

PSALM 12

THE PROMISED PRESERVATION OF THE PURE WORDS OF THE LORD

AUTHOR: David

INTRODUCTION: The inspired superscription attributes this psalm to David. In this psalm King David laments the untruthful and destructive words of ungodly men directed toward him in particular, and the righteous in general. The LORD responds with the assurance that the words of the ungodly will be "cut off". Included in the psalm is a contrast between the words of men, which are corrupted and temporary, with the words of the LORD, which are pure and eternal. Verses 6-7 include the strongest promise in all the Bible that the words of the LORD will be preserved pure for every generation.

- [1] The psalm is both a lament and an imprecatory appeal for the LORD to "help". David laments the fact that "the godly man ceaseth" and "the faithful fail", which is a perennial truth whether the perspective is the nation of Israel (e.g., Rom9:6; 11:2-4) or the Church (e.g., 2Tim3:1-5).
- [2] "They" are ungodly men (v1). Their sin is their spoken words, which are characterized as "vanity" (i.e., useless, insubstantial, and/or transitory¹). Note that "flattering lips" are a manifestation of a "double heart" (Cp., "double minded man"; Jas1:8).
- [3] Here, "flattering lips" are also associated with "pride" (Cp., Isa14:12-14). In response to David's imprecatory appeal², the LORD promises that the words spoken by the ungodly will be "cut off" (Cp., Isa14:15).
- [4] "Who have said" are the ungodly men (v1), and it is especially their **words** that are in view. They believe they can "prevail" over their enemies with their "lips" (i.e., words). The rebellious refrain, "who is Lord over us?", is the attitude seen in both Satan (cf. Isa14:12-14; Rev12:10) and the coming Antichrist (cf. Dan7:25; 2Thess2:4; Rev13:6).
- [5] The LORD's response, "now will I arise [in judgment]" (Cp., Ps110:1; Act7:56), is for the purpose of ending "the oppression of the poor" and comforting the "sighing of the needy". The LORD's commitment to His people is "I will set him in safety". By using "puffing" in place of words sets it in a clearly negative light (Cp., 1Cor4:19; 5:2; 13:4).

¹ The Book of Ecclesiastes uses "vanity" especially in the sense of *transitory* and *quickly passing away* (Cp., 1Jn2:17). Note that the Hebrew word translated "vanity" is *ha-bel*, which is also the Hebrew name Abel (cf. Gen4:2); it is also translated as *breath* or *vapor* (Cp., Jas4:14).

² Imprecatory appeals as found especially in the Psalms are based on God's commitment under the Abrahamic covenant to curse those who curse Abraham and his descendants (Gen12:3); they are appropriate prayers for Jews under Law, but not for Christians under grace (cf. Rom12:14; Eph4:32).

- [6] In contrast to the words of the ungodly, which are "vanity" (v2) and "pride" (v3), "the words of the LORD are pure words". The contrast includes both the character and intent of the speakers as well as the quality of their "words". As an elaboration of the "pure words" of the LORD, they are compared metaphorically to "silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times". This metaphor has been taken too far by some; it does not suggest that the words of the LORD went through a purification process, only to be rendered "pure" at the end of that process. The metaphor only applies to the end state; "the words of the LORD" are as pure as silver having undergone a seven-fold metallurgical process of refinement (i.e., perfectly pure).
- [7] This is a promise of the "LORD" to "preserve" His words (v6) for every "generation". God's people will always have God's words available to them (Cp., Isa59:21; Matt24:35; 1Pet1:24-25); they will not be lost. This is not a promise that only applies to a set of divine originals in heaven, as some have suggested (Cp., Ps119:89), but it is a promise to "every generation" on earth. Thus, God has promised both to inspire His words (2Tim3:16) and to preserve His words³.
- Textual Note. The translation of Psalm 12:7 has been the subject of much dispute and controversy. See the APPENDIX for a detailed discussion of the technical issues associated with its translation.
- [8] In the chiasm of this psalm, v8 corresponds to v1. The lament over the ubiquity of "the wicked" and the exaltation of "the vilest men" is repeated.

³ As has been aptly said, divine inspiration without divine preservation would have been a divine waste of time.

