

Psalm 12 "Pure Words"
Psalm 12
Romans 16:17-27

January 24, 2016

Psalm 12 may have been written 3,000 years ago,
but as with all the Psalms, it connects with every generation.

"On every side the wicked prowl, as vileness is exalted among the children of man."
This week I read comments from the 4th century, the 6th century,
the 8th century, the 16th century, the 19th century, and the 20th century.
All of them thought that Psalm 12 was speaking to their day.

It can be tempting at times to think that it has never been this bad before!
That this generation trumps all prior generations.

In the 4th century, Evagrius of Pontus said it this way:
"First the righteous fail, then the truth is diminished.
Not only is there no truth among the righteous,
there is no holiness among honest people.
Now, since the righteous have failed, truth is diminished.
Perhaps the poverty of righteous people
is the reason why so many heresies have shot up." (p100)

It was true in the 4th century.
It is true in the 21st century.

The Psalms were collected and gathered together
in order to be the hymnal of God's people.
If you try to get back into the mind of the original human author
and understand his own personal experience,
you will miss the point of the Psalm!

The Psalms were given to us as templates – as patterns –
so that we might inhabit them (in Christ).
Just as Israel was called to sing these Psalms in David,
so we are called to sing them in Christ.

Have you had any experience with friends who betrayed you?
Neighbors who lied to you?
Flatterers who flattened you?
People who used their tongues to cut you down?

Then Psalm 12 is for you.
In every generation from David to the present,
Psalm 12 is designed for the people of God to cry out to the LORD
and find comfort and refuge in him.

Sing Psalm 12

Read Romans 16:17-27

Paul tells us in Romans 16 that the problem of Psalm 12 continues today.

False teachers “do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ,
but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery
they deceive the hearts of the naive.”

There will always be those who will tell you what you want to hear.

Only the Word of the LORD can break through the smooth talk and flattery
and tell you what you *need* to hear!

So let's go back to Psalm 12 and hear the pure words that we *need* to hear.

Introduction

The inscription reads:

To the choirmaster: according to The Sheminith.[a] A Psalm of David.

Psalm 6 is also said to be “according to the Sheminith.”

Sheminith simply means “eighth” in Hebrew.

And, yes, it could be a musical term, referring to an “octave.”
There are seven notes in the Hebrew scale, culminating in the eighth –
which is a renewal of the first.

In the same way there are seven days in the week, culminating in the eighth –
which is a renewal of the first.

We do not know exactly what “according to the eighth” would have meant to the choirmaster.

But the early Fathers understood exactly how to understand this.

The “eighth” in scripture is always pointing forwards towards the end.

God rested on the seventh day –
and he hallowed the seventh day,
and he called man to rest on the seventh day.

But man sinned –
and so the seventh day became a reminder of the futility of this age.

In the Old Testament, the seventh day – the Sabbath –
remained as a reminder of creation and of the Exodus –
how God delivered them from slavery in Egypt (Dt 5).

But the eighth day became the symbol of salvation.

After all, every Israelite boy was circumcised on the *eighth* day.
On the 8th day, he entered the covenant community of God's people.

When a priest was consecrated,
he went through a seven day ritual of purification,
and entered his priestly duties on the *eighth* day.

The ritual for the restoration of the unclean (lepers and the like)
also focused on the *eighth* day – when they could re-enter the assembly.

Even the feasts of Israel had a focus on the eighth day.

Passover was a seven-day feast.

But Passover pointed forward to Pentecost.

You count seven weeks – seven sevens – from the Sabbath of Passover.

Pentecost was the day after the seventh Sabbath –

the fiftieth day (7×7 plus 1) –

in other words, Pentecost was the ultimate eighth day

(and was *always* on a Sunday!).

Likewise the Feast of Booths had its sacred assemblies

on the first day and on the *eighth* day of the feast.

Think about what that means.

Circumcision – the sign and seal of righteousness – was on the eighth day.

Priestly service – and the restoration of the unclean – was on the eighth day.

Most of Israel's festal assemblies were on the first/eighth day.

