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Psalm 12

Meditation 1— Psalm 12.¹⁻⁴

Plea and complaint

¹Help, YHWH, because the trustworthy individual has ceased to exist;
the truthful have vanished from humankind.

²Everyone speaks disingenuously with everyone;
using flattering language, they tell each other what they want to hear.

³Put an end, YHWH, to all such flattering language.
Put an end to lips uttering boasts

⁴that assert, “We will maintain power by means of our speech.
We are in control. Who can be our master?” (author’s translation)

After two introductory psalms, Psalms 3-7 are full of the Psalmist’s complaints about those who oppose him. Those who oppose the Psalmist accuse him of wrongdoing which, they charge, has separated him from God. However, in this series of related complaints, the Psalmist consistently maintains his innocence, trusts in God’s fidelity toward him, and persistently makes confident requests for God’s help against his detractors. In Psalm 8, a sort of apotheosis, the Psalmist’s view turns more global so that in Psalms 9 and 10, the Psalmist considers that such adversaries as he has, whom he identifies for the first time as “malevolently immoral,” are a global phenomenon.

The malevolently immoral are characterized as attacking the vulnerable everywhere and in whatsoever circumstances they may be found. Notwithstanding the global influence and power that the malevolently immoral possess or the pessimism of so many about being able to counter or stop their influence and power (11.¹⁻³), the Psalmist maintains his confidence in God and maintains hope of victory over these malevolent forces. The Psalmist is sure that God remains aware of the threat posed by the malevolently immoral and is willing and able to help against their attacks (11.⁴⁻⁶). In this confidence, the Psalmist and all others who believe in God’s fidelity keep their eye firmly and joyfully on God (11.⁷).

But the malevolently immoral who oppose the Psalmist and other innocent victims like him, are persistent. And so, their threat is present again in Psalm 12. While those of whom the Psalmist complains in verses 1-4 are not named, they are, finally, named in the final verse.

“...the malevolently immoral roam about absolutely everywhere,
whenever what is despicable is celebrated among humankind.”

We will return to this final verse in an upcoming meditation. For now, we limit ourselves to the first four verses which provide further characterization of the malevolently immoral. We have already noted their global influence as described in Psalms 9 and 10. In Psalm 12, it seems to the Psalmist that they have completely taken over the world.

“...the trustworthy individual has ceased to exist;
the truthful have vanished from humankind.
Everyone speaks disingenuously with everyone;
using flattering language, they tell each other what they want to hear.”

The prophet Jeremiah made a similar observation.

“Take ye heed every one of his neighbour,
and trust ye not in any brother:
for every brother will utterly supplant,
and every neighbour will walk with slanders.
And they will deceive every one his neighbour,
and will not speak the truth:
they have taught their tongue to speak lies,
and weary themselves to commit iniquity.
Thine habitation is in the midst of deceit;
through deceit they refuse to know me,
saith the LORD.
Therefore thus saith the LORD of hosts,
Behold, I will melt them, and try them;
for how shall I do for the daughter of my people?
Their tongue is as an arrow shot out;
it speaketh deceit:
one speaketh peaceably to his neighbour with his mouth,
but in heart he layeth his wait.”¹

The prophet Micah warns,

“Don’t confide in an acquaintance.
Don’t trust a friend.
Guard what you say to your wife.”²

The Psalmist, Jeremiah, and Micah are not alone in seeing that something has gone terribly wrong on earth. The Psalmist portrays God, Himself, as drawing a similar conclusion.

“YHWH looked down from the heavens upon humankind
to determine, if there were any possessing knowledge;
any consulting [’]elohîm.
The whole lot of them had rebelled;
as one, they had become morally tainted.
They did nothing beneficial.
None! Not even one!”³

So, in Psalm 12, the Psalmist feels that no one can be trusted. Everyone speaks in a false, manipulative, and performative manner. We know ourselves and others better than we often think. Whether consciously or unconsciously, in any conversation or relationship with another, we very quickly discern the thoughts and feelings of the other. We easily discern what they want to hear. If impressing them, in some way winning them over, or gaining power over them is of high enough value, we will say what they want to hear, regardless of our own views. Such disingenuous speech is as much a form of flattery as when we disingenuously complement another in some way.

