



**Bible Study**  
*Biblical Theology of Psalms*  
**Lesson 12: Psalm 12**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### ***Psalm Summary:***

Psalm 12 puts hope in God's pure words because his thoughts and actions are the same, as opposed to the lies of the wicked.

### ***Outline***

1. 1-4 Perverse Words
2. 5-8 Pure Words

## **OBSERVATION**

**P**salm 12 was written by David, as the superscription ascribes it to him. It is directed to the chief musician, or choirmaster, upon the eight. The same word is used in the heading of Psalm 6 and could refer to an eight stringed instrument, or possibly the octave as direction for singing different parts. The heading gives no occasion for the psalm.

Psalm 12 is not typically categorized as a communal lament, but that is how I categorize it. It does fit the conventions of a communal lament, and verse 7 uses the plural pronouns to indicated deliverance of the community and is an expression of confidence. The psalm begins with a direct address prayer to God for help (1) and proceeds to the crisis complaint (1-2). The psalm reflects on God's disposition toward false speakers (3-4). The middle of the psalm gives a divine oracle as response from God (5) and then reflects on the purity of God's words (6). The psalm ends with an expression of confidence in God, and instead of a commitment to praise, it returns to the present crisis (7-8).

Psalm 12 also has prophetic predictive elements. Time alternates in the psalm between the present (1-2), the future (3-7), and the present with the future not yet realized (8). David's confidence is shown to be in God's words of promise for the future. It also has some minor wisdom elements since it focuses on speech and contrasts false speech with the pure, reliable speech of God.

### ***Walk Through Psalm 12***

Verses 1-2 open the psalm by calling on God to help. David moves quickly to the crisis of the psalm. The godly and faithful are disappearing from the earth. The word for godly is most often translated saints and it describes those who are devoted to God's covenant (Deuteron-

omy 33:8-9). The word for faithful emphasizes loyalty and means truth and certainty. The Hebrew word ultimately comes in English as, amen.

The first verse uses hyperbole to describe the circumstance. This is not an individual lament of the sort where David calls for help because he is alone. David is concerned about the apparent shrinking of the community of the faithful. Think about the mention of the poor and needy (5, 7), which are part of a stock vocabulary relating to oppressed and vulnerable groups as a representation of the covenant community in afflictions.

The phrase children of men is literally, the sons of Adam (Psalms 11:4), so his perspective is here on earth. The crisis is the false speech so prevalent in the community. The mention of neighbor (2) emphasizes a lack of justice in the broader community. He refers to empty talk, flattery, and double talk as abundant. Double talk is false speech where the words and/or actions do not align with the internal thoughts and motives.

Verses 3-4 reflect on God's future judgment. God will literally cut off the lips of flatterers and cut off the tongue that speaks pride. This vivid imagery is a figure of their destruction in judgment. They will not stand and their way will perish (Psalm 1:5-6). David speaks in terms of finality and so refers to the future judgment and establishment of righteousness on the earth. Their proud speech is an overconfident defiance of God, reminding us of both the counsels of the ungodly (Psalms 1:1) and the rebellion of the nations (Psalms 2:1-3).

Verse 5 gives a divine oracle in the middle of this psalm. Yahweh speaks in response to the crisis. He hears the groaning of the oppressed and reminds of God's words to Moses before sending him to Egypt to deliver the people (Exodus 3:7-9). We have previously seen God asked to arise in judgment and deliverance (Psalms 3:7; 7:6; 9:19; 10:12), but here God speaks of his own rising up. That is his answer to the crisis: he will arise. The oracle looks to the future when God will rise up according to his promise. He promises to set the faithful in safety, a form of the word used in verse 1.

Verse 6 then reflects on God's words and their purity. David uses imagery of refining silver with fire. The process is not the point, but rather the product is the point. He uses a simile to compare God's words to silver that has been refined seven times by fire. He is not saying God's words have been refined seven times, as though they contained impurities that needed removed. His words are pure, like the purest metal conceivable on earth—seven times refined silver. The number seven is not a secret code, but rather takes the expression to the highest degree. Silver refined seven times was so pure it could not be refined, or purified any more.

The purity of God's words is a poetic way of expressing their complete truthfulness and trustworthiness. His pure words are contrasted with the double talk of the vain talkers (2). So, God's words are flawless. His words, his promises, are absolutely pure and it's not possible to refine them.

Verse 7 is the expression of confidence in God to deliver the poor and needy suffering af-

fliction by the multiplication of the wicked and their false speech. The first line of verse 7 states that God will keep his words. The word indicates guarding. He's going to guard, going to keep them from failing.

The second line states that God will preserve us, and again the first person plural is used. He will guard or watch over the faithful, so that they will not suffer the same fate as the wicked. In other words, being preserved from "this generation" means not suffering the judgment upon the proud flatterers.

Verse 8 returns to the present time of the psalmist. The first phrase pictures the wicked strutting around. They walk on every side, but they walk freely. They walk in their pride, and that's obviously a theme in the Psalm. Vileness of men speaks of worthlessness and also of shameful excess. The present situation is lamentable, because wicked men are able to strut around when the vilest of men are exalted or are lifted up. In other words, they're in positions of power. The use of power to oppress the covenant faithful is thematic throughout Psalms.

## INTERPRETATION

What does Psalm 12 teach?

### ***The Power of Words***

Psalm 12 focuses on the power of words, and this Psalm keeps a close association between the words that are spoken on one hand and the character of the speaker or the speakers on the other. For instance, when he talks early in the Psalm about vanity, which is empty speech, and talks about flattery, he notes that it comes from a double heart. Double talk is hypocritical speech where the speech and or actions of a person do not correspond to the thoughts of his heart, like the image of a rotten tree producing rotten fruit in places like Luke 6:43. James also spoke of the image of a fountain or a spring of water that can't give both saltwater and fresh. It can't give both sweet and bitter at the same time. They're coming from the same source, and that's going to be the water that flows out at the spring from the source.

David contrasts the words that come from God, because they are flawless. We see that particularly in verses 5 to 7. The Old Testament consistently puts confidence in God's words, because of God's character. In other words, it's God character that stands behind his words, and so therefore you can be confident. It's like when a person has a reputation as a liar, cheat, or even an empty talker and they talk about things they never do, then you're not going to trust what they say.

Throughout the Bible, confidence is put in God's words because he is righteous and true, and he speaks words of truth. So we have confidence in God's words because of his charac-

ter. The knowledge of God's character gives David confidence in this psalm. He begins and ends the Psalm with his present circumstances, where the faithful are disappearing and the wicked are flourishing and strutting around. But he has confidence in God's words because of God's character, because he knows who God is.

### ***The Messianic Hope***

To consider the messianic hope in this psalm, we have to ask, what "words" are the foundation of David's hope and confidence? This psalm features a rare divine oracle in verse 5 where God speaks directly and his words evoke exodus imagery. His declaration that he will arise is paralleled in such promises as the woe to Assyria in Isaiah 33:10. "Now will I rise, saith the Lord; Now will I be exalted; Now will I lift up myself." He's speaking there of rising up in judgment to bring righteousness to the earth. The Lord also said he will set the afflicted in safety, evoking the imagery of the deliverance and restoration of Israel spoken of in similar terms in Isaiah 26:1. "In that day shall this song be sung in the land of Judah; We have a strong city; Salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks." God will set them in safety.

The words David has so much confidence in are the words of the covenant that God made with him, particularly 2 Samuel 7:10. "Moreover I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them that they may dwell in a place of their own, and move no more; neither shall the children of wickedness afflict them any more, as beforetime." So as David thought about the community of the faithful shrinking and disappearing and how the godless seem to be multiplying, the wicked are strutting around boasting of their lies and injustice and oppression of neighbors, he acknowledged that promise is not being realized in this lifetime. But David knows God's words are pure and God has spoken those words. He promised later in 3 Samuel chapter 7 that he's going to bring this about through the seed of David. It's not going to come about through David himself, but the seed of David is going to establish the throne and the Kingdom that's going to bring righteousness to the Earth. These are the words that David is trusting in regardless of his present circumstances. These are the pure words that are purer than silver that's been refined seven times. These are the words he has confidence in.

David speaks of the vilest of men at the end of this Psalm being exalted. When the vilest of men are exalted or lifted up, that causes the wicked to flourish and strut around on every side. The same word for exalted here is used in Psalm 3:3 and in Psalm 9:19 to refer to exaltation to rule, lifting up of the head, lifting up from the grave to the gates of power. So David saw in his time that the earth was not being ruled by the godly man, and that's what he was looking forward to. Psalm 2 again gives the answer to the wicked rulers of the earth, and that answer is the installation of God's Anointed Son King to the throne in Zion (Psalms 2:6-7). His rule will establish righteousness on the earth (Psalms 2:6-7).

These are the words that David has confidence in. These are the pure words of the Lord that's going to bring his Messiah and his kingdom to the earth so that the wicked is not going to flourish and prosper. They're not going to strut around. Lies are not going to pre-

vail, but justice and righteousness will be established. These words are also the words that comforted David as he was dying. “Now these be the last words of David. David the son of Jesse said, And the man who was raised up on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, And the sweet Psalmist of Israel, said, The spirit of the Lord spake by me, And his word was in my tongue. The God of Israel said, The Rock of Israel spake to me, He that ruleth over men must be just, Ruling in the fear of God. And he shall be as the light of the morning when the sun riseth, Even a morning without clouds; As the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain. Although my house be not so with God; Yet he hath made with me an everlasting covenant, Ordered in all things, and sure: For this is all my salvation, and all my desire, Although he make it not to grow.

But the sons of Belial shall be all of them as thorns thrust away, Because they cannot be taken with hands: But the man that shall touch them must be fenced with iron and the staff of a spear; And they shall be utterly burned with fire in the same place” (2 Samuel 23:1-7).

So these are the words that’s the Messianic hope. God’s words are pure. He’s going to bring his Messiah. He’s going to bring his kingdom. He will sit on David’s throne. He will be of the seed of David. He will plant the people of Israel in safety. And he will cause the wicked to cease from the Earth.

## APPLICATION

What does Psalm 12 say to modern readers?

1. Understanding Psalm 12 helps us understand the power of words. Words are only worth what the character of the speaker is worth. We should be moved to use wisdom in speaking words, care to speak words of truth and righteousness. We should also understand not to trust in the words of fools and God haters who seek to lead us astray.
2. Understanding Psalm 12 helps us understand that God has spoken sure words about the future. Our present circumstances are not what will always be, and though we are afflicted by the lying vanities in the world, we will not suffer the fate of the wicked. Those who have put their trust in Jesus Christ. Our hope, just like David’s here, is in the coming kingdom of Christ. That’s the hope expressed in the model prayer: “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). We have that same future-oriented, forward looking hope based on the purity of God’s words that are backed by his own character.

## **ABOUT THIS STUDY**

This series is a study in biblical theology of the book of Psalms. Each lesson typically covers one Psalm. This PDF is provided for personal study, small group study, or use in a church class. Unless otherwise noted, all lessons have been prepared by Jeff Short, the pastor of Harmony Baptist Church.

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