

## **Series FolkSongs of Faith**

### **This Message Words of the Wicked Versus the Words of the LORD**

#### **Scripture Psalm 12**

David was an enigmatic person. He was able to bring the Israelites together into one unified and prosperous nation, and to make the nation strong enough to protect itself against numerous enemies. He was a wise and very successful leader of military campaigns. He was always eager to defend the name of Yahweh.

Throughout his lifetime David meditated deeply on the Word of God. He is reputed to have written more than 3500 songs of praise (*reported in Dead Sea Scrolls 11QPs*). Seventy-three of the Psalms in our Bibles are attributed to him.

Yet, for all of the positive attributes of David, he made some terrible mistakes in his life which caused him no end of grief. For example, his sinful relationship with Bathsheba had enormous public consequences. The prophet Nathan confronted David, saying: "Why have you despised the word of God, to do what is evil in his sight?" Nathan declared that God would henceforth curse the King with a troubled reign, full of violent civil unrest and intrigue.

And what agonies David had to endure! Because of his sin, David lost the kingdom for a time. Some of the children from his dysfunctional family rebelled and were a threat to his life and reign. In the end David's kingdom was revived and handed over to Solomon, but through it all David endured considerable loss of authority, prestige, vitality, family members, and friends who were close to him.

Remarkably, in spite of his many failures, David continued to be identified by Yahweh as "a man after His own heart." Yahweh gave important promises to David, and David placed great confidence in the promises of God to deliver those who looked to God for salvation. At times it was not easy for him to maintain his confidence since in his day powerful wicked people were taking advantage of the weak and vulnerable. The Psalm we will think about today describes the multitude of deceptive evildoers who surrounded David and moved him to cry out to God for deliverance.

## Read Psalm 12

The structure of this Psalm is easy to analyze. The first half is a prayer on behalf of godly, faithful people; the second half a statement of confidence in God. The first two verses are a plea for deliverance from deceitful people; the last two verses are an affirmation that the LORD would indeed deliver His people from those who are deceitful. The middle verse of the Psalm is the most important; it is a promise of protection.

The Psalm begins with a plea for help because it seemed to David that all men had become faithless and every tongue false. The word “godly” refers to those who are steadfastly loyal to God, and who zealously follow His ways. The parallel term “faithful” refers to those who are true and obedient to God’s covenant. These are two strong words indicating individuals who are normally pleasing to God.

However, it seemed to David that the godly and faithful followers of God had become extinct in Israel. The phrase in Hebrew states that they had vanished from among “the sons of men,” that is, from humanity. According to David’s observations, liars and deceivers had replaced those who were true to their word and commitments. The phrases “no more” and “have vanished” are undoubtedly exaggerated expressions, not reality, but David could not determine who was sincere and could be trusted. As far as David was concerned, everyone twisted and perverted the truth.

People typically tell lies in order to avoid the consequences of their actions. Liars also conceal and falsify information in order to gain an advantage over other people, or, at least, to gain acceptance and favor in the opinions of others. Sometimes lies are malicious in nature, seeking to destroy the character and reputations of victims. Sometimes lies are in the form of flattery, which is defined as “excessive and insincere praise” intended to advance the speaker’s own interest. As verse 2 declares, it was the intention of everyone to deceive everyone else. This meant that all the people were promoting their own selfish interests and no one was able to trust anybody else. No one was concerned about the common good of the people. The conditions were chaotic.

David wanted the Lord to bring to an end the self-seeking ambitions of those around him. In verses 3 and 4 the evil character and intentions of the liars and deceivers is explained. They not only wanted to gain an advantage over the godly and faithful Israelites, but they boasted about their ability to “triumph over them.” They wanted authority and power, and they did not want any godly influences affecting their behavior. The evildoers were confident that they would be able to gain control over the followers of Yahweh through their lies and deception.

The phrase “we own our lips” implies that they were saying and doing what they wanted to say and do, and that no one was able to restrain their speech. They did not want any limits on their freedom of speech. In David’s time, free speech was used to spread lies and rumors about the godly and faithful followers of God. In our modern era, the rights of free speech are used in much more disreputable ways — to dishonor God, religion, immigrants, political leaders — anyone or anything the speaker wants to criticize, slander, ridicule, or disparage.

Each day the media is filled with reports of people who push the limits of free speech and decency. Incidents in recent years that you may have read about involved the cartooning of the Islamic prophet Mohammad, which led to a shooting incident, and the purchase by the Milwaukee Art Museum of the portrait of Pope Benedict which had been constructed out of 17000 colorful condoms. And in our political campaigns, there are multiplied statements of yellow journalism and misleading information. Both the Israelites of old and Americans of today have had to deal with the abuses of freedom of speech.

