

PSALM 12

- The Lord responds to the cry of those oppressed by the deceptive talk of the wicked -

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Introduction and setting

It is not possible to determine a precise context for this psalm. What is clear is that it is about the power of words/speech. There is a strong contrast in this psalm; it concerns the destructive use of the tongue/speech by the wicked versus the life-giving words of the Lord. Evil speech is revealed in its gross godlessness and contrasted with the trustworthy speech of God. Nothing less than salvation from the Lord is the only hope against the destruction of deceptive and lying speech. Again, the shocking reality is that this evil and destructive use of the tongue is by the “neighbour” (vs. 2); in Israel that means those that form part of the Lord’s covenant people!

Psalm 12 is a prayer or part of a worship service performed in a time of crisis comparable to the crisis depicted in Psalm 11, where the foundations of life together as people of God are overthrown. The society of the people of the Lord disintegrates where the use of the tongue is not curbed and disciplined to speak that which is truthful. The part of the foundation that is overthrown and destroyed is just/truthful speech.

Form and structure

In Psalm 12 a speaker pleads with the Lord on behalf of the innocent in verses 1-4. In verse 5 follows an assurance from the Lord himself of his protection as response against the evil tongues. Verses 6-8 are an assurance of and testimony to the power of the Lord’s trustworthy words to save from the evil tongue of the neighbour. The basic structure of Psalm 12 is as follows:

- i. 12:1-4 – A prayer on behalf of the loyal worshippers against the deceptive talk of the wicked persons.
- ii. 12: 5 – Yahweh himself responds and gives assurance of his protection.

- iii. 12:6-8 – the testimony (praise) of the trustworthy word of the Lord and confirmation of that trust in addressing the Lord in faith and trust.

Technical notes

Verse 5 c: *yapiah*; the translation is disputed. In this study we do not want to attach too much interpretational value to this unclear translation.

Exposition

Verse 1-4:

For the director of music. According to sheminith. A psalm of David.

- ¹ *Help, LORD, for no one is faithful anymore;
those who are loyal have vanished from the human race.*
- ² *Everyone lies to their neighbour;
they flatter with their lips
but harbour deception in their hearts.*
- ³ *May the LORD silence all flattering lips
and every boastful tongue—*
- ⁴ *those who say,
“By our tongues we will prevail;
our own lips will defend us—who is lord over us?”*

- ❖ The psalm starts with the only thing the faithful can do in times of crisis; we hear an urgent appeal to the Lord to help. It seems as if the cry in verse 1 is a prayer done on behalf of others. It does not address the specific need of an individual. It has in mind the general disintegration of trustworthiness amongst the people of God. The foundations of the communal life of the people of Yahweh are shaking! The reason for this prayer is made explicit; there is no faithful and trustworthy person left amongst God’s people! (*Hasid* : Hebr. – “faithful”; *emuniem*: Hebr. – “trustworthy”). Those who are faithful and trustworthy are those whose *character, words and deeds are consistent with what can be expected from those included in the covenant relationship with the Lord*. They are the fellow members of God’s people on whom the weak, the stranger and all those vulnerable persons seeking refuge with Yahweh and his people can rely on and be secure with in all respects. This faithfulness has nothing to do with the popular idea of “aimlessness”.
- ❖ However, the faithful worshippers and those who are loyal to true worship in the temple in the Lord’s presence have vanished! The situation is described in hyperbolic (deliberate exaggeration) terms. This is evident from the fact that there is at least someone who is praying this prayer. A group known as the “needy” is mentioned later (vs. 7) who are those

who need protection against the unfaithful and disloyal worshippers. What is obvious is that faithfulness does no longer characterize the life of the people of Yahweh. Clearly those who know how great their need of the Lord is have become a minority voice in Jerusalem! The upright in heart has become a species threatened with extinction in the church! This can become a sad reality in the life of a congregation. Broyles uses a succinct description: *"...those fit to worship him (Yahweh-EV) are few and in dire need of protection".*¹

- ❖ Wherein does the threat and danger lay? The answer is shocking. Those who bring their sacrifices to the temple and boast of belonging to the people of the Lord speak deceptively. This deceptive speech is not directed towards or against strangers, but the lies are spoken to or against their fellow worshippers ("neighbour" vs. 2 - in Israel that simply meant your fellow-believer; individual members of the heathen nations were not viewed as "neighbours"). They speak deceitfully. Their words do not reflect the intentions of their hearts! Violence is committed with their mouths! The "vain/false speech" (Hebr: *sjaw*) terminology used here corresponds with the "false witness" (Hebr: *ed sjaw*) used in the ninth commandment in Deuteronomy 5:20. No mention is made in this psalm of a direct false accusation made by the wicked. However, the faithful do suffer as a result of this false speech.
- ❖ How can this speech be described? It is arrogant speech which makes a claim of self-sufficiency and the power to control and determine their own destinies. This is the outstanding characteristic of the wicked; their dependence upon the Lord and his anointed king (including the law of Yahweh) is not acknowledged. This refusal is manifested in their speech. There is a manifest arrogance with which they (want to) exert an influence on their neighbour. They are lord of their own lives; nobody lords it over them (vs. 4)! This independence (autonomy) is a deliberate effort to throw off the rule of Yahweh by and through his law. The "deception" of the wicked (vs. 2) is revealed in their opposition to the rule of the Lord. They are part of his covenant people, but do not acknowledge the gracious rule of the Lord.
- ❖ Their deception lies in them being part of the Lord's people, but not subjecting themselves to his good will. The great danger is their influence exerted amongst and upon the faithful. Imagine someone in Israel caught up in this spiritual atmosphere of triumphalism and exposed to "sit in the company of mockers" (Psalm 1:1-2). Such deceptive speech can so very easily influence those who want to live from the goodness and care of the Lord. The problem with the wicked in this psalm is their strong capacity to influence and dominate others of different persuasion; all by means of their double-hearted speech.
- ❖ Therefore the urgent prayer in verse 1: "*Help, Lord...!*" The desire to have the situation changed is expressed in verse 3. There is hope in the Lord alone; He will have to silence

