

# Exposition on Psalm 36

by St. Augustine

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*St. Augustine's exposition on Psalm 36 explores the nature of ungodliness, the significance of God's mercy, and the importance of aligning one's heart with God's will.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 35:1-11

**Topics:** "Repentance", "Sin Nature"

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## Description

St. Augustine preaches about the dangers of ungodliness, emphasizing how the lack of fear of God leads to a willful ignorance of His commandments, resulting in a love for sin. He delves into the deceitful nature of seeking out one's iniquity without truly hating it, highlighting the importance of genuine repentance. St. Augustine also discusses the significance of understanding and the will to do good, pointing out the need to guard against pride and the influence of the wicked to avoid falling into sin and being removed from God's presence.

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## Transcript

1. ...The ungodly has said in himself that he will sin: there is no fear of God before his eyes Psalm 35:1. Not of one man, but of a race of ungodly men he speaks, who fight against their own selves, by not understanding, that so they may live well; not because they cannot, but because they will not. For it is one thing, when one endeavours to understand some thing, and through infirmity of flesh cannot; as says the Scripture in a certain place, For the corruptible body presses down the soul, and the earthly tabernacle weighs down the mind that muses upon many things; but another when the human heart acts mischievously against itself, so that what it could understand, if it had but good will thereto, it understands not, not because it is difficult, but because the will is contrary. But so it is when men love their own sins, and hate God's Commandments. For the Word of God is your adversary, if you be a friend to your ungodliness; but if you are an adversary to your ungodliness, the Word of God is your friend, as well as the adversary of your ungodliness....

2. For he has wrought deceitfully in His sight Psalm 35:2. In whose sight? In His, whose fear was not before the eyes of him that did work deceitfully. To find out his iniquity, and hate it. He wrought so as not to find it. For there are men who as it were endeavour to seek out their iniquity, and fear to find it; because if they should find it, it is said to them, Depart from it: this you did before you knew; you did iniquity being in ignorance; God gives pardon: now you have discovered it, forsake it, that to your ignorance pardon may easily be given; and that with a clear face you may say to God, Remember not the sins of my youth, and of

my ignorance. Thus he seeks it, thus he fears lest he find it; for he seeks it deceitfully. When says a man, I knew not that it was sin? When he has seen that it is sin, and ceases to do the sin, which he did only because he was ignorant: such an one in truth would know his sin, to find it out, and hate it. But now many work deceitfully to find out their iniquity: they work not from their heart to find it out and hate it. But because in the very search after iniquity, there is deceit, in the finding it there will be defence of it. For when one has found his iniquity, lo now it is manifest to him that it is iniquity. Do it not, you say. And he who wrought deceitfully to find it out, now he has found, hates it not; for what says he? How many do this! Who is there that does it not? And will God destroy them all? Or at least he says this: if God would not these things to be done, would men live who commit the same? Do you see that you worked deceitfully to find out your iniquity? For if not deceitfully but sincerely you had wrought, you would now have found it out, and hated it; now you have found it out, and you defend it; therefore you worked deceitfully, when you sought it.

3. The words of his mouth are iniquity and deceit: he would not understand, that he might do good Psalm 35:3. You see that he attributes that to the will: for there are men who would understand and cannot, and there are men who would not understand, and therefore understand not. He would not understand, that he might do good.

4. He has meditated iniquity on his bed. What said He, On his bed? Psalm 35:4. The ungodly has said in himself, that he will sin: what above he said, in himself, that here he said, On his bed. Our bed is our heart: there we suffer the tossing of an evil conscience; and there we rest when our conscience is good. Whoso loves the bed of his heart, let him do some good therein. There is our bed, where the Lord Jesus Christ commands us to pray. Enter into your chamber, and shut your door. Matthew 6:6 What is, Shut your door? Expect not from God such things as are without, but such as are within; and your Father which sees in secret, shall reward you openly. Who is he that shuts not the door? He who asks much from God such things, and in such wise directs all his prayers, that he may receive the goods that are of this world. Your door is open, the multitude sees when you pray. What is it to shut your door? To ask that of God, which God alone knows how He gives. What is that for which you pray, when you have shut the door? What eye has not seen, nor ear heard, or has entered into the heart of man. And haply it has not entered into your very bed, that is, into your heart. But God knows what He will give: but when shall it be? When the Lord shall be revealed, when the Judge shall appear....

