

A SMALL WORLD AFTER ALL

SERIES: PATTERNS FOR PRAYER

by Steve Zeisler

There are voices everywhere in the air These days, aren't there? Perhaps you have found yourself a bit mesmerized by the accounts of the war breaking in the Middle East. It's hard not to be captured by history in the making, as many have rightly called it. On the dramatic eve of the beginning of the bombings, many Americans Listened to the CNN newsmen crawling around on the floor of their room in the Reached Hotel in Baghdad, looking out the window and describing what they saw; on site, people giving instant impressions of events as they took place. I don't think history has ever been recorded in quite this way before.

While some voices are reporting on what's happening, others are analyzing. experts in the military, experts in psychology, experts in politics, experts on expertise for all I know, giving their insight into what's happening. And we have yokes of those who oppose the policy, in contrast to the voices of those who defend it.

Many of the voices speak of God, don't they? We find ourselves in this country urged to pray. The morning after the bombings began, we saw our own president with Billy Graham in church, and we heard their prayers offered to God. We saw Saddam Hussein on his prayer rug offering his prayers, recorded for his people to see. We hear the shrill voice that insists on Islamic jihad: This is holy war, and God should be exalted as the infidels are routed.

Hearing God's voice

There are voices and more voices, continual descriptions and analysis. It seems to me that because we've met in Christian worship this morning, the voice we ought most to want to hear is God's voice, his word about humanity and the world we live in. So I invite you to turn to Psalm 36. We can think of this as CNN's Old Testament Bureau, and we'll be hearing now the voice of the Lord on the subject of these events.

We're in the midst of a series on prayer. We want to learn from the great prayer book of the Bible, the Psalms. We're asking the Lord to teach us not only what this material says, but to help us learn to respond as men and women of prayer as we consider what we hear.

As it begins, this psalm does not address God, you'll notice. It is not at its onset a prayer. In the NIV, verse 1 says, "An oracle is in my heart concerning the sinfulness of the wicked." It's an analysis, an observation. There's a translation problem here; you may have the NASB, the King James, or some other version that says, "Transgression speaks to the ungodly one within his heart." There is a statement being made here, an oracle. It's difficult to tell in translating the Hebrew, though, whether the announcement is to the wicked man in his heart or about the wicked man in the heart of David. So you'll see some variance there. But it's clear that the analysis is of a wicked man, an individual who is unrighteous and has embraced the rebellion into which he was born, who has not repented of his sins and has no inclination to do so. After that analysis, this psalm then continues into prayer and the lessons of prayer that we hope to learn.

Now, when you bear that there is information here about a wicked man and what he's like, there's probably one candidate, this week anyway, who will come to mind for most of us, Saddam Hussein is a wicked man. There is every evidence in his own statements and in his actions that he, whom our government has targeted as the individual behind all these problems, qualifies as a wicked man. But I want to interject a word of caution before going any farther. Firstly, to the degree that these things are true of him, he will stand before God. It is

the Lord who brings vengeance upon the unrighteous. And secondly, his nation and other Arabs in this country and elsewhere ought not be indiscriminately assigned guilt for his crimes and evil intentions. It's easy for us in times of war to give way to sinful prejudice.

Our heavenly Father, in creating a place for his people, not only secures them in refuge against the storm and brings community and feasting, but he pours forth a river that makes life itself delightful to live.

A description of the wicked

Yet this psalm says there are wicked individuals in the world. The wise man or woman will take the time to understand what makes them so, and resist all temptation to follow their example. Let's read the whole psalm, and then we'll look at verses 14.

An oracle is within my heart concerning the sinfulness of the wicked: there is no fear of God before his eyes. For in his own eyes he flatters himself too much to detect or hate his sin. The words of his mouth are wicked and deceitful; he has ceased to be wise and to do good. Even on his bed he plots evil; he commits himself to a sinful course and does not reject what is wrong.

Your love, O LORD, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies, Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your justice like the great deep. O LORD, you preserve both man and beast.

**How priceless is your unfailing love!
Both high and low among men find refuge in the shadow of your wings.
They feast on the abundance of your house;
you give them drink from your river of delights.
For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light.**

**Continue your love to those who know you,
your righteousness to the up-right in heart.
May the foot of the proud not come against me, nor the hand of the wicked drive me
away.
See how the evildoers lie fallen -- thrown down, not able to rise!**

The first four verses are a description of the wicked man. I want to make a couple of observations before we look at the details of what's there. First, the wicked individual being described here is not wicked because circumstances out side his control forced him to be so or determined that he should act wickedly. This is someone who has chosen to be as he is, not someone who has, say, chemical imbalances in his brain that cause him to do things that he hates and can't stop. Nor is this a horribly battered individual from a dysfunctional background that has constrained his behavior. This is someone who has become the way he is because of deliberate choices which we're going to look at in a moment. Secondly, the focus of these verses is not on wicked deeds; it is on the wicked heart.