APPENDIX

MODERN CONTROVERSY OVER TRANSLATION IN PSALM 12:7

Psalm 12:6-7 records the promise of God to "preserve" His "purified" (i.e., uncorrupted) "words" for the use of every "generation". On its face, this promise destroys the assertion of modern (so-called) biblical scholarship that the pure words of God were corrupted in the earliest centuries of the Church Age, they disappeared from common use in churches, and they were only rediscovered by means of archeology and are in the process of being restored by application of the methods of modern textual criticism beginning in the late 19th century. If this fairy tale of modern scholarship is true, Bible-believers in their Christian churches were without the "purified" words of God for the better part of two millennia, or as many as fifty generations! According to scripture, such a scenario is simply impossible.

Nevertheless, in a diabolical effort to suppress the truth (cf. Rom1:18) of God's promise to preserve His words (and thereby rescue the continuing work of textual critics to further corrupt the text of scripture) translators of modern versions have twisted Psalm 12:6-7 to mean something altogether different. For ease of comparison, Psalm 12:6-7 is shown in Table A-1 as translated in the KJV versus the NIV, NASB, and ESV, with the significant alterations of the modern versions highlighted in red.

Note that in the KJV, the pronoun "them" is used twice in verse 7, taking as its antecedent "the words of the LORD" in verse 6; thus, the promise of preservation to every generation clearly applies to "the words of the LORD". This is the most natural grammatical conclusion to draw, since (in general) the antecedent of a pronoun is the nearest noun or substantive that precedes it.

In the modern versions, however, the translations of the Hebrew pronouns⁴ in verse 7 are changed to "the needy" (NIV), "us" (NIV, ESV), or "him" (NASB), skipping over verse 6 and taking as their antecedents "the poor" and "the needy" found in verse 5. Thus, in the modern versions, God's promise of preservation does not apply to the words of the LORD, but to the poor and needy among the people of God. Prior to considering the reason modern translators give (and assessing its validity) for these very different translations, the Bible-believer should consider whether these new renderings could possibly be correct. If the promise of preservation in Psalm 12:7 applies to the poor and needy among the people of God, clearly God has not kept such a promise (which is blasphemous to suggest). It is an historical fact that the people of God have been persecuted and killed in every generation, to which scripture itself testifies (cf. Ps44:22; Rom8:36; Rev6:9-11).

⁴ There is the additional issue that the Hebrew pronouns in verse 7 are rendered as 3rd person-plural in the KJV, as 1st person-plural in the NIV and ESV, and as 3rd person-singular in the NASB. The Hebrew pronouns are technically singular, but they are used as plurals in this context; this is analogous to the English pronoun "everyone", which is technically singular, but takes plural verbs since its usage is as a plural concept (i.e., one of many). Thus, verse 7 could be more explicitly rendered: "Thou shalt keep **every one of** them, O LORD, thou shalt preserve **every one of** them from this generation forever".

Thus, if one presupposes the inspiration of scripture (2Tim3:16) and its testimony to the veracity and immutability of all that God has said (Heb6:17-18), the modern renderings of Psalm 12:7 cannot be correct.

What is the argument advanced by modern scholars for translating the pronouns in Psalm 12:7 differently than in the KJV? The issue relates to *gender discordance* between the pronouns in Psalm 12:7 and their proposed antecedent in verse 6. The pronouns in verse 7 translated "them" in the KJV are masculine in gender, whereas "words" in verse 6 as the apparent antecedent is feminine. Modern scholars insist that such gender discordance between pronouns and their antecedents is not permitted by Hebrew grammar, making it impossible that the antecedent of "them" be the "words of the LORD". In contrast, the "poor" and "needy" in verse 5 are masculine substantives. It is alleged, therefore, that verse 7 must be referring back to the poor and needy among the people of God as the objects of God's preservation.

In this case, we have two grammatical principles competing against one another. The one is that a pronoun generally takes the nearest noun or substantive that precedes it as its antecedent, the other is that a pronoun and its antecedent generally agree in gender. Which principle takes priority when they cannot both be satisfied. It turns out that although translators of the modern versions wanting to defend their rendering of Psalm 12:7 insist that in Hebrew pronouns and their antecedents must agree in gender, that is not necessarily the case. In fact, in their modern textbook on Hebrew grammar, Waltke and O'Connor⁵ affirm that "the masculine pronoun is often used for a feminine antecedent". This principle of Hebrew grammar was well known, even in the 19th century, since Kautzsch⁶ also asserts that "*masculine* suffixes (especially in the plural) are not infrequently used to refer to *feminine* substantives". Apparently, this "rule" of Hebrew grammar is not as immutable as translators of modern versions would have us believe. In fact, they have no problem linking masculine pronouns with feminine antecedents in other places, as shown in Table A-2.

