

Psalm 12:1–8

TO THE CHOIRMASTER: ACCORDING TO THE SHEMINITH. A PSALM OF DAVID.

Psalm 12 begins suddenly—almost abruptly:

I. Psalm 12:1a — Save, LORD...

Here in just two simple words is the cry of the humble. So it's a cry that should ultimately be found on the lips of all of us. "Save, LORD..."

The Hebrew for "save" is *ho-si-ah*, and it's an imperative. "Save!" But the point of the imperative is not a command, as though we could order God about or make Him save. The point of the imperative is to express how absolutely necessary it is that God should act *because* there's no other hope of deliverance or help in any other place. I think of when Peter "got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, 'Lord, save me'" (Mat. 14:29-30). Here is the ultimate expression of true faith and trust and so here also in a very real sense is an ultimate expression of true worship. The one we look to for deliverance and salvation, for rescue and help, for protection and security—the one in whom we *trust*—is ultimately the one we worship. And so by the time of Jesus in the New Testament, *ho-si-ah na*—"save us"—had become not only a cry of desperation and need but also one of praise and adoration – of worship. On Palm Sunday as Jesus was entering the city of Jerusalem riding on a donkey:

- Matthew 21:9 — The crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna [*ho-si-ah na*, "Save us!"] to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna [*ho-si-ah na*] in the highest!"

Have we truly learned to cry out from our own hearts and with our own lips, "Save, LORD"? Could the whole orientation of our hearts and of our lives be accurately expressed and summed up by those two words? For the psalmist who composed this prayer, there were some very specific circumstances that caused him to cry out like this.

II. Psalm 12:1 — Save, LORD, for the godly one is gone; for the faithful [ones] have vanished from among the children of man.

In order to understand just how dark and how desperate the psalmist's situation was, we have to remember and understand the covenantal context (the context of the covenant). The Hebrew word for "godly" is *ha-sid*. It's related to the noun *he-sed* – a word that refers most often to God *covenant* love and mercy. We read in Psalm fifty-two:

- Psalm 52:8–9 — I am like a green olive tree in the house of God. I trust in the steadfast love [*he-sed*] of God forever and ever. I will thank you forever, because you have done it. I will wait for your name, for it is good, in the presence of the godly [*ha-sid*].

Do you see how the *ha-sid* (the godly and pious) are those who live in light of the *he-sed* (the steadfast covenant love) of God? Do you see how the living of our lives in covenant with God is

nothing more nor less than our *response* to His mercy and grace? Could each one of us truly be described as a godly or a pious man or woman? Indeed, *today* there's a sense in which this is simply the description of every true Christian – of every genuine member of the covenant community.

After mentioning the “godly one” the psalmist goes on to speak of the “faithful” (*e-mun*). This is a word that's often used to describe *God's* faithfulness, and especially His faithfulness within the context of the covenant. Almost every time this word (*e-mun*) is used of God, it's paired with the word for his steadfast, covenant love (*he-sed*; Ps. 33:4-5; 40:10; 88:11; 89:1, 24, 33, 49; 98:3; 100:5; Lam. 3:22-23).

- Psalm 36:5 — Your **steadfast love** [*he-sed*], O LORD, extends to the heavens, your **faithfulness** [*emu-nah*] to the clouds.
- Psalm 89:2 — **Steadfast love** will be built up forever; in the heavens you will establish your **faithfulness**.
- Psalm 92:1–2 — It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your **steadfast love** in the morning, and your **faithfulness** by night.

So who are the “faithful ones” among the “children of man”? It's simple. They are those who “keep faith” with their faithful covenant Lord. They are those who faithfully live according to God's covenant with His people. So we read in Psalms 37 and 119:

- Psalm 37:3 — **Trust in the LORD**, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend *faithfulness*.
- Psalm 119:30 — I have chosen the way of *faithfulness*; I set **your rules** before me.