¹ Broyles, Craig C. Psalms – New International Biblical Commentary, p. 83

their flattering talk. The people of the Lord cannot survive in his dwelling while the lies of the wicked dominate the life of the church. They must be silenced!

Verse 5:

⁵ *“Because the poor are plundered and the needy groan,
I will now arise,” says the LORD.
“I will protect them from those who malign them.”*

- ❖ In this verse Yahweh himself now responds and gives assurance of his protection to the needy. This verse forms the centre of this psalm. Yahweh’s response is a word of promise. He speaks of hope and salvation. Throughout the Psalter there is a call to the Lord to “arise” (Hebr.: *quma YAHWEH*; cf. Ps. 3:7; 7:6; 9:19, 10:12, etc.). Through these words the Lord promises to act from his throne (cf. Numbers 10:35). The Lord takes the role as judge and warrior through “rising”. He has heard the cry of the needy and responds to it.
- ❖ This salvation is not something that will happen in the future. The Lord says he will rise immediately (Hebr.: *attah* – “now”). The needy may know that the Lord immediately responds to fight his cause on his behalf. Secure in that knowledge, the righteous may continue his life. The outcome is secure not because the Lord will eventually get involved; it is secure because the Lord arises immediately. The result may only become visible to the sufferer in future, but that does not take anything away from the reality of the Lord’s salvation. The just shall live by faith (Habakkuk 2:3-4). The reason for the Lord’s involvement is clear: *“Because the poor are plundered and the needy groan”* (12:5a).
- ❖ This is characteristic of the Lord. In Exodus 3:7 the Lord responds in a very similar way, revealing his involvement in the life of his people. The Lord “sees” and He “hears”; this is part of his character that separates him from the immobile gods of the nations. The Lord is moved by the need and helplessness of the pure in heart. Yahweh saves them, not because of their presumed good moral behaviour, but rather because they need a saviour and are helpless. “Poor” and “needy” is a word pair that often occurs in the Old Testament (cf. Deut. 15:11; Psalms 35:10 and 40:17). This is a description of those who have no resources of their own to serve as security, but rather live in total dependence on the Lord. This includes economic dependence. In this psalm the poor and needy are those who are defenceless and powerless when *“no one is faithful anymore”*.

Verses 6-8:

⁶ *And the words of the LORD are flawless,
like silver purified in a crucible,
like gold refined seven times.*

⁷ *You, LORD, will keep the needy safe
and will protect us forever from the wicked,*

⁸ *who freely strut about
when what is vile is honoured by the human race.*

- ❖ In these verses we hear praise as a response to the trustworthy word and promise of Yahweh. An interesting choice of words is used to describe the promise of the Lord. The words of the Lord are described as “flawless” (Hebr: *thr* – “pure”) and “refined”. They form a perfect contrast to the words of the wicked; their words are “deceitful”, “arrogant”, “vain” and “empty”. Verse 7 is an expression of praise from the people of the Lord, addressed to him directly. It is an expression of faith and assurance that they have been heard and answered. In verse 8 the wonder of the Lord’s salvation is emphasized by reiterating the precarious situation in which the Lord arises to protect and save. It is a situation in which “*what is vile is honoured by the human race*”. It seems as if the wicked have gained the majority position and upper hand amongst the people. The fact that the Lord arises to salvation does not mean that the circumstances in which the faithful live changes all of a sudden. The assurance of the Lord’s salvation does not arise from changed circumstances. Assurance comes from trust in the pure and true word-promise of the Lord.

Application

- ❖ Evil speech is not just a sad reality amongst God’s people; those who want to live faithful lives also suffer from this wicked use of the tongue.
- ❖ Too easily it can become true that only a minority amongst the Lord’s people are faithful and trustworthy people. The upright in heart can become a species threatened with extinction in church! This danger should be guarded against unceasingly.
- ❖ It is characteristic of the Lord to respond to the cry for help directed to him from the weak and helpless. Genesis 21:16-17 and Exodus 3:7 are two examples of the Lord responding in a very similar way, revealing his involvement in the life of his people. God is not an immovable God; on the contrary! In one of the Reformed confessions of faith, i.e. in the Belgic Confession, the church confesses in Article 17: “...our gracious God in his marvellous wisdom and goodness **set out** to seek man”. This is God’s response to man who fled from him after he sinned. God is not the immovable spectator, but rather the “most moved mover”.

- ❖ Where people in church rebel against the rule of the Lord and his anointed Messiah, those who embrace the rule of the Lord suffer as a result of their fellow church members. The wicked destroy the life of the church as communion of the saints. That which binds them together in communion is rejected.
- ❖ The faithful cannot and may not become resigned to a situation in which the deceivers dominate over the people of the Lord. The situation must change (vs. 3)!

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