

Bible Study is a lifelong adventure. I remember going to Sunday School when I was in grammar school and reading the scriptures. Our instructor was heavily into memorizing various verses, and I did well. I could repeat back by rote exactly the King James Version but most of the understanding was beyond my young brain. It wasn't a bad start but I had a long way to go. In the 1050's the Revised Standard Version became available and now at least I had the verses in a language I was used to speaking and reading.

Today there are over 450 versions of the Bible in English alone. And there are 224 versions on Biblegateway.com in 73 different languages. Why so many versions and how does one go about using them to increase their understanding of the scriptures?

I think a good place to start is with one of the more popular versions like the New International Version, or the New Revised Standard Version. These are in common English and easier to read. Once you have one of these that you can keep referring to, then it might be useful to look into one of the more loosely translated versions like The Voice, or The Message or the New Living Bible. These are not direct translations but try to translate idea for idea. They can sometimes be misleading so I would not use one for my go-to bible, but they can be useful when the scripture is difficult to understand.

Why would you need different bibles, you ask? Because translating from Hebrew, Latin or Greek is very difficult. Each language has words that don't exist in English or may have a different understanding in modern English. So the translators need to use their own judgment to try and convey the idea. Each translator comes with his or her own spiritual baggage and that can taint the translation to a degree. To get at the root meaning of a scripture one needs to read several translations and with the help of the Holy Spirit within them, work out the meaning of that scripture – what it means in their own life.

So as a beginner I read as many different translations as I could find and afford. I remember wondering why some had the Apocryphal books and others didn't. I remember getting into a trouble in Sunday School for reading and talking about these books. The youth pastor told me to "stick to the Bible". I wish I had had enough nerve then to ask him why they were in some Bibles and not others and why I wasn't supposed to read them.

Reading and becoming familiar with the scriptures is a good start but eventually we need to proceed to the next level. To do that, we need to begin looking at commentaries and bible dictionaries and the notes that are in many bibles. We need to begin looking beyond just the words and begin looking into context and begin letting it direct our actions.

Paul told Timothy *"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and **who correctly handles the word of truth.**"* 2 Timothy 2:15 NIV

One of the things I have found extremely helpful in the last couple of decades is to try to understand where in space and time that particular scripture is referring. This gives a much better understanding because I get to know what else is happening in the area at that time. Who is speaking? What country is being spoken about? What conditions are the people living in? What governance are they living under?

All of these things, and more, bring insights that aren't generally visible when one just reads the scripture by itself. So much more understanding is available when we really chew on a section of scripture by reading secular literature about the times spoken of in that scripture. We didn't live in those times and have little to no knowledge about them. There are those who study and write about these various times and they can make the scripture come alive.

Another way, is to learn about the culture of the time. What are the cultural norms? What language is being spoken? What do other people living in the area believe? What is the cultural and ethnic diversity of the time? Does that effect what the Bible writer is talking about? How may that affect us in today's world?

When we look at the scriptures in Real Time and Space, we begin to see why people were doing what they were doing. These are real people, real places, and real faith. Whether the people are getting it right or are way off base, it is important to know why they are thinking the way that they are. If they are right it is good to take note of that rightness. If they are wrong what conditions have caused that aberrant thinking and actions. Learn to judge the action and not the people. It is too easy to look at them and say that they deserve what they get. There is usually a reason that they have chosen the wrong way.

Your Bible studies will slowly help you to see God in a whole new way.