FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

BIBLIOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Word of God

UNIT 8: THE TRANSMISSION AND PRESERVATION OF SCRIPTURE

Lesson 18

Translations of the Bible

From the Original Languages to the English Bible

Key Text: Nehemiah 8:8

Dr. Joshua Nichols
Pastor, Theologian, Author
faithfultotheword.com

Series Verse

"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."

2 Timothy 3:16–17, NASB 1995

Introduction

Lesson 17 established that the Bible we possess rests on an extraordinarily well-preserved manuscript tradition, that the Masoretic Text faithfully transmits the Hebrew Old Testament, that the Dead Sea Scrolls confirm this transmission across a millennium, and that the 5,800+ Greek New Testament manuscripts, carefully studied through the science of textual criticism, provide a text that scholars are highly confident represents what the original authors wrote. But the ordinary believer does not read the Hebrew Masoretic Text or the Greek New Testament. She reads a translation. And that fact raises the next set of questions: How did the Bible get from the original languages to our English Bibles? What philosophy governs the translation of Scripture? How should we evaluate the translations available to us today, and how should we choose one to use?

These are not merely practical questions; they are theological ones. The conviction that the God-breathed Word must be in the language of the people, accessible, understandable, and able to be received by those to whom it was given, is a Reformation conviction grounded in the doctrine of perspicuity. If God's Word is sufficiently clear to be understood by ordinary believers, then it must be in a language ordinary believers can read. The history of Bible translation is, in large part, the history of this conviction working itself out across two millennia: from the Septuagint to the Vulgate, from Wycliffe to Tyndale, from the Geneva Bible to the King James Version, and from the KJV to the proliferation of modern translations.

This lesson will trace that history, examine the theological and philosophical principles that govern translation, evaluate the major modern English translations, explain why Faithful to the Word uses the NASB 1995 as its primary text, and close with the pastoral responsibility of helping believers choose and use a translation that serves their encounter with the Word. The goal is not translation expertise, that requires years of linguistic training, but translation literacy: the ability to understand what a Bible translation is, what it is trying to do, and how to use it well.

I. The Septuagint: The Greek Old Testament and Its Significance

The first major Bible translation in history is also one of the most significant for understanding the New Testament and the early church: the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, produced beginning in the third century BC in Alexandria, Egypt.

A. Origins and Production

The Letter of Aristeas, a second-century BC document, describes the commission of a Greek translation of the Torah for the library of Ptolemy II Philadelphus of Egypt (283–246 BC). According to the legend, seventy-two Jewish scholars (six from each tribe) produced the translation in seventy-two days, independently and with miraculously identical results, hence the name Septuagint (from the Latin for seventy) and the designation LXX (the Roman numeral for seventy). The legendary details are not to be taken literally, but the core historical fact is well established: a Greek translation of the Pentateuch was produced in Alexandria in the third century BC, and the translation of the remaining books of the Hebrew canon was completed over the following century or two.

B. The Significance of the LXX

The Septuagint is significant for multiple reasons. First, it was the Bible of Greek-speaking Judaism and therefore the Bible of the early church in most of the Mediterranean world. When Paul or the author of Hebrews quotes the Old Testament, they typically quote from the LXX rather than translating directly from the Hebrew. Understanding the LXX is therefore essential for understanding the New Testament's use of the Old.

Second, the LXX demonstrates the principle of vernacular translation in action. The Jewish community in Alexandria needed Scripture in the language they actually spoke and read. The translation from Hebrew to Greek was not a compromise or a concession; it was an application of the conviction that God's Word must be accessible to the people to whom it is given. The Septuagint is the prototype of all subsequent Bible translation.

Third, the LXX has textual significance for Old Testament scholarship. In some places, the LXX appears to reflect a Hebrew text different from the Masoretic Text, and these variants are relevant data for textual criticism. The Dead Sea Scrolls have in some cases confirmed LXX readings over the Masoretic Text, demonstrating that the LXX translators sometimes had access to legitimate Hebrew variants that were not preserved in the Masoretic tradition.

