

## A Song for Every Season (Part 8 of 10)

### Where Have the Godly Gone?

Psalm 12

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*Save, O Lord, for the godly one is gone; for the faithful have vanished from among the children of man. 2 Everyone utters lies to his neighbor; with flattering lips and a double heart they speak.*

*3 May the Lord cut off all flattering lips, the tongue that makes great boasts, 4 those who say, "With our tongue we will prevail, our lips are with us; who is master over us?"*

*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." 6 The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times.*

*7 You, O Lord, will keep them; you will guard us from this generation forever. 8 On every side the wicked prowl, as vileness is exalted among the children of man (ESV).*

By personal and pastoral experience I have come to observe something about grief: **it is not tame.** If you've ever grieved deeply because of a great loss in your life, the kind of loss that heals but creates a permanent scar, then you know what I'm talking about. Sorrow, unlike any other human emotion, is unwieldy, unyielding, and unpredictable. It comes from areas of your soul that you didn't know existed; it creates feelings that go to frightening depths; and it creates questions that are uncomfortable and, at times, unnerving. Grief is not tame.

However, the untamable nature of grief is not the only challenge. Pain and sorrow are inevitable. We live in a broken world that is marred by the effects of sin, and the result is that sooner or later you come face-to-face with grief. It is only a matter of time. It may come through the death of a loved one, the betrayal of a friend, the injustice of some situation, or even the pain of persecution. Pain in this life is a guarantee. Grief is not tame and it is common.

So what do you say or think during a season of sorrow? How do you grieve well? How do you balance honest wrestling with unhelpful brooding? These are the kind of questions that are answered in part through a very helpful type of Psalm.

## **Lament: Songs of Sorrow**

For the next two weeks we are going to examine two Psalms of Lament. This week we will look at Psalm 12 which is a community lament which expresses sorrow for a group of people who look at life and culture and say, "Where have all the godly gone?" Next week we'll look at Psalm 13 which is more personal: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?"

When we started this series, I explained to you that there are at least seven different types of Psalms. Lament is just one of those, but it is one of the most important. Let me give you a few reasons why:

- Psalms of lament are the largest group of Psalms in the entire book
- They express a depth of emotion that every person will eventually feel
- They deal honestly with feelings that can be uncomfortable to acknowledge or talk about
- They model what God-centered grieving looks and sounds like
- They help us rediscover the path of worship through lament

If pain is common and grief is not tame, then it seems that Psalms of Lament should be incredibly applicable, helpful, comforting, and instructive. And that certainly is the case with Psalm 12.

There are three words that capture the essence of what this Psalm is all about: cry, promise, and trust.

### **Cry: Longing for Help**

The Psalmist is desperate and wastes no time introducing his pain or concern. The circumstances that he sees and feels are real and right in front of him. There is almost a sense that he is overwhelmed, frustrated, but mostly it seems that he is scared. Pain is scary.

#### ***"Save Us!"***

In verses 1-4 he lays out his what he sees and what he wants to happen. He cries out for help. The Psalm begins with a direct appeal: "Save!" The Hebrew word here is *yasa*, and this word, along with its derivatives, is used over 350 times in the Old Testament. Its meaning is to move a person from distress to safety thereby providing deliverance. As you can imagine, it has a strong spiritual connotation to it.

The story-line of the Bible is way in which God delivers or saves his people. In the New Testament we see the fully orbbed reality of this expressed through Jesus whose named is tied to his mission in life: "...and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21). But in the Old Testament we see this idea of saving people or a nation expressed in particular events. For instance, Noah and the Ark, Abraham called from Ur, David defeating Goliath, and deliverance from the slavery of Egypt (the most defining moment in Israel's identity). All of these Old Testament events show us God's consistent deliverance.

It would be hard to overestimate the importance of this theme in the Bible. Israel, by definition, is a rescued people, and God is their savior. Over and over God has delivered them, and he has done so despite their waywardness from him. In fact Psalm 106 is entirely dedicated to tracing the mercy of God in saving his people despite what they deserved.

*7 Our fathers, when they were in Egypt, did not consider your wondrous works; they did not remember the abundance of your steadfast love, but rebelled by the Sea, at the Red Sea. 8 Yet he saved them for his name's sake, that he might make known his mighty power (Ps 106:7-8).*

God has delivered his people so often and with such a mighty display of power that he is even called “a God of salvation” (Jehovah – mowshaah) in Psalm 68:20. In other words, saving people is what God does! And the Psalmist calls upon God to do what he does! Save us!

### ***“The Godly are Gone”***

That invites another question: “saved from what?” The Psalmist is grieved by what he sees, and he uses hyperbolic words to express what he feels. In short, he sees a culture that has lost its way, and it seems to him that the influence of righteousness is gone. His words are extreme, emotional, and not meant to be taken literally. However, what the Psalmist feels is very real. Notice the following statements:

- *“the godly one is gone”* (v 1)
- *“the faithful have vanished from among the children of men”* (v 1)
- *“everyone utters lies to his neighbor”* (v 2)
- *“with flattering lips and double heart they speak”* (v 2)

We are not sure what specific situation prompted this kind of statement, but there were plenty of seasons in Israel’s history when righteousness was not flourishing and when evil seemed to be winning the day. He describes a culture where lying is common place, double-talk is expected, and even compliments have an agenda.

