

Why are there so many Bible translations? * Qs from the pews
July 10, 2022 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

Every summer I ask you to give me questions to think about for our Q's from the pews series and every summer you come up with some really great questions. Six years now we've been doing this and if you go to our website, there's actually a page where you can hear every answer I've given and I have to say, we're amassing quite a collection of great questions.

This summer we'll be adding to that collection. You've given me some really great questions –

What is heaven like? What about angels? What about when God doesn't answer prayer?
With all the science around evolution, how do we know God put us here?
Can we love 'all love is love'?

Those are great questions and I'm looking forward to unpacking them with you over the next couple of months. And I have to say, I'm really proud of you for all of the questions that you've given me. Last year it struck me – what a privilege it is to have a congregation that is willing to talk about sensitive stuff like sex and race and suffering because I know there are some churches where you'd never hear that from the pulpit – “we only talk about proper, polite, 'church-appropriate' stuff.”

Well to that I'd say “If something is happening in our life and culture then it is church appropriate. All things are church-appropriate because all things are under Jesus' lordship.” And so the fact that you are willing to wrestle with these questions with me makes me think that you really are committed to thinking about the world from Jesus' point of view, according to God's values. So we're going to have some great conversations here this summer and you can see them all on the outline there.

Today, we are going to start off with what appears to be a pretty basic question but is in fact foundational to everything else I'm going to say in this Qs from the pews series. Many people have opinions about the things that we're going to think about this summer; I'm going to do my best to open up God's Word to see what HE has to say about it and so we really need to highlight the importance and authority of the Bible here as we begin. And our question today allows us to do that. Here's the question:

Why are there so many Bible translations? Which one is best for me?

That's a good question. There is no shortage of Bible translations; it used to be that you could go into a Christian bookstore and find a whole wall of Bible translations. My Bible software alone has about 50 English translations and that's not to mention French and Spanish and Swedish and Korean. A lot of you probably grew up with the King James Version, but then along came the NIV, the NASB, the NKJV, the ESV, the LB, the NLT, the GNB, the CEV, the CSB – you've got a whole alphabet soup of Bibles. Why? Why are there so many Bible translations and which is best for me?

To answer the first question, I'm going to give you a big idea that we can unpack together and it goes like this. The various Bible translations allow us to read, understand and treasure God's Word. That's my answer to the first question and then I'll handle the second one after that.

So first, why are there so many Bible translations? Well, because they allow us to read, understand and treasure God's Word.

These translations allow us to read the Bible.

I remember years ago, at a VBS gathering, the coordinator, a lovely lady like Mary Sharp called me up to the front and asked me to read from the Bible. I was about Ben's age. She handed me a Bible and said 'here, read this.' And I looked at it and said 'this isn't even English.' And she said 'you were supposed to say 'it's all Greek to me' (ha, ha, ha) because she had given me a Greek Bible. Now don't know if she had any inclination that years later, I'd study Greek in seminary, but God works in mysterious ways.

That illustrates my first point though that we need Bible translations so that we can read God's Word. The original version of the Bible is not in English; it's in Greek and Hebrew and a little bit of Aramaic. It's not like the Southern senator who apparently said 'if English was good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for Texas.'

Jesus didn't speak English, He probably spoke Hebrew and Aramaic and that frankly is what the Bible is written in. Hebrew and Aramaic for the OT and Greek for the New.

So if we're going to read God's Word then we need to get it into English.

But here's the thing: pulling it over into English doesn't really help, we need to do some translating to understand what it says.

So for example, John 3:16 in Greek literally says 'Thus for He loved the God the world so that the son the only-begotten He gave in order that all the believing ones in Him they will not perish but have life eternal.' Doesn't exactly flow off the tongue, does it? And you spend so much time trying to just READ IT that you'd have a hard time understanding it, so we need to do some translating.

But that raises an interesting question in and of itself? Do you translate it as literally as possible or do you translate it as expressively as possible?

For Bible translators, there's a spectrum running from literal translation – 'formal equivalence' – to more descriptive translation – that's 'dynamic equivalence.' You can see that on the handout today.¹

It's essentially, do you translate it 'word for word' – as closely as possible to the words the author used – or 'thought for thought' – getting closer to the meaning of the words, even if it's not using the exact words the author used? Or, you can even take it a step further and just rephrase it all together into modern language; that's a paraphrase.

Let me give you an example, just to illustrate: 1 John 3:17 – the Greek literally says (I'll smooth it out a little for you) 'If someone has 'the life' of the world and sees his brother has a need and closes his bowels to him, how does the love of God abide in him?'

That's literally what it says but does it accurately communicate what John meant when he wrote it down? No. What does 'the life of the world' mean? What about bowels? We need to understand those things if we're going to understand the passage.

This is where we have to get a bit more dynamic in our translations – most translations agree that 'the life the world' means 'that which is necessary for life in the world' and so the KJV says 'the world's

goods' or the NIV has 'material possessions' and I think that communicates more clearly what John meant.