And so, Cassiodorus (6th c.) understood exactly what the “eighth” meant:

The “eighth” refers to our eternal rest, for this world does not experience an eighth day.

Once the seventh is finished, it always returns to the first.”

But in the resurrection of Jesus, an eighth day *has* dawned!

All four gospel writers tell us that Jesus was raised from the dead

on the first day of the week – on the day *after* the Sabbath.

But John is the one who highlights the fact that when Thomas doubted,

Jesus appeared to him *eight days later*.

Salvation requires an *eighth* day.

Psalm 12 opens with the words “Save, O LORD,”

as David, the *eighth* son of Jesse, cries out to the LORD for deliverance!

Books 1-2 of the Psalter (Psalms 1-72)

set forth a picture of what the kingdom of God should look like.

They presuppose that David (or his son) is sitting on the throne.

But that doesn't mean that everything is fine!

As we saw last time from Psalm 11,

violence and murder are undermining the foundations of society.

Even when the king is just and righteous,

we still live in a fallen world.

King Jesus is now sitting on the throne.

But we do not yet see all things under his feet.

We see a world in which the foundations are destroyed.

What can the righteous do?

The righteous can take refuge in the LORD –

not by running away – not by fleeing to the mountains like a bird –
but by coming into the holy temple of the LORD,
by *worshiping* the LORD,
and by doing what is right.

“For the LORD is righteous; he loves righteous deeds;
the upright shall behold his face.” (11:7)

But that presupposes that there are righteous people!

And Psalm 12 starts by calling that into question.
Because the problem of Psalm 12 is that when I look around,
I do not see faithfulness.
When I listen to those around me,
I hear lies and flattery.

David recognizes that the LORD, alone, is the one who can save.

Those first two words, “Save LORD!” bring us to the central reason why this is
“according to Sheminith” - according to the *eighth* -
because we long for a day beyond the seventh day -
a day beyond the endless cycles of our world.

And there are two words used for what has vanished from the earth:

1. The Problem: Vanishing Friends and Lying Neighbors (v1-2)

*1 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.*

“the godly one is gone”

“the faithful have vanished from among the children of man”

It's difficult to translate the first word.

The word is *hasid* – from which modern Jews speak of the *hasidim* –
the godly – the faithful.

It comes from the same root as *hesed* which is translated “steadfast love”
or “covenant loyalty.”

The English word “godly” is fine – except that it leaves out the whole theme of loyalty.
The problem is that the English word “faithful” is probably the best single word
to translate both *hasid* and *emunim* (in the second line of the verse).

The *hasid* is one who is loyal to his friends – he is steadfast in his commitments.

The *emunim* are faithful – they are true to their word.

You find these qualities paired together often in scripture.

“Hesed and emeth” - steadfast love and faithfulness.

And here you have the nouns that refer to *people* who exhibit those qualities.

I say all that to highlight the point that *both words* in verse 1
focus on the theme of faithfulness, loyalty, being true to your word.

I want you to think about the importance of faithfulness.

I discovered the importance of faithfulness on my first date with Ginger.

After watching a movie, she and her sister-in-law went to the bathroom.

I said that I'd wait for them.

Then I had the brilliant idea that I should get some flowers for her...

Brilliant – only if I could have accomplished it
in the time it took for her to go to the bathroom –
so that I would be standing there with flowers when she came out...

Ginger came out of the bathroom and discovered that
“the faithful have vanished from among the children of men...”

A small thing, perhaps,
but an important principle:
faithfulness is absolutely necessary for life together.

Do you have a good friend?

Do you have someone you can trust?

Someone you can tell anything – and you know that they will still have your back?

Faithfulness is at the heart of *all* friendship.

Indeed, faithfulness is necessary for the proper functioning of society.

It is mind-blowing how much trust we place in complete strangers!

Think about “payday.”

You receive a piece of paper with some words on it –

or, if you have direct deposit, your bank does.

The bank looks at that piece of paper and credits your “account.”

You go to the store and take whatever food you want

in exchange for handing them some paper or plastic,

which they believe will be credited to *their* account!