5. He has set himself in every way that is not good. What is, he has set himself? He has sinned perseveringly. Whence also of a certain pious and good man it is said, He has not stood in the way of sinners. As this has not stood, so that has set himself. But wickedness has he not hated. There is the end, there the fruit: if a man cannot but have wickedness, let him at least hate it. For when you hate it, it scarcely occurs to you to do any wickedness. For sin is in our mortal body, but what says the Apostle? Let not sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in the lusts thereof. Romans 6:12 When begins it not to be therein? When that shall be fulfilled in us which he says, When this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality. 1 Corinthians 15:54 Before this come to pass, there is a delighting in sin in the body, but greater is the delighting and the pleasure in the Word of Wisdom, in the Commandment of God. Overcome sin and the lust thereof. Sin and iniquity do thou hate, that you may join yourself to God, who hates it as well as thou. Now being joined in mind unto the Law of God, in mind you serve the Law of God. And if in the flesh thou therefore servest the law of sin, Romans 7:25 because there are in you certain carnal delightings, then will there be none when you shall no longer fight. It is one thing not to fight, and to be in true and lasting peace; another to fight and overcome; another

to fight and to be overcome; another not to fight at all, but to be carried away....

6. Your mercy, O Lord, is in the heavens, and Your truth reaches even unto the clouds Psalm 35:5. I know not what Mercy of Him he means, which is in the heavens. For the Mercy of the Lord is also in the earth. You have it written, The earth is full of the Mercy of the Lord. Of what Mercy then speaks He, when He says, Your Mercy, O Lord, is in the heavens? The gifts of God are partly temporal and earthly, partly eternal and heavenly. Whoso for this worships God, that he may receive those temporal and earthly goods, which are open to all, is still as it were like the brutes: he enjoys indeed the Mercy of God, but not that which is excepted, which shall not be given, save only to the righteous, to the holy, to the good. What are the gifts which abound to all? He makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. Matthew 5:45 Who has not this Mercy of God, first that he has being, that he is distinguished from the brutes, that he is a rational animal, so as to understand God; secondly, that he enjoys this light, this air, rain, fruits, diversity of seasons, and all the earthly comforts, health of body, the affection of friends, the safety of his family? All these are good, and they are God's gifts....

7. But this man rightly understood what mercy he should pray for from God. Your Mercy, O Lord, is in the Heavens; and Your Truth reaches even to the clouds. That is, the Mercy which You give to Your Saints, is Heavenly, not earthly; is Eternal, not temporal. And how couldest Thou declare it unto men? Because Your Truth reaches even unto the clouds. For who could know the Heavenly Mercy of God, unless God should declare it unto men? How did He declare it? By sending His truth even unto the clouds. What are the clouds? The Preachers of the Word of God....Truth reached even to the clouds: therefore unto us could be declared the Mercy of God, which is in Heaven and not in earth. And truly, Brethren, the clouds are the Preachers of the Word of Truth. When God threatens through His Preachers, He thunders through the clouds. When God works miracles through His Preachers, He lightens through the clouds, He terrifies through the clouds, and waters by the rain. Those Preachers, then, by whom is preached the Gospel of God, are the clouds of God. Let us then hope for Mercy, but for that which is in the Heavens.