And then, 'bowels'; what is that all about? Well, here it comes down to understanding what's going on.

If I were to ask you 'where do love comes from' according to our culture, what would you say? What part of our body does love come from?

In our culture, love comes from the heart. But in Hebrew, it comes from the bowels – 'from your gut' – if you shut your bowels to someone, you are closing your heart to them; you are refusing to show compassion to them. And so to make that make sense in English, we have to shift it over from word for word to thought for thought. The KJV said 'bowels of compassion' – they tried to meet in the middle; the ESV says 'closes his heart,' the NIV says 'has no pity on him;' the Message says 'turn a cold shoulder;' those are all ways of getting at the meaning of the text so that we can understand what the Bible really says.

And you can actually chart Bible translations on a spectrum from word-to-word to thought-to-thought:

The English Standard Version, the New American standard; they tend to be more literal in their translation; the New Living Translation, the Contemporary English version, they tend to be more thought-for-thought – with paraphrases like the Living Bible and Message essentially retelling in a modern way what the Bible says. The NIV tends to be more or less in the middle and that's why it's so often used in churches; that's why we use it here – because it finds a happy medium between what it says and what it means.

Now that's not to say that any one translation is better than the other or that one translation method is better than another; frankly all of the major Bible translations are good, accurate, faithful, trustworthy translations of the Bible.

And that's important, because they allow us not just to read and understand the Bible, but they help us to treasure it.

I have a lot of handwritten cards from my parents and grandparents and I treasure those. I have a lot of little notes that Anna and Ben have written to me as they learned how to write. I treasure those. And yet even more important than those things is what God has written to me in His Word.

The Bible is not just Harry Potter or Jodi Picoult. It's not a collection of sayings from Mahatma Ghandi or Nelson Mandela. The Bible is the very Word of God – the sovereign Creator of the universe using human language to communicate directly with us in a way that we can understand to lay out the way to live a good life in relationship with Him. That's a treasure. That is something to cherish.

Listen to Psalm 119:12 –

- 12 Praise be to you, O LORD; teach me your decrees.
- 13 With my lips I recount all the laws that come from your mouth.
- 14 I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches.
- 15 I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways.
- 16 I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word.

I love how the psalmist talks about the Bible here. 'I rejoice in your statutes as one rejoices in great riches.' 'I delight in your decrees.' The Bible is not some stuffy old book that sits up on your shelf. The Bible is a treasure, an invitation, a road map into abundant life and eternal life and relationship with the wise, holy, compassionate God who made you. The letters from my grandma express just how much she cared about me; God's Word reveals that He loves me even more. And so I treasure it.

But the Bible is not just a letter from an beloved grandparent; the Bible is a letter from the almighty God. God's Word shows us how the world works. It shows us good and evil and right and wrong and lays before us the path that leads to life. That's why it's foundational for us as Christians, for us to build our lives and values upon it. The answers that I give for Qs from the pews are all going to be carefully and intentionally rooted in the Bible because that is our final authority for life and faith. Those answers may not be popular according to the world, but neither the world nor popularity determine right and wrong. God's Word does. And so we treasure it.

But here's a question; how do we treasure it? I know that for some people, treasuring the Bible means putting in on a special shelf and never laying a finger upon it, but the Bible is not something you treasure that way. The Bible is something you treasure by living it out. By doing what it says.

James 1:22, James writes -

22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

23 Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror

24 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

25 But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it--he will be blessed in what he does.

(Jam 1:22-25 NIV).

God's Word is the perfect law that gives freedom, that brings blessing; treasure it by digging into it, reading it, internalizing it, living in light of it. Treasure God's Word by obeying it.

I really want to encourage you to think about your relationship with the Bible. Is it something you treasure by leaving on a shelf? Is it a book of suggestions that you can pick and choose what you like? Is it playing second fiddle to the wisdom of the world? Or is it your instructor, your guide? The Bible is a letter of love given to you by a sovereign God to show you His commitment to you and His purposes for your life. Make time to get into it. Be intentional about reading it. Treasure it by obeying it.

The various translations allow us to read, understand and treasure/obey God's Word; that's why there are so many translations. So there's question number one, but what about question number two? Which one is right for me?

Well, which one best allows you to read, understand and treasure and obey God's Word? If you are new in your faith or artistic in your disposition, a more dynamic translation is probably best for you – the NLT or the Message or something. If you're a bit farther along or a bit more analytical, maybe a more literal translation would be helpful.

But even then, what you're using it for can determine what translation is best. For study and for sermon prep, I largely use literal translations. The ESV is my preferred translation for that kind of thing; but when I really need God's Word to speak to my heart, I often go back to my Living Bible paraphrase because it has the kind of thought-for-thought simplicity that I need. And then for preaching, I use the old NIV because it kind of meets in the middle. It's pretty literal but pretty idiomatic too so it's helpful for a big group like this.

So what Bible translation is best for you? The one that best helps you to read, understand and obey it. Take time to treasure God's Word.

BENEDICTION

Colossians 3:16-17 - Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

i