It is one thing to be around evil. But it is another kind of evil when that evil has an initial appearance of kindness or sweetness. A good example of this would be the evil bear in the movie Toy Story 3. The main villain is a character who has a soothing, sweet, good-ole-boy, Ned Beatty Southern drawl. While he’s the leader of a motley crew of evil toys, he appears – at first – to be a sweet, caring figure. Do you remember his name? Lots-O-Huggin Bear. And he’s a freaky character because he’s not only evil; he’s a sneaky evil.

When the Psalmist looks around him, he is deeply concerned. Godliness is gone; no one is faithful; lies and two-faced people are everywhere; and the entire culture – including the religious culture – is compromised.

All of us can relate to this at some level. Some look at our culture and remember when things were not so overtly godless. Others shake their heads in disbelief at the presence of evil in our world. Parents wonder what kind of world their children will live in. But for some of you this is personal. You've been the victim of the evil in the world and maybe at the hands of someone who overtly lied or acted as if they were friendly or kind. Some of you have seen supposedly righteous people do seriously unrighteous things. And you can resonate with the exasperation in the voice of the Psalmist.

### ***"Cut them off"***

Justice, vindication, and deliverance are what he wants. Central to the pain is the fact that there is no immediate judgment, and the perpetrators look as if they are getting away with it. Therefore, the Psalmist says:

*May the Lord cut off all flattering lips, the tongue that makes great boasts, 4 those who say, "With our tongue we will prevail, our lips are with us; who is master over us?" (Ps 12:3-4)*

The Psalmist sees the awful arrogance of what is taking place, and it angers him. He longs for God to bring about the required justice. The phrase "to cut off" doesn't mean that he longs for them to be lipless or deformed. Rather, the phrase is a request for divine judgment that would make them stop (see Lev 20:3, Amos 2:3), to separate them from the community or mankind.

The cry here is for God to do something. Ever felt like that? Ever been done wrong? Ever been lied about or to? Ever had anyone be two-faced with you? Ever watched an arrogant person get away with something? Ever wondered or said, "God, when are you going to do something?" That is the basis of a lament.

### **Promise: God's Answer in Crisis**

Verse 5 records God's answer, and it is presented as an oracle or a word from God. This verse is the focal point for the entire Psalm. If this Psalm was used in a worship setting, this verse may have been read out loud by a priest or prophet representing the voice of God.

Here's what it says: *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" (Ps 12:5).*

### ***Two Promises***

Now there are two important promises to note here. First, the verse indicates that God has heard the cry of the afflicted and that he will act. God knows what is going on, and he is not standing by. He is moved by the plight of his children, and once again he is going to do something. Other Psalms communicate the same truth:

*4 For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, and he has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him (Ps 22:24)*

*33 For the Lord hears the needy and does not despise his own people who are prisoners (Ps 69:33)*

*8 You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book? (Ps 56:8)*

In other words, God hears and knows. He really cares.

Secondly, verse five gives an additional promise regarding what God intends to do. The text says that God “will place him in the safety for which he longs.” Notice that it is God who is going to do this, and notice that God will place him in safety. Now this could mean a number of things including 1) that God will provide the judgment longed for, 2) that in the midst of the hardship there will be safety, or 3) that God himself will go before them and make things safe. Regardless of which of these it might be the point is really the same – God is going to make this right.

Let’s review what we have here. A man is hurting because he feels like evil is winning, and he longs for divine intervention. In the midst of this moment, God speaks – offering comfort that he has heard and the assurance that he will make everything right. In other words, in the midst of a crisis we hear the word of God – a promise is issued.

### ***A New Testament Promise***

In John Bunyan’s 17<sup>th</sup> Century work, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, we find that Pilgrim is locked in a prison in Doubting Castle under assault from the Giant called Despair. He remembers the key that he possesses called Promise.

*What a fool I am, thus to be in a stinking dungeon, when I may as well walk at liberty! I have a key in my bosom, called Promise, that will, I am persuaded, open any lock in Doubting Castle.’ Then he pulled it out of his bosom and began to try at the dungeon door, whose bolt, as he turned the key, gave back, and the door flew open with ease, and Christian and Hopeful both came out. Then he went to the outward door that leads into the castle yard, and with his key opened that door also.*

Now let’s translate that into our New Testament context. We have the sure promise of God that is found in the person of Jesus Christ and his Word. God has definitively spoken to us through his son (Hebrews 1:1-2), who sympathizes with our weaknesses (Hebrews 4:14-15), and who has made it possible for us to come with boldness “to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16). We have sure Word from God – a word that is sharper than any two-edged sword, a word that is a discerner of the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Hebrews 4:12). And we have all of this so that we can “run the race set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:1b-2).