8. Your Righteousness is like the mountains of God: Your Judgments are a great deep Psalm 35:6. Who are the mountains of God? Those who are called clouds, the same are also the mountains of God. The great Preachers are the mountains of God. And as when the sun rises, he first clothes the mountains with light, and thence the light descends to the lowest parts of the earth: so our Lord Jesus Christ, when He came, first irradiated the height of the Apostles, first enlightened the mountains, and so His Light descended to the valley of the world. And therefore says He in a certain Psalm, I lifted up my eyes unto the mountains, from whence comes my help. But think not that the mountains themselves will give you help: for they receive what they may give, give not of their own. And if you remain in the mountains, your hope will not be strong: but in Him who enlightens the mountains, ought to be your hope and presumption. Your help indeed will come to you through the mountains, because the Scriptures are administered to you through the mountains, through the great Preachers of the Truth: but fix not your hope in them. Hear what He says next following: I lifted up my eyes unto the mountains, from whence comes my help. What then? Do the mountains give you help? No; hear what follows, My help comes from the Lord, which made Heaven and earth. Through the mountains comes help, but not from the mountains. From whom then? From the Lord, which made Heaven and earth....

9. Your Judgments are like the great abyss. The abyss he calls the depth of sin, whither every one comes by despising God; as in a certain place it is said, God gave them over to their own hearts' lusts, to do the things which are not convenient. Romans 1:28 ...Because then they were proud and ungrateful, they were held worthy to be delivered up to the lusts of their own hearts, and became a great abyss, so that they not

only sinned, but also worked craftily, lest they should understand their iniquity, and hate it. That is the depth of wickedness, to be unwilling to find it out and to hate it. But how one comes to that depth, see; Your Judgments are the great abyss. As the mountains are by the Righteousness of God, who through His Grace become great: so also through His Judgments come they unto the depth, who sink lowest. By this then let the mountains delight you, by this turn away from the abyss, and turn yourself unto that, of which it is said, My help comes from the Lord. But whereby? I have lifted up my eyes unto the mountains. What means this? I will speak plainly. In the Church of God you find an abyss, you find also mountains; you find there but few good, because the mountains are few, the abyss broad; that is, you find many living ill after the wrath of God, because they have so worked that they are delivered up to the lusts of their own heart; so now they defend their sins and confess them not; but say, Why? What have I done? Such an one did this, and such an one did that. Now will they even defend what the Divine Word reproveth. This is the abyss. Therefore in a certain place Proverbs 18:3 says the Scripture (hear this abyss), The sinner when he comes unto the depth of sin despises. See, Your Judgments are like the great abyss. But yet not are you a mountain; not yet are you in the abyss; fly from the abyss, tend towards the mountains; but yet remain not on the mountains. For your help comes from the Lord, which made Heaven and earth.

10. Because he said, Your Mercy is in the Heavens, that it may be known to be also on earth, he said, O Lord, You save man and beast, as Your Mercy is multiplied, O God Psalm 35:7. Great is Your Mercy, and manifold is Your Mercy, O God; and that showest Thou both to man and beast. For from whom is the saving of men? From God. Is not the saving of beasts also from God? For He who made man, made also beasts; He who made both, saves both; but the saving of beasts is temporal. But there are who as a great thing ask this of God, which He has given to beasts. Your Mercy, O God, is multiplied, so that not only unto men, but unto beasts also is given the same saving which is given to men, a carnal and temporal saving.

11. Have not men then somewhat reserved with God, which beasts deserve not, and whereunto beasts arrive not? They have evidently. And where is that which they have. The children of men put their trust under the shadow of Your wings. Attend, my Beloved, to this most pleasant sentence; You save man and beast. First, he spoke of man and beast, then of the children of men; as though men were one, the children of men other. Sometimes in Scripture children of men is said generally of all men, sometimes in some proper manner, with some proper signification, so that not all men are understood; chiefly when there is a distinction. For not without reason is it here put; O Lord, You save man and beast: but the children of men; as though setting aside the first, he keeps separate the children of men. Separate from whom? Not only from beasts, but also from men, who seek from God the saving of beasts, and desire this as a great thing. Who then are the children of men? Those who put their trust under the shadow of His wings. For those men together with beasts rejoice in possession, but the children of men rejoice in hope: those follow after present goods with beasts, these hope for future goods with Angels....