II. The Latin Vulgate: Jerome's Translation and Its Medieval Dominance

As Latin replaced Greek as the dominant language of the Western Roman Empire, the church needed a Latin Bible. Various Latin translations (the Vetus Latina, or Old Latin) circulated in the West during the second and third centuries, but they varied considerably in quality and consistency. In AD 382, Pope Damasus I commissioned the brilliant scholar Jerome to produce a new, authoritative Latin translation.

A. Jerome's Achievement

Jerome (AD 347–420) was the most learned biblical scholar of his era, with expertise in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. His translation of the Old Testament was a remarkable scholarly achievement: rather than revising the existing Old Latin translations or simply translating from the LXX, Jerome went back to the Hebrew text itself, a decision that was controversial in his day but proved theologically and textually superior. His translation of the complete Bible, completed around AD 405 and later known as the Vulgate (from the Latin vulgata, "common"), became the standard Bible of the Western church.

B. The Vulgate's Medieval Dominance and Its Problems

For over a thousand years, the Vulgate was the Bible of Western Christianity. Medieval theology, liturgy, and preaching were saturated with its Latin text. The great theologians of the medieval period, Anselm, Aquinas, Bonaventure, thought and argued from the Vulgate. Its language shaped Western Christianity so profoundly that even today English theological vocabulary reflects its Latin roots.

But the Vulgate's monopoly created serious problems. As Latin declined as a spoken language, ordinary Christians lost access to the Bible in any language they could understand. The clergy, who still read Latin, controlled access to the text. And as the centuries passed and manuscript copying introduced errors, the Vulgate's text itself became increasingly unreliable. By the late medieval period, the combination of Latin-only access and textual deterioration had effectively locked the Bible away from ordinary believers, a situation that the Reformers identified as a primary cause of the church's theological corruption.

III. The English Bible Tradition: From Wycliffe to the King James Version

---

The history of the English Bible is one of the most dramatic narratives in Christian history, spanning three centuries of scholarly labor, political conflict, martyrdom, and providential preservation. It is also a narrative about a theological conviction: the Bible belongs to the people, in their own language, readable without clerical mediation.

A. John Wycliffe (c. 1328–1384)

John Wycliffe, the Oxford philosopher and theologian known as the "Morning Star of the Reformation," was the first to produce an English translation of the complete Bible. Wycliffe and his associates translated the Vulgate into Middle English in the 1380s, working not from the original languages (which Wycliffe did not know) but from the Latin text. The translation was unauthorized, condemned by the church, and copied and distributed by hand by Wycliffe's followers (the Lollards) in defiance of ecclesiastical

prohibition. Wycliffe's conviction was simple and revolutionary: if ordinary people could read the Bible for themselves, they would not need the church's mediation to know what it taught. The ecclesiastical establishment understood this perfectly well and suppressed the translation accordingly.

B. William Tyndale (c. 1494–1536)

The true father of the English Bible is William Tyndale, not because he was first but because he was the first to translate from the original Hebrew and Greek rather than from the Latin Vulgate, and because his elegant, powerful prose became the foundation of virtually all subsequent English Bible translations. His New Testament (1526), translated from Erasmus' Greek text, was smuggled into England in bales of merchandise. His Pentateuch followed (1530), translated from the Hebrew. His other Old Testament translations were completed posthumously by others.

Tyndale's famous declaration to a clergyman who challenged his translation work, "If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scriptures than thou dost", is the motto of the vernacular Bible tradition. He was arrested, condemned for heresy, strangled, and burned at the stake in 1536. The English Bible exists, in large measure, because of his willingness to die for it. It is estimated that approximately 80% of the King James New Testament and 75% of the KJV Old Testament come directly from Tyndale's translation.