And at the store, you rely on the *faithfulness* of farmers,
transportation companies, manufacturers, salespeople.

Imagine what would happen to your business

if you could not trust your suppliers to come through?

What would happen to your school

if the school could not trust students to pay – or teachers to show up?

Everything in life hinges on *faithfulness*.

And faithfulness is all about being *true* to your word.

So when you cannot trust anyone,
society crumbles into chaos.

What happens when you cannot trust people?

If you *know* that other people are not going to keep their word,
if they are not trustworthy,
then what happens to you?

If you don't trust someone,
what will happen when that person asks you a question?

White lies – half-truths – evasions – just saying what they want to hear...
This is how the cycle of lies begins.

I can't trust them – so I just won't tell them the whole truth.

“Everyone lies to his neighbor; with flattering lips and a double heart they speak.”

The double heart is rooted in a lack of trust.
You want their approval – so you say nice things (flattering lips) –
but you don't trust them – so to someone else, you say less flattering things!
The single heart – the simple heart – is a heart that trusts the LORD,
and therefore is not worried about what others will say and do.
The double heart is expressed when you think one thing, but say another.

And the problem is that *everyone* does this.

The problem is pervasive – all throughout the human race!
When David says that the faithful have vanished from among the children of men,
he uses the phrase, “the sons of *adam*.
Adam is simply the Hebrew word for *man* –
and so the problem is that all men are liars and flatterers.

James warns in James 3:1-12,

“And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness.
The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body,
setting on fire the entire course of life,
and set on fire by hell.
For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature,
can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind,
but no human being can tame the tongue.” (v6-8)

That's an important warning!

James is simply taking seriously what the Psalmist says here -
that *everyone* utters lies to his neighbor.

Everyone.
Even you.

Even me.

So the problem is the tongue – the tongue of the sons of Adam.

What do you do with your problems?

You bring them to God – and ask him to do something about them!

And so in verses 3-4, David brings his petition to God:

2. The Prayer: May the Lord Cut Off the Lips and Tongues of Pride (v3-4)

*3 May the Lord cut off all flattering lips,
the tongue that makes great boasts,*

I want you to notice how David says this.

In one sense, the problem is immense – and everyone contributes to it!

But David does not pray that God will destroy everyone!

Rather, David prays that the Lord will cut off flattering lips
and boasting tongues.

And, in case there is any doubt who is in view,
he adds in verse 4,

*4 those who say, “With our tongue we will prevail,
our lips are with us; who is master over us?”*

Yes, *everyone* utters lies to his neighbor.

The faithful have *vanished* from among the children of men.

But the psalmist does not ask that everyone be destroyed.

Rather, he focuses on the *lips* and the *tongues* of the powerful.

Remember the *hasid* – the one who demonstrates steadfast love?
We keep seeing the importance of *righteousness* and *justice*
in terms of those in authority.

Righteousness has to do with how you order your society.

What happens if your home is characterized by people thinking one thing,
but saying another?

If people use words to manipulate, flatter, and boast
using words to prevail over others -
then words became weapons of control.

In Psalm 11, the problem was violence and murder.

And the solution was for God to send fire from heaven against the wicked.

In Psalm 12, the problem is flattery and boasting – the problem is with the tongue and the lips –
and so the solution is for God to cut off flattering lips and boasting tongues.

Not that God will destroy the whole person – but that God will deal with their tongues and lips.
The punishment should fit the crime!

And in verse 5 we hear God's answer:

3. The Answer: “I Will Arise” - The Purity of God's Words (v5-6)

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.*”

And the LORD promises that he will “arise” and answer the groans of the needy.

Again we see the focus on relationships of power.
Why does God arise?

Because the poor are plundered.
Because the needy groan.

This time, it is not violence that is used against the needy.

This time it is words.

How are *words* are used in plundering the poor?

Think of Mr. So-and-So at the end of the book of Ruth –
the one who should have been a redeemer –
but instead he thought he could conspire with Boaz to defraud Ruth
by words.

And in the city gate – or in courtrooms and boardrooms around the city –
words are used to plunder the poor.

