

Living Godly in an Ungodly Age

BY DR. RON J. BIGALKE

Psalm 12 was written “for the choir director; upon an eight-stringed lyre.” The Hebrew phrase, *'al-hashminith* (“according to the eighth;” Vulgate, “for the octave”), is also provided in the superscription of Psalm 6. In 1 Chronicles 15:21, the phrase occurs and is prefaced by the verb “to lead with lyres tuned.” The lyre is indicated as the instrument, and the phrase “according to the eighth” would seem to indicate the voice range (i.e., the instrument is tuned for the bass singers).¹ Psalm 12 was likely sung in worship on the eighth day (“a Sabbath”) of the Feast of Tabernacles.² During the Feast of Tabernacles,³ the Israelites dwelt “in booths” (Lev 23:42; cf. Zech 14:16), which pictured the final harvest and rest when Israel will dwell securely, and was a reminder of the temporal dwellings of the Israelites as they sojourned in the wilderness (Lev 23:43). Psalm 12 is a reminder of God’s protection for His people, as they live in the midst of an ungodly society.

David composed this psalm in recognition of the solemn reality that believers are often outnumbered

in this fallen world. Jesus said, “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matt 7:13). Consequently, those who would live godly often encounter unyielding opposition to the commands and doctrines of Scripture. If the godly are to be victorious, they must call upon the Lord, because only He can protect the godly when they are the minority among the ungodly. The content of Psalm 12 is vigorous, and reflects the same confidence in God as Psalm 11. The voices of the godly and ungodly are alternated, with emphasis upon the promise of God. Psalm 12 was composed in reverse parallel (chiasmic structure).

A God is addressed: the godly ceases to be (vv. 1-2)

B God is referenced (the boasts of the ungodly) (vv. 3-4)

C God spoke with certainty (v. 5)

B God is referenced (the promises of God) (v. 6)

A God is addressed: the ungodly exalt vileness (vv. 7-8)

As always true with regard to a promise of God, it was given with certainty, “I will set him in the safety for which he longs.”

Wickedness increases when the moral are the minority (A and A). The primary contrast in Psalm 12 is between godless speech, which is false and flattering, and the Word of God, which is pure and trustworthy (B and B). The godly are to trust God as their defense (C).

THE CHRISTIAN'S DISTRESS

(12:1-2) The moral absolutes of God's revealed Law formed the basis for the godly society in which David lived. He cried to the Lord for help, because this once godly society in which he lived was declining rapidly. All manner of ungodliness was prevalent in the absence of God's Word, and prayer to Him. Believers found themselves the minority in society and questioned how to live godly in an ungodly society. Godliness and faithfulness were vanishing, as a consequence of the preponderance of “falsehood” spoken “with flattering lips.” Godliness was disappearing, society was disintegrating, truth discounted, and sin dominant. In such perilous and treacherous times, David indicated that believers must trust in the promises and protection of God to possess the strength to live in this ungodly era.

It is a maxim that nature abhors a vacuum; therefore, what occurs when God's Word and prayer are rejected?

- disappearance of godliness
- disintegration of society
- discounter of truth
- dominance of sin

THE CHRISTIAN'S DEPENDENCE

(12:3-4) The use of *bene 'adam* (“sons of men”) in verse 1 indicates the universal content of this Psalm. David, therefore, was dependent upon God to remove the source of “falsehood”: “all flattering lips” and “the tongue that speaks” boastfully, which arise from “a double [perverted] heart.” The tongue is a formidable force of destruction, because whoever controls the dominant form of communication will influence public opinion. The psalmist lamented that the once godly nation had become



corrupt. The people spoke arrogantly and defied accountability to God, saying, “who is lord over us?”

THE CHRISTIAN'S DEFENSE

(12:5) When overwhelmed by ungodliness, the believer's defense is God. The Lord will alleviate “the devastation of the afflicted” and “the groaning of the needy.” As a consequence of being the minority, the godly were afflicted and needy from the actions of the ungodly. The psalmist's prayer was answered directly by God (the first psalm to contain an answering oracle; cf. Ps 60, 81, 95). As always true with regard to a promise of God, it was given with certainty, “I will set him in the safety for which he longs.” The Lord knows the difficulties His people experience for faithfulness to Him, and therefore promises, “Now I will arise.”

THE CHRISTIAN'S DELIVERANCE

(12:6) The drastic contrast between human speech and the promises of God is that the Lord speaks with “pure words; as silver tried in a furnace on the earth, refined seven times.” God's words are pure and trustworthy. The comparison of God's words to silver indicates there is no dross of falsehood, which is reinforced by the phrase “refined seven times” (a figure of completeness). God's Word is pure, unalloyed silver, which indicates the quality of His promises. God does not speak with falsehood. “Every word of God is tested; He is a shield

“Now you know well that every wise workman takes his tools away from the work from time to time, that they may be ground and sharpened; so does the only-wise Jehovah take his ministers oftentimes away into darkness and loneliness and trouble, that he may sharpen and prepare them for harder work in his service”⁴ [cf. Phil 1:12-14].



to those who take refuge in Him” (Prov 30:5). Jesus prayed for His disciples to be sanctified “in the truth” and stated “the truth” is the words of Scripture (John 17:17). Trusting in God will never disappoint the godly, because God’s infallible and inerrant Word promises their defense. God’s servants are not exempt from the crucible that removes the dross in their lives (cf. Ps 66:10; Prov 17:3).

THE CHRISTIAN’S DISPOSITION

(12:7-8) David restated his dependence upon God. The psalmist confessed confidently, “You, O LORD, will keep them; You will preserve him from this generation forever.” Peace is the disposition of the godly among tumultuous times. David’s lament is brought to a peaceful conclusion. Such peace, of course, is the blessing of knowing and therefore trusting God. Augustine wrote famously, “. . . you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they can find peace in you” (*Confessions* 1.1).⁵ Pascal wrote similarly, “What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around

him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself” (*Pensées* 148 [428]).⁶

The godly are promised the protection of the Lord from the ungodly society in which they may live. Conversely, the ungodly assume they are not accountable to God, and “vileness is exalted among the sons of men.” The repetition of “sons of men” (12:1, 8) emphasizes the mortality of the ungodly, in contrast to the hope of the psalmist in the eternal (covenantal) God. The psalm concludes with the ungodly still honoring the worthless among men, but reveals that God is sovereign over the affairs of the world. As believers live in an ungodly society, they are not to follow the majority but to focus their dependence upon God’s Word and prayer as the means to living victoriously. He will set the godly “in the safety for which he longs” and “preserve him” (12:5, 7), because, “The words of the LORD are pure words” (12:6). (MC)

ENDNOTES

- 1 For the view that the phrase refers to the instrument, see Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 31.
- 2 The feast is also called the “Feast of Ingathering” (Exod 23:16) because it was associated with harvesting.
- 3 For more information, see the discussion in John A. Lamb, *The Psalms in Christian Worship* (London: Faith Press, 1962) 12-17.
- 4 Andrew A. Bonar, *The Life and Remains, Letters, Lectures and Poems of the Rev. Robert Murray McCheyne* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1849) 157.
- 5 Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Penguin, 2001) 1.
- 6 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin, 1995) 45.