

Homiletics Analysis: Psalms 36

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Psalms 36 is a psalm of David structured in three distinct movements. The psalm opens with a penetrating description of the wicked — not primarily their actions but the interior architecture of wickedness: there is no fear of God before his eyes (v. 1), he flatters himself, he cannot discern his own evil (vv. 1–2), his words are deceitful, he has ceased to be wise and do good (v. 3), he schemes on his bed and pursues a path that is not good (v. 4). This is wickedness diagnosed from the inside out — a portrait of a soul that has lost its orientation to God entirely.

The psalm then pivots sharply in verse 5 to a sustained declaration of the LORD's character: His steadfast love (*hesed*) reaches to the heavens, His faithfulness to the clouds, His righteousness is like the mountains, His justice like the great deep — cosmic in scale, immovable in character (vv. 5–6). Verse 7 presses this into personal application: “How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings.” The imagery moves from cosmic to intimate — from mountains and deeps to wings and a feast. Verses 7–9 describe the abundance of God's house: the river of delights, the fountain of life, the light of His light. These are not mere metaphors of comfort — they are covenant realities, the fullness of what it means to dwell in God's presence.

The psalm closes with a prayer (vv. 10–12): continue your *hesed* to those who know you; let not the foot of arrogance come against me; there the workers of iniquity have fallen — the wicked do not endure. The prayer is not anxious but confident, grounded in everything just declared about God's character.

This Text — Intent:

God's intent through this psalm is to reorient the reader's deepest loyalties by placing the fullness of His own character beside the emptiness of wickedness — and inviting the reader to find their refuge, their feast, their very life in Him. The psalm does not merely contrast good and evil in behavioral terms; it contrasts two different orientations of the soul — one that has no fear of God and flatters itself, and one that hides under the shadow of His wings and drinks from His river of delights. The intended effect is worship-grounded security: the reader is drawn out of anxiety about the wicked, out of self-reliance, and into confident rest in the God whose steadfast love reaches to the heavens. The psalm intends to produce refuge-seeking, not merely right thinking about God.

Subject Sentence

Subject Sentence: The LORD's inexhaustible covenant love stands over against the bankruptcy of wickedness as the soul's only true refuge.

Primary Claim

Primary Claim: God is calling His people to abandon all false refuges — including the soul's tendency to flatter itself and drift from His fear — and to find in His boundless steadfast love, faithfulness, and presence the only fountain of life that satisfies and secures.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Structure and Its Implications: Some interpreters read Psalm 36 as two loosely connected poems — a wisdom meditation on wickedness (vv. 1–4) and an independent hymn of praise (vv. 5–9) — with the prayer (vv. 10–12) appended. This reading dissolves the psalm's governing tension and misses its rhetorical architecture. The contrast between vv. 1–4 and vv. 5–9 is not accidental or editorial — it is the psalm's entire argument. The wicked soul is defined by the absence of *hesed*-orientation; God's character is defined by its inexhaustible presence. To read these as independent units is to preach each half without the force that the other half provides. The Reformed reading treats the three-part structure as unified and intentional, with each section requiring the others to make its claim.

“Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart” (v. 1): There is interpretive divergence on the subject of v. 1b. Some read “transgression” as personified — sin itself speaking within the wicked person. Others read it as the wicked person speaking transgression to themselves (i.e., consulting their own rebellion as an oracle). The difference is subtle but homiletically significant: the first reading emphasizes the enslaving power of sin from without; the second emphasizes the wicked person's active self-deception and complicity. The Reformed tradition's anthropology — which insists that depravity is not merely victimhood but active, responsible rebellion (cf. Romans 1:18–32) — favors the second reading, though the first reading's insight that the wicked are *captured* by their rebellion is not wrong and need not be fully excluded. The dominant Reformed reading: the wicked person functions as their own oracle of rebellion, consulting transgression instead of God — a profound picture of the inverted worship of the self.

Verses 5–9 and the Beatific Vision: Roman Catholic and some mystical Protestant interpreters have read vv. 7–9 (“river of delights,” “fountain of life,” “in your light do we see light”) as windows onto the beatific vision — direct experiential contemplation of God's essence. This reading over-spiritualizes what is a covenant-relational declaration. The

imagery in vv. 7–9 is covenantal and Edenic — God’s house, His table, the river, the fountain — grounded in Israel’s experience of Tabernacle/Temple worship and pointing typologically to the fullness of covenant fellowship (cf. Rev. 22:1–5). The “fountain of life” and “light” are not mystical abstractions but covenant realities: life and knowledge of God as they are mediated through His covenant presence. This should be *acknowledged* — there is an ultimate eschatological dimension to vv. 7–9 that stretches toward final glory — but the mystical/contemplative over-reading should be *qualified* by holding the imagery in its covenant-historical context.

