

Sermon Given by

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“The war of words”

Psalm 12 is similar in many ways to Psalm 11 that we were looking at last week – there are quite a few recurring themes. Like last week, we find David at a time of great distress and he shouts out at the start, “Help Lord!” It’s a lesson for us from the off that our prayers in times of need and desperation don’t need to be long and flowery. It’s the same in life. If we’re drowning in a lake and we saw a passer-by coming we wouldn’t say, “Hear ye, hear ye, the proximity of my head to the base of the lake due to the weakness of my muscles and the chilly temperature of the water is such that it would be an eminent blessing if you could see it within yourself in the foreseeable future to intervene on my behalf.” In a situation like that we’d just cry for help. “Help Lord!” is a great prayer to pray in many situations. And David in Psalm 12 is modelling that for us. But what’s caused this distress? He asks the Lord to help because v1 **“the godly are no more; the faithful have vanished from among men.”** That’s most likely exaggeration for effect but it’s exactly how he feels. Sin and ungodliness were so pervasive from his perspective that it felt like there were no godly people left. He feels isolated; he feels surrounded by wickedness and he feels it very acutely. His inner spirit seems shaken by what he sees all around him and he cries out Help Lord.

There’ll be times when we feel exactly the same. Maybe at work or at various social functions there’ll be certain times where the difference between what you as a Christian think and how you behave is so far removed from that of those around you that you feel incredibly isolated and you want to cry out, “Help, Lord!” Or perhaps you’re the only Christian at home and at times you feel hemmed in. For all believers today we certainly feel this or we should feel it as the culture and society in general increasingly rejects God and His ways. Increasingly we’re treated like 3-headed monsters for believing what we believe and at times we feel the force of it and we cry out with David, **“Help Lord, for the godly are no more; the faithful have vanished from among men”**. And I guess the challenge for us if we never cry out to God like that is to ask ourselves whether we have become too attached to this world and the ways of this world.

In Psalm 11 the ungodliness he saw was expressed in the physical persecution of the upright but here in Psalm 12, it’s something else that causes David distress; it’s the words of the ungodly. It seems like the whole culture and society has rejected the truth and instead embraced lies and deceit. V2: **“Everyone lies to his neighbour; their flattering lips speak with deception.”** Like in psalm 11 we’re not told the historical setting for the psalm. All we’re told is that it is “For the director of music, according to sheminith. A psalm of David.” No-one is that sure by the way what “according to sheminith” means. Most likely it was a musical term - perhaps some particular tuning or key for the harp, so we have our G minors and our F majors and they had “according to sheminith.” No-one knows. The point is that we’re not told the historical context. This isn’t a problem but rather in many ways it’s a blessing because in Psalm 12 there are timeless truths that apply to any generation. The lack of historical details seems to allow a greater freedom to appreciate and relate to what David is

going through. It's as if it's expected that like David we'll find ourselves at times distressed by the culture in which we live; the lies and the deception that we see all around us. And having spent a lot of time in Psalm 12 this week, I'm struck by how relevant this psalm is to today's world. Going to look at it under two main headings – The corruption to be faced and The Protection to be found.

1st then **The Corruption to be faced:** This is revealed first of all in the pervading culture of lies. V2: ***“Everyone lies to his neighbour; their flattering lips speak with deception.”*** That's what David was surrounded by and that's what we're surrounded by. People who say 1 thing to one person and then they move across the room and say another contradictory thing to someone else. And they hope that the 2 individuals don't meet because then of course they will discover that Mr X has been speaking deception with flattering lips. We live in a culture of lies or as it's known with reference to politics, we live in a culture of spin. A couple of months ago I read Andrew Marr's book on the History of Modern Britain; there was also a TV series on it that you might have seen. As he gives an overview of the Blair government, he's very sceptical and yet his conclusions are hard to disagree with. He takes us to the start of Mr Blair's time in office and this interview with Mr Blair saying how he's basically an honest guy and that people understand that. And then Andrew Marr whizzes us to the end of Tony Blair's time in office and shows us crowds of people outside parliament with placards saying B.Liar. And summing up New Labour Andrew Marr sees it very much as a time of manipulation and deceit by powerful people. In politics there's spin, in advertising too there's deception. A man is deceived into thinking that if he uses Lynx deodorant all the beautiful girls will come running to him. Or those shampoo ads, I've used that shampoo and my hair has never looked as silky and shiny as the man in the advert. Lies are all around us; they are built into the very fabric of our society. Lies that are so believed that they are taken for granted. Take what our culture says about marriage; it'd probably just about still say it was a good thing but if it's not working out; if it's getting hard, if you fall for someone else then it's fine to opt out. Or how about faith? Faith is fine, it's a good thing even – helps people to get through tough times, it's a good thing as long as it's a private thing – something you very much keep to yourself. Or Jesus, well he's a great man, a wonderful teacher but he can't be the only way to God; that'd be a very arrogant claim to make. We're surrounded by lies. In matters of ethics – abortion, euthanasia, what's taught in schools about sexuality or cosmology we're faced with deception.

