

A Place of Safety

Psalm 12

Series: Psalms
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Have you ever been so overwhelmed with what is going on around you that you just wanted to escape—you just wanted it all to go away? Have you ever been so exasperated or confused or bewildered that just didn't know what to do next or where to go or how to respond? Maybe it was listening to news and hearing all the crazy things going on in the world. Maybe it was closer to home—struggles on the job, in the home, or in your own heart.

Open your Bibles this evening to Psalm 12.

Here David both teaches us how to bring our struggles to God and shows us where to go and what to do when we are beaten down and confounded by life.

In this psalm David faces a perplexing problem. He has seen a terrible injustice and feels helpless to do anything about it. He sees first hand the ravages and consequences of evil. The devastation left in the wake of sin so grieves and overwhelms his soul that he is compelled to cry out to God in prayer.

I want to look at this psalm tonight as we prepare to pray together and uncover the answer to David's distress. The problem he faces is one that we face as well—one that still perplexes us in our day as we live with the consequences of sin in a fallen world. In this psalm God comforts David and helps him to understand—even as David sings he finds his answer.

Let's begin by reading the psalm together.

Psalm 12	To the Choirmaster. According to Sheminith. A Psalm of David.
12:1	Save, O LORD, for the godly one is gone; for the faithful have vanished from among the children of man.
12:2	Everyone utters lies to his neighbor; with flattering lips and a double heart they speak.
12:3	May the LORD cut off all flattering lips, the tongue that makes great boasts,

12:4 those who say, "With our tongue we will prevail,
our lips are with us; who is master over us?"

12:5 "Because the poor are plundered, because the needy groan,
I will now arise," says the LORD;
"I will place him in the safety for which he longs."

12:6 The words of the LORD are pure words,
like silver refined in a furnace on the ground,
purified seven times.

12:7 You, O LORD, will keep them;
you will guard us from this generation forever.

12:8 On every side the wicked prowl,
as vileness is exalted among the children of man.

Inscription

Psalm 12 To the Choirmaster. According to Sheminith. A Psalm of David.

The title to this psalm indicates that it was composed by David and was meant for use in public worship. Songs directed to the Choirmaster (some versions have Chief Musician) were specifically intended for public worship. The inscription includes a musical direction as well, "according to Sheminith" meaning *eight or octave*. Some translators have suggested that this refers to an eight-stringed instrument, but it is more likely a musical marking indicating that the song was to be sung down in a low key (upon the eighth *lowest* string).

The psalm is a lament and so a low and somber key would be very fitting.

David's Prayer

The psalm begins with a prayer in verse 1:

Psalm 12:1 Save, O LORD, for the godly one is gone;
for the faithful have vanished from among the children of man.

Unlike many of the psalms that begin with joy and praise, this psalm begins abruptly with a cry for help. In fact the first word that David utters is the word *Save!* The Hebrew word for *Save* הוֹשִׁיעָה in verse one comes from the root YASHA' יָשַׁע from which the name Jesus is derived. It is the word David uses in Psalm 3:7–8 where he acknowledges that salvation comes from God.

David's cry for help is followed by an explanation: David sees that the godly and the faithful are vanishing. Now to understand David's distress, it helps to know the background of the psalm. This psalm was written in the midst of events recorded in 1 Samuel, chapters 18 to 22.

Let's look for a moment at these chapters in 1 Samuel. They record some dark days in the life of David. His troubles begin in Chapter 18. David has befriended Saul's son, Jonathan. David has a prominent position in the military and God prospered all he did.

We read in—

1 Samuel 18:5 And David went out and was successful wherever Saul sent him, so that Saul set him over the men of war. And this was good in the sight of all the people and also in the sight of Saul's servants.

Now this appears to be something good, something in David's favor. God is prospering him. But as David grew in favor with the people, Saul's jealousy began to grow and he became envious of David. In verses 6–9 we read—

1 Samuel 18:6–9 As they were coming home, when David returned from striking down the Philistine, the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments. And the women sang to one another as they celebrated,
“Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands.”
And Saul was very angry, and this saying displeased him. He said, “They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands, and what more can he have but the kingdom?” And Saul eyed David from that day on.