While such false, manipulative, and performative speech can be somewhat benign when engaged in at the

¹ Psalm 9.⁴⁻⁸

² Micah 7.⁵

³ Psalm 14.²⁻³

personal level, the Psalmist has something far less benign and much more sinister in mind. False, manipulative, and performative speech is especially useful to and prevalent among those who wish to acquire or maintain power and influence over others. In this sphere, it becomes propaganda and spin. The Psalmist has this more sinister use of false, manipulative, performative, and flattering speech in mind when he makes his complaint to God. The malevolently immoral assert,

“We will maintain power by means of our speech.
We are in control. Who can be our master?”

Far too much political discourse is divorced from truth and reality, and is manipulative and performative in content and intent. Examples of this performative and manipulative political discourse abound among politicians who seek to obtain or maintain power and influence. While such speech is common, it is especially egregious in the speech of the former U.S. president and current GOP’s leading 2024 presidential candidate, who, devoid of principle or real governing interests, acts more like actor or performer than one with serious governing interests. Based on the responses of his audiences, they love his belligerence and irreverence. Swear words, slurs, and hate speech aimed at certain groups elicit the loudest cheers and largest roars of approval and gratification. Knowing what his audiences feel themselves and what they want to hear, he gives it to them in spades. Again, this performative speech in which he mimics his audiences and gives voice to their own twisted views is a form of flattery (why his audiences at twisted as they are is a question for another time and place).

For two years, this same candidate used a derisive nickname for his presumed chief rival. The moment the rival withdrew from the political race, the leading candidate ceased all name calling and began to speak respectfully and appreciatively of the rival. When asked why the nickname had been abandoned and a previously absent conciliatory tone had been adopted, the candidate responded casually with, “Well, he is no longer my rival.” This explanation, amounting, really, to a confession, demonstrates that all the name calling of the previous two years was performative, divorced from any real sense of what the leading candidate felt about the other. It was meant to manipulate his audiences. Among the many marvels that surround this candidate is that his followers cannot see through the obvious façade.

Unfortunately, these two examples are the least offensive and least destructive of the innumerable examples of this candidate’s false, manipulative, and performative speech in which he incessantly engages. They also confirm what the Psalmist discerns: that such false, manipulative, and performative speech and action are central to the acquisition and maintenance of power (and, yes, by associating this candidate with the Psalmist’s complaint, I identify him as an example of the malevolently immoral, and an extreme one at that. This is not me being ugly. This is simply me speaking truthfully, and, popular or not, consistent with scripture’s judgments).

False, manipulative, and performative speech is also used to influence. One modern example at the institutional level will suffice for now. FOX, one of the U.S.’s broadcast “news” networks, does little more than put its finger in the air, establish what its audience wants to hear, and then give it to them. There have been rare occasions when it has either misjudged its audience’s appetite for truth or decided to tell the truth regardless of its audience’s appetite to hear itself parroted. As soon as its viewership complained or dropped because it rebels at hearing something that does not conform to its conceptions, the network quickly retreats and goes back to feeding its audience what it wants to hear, truth be damned.

Individuals and institutions often chose to maintain their power and influence though false, manipulative, and performative speech. They refuse to act with self-restraint or control. They will not be reined in by society’s norms, any moral principles, or regard for truth. And, most assuredly, they will not be guided by God and the principles upon which respectful and healthy personal relationships and an enduring society are based.

“We are in control. Who can be our master?”

This is in line with the Psalmist’s observation in Psalm 10.

“The malevolently immoral, consistent with their stubborn arrogance, are unreflective.

’Elohim is not considered in any of their plans.

They twist ’Elohim’s principles.

’Elohim’s elevated judgement opposes them.

Anything that would restraint them they blow off.

They say to themselves, ‘I cannot be toppled.