C. Coverdale, the Great Bible, and the Geneva Bible

Miles Coverdale completed the first complete printed English Bible in 1535, drawing on Tyndale's work and Luther's German Bible. The Great Bible of 1539 was commissioned by Henry VIII and placed in every English church. But the most influential pre-KJV English Bible was the Geneva Bible of 1560, produced by Protestant scholars in exile in Geneva during the reign of the Catholic Queen Mary. The Geneva Bible was the first English Bible with verse numbers throughout, and its extensive marginal notes, reflecting Reformed theology, made it the most widely read English Bible for decades. It was the Bible of the Puritans, of Shakespeare, and of the Pilgrims.

D. The King James Version (1611)

The King James Version, commissioned by King James I of England in 1604 and produced by forty-seven scholars working in six teams, was published in 1611. The translators drew heavily on Tyndale's work, the Bishops' Bible, the Geneva Bible, and others, standing on the shoulders of a century of English Bible translation. The KJV became the dominant English Bible within a generation and remained so for three centuries. Its prose is majestic, its cadences deeply embedded in English literary and religious culture, and its influence on the English language is incalculable.

The KJV is not, however, the most accurate English translation available today. Its New Testament was translated from the Textus Receptus, a Greek text compiled from late medieval manuscripts now considered inferior to the earlier manuscripts on which modern critical editions are based. Its Old Testament is similarly based on a Masoretic tradition that has been refined by subsequent scholarship. The KJV's language, beautiful as it is, is also 400-year-old English, a language that many modern readers do not naturally understand. These limitations do not diminish the KJV's historical achievement; they are simply the reasons that subsequent translations have been necessary.

IV. The Reformation Conviction: The Bible in the Language of the People

The Reformation's insistence on vernacular Bible translation was not a pragmatic concession to popular demand but a theological conviction rooted in the doctrines of perspicuity and the priesthood of all believers. If Scripture is sufficiently clear to be understood by ordinary believers without Magisterial mediation, and if every believer has the right and responsibility to read Scripture for herself, then the Bible must be in the language ordinary believers read.

This conviction is expressed in Nehemiah 8:8, the key text for this lesson:

> *"They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood what was read.", Nehemiah 8:8, NASB 1995*

The scene in Nehemiah 8 is the great public reading of the Torah to the assembled people of Israel after the return from exile. Ezra and the Levites did not merely read the Hebrew text; they translated it, most likely into Aramaic, the vernacular of the returned exiles, and explained it, so that the people understood. The goal was understanding: "so that they understood what was read." Translation is not a compromise of the Word; it is the extension of the Word to those who cannot access it in the original language. It is the service of comprehension in the name of the God who spoke to be understood.

The same conviction drove Luther's German Bible, Tyndale's English New Testament, and the flood of vernacular translations that followed the Reformation. When Tyndale said he would make the ploughboy know more of Scripture than the clergy, he was not making a populist political statement; he was expressing the perspicuity doctrine in action: the Word of God is clear enough to be understood by the ploughboy, if only he can read it in his own language.

V. Translation Philosophy: Formal Equivalence, Dynamic Equivalence, and Paraphrase

Bible translation is not a simple process of finding the English word that corresponds to the Hebrew or Greek word. Languages differ not only in vocabulary but in grammar, syntax, idiom, word order, and cultural context. Every translation involves interpretive decisions about how to handle these differences, and different translations make those decisions on the basis of different philosophies. Understanding the three main approaches, formal equivalence, dynamic equivalence, and paraphrase, is essential for using any translation intelligently.

A. Formal Equivalence: Word-for-Word

Formal equivalence (also called "word-for-word" translation) seeks to render each word and grammatical structure of the source language as closely as possible in the target language. The goal is to preserve the form of the original as well as its meaning, so that the reader can see as clearly as possible what the original author wrote.

Formal equivalence translations are the most useful for close study, for memorization, and for theological argument. When a doctrinal conclusion depends on the precise wording of a text, on whether a particular word is singular or plural, on whether a particular verb is in the perfect or the aorist tense, on whether a particular preposition is "in" or "through", a formally equivalent translation gives the reader the best access to what the original actually says. The NASB and the ESV are the leading formal equivalence translations in current use.