In the eyes of Saul, David had become a threat. Even after Saul agreed to allow David to marry his daughter and become his son-in-law—even after bringing him into his own house—the envy was still brewing. Saul wanted to remain king and David's growing popularity with the people didn't sit well with his political agenda.

At the beginning of Chapter 19 Jonathan tells David that Saul was feeling threatened and was in fact plotting to kill David.

1 Samuel 19:1–3 And Saul spoke to Jonathan his son and to all his servants, that they should kill David. But Jonathan, Saul's son, delighted much in David. And Jonathan told David, “Saul my father seeks to kill you. Therefore be on your guard in the morning. Stay in a secret place and hide yourself. And I will go out and stand beside my father in the field where you are, and I will speak to my father about you. And if I learn anything I will tell you.

Because of Jonathan's warning, David was able to escape and by chapter 21 we find David fleeing for his life.

First he went to Nob, a city of priests, to see Ahimelech the high priest. Listen to the account in 1 Samuel 21:1–9.

1 Samuel 21:1–9 Then David came to Nob to Ahimelech the priest. And Ahimelech came to meet David trembling and said to him, “Why are you alone, and no one with you?” And David said to Ahimelech the priest, “The king has charged me with a matter and said to me, ‘Let no one know anything of the matter about which I send you, and with which I have charged you.’ I have made an appointment with the young men for such and such a place. Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here.” And the priest answered David, “I have no common bread on hand, but there is holy bread—if the young men have kept themselves from women.” And David answered the priest, “Truly women have been kept from us as always when I go on an expedition.

The vessels of the young men are holy even when it is an ordinary journey. How much more today will their vessels be holy?" So the priest gave him the holy bread, for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence, which is removed from before the Lord, to be replaced by hot bread on the day it is taken away.

Now a certain man of the servants of Saul was there that day, detained before the Lord. His name was Doeg the Edomite, the chief of Saul's herdsmen.

Then David said to Ahimelech, "Then have you not here a spear or a sword at hand? For I have brought neither my sword nor my weapons with me, because the king's business required haste." And the priest said, "The sword of Goliath the Philistine, whom you struck down in the Valley of Elah, behold, it is here wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod. If you will take that, take it, for there is none but that here." And David said, "There is none like that; give it to me."

What did David tell the high priest?

He told him that he was there on the king's business and needed provisions.

Was David honest with the high priest?

No. He in fact was deceptive. David was not there at Saul's request and he did not tell Ahimelech and the priests his real intentions.

But the priests trusted David—they knew him—he was a great warrior, faithful to God and to the king and so they consented to help him. They even gave him bread from the altar that should have fed the priests and they gave him Goliath's sword.

In verses 10 to 15 David continues his flight by going to Gath, a city of the Philistines. In Gath, David is almost recognized but he manages to escape by more deception—by pretending that he is insane. We reach chapter 22 of 1 Samuel and find David hiding out in the cave of Adullan. There many who were upset with Saul and disgruntled with the state of the kingdom came to help David—about 400 men. Then David went Moab. But Saul was growing wise to David's whereabouts and so David is warned in verse 5.

1 Samuel 22:5 Then the prophet Gad said to David, "Do not remain in the stronghold; depart, and go into the land of Judah." So David departed and went into the forest of Hereth.

What follows in the rest of chapter 22 is a great atrocity. David is out of Saul's reach, but Saul is outraged that so many are defecting to join with David. We pick up the account in verse 6:

1 Samuel 22:6–8 Now Saul heard that David was discovered, and the men who were with him. Saul was sitting at Gibeah under the tamarisk tree on the height with his spear in his hand, and all his servants were standing about him. And Saul said to his servants who stood about him, "Hear now, people of Benjamin; will the son of Jesse give every one of you fields and vineyards, will he make you all commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds, that all of you have conspired against me? No one discloses to me when my son makes a covenant with the son of Jesse. None of you is sorry for me or discloses to me that my son has stirred up my servant against me, to lie in wait, as at this day.

But remember back in chapter 21, where David schemed to get provisions from the priests. In verse 7 of chapter 21 we read:

1 Samuel 21:7 Now a certain man of the servants of Saul was there that day, detained before the Lord. His name was Doeg the Edomite, the chief of Saul's herdsmen.

