

What's the difference between Bible translations?

As we begin our 2026 Bible reading plan, Follow the Word, you might ask, "Which translation should I use?" There is much to say about Bible translations, which this document cannot address. In order to be brief yet helpful, here is a simple guide to help you choose:

1. Word-for-Word Translations | "formal equivalence"

These aim to stay as close as possible to the original Hebrew and Greek words and sentence structure. They value accuracy, even if the wording sometimes feels formal or a little harder to read. They are also written with a vocabulary found in higher reading levels. Versions like the ESV, NRSV or NASB keep more of the "mystery" of Scripture intact, which can be especially meaningful for deeper study. Having some cultural context can help these come alive.

- **ESV (English Standard Version)** is the translation used by our denomination (LCMS) in all of its official publications. It is written at an 8-9th grade reading level. It has exactness without losing smooth readability - especially for public reading.
- **NRSV (New Revised Standard Version)** is very similar to the ESV in its translation style but once difference is its plural gender correctness. For example, when the Greek word "man" actually means "man and woman" or "humanity" the NRSV translates it that way. In the ESV, it would just literally translate the word "man" in Greek to "man" in English even if the Greek meant "humanity." The NRSV is written at an 11th grade reading level.
- **NASB (New American Standard Bible)** seeks to be the most word-for-word translation, even when the order (syntax) of words from the original language to English makes it awkward. It seeks exactness over readability, where the ESV will lean toward English readability. And when an English word is added to make the translation clear, it will put that word in italics. It is highly desired for scholars doing Biblical study. It is written at an 11-12th grade reading level.

2. Thought-for-Thought Translations | "dynamic equivalence"

These focus less on each individual word from the original languages and more on communicating the meaning of the phrase or idea. This often makes them easier to read in English, because the sentences are written with English in mind, but it also means the translators must make interpretive choices for you. They are not changing the meaning of the Bible, but when the original text might leave room for mystery, these versions provide some interpretation for clarity or understanding. Versions like the NIV or NLT can be great for daily reading, but you may miss some of the nuance found in the original languages.

- **NLT (New Living Translation)** is written at a 6th grade reading level.
- **NIV (New International Version)** is written at a 7/8th grade reading level.

3. Paraphrases

Paraphrases restate Scripture in very modern, conversational language. They can bring fresh insight or emotion to familiar passages, especially for devotional use. But because they take the most freedom with language, they should not be your only study Bible. Examples include The Message or The Living Bible.

Free Access to the various Bible translations is available through your phone's App store. "The Bible" app (the app's tile is labeled Holy Bible) will give you access to the translations listed above plus many others in English as well as in many other languages.



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Also available at
<https://www.bible.com/>

Bottom line: Choose a translation you will actually read, and let God shape you daily as you Follow The Word. You are always welcome to email Vicar Seth (sgehrke@stjohn.tv) if you want to discuss further.