For your information, there is an alternate way of translating the phrase “we own our lips.” The alternate words are “our lips are our plowshares.” If this is the correct translation, and it is a valid possibility, then the expression would imply that words were being used by evildoers as a tool to achieve their purposes and, in the context, the purpose would be the overturning and elimination of godly influences in the land.

The last phrase of verse 4 expresses the challenge of evildoers to authority: “Who is our master?” or “Who is lord over us?” In an ultimate sense, the boastful deceivers were exalting themselves over Yahweh. Their speech and their actions represented a rejection of God’s instructions. In verse 5 the deceivers were identified as “oppressors.” As you can recognize, there are several clues in this Psalm describing the character and objectives of the deceivers.

In the last verse of the Psalm they are called “the wicked.” Verse 8 is a summary description of the attitudes and behaviors of the enemies of God. The fact that these enemies “freely strut about” indicates that their behavior is public and brazen. There is no behind-the-back secrecy about their actions. David described their arrogant behavior as “vile.”

The real tragedy about the situation was that such vile behavior was acceptable to the majority of the Israelites, even “honored” by them. All of this was an indication of the rebellious and unruly spiritual attitudes of the Israelites toward Yahweh and toward the godly and faithful followers of Yahweh. Such were the conditions in which David was trying to rule as Yahweh’s chosen king.

In verse 5, there is an abrupt change in the focus of the Psalm. David was given words of assurance from the LORD that He would deal with the situation. Some commentators have suggested that David received a prophetic insight directly from the LORD concerning what He would do. Other commentators suggest that the insight probably came to David as an oracle from a priest or a prophet. Another group of commentators think that David remembered a promise of the LORD given previously. We don’t know the reason behind the abrupt change in the focus of the Psalm, but verse 5 is the turning point in the poetry.

What seems obvious is that God was responding to David’s prayer. The LORD announced that He had seen the oppression and heard the “groanings of the needy,” and that the time had come for Him to rise up and take action to protect helpless victims. The word “protect” can also be translated “deliver” or “vindicate.”

These words of the LORD were very important and significant to David. His description of the words of the LORD was in sharp contrast to the boastful and deceiving words of treachery and dishonesty of the wicked ones. God’s words are depicted here to be as “flawless” as highly refined silver, as pure as silver which has gone through the refining process seven times. In other words, verse 6 indicates that there is nothing false or inconsistent or misleading about God’s words. They were as pure and accurate as they could be. Verse 6 has significant implications concerning the integrity and trustworthiness of God’s Word. As the people of God, we must consider His Words to be “flawless,” read them often, and obey their instructions.

The last two verses are David's statement of confidence in the LORD's promise of deliverance. Those who were rebelling against the LORD were trying to eradicate individuals who were godly and faithful, but David believed that the LORD would take care of His own. We also must have confidence that God offers special protection from the evil of the world regardless of the circumstances of our lives. For the godly and faithful followers of God, His protection will extend "forever."

In his era, David counted on the LORD to keep him safe from his enemies, and he prayed earnestly that the LORD would keep the wicked from "strutting their stuff," that is, from displaying their "vileness" among the people of Israel. In our day, we must also maintain confidence in the ultimate authority of God over evil and in His promises of safe-keeping.

Vileness is promoted and exalted in many ways in our time. We are daily exposed to immorality, brutality, the love of money, the abuse of authority, hatreds, racism, etc.. Ungodly behavior has become ordinary behavior in the lives of people, and it is displayed in both their public as well as private lives. The things that God condemns are now prominently featured in the news and entertainment media. The entertainment industry even gives awards to the people who produce and promote ungodly behavior. Many people boast about their shameful activities.

Most believers today live and work in environments very similar to the one David described in this Psalm. I hope the words of this Psalm are a comfort to you. God has promised to preserve those individuals who purpose to follow His ways, even though they must live in circumstances polluted by deceit and corrupt speech. Scripture teaches that it is possible to live holy and righteous lives in the midst of this deceitful and depraved world. The powers of evil were defeated when Jesus died on the cross (*Colossians 2:14-15*). God has arisen on behalf of His godly and faithful followers. God's Word is reliable. We can be confident that "he who began a good work in us will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (*Philippians 1:6*).

Let me conclude by quoting some verses written by Paul to the believers in the fellowship in Philippi. These verses are very appropriate for us today: "Press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus. ... As I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. Therefore, my brothers, ... that is how you should stand firm in the Lord" (*Philippians 3:18-4:1 excerpts*).