

9/21/25

Psalm 12 – When Vileness is Exalted

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Well, good morning. Fun fact, for those who are interested, today is a special day for my family. One year ago today, we woke up in our home in Kansas City, packed up the last of our things, welcomed a small army of friends to help us load up our trucks, and headed north to move up here to Ames. Of course, many of you were there on the back end to help us do the inverse, unload the trucks, and unpack our things. So, this is a special anniversary, one year ago today we moved up here to start this next chapter in our lives.

It's been a great year, we have been so incredibly blessed to be here, and so incredibly thankful to get to serve this body and serve alongside this body. So, thank you for calling me, thank you for trusting me to share in the task of shepherding you all. It is a huge privilege, a huge honor, and just a lot of fun. So, thank you.

Ok, let's get into this text a bit. This is a challenging text, and something of a sobering text. To cut to the chase a little bit, this text is more or less an expansion of what we saw last week in Psalm 11:3, **“if the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?”** This text addresses an issue that arises in societies from time to time. What can and should the godly do when society is run by the ungodly and society collapses into chaos? When the godly either won't exercise authority, or are pushed out of influence, and society descends into chaos, what should the godly do?

Here is the basic structure of the text – I'll give you the outline, then my main point.

Verses 1 through 5 spells out the problem – society has descended into chaos because those in charge are not godly and rule in godless ways.

Verses 6 through 8 spells out the solution – take refuge in the Word of God, the promises of God, and the people of God.

Verse 5 more or less functions as the pivot point. One through 4 is David's prayer for help and deliverance, and his spelling out of the problem. But then verse 5 is God's response, he spells out the problem, then he tells David what he's going to do.

Then, verses 6, 7, and 8 are commentary, more or less spelling out how we should respond to all of the above – both the problem, cultural chaos, and God's promised deliverance.

Now, verse 8 is obviously spelling out more of the direness of the problem, not explicitly addressing the solution, but I'll try to show you how that verse can point us to an implied solution. We'll get there when we get there.

Ok, verse 1. **“Save, O LORD, for the godly one is gone; for the faithful have vanished from among the children of man.”** So, here is basically the root issue. Everything else is downstream of this. This is the underlying cause of all the other problems. Those in power are no longer godly, and the faithful are scattered. One way or another, the rulers are ruling in a godless way – either because they are themselves godless, or through cowardice, foolishness, or coercion the otherwise godly are ruling in a godless way.

We don't know exactly when this was written, or exactly what circumstances David had in view. But through church history, many have speculated that this might be best associated with one specific episode from David's life, when he was fleeing from Saul. So, there's this event we read about in 1 Samuel 22:17-19. So, David was on the run from Saul, who was trying to kill

him. He went to a town called Nob, and the priests there let him stay with them, and gave him some food, and then helped him escape when Saul got close.

Saul finds out about this, and let's just say, it goes bad for the priests. Here's 1 Samuel 22:17-19, this is from right after Saul finds out the priests helped David.

And the king said to the guard who stood about him, "Turn and kill the priests of the Lord, because their hand also is with David, and they knew that he fled and did not disclose it to me." But the servants of the king would not put out their hand to strike the priests of the Lord. Then the king said to Doeg, "You turn and strike the priests." And Doeg the Edomite turned and struck down the priests, and he killed on that day eighty-five persons who wore the linen ephod. And Nob, the city of the priests, he put to the sword; both man and woman, child and infant, ox, donkey and sheep, he put to the sword.

So, it's entirely plausible that this is what David has in mind when he pens this Psalm. The godly one is gone. Saul once was godly. He wasn't always this way. But now, the godly Saul is gone. And the faithful have vanished, the priests have been slaughtered by Doeg.

Now, this is really important to note – godlessness in the leadership never stays with the leadership. Charles Spurgeon, commenting on the first verse of Psalm 12 says, "*They say that fish smell first at the head, and when godly men decay, the whole commonwealth will soon go rotten,*" (Charles Spurgeon, *Treasury of David*, I, 141).

When the wicked rule, the godly are discouraged, harassed, sent into hiding, or forced to compromise. And at the same time, the godless, the Doegs of the world, are encouraged, they are emboldened in their wickedness.

Note what happened in that story. Saul told Doeg to kill the priests. That's bad, of course, but did Doeg stop there? No, he was emboldened in his wickedness by the king's wickedness. He went on to slaughter the whole town.