The limitation of formal equivalence is that the resulting English is sometimes wooden or unnatural, because the grammar and syntax of Hebrew and Greek often differ significantly from English, and a strictly literal rendering can produce awkward or ambiguous English prose. Formal equivalence translations also require more of the reader: their precision sometimes demands effort that more idiomatic translations do not.

B. Dynamic Equivalence: Thought-for-Thought

Dynamic equivalence (also called "thought-for-thought" translation) seeks to render the meaning of the original text in natural, idiomatic target-language prose, even when this requires departing from the formal structure of the original. The goal is communicative equivalence: the reader's response to the translation should correspond to the original audience's response to the original.

Dynamic equivalence translations are generally more readable and accessible, especially for those who are new to Scripture or who find formal equivalence translations difficult. They are useful for reading large portions of Scripture quickly, for grasping the overall

flow and argument of a passage, and for introducing the Bible to those unfamiliar with its language. The NIV is the most widely used dynamic equivalence translation.

The limitation of dynamic equivalence is that the translator's interpretive decisions are embedded in the translation itself, often invisibly. Where a formally equivalent translation presents the reader with the original's structure and lets the reader do the interpretive work, a dynamically equivalent translation has already done some of that work, and may have done it incorrectly, or in a way that forecloses legitimate alternative readings. Dynamic equivalence also tends toward gender-inclusive language and other ideologically influenced translation choices that may depart from the original in ways that are not linguistically necessary.

C. Paraphrase

A paraphrase is not a translation in the strict sense; it is a retelling of the biblical text in contemporary idiom, prioritizing accessibility and emotional immediacy at the cost of precision. The Message, by Eugene Peterson, is the most widely known English paraphrase. While paraphrases can be useful for devotional reading or for grasping the general sense of a passage in fresh language, they should never be used as the primary text for close study, preaching, or doctrinal argument. A paraphrase is the paraphraser's interpretation of the text, not the text itself, and using it as if it were the text confuses the interpreter's voice with the Author's.

VI. Evaluating Modern English Translations

The contemporary English reader has access to more Bible translations than any generation before her, a blessing that is also a source of potential confusion. The following brief evaluations of the major modern translations are offered to help believers navigate their options intelligently.

A. New American Standard Bible (NASB 1995)

The NASB, produced by the Lockman Foundation and first published in 1971 with a significant revision in 1995, is among the most formally equivalent of the major English translations. It prioritizes precision over readability, rendering the original languages with a literalness that makes it particularly valuable for close study, memorization, and theological argument. Its textual basis is reliable: the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia for the OT and a carefully evaluated eclectic Greek text for the NT. Its consistent use of italics to indicate words added for clarity and its retention of important theological vocabulary make it an excellent study Bible.

Faithful to the Word uses the NASB 1995 as its primary translation because of its commitment to verbal precision, its theological reliability, its suitability for the kind of close exegetical work that expository preaching and systematic theology require, and its accessibility to careful readers even while demanding careful reading.

B. English Standard Version (ESV)

The ESV (2001, with minor revisions) is a formally equivalent translation produced by a team of evangelical scholars working in the tradition of the Revised Standard Version. It balances formal equivalence with literary quality more successfully than the NASB, producing prose that is both precise and readable. Its textual basis is reliable, its theological vocabulary careful, and its consistent use across evangelical scholarship and publishing makes it increasingly a common text for preaching and study. The ESV is an excellent choice for those who want a formally equivalent translation with more natural prose rhythm than the NASB.

C. New King James Version (NKJV)

The NKJV (1982) updates the language of the KJV while retaining its textual tradition, including the Textus Receptus for the New Testament. It preserves the majesty of the KJV's prose in more accessible language and is beloved by those who value the KJV tradition. Its primary limitation is its New Testament textual basis: the Textus Receptus is considered inferior to the critical text by most contemporary textual scholars. For those who are committed to the Majority Text tradition for theological reasons, the NKJV is a natural choice; for those who prefer translations based on the critical text, the NASB or ESV are preferable.

