

After the Spiritual High Wears Off

By Steve Burchett



I was just back from serving the youth of our church as one of their leaders at an annual camp. The Bible teaching was excellent. The youth were a delight, and several experienced God's work in their lives. I returned on a "spiritual high." As I drove around the day after getting home, I was surprised at how patient I was with some very poor drivers out and about. "That's

okay, neighbor. I love you. Don't even worry about stupidly cutting me off in heavy traffic!"

Two days later, I was back out on those same streets, and some of those same below average drivers decided to join me again. But this time, I wasn't so ready to be kind; something was different in my spirit! What was happening to me? In one sense, I had come down from that spiritual high.

I don't want you to think I'm justifying my impatience; there are no excuses for sin. But I share that experience with you to highlight an experience that most believers will have in their lives: having been at a camp, or a retreat, or a conference, you find yourself "on fire for the Lord." But then you're back home, back at work, back among unbelievers, and the zeal wanes.

Here's the reality: it's not possible to maintain such a spiritual high every day of your life, but you can avoid spiritual lows. You may not achieve everything you hoped for regarding certain commitments you made at camp or the retreat, but a characteristic of faithfulness to the Lord is possible. But how? Psalm 36 will help us to think carefully about this.

First of all, the way forward "after the spiritual high wears off" is to **recognize what we are up against**. The first four verses of Psalm 36 describe a wicked person who is representative of individuals seeking to destroy God's people. It begins, "Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart" (v. 1). Sin is personified as talking to this person, deceiving him, guiding him away from "the fear of God," demonstrated by his thinking highly of himself and living as if he will never face any consequences for sin (v. 2). The result? "The words of his mouth are trouble and deceit; he has ceased to act wisely and do good. He plots trouble while on his bed; he sets himself in a way that is not good; he does not reject evil" (vv. 3-4).

It's not until verse 11, as David is praying, that we learn that wicked people are after God's people: "Let not the foot of arrogance come upon me, nor the hand of the wicked drive me away." This is the world, led by Satan, that we walk back into after camp, or after that retreat or conference. It's helpful to know this because, when attacked, or tempted, we won't be surprised.

But we need help if we are going to persevere after the spiritual high. So David tells us, second, that we must **remember who is on our side, and rely on him**.

The word "like" was a favorite of one of my daughters. So, like, she would, like, use it quite, like, inappropriately at, like, the supper table when telling a story. At some point, I would institute the 25 cent rule: "You will owe me a quarter for every wrong use of the word 'like' until we finish supper."

One of the Lord's favorite words in the Old Testament is a word that we can't hear enough. It's used around 250 times in the Old Testament, and we see its prominence in Psalm 36 as it appears three times (vv. 5, 7, 10). It's the Hebrew word *hesed*, translated in the *ESV* as "steadfast love." It's Yahweh's "covenant love," meaning his "committed love." To use words from an old hymn, *hesed* is God's "love that will not let me go."

In contrast to wicked people who are against us, the steadfast love of Yahweh is David's focus in verses 5-9. He first expresses its *bigness*:

Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds.
Your righteousness is like the mountains of God;
your judgments are like the great deep;
man and beast you save, O LORD. (vv. 5-6)

And then David reminds us of the *preciousness* of God's steadfast love. It is precious because it brings protection (v. 7) and because it brings provision (v. 8). And this is the reality because, "For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light" (v. 9). God is *able* to love like this! After all, God gave his only Son, so certainly he will not abandon us (cf. Rom 8:32).

It's no wonder that we find David praying, "Oh, continue your steadfast love to those who know you, and your righteousness to the upright of heart!" He's very aware that the future destruction of the wicked is certain (v. 12), but until then, God's people need God's aid, so he prays for what is guaranteed — "Yahweh, carry out your steadfast love in our lives today!"

Psalm 36, therefore, is reminding a believer back from camp or a conference, or any believer wanting to persevere to the end, to do this:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in his wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace. (Helen Lemmel, 1922)