So, when Saul goes godless and slaughters the priests, what do other priests, what do other godly people learn from this? Now all of a sudden godliness is no longer safe. I might lose my life for being godly.

And what do the wicked learn? This king is not a threat to godlessness. Wickedness does not get punished. So, the wicked are emboldened, and the godly are threatened.

So anyways, that's the root problem, the godly king is gone, and in his place we have an ungodly king, and the whole nation is descending into chaos.

William Penn, founder of Pennsylvania, once said, "Men must be governed by God, or they will be ruled by tyrants." This is the basic idea of this passage. If those in charge, whether it's a king, or a president, or congress, are godly and rule in the fear of God, the people are free and flourish. If those in charge do not fear God, the people will be governed by tyranny.

Now, it's important to note, Saul was no atheist, and William Penn wasn't thinking about Stalin, he was thinking about King Charles the second, who was both king of England, and the head of the church of England.

It's easy for us to kind of oversimplify things in our day. To us, when we think of godless versus godly, or, from the outside looking in, whenever you hear a pastor start talking about godless versus godly, it's easy to just think that that those are synonyms for irreligious and religious. In reality, as the church has wrestled with this problem down through history, it has been in the context of *religious* godless rulers. Men who claimed the name of Christ, but who had no fear of God in their hearts, and who only cared about the Bible when it suited them, and

ignored all the parts that put restraints and controls on those in power. They wanted the authority of Christ without the character of Christ.

So yes, godless tyranny can come in a secular form, we've seen plenty of that in the last hundred years, and yet, there is also such a thing as godless, religious tyranny. There is such a thing as hypocritical religious tyranny.

And, just to bring this closer to home – this is true at the national scale, but it is also true at smaller scales. Godless leaders – whether religious or irreligious – will cause chaos in a company, even in a church, or in a family. Wherever you see leaders who do not *fear* God, and do not take his Word seriously in *every* part, - again, kings, presidents, bosses, pastors, or dads – wherever you see godless leaders, you will soon see chaos, misery, and death.

Ok, that's the basic problem, the godly are gone.

Then, in the next few verses David spells out the impacts, the symptoms of ungodly rule on society.

Verse 2: lies and flattery become widespread. I think it's something of an indictment against our age that we don't generally see flattery as the evil that it is. It's a funny thing, because flattery is lying and manipulation, or at least embellishing the truth, meant to manipulate someone, and yet we kind of like it. We don't see it as a fundamentally manipulative thing. It's kind of a little boost to our self-esteem. We tolerate it, and don't despise it like we should.

When godliness and truth is not the law of the land, what matters is how you make me feel. If you make me feel good about myself, I like you. If you make me feel bad about myself, you're evil.

And then notice this, I think this is really interesting. Notice verse 4, “[**May the Lord cut off...**] **Those who say, ‘with our tongue we will prevail, our lips are with us; who is master over us?’**” David is putting his finger on something really interesting here. One of the main tools that the godless use to create cultural chaos is word games.

The more someone wants to mess with words. The more someone wants to use old common words with new technical meanings, or make up new technical terms for mundane things, the more they are masking and covering over wickedness. This is why the Bible is so positive on plain and simple speech.

Proverbs 10:19, “**When words are many, transgression is not lacking.**”

Matthew 5:37, talking about oaths, Jesus says, “**Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.**”¹

So, this is what godlessness does. It messes with words to disguise what it’s doing. It doesn’t want to be seen straight on. It needs to throw verbal smoke screens. We see this even in kids when they get caught doing what they shouldn’t. They just kind of word vomit a ton of irrelevant background information, to just burry their guilt in a mountain of words.

So, we need to see this. One of the downstream effects of godlessness in society is a widespread confusion around terms and vocabulary. If you are godly, and want to promote the truth, speak plainly, simply, and straight. Use words to make meaning clear, not murky.

Ok, so then in verse 5, we get into the LORD’s response. And note what he says, note what he adds to David’s complaint. Yes, David, the ungodly rule. Yes, David, lies and flattery are the rule of the day. But add to that, verse 5, “**the poor are plundered, [and] the needy groan.**”

¹ See also, 1 Corinthians 1:12, and James 5:12.

This is what we need to see. In godless societies, the poor always suffer. Godliness in the leadership isn't just about religious and cultural issues. Godliness in leadership is good for society, especially the poorest of society.