My future holds no misfortune.’”⁴

The malevolently immoral and their false, manipulative, and performative speech represents an assault upon decency. It represents an assault upon society. “What,” the Psalmists asked in the previous Psalm, “can the just do, when the foundations are being torn down?” Whatever resistance we can offer, our best resistance rests with God. We plead, as does the Psalmist in this psalm, that God help us and put an end to the those who seek influence and power though the use of false, manipulative, and performative speech.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 14, 2024)

⁴ 10.⁴⁻⁶

meditation 2— psalm 12.⁵

Yhwh's positive reply

⁵“Because of the despoiling of the downtrodden
and the grieving of the impoverished,
I will immediately arise,” promises YHWH.

“I will provide them with protection against those who hold them in contempt” (author’s translation).

In verses 1-4, the Psalmist complained about the malevolently immoral who used false, manipulative, and performative speech to acquire and maintain influence and power. Such behavior, it seemed to him, was nearly universal.

“Help, YHWH, because the trustworthy individual has ceased to exist;
the truthful have vanished from humankind.
Everyone speaks disingenuously with everyone;
using flattering language, they tell each other what they want to hear.
Put an end, YHWH, to all such flattering language.
Put an end to lips uttering boasts
that assert, “We will maintain power by means of speech.
We are in control. Who can be our master?”

However, this quest for influence and power is but one motivation for the use of false, manipulative, and performative speech. From his initial complaint of the false, manipulative, and performative speech and his characterization of the malevolently immoral, the Psalmist transitions into God’s reply in verse 5. Here, God makes a promise. It is a marvelous promise. It moves the Psalmist. He will reflect beautifully on it in the concluding verses of the Psalm. But before we reflect on the promise, we should make an important observation. In transitioning from his characterization of the false, manipulative, and performative speech of the malevolently immoral to God’s response to that speech, the Psalmist speaks of

“... the despoiling of the downtrodden
and the grieving of the impoverished...”

In the Psalmist’s mind, then, there is some connection, some relationship between the false, manipulative, and performative speech of the malevolently immoral and the oppression that the malevolently immoral perpetrate against the downtrodden and impoverished. What is that connection and relationship?

We were informed in Psalm 10.² that

“In self-importance, the malevolently immoral vigorously pursues the disadvantaged.
The disadvantaged are ensnared by the plans they conceive.”

Furthermore,

“They [the malevolently immoral] sit in ambush outside villages.
From concealed places they slay the innocent;
their eyes peer out at the vulnerable.

Like a lion, they lie in wait from a concealed place in the brush.
They lie in ambush to seize the downtrodden.
They seize the downtrodden, dragging him into their lair.
They crouch low, hunch down,
and fall upon the bones of the vulnerable.
They say to themselves, “God pays no attention.
He’s absent. He sees nothing, ever.”¹

No one, of course, is safe from the false, manipulative, and performative speech of the malevolently immoral. But the downtrodden, impoverished, and disadvantaged are particularly vulnerable to such speech. First, they inevitably become the targets of such speech. They are targeted by those who seek power. They are bad-mouthed and belittled as a means of obtaining power. We saw an example of this in the 2016 American election as the leading GOP candidate for president used grotesque, false, manipulative, and performative speech to belittle foreigners, immigrants, migrants, and asylum seekers—all of whom are disadvantaged and vulnerable.

Once those who seek power have acquired power, they can use their influential speech to target the vulnerable, disadvantaged, and poor through the manipulation of public attitudes toward them and through public policy. Society is encouraged to consider vulnerability as a character flaw rather than a proof of societal failure. Too often, the vulnerable and their grieving becomes viewed with a sense of justified glee rather than compassion. Laws are passed that leave the poor to suffer all manner of insecurities—food insecurity, housing insecurity, and health insecurity, for example. The poor suffer all manner of injustices in the legal system as they are denied quality legal representation and equal treatment under the law. All too often a corrupted legal system does not hold accountable the wealthy who take advantage of and mistreat the vulnerable.

The Hebrew prophets see all these evils in their society and comment energetically upon them. We could fill pages, write entire books on the prophet criticisms of the malevolently immoral and societies that follow their lead. Of course, the modern world is every bit as guilty of such malevolent immorality as ancient Israel and Judah.

