



Psalm 12 - Plea for Help in Evil Times

To the leader: according to The Sheminith. A Psalm of David.

Introduction

This is a community lament, suited to occasions when the people of God are dominated by liars in positions of authority. It is not clear whether these liars are unfaithful Israelites or Gentile oppressors; the psalm works for either situation.

Psalm 12:1-2 - The Liars Prevail.

As usual in laments, the psalm describes the situation: the particular kinds of lies are flattering lips and insincere speech, i.e. a double heart, both of which manipulate others for the sake of gain (v.2). In such an environment the godly and the faithful become so rare that it seems as if they have disappeared (v.1), either because they have been suppressed or because they have been seduced into lying themselves.

- ¹ Help, O Lord, for there is no longer anyone who is godly;
the faithful have disappeared from humankind.
- ² They utter lies to each other;
with flattering lips and a double heart they speak.

Psalm 1-2

Help, O Lord, for there is no longer anyone who is godly. The exact circumstances under which David wrote this psalm are unknown, and it could have been during many different periods in his life. David knew what it was like to feel that the faithful have disappeared from humankind: <<*The righteous perish, and no one takes it to heart; the devout are taken away, while no one understands. For the righteous are taken away from calamity*>> (Isaiah 57:1), and: <<*The faithful have disappeared from the land, and there is no one left*

who is upright; they all lie in wait for blood, and they hunt each other with nets>> (Micah 7:2). David was a warrior and a fierce soldier; but it is seen here that he also had to deal with the battles of gossip and backbiting; of idle and deceptive talkers. David knew what it was like to feel all alone in this kind of battle, where it seemed that no one would speak up and defend him. Instead he took his case to the Lord. It can be sensed that David probably would have preferred to battle with swords and shields than among the gossips and backbiters surrounding him.

With flattering lips and a double heart they speak. Instead of the godly man, David saw around him those who spoke with idle chatter, and who were two-faced hypocrites and liars.

The essence of flattering lips is that they say what people want to hear. There are many such speakers today, even within the church; those who know the right answer for every occasion, but speak with no honesty or transparency of heart. They constantly speak what people hope to hear or what is assumed to be correct instead of their true thoughts, feelings, and deeds. Daniel says that flattery will be a tool of that wicked world ruler who will arise at the last day: <<*He shall seduce with intrigue those who violate the covenant; but the people who are loyal to their God shall stand firm and take action*>> (Daniel 11:32).

Psalm 12:3-4 - May the Lord Cut Off the Liars.

The psalm moves on to prayer. The mention of flattering lips takes up a term from v.2, showing the flow of thought. Note how the lips and tongue of v.3 appear in reverse order in v.4.

- ³ May the Lord cut off all flattering lips,
the tongue that makes great boasts,
⁴ those who say, ‘With our tongues we will prevail;
our lips are our own – who is our master?’

Psalm 12:3-4

May the Lord cut off all flattering lips by removing them from his people, as in: <<*I myself will set my face against them, and will cut them off from the people, because they have given of their offspring to Molech, defiling my sanctuary and profaning my holy name*>> (Leviticus 20:3).

With our tongues we will prevail; who is our master? David despised these destructive tongues not only for what they said, but also for their pride that made them so difficult to stop. It was as if they freely said, “You can never make us stop talking as we please.” The Lord’s brother writes of the dangers of an uncontrolled

tongue: <<So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue – a restless evil, full of deadly poison>> (James 3:5-8).

For the one who professes to be a follower of Jesus Christ, there is only one answer to this question, who is our master? Jesus Christ is the Lord, and he owns his followers body, soul, and spirit. Believers are bought with a price, and are therefore obligated to glorify God in their bodies, including their lips and tongue: **<<For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body>>** (1 Corinthians 6:20).

Psalm 12:5-6 - The Reliable Promises of God Are Refreshing.

In such a climate of insincerity, God's promises provide hope.

- ⁵ 'Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan,
I will now rise up,' says the Lord;
'I will place them in the safety for which they long.'

Psalm 12:5

The poor and the needy are familiar groups whom the true Israelites will not oppress but care for: **<<Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land'>>** (Deuteronomy 15:11), and: **<<You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy labourers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns>>** (Deuteronomy 24:14); to oppress them arouses God to action: **<<For the needy shall not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the poor perish for ever>>** (Psalm 9:18).

I will now rise up. These destructive talkers spoke as they pleased; but they could not stop the Lord God from speaking as he pleased. In a wonderful and dramatic way the Lord announced that he would act on behalf of the poor and needy victimised by these proud, unstoppable talkers. Spurgeon wrote 'Think of God arising in his might. When he ariseth, he shakes terribly the earth; nothing stands before him when he once arises. Poor, sick, needy, sorrowing, sighing child of God, it is you who can bring him into this marvellous state of activity.'

- 6 The promises of the Lord are promises that are pure,
silver refined in a furnace on the ground,
purified seven times.

Psalm 12:6

To say that God's promises are pure, refined, and purified is to insist that they have no dross of lies, flattery, or insincerity: God means what he says; his words are completely pure. This general truth gives bite to his specific promise of v.7, as confirmed in: *<<Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him>>* (Proverbs 30:5). This means that the Word of God can be trusted in every sense. It is good, pure, and tested thoroughly. It can be trusted that God has tested his own word; but it has also been tested by students, scholars, critics, and doubters through the centuries - and the Word of God still stands. It is like a mighty anvil that has worn out countless hammers that have pounded upon it: *<<Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart>>* (Hebrews 4:12).

Psalm 12:7-8 - God Will Guard His Faithful.

The psalm closes with assurance: God will protect his faithful followers.

- 7 You, O Lord, will protect us;
you will guard us from this generation for ever.

Psalm 12:7

You, O Lord, will protect us; you will guard us from this generation for ever. This was David's declaration of confidence in God's ability to protect his own words. He did not only give his word to mankind; his providential hand has protected the existence and integrity of his word through the centuries: *<<For the Lord loves justice; he will not forsake his faithful ones. The righteous shall be kept safe for ever, but the children of the wicked shall be cut off>>* (Psalm 37:28), and: *<<While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled>>* (John 17:12). It seems best to take us here as the poor and needy of v.5 and the godly of v.1. Their disappearance was not absolute as commented on at vv.1-2.

- 8 On every side the wicked prowl,
as vileness is exalted among humankind.

Psalm 12:8

This final verse returns to describe the prevailing conditions of vv.1-2; although this is a sombre note on which to close, it keeps the faithful mindful of their constant dependence on God to guard them. The psalm has also shown that this trust is well placed.

On every side the wicked prowl. David knew that the existence and exaltation of God's pure word would not eliminate the wicked. They would still exist and prowl on every side as they could, but never with the assurance of final victory: <<***Day and night they go around it on its walls, and iniquity and trouble are within it; ruin is in its midst; oppression and fraud do not depart from its market-place***>> (Psalm 55:10-11)

As vileness is exalted among humankind. It might be felt that this psalm ends on a sad, depressing note. Yet David was utterly realistic in his outlook. He knew that even with the precious and pure Word of God available to all of humankind, many people would still prefer that vileness is exalted.