Small world

With those observations in mind, now let's look at the detail. This man lives in a very small world, doesn't he? His world consists of his own thoughts, his own speech, his own vision. The one place we see him in action is lying on his bed at night by himself, presumably in the dark, plotting in his own little mind destructive things to do and rejecting that which is wise. This man's life is bounded on every side by himself. As we proceed through this, first of all, it's his eyes that are mentioned. In verse 1 there is no fear of God before his eyes. Instead, he flatters himself in his own eyes. He surrounds himself with a hall of mirrors. He stares at himself and preens before the mirrors, imagines wonderful things about himself and tells himself untruths about who he is.

Earlier this winter, one of the nights was especially cold, and there had been moisture in the air. The windows of the car I got into early in the morning were entirely frosted over. I was running late for something, so I

made a quick effort to get a view through the front windshield and the hack, but it was done too quickly. About halfway down our block, I realized I couldn't see a thing. Then I began to think, there are children who live on this block -- my own, and others' -- people I care about, and what I am doing is deliberately endangering them by proceeding ahead in this blindness I've chosen. I can and must do something about it. The blindness we speak of here, the eyesight that doesn't see the greatness of God, but sees only itself, was also freely chosen.

Then verse 3 says his mouth speaks deceitful things. He begins to believe his own propaganda about himself after awhile. He's a man who lives in the tiniest of environments. Someone has well said that a person who's all wrapped up in himself makes a very small package. That's clearly the case of this man. We can imagine that the only other voices that are admitted into a world like this are the voices of yes men who always agree, always flatter, and always kowtow. The striking thing to me about Saddam, by all accounts, is that he admits no voice that disagrees with him, that doesn't flatter, that doesn't promote him, I thought it was a telling moment when James Baker and Tariq Aziz met in Geneva, and Aziz refused the letter from President Bush because it was not sufficiently deferential. Saddam Hussein was not even going to be permitted to hear such things. His messiah complex is fed by the voices he permits himself to hear.

The man described in verses 1-4 lives in a tiny little world. It says he deliberately rejects what is wise. It's interesting that in verse 2 it says his flattery doesn't permit himself to detect or hate his sin. He can't even see it anymore. He's lost the ability to even know he's sinful and certainly the ability to hate it. He has ceased to be wise and good. He might have had the opportunity once, but he's deliberately chosen the course that he's on. Then finally, we have the scene where he's alone at night on his bed by himself plotting terrible things. He plots evil, commits himself to a sinful course, and does not reject what is wrong.

God's greatness

Now the contrast begins in verse 5. Now if you're familiar with the psalter, you may remember that other psalms contrast the wicked man with the righteous man. Psalm 1, for example, begins with a righteous man and ends with the opposite: "Not so the wicked!" But the contrast in this psalm is not between the wicked man and the righteous man. It is between the wicked man and the Lord God.

David begins to speak about the immense grandeur of God himself. We have seen the wicked man's tiny little world filled with himself, his minors, and his own voice. Now in verse 5 we see the heavens! "Your love, O LORD, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your justice like the great deep. O LORD, you preserve both man and beast." He uses only the largest things in creation to describe the character of God -- the skies, the mountains, the ocean depths. It is exactly the opposite of the environment in which we found ourselves in verse 4. There is no fear of God before the eyes of the wicked man, but the one who chooses to fear and revere God breaks out into a world where the air is fresh, the skies are distant, and the mountains are majestic. All of these tell him things about his God.

I think it's important to notice that the first word David speaks in describing God is love. It's the Hebrew word *hesed*. It's repeated in verse 7. As the first and repeated term used to speak of God, it accentuates his orientation toward us, his love for us, his commitment to us. It is covenant love, which is absolute, without flaw. When David thinks of God, what he finds himself meditating on first is that God loves us.

Why would we ever choose not to fear God? Doesn't that question occur to you? Having thought of him once, having broken out of the shell of my own tininess, I see the immensity of God, his love. I see his concern for me, his longing to bless. Why would we resist that? And yet we do often, don't we? We want to hear songs about ourselves often, rather than about God. We want to hear flattery, the promotion of ourselves. But when we turn to see God, what we have is his beauty, his love, his immensity as the alternative to the wicked man.

Blessings at home

Having spoken of God's character, David goes on to list God's benefits to the individual who receives from him. He uses a number of metaphor -- shelter under wings, a fountain bubbling up and issuing into a river,

and a banquet. But I was struck by the fact that the feast in verse 8 is taking place in God's house. I happened to be talking to Paul Winslow earlier this week and thinking of the move the Winslows are making to Spokane, Washington, where the Lord has called them into a wonderful new ministry. It turns out that they chose not to buy a house there, but to build one instead. I remember once years ago having a discussion with Paul about the deep sense of satisfaction that comes from a man being able to create a home for his family. Building a house is a way of extending his ministry, of indicating his concern for the family he is to lead, protect and care for. I remembered that conversation reading these verses, picturing a feast in the house of God. We have a heavenly Father who wants to meet the needs of his children, who wants to care for his family in this way.

