

## **CHAPTER 11**

### **THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF VARIOUS VERSIONS OF THE BIBLE AND RECOMMENDED TRANSLATIONS**

*They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.*

*Nehemiah 8:8 (NASB)*

#### **Choosing the right Bible translations to use**

Another important question, which we all need to consider, is what translation of the Bible we should read. Some nations don't have to face that question, because they have only one translation in their language, or even none. However, for English speakers there is a huge range of translations to choose from.

The question for us, therefore, is which of these should we choose, and why? We therefore need to examine the different ways in which people translate the Bible and consider the advantages and disadvantages of each approach. We could briefly summarize the two main approaches as follows:

- a) '*Formal equivalence*'. This is alternatively called '*literal*' or '*word for word*' translation
- b) '*Dynamic equivalence*', also called '*functional equivalence*' or '*paraphrasing*'. This is where the translators try to provide what they think is the fuller or wider meaning of the verse or phrase, rather than a word for word translation. They would say that they are trying to convey the thought behind the words used.

Let us examine each of these two approaches more closely and then look at which Bible translations adopt each of these alternative methods and what significance that has.

#### **Formal equivalence – i.e. literal, word for word translation**

Translators who take this approach aim to stay as close as they can to the exact words used in the original Hebrew or Greek text of the Bible. They try to avoid the temptation to add in their own thoughts, ideas and preferences. They achieve all this by trying, as far as they can, to translate the text word for word.

By so doing they aim to preserve and convey the same meaning, structure, and even word order, as was used in the original. The principle behind this approach is that the more literal the translation is, the less likely it is to corrupt or obscure the intended meaning of the prophet or apostle who wrote it.

The Bible versions which use the literal approach most strongly are the King James Version (KJV) (this is also known as the Authorised Version or AV), the New King James Version (NKJV), the Revised Standard Version (RSV), the English Standard Version (ESV), the American Standard Version (ASV), and the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

On the whole, these six versions listed above are (in my view) the best and safest translations of the Bible to use. They try to keep the fine details of things such as gender or tense, or whether the original word was in the singular or plural etc. Such precise shades of meaning can frequently be highly significant.

To change such a detail, whether for the purpose of being ‘gender-inclusive’, or to make it easier to read, runs the risk of altering the meaning. It can remove some nuance, or obscure a fine distinction, from which a careful student of the Bible could have drawn a valid inference.

A lot of truth is gained indirectly by looking closely at such things as tense or gender etc. Therefore it really matters to get them exactly right and not to throw away even the smallest details, however worthy one’s motives might be for altering it.

For one thing, we simply do not have the right or the authority to change God’s Word, even if our aim is to ‘help’ people by simplifying it. We have even less justification if our aim is to make the Bible less likely to offend them, e.g. by removing references to ‘man’ or ‘men’ and putting ‘person’ or ‘people’ instead.

It is possible that in some instances changes of that sort may not do any harm. However, in some situations they could, and we have no right to take any chances about that. Imagine you were given the job of translating the battle orders of Field Marshal Montgomery from English into French.

He would not be pleased if you took the liberty of altering his exact choice of words, or the precise tenses, or any other such nuance. The only safe and acceptable approach would be an exact translation, so far as you possibly could. Even the slightest change, or simplification, could alter the meaning of the battle orders, the significance of which you may not necessarily foresee at the time.

Likewise, when the shipping forecast is read out on Radio 4 it follows an exact form, structure and rhythm and some very precise technical words are used. Our navy and fishermen would not be happy if someone tried to simplify it for them, such that even the smallest detail was altered, obscured or left out.

However, having said all that, it is not always possible, however much one might desire it, to translate exactly, word for word, from one language into another. That is especially so if the languages have little or nothing in common and have separate origins and structures. For example, French and English have a lot in common, but English and Chinese, or English and Russian do not.

I don’t have much experience of any foreign language other than French, but even in translating into or out of French, there are complications which mean that sometimes you just cannot use an exact or literal translation. It could even produce nonsense or error if you tried to do so. At the least, it could be cumbersome and may sound odd.

For example if you wanted to translate “*La jupe de ma tante*” from French into English it would look odd if you said “*The skirt of my Aunt*”. It would be clumsy and even incorrect because the structure and word order of French is irreconcilably different from English.

Likewise if you tried to do it in reverse, and were to translate “*My Aunt’s skirt*” as “*Ma tante’s jupe*” it just would not work. That would not be proper French. They probably wouldn’t know what you meant, unless they also knew some English, because there is no such thing in French as using an apostrophe to indicate possession. English has that device, but French doesn’t.

Accordingly, however hard you try, you cannot produce a Bible translation from Hebrew or Greek into English, or into any other language, which in every case completely renders the original meaning in the exact original structure, word order, style etc. Sometimes it just won’t fit and some change of the words, or the order, will be needed to avoid writing something which is distorted and makes no sense in the ‘target language’, i.e. the language you are trying to translate into.

Nevertheless, having said all that, there are many times where, however odd the translation may sound in English, it is still helpful to be able to see exactly what the original language of the Bible

said. Where the meaning of the verse is complex, or controversial, then a translation which seeks to reproduce it exactly can be very helpful, and even essential.

**Dynamic equivalence, which is also known as functional equivalence or paraphrasing. This aims to be ‘thought for thought’ translation, rather than ‘word for word’**

We have seen some of the difficulties that arise when trying to translate literally, word for word. The alternative approach, known as *dynamic equivalency*, attempts to address those difficulties, by choosing not to use the exact words, word order, tenses or genders etc of the original Hebrew or Greek.

Instead, the translators attempt to convey to the reader the overall thoughts and ideas of the original text, even if not expressed in the exact words or structure of the original language. Dynamic equivalence is not my preferred option, because of the dangers it creates.

However, one has to concede that it does, sometimes, have certain advantages. It tends to produce a simpler, easier read and it avoids some of the complex or convoluted sentences which a word for word translation often produces. That simplicity often appeals to people whose English is not strong, or whose knowledge of the Bible is limited.

For such people a translation based on dynamic equivalency can be helpful and can make the Bible more accessible. It can even make some of the meaning clearer, by putting thoughts into less complex words or sentences, which amplify the meaning and even explain it.

This is especially so where the original text contains figures of speech, or slang which make sense in Hebrew or Greek, but not when translated word for word. So, for example, if the original Greek text said “*if your eye is good*” it could be helpful for many people if the translation said instead “*if you are generous*”. As we saw in chapter two, that is what that Jewish slang expression means.

So that is what Jesus actually *meant* when He said it. Therefore, to render His expression in those quite different words in English would convey His real meaning, albeit not in His exact *original words*. That's because we have no equivalent phrase in English. To ‘*have a good eye*’ is a slang expression which simply does not exist in English. Thus it