Do you see how the *e-mun* (the faithful ones) are those who live in light of the *emu-nah* (the faithfulness) of God? Do you see how the living of our lives in covenant with God is nothing more nor less than our joyful response to His mercy and grace? So, could each one of us here be truly described as one who “keeps faith” with God? Again, there's a sense today in which this is simply a description of every true Christian. Today, to be a member of the covenant community is ultimately to be both godly and faithful—*ha-sid* and *e-mun*—in response to the *he-sed* and *emu-nah* of God.

Now in the days of the *Old Covenant*, the *ideal* was still the same. The ideal was that the entire covenant community—all of those marked out by circumcision as the physical descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob—should truly be godly, keeping faith with God according to the covenant that He had made with them at Mount Sinai (Psalm 79:1–4; 148:14; 149:1–5, 9). Only that ideal, which today we might take for granted, was never realized due to the stubbornness of God's people and their hardness of heart. On rare occasions, the people as a whole might be characterized as “godly” and “faithful,” but far more often it was the “godly” and the “faithful” (the *ha-sid* and the *e-mun*) who were the minority even in the midst of the covenant community. Remember, there was no separate temple for the godly. There were no separate feasts for the faithful. The godly and the faithful lived and “worshiped” side by side with the ungodly and the unfaithful even in the midst of the covenant community. Can you imagine, then, the distress of the Psalmist when he prays these words: “Save, LORD, for the godly one is **gone**; for the faithful [ones] have **vanished** from among the children of man.” His point is

not that the godly and faithful have vanished from among the surrounding idolatrous nations because there never were any godly or faithful there. His point is that the godly and faithful have vanished even from out of the covenant people – the only place on earth where they were to be found in the first place. That would be like you coming to church, knowing that it was the true church and yet also knowing that you and perhaps two or three others were the only members who were truly born again. Can you even imagine that? And so the psalmist, along with that tiny, almost non-existent minority that he represented, feels entirely alone. I think of the words of Elijah when he answered the Lord:

- 1 Kings 19:10 — I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left.

I think of the words of the prophet Micah:

- Micah 7:1–2 — Woe is me! For I have become as when the summer fruit has been gathered, as when the grapes have been gleaned: there is no cluster to eat, no first-ripe fig that my soul desires. The godly [*ha-sid*] has perished from the earth, and there is no one upright among mankind.

When we even just imagine such a reality, does it not cause us to be grateful for this New Covenant reality of the church where we are literally surrounded on all sides not by the “perfect,” no, but nevertheless by the “godly.” We are surrounded on all sides not by the sinless, no, but nevertheless by those who are faithful – who “keep faith” with the God who has entered into covenant with us. Shouldn’t this cause us to treasure all the more this gathering together of the “godly” and the “faithful” in covenant community? Shouldn’t this cause the fellowship that we enjoy with one another to be all the more sweet and full of joy?

But Elijah, and Micah, and the psalmist were all more than just alone: Elijah concludes his complaint with these words: “I, even I only, am left, **and they seek my life, to take it away.**” Micah concludes: “The godly has perished from the earth, and there is no one upright among mankind; **they all lie in wait for blood, and each hunts the other with a net.**” The psalmist continues in verse two:

III. Psalm 12:2 — *Everyone* utters lies to his neighbor; with flattering lips and a double heart they speak.

This is a level of spiritual isolation and aloneness that it really should be hard for us to comprehend. This would be like coming to church and knowing that it was the true church and yet also knowing that you and maybe two or three others were the only members who were truly born again – and then also knowing that behind all the fair sounding talk of everyone else in the church all they really wanted to do was stab you in the back (whether metaphorically or literally). But these things obviously shouldn’t be! The problem isn’t just the liars and the flatterers and the deceivers, the problem is that it was the covenant community of God’s own chosen people that was itself filled with these liars and flatterers and deceivers. Can you imagine the isolation of that tiny, vanishing remnant of God’s people? Can you imagine how vulnerable

they felt as their own brothers and sisters in the covenant community had all turned against them? So the psalmist prays:

IV. Psalm 12:3–4 — May the LORD cut off all flattering lips, the tongue that makes great boasts, those who say, “With our tongue we will prevail, our lips are with us; who is master over us?”