Now in verse 9 of chapter 22, Doeg speaks up.

1 Samuel 22:9–10 Then answered Doeg the Edomite, who stood by the servants of Saul, "I saw the son of Jesse coming to Nob, to Ahimelech the son of Ahitub, and he inquired of the Lord for him and gave him provisions and gave him the sword of Goliath the Philistine.

This news enrages Saul and so we read how Saul enacts his vengeance:

1 Samuel 22:11–19 Then the king sent to summon Ahimelech the priest, the son of Ahitub, and all his father's house, the priests who were at Nob, and all of them came to the king. And Saul said, "Hear now, son of Ahitub." And he answered, "Here I am, my lord." And Saul said to him, "Why have you conspired against me, you and the son of Jesse, in that you have given him bread and a sword and have inquired of God for him, so that he has risen against me, to lie in wait, as at this day?" Then Ahimelech answered the king, "And who among all your servants is so faithful as David, who is the king's son-in-law, and captain over your bodyguard, and honored in your house? Is today the first time that I have inquired of God for him? No! Let not the king impute anything to his servant or to all the house of my father, for your servant has known nothing of all this, much or little." And the king said, "You shall surely die, Ahimelech, you and all your father's house." And the king said to the guard who stood about him, "Turn and kill the priests of the Lord, because their hand also is with David, and they knew that he fled and did not disclose it to me." But the servants of the king would not put out their hand to strike the priests of the Lord. Then the king said to Doeg, "You turn and strike the priests." And Doeg the Edomite turned and struck down the priests, and he killed on that day eighty-five persons who wore the linen ephod. And Nob, the city of the priests, he put to the sword; both man and woman, child and infant, ox, donkey and sheep, he put to the sword.

Word of this terrible atrocity reaches David at the end of the chapter.

1 Samuel 22:20–23 But one of the sons of Ahimelech the son of Ahitub, named Abiathar, escaped and fled after David. And Abiathar told David that Saul had killed the priests of the Lord. And David said to Abiathar, "I knew on that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Saul. I have occasioned the death of all the persons of your father's house. Stay with me; do not be afraid, for he who seeks my life seeks your life. With me you shall be in safekeeping.

This incident is likely what drove David to flee to God and pray the words of Psalm 12. Eighty-five men who served as God's priests, along with their families and possessions were cut down and destroyed. God's own servants—His priests—killed in the midst of political ambition and jealousy. It was outrageous. It was overwhelming. It was crazy.

How could God allow this to happen? How could He permit such injustice and suffering?

And what is worse, David has to confess in verse 22 that it was his own deceptions that placed the priests in jeopardy. He was not honest with them. He did not even tell them he was fleeing or that Saul might come looking for him.

The priests' desire to help David and serve him was turned against them and they were murdered. And so David begins his prayer in Psalm 12—

Psalm 12:1 Save, O LORD, for the godly one is gone;
 for the faithful have vanished from among the children of man.

He continues in verse 2 describing the sin that threatens his soul.

Description of the Problem

Psalm 12:2 Everyone utters lies to his neighbor;
 with flattering lips and a double heart they speak.

The evil exposed in this psalm concerns the use of speech by the wicked. David looks at humanity—and he sees dishonesty.

He says they speak “with a double heart” in verse 2, meaning they are deceitful. The Hebrew here is literally *בְּלֵב וְלֵב* *with a heart and a heart*. They say one thing and mean another. They don't mean what they say. They lie if a lie will better accomplish their purposes. They have one heart they bring with them to worship before God and another they take with them out into the world with their neighbors. One heart pretends to be honest and good, the other is committed to the selfish pursuits of sin. They flatter others, saying good things so that others will do what they want.

Now David saw this in the political intrigue that was threatening his life. He saw it among his enemies. BUT this threat is not just rising from the outside. We saw in David's own attempts at deception—one that ended with disastrous consequences—this is something he is struggling with in his own heart as well.

Where can we find truth? Who can we believe? Lies and flattery are all around and even in us!

The following verses express his expectation of the Lord.