D. New International Version (NIV)

The NIV (1978, significantly revised in 2011) is the most widely read English Bible translation in the world and the primary representative of the dynamic equivalence approach. It is more readable than the NASB or ESV, accessible to a broader range of readers, and useful for those who want a reliable translation for general reading and accessibility. Its primary limitation is the interpretive latitude that dynamic equivalence requires: the NIV's translators make more interpretive decisions on behalf of the reader than formal equivalence translators do, and some of those decisions, particularly in the area of gender language, have generated controversy. It is an adequate translation for general reading but is not the first choice for close study or doctrinal precision.

E. Christian Standard Bible (CSB)

The CSB (2017, a revision of the HCSB) positions itself as an "optimal equivalence" translation, formally equivalent where possible, dynamically equivalent where necessary for natural English. It represents a genuine attempt to combine the precision of formal equivalence with the readability of dynamic equivalence, and it succeeds reasonably well.

Its textual basis is reliable, its theological vocabulary careful, and its prose is accessible. For those who find the NASB too wooden but want more precision than the NIV provides, the CSB is a strong option.

VII. The Pastoral Responsibility: Helping Believers Choose and Use a Faithful Translation

The proliferation of Bible translations is a blessing, evidence of the Reformation conviction that the Word belongs to the people in their own language, but it also creates pastoral challenges. Some believers are confused by the differences between translations. Some use a paraphrase as if it were a translation. Some are attached to a translation (typically the KJV) on grounds of tradition or aesthetic preference rather than textual quality. And some are susceptible to the claim that one particular translation is the only truly faithful one. The pastor has a responsibility to help the congregation navigate these questions wisely.

A. Principles for Choosing a Translation

The following principles provide a framework for translation selection:

1. Prioritize formally equivalent translations for close study, memorization, preaching, and doctrinal argument. The NASB, ESV, and (with its textual caveat) the NKJV are the best choices for these purposes. The goal of close engagement with the Word is best served by translations that give the reader the closest access to what the original authors actually wrote.
2. Use more than one translation. Reading a familiar passage in a different translation frequently illuminates aspects of its meaning that one translation's word choices have obscured. A formally equivalent translation provides the close access; a dynamically equivalent translation provides fresh perspective on the overall sense. Using multiple translations is not a sign of uncertainty; it is a sign of hermeneutical seriousness.
3. Avoid paraphrases as primary texts. The Message and similar paraphrases are useful for devotional variety but should never be used as the primary text for study, preaching, or doctrinal argument. The paraphraser's voice must never be confused with the Author's.
4. Evaluate translations on the basis of their textual basis, translation philosophy, and scholarly credentials, not primarily on the basis of tradition or aesthetic preference. The KJV is beautiful; it is also based on a Greek text inferior to what we now have. Aesthetic attachment to a translation is understandable, but it should not override textual and scholarly considerations.

5. Recognize that no translation is perfect. Every translation involves interpretive decisions, and every translator is fallible. The existence of imperfect translations does not mean that we cannot trust our Bibles; it means that we should use the best available translations with the humility that recognizes their derivative status relative to the original text.

B. The Pastoral Task

The pastor's responsibility with respect to Bible translation is to help the congregation understand what a translation is, to commend the most reliable and appropriate translations for different purposes, to protect the congregation from the confusion of paraphrases being used as Scripture, and to model the use of the original languages, or at least of the best translations, in preaching and teaching. The goal is a congregation that reads its Bible with both gratitude (for the translations that make the Word accessible) and discernment (about what any translation is and is not).

Ultimately, the choice of a translation is in service of the encounter with the Word itself. The best translation is the one that brings the reader into the closest possible contact with what God originally said. The worst translation decision is to be paralyzed by the proliferation of options and to read the Bible less, or with less confidence, as a result. The Word that Ezra read to the returned exiles, translating to give the sense so that they understood what was read, is the same Word available to us today in more and better translations than any generation in history has possessed. Receive it with gratitude. Read it with diligence. Submit to it with joy.

