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**Psalms 36, ESV.**

- 36** <sup>1</sup> *Transgression speaks to the wicked  
deep in his heart;  
there is no fear of God  
before his eyes.*
- <sup>2</sup> *For he flatters himself in his own eyes  
that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated.*
- <sup>3</sup> *The words of his mouth are trouble and deceit;  
he has ceased to act wisely and do good.*
- <sup>4</sup> *He plots trouble while on his bed;  
he sets himself in a way that is not good;  
he does not reject evil.*
- <sup>5</sup> *Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens,  
your faithfulness to the clouds.*
- <sup>6</sup> *Your righteousness is like the mountains of God;  
your judgments are like the great deep;  
man and beast you save, O LORD.*
- <sup>7</sup> *How precious is your steadfast love, O God!  
The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings.*
- <sup>8</sup> *They feast on the abundance of your house,  
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.*
- <sup>9</sup> *For with you is the fountain of life;  
in your light do we see light.*
- <sup>10</sup> *Oh, continue your steadfast love to those who know you,  
and your righteousness to the upright of heart!*
- <sup>11</sup> *Let not the foot of arrogance come upon me,  
nor the hand of the wicked drive me away.*
- <sup>12</sup> *There the evildoers lie fallen;  
they are thrust down, unable to rise.*

## **The stuffed rabbit.**

A while back, I talked to a man who was dying of cancer. We hit it off immediately, as we had a lot in common: we were about the same age; we both owned powerful cars as young men; we both went to twelve years of Catholic school; we both became Protestants as adults. But there was one huge difference: I had a normal, stable, joyful childhood – and he certainly did not. We'll call him Zane. He and his mother had to run away when he was a boy because his father was violent and would physically abuse both of them. So, when he was a little boy, he and his mom left in the middle of the night. Her parents were dead, and she had no siblings. There weren't any family members who could help them out. They moved to another state, to Colorado. His mother did not have much education and ended up with a job that didn't pay well. Zane spent a lot of time at home alone because his mother couldn't afford to pay for childcare. He found himself working at a very young age - working illegally in violation of child labor laws. He finished high school, but that was all; he took a job right out of high school so he could help his mother. His mother was never happy. She felt cheated by life, and she was angry that she couldn't have any of the nice things that other people had. And during all those years when he was growing up, she was afraid that her husband would find them. He felt her fear

and so he was a nervous kid. His dad tracked them down twice that he knew of; his father was arrested on one of those occasions but was soon released. In sum, Zane grew up poor, constantly worrying about his mother's safety, and afraid of his father reappearing; he hardly ever talked to his mother, and he worked when other kids were playing. But through all of that, he managed to feel secure, not in an earthly way. His mother was a Christian, and although she had never learned to truly trust God, he did. Since he went to Catholic school, he wasn't required to attend Sunday school after church, like the Catholic kids who went to public school. He loved it so much, though, that he went anyway. He loved learning about the Bible, and he grew up knowing that God would not put anything in his life that wasn't meant to bring him closer to God. I met with Zane several times while he was in the hospital. And of course, as always, I am changing facts about Zane and his situation to protect his privacy. He lived alone, and leading up to his hospital visit, he collapsed at home several times. He had never been married. They did numerous tests to find a treatment that might work for his cancer. In the end, they gave him chemotherapy and radiation, but they concluded that his cancer was terminal, that they couldn't do anything to extend his life. Eventually, he left the hospital and went to hospice. I never saw him again after that.

Zane and I would talk for thirty minutes to an hour each time I visited him. At his request, I brought him a Bible. We prayed together. He made a point of saying that he believed in God, that he was not afraid to die, and that he would accept whatever God wanted to do with him. He asked me to pray for a painless transition to whatever God had in mind for him. One day, after he had been diagnosed as having a terminal condition, he told me about his childhood. One thing that he said really stuck with me. He said that he didn't have the normal, happy childhood memories that most people like to talk about. Then, he asked me if I would go buy something for him. I said sure, what do you need? He said that he could remember being little and wishing that his mother could afford to buy him toys and books and bicycles and the other things that kids played with. He had always wanted a skateboard. He had had a few model airplanes and cars that he had put together and proudly displayed on his empty bookshelf at home. He said that when he was a young man and finally had a decent paying job, he tried buying some things for himself, to try to claim a little of the fun he missed as a kid. He bought himself a slightly used Camaro. It was red, with a 6-speed manual transmission and a V-8 engine. He washed it every week, found excuses to drive it, tricked it out with bright red seat covers and with red brake rotors and calipers. He put a ceramic coating on it so the Camaro would glint in the sun. He

told me that he drove that car for six or seven years and tried very hard to have a good time with it. In the end, he grew bored with it and sold it. He said that he just never learned to enjoy toys, that he had missed that part of his development. There was no way to make up for it. Then, he told me what he wanted me to buy for him: a stuffed animal. I said sure, I'll do that. He explained that he had never owned any stuffed animals as a kid, but as an adult, he had had dreams about stuffed animals, and that they were very beautiful dreams. He thought that maybe that stuffed animals were the one toy that would make him feel like a happy kid. So, I went down to the hospital gift shop and bought him a big white rabbit. He did indeed grin like a kid when I handed it to him.