12. They shall be satiated with the fullness of Your House Psalm 35:8. He promises us some great thing. He would speak it, and He speaks it not. Can He not, or do not we receive it? I dare, my Brethren, to say, even of holy tongues and hearts, by which Truth is declared to us, that it can neither be spoken, which they declared, nor even thought of. For it is a great thing, and ineffable; and even they saw through a glass darkly, as says the Apostle, For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face. 1 Corinthians 13:12 Lo, they who saw through a glass darkly, thus burst forth. What then shall we be, when we shall see face to face? That with which they travailed in heart, and could not with their tongue bring forth, that men might receive it. For what necessity was there that he should say, They shall be satiated

with the fullness of Your House? He sought a word whereby to express from human things what he would say; and because he saw that men drowning themselves in drunkenness receive indeed wine without measure, but lose their senses, he saw what to say; for when shall have been received that ineffable joy, then shall be lost in a manner the human soul, it shall become Divine, and be satiated with the fullness of God's House. Wherefore also in another Psalm it is said, Your cup inebriating, how excellent is it! With this cup were the Martyrs satiated when going to their passion, they knew not their own. What so inebriated as not to know a wife weeping, not children, not parents? They knew them not, they thought not that they were before their eyes. Wonder not: they were inebriated. Wherewith were they so? Lo, they had received a cup wherewith they were satiated. Wherefore he also gives thanks to God, saying, What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits towards me? I will take the cup of Salvation, and call upon the Name of the Lord. Therefore, Brethren of men, let us be children and let us trust under the shadow of His wings and be satiated with the fullness of His House. As I could, I have spoken; and as far as I can I see; and how far I see, I cannot speak. And of the torrent of Your Pleasure shall Thou give them to drink. A torrent we call water coming with a flood. There will be a flood of God's Mercy to overflow and inebriate those who now put their trust under the shadow of His wings. What is that Pleasure? As it were a torrent inebriating the thirsty. Let him then who thirsts now, lay up hope: whoso thirsts now, let him have hope; when inebriated, he shall have possession: before he have possession, let him thirst in hope. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled. Matthew 5:6

13. With what fountain then will you be overflowed, and whence runs such a torrent of His Pleasure? For with You, says he, is the fountain of Life. What is the fountain of Life, but Christ? He came to you in the flesh, that He might bedew your thirsty lips: He will satisfy you trusting, who bedewed you thirsting. For with You is the fountain of Life; in Your Light shall we see light Psalm 35:9. Here a fountain is one thing, light another: there not so. For that which is the Fountain, the same is also Light: and whatever you will you call It, for It is not what you call It: for you can not find a fit name: for It remains not in one name. If you should say, that It is Light only, it would be said to you, Then without cause am I told to hunger and thirst, for who is there that eats light? It is said to me plainly, directly, Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. Matthew 5:6, 8 If It is Light, my eyes must I prepare. Prepare also lips; for That which is Light is also a Fountain: a Fountain, because It satisfies the thirsty: Light, because It enlightens the blind. Here sometimes, light is in one place, a fountain in another. For sometimes fountains run even in darkness; and sometimes in the desert you suffer the sun, findest no fountain: here then can these two be separated: there you shall not be wearied, for there is a Fountain; there you shall not be darkened, for there is Light.

14. Show forth Your Mercy unto them that know You; Your Righteousness to them that are of a right heart Psalm 35:10. As I have said, Those are of a right heart who follow in this life the Will of God. The will of God is sometimes that you should be whole, sometimes that you should be sick. If when you are whole God's Will be sweet, and when you are sick God's Will be bitter; you are not of a right heart. Wherefore? Because you will not make right your will according to God's Will, but wilt bend God's Will to yours.