How often have the wealthy and powerful used words
to prevent the poor from obtaining justice?

How many times has there been no Boaz?
Mr. So-and-So stands up and says,
“Let's just arrange this neatly between us” -
and without objection, it is so ordered.

And if a complaint arises, it is squelched in order to protect the powerful.

I listened to a friend talk about life in inner-city Chicago,
where the gangs control the streets.

The big bosses have been taken down – so the result is anarchy.
Truly, the *hasid* is gone, the faithful have vanished –
and the proud and boastful plunder the poor.

The same thing – on a smaller scale – happens in suburban homes,
when a man uses words to control and manipulate his wife and children.

“No one tells me what to do!”

And so the needy *groan*.

God does not answer because you are so articulate!

God does not hear you because you are so eloquent!

No, God hears you because you *groan* in the midst of your afflictions.

Paul speaks of the groanings of the Christian –

as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons (the redemption of our bodies).

Paul says that the “Spirit helps us in our weakness,” (Romans 8:26)

even though we do not know what to pray for as we ought,

We are weak – we are afflicted with the sufferings of this present time.

We have received the *Spirit* of adoption as sons -

the firstfruits of the promised inheritance –

but we have not yet received the redemption of our bodies.

It is interesting that Paul's discussion in Romans moves from this groaning

to the great deliverance that God has wrought in Jesus:

“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all,

how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (v32)

In Jesus, God has arisen and delivered us.

Of course, back in Psalm 12, that deliverance was still future: “I will now arise...”

But with God there is both steadfast love and faithfulness – *hesed* and *emeth*.

You can trust the words of the LORD –

which is the point of verse 6:

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

The purity of God's word is compared to silver refined seven times.

In the ordinary process for refining silver, you only need to do it once –

and you have a *very* pure product (probably 99.5%).

The point of saying “purified seven times” is that the word of God is pure
beyond all measure!

Our words are impure – an alloy of truth and falsehood –

coming as they do from double hearts that think one way and speak another.

The world is not as it should be.

We are not as we should be.

And in response to God's words,
we give thanks.

Notice how the Psalmist moves:

the lying, flattering words around us call us to prayer;
the pure, delightful words of the LORD call us to thanksgiving!

4. The Thanksgiving: “You Will Guard Us” (v7-8)

7 You, O Lord, will keep them;

Namely, you will keep your words!
God is faithful.
He is loyal to his covenant promises,
and he will keep his words forever.
What he has promised, that he will do!

And this thanksgiving arises up from the mess!

you will guard us[b] from this generation forever.
8 On every side the wicked prowl,
as vileness is exalted among the children of man.

Our situation hasn't changed in the last half hour!
We are still surrounded by vileness.
We are still encompassed by lying tongues and flattering lips.

But one thing has changed!
We have heard pure words.
Words that flow from a single heart – not a double heart.

We have heard the words of Jesus.
Because in Jesus,
“the word became flesh and dwelt among us,
and we have seen his glory,
glory as of the only Son from the Father,
full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)

When John says “full of grace and truth,”
you could argue that he is reflecting on the old Hebrew phrase,
“full of *hesed* and *emeth*”
full of steadfast love and faithfulness.

No, it's not the LXX way of translating *hesed* and *emeth* –
I'm not making a literary point here!
It's a theological point.
All that *hesed* and *emeth* meant
with its emphasis on God's faithfulness and covenant loyalty –
that when God says something, it means that he will do it!

All that comes together in the incarnation of Jesus,
so that in Jesus, grace and truth unite.
In Jesus God has *done it!*

“If God is for us, who can be against us?”
“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?”

This is why Psalm 12 ends the way it does!

Psalm 12 does not end with an imperative - “now go do this...”
Rather, Psalm 12 ends with thanksgiving,
“You, O LORD, will keep them [you will keep your words];
you will guard us from this generation forever.”

Yes, on every side the wicked prowl, as vileness is exalted among the sons of Adam,
but *you* O LORD will keep your pure and faithful words.

That is God's promise.

And it is *that promise* that Cortis Thomas Pyle receives today in his baptism.