

**There are, no doubt, myriad versions and translations of the Bible.** Determining which one is best for you or a loved one can certainly be a daunting task. It may be helpful to remember that the original texts included in the Bible were written largely in Hebrew and Greek, with certain portions also written in Aramaic. Therefore, any English Bible you might find is a translation from the original languages. Translating anything from one language to another is fraught with challenges, like how to convert sentence structure, punctuation, rich languages to poor languages, or vice versa. This is why it may be helpful to understand three basic approaches to translating scripture and producing a “version” of the English Bible.

All English translations fit, more or less, into three basic categories of translation: word-for-word (formal equivalence), sentence-for-sentence (dynamic equivalence), or thought-for-thought (idiomatic). Some may include a fourth category of “paraphrastic,” but most scholars believe that these sorts of versions are too far from the original language to be considered a true translation.

To help you understand which of these approaches may be best for you, here are a few thoughts on each:

## 1. Word-for-Word

These translations are the closest to the original language. Accuracy and fidelity to the original text are the priorities here. The goal for these translations is for the English version to read as close to the original text as possible. These are great translations for studies and those who want to dive deep into a passage or verse. In order to achieve this accuracy, however, the translators have sacrificed readability, rendering these translations a bit harder to follow or understand at times.

### Popular versions in this category include:

NASB (New American Standard Bible)  
ESV (English Standard Version)  
NKJV (New King James Version)

## 2. Sentence-for-Sentence

The goal with these translations is to find a happy middle ground between accuracy and readability. As the name would suggest, rather than trying to maintain a word-for-word fidelity, these translations attempt to capture the meaning of a sentence, rather than a particular word. Meaning they read a sentence in the original language and then try to come up with a sentence in English that best captures the meaning of that sentence in the original language. These translations are, on the whole, slightly more readable than their word-for-word counterparts, while being slightly less accurate.

### Popular versions in this category include:

NIV (New International Version)  
CSB (Christian Standard Bible)

### 3. Thought-for-Thought

For maximum readability, these translators don't try to capture a word-for-word meaning, or even sentence-for-sentence. Instead, these translators are guided by a fidelity to the essential thought or point being put forward by each portion of scripture. This approach gives them license to reorder or reword groups of sentences with the desire to make that idea as readable and approachable as possible for an English speaking audience. While this creates obvious drawbacks in terms of accuracy, these translations can be a great benefit to new believers, young believers, or really any believer who is seeking to gain an understanding of a large portion of scripture at a time. We would recommend, however, having an additional translation on hand that has more highly prioritized accuracy in case questions about a particular word or verse do arise.

#### Popular versions in this category include:

NLT (New Living Translation)

NIRV (New International Readers Version)

### 4. Paraphrastic

Really, the only paraphrased version we are aware of and would endorse would be The Message by Eugene Peterson. This "translation" makes the Bible remarkably easy to understand and approachable, so it is certainly useful within the church and our devotional lives. But Dr. Peterson himself would be the first to tell you that The Message is NOT a translation and always needs to be supplemented by a more accurate version of the Bible.

As a final note, it is worth mentioning that each group of scholars comes equipped with their own biases, their own preferences in scholarship and language, and is even the product of a school of thought or theology within Christendom that cannot help but impact the way they translate scripture.

A small example of this is how a scholar may choose to translate a word in the Greek that is probably best translated as "all humans." Some would translate that to "mankind." Perhaps this is done because it most accurately captures the meaning of "all humans," or perhaps it is done because this scholar leans towards a patriarchal view of scripture and chooses to skew his or her translation in this direction because they believe it really is the most accurate reproduction of the original language. Still other scholars, for various reasons, may translate "all humans" as "all people," "people," "all men and women," or simply "all humans."

We do not bring this up to further muddy the waters for you as you consider which translation to acquire. Rather, we see it as important to point out that, just as all translators are flawed, so are all translations. It becomes, then, important to maintain a generous view of which translation is "best" simply because of all the various factors which go into producing each translation.



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