One comes to believe, indeed, that the targeting and disadvantaging of classes of fellow citizens is one of the driving motivations of the malevolently immoral as they seek power and influence. According to the false belief in a “zero-sum game,” the losses that the vulnerable suffer are gain for the malevolently immoral. In the false doctrine of the malevolently immoral in which any success, however slight, that the vulnerable might enjoy is felt to be a loss to themselves, the malevolently immoral do all in their power to keep the vulnerable in their subservient place.

It’s all unspeakably pathetic. Unspeakably evil. Very few things rouse God to action like the false, manipulative, and performative speech and the very real action that is taken against the downtrodden, the disadvantaged, the poor, and the impoverished. We should be overjoyed, then, but not surprised by the Lord’s promise,

“‘I will immediately arise,’ promises YHWH.
‘I will provide them with protection against those who hold them in contempt.’”

One can hardly wait for God to fulfill His promise and come to the aid and rescue of the downtrodden, disadvantaged, and impoverished. It is to this promise of that divine aid and rescue that we turn our attention in the next meditation.

¹ Psalm 10.⁸⁻¹¹

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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meditation 3— psalm 12.⁶⁻⁸

Certainty of yhwh's promises

⁶YHWH's promises are sure promises.

They are like silver refined in an earthen furnace,
refined to completion.

⁷It is You, YHWH, who protects them.

You continually defend them from their peers—

⁸the malevolently immoral roaming about absolutely everywhere
whenever what is despicable is celebrated among humankind (author's translation).

One of the great strengths of scripture is its adaptability to new conditions and applicability to every reader. Its strength as “a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” is priceless.¹ Many a man and woman has been undone as scripture read them and then remade by the matchless and discerning word of God.

As valued as scripture's applicability is to each individual and their circumstances, it is, nevertheless, always a good idea to begin one's understanding and application of scripture as best one can within its original historical, cultural, and narrative context. The former two can be difficult and sometimes impossible. The latter, however, is easily assessable to every reader.

Today's reading provides a good example of the importance of the narrative context. The Psalmist bears witness that “YHWH's promises are sure promises.” This is true of every word and every promise God speaks. They can be relied on. Yet, here, in its narrative context, the Psalmist has a more localized focus on the dependability of God's words and promises. As recorded in verse 5, the Psalmist has heard God forthrightly declare,

“Because of the despoiling of the downtrodden
and the grieving of the impoverished,

I will immediately arise,’ promises YHWH.

‘I will provide them with protection against those who hold them in contempt.’”

It is these words and this specific promise, this specific “word of God” to which the Psalmist refers when he speaks of the tried-and-true dependability of God's promises.

God informs the Psalmist that He observes very closely and accurately how individuals, institutions, governments, and societies treat the disadvantaged, impoverished, and downtrodden. He sees every act of oppression perpetrated against them. His ears are wide open to every sigh the vulnerable utter, every worry they express, and every heartache they suffer. He will rescue the downtrodden and impoverished from every oppressor who holds them in contempt. He will hold the malevolently immoral accountable for every troubled sigh, every worry, and ever heartache they cause.

The Psalmist believes God's witness. We can count on this promise being fulfilled, he assures us. In our language, we might assure that “you can take it to the bank.” In the Psalmist's language, God's promise to rescue the downtrodden and impoverished is as sure as silver is pure that has passed through the most arduous purifying process.

¹ Hebrews 4.¹²

“They are like silver refined in an earthen furnace,
refined to completion.”

There are few expressions of this faithful and divine promise more beautiful, edifying, or encouraging than that found in the fifty-eighth section of the Doctrine and Covenants. Here, God reminds His followers that they are called to testify and bear witness of His future intentions, intentions that will be best exemplified and fulfilled in a society that goes by the name, “Zion.” There, in Zion,

“a feast of fat things [will] be prepared for the poor; yea, a feast of fat things, of wine on the lees well refined, that the earth may know that the mouths of the prophets shall not fail; yea, a supper of the house of the Lord, well prepared, unto which all nations shall be invited. First, the rich and the learned, the wise and the noble; and after that cometh the day of my power; then shall the poor, the lame, and the blind, and the deaf, come in unto the marriage of the Lamb, and partake of the supper of the Lord, prepared for the great day to come. Behold, I, the Lord, have spoken it.”²