What the psalmist essentially prays is, “May the Lord purify His covenant people by cutting off from out of their midst all who are wicked and arrogant.” May the Lord cause His chosen people to be filled once more with the godly and the faithful – the *ha-sid* and the *e-mun*. We know that the Lord answered this prayer at various times and in various ways throughout the history of Israel – His Old Covenant people. But we also know that it was never fully answered until the coming Christ. When John the Baptist was preaching and preparing the way for the Messiah, he said:

- Matthew 3:10–12 — Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

Jesus said to the Pharisees:

- Matthew 21:42–44 — Have you never read in the Scriptures: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes”? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.

Right here in this New Covenant community is the true and ultimate answer to this prayer and longing of the Psalmist. Already, the Lord has cut off all flattering lips and the tongue that makes great boasts, leaving only those who are truly regenerate – the godly and the faithful. This is what explains how Paul can write to the entire, gathered New Covenant community in Corinth with these words:

- 1 Corinthians 1:2 — **To the church** of God that is in Corinth, **to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints** together with all **those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ**, both their Lord and ours.

How we ought to treasure the gathering together of God’s saints and the fellowship in the Holy Spirit that we enjoy each and every Sunday! This is a gift that’s been made available to us only through the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

And yet even as we rejoice in these realities, we should also be exhorted to assure our hearts before God that we are among the *ha-sid* and the *e-mun*—the godly and the faithful—the true members of God’s covenant people. Notice the strong emphasis here on words and speech. In

verse 2 the psalmist says: “Everyone *utters lies* to his neighbor; with *flattering lips* and a double heart they *speak*.” In verse 3 the psalmist says: “May the LORD cut off all flattering lips, the tongue that makes great boasts.” And then in verse 4, he even quotes “those who *say*, ‘With our *tongue* we will prevail, our *lips* are with us; who is master over us?’” Why all this emphasis on speech and words? In the Bible, it’s out of the abundance of the *heart* that the *mouth* speaks (cf. Lk. 6:45), and therefore it’s the mouth (as a window into our hearts) that can be thought of in the Bible as that which gives birth to our deeds and actions.

- Romans 3:12–18 — “Their **throat** is an open grave; they use their **tongues** to deceive.” “The venom of asps is under their **lips**.” “Their **mouth** is full of curses and bitterness.” “Their **feet** are swift to shed blood; in their **paths** are ruin and misery, and the **way** of peace they have not known.”

This helps us to understand what Isaiah says of the coming Messiah and also what Peter writes of Jesus:

- Isaiah 53:9 — They made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done **no violence**, *and there was no deceit in his mouth*.
- 1 Peter 2:22 — He committed **no sin**, *neither was deceit found in his mouth*.

There was no deceit in Jesus’ mouth not only so that He might be our perfect substitute, but also so that in Him, it might be said of all of us—of every member of the New Covenant community:

- John 1:47 — Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!

We rejoice in this! We glory in this truth! And yet even as we do this, we should also be exhorted to assure our hearts before God that we truly are among the *ha-sid* and the *e-mun*—not the perfect and the sinless, or even the perfect “enough” or the sinless “enough,” but the godly and the faithful—the true members of God’s New Covenant people. We ought to be exhorted to heed carefully the Apostle Paul’s words to us in Ephesians:

- Ephesians 4:25, 29–32 — Therefore [in light of the reality of the “new self, created after the likeness of God”; v. 24], having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another... Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

What a beautiful contrast we have here in these verses—and in this New Covenant community—with the plight of the Psalmist!

Now there *is* a principle here in Psalm 12 that we can apply even to our experience of life lived in the world (not just in the covenant community). The Old Covenant community was a nation with boundaries. So imagine if that entire Old Covenant community had been truly regenerate!