Let's look at our Bible passage for today. It's an entire Psalm, number 36. It talks about God's faithfulness to his people and about the sad state that befalls unbelievers. God's steadfastness to those who follow his ways is compared to the massive heights of mountains and the unknown depths of the seas. It was a verse from this Psalm that I thought of one day when I was talking to Zane: *<sup>7</sup>How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings.* After I gave him the stuffed rabbit and he placed it next to himself in bed, he said that the reason he had turned out a good man, someone who worked hard, followed the law, and treated all people with respect was

because God had always protected him. It was God's love that had made him feel safe no matter what happened in life. Even when his mother died in a car crash when he was twenty, he could feel God watching over him. It was God who was with him every step of his life, who loved him, guided him, made him feel secure. There was never anyone else in his life who did those things for him.

Let's look at the middle portion of Psalm 36 in the context of Zane's life.

These lines follow the verse I just quoted.

<sup>5</sup> *Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens,  
your faithfulness to the clouds.*

<sup>6</sup> *Your righteousness is like the mountains of God;  
your judgments are like the great deep;  
man and beast you save, O LORD.*

Most of us think of God's faithfulness to us, his willingness to forgive us, to treat us in a loving way despite our failings, in a largely abstract fashion. God's love and protection are not truly tangible. But to Zane, these two verses of Psalm 36 are very literal: He truly depended on God's steadfastness, God's dependability every day of his life. It was God who rescued him in life. Zane could feel God's love extending to the heavens, far above the clouds, and he could feel God's righteousness reaching up above the mountains. Here are the next three verses of our passage:

- <sup>7</sup> *How precious is your steadfast love, O God!  
The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings.*
- <sup>8</sup> *They feast on the abundance of your house,  
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.*
- <sup>9</sup> *For with you is the fountain of life;  
in your light do we see light.*

Imagine if you were like Zane and the only being who had ever spread their wings to protect you was God. Suppose there was no one else. To Zane, it was God who kept him alive and healthy, who gave him his life and hope, who provided the light of day and the light of God's Word. This is what struck me about Zane: his faith was unbelievably deep, radically solid. His faith was as strong as the faith of any person whom I had ever met. No believer, no ordained clergy, no one ever seemed to me to believe in God any stronger than Zane. In a strange way, he had benefited from having an insecure, frightening, deprived, and lonely childhood. This struck me during my series of visits with Zane: I was being blessed by talking to a true, fully committed believer. He talked about being ready to go be with God. He said that he was going to see his mother again and that he was happy that she would finally be happy. He was unafraid of death. Completely unafraid. Zane had walked with God all his life and was going to be with God for eternity.

A couple of days before Zane left the hospital, he told me that he had one regret. He had a half-sister. His father had had a child with another woman after

his mother left him. But he hadn't talked to her since he was in college. Decades had gone by, several decades. I asked him if he had any idea how to find her. He said he didn't know – but then later in that same day, he asked to have me come talk to him again. He had found her! He said that when he was in college, she was a kid and was living with his father and his new girlfriend, back in the town where Zane had been born. He couldn't find her on the Internet, but Zane found her mother, his father's old girlfriend, and had called her. She gave him the number of his sister. They had just talked for two hours, and Zane happily told me that his sister had thanked him for finding her before dying. She told him that she had wanted to talk to him a hundred times but had never tried to find him. If he had died and she had never talked to him, she would have been devastated. He smiled and told me that he had something he never thought he would have – someone to leave behind when he went to spend eternity with God. And he said that he was a hundred per cent confident that he would soon be in that supernatural place where everything operates according to the laws of God.

During my last visit with Zane, he told me that in many ways, he was thankful that he had had a hard life. We both knew what he meant. Then, at one point, I looked up on the white board in his room. The nurses always have the patient's name, the doctor caring for the patient, and the nurse taking care of the

patient that day, along with information about the next of kin and any emergency contacts on the white board. Now, there was his sister, too – her name and her phone number. And there was someone else on that board. It was just a first name: Ruby. I asked him who Ruby was. He pointed at the stuffed rabbit. As it turned out, he had had a little contest with the nurses and the aids on the unit. They all suggested names and he picked the one he liked the most – Ruby, because rubies are the stone for love and for the zest of life, he told me. He said that was how he felt, filled with God’s love, the love of his newly-found sister, and the love of the people who had taken care of him at the hospital – including me. And he also had a zest for life – a zest for eternal life.

The next day, Zane left the hospital to go into hospice. He must be dead by now. Please pray very briefly with me:

*God, as someone made in your image, I want what Zane had - an unwavering belief in your existence, your love, and your protection. In truth, God, I may never have faith as strong as Zane’s. But please help me come as close as possible.*

*Amen.*