7 means that God's love is too good to let slip.³

His "steadfast love" offers us...

Security & comfort

"The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings." v.7

His love is our source of...

Provision for life

"They feast on the abundance of your house" v.8

And his provision is not stingy and it fill us with..

³ Derek Kidner, vol. 15, *Psalms 1-72*, IVP, 1973, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, p. 165



**Overwhelming joy
“and you give them drink from the river of your delights.” v.8**

And his love gives us the greatest gift of all,

**The gift of life!
“For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light.” v.9**

David, even though he is under the inspiration of the Spirit, is still grasping for ways in which to describe the beauty and immensity of the “steadfast love” of God.

It’s was God’s “steadfast love,” his fear-relieving grace, that moved him to provide a solution to the human sin problem and to provide that we need. In David’s day, in Old Testament times, God graciously provided a temporary resolution of the sin problem through the offering of blood sacrifices that were to be made year after year. An animal would die in the place of the sinner whose sin was deserving of death.

But those animal sacrifices were intended by God to point forward to the day when he would offer the perfect sacrifice for sin, his own Son, Jesus Christ. And it was only with Jesus that we see the full extent of God’s great love for us.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16

“God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5:6-8

How much are we loved? Someone once wrote: “Jesus was asked, ‘How much do you love us?’ Jesus opened his arms and said, “This much,” and then he died.”

“In the Gospel we are told that we are more sinful than we could ever have imagined and more loved than we could ever have believed.”

It’s hard to hold this two-sided nature of grace in balance in our lives. We tend to slip one way or the other. Perhaps this morning you need to regain a sense of gratitude for God’s fear-inducing grace that brought you a conviction of sin so that you called out to him for mercy in Jesus and he forgave all your sins! Or maybe this morning, you need to renew your grip upon the fear-relieving grace of God and thank him for his precious “steadfast love.”

Paul Tripp is an American pastor and counsellor and earlier this summer he published a short blog on the internet that expanded on this wonderful, old



observation about the Gospel. I'm going to close with his words and if you'd like a copy, there are photocopies on the tables by the doors as you leave. Take a copy. Read it over this afternoon or during your time with the Lord this week or in a quiet moment. I hope this will help you appreciate the full wonder of God's two-sided grace in your life.

Paul Tripp wrote, in "*Grace, Right Here, Right Now*,"...

Grace is the most transformational word in the Bible. The entire content of the Bible is a narrative of God's grace, a story of undeserved redemption. By the transformational power of his grace, God unilaterally reaches his hands into the muck of this fallen world, through the presence of his Son, and radically transforms his children from what we are (sinners) into what we are becoming by his power (Christ-like). The famous Newton hymn uses the best word possible, maybe the only word big enough, for that grace—amazing.

...Grace will turn your life upside down while giving you a rest you have never known. Grace will require you to face your unworthiness without ever making you feel unloved.

Grace will make you finally acknowledge that you cannot earn God's favor, and it will once and for all remove your fear of not measuring up to his standards. Grace will humble you with the fact that you are much less than you thought you were, even as it assures you that you can be far more than you had ever imagined. You can be sure that grace will put you in your place without ever putting you down.

Grace will enable you to face shocking truths about yourself that you have hesitated to consider, while freeing you from being self-consciously introspective. Grace will confront you with profound weaknesses, and at the same time bless you with new-found strength. Grace will tell you again and again what you aren't, while welcoming you again and again to what you can now be. Grace will make you as uncomfortable as you have ever been, while offering you a more lasting comfort than you have [ever known before.]

Grace will work to drive you to the end of yourself, while it invites you to fresh starts and new beginnings. Grace will dash your ill-founded hopes, but never walk away and leave you hopeless. Grace will decimate your little kingdom of one as it introduces you to a much, much better King. Grace will expose to you the extent of your blindness as it gives you eyes to see what you so desperately need to see. Grace will make you sadder than you have ever been, while it gives you greater cause for celebration than you have ever known.

Grace enters your life in a moment and will occupy you for eternity. You simply cannot live a productive life in this broken-down world unless you have a practical grasp of the grace you have been given.



Are you living out of this amazing grace? Does it shape the way you respond to your personal struggles, your relationships, and your work? Does your trust in this grace form how you live with your husband or wife? Does it propel the way you parent your children? Does it give you comfort when friends have disappointed you? Does it give you rest when life is unpredictable and hard? Does it make you bold and give you courage in places where you would have once been timid? Does it make the idols that tempt you less attractive and less powerful? Do you wake up and say, "I don't know what I will face today, but this I do know: I have been given amazing grace to face it right here, right now."

May God help you to understand and rest in the grace that you have been given!⁴

Amen.

- ❖ **Invitation to the Lord's Table**
- ❖ **Songs of Communion**
 - Thy Mercy, My God
 - I Boast No More
 - Amazing Grace
- ❖ **Benediction**

⁴ Paul Tripp, "Grace: Right Here, Right Now" Posted: 11 Aug 2010 04:30 AM PDT
<http://www.desiringgod.org/Blog/>