

How to Choose a Bible

It's a bewildering experience to go to the Bible section of the bookstore or Amazon.com looking for a new Bible or translation. There are so many to pick from? Which is best? What will help you read and understand the most? To make the right choice for you, there are really just a few important things to know.

Why are all the translations different?

If you compare all the available English translations of the Bible, you will notice lots of differences in wording, sentence length, and so on. These differences are not a result of people changing the Bible! The Bible exists in ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek manuscripts, and the form of the original Bible is found in official editions produced by biblical scholars. There is only one text of the Bible, and it's not English! All of our modern English translations are the result of different groups of translators trying to best capture the meaning of the original texts and put it into English.

What is the goal of the translation?

The main reason for all of the different English Bibles is that they each have different goals, called a "philosophy of translation." The goal of some translations is to offer formal equivalence, in other words to match the English closely to the word order and structure of the Greek or Hebrew. These translations (such as the New American Standard) result in very awkward, difficult English, and are hard for many people to read casually. They are, however, great for close Bible study, especially when you want to study particular words in the Bible. The opposite end of the spectrum is called dynamic equivalence, which means the translators are mainly trying to produce an easy-to-read contemporary English translation. This often means they translate the ideas in the biblical passage, but do not offer a word-for-word representation of the biblical text (the New Living Translation is a great example). Other dynamic equivalent translations even adapt some of the ancient images and figures of speech in the Bible into modern ones (like the Message). Most English translations try to fit somewhere in between these two philosophies, producing normal English, but still mapping closely to original text (like the New International Version or the English Standard Version).

The example below demonstrates the philosophy of translations on a continuum of more "formal" to more "dynamic" equivalence.

Romans 8:6 according to different translation philosophies:

- **New American Standard**

For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace,

- **Kings James Version**

For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.

- **New International Version**

The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace;

- **New Revised Standard Version (our pew Bible)**

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.

- **Contemporary English Version**

If our minds are ruled by our desires, we will die. But if our minds are ruled by the Spirit, we will have life and peace.

- **New Living Translation**

So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace.

- **The Message**

Obsession with self in these matters is a dead end; attention to God leads us out into the open, into a spacious, free life.

What Bible should I pick?

First, decide how you're going to use this Bible. If it's for study with dictionaries or commentaries, you may want something more on the formal equivalence end. If it's for more rapid or casual reading, you likely want a translation leaning toward the dynamic equivalence end.

Second, if you don't own any biblical commentaries, consider getting a Study Bible. These contain maps, sidebar discussions, and commentary at the bottom of the page to help you understand what you're reading.

Lastly, be sure to read a sample page or two before you buy anything. The most important thing about a translation is that you can easily understand the language it and that you'll actually enjoy reading it.

Here are some translations and study Bibles we recommend:

- New American Standard Study Bible [Formal Equivalence]
- New International Version Study Bible [Balance between Formal and Dynamic Equivalence]
- New Revised Standard Version [Balance between Formal and Dynamic Equivalence]
- English Standard Version Study Bible [Balance between Formal and Dynamic Equivalence]
- Contemporary English Version [Dynamic Equivalence]
- New Living Translation [Dynamic Equivalence]
- The Message [Dynamic Equivalence]