

Psalm 12

In Psalm 12 we find once again, as we often do in the psalms, that the psalmist is in deep trouble. In the first verse he expresses that trouble this way: “Help, LORD; for the godly man ceaseth; for the faithful fail from among the children of men.” It is as if the psalmist is looking around and wondering where all of the godly and faithful have gone. He finds that the faithful fail and the godly man cease, and in their place are the wicked. “The wicked walk on every side, when the vilest men are exalted” (v. 8). He looks to his right; he looks to his left; there are no godly and faithful, but there are the wicked. He looks to the seats of power; there are no godly and faithful, but there the vilest men have been exalted. This represents a grave danger and threat for the psalmist.

If you would press a little further and ask, “What is the threat to the psalmist of the faithful’s failing and the wicked’s walking on every side?” you find throughout the psalm that these wicked are characterized by lies. The danger for the psalmist in Psalm 12 is not that men would lay hands on him. It is not that they would harm his body. It is not that they would throw him in prison or kill him. But the threat is that they speak lies. In fact, right away in verse 1, where it says, “The *faithful* fail from among the children of men,” that word “faithful” means those who speak the truth. They fail from among the children of men, and in their place are those who speak lies.

What makes these lies especially dangerous is that they are lies of flattery. The wicked who walk on every side pretend that they are the psalmist’s friends. They pretend that they are with the psalmist and that their cause is the psalmist’s cause. “They speak vanity every one with his neighbour: with flattering lips and with a double heart do they speak” (v. 2). Verse 3 refers again to flattering lips. That is a very graphic description of how these wicked speak to the psalmist. They have a double heart—literally, *a heart and a heart*. With one heart they speak words of friendliness and support; but with another heart they hate the psalmist and are looking for and even preparing the psalmist’s fall, so that the words that they speak are nothing but flattery and vanity. They are empty. They are lies. The wicked speak these flattering words in order to get the psalmist to let his guard down and not be vigilant so that these wicked can overthrow him.

In fact, what they are trying to do is to bring the psalmist to their cause. They pretend that the psalmist’s cause is their cause; but, rather, they want the psalmist to join their cause. That comes out in verse 4. We read that they say, “With our tongue will we prevail.” By our lies we will prevail. We won’t have to kill the psalmist; we’ll simply deceive him and bring him over to our side. “Our lips are our own: who is lord over us?” They are proud of their lips. They’re proud of their speech. They’re proud of their ability to convince men with the words that they speak.

The spiritual reality of that lying and that flattery is that they are oppression. They are “the oppression of the poor” (v. 5). They cause the needy to sigh. Those words do not help the psalmist. They do not lift him up. Instead, they are a snare. All that the wicked do is puff at the psalmist (v. 5), blowing out their words of flattery and vanity.

This is one of the attacks that always comes against the church because this was the attack that always came against Jesus Christ. He was surrounded by flatterers. He was surrounded by men who spoke empty, vain, boasting words in an attempt to take him away from his cause, which was the glory of God in the salvation of the church through his death, and to bring Jesus over to their cause, which was the cause of man over against God. Throughout Jesus’ entire ministry he had to face these flatterers. For example, in John 6, after Jesus had fed the five thousand with five loaves and two small fishes and the disciples had gathered up twelve baskets of fragments, Jesus and his disciples went to the other side of the sea. And the unbelieving among those who had been fed, who only wanted food for their bellies, “took shipping, and came to Capernaum, seeking for Jesus” (John 6:24). When they had found him on other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when camest thou hither?” (v. 25). Those were the flattering words of a double heart that were only empty vanity. They asked this friendly question and

called him by an honorable name—“Rabbi, Teacher, when camest thou hither?”—acting as if they were very interested to have Jesus among them. But Jesus saw right through those flattering words and answered them, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled” (v. 26). Their speech to Jesus was nothing but empty flattery; and Jesus exposed it by saying, “You are here for your bellies. What you are interested in is a kingdom of man—not a kingdom of righteousness, not a kingdom of the grace of God displayed in the miracle, but a kingdom of man.” And after Jesus talked to those men for a long time about the bread of life, the unbelieving among them “went back, and walked no more with him” (v. 66). Their whole purpose was simply to flatter and to speak kind but false words to Jesus in order to bring him over to their cause.

And the church of Jesus Christ faces that yet today. There are many who flatter the church with puffed-up words; many who flatter God’s people with honorable titles; many who pretend that their cause is the cause of Christ, even though their cause is not the cause of Christ but the cause of the kingdom of man. They are vile men. They do not speak truth but desire to have whatever power they think exists in the church for themselves and for their own ends. And the people of God are susceptible to and threatened by that kind of flattery and that kind of hypocrisy.

Our defense and safety against that flattery and those vain words are Jehovah, who is true, and his word. That is Psalm 12 as well. “For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, now will I arise, saith the LORD; I will set him in safety from him that puffeth at him” (v. 5). Whereas the words of men are empty and flattering, “the words of the LORD are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times” (v. 6). Here the psalmist refers to the ancient practice of purifying metals by putting them in a furnace of earth—either a hole dug in the ground or earth built up above the ground—with the hottest fire that men could build. The silver that comes out of such a furnace is pure, without any impurity or mixture of error. And such are the words of the Lord. They are pure words, which means that they are true. They can be relied on. The words of the Lord establish the cause of God not as the cause of the kingdom of man but as the cause of the kingdom of God and the salvation of the church. “Thou shalt keep them, O LORD, thou shalt preserve them from this generation for ever” (v. 7).

And then when we come to verse 8, that is not a negative note to end on. It might seem like the psalm ends negatively. “The wicked walk on every side, when the vilest men are exalted.” Rather, that ending of the psalm is a positive explanation for the child of God of what is going on. When the church looks around and sees that the faithful fail and the godly cease and that there is all kinds of flattery, God’s people might be troubled and say, “What is happening? How can this be? Something must be wrong.” The end of Psalm 12 shows the child of God and the church that nothing is going wrong. This is always the way it is. This is always the way it happens when vile men seek their own cause: the wicked walk on every side. But in spite of the wicked’s walking on every side, the people of God are safe, kept and preserved by the pure words of the Lord.

Our Lord Jesus Christ did not succumb to flattering words. He did not leave the cause of Jehovah’s glory for the cause of the kingdom of man. He went to the cross and established the kingdom of God in righteousness. There is our hope. There is our comfort as God’s church in the midst of this world.