Notice that in Psalms 119:111, 119:129, 119:152, and 119:167 the translators of all the modern versions have properly concorded masculine pronouns with feminine antecedents, as is also the case in the KJV. It turns out that in the Psalms it is actually quite common for a feminine antecedent to take a masculine pronoun, particularly when that antecedent is a synonym for Scripture⁷.

Finally, the grand theme of Psalm 12 is "words", which should naturally lead to the expectation that the subject of God's preservation in verse 7 is "words". In addition, the basis of Hebrew poetry is parallelism, which figures prominently in the Psalms, and Psalm 12 is no exception. Consider the antithetical parallelism that exists between vv2-3 and vv6-7:

v2 – The words of men (v1) are vain

⁵ Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, IN, 1990) p. 361.

⁶ E. Kautzsch, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1898) p. 463.

⁷ The fact that feminine synonyms for Scripture often concord with masculine pronouns might be related to the identification of the written words of the LORD with the second Person of the Trinity as the living Word of God (Jn1:1; 1Jn5:7), who is male.

- v3 - The LORD will cut them off
- v6 - The words of the LORD are pure
- v7 - The LORD will preserve them forever

If the subject of God's preservation in verse 7 is people, rather than "words", the intended parallelism is destroyed.

In conclusion, Psalm 12:6-7 is the clearest presentation of God's promise to preserve His words found in the Bible. Modern objections to its translation in the KJV, that would obscure or remove this promise, are without foundation. The gender discordance between pronouns and antecedents found in the Hebrew text is not uncommon in the Psalms, especially when the subject is Scripture; this is recognized even by modern translators in numerous other places. Rather, it is modern translators who violate grammatical norms, mistranslating pronouns in person and number. Finally, even apart from grammatical considerations in the original language (Hebrew), the English reader would naturally conclude from the theme and parallelism of Psalm 12 that the intended subject of God's preservation is His "words". The Bible-believer should continue to understand and treasure Psalm 12:6-7 as properly translated in the King James Bible.

Table A-1. Psalm 12:6-7 in the KJV, NIV, NASB, and ESV.

KJV	NIV	NASB	ESV
⁶The words of the LORD are pure words, like silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times. ⁷Thou shalt keep them, O LORD, thou shalt preserve them from this generation forever.	⁶And the words of the LORD are flawless, like silver purified in a crucible, like gold refined seven times. ⁷You, LORD, will keep the needy safe and will protect us forever from the wicked,	⁶The words of the LORD are pure words; As silver tried in a furnace on the earth, refined seven times. ⁷You, O LORD, will keep them; You will preserve him from this generation forever.	⁶The words of the LORD are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times. ⁷You, O LORD, will keep them; you will guard us from this generation forever.

Table A-2. Examples of Masculine Pronouns with Feminine Antecedents.

KJV	NIV	NASB	ESV
Psalm 119:111			
Thy testimonies (fem.) have I taken as an heritage for ever: for they (masc.) are the rejoicing of my heart.	Your statutes (fem.) are my heritage forever; they (masc.) are the joy of my heart.	I have inherited Your testimonies (fem.) forever, For they (masc.) are the joy of my heart.	Your testimonies (fem.) are my heritage forever, for they (masc.) are the joy of my heart.
Psalm 119:129			
Your testimonies (fem.) are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them (masc.).	Your statutes (fem.) are wonderful; therefore I obey them (masc.).	Your testimonies (fem.) are wonderful; Therefore my soul observes them (masc.).	Your testimonies (fem.) are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them (masc.).
Psalm 119:152			
Concerning thy testimonies (fem.), I have known of old that thou hast founded them (masc.) for ever.	Long ago I learned from your statutes (fem.) that you established them (masc.) to last forever.	Of old I have known from Your testimonies (fem.) That You have founded them forever (masc.).	Long have I known from your testimonies (fem.) that you have founded them forever (masc.).
Psalm 119:167			
My soul hath kept thy testimonies (fem.); and I love them exceedingly (masc.).	I obey your statutes (fem.), for I love them greatly (masc.).	My soul keeps Your testimonies (fem.), And I love them exceedingly (masc.).	My soul keeps your testimonies (fem.); I love them exceedingly (masc.).