The fact is that we live in a culture that is increasingly hostile to the Christian faith and there's great pressure for us to conform, to believe the lies and to fit in. It's a corrosive environment which is why we need to cry out with David, “Help Lord!” How badly we need God's help and strength and protection. We can also surely alleviate the sense of isolation we feel by making the most of the opportunities we have to meet with other Christians. Do think about joining a mid-week group if you're not in one or a prayer triplet – we need one another to keep going, to strengthen and encourage each other in the faith, to pray for one another. We live in a hostile world. And did you notice the emphasis on flattery in these verses. It comes in v2 ***“Everyone lies to his neighbour; their flattering lips speak with deception.”*** And v3 ***“May the Lord cut off all flattering lips...”*** Flattery is very pleasurable and yet it's also destructive. There's a big difference between expressing gratitude or giving someone a sincere compliment and flattery. Flattery is deceitful and manipulative. Flattery is a temptation for us all of us whether we're giving it or receiving it. For example, there's a strong temptation for any believer engaging in evangelism with a non-believer to flatter them

and not mention difficult things like sin and God's wrath. There's a strong temptation for the preacher to never mention those issues that are massively counter-cultural and you know may cause some heat from some quarters. A corrupt society and a degenerate church will be consumed with a desire for what is pleasant and comfortable and will resist at every juncture that which is painful. Praise God I don't see this much at All Saints but we need to watch out for it in ourselves and one another. As we're warned in that first reading from 2 Timothy 4:3 ***"For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths."*** So as we're surrounded by a culture of lies, we need one other so that we're not too isolated, so that we can strengthen one another in the truth. We need to depend on the Lord, crying out to Him to help us, to keep us from giving into to the pressure to conform, to protect us from lies. We're to ask for his help and we're also to pray with David that God would intervene that society would be transformed. That's essentially what David is praying in v3 when he asks: ***"May the Lord cut off all flattering lips."*** It's a prayer that God would silence the wicked. Maybe that seems a bit strong to you but let's look at the second way the corruption to be faced is revealed and that shows all the more why it's right to ask that God silence the wicked. The corruption to be faced is revealed secondly in the arrogant defiance of tongues. It's bad enough that they were telling lies but on top of this they were arrogant and defiant about it. David quotes the sayings that characterised the self-centredness of the culture. V4 ***"We will triumph with our tongues; we own our lips – who is our master?"*** What were they doing? Well, for one thing they were worshipping their own deceptive words and thereby they were worshipping themselves, declaring their own personal sovereignty.

In today's world it goes something like this: "I'll say what I want to say, they're my lips, I own them and my opinion is my business, I'm entitled to it and you must hear it. I am the almighty autonomous individual and I have the absolute right to say what I want, when I want to whom I want." Like David we face corruption through the lying tongues all around us, through the arrogance and defiance of those same lying tongues and thirdly we face corruption through the degraded values of our culture. Have a look at v8 – it's a striking verse that again is so appropriate for today. V8: ***"The wicked freely strut about when what is vile is honoured among men."*** How do we see this today? Well in all sorts of ways. One way we see this is in the heroes, the icons we look up to – so many are adulterers, or drug-takers, people of filthy language. So few are truly noble and upright in character. How else is v8 true today? We see what is vile honoured in the view of masculinity that is prized in popular men's magazines like Loaded and FHM. To be a true man, so they imply, you have to sleep around, drink a lot of beer, swear and watch the footy, which of course is a pathetic view of what it is to be masculine. What is vile is honoured. We see it in the church when Bishop Katherine Schori, an active lesbian is asked to preach and preside at communion at Southwark cathedral. What God calls sin is sanctified and honoured. It's no wonder David cried out "Help Lord!" and we should too as we look at the corruption to be faced. Wonderfully though, that's not all. There is corruption to be faced but there's also...

Protection to be found – that's our second heading. There's protection to be found. V5 ***"Because of the oppression of the weak and the groaning of the needy, I will now arise," says the Lord. "I will protect them from those who malign them."*** As children we used to say "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." But that's

not true, words do wound; lies are destructive – look how destructive the words of the devil were in Genesis 3. God doesn't downplay the harm that can be done by the words of the wicked. ***"I will protect them from those who malign them."*** It's wonderfully encouraging because we as believers are increasingly maligned by the culture. I was speaking to a neighbour in Garden Fields a while back and telling him about TNG, our youth group and he accused me there and then to my face of brain-washing them. It's painful being maligned like that. As evangelicals we're maligned as fundamentalists, narrow-minded idiots whose words have no place in modern society. We're maligned by the culture but God is with us and as we look to Him and trust in Him and cry out to Him we can know his Fatherly protection. V5 ***"Because of the oppression of the weak and the groaning of the needy, I will now arise," says the Lord. "I will protect them from those who malign them."***

God cares personally for us and promises personally to protect us – see this again in V7 ***"O Lord, you will keep us safe and protect us from such people forever."*** And we see from v6 that a key way in which God does protect his people is through his word. Isn't v6 a fantastic verse and notice the strong contrast between the words, the lies of the wicked and the words of God. V6 ***"And the words of the Lord are flawless, like silver refined in a furnace of clay, purifies seven times."*** When you melt down silver the impurities burn off or float to the surface. You let it cool and do it again – it becomes more and more pure. Go through that process seven times, that Bible number of completion, and you have perfect purity. There's no flattery from God, no trace of deceit and His words don't destroy the weak and needy, rather God's words bring courage and faith and strength to his people. They build up rather than tear down, they bring life rather than death. So if we want to know God's protection we must go to God's pure words. We're hemmed in by lies all around us; our ears are bombarded by deceit and if we're to stand firm and not succumb we must be those who like King David, seek and know God's protection through his words.

I want to end with an old illustration of the Christian life that I think is very fitting for Psalm 12. The Christian life has been likened to being on a boat in the ocean. The boat is wracked by great storms, the wind and the rain tear across the water and hit the boat. The storm is fierce, the waves are high and attack the boat. But by God's grace the boat stands firm and He ensures that it will reach the heavenly harbour. God doesn't remove us from the world now – he wants us to be involved in the world, being a blessing to it, reaching out to it. But we can only get through the storm as we turn to Him, crying out for help and as we hear His word that He will protect us and that one day the storm will be over and He will bring us into the calm harbour of heaven. God has promised to keep us to the end and His words are pure and certain and true and enable us to persevere.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)