David's expectation

Psalm 12:3 May the LORD cut off all flattering lips,
 the tongue that makes great boasts,

In verse 3 David voices his hope that God will hear his prayer and act in judgment. There will come a day when the Lord will cut off His enemies and judge the wicked for their sinful actions and words.

way it translates the verb in verse 1 with the noun in verse 5. The Hebrew word translated *in safety* בְּיָשׁוּעַ in verse five is the noun form of the verb *Save* הוֹשִׁיעַ which begins verse one. When David uses the word *safety* in verse 5, it indicates a direct answer to the petition in verse one that God would *save*.

God promises to set the needy in a place of safety, but notice what that safety is! The following verses contain the answer:

The Place of Safety

Psalm 12:6 The words of the LORD are pure words,
 like silver refined in a furnace on the ground,
 purified seven times.
Psalm 12:7 You, O LORD, will keep them;
 you will guard us from this generation forever.

The place of safety is in the Word of God. Deceit and oppression were in the lies of sinful hearts. But safety—our salvation is found in the true and sure Word of God.

The falsehood and deception of the wicked heart is here abruptly contrasted with the purity of God and His Word. Man's words are vanity, flattery, emptiness, deceit, arrogance, boasting, pride... But the Word of God is pure, kept by God's promise. Man's words are dross compared to the precious gold of God's Word. God's Word is pure and precious. It can sanctify and protect God's people who stand upon it.

In Psalm 19, beginning with verse 7, David says of God's Word:

Psalm 19:7–11 The law of the Lord is perfect,
 reviving the soul;
 the testimony of the Lord is sure,
 making wise the simple;
 the precepts of the Lord are right,
 rejoicing the heart;
 the commandment of the Lord is pure,
 enlightening the eyes;
 the fear of the Lord is clean,
 enduring forever;
 the rules of the Lord are true,
 and righteous altogether.
 More to be desired are they than gold,
 even much fine gold;
 sweeter also than honey
 and drippings of the honeycomb.
 Moreover, by them is your servant warned;
 in keeping them there is great reward

God's Word is free of any error or falsehood. It does not mislead. It is not deceitful. God's Word can be trusted and rested upon absolutely.

God's Word gives us hope, because while we struggle with sin around us and in us, it points us to Christ and to the gospel. Though we may see great injustice and persecution of God's people, we understand that God works all things together for His own glory and for good for those who love Him.

The greatest injustice ever enacted—crucifying the Son of God—was God's way to bring reconciliation, redemption and salvation to all who cry out to Him to be saved! We must keep our eyes fixed on God's Word, centered on the cross—our souls safely anchored in Christ and the gospel.

Finally, look at the final verse of the psalm. This psalm doesn't end in the way you might expect.

CONCLUSION

Psalm 12:8 On every side the wicked prowl,
 as vileness is exalted among the children of man.

This is not how you might think a psalm expressing confidence in God and His Word should end. This just doesn't fit our expectations for a final verse in a song crafted to give praise to God. We like our songs to end on high notes with major chords, not with low and somber lyrics.

C. H. Spurgeon refers to this as a "return to the fount of bitterness, which first made the Psalmist run to the wells of salvation." The overwhelming circumstances that grieved David's heart at the beginning of his prayer have not changed. The trouble still exists. The consequences of sin still loom large.

The righteous still struggle and battle with sin in their hearts. And the wicked are still walking all about and around the few righteous. The worst of them are exalted, commended by the world. BUT what has changed at the end of this psalm is David's outlook. He has been brought back to the Word of God. He has been reminded that there is a place of safety—a place where we can take refuge as well.

Refuge in Prayer: where we can cry out to God for help and salvation

And refuge in God's Word: where God points us to Christ and the Gospel

God may not always take away the immediate circumstances that overwhelm us or bring us immediate relief from heavy consequences, but His ear is always open for us to call to Him in prayer and His Word is always faithful and true.

I cannot emphasize enough how needful it is keep yourself near to God in His Word and in prayer. This is why we take time to pray and study His Word together. It is why we should discipline ourselves to prayer and the Word every day.

In this life, on this side of heaven, we will have struggles in the fight against sin, from the outside and even more, from the inside—in our own hearts. But God has given us the means to press on. Let's take every advantage to take refuge in the place of safety that God Himself provides.

Let's go now to a time of prayer.

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