Think of what's being said here, David says first of all that in a relationship with God we find refuge. Verse 7: "How priceless is your unfailing love." It is love that extends to both low and high. God's love doesn't fall upon those who are deserving or who find some appropriate category to fit themselves into, Low and high, all of us together are recipients of the love of God. Then he says there's shelter there. The house that's erected by a loving father will always be a shelter for its inhabitants, a place you can go when the storms are the hardest, when your fears are the greatest, when the attacks are the most vicious. Being able to go back home to a place where you're accepted and sheltered, where there's refuge and you are cared about, is one of the benefits to those who are rightly related to God.

Feast and fountain

Secondly, he says in verse 8, "They feast on the abundance of your house" in this place where God is known, where his care is exhibited. A feast is always a picture of fellowship, isn't it? You don't just inject nourishment into your veins somehow, but you meet together with those you love. There's warmth, community, and laughter. As course after course comes out, each brings a new chorus of enjoyment. January is diet month in our culture, and I hate as much as you do having to resist and wishing that food wasn't as powerful an attraction as it is. But in verse 8 we see that where the Lord God is the protector, where his greatness is established, people enjoy being together and feasting in his house.

Through his light God imparts vision, the beauty that comes with illumination, and the ability to relate and succeed in what we do

It goes on to say that we drink from the river of his delight and then in the next verse we find a fountain. We probably ought to imagine that this glorious fountain bubbling up creates a river that issues from it. Let's imagine that we're building our house in Spokane or some other place, and out side is a beautiful, majestic fountain (I hear they have water in the north west, unlike California). The fountain sprays, and there's color and beauty. It adds something to the experience of being in the home. The fountain of life itself probably harkens back to the garden of Eden with its rivers and fountains. The fountain having sprung up, a river issues from it, and it is the river of delight. That's a great picture:

Our heavenly Father, caring for us, causes life itself to spring from the ground. As it issues forth, we drink from it and experience life as delightful, not as drudgery, anguish, or mere existence. Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." John 10:10.) That's the point here; it's abundant life. Our heavenly Father, in creating a place for his people, not only secures them in refuge against the storm and brings community and feasting, but he pours forth a river that makes life itself delightful to live.

Then lastly, light of various kinds is provided for in the house being built. I imagine skylights scattered abundantly around the building, the lights of heaven pouring in. David says, "In your light [the light that issues forth from God himself], we see light." We would never see at all were it not for God. Through his light he imparts vision, the beauty that comes with illumination, and the ability to relate and succeed in what we do.

For David, the contrast in this psalm is between the wicked man and the Lord himself. He praises the Lord for his characteristics -- loving kindness, faithfulness, righteousness, and justice. He is those things, and they are immense. David also sees the benefits that have accrued to God's children, and they're wonderful to understand and to experience. Now, finally, in verse 10 we come to the petition that ends the psalm. What will David ask for, having made these observations about the wicked man, God himself, and the people of God?

Well, it's interesting to me that he does not pray that the wicked man be cast down. He does not pray for the overthrow of the evil individual, He merely observes (v.12) that it takes place. "See how the evildoers lie fallen -- thrown down, not able to rise!" He doesn't ask God to do that. He knows it's inevitable that the righteous God who rules this universe will oppose the wicked man and bring him down. The rebel who will not repent will be thrown to the ground.

Continue your love

David observes that, but what he prays in verse 10 is, "Continue your love." David is afraid that somehow his standing as a righteous man and his place in the plan of God 'night be lost to him. What he's admitting when he says that is that he's capable of being tempted, too. All of the flattery and self-love that went into making the wicked man who he is -- all the songs, the calling, the beckoning -- appeal to him as well. When he says, "Continue your love," there's no chance in David's thinking that God's love would ever cease. *Hesed*, the word he uses for love, in itself means covenant love, unending and committed. God is not going to stop loving him. What David is afraid of is that he'll stop choosing it, that somehow he will become the man described in v.14. So his prayer is, in effect, "Lord, continue to remind me of your love, continue to win me with your love, because I'm as capable of becoming self-centered as anyone else. I'm as capable of living in a small world as a great one." Verses 10 and 11: "Continue your love to those who know you, your righteousness to the upright in heart. May the foot of the proud not come against me, nor the hand of the wicked drive me away."

Probably a better translation of verse 11 is, "May the foot of pride not come against me," it's not the proud man with his foot to be dealt with, but pride itself, with its ability to take advantage of us. David doesn't want to become proud himself. Pride's ability to win our attention, to make us care for it and listen to it, is what he's concerned about. Having observed the wicked man in theory and having seen him as he's fallen, he prays, help me realize my need for humility, my instinct toward everything that's wrong and destructive. Keep those voices from any ascendancy in my thinking."

This is an important lesson about prayer in time of war. When our attention is turned toward human greatness, and the ability of the technology we control to perform, it's too easy to value less who God is in our lives, to feed less on his bounty, and to become more impressed with ourselves.

Psalm 36 begins with an oracle, or teaching about the nature of the wicked man. It ends with a prayer that recognizes our vulnerability to the pride that produces such a man.

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