That is right, but you are crooked: your will must be made right to That, not That made crooked to you; and you will have a right heart. It is well with you in this world; be God blessed, who comforts you: it goes hardly with you in this world; be God blessed, because He chastens and proves you; and so will you be of a right heart, saying, I will bless the Lord at all times: His Praise shall be ever in my mouth. 15. Let not the foot of pride come against me Psalm 35:11. But now he said, The children of men shall put their trust under the shadow of Your wings: they shall be satiated with the fullness of Your House.

When one has begun to be plentifully overflowed with that Fountain, let him take heed lest he grow proud. For the same was not wanting to Adam, the first man: but the foot of pride came against him, and the hand of the sinner removed him, that is, the proud hand of the devil. As he who seduced him, said of himself, I will sit in the sides of the north; Isaiah 14:13 so he persuaded him, by saying, Taste, and you shall be as gods. Genesis 3:5 By pride then have we so fallen as to arrive at this mortality.

And because pride had wounded us, humility makes us whole. God came humbly, that from such great wound of pride He might heal man. He came, for The Word was made Flesh, and dwelt among us. John 1:34 He was taken by the Jews; He was reviled of them. You heard when the Gospel was read, what they said, and to Whom they said, You have a devil: and He said not, You have a devil, for you are still in your sins, and the devil possesses your hearts. He said not this, which if He had said, He had said truly: but it was not meet that He should say it, lest He should seem not to preach Truth, but to retort evil speaking.

He let go what He heard as though He heard it not. For a Physician was He, and to cure the madman had He come. As a Physician cares not what he may hear from the madman; but how the madman may recover and become sane; nor even if he receive a blow from the madman, cares he; but while he to him gives new wounds, he cures his old fever: so also the Lord came to the sick man, to the madman came He, that whatever He might hear, whatever He might suffer, He should despise; by this very thing teaching us humility, that being taught by humility, we might be healed from pride: from which he here prays to be delivered, saying, Let not the foot of pride come against me; neither let the hand of the sinner remove me.

For if the foot of pride come, the hand of the sinner removes. What is the hand of the sinner? The working of him that advises ill. Have you become proud? Quickly he corrupts you who advises ill. Humbly fix yourself in God, and care not much what is said to you. Hence is that which is elsewhere spoken, From my secret sins cleanse Thou me; and from others' sins also keep Your servant. What is, From my secret sins? Let not the foot of pride come against me. What is, From other men's sins also keep Your servant? Let not the hand of the wicked remove me. Keep that which is within, and you shall not fear from without.

16. But wherefore so greatly do you fear this? Because it is said, Thereby have fallen all that work iniquity Psalm 35:12; so that they have come into that abyss of which it is said, Your judgments are like the great abyss: so that they have come even to that deep wherein sinners who despise have fallen. Have fallen. Whereby did they first fall? By the foot of pride. Hear the foot of pride. When they knew God, they glorified Him not as God. Therefore came against them the foot of pride, whereby they came into the depth. God gave them over to their own hearts' lusts, to do those things which are not convenient. Romans 1:21-24 The root of sin, and the head of sin feared he who said, Let not the foot of pride come against me. Wherefore said he, the foot? Because by walking proudly man deserted God, and departed from Him. His foot, called he his affection. Let not the foot of pride come against me: let not the hand of the wicked remove me: that is, let not the works of the wicked remove me from You, that I should wish to imitate them. But wherefore said he this against pride, Thereby have fallen all that work iniquity? Because those who now are ungodly, have fallen by pride. Therefore when the Lord would caution His Church, He said, It shall watch your head, and you shall watch his heel. Genesis 3:15 The serpent watches when the foot of pride may come against you, when you may fall, that he may cast you down. But watch thou his head: the beginning of all sin is pride. Sirach 10:13 Thereby have fallen all that work iniquity: they are driven out, and are not able to stand. He first, who in the Truth stood not, then, through him, they whom God sent out of Paradise. Whence he, the humble, who said that he was not worthy to unloose His shoe's latchet, is not driven out, but stands and hears Him, and rejoices greatly because of the Bridegroom's voice; not because of his own, lest the foot of pride come against him, and he be driven out, and be not able to

stand....

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