In other words, we have a greater oracle in our hands – the very Word of God. And this book is our answer in the midst of crisis. It is loaded with promise upon promise upon promise.

This is where good, biblical lament should lead us. Biblical lament leads us through honest pain to the promises of God’s word. And let me give you a warning here. Lament that doesn’t lead to the

sure promises of God will result in bitterness, resentment, and depression. Be sad. Be very, very sad, but take your sadness somewhere. Take your sadness, your outrage, and your pain to the promises of God. God's answer in the midst of crisis is to give us a promise.

### **Trust: Believe While Hurting**

The final element in this lament is all about trust, and this is so important. In fact it is the difference between good, godly lament and unhelpful, sinful lament. It comes down to more than just the circumstances, situations, or the extent of the pain in our lives; it is directly related to what you believe **in the midst** of your pain and lament.

The Psalmist here shows us the incredibly important value of believing while hurting.

#### ***Responding to the Word***

Verse 6 immediately follows the Oracle of verse 5. So just after hearing the Word of God, the Psalmist responds with an affirmation of the surety of Word. It is almost as if he is preaching to his own heart:

*The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times (Ps 12:6).*

What a contrast to the world in which the Psalmist is living. He lives in a culture filled with half-truths, questionable motives, and mixed messages. But the Word of God is not like that! No, it is a pure word; it is trustworthy, reliable, life-giving, and sure. Further it is like silver that is refined seven times; it endures the fiery test of time.

#### ***Trust and Believe***

Verse 7 advances the thought even further. The Psalmist banks his life on the promise that God, by virtue of his promises, will "keep them, you will guard us from this generation forever." In other words, God is worthy to be trusted. And it was the Word from God that made this clear.

Finally, notice how this lament closes. It ends in a very interesting way. After all this very hopeful material on promise and deliverance, verse 8 seems like a downer - *On every side the wicked prowls, as vileness is exalted among the children of man (Ps 12:8).*

This verse brings us back to the reality of the moment. Wickedness and vileness are all around him, and it is almost as if he knows that this is not likely to change. The Psalmist seems to know that even if circumstances do not change, that God is still able to help him. He seems to imagine himself as an island in the midst of a sea of wickedness. He is clinging to God's promises and finding hope even when things are hard.

I love to think about the fact that the same Word that gives us comfort and help is the same Word that helped others before us. One of the reasons that I love biographies is because they link us historically to men and women whose lives prove that God is worthy to be trusted.

Charles Simeon (1759-1836) pastored the same church in Cambridge, England, for 54 years, and the first 12 were absolutely horrible. The people didn't want him as their pastor, and they tried everything to get rid of him. They went so far as to lock the doors on their pews so he couldn't use the seats, and when he set up seats in the aisles, they threw the chairs on the lawn. Yet Simeon persevered. How did he do it? Part of the answer comes from a man who lived with Simeon for a while and watched him live.

*"Simeon invariably arose every morning, though it was the winter season, at four o'clock; and, after lighting his fire, he devoted the first four hours of the day to private prayer and the devotional study of the Scriptures... Here was the secret of his great grace and spiritual strength. Deriving instruction from such a source, and seeking it with such diligence, he was comforted in all his trials and prepared for every duty."<sup>1</sup>*

Simeon learned and lived what we still need to learn: that God's word is an inexhaustible resource for endurance. The Word of God is what we must believe and trust while hurting.

### **Learning to Lament**

Let me close by offering a few summary thoughts that I think are really critical in light of what we've learned from Psalm 12 today.

- 1. Pain and sorrow are inevitable so we ought to be ready and not surprised.** One of the benefits of this Psalm is realizing that reality of the world that we live in so that suffering, when it comes, doesn't completely take us off guard.
- 2. Godly sorrow involves being honest about the pain.** Stoicism and emotionalism are the two extremes. Godly sorrow means that you don't deny how hard this is, but at the same time you aren't denying God's goodness.
- 3. Lament can and should lead us to God's promises.** Where does your lament lead you? That's a critical question. Self-centered lament leads to bondage and misery. God-centered lament leads to hope and comfort.
- 4. We must learn to trust while hurting.** Freedom does not come from an absence of pain; it comes from learning to trust while in pain.

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<sup>1</sup> John Piper. The Roots of Endurance. (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Publishers, 2002), 106.

I'm so thankful for Psalms like these because they help us in our pain. Grief, after all, is not tame. But thankfully it is not supreme, either. In other words, it is a beautiful and hopeful thought that even the darkest and most discouraging moments in life can actually lead me to worship God. And that is something that only God could do. He takes my pain and brings me to himself.

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**Summer Challenge:**

- Memorization – Psalms 34:16-18
- Reading:
  - — Psalms 117-118
  - — Psalms 119
  - — Psalms 120-128
  - — Psalms 129-134
  - — Psalms 135-137