Key Text (NASB 1995)

Nehemiah 8:8

> *"They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood what was read."*

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
The Septuagint (LXX)	The Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, produced in Alexandria, Egypt, beginning in the third century BC. The name derives from the Latin for "seventy" (septuaginta), reflecting the tradition that seventy (or seventy-two) Jewish scholars translated the Pentateuch for the Egyptian king Ptolemy II. The LXX became the standard Bible of Greek-speaking Judaism and the primary Old Testament of the early church, and its text is frequently quoted by the New Testament authors.
The Latin Vulgate	The Latin translation of the Bible produced by Jerome between approximately AD 382 and 405, commissioned by Pope Damasus I. The Vulgate became the standard Bible of the Western (Latin-speaking) church for over a millennium, its text deeply embedded in medieval theology, liturgy, and scholarship. The Vulgate's monopoly on biblical access in the medieval Western church was a primary target of the Reformers' insistence on vernacular translation.
Formal Equivalence	A translation philosophy that seeks to preserve the form of the original text as closely as possible, rendering each word and grammatical structure of the source language with the nearest available equivalent in the target language. Also called "word-for-word" translation. Formal equivalence translations (such as the NASB and ESV) prioritize accuracy to the original text and provide the best tools for close study and memorization, at the cost of some natural readability in the target language.
Dynamic Equivalence	A translation philosophy that seeks to render the meaning of the original text in natural, idiomatic language in the target language, prioritizing communicative effect over formal correspondence. Also called "thought-for-thought" translation. Dynamic equivalence translations (such as the NIV and NLT) prioritize readability and accessibility at the cost of some formal precision. The boundary between dynamic equivalence and interpretive paraphrase is sometimes difficult to maintain.

Paraphrase	A rendition of the biblical text that prioritizes readability and accessibility to the point of substantially departing from the form and sometimes the precise content of the original. Paraphrases (such as The Message) are not translations in the strict sense; they are the paraphraser's interpretation of the text expressed in contemporary idiom. While they may be useful for devotional reading or grasping the general sense of a passage, paraphrases should not be used for close study, preaching, or doctrinal argument.
The King James Version (KJV)	The English translation of the Bible commissioned by King James I of England and produced by a team of forty-seven scholars between 1604 and 1611. The KJV was based on the Hebrew Masoretic Text (Old Testament) and the Textus Receptus Greek tradition (New Testament). It became the dominant English Bible for three centuries and remains beloved for its majestic prose, deeply embedded in English literary and religious culture. Its New Testament textual basis is now considered less reliable than the critical text underlying modern translations.
The NASB 1995	The New American Standard Bible (1995 revision), produced by the Lockman Foundation. The NASB is among the most formally equivalent of the major English translations, prioritizing accuracy to the original languages over idiomatic readability. Its textual basis is the Hebrew Masoretic Text (OT) and a reliable eclectic Greek text (NT). Faithful to the Word uses the NASB 1995 as its primary translation because of its commitment to verbal precision and its suitability for close textual study, preaching, and memorization.
Textus Receptus	Latin for "received text." The Greek New Testament text compiled primarily from late medieval manuscripts by Erasmus (1516) and subsequently published in various editions. It served as the textual basis for the King James Version and is preferred by some traditions today (the "KJV-only" movement). Most modern textual scholars regard the Textus Receptus as an inferior Greek text compared to critical editions based on earlier and more reliable manuscripts.
The Geneva Bible (1560)	The first English Bible to be divided into numbered verses throughout, produced by Protestant scholars in exile in Geneva during the reign of Queen Mary I. The Geneva Bible was the Bible of the English Puritans, of Shakespeare, and of the Pilgrims who came to America. Its extensive marginal notes, reflecting Reformed theology, made it the most widely used English Bible for decades before the publication of the KJV in 1611.
William Tyndale (c. 1494–1536)	The English scholar and reformer whose translation of the New Testament (1526) and portions of the Old Testament directly from the original Greek and Hebrew languages became the foundation of all subsequent English Bible translations. Tyndale was executed for heresy in 1536 for the act of translating the Bible into English. His famous declaration, that he would make it so that a boy who drives the plough would know more of the Scripture than the clergy, captures the Reformation conviction that the Bible must be in the language of the people.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that translation is a legitimate and necessary act of faithful biblical stewardship, that the God who breathed out His Word in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek intended it to be understood by those who speak other languages, and that the labor of translation is the service of the perspicuous Word to those who cannot access it in the original. Translation is not a compromise of inspiration; it is the extension of the Word's reach to every tongue and nation.