There are basically three forms that godless leaders can take to prey on the poor. There's religious hypocrisy, where the leaders take advantage of the parts of the Bible that give them authority, but ignore all the parts of the Bible that require self-sacrifice, self-denial, Christlike character, gentleness, and love.

Then, there are the godless secular ideologies that are meant to make society and individuals better, but in the end have disastrous consequences. Could be criminal justice ideology, could be marriage ideologies, could be political ideologies – generally it's an attempt to be wiser, more merciful, or more sensitive to human nature than God himself. But in the end, “there is a way that seems right to man,” they result in chaos, misery, and death. And it's the poor who suffer the most.

But then third, there's just carnal godlessness. This is the godlessness that isn't fueled by any kind of sophisticated ideology. Those in power just want to use their power to satisfy their own lust for wealth, control, pleasure, or glory. Again, this is both Ghangis Khan, but also just a self-centered parent who uses their influence to make life miserable for everyone else in the family, to satisfy their own appetites.

So, whichever one of those three hits closest to home for you, the first thing I want you to hear is just this – it wasn't meant to be that way. So, whether you've suffered because of secular ideologies, or hypocritical religious communities, or an alcoholic parent and dysfunctional household – know that that is not how it's supposed to be. God has a good design for life, for family, for church, and for society. It was not meant to be this way.

What does God do about this? When society descends into chaos, what does God do? Look at verse 5 again, **“because the needy groan, I will now arise,’ says the LORD; ‘I will place him in the safety for which he longs.’”**

Ok, so I want to walk through the last three verses and point out three application points, three things that God has given us as a part of how he will deliver us. Two of them are pretty much just right there on the surface, then in verse 8 I want to try to show you what I think that verse at least hints at.

Notice verse 6, here’s the first thing, **“The words of the Lord are pure words.”** Here’s the first thing, whether you’re anxious in need of comfort, or looking for refuge, this is where you need to start. What do you think of God’s word? Is it a respectable ancient book best kept on the shelf? Is it an outdated book of wisdom with a few good timeless nuggets in there? Or is it life and light? Is it the very word of God to all peoples in all places at all times?

This is important to see. When chaos falls on you because of godless leaders – what is your first response? I so appreciate Spurgeon here, again, commenting just on the first verse, he says, *“The death, departure, or decline of godly men should be a trumpet-call for more prayer.”*²

The first step, the first response to godlessness around us should be a redoubled seriousness in ourselves to pursue godliness. There will likely be more actions that are needed down the line, but the first step for us as individuals, as a church, and even as a society needs to be a redoubled pursuit of godliness. Like Spurgeon says, that should start with prayer, but then like David says here in verse 6, it should also be a call to take the Bible more seriously.

So, whether you’ve been a Christian for decades, or you are checking out the church for the first time because of the cultural chaos around you, your first step should be to take God’s

² Spurgeon, 141.

Word seriously. All the problems and chaos around you – at a societal level, a church level, or a family level – stem from a lack of the fear of God, and a dismissal of the Word of God.

So, there are four steps you need to take, and each one is absolutely necessary. Four steps. First, you have to *know* what the Bible says. The Bible isn't a totem you just kind of affirm, and carry around. It is God's Word to you, to be heard, and known.

Second, you have to *believe* what it says. The Bible is God's Word, perfect, infallible, inerrant, and authoritative in every word, in every sentence, and in every chapter. God's Word is as true as God is. If you struggle with that, if you have doubts or questions, don't just do nothing with that. Let's talk. Most of your questions, I promise you, have good answers. The truth is not afraid of investigation. The truth is not afraid of hard questions. Bring your questions, get answers.

Third, you have to *love* what it says. If you know and believe the Bible, but kind of feel embarrassed about it, and kind of need to explain away the hard edges whenever you talk about it with a secular person, it will be hard to find the life, light, and shelter that God means his Word to be for you. Do you love it?

Then fourth, you have to *do* what it says. James 1:22 says, **“be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”** Interestingly, actually doing the Word is one of the best ways to come to *love* the Word. Psalm 34:8 says, **“taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.”** God invites you to taste, to experience the goodness of godliness. The more you are actually set free from sin and empowered to do godliness according to God's Word, the more you will believe it, and love it.

Would you take refuge in God's Word? Then know it, believe it, love it, and do it.³

³ See also, Psalm 19:7, Psalm 119:105, Proverbs 30:5.