There still would have been all the pagan and idolatrous nations surrounding them, but living within that community you would have been entirely insulated from all the wickedness and the animosity of the world outside. But today, the New Covenant community has no geographic boundaries. The beauty of this is that it's spreading throughout all the nations of the world. The challenge of this is that even though we may all be regenerate in this New Covenant community, we're nevertheless still not insulated from the wickedness and the animosity of the world. Even as individuals we're very much surrounded by the world. We're living very much in the midst of the world. And so there is a secondary sense in which we can still pray with these words of the psalmist as an isolated and persecuted minority in the midst of much evil and wickedness. We long for the day when the whole earth is filled with *only* the godly and the faithful (the *ha-sid* and the *e-mun*) – when all the nations of the world are one in the New Covenant community of faith (Rev. 21:24-26). We long for the day when all those with flattering lips and tongues that make great boasts have been cut off from the earth. And so we rejoice that against the words and the speech of the wicked is set the words and the speech of Yahweh. No sooner have the wicked finished speaking in verse 4 (“With our tongue we will prevail, our lips are with us; who is master over us?”) than God speaks in verse five:

V. Psalm 12:5 — “Because the poor are plundered, because the needy groan, I will now arise,” **says the LORD**; “I will place him in the safety for which he longs.”

Against the speech of the wicked is set the speech of God. Against the words of the wicked is set the word of God. On the one hand, we can live in fear of the words of the wicked; *or*, on the other hand, we can live in confidence and trust in the word that God has spoken.

“Because the poor are plundered, because the needy groan, I will now arise,” **says the LORD**; “I will place him in the safety for which he longs.” Here, as in so many other places in Scripture, the poor and the needy are simply the equivalent of the “godly” and the “faithful” – those who live faithfully in covenant with God (cf. Ps. 37:14; 70:4-5; 86:1-2; 109:16, 21-22). And so these words are for *us* to cling to. They're for *us* to hold on to. And why should we trust these words of God, rather than fear the words of the wicked?

VI. Psalm 12:6-7 — The words of the LORD are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times. You, O LORD, *will* keep them [the poor and the needy / the godly and the faithful]; you *will* guard him from this generation forever.

While the words of the wicked may be full of insincerity and flattery, the words and promises of God are true, without any pretense or deceit. While the wicked boast of things ultimately far beyond their power, *whatever* God *says* He is able to *do*. Calvin writes:

“There is no truth which is more generally received among men than that God is true; but there are few who frankly give him credit for this when they are in adversity. It is, therefore, highly necessary for us to cut off the occasion of our distrust; and whenever any doubt respecting the faithfulness of God's promises steals in upon us, we ought immediately to lift up against it this shield, that the words of the Lord are pure.”

All the words of God are pure, infinitely more pure—and therefore infinitely more reliable and trustworthy—than any words of any man could ever be (“like silver refined in a furnace... purified seven times”).

- Proverbs 30:5 (cf. Ps. 18:30; 119:140) — Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.

So will we live in fear of the words of the wicked, or will we live in confidence and trust in the words that God has spoken? Will we look confidently to God for His promised salvation even as we still acknowledge with the Psalmist:

VII. Psalm 12:8 — On every side the wicked prowls, as vileness [that which is base and worthless] is exalted among the children of man.

Conclusion

We started, this morning, with the words, “Save, LORD...” – *ho-si-ah yah-weh*. The Hebrew name, Joshua, is a combination of these two words, *yah-weh* and *ho-si-ah*: *y^e-ho-sua* (“Yahweh saves”). When the angel Gabriel appeared to Joseph, he told him to name the child that Mary was to give birth to, “Jesus,” which is just the Greek equivalent of *y^e-ho-sua* (“Yahweh saves”). So today, when we pray with the psalmist “Save, LORD...,” we can hear and see God’s answer in the word that He has spoken to us through Jesus (“Yahweh saves”).

- Hebrews 13:5–6 — *He has said*, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” *So we can confidently say*, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?”