We must also understand that translation involves interpretive decisions and that no translation is perfect. This does not mean that all translations are equally reliable or that we cannot trust the Bible in English. It means that we should use the best available translations with appropriate humility, that we should use multiple translations to check our understanding, and that the original languages are the final court of appeal for doctrinal questions where translation choices matter.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

The history of Bible translation should produce in us a profound gratitude for those who gave their lives to give us the Scripture in our own language. Tyndale was strangled and burned so that the ploughboy could read the Bible in English. The Geneva Bible scholars were in exile from their homes for the same conviction. The Reformation scholars who challenged the Vulgate's monopoly risked everything for the principle that the Word belongs to the people. Hold your English Bible with the reverence that this history warrants.

Let the history also produce in you a renewed commitment to actually reading the Bible you have been given at such cost. In an era of unprecedented Bible accessibility, when the average English-speaking believer has access to more Bible translations than any generation in history, including free digital access to dozens of versions, biblical illiteracy is not a resource problem; it is a will problem. The Word is near. The translations are excellent. Read them.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

1. Use a reliable translation consistently. Choose a formally equivalent translation, the NASB or ESV are the recommended options, as your primary Bible for study, memorization, and personal devotion. Consistency enables you to build familiarity with the text that aids memorization and deepens your engagement over time.

2. Use multiple translations for study. When studying a passage carefully, compare your primary translation with one or two others. The ESV alongside the NASB provides the comparison of two formally equivalent translations; adding the NIV or CSB provides a dynamically equivalent perspective on the same text. Note where they agree and where they differ, and investigate why.
3. Avoid using paraphrases as primary texts. The Message and similar paraphrases may be useful for devotional variety, but using them as your primary Bible, for sermon preparation, or for doctrinal argument substitutes the paraphraser's voice for God's. Use paraphrases, if at all, as a secondary devotional resource after you have done serious study in a faithful translation.
4. Learn to use the original languages, or tools that access them. Even a basic familiarity with the tools of original-language study, a Strong's Concordance, an interlinear Bible, a good lexicon, gives the serious student access to the original text in ways that no translation fully captures. If you are in pastoral ministry, invest in learning Greek and Hebrew. If you are a layperson, invest in the tools that let you access the original languages without full competency in them.
5. Help your congregation navigate the translation landscape. Many believers are confused or intimidated by the proliferation of translations. Provide clear, accessible guidance on the differences between translations, commend the most reliable ones for study, and address the translation controversies (KJV-only, inclusive language) with both theological clarity and pastoral patience.

D. For Every Season of Life

For the new believer choosing a first Bible: Start with a formally equivalent translation, the NASB or ESV. The initial investment in learning to read a text that demands careful attention will pay dividends for a lifetime. If the precision feels daunting at first, supplement it with a dynamically equivalent translation like the NIV or CSB for parallel reading, but make the formally equivalent translation your primary text.

For the long-time believer using only one translation for decades: Your familiarity with that translation is a genuine asset, it has formed your vocabulary, shaped your memory of key passages, and given you a consistent textual home. But consider supplementing it with a different translation for fresh engagement with familiar texts. Even a brief comparison of how the NASB and ESV render the same passage can illuminate aspects of the text you have never noticed.