Now, this is important. As much as the Bible has things to be believed, and commands to be done, at its core it is not a religious fact-book and rule-book. At its core, it is a book about God in Christ reconciling a sinful and fallen world to himself. So, at the very core of knowing, believing, loving, and doing the Word is knowing, believing, loving, and doing the gospel of Jesus Christ.

At the core of the Bible is the message that you yourself need a savior, not better behavior, not better knowledge, but a savior, a substitute. That you yourself need forgiveness and mercy. That God loves you yourself and sent his son to die for you yourself. You need the perfect life of Christ, and the atoning death of Christ. If the Bible is just a book of moral rules, we'll never actually be transformed by the power of God – we'll always be drifting towards hypocrisy. It's not a book about how you need to move towards God, it's a book about how God has moved towards you in Christ. It's only when we start to see Jesus on every page that we start to really be transformed by what we read.

Ok, so the first thing that God gives us as a way of “placing us in the safety for which we long” is his Word. It's true, we can trust it, we can celebrate it, and we should do it.

That really lays the foundation for the other two, so that's the biggy, I'll be somewhat brief on the others.

Second, look at verse 7, **“You, O LORD, will keep them; you will guard us from this generation forever.”**

Here, the resource that I want to put in front of you is simply God's promises. Again, if his Word is true, then we should build our lives on the things that he has promised us in there. **“You will guard us from this generation forever.”** It's always hard in the moment, but that's

why God gave us promises. So that when it is hard to hope and believe, we have something to cling to.

So, there are three types of promises you should be thinking about, especially when we're thinking about cultural chaos. First there are personal and present promises, we saw an example of this a few weeks ago in Psalm 5:12, **"For you bless the righteous, O Lord; you cover him with favor as with a shield."**⁴ God is actually the sovereign Lord of history and your life. This doesn't mean that everything will go your way, or that you will never stick your hand into the garbage disposal of sin and brokenness, but it does mean that as we fret about and worry about our lives and the future, we need to factor in the hope of God's sovereign protection and help.

Then second are personal and future promises. First Corinthians 15:19 is a good example of this, the Apostle Paul says, **"If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied."** For the Christian, God's sovereign providence should give us hope in this life, but that should pale in comparison to our hope for the next. Even if everything goes dark for us in this life, and we live to see some really dark days for the church, for those who are in Christ, our true and sure hope is kept in heaven, guarded at the right hand of God. This life is not our final hope.

Then the third kind of promise we need to keep in mind is Christ's promises to his church. This is probably most directly what verse 7 here is about. Note that it's plural. God will guard *us* from this generation forever. Whatever happens in the world around us, God will preserve his church, and he will build his church on into the next generation.⁵ That should give us hope and confidence as we invest in the church, and build up the church, not just for ourselves, but for our children, and their children after us. Our ambition for our church shouldn't

⁴ See also Proverbs 30:5, Isaiah 41:10.

⁵ See also Matthew 16:18.

just be in reaching this generation, those around us now, but in building something that can continue to reach people for generations to come.

All of these promises – present promises, future promises, personal promises, corporate promises – should shape our posture and attitude towards life and culture. Trusting in God’s promises, even in the middle of chaos, we should be people marked by settled *confidence*, believing *hope*, and unshakable *gratitude*. The world doesn’t need more panic, despair, cynicism, and resentment. Christ calls us to be a city on a hill, a light in the dark for the world to take refuge and find life in Christ. What the world needs to see now is a poor and despised people – the church – exhibiting supernatural confidence in God, unaccountable hope in the future, and gratuitous gratitude for the good things God has given us.

Ok, very briefly here, I just want to touch on this last verse, verse 8, **“On every side the wicked prowl, as vileness is exalted among the children of man.”**

I just want to note two things here. First, note the importance of solidarity. And second notice the power of culture.

What’s the image, **“on every side the wicked prowl.”** On every side of what? Of the flock. The third resource that God gives us to place us in safety is the church. The word – verse 6, his promises – verse 7, and the church, verse 8.

Hebrews 10 would have been another good passage to look at to talk about cultural chaos. Hebrews 10 touches on the cultural temptations towards religious godlessness on the one side – a return to the Jewish sacrificial system – and lawless pagan godlessness on the other. And right in the middle of it all, Hebrews 10:23-25 says this, **“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up**

one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

So, you see the same themes, hold fast, don't waver, He who promised is faithful. This is so important, I didn't stress this enough today, but you at least need to see this. Why should we hold fast to our hope? Because *he who promised is faithful*. When culture and circumstances look threatening, the Christian needs to look beyond circumstances to God himself. Our hope is ultimately as unshakable, as true, as good, as reliable as God himself.