Though one rejoices that such a time will come, still, it is a major disappointment that this day has not already arrived. One is tempted to complain and ask why. Are God’s promises really as sure as the Psalmist claims? I am not always so hopeful. Some two-and-a-half millennia have passed, after all, since his utterance, and still the malevolently immoral rule. Still, the vulnerable worry and hurt and suffer at their hands. “How long, O Lord, holy and true,” must they continue to suffer?” we ask with the suffering to whom the Revelator gave voice.³

I don’t know. I am as uncertain as the next about God’s plans. There are, for example, two hypothetical types of millennialism: premillennialism and postmillennialism. Those who advocate for the first, believe that Jesus will come before the millennium begins and will, in fact, usher it in. He will dramatically and miraculously change society. Those who advocate for the second, believe that Jesus will come after the millennium begins, coming then because humanity has already ushered it in a new type of society, and, having chosen to live by his principles, are prepared to meet him.

I am not a strong literalist and am unsure about the whole millennium thing. But, if I were a millennial literalist, I would lean toward the postmillennialist view. God has had thousands of years to do something about the malevolently immoral and for the vulnerable. He has not. He has been silent as the Stalins and Hitlers and Pol Pots and Trumps have wreaked havoc. He has silently watched many millions suffer at their and their kindred spirits’ hands. This leads me to conclude that when it comes to His promise to check the power of the malevolently immoral and protect and deliver the vulnerable from them, God cannot or will not bring it to fruition through force and violence; that He can’t or won’t fulfill His promise without the help and cooperation of others—without the help and cooperation of you and me.

It seems likely to me that Zion represents those people who, among other things, exemplify for all the world to see what true godliness looks like in relation to the treatment of the downtrodden, the impoverished, and the vulnerable. Zion must act as example before the world can begin to change and become a place better fit to receive its King.

Sadly, it seems that the vulnerable continue to suffer, in part, because God’s people continue to be ensnared by their own unholy and lustful temporal desires, and, so, are not the examples that they are called to be. Perhaps it is God’s people who are largely to blame for the delay of God’s promises to the world’s downtrodden, impoverished, and vulnerable. God’s people are, perhaps, still enthralled by “the malevolently immoral who roam about absolutely everywhere;” Too many of them continue to celebrate

² DC 58.⁶⁻¹²

³ See Revelation 6.¹⁰

perverted economic, nationalistic, and militaristic systems, are enslaved by their despicable principles, and engage in despicable behavior themselves. If so, woe, woe, woe be unto those slothful and unwise servants and the world that is left without the savor of salt.

The Psalmist began Psalm 12 with the observation and complaint that the malevolently immoral seemed to have taken over the world.

“...the trustworthy individual has ceased to exist;
the truthful have vanished from humankind.
Everyone speaks disingenuously with everyone;
using flattering language, they tell each other what they want to hear.”

He ends on much the same note, complaining that the malevolently immoral seem to be “roaming about absolutely everywhere,” and lamenting that this state persists because “what is despicable is celebrated among humankind.” It seems to me that not much has changed since the Psalmist’s day. The malevolently immoral continue to roam unhindered across the planet. Mankind continues to celebrate what God finds despicable.

We join the Psalmist in pleading with God to rise in defense and comfort of the downtrodden, impoverished, and vulnerable, and that the malevolently immoral will get their comeuppance. We join God, Himself, in hoping for a day when His people will fulfill their role as the light of the world; as salt to give savor to the world so that the promises made to the downtrodden, impoverished, and vulnerable will finally be realized. We look forward to that day when God

“comfort[s] all that mourn...
gives[s] them beauty for ashes,
the oil of joy for mourning,
the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness;
that they might be called trees of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord,
that he might be glorified.”⁴

May His people reject the lies of the malevolently immoral and the celebration of what is despicable. May they be found willing partners in this grand enterprise of creating a new society in which the downtrodden, the impoverished, and the vulnerable feast on the fat things of this world and the fat things of eternity.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 14, 2024)

⁴ Isaiah 61.²⁻³