For the pastor deciding which translation to use in preaching: The translation you preach from will become the congregation's Bible, the text they bring to church, the words they memorize, the version they associate with the Word they have received. Choose wisely. A formally equivalent translation serves your expository ministry best: it gives the congregation the closest access to what the text actually says, it supports memorization,

and it models the textual precision that faithful exposition requires. Explain to your congregation why you use the translation you use, and help them understand the principles at stake.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. Which Bible translation do you currently use most? Why did you choose it, or how did you come to use it? Now that you have studied translation philosophy, would you make the same choice? Why or why not?

Observation Questions (What Does the Text Say?)

2. Read Nehemiah 8:1–12. What happened in this scene, and what was Ezra's goal in reading from the law? What does verse 8 specifically say about how the reading was done, and what was the result? How does this scene model the purpose of Bible translation?

3. Read Psalm 119:130. How does this verse relate to the Reformation conviction that the Bible must be in the language of the people? What does it imply about the accessibility of the Word to those who lack formal education or clerical training?

4. Read Romans 10:14–17. What chain of necessity does Paul describe, and where does the availability of the Scripture in the hearers' language fit in that chain? What implications does this passage have for the missionary importance of Bible translation?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

5. Explain the difference between formal equivalence, dynamic equivalence, and paraphrase as translation philosophies. Which approach is most useful for close study, and why? Which is most useful for accessibility, and why?

6. The lesson argues that translation is not a compromise of inspiration but the extension of the Word's reach. How does the doctrine of perspicuity ground this conviction? What would it mean for the perspicuity doctrine if the only fully reliable Bible were the Hebrew and Greek originals?

7. Why did the Reformers regard the Vulgate's monopoly on biblical access as a theological problem, not merely a practical inconvenience? What doctrine is at stake when the Bible is accessible only to a trained clerical elite?

8. What are the primary strengths and limitations of the NASB and the NIV respectively? For which purposes is each translation best suited, and why?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

9. The lesson argues that the worst translation decision is to be paralyzed by the proliferation of options and to read the Bible less as a result. Is this a danger in your own life or in your church community? What practical steps would address it?

10. Tyndale was executed for translating the Bible into English. What does his story say about the value of vernacular Bible access? How does the knowledge of that history change the way you handle the English Bible you have been given?

11. The lesson recommends using multiple translations for serious study. Pick a theologically significant passage (such as Romans 3:21–26 or Hebrews 4:12–13) and compare how the NASB, ESV, and NIV render it. What differences do you notice? What do the differences reveal about the interpretive decisions built into each translation?

12. This lesson completes Unit 8 on the Transmission and Preservation of Scripture. Looking back over Lessons 17 and 18, what single conviction, about the manuscript tradition, textual criticism, providential preservation, or translation philosophy, has most deepened your confidence in the Bible you hold? How will it change the way you read, study, or teach the Word?

Prayer Focus

Spend time in prayer as a group, thanking God for the extraordinary gift of the Bible in your own language, for the translators who gave their lives to make it accessible, for the scholars who have worked to make modern translations as accurate and reliable as possible, and for the God who breathed out His Word in human languages and intended it to be understood in every tongue. Thank Him for the principle of Nehemiah 8, that His Word is to be read so that people understand. Ask the Lord to give you a deeper reverence for the translated Word you hold, a renewed diligence in reading it, and wisdom as you help others navigate the landscape of modern translations. Pray for Bible translation organizations working to provide the Word in every language on earth, that the ploughboy of every nation might know more of the Scripture than he ever imagined possible.

This lesson concludes Unit 8: The Transmission and Preservation of Scripture. In two lessons, we have traced the journey of God's Word from the original autographs through the manuscript tradition, the science of textual criticism, and the history of translation to the English Bibles in our hands today. The Word that God breathed out has been faithfully preserved through the meticulous care of scribes, the providential governance of a faithful God, and the courageous labor of translators across many centuries. In Unit 9, we turn to the Interpretation of Scripture, the principles and methods by which we read the preserved and translated Word rightly, hearing what the Spirit intended the human authors to say.

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory