

The LORD Protects the Godly: A Sermon on Psalm 12

Rev. T. Vandergaag

Introduction

Faithful believers in Christ Jesus our Lord,

Nobody likes a complainer. When you complain about doing your chores around the house and complain, you're parents or maybe even a sibling will tell you to stop complaining. Complain too much and you may be sent to your room.

And yet when we look at scripture, we realize that sometimes it's ok to complain. Some complaints are biblical and are found especially the Psalms -- we call them Lament Psalms or more simply Complaint Psalms. In the Psalms there are three kinds of complaints. Some of these psalms are laments about the psalmists own thoughts and feelings (Ps 13); some are complaints about the actions of others (Ps 12); some are complaints about the actions of God himself (Ps 42). All of these complaints are directed to God himself.

Psalm 12 is complaint to the LORD God about the actions of others, specifically about the actions of the wicked and how they mistreat the righteous. I proclaim God's Word to you this morning in this way: *The LORD protects the godly*

1. The plea for help (vv. 1-4)
2. The LORD's response (vs. 5)
3. The confession of trust (vv. 6-8)

The plea for help (vv. 1-4)

The Psalmist, which the superscript just above the Psalm ascribes to David, begins with a plea for help: "Help, LORD" the psalm begins. The word for help is often used in the context of receiving deliverance from ones enemies and so is sometimes translated as save us. In Exod 14:10 we read about how the LORD "helped" or "saved" Israel from the Egyptians by drowning Pharaoh and his hosts in the red sea. In Judges we regularly read about how the LORD raised up a judge to "save" or "help" his people. Just before striking down Goliath in 1 Sam 17, David said to the Philistine, "you come against me with sword and spear and javelin....[but] the LORD will hand you over to me, and I'll strike you and cut off your head...[and] all....will know that...*the LORD saves*; for the battle is the LORD's (1 Sam 17:45-47). And this is also what David is asking for in Ps 12. David is asking God to save him from his enemies, to help him defeat those who are threatening them.

The reason for this plea for help is also given in vs. 1. READ. This is quite a plea to bring before the LORD. Is the psalmist really declaring before the LORD there are no godly left on earth besides him? Is he really saying that he is the only faithful person left on planet earth? It certainly seems that way, esp. when we read vs. 2. READ.

But here Psalm 12 David is not having an Elijah moment. In his zeal, Elijah prayed to God and said "The Israelites have rejected your covenant...I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too" (1 King 19:10)." Later the LORD gently corrected Elijah and said, "I reserve seven thousand in Israel -- all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him."

Perhaps at times King David may have felt like Elijah (perhaps at times we feel that we too -- that we are the only ones are really, truly serving the Lord), but here, in Psalm 12, David is not speaking as an individual. He is speaking on behalf of all the godly. This is clear in vs. 5 where in response to this plea, the LORD says "I will protect *them*" and again in vs. 7 it says "O LORD, you will keep *us* safe."

So this plea for help is communal plea coming from all the godly together. And then the reason for the plea is much more understandable. The godly look around in despair. There are just so few of us. And with such a small number, it's not hard to imagine that we too will vanish from among men -- especially when we realize how smooth the wicked are. Vs. 2 says they have flattering lips, literally it means "a lip of smooth things" - - so they say nice things, things attract us to them, but for their own purposes and for our destruction. They are like a slick car salesman who will sell you a lemon and make you believe it's the most reliable car you'll ever drive. Only this is far worse. These wicked people will gain your trust, show you compassion, but only to later use what they know to destroy and humiliate you. This is what we call breaking someone's trust. This is something they warned about at seminary; it's true in all relationships: breaking someone's trust is about the worst thing you can do -- do it once and that person (and many others) will never trust or confide in you again.

When we look around at the lies, the deception, the flattery in this world, we realize just how vulnerable we are. We need help...the Lord's help!! If we have any chance of surviving, if we have any chance of remaining faithful in this dark world, he must protect us!

In vv. 3 and 4 God's people pray that the LORD will protect them by cut off all flattering lips and every boastful tongue that says, "we will triumph with our tongues; we own our lips -- who is our master?" Perhaps we may wonder if this is literal or not? Are God's people praying that the LORD cut off the tongues of the wicked with a sword? Perhaps. Cutting body parts off was punishment also among God's people for wrong doing (Deut 25:11-12). Cutting off the tongue was among the acceptable punishments in the cultures around them (Babylonian Code of Hammurabi). Such an action, though cruel by our standards, would effectively silence the flattering lips and boastful tongues of the wicked. It also may be more metaphorical and simply a way of calling God to silence their enemies. In any case, the point is that the godly are praying that these wicked people be silenced. They think that their tongues give them power. They think they are their own master. They are proud, arrogant ungodly people will need to be put in their place. That God will show them that he is their master.

Earlier we noted that David prays this prayer on behalf of God's people. In John 17 Jesus Christ prays on behalf of his people. There Jesus Christ prayed for his disciples: "Holy Father, protect them," he prayed, "by the power of your name -- the name you gave me -- so that they may be one as we are one." And later he says, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one." What a glorious comfort this is. To know that Jesus Christ has prayed for his disciples, prayed that his Father would protect them from evil.

This prayer was especially for his disciples at that time, but it is a prayer that Jesus Christ continues to pray for all of his disciples and the church as a whole. Think of the Apostle John says in 1 John 2:1, "My dear children...we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense--Jesus Christ, the Righteous One." Hebrews 7:25 tells us that as our great high priest Jesus Christ "always lives to intercede for [us]." Paul says a similar thing in Romans 8: Jesus Christ "is at the right hand of God," he says, "and is also interceding for us" (vs. 34). Interceding means that someone is making an appeal or an earnest request on someone's behalf -- this is really what the pro-life movement is all about -- people are interceding, making earnest requests to the government on behalf of the unborn. Well this is what Jesus Christ is doing for us at God's right hand. As head of the Church, he is earnestly asking his Father to protect us. He is praying that the ungodly will be silent, that their voices will not be heard, that they will not overpower the godly.

The LORD's response (vs. 5)

In most other lament Psalms, immediately after the cry for help the psalm concludes with a confession of trust in the LORD. Here I invite you to open your Bible with me to Psalm 13, which is an Individual Lament Psalm. Vv. 1-4 is the cry for help. Vv. 5-6 is a confession of trust. Now if we look at Psalm 12, vv. 1-4 is the cry for help and then there is a confession of trust in vv. 6-8. But there is something special about Psalm 12. Psalm 12 has something that Psalm 13 does not. Have you figured it out yet? Well look at Ps 12:5. READ. This is a direct response from the LORD! This is something that most lament Psalms don't have! Yes, the LORD hears their prayer and responds immediately to their cry for help. Isn't that amazing? The LORD doesn't leave them hanging; he doesn't make them wait for his response. It shows the nearness of our God. It shows very clearly that he hears and answers our every prayer (cf. Hymn 42:4) -- which is something we will discuss more this afternoon when we consider what the word *amen* means. It means that God has certainly heard our prayers and Psalm 12:5 is clear proof of this.

So how does the LORD answer their prayer? Well, he promises to rise up and protect the godly. But notice that in vs. 5 the LORD refers to the godly as *the weak* and *the needy* who have been oppressed and groan under the power of the enemy. This is clear proof that bad things can happen to faithful people, even to faithful communities. Yes, sometimes God in his infinite wisdom allows his people to suffer at the hands of the wicked.

Now we should not imagine their enemies are oppressing the faithful and causing them groan with sticks and stones. No. Their groaning and oppression is the result of the lies of the wicked, and their deceptive speech. Here we see that wicked words have the power to oppress the godly and cause them to groan. Words hurt. If you don't believe me, ask anyone who has been bullied. It's not the pushing, the punches, the hair pulling that oppresses them and makes them groan, it's the name calling, the lies, the gossip, and the slander that hurt the most. In the short time I've been here, I've met and heard of too many people who have experienced this at the hands of other believers. Brothers and sisters, this should not be. It's one thing to groan and be oppressed by the ungodly, it's quite another for God's people to treat each other in this way. May it never be said of you or me that our flattering lips and deceptive tongues have caused fellow believers to groan and be oppressed.

And because of the wicked words spoken against godly, the LORD promises to rise up and protect them. How exactly, he doesn't say. If we look at John 17, however, we can say that protection doesn't mean the LORD removes us from this world. Jesus prayed that the disciples would be protected from the evil one, but that he would not take them out of the world. Jesus goes onto pray that the Father will "sanctify them by the truth" -- that is to set them apart and make them holy. When this happens, then the Spirit so works in our hearts that even though the enemy continues to attack, we don't despair. We don't despair because we know that through it all God is stronger than our enemy that his words are more sure than the words of the wicked. If God says he will protect us, then he will, of that we can be absolutely certain. This confidence is exactly what we find in vv. 6-8 of our text....

The confession of trust (vv. 6-8)

In the NIV vs. 6 is connected with vs. 5, but it really belongs with vs. 7-8. As a whole, vv. 6-8 are a response to the LORD's promise in vs. 5. The LORD has promised with words to protect the godly, and in vs. 6 the godly proclaim that those words "are flawless" -- this can also be translated as pure. This is what the animal sacrifices had to be when presented to the LORD -- pure and clean, without defect. This is what God's words are -- they are flawless, pure, clean, without defect. This, we realize, is in direct contrast to the words of the wicked described in vs 2. Their words are full of lies and deception; the LORD's are pure and clean. The words of the wicked bring oppression and groaning; the words of the LORD revive the soul and give joy to the heart (cf. Ps 19). The psalmist goes on to compare the words of the LORD in vs. 6 to "silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times." In those days silver was put through a furnace seven times to be tested for its purity. The Psalmist is saying that the words of the LORD have also been tested and they have always proven true. This too is in contrast to the words of the wicked -- if their words were to be tested seven times, there would be nothing left of them. Their words would be shown to be empty, and ultimately to have no power.

This realization allows the godly, ourselves included, to confidently proclaim to the LORD, "O LORD, you will keep us safe and protect us from such people forever." Yes, what a comfort that is to all the godly who have been oppressed and groan under the words of the wicked. In the end, their words are empty. Their taunts are in vain. In the end, the LORD's words will prevail. He will protect us from such wicked people forever! (cf. Romans 8:33ff)

This doesn't mean the wicked will be wiped out, they are still here. Look at vs. 8. But armed with God's words and Word, we need not fear. For even when it looks like they will triumph, even if they continue to attack and slander us with their flattering and deceptive lips, we know, we believe that we are safe in the arms of our LORD God. He is our help. He is our strength. He is our protection. No matter how much the wicked strut about, we need not fear. The LORD our God is with us. He is mighty to save! And we know that the LORD God will protect us, God's people, because of the high priestly work of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is interceding on the basis of his sacrificial work done on the cross for us. He is saying, "Father, look at my hands and my feet. I did this for them so that their sins have been removed in your sight. Now I beg you, protect them from evil." What a confession of trust this is! In the midst of adversity, in the midst of enemies, God's people know they are safe! This means too, then, that we should also be willing to listen compassionately to those who are going through trials. We don't have to pretend that life is always good and beautiful. Sometimes life is hard and burdensome.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the sermon, I said sometimes it's ok to complain and that's true. It's ok to complain to the LORD, to cry out to him for help, to tell him that right now that you are struggling, that you are anxious, perhaps depressed, or lonely, or tired, and that life even sucks. It's ok to complain about how others have treated you -- in the things they've said and done to you. It's ok to even to complain that to the LORD that he seems to be hiding his face from you (Ps 13). Psalm 12 and other Lament Psalms are a clear example of this.

But, as we have seen, Lament Psalms don't end with complaints and neither can we. Ps 12 teaches us that we have a God who hears, a God who loves, a God who answers our pleas, and who protects us from our enemies -- whoever and whatever enemies we have. And so after complaining to the LORD we must confess trust in him. We must acknowledge that even in the midst of our complaints, our troubles, our oppression, our groaning, that the LORD is with us, guiding us to the end, and working out all things for our salvation. So put your trust in the LORD, congregation, pour out your hearts to him, knowing that his Word is pure. He will help us. He will arise and by his might put all our enemies to flight. Yes, the LORD surely protects the godly. Amen.