Ok, so hold fast to hope because of God himself. Then what – and hold fast to one another! **“Don't neglect to meet together,” “stir up one another to love and good works.”** We can't do this alone! We need each other. This is what the church is for. In the middle of cultural chaos, we need to help and encourage each other to keep our eyes on our Triune God, stay hopeful, and stay faithful.

We need each other.

Ok, but then second, also note the importance of culture. Verse 8 again, **“as vileness is exalted among the children of man.”**

The people you surround yourself with will shape the kinds of things that you celebrate and the kind of things that you revile. What our culture does really well, and this goes back to the bit earlier about being a little embarrassed about God's word, what our culture does really well is to get people to celebrate what is vile, and revile what is good, true, and beautiful. Modern secularism doesn't appeal primarily to the mind, but to the heart.

Precisely at this point we need the church to be a counter-culture of celebration. We need to be people that help each other to exalt what is good, and true, and beautiful, and to revile what is vile.

We need to remind each other, ‘no, no. That really is vile, you’re not crazy.’

So, we need the church. We need the church just to surround us, and encourage us, and help us do things that are good and godly. But we also need the church to help shape our affections. We need help to reorient our hearts to God and the things of God.

So, this is my appeal to you. Don’t be an a la carte Christian. Don’t just come to church and hear the sermons and sing the songs. That’s great, but you need to go deeper. You need to immerse yourself in the life of the church, you need to know and be known. This is why we do things like membership, and gospel life groups.

This church is not a purveyor of religious goods and services. True gospel transformation, true gospel confidence, true gospel hope, and true gospel gratitude are formed and forged through doing life deeply together under the Word of God. So, wherever you are, whether you are an anxious Christian, or a cultural refugee, or whatever else, come inside, stop looking in through the window. There is a seat for you. Come inside.

So, this is our plan in the midst of cultural chaos – we need to root ourselves in the gospel, while the culture is more and more reviling God’s word, we need to more and more believe it, love it, and live it. While the world is telling everyone to despair and panic, we need to fix our eyes, in gratitude and hope, on God above the world – he is not a victim of time and circumstance, God holds all of time and space in his hands. If he says he will protect us, he will protect us. And we need to find solidarity with God’s people in God’s church, we need to help each other stay on the path by praising what is really worthy of praise.

Lord’s Supper

This morning, we are going to be celebrating the Lord's Supper. In this Supper we are nourished by Christ as we fix our eyes on him by faith and as we remember his sacrifice for us. In 1 Corinthians 10, the Apostle Paul points out that this cup and this bread are participations in the blood and body of Christ. But then he adds something peculiar that I think might be helpful to note this morning. In verse 17 he says, **"because there is one bread, we who are many are one body for we all partake of the one bread."** As much as this Supper reminds us of and strengthens our union with Christ, so it also reminds us of and strengthens our union with each other. The wicked might prowl on every side, but we are in this together. Vileness might be exalted among the children of man, but in here we exalt Christ and Christlikeness, God and godliness.

Pray with me.

Almighty God,

Help us today. Wherever we are coming from, whatever chaos we have experienced in life, please help us. Help us to take refuge in you. Help us to cling to you, to flee to you, to seek peace, joy, life, and light in you.

Help us to cling to you Word. To not focus on events around us, but to focus on you, on your Word, and on what you would have us to do.

Help us to believe your promises. Help us not just to affirm and assent to your promises, but help us to be agents of hope, and life, and gratitude. While the world descends into bitterness, resentment, cynicism, and anger, help us to be beacons of forgiveness, love, hope, and gratitude.

Lord, and would you shape us. Would you guide us and restore us through your Spirit in us. Help us to help each other. Help us to love each other, to be for each other. Shape us Lord, shape us by your Holy Spirit, transform our affections.

Lord, we love you, we trust you, we look to you, our shepherd, our captain, our king.

Lord, as we turn to the Supper, we lift these elements to you. Like us, just common ordinary things, but we lift them to you, that you might use them as tokens of your grace. Feed us, we come to you hungry. Nourish us, we come to you desperate. Strengthen us, we come to you weary.

We pray all this in the mighty name of Jesus,

Amen.