Arminian/Wesleyan Readings: Wesleyan interpreters sometimes press vv. 1–4 as evidence for a works-based reading of depravity — the wicked *choose* to reject God’s fear step by step (flattering himself, ceasing to do good, scheming, setting on a path). This reading rightly preserves human responsibility but can underweight the *structural* nature of the depravity described — the text does not present a series of free choices but a soul whose entire interior architecture has been reorganized around the absence of God’s fear. The Reformed reading *acknowledges* the genuine responsiveness implied (the wicked *does* things), while insisting that what is described in vv. 1–4 is not a sequence of avoidable choices but the consistent and self-reinforcing fruit of a heart already oriented away from God.

Key Canonical Support

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- **Romans 3:10–18** — Paul’s catena of OT quotations includes v. 1 (“there is no fear of God before their eyes”) as part of his summary indictment of universal human sinfulness — confirming that the psalm’s portrait of the wicked is not describing an extreme subclass but the condition of every unregenerate soul. This grounding transforms the psalm’s opening from “a description of other people” to a mirror.
- **John 4:13–14; John 7:37–38** — Jesus’ declarations about living water echo the “fountain of life” of v. 9; He presents Himself as the fulfillment of exactly the covenantal abundance Psalm 36 places in God’s presence. The psalm’s “fountain” finds its New Covenant embodiment in Christ Himself.
- **Revelation 22:1–5** — The river of the water of life, the throne of God and of the Lamb, the light of His presence replacing sun and moon — the eschatological vision of Revelation 22 is the consummation of what Psalm 36:7–9 declares covenantally. The psalm’s “river of delights” flows into the New Jerusalem.
- **Psalms 73:25–28** — Asaph’s conclusion after wrestling with the prosperity of the wicked: “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you... for me it is good to be near God.” Psalm 73 traverses the same terrain as Psalm 36 — the threat posed by the wicked’s apparent flourishing — and arrives

at the same refuge: the nearness of God is the only ultimate good. These psalms interpret each other.

- **Jeremiah 17:5–8** — The contrast between the one who trusts in man (a shrub in the desert, roots in parched places) and the one who trusts in the LORD (a tree by water, roots reaching the stream) parallels Psalm 36’s contrast between the waterless interior of wickedness and the river of delights in God’s presence. Both passages use water/drought imagery to diagnose the soul’s ultimate orientation.

Aim

Aim: To expose the spiritual bankruptcy of every soul-orientation that replaces God’s fear with self-flattery, and to press the reader toward concrete refuge in the God whose steadfast love, faithfulness, and abundant presence are the only fountain of life that satisfies and secures.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart; there is no fear of God before his eyes	The oracle of the self — sin as the wicked person’s inner counsel; contrast with Proverbs 1:7 (fear of God as the beginning of wisdom)
2	He flatters himself in his own eyes regarding his iniquity; he cannot detect or hate it	Self-deception as a symptom and deepening mechanism of depravity; he is incapable of honest self-assessment
3	His words are iniquity and deceit; he has ceased to act wisely and do good	The interior corruption now externalized in speech and action; “ceased” suggests a prior condition now abandoned
4	He plots iniquity on his bed; he sets himself in a way that is not good; he does not reject evil	The full pattern: inner scheming, deliberate path-setting, refusal of moral correction; comprehensive orientation away from God
5	Your steadfast love (hesed),	The pivot — from the wicked

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
6	O LORD, reaches to the heavens; your faithfulness to the clouds Your righteousness is like the mountains of God; your judgments are like the great deep; you save man and beast	to the LORD; cosmic scale of divine character; the contrast with v. 1 is total Immovable and unfathomable — righteousness and justice as foundational realities; universal saving care
7	How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings	Cosmic love pressed into personal refuge; “shadow of your wings” — covenant shelter (cf. Ruth 2:12; Ps. 91:4)
8	They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from the river of your delights	Covenant abundance — not mere survival but feasting; “river of delights” (nahar ’adaneka) — Edenic resonance
9	For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light	The deepest statement: God Himself is the source of life and the condition of all true knowledge; life and light are found only in Him
10	Continue your steadfast love to those who know you, and your righteousness to the upright of heart	The prayer for continuation — what has been declared about God is now asked of God for the covenant community
11	Let not the foot of arrogance come against me, nor the hand of the wicked drive me away	Prayer for protection against the very wickedness described in vv. 1–4; arrogance is the mark of the wicked soul
12	There the evildoers lie fallen; they are thrust down, unable to rise	Prophetic confidence: the wicked do not endure; the psalmist sees their end with certainty, not anxiety

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–4	The Oracle of Self: The Interior Architecture of Wickedness
2	5–9	The Ocean of God: The Inexhaustible Character and Covenant Abundance of the LORD
3	10–12	The Refuge Secured: Prayer for Continued Heseḏ and Confidence in the Wicked's End

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The LORD's inexhaustible covenant love stands over against the bankruptcy of wickedness as the soul's only true refuge.

Primary Claim: God is calling His people to abandon all false refuges — including the soul's tendency to flatter itself and drift from His fear — and to find in His boundless steadfast love, faithfulness, and presence the only fountain of life that satisfies and secures.

Applications (Five)

1. Diagnose the oracle you are consulting. (*Mind/Belief*) Verse 1 describes the wicked person as someone who consults transgression as their inner oracle — their own flattering voice has replaced the fear of God as the governing word in their soul. Every person consults something at their center; every person has a voice that speaks most authoritatively to them in the dark, on the bed, in the scheming of plans. The question this passage presses is not “are you doing outwardly evil things?” but “whose voice are you consulting inwardly?” The person who has drifted from the fear of God will not typically know it — verse 2 makes clear that self-deception is part of the condition. This requires the discipline of bringing the soul back under God's word as the external, authoritative oracle, rather than relying on one's own moral assessment of oneself.

2. Let the scale of God's steadfast love rebuke the smallness of your functional gods. (*Affections/Worship*) Verses 5–6 describe God's heseḏ as reaching to the heavens, His faithfulness to the clouds, His righteousness like immovable mountains, His judgments like the fathomless deep. These are not poetic decorations — they are deliberate contrasts

with everything the human heart tends to run to for security. The functional gods we build are small: manageable, controllable, exhaustible. The LORD's character is not. The application here is affective and worshipful: sit with the scale of what is being declared. Let it produce in you the same response David intends — “how precious is your steadfast love” (v. 7) — the almost stunned recognition that what you have been anxiously chasing in lesser things is infinitely available in God. The antidote to idol-addiction is not willpower but wonder.

3. Stop living at the edge of the feast you have been invited to. (*Affections/Worship*)

Verses 8–9 describe an astonishing abundance: feasting on the richness of God's house, drinking from the river of His delights, the fountain of life, the light of His light. This is not a picture of bare survival — it is overflowing plenty. But many believers live as if they have been told they may stand in the doorway of God's house and look in. The psalm's invitation is to the table, not the threshold. The application is this: what would it look like to actually drink from the river rather than occasionally moistening your lips? This is a call to more deliberate, more expectant, more sustained engagement with the means of grace — Scripture, prayer, corporate worship, the Lord's Supper — not as religious obligations but as the actual table at which the feast is served.

4. Pray for the continuation of God's hesed with confidence, not anxiety. (*Will/Behavior*)

The prayer of verses 10–12 is notable for its tone: it is a confident prayer, not a desperate one. It asks God to “continue” — to sustain and extend — what He has already been and already declared Himself to be. The psalmist does not pray as someone uncertain whether God will show up; he prays as someone who has just declared the cosmic dimensions of God's hesed and is now asking that reality to keep bearing on his specific situation. The practical application is this: your prayer life should reflect what you believe about God's character. Anxious, uncertain, hedging prayer reveals that the doctrine of the previous eight verses has not yet reached the prayer-life. Let the content of vv. 5–9 reshape the posture of your prayers.

5. Look at the wicked's end before you fear their current power. (*Mind/Belief*) Verse 12 is striking in its brevity and confidence: “There the evildoers lie fallen; they are thrust down, unable to rise.” The psalmist does not end with a plea for God to eventually deal with the wicked — he ends with a prophetic declaration of what he has already seen. The application is direct: when the wickedness described in vv. 1–4 appears to be winning — when arrogant self-deception seems to be rewarded, when the God-fearing appear to be disadvantaged — the believer's stability comes from seeing further and seeing clearer than immediate circumstances allow. The wicked's fall is not hoped for — it is announced. Confidence in God's justice is not passivity; it is the ground of continued faithfulness in a world where the wicked sometimes seem to prosper.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Psalm 36 provides a theologically rich account of both depravity and divine character that is grounded in relational-covenantal categories rather than merely forensic ones. The psalm's portrait of wickedness is not simply a list of sinful behaviors but a diagnosis of the soul's governing orientation — what it consults, what it fears, what it flatters itself toward. This has significant implications for a biblical anthropology: human beings are fundamentally worshipping creatures, and wickedness is not primarily a behavioral category but a misorientation of the soul away from God's fear. Correspondingly, God's *hesed* in vv. 5–9 is not presented as an abstraction but as the overflowing abundance of a covenantal relationship — He is the fountain, the feast, the light — and His character is the only adequate answer to the soul's misdirected search for life. The psalm also demonstrates that divine justice (mountains, great deep, v. 6) and divine mercy (*hesed*, wings, v. 7) are not competing attributes but simultaneous and complementary dimensions of the same God, both of which are available to His people as refuge.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Psalm 36 is a compressed systematic theology in lyric form, and its Reformed significance is substantial. The opening verses describe what Reformed theology calls the *noetic* and *moral* effects of the fall with precision: the wicked cannot perceive his own iniquity (v. 2), cannot accurately assess himself, cannot generate wisdom or goodness from within. This is not a mild impairment — it is the radical inability of a soul that has reorganized itself around the absence of God's fear. Romans 3's use of verse 1 confirms the universal, not merely exceptional, scope of this diagnosis. The passage's covenantal abundance (vv. 7–9) is a pre-figuration of the gospel's fullness: the “fountain of life” and the “river of delights” find their ultimate referent in Christ, in whom “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9) and who declares Himself the living water that satisfies permanently (John 4:14; 7:38). Reformed soteriology insists that grace is not merely a correction of the will but a reorientation of the entire person — from self-flattery and inner transgression-consulting to genuine fear and refuge in God; Psalm 36 narrates exactly that transformation through its three-part movement from the portrait of wickedness to the declaration of God's character to the prayer of the one who now lives under His wings.

Main Takeaway

Main Takeaway: The soul that flatters itself and drifts from God's fear is not living freely — it is living on nothing, consulting an oracle that lies. God's steadfast love reaches to the heavens, His table is overflowing, and His light is the only light in which you will ever see

clearly. Stop consulting yourself. Come to the feast. Hide under His wings. The wicked do not endure — but those who take refuge in Him do.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Moralizing the contrast between the wicked and the righteous.** The most common mishandling of this psalm is to preach Division 1 as a behavioral checklist (“don’t be like this”) and Division 2 as a reward for good behavior (“if you obey, you get the feast”). This entirely misses the psalm’s anthropological depth. The contrast is not between well-behaved and poorly-behaved people — it is between two different soul-orientations: one governed by transgression as its oracle and one that takes refuge under God’s wings. The cure for the condition in vv. 1–4 is not trying harder but being genuinely reoriented toward God’s fear — which is itself a gift of grace. Preach the diagnosis accurately before moving to application.
- **Skipping Division 1 to get to the “good part.”** Some expositors are tempted to rush through vv. 1–4 because they are uncomfortable or because vv. 5–9 feel more preachable. This destroys the psalm’s rhetorical power. The beauty and abundance of vv. 5–9 land with full force only when the bleakness of vv. 1–4 has been genuinely felt. The feast is more precious when the reader has understood what the alternative looks like. Preach both halves and let the contrast do the theological work.
- **Reading “the wicked” as someone else.** Given Romans 3’s application of v. 1 to universal human sinfulness, the preacher must resist allowing the congregation to hear vv. 1–4 as a portrait of extreme or unusually godless people. The self-flattering, self-deceived soul that cannot detect its own iniquity is not a rare type — it is the natural condition of every unrenewed heart, and it remains a temptation and threat even for believers. The homiletical move is to press the mirror-function of the opening verses before extending the invitation of vv. 5–9.
- **Treating vv. 7–9 as comfort without eschatological dimension.** These verses are more than pastoral reassurance — they are covenant promises with deep typological roots (Eden, Temple, New Jerusalem) and eschatological horizons (Rev. 22). To preach them only as “God will take care of you today” truncates what the text is actually offering: not just present comfort but the ultimate, inexhaustible, final abundance of life in God’s presence. The application should include both the present reality of refuge (v. 7) and the eschatological fullness toward which the psalm strains.
- **Missing the confidence of the closing prayer.** The prayer in vv. 10–12 is frequently preached as anxious — a worried cry for help in the face of the wicked’s apparent

power. But its tone is the opposite: it is the prayer of someone who has just declared the cosmic dimensions of God's hesed and is now applying that doctrine to his circumstances with confidence. Verse 12 is not a wish but a prophetic announcement. The preacher should draw out the connection between theological robustness (vv. 5–9) and prayerful confidence (vv. 10–12) — the latter grows from the former.

- **Neglecting the idol-diagnostic function of verse 1.** The phrase “transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart” — the oracle of the self — is one of the most penetrating descriptions of idolatry in the Psalter. The wicked person is not irreligious; they are religious toward themselves, consulting their own desires and rationalizations as if they were a divine oracle. This is the precise interior condition that every idol-structure produces. Keller's idol-diagnosis lens is directly applicable here: beneath many of the behaviors and anxieties that bring people to church lies this fundamental condition — the self functioning as its own oracle. Name it specifically rather than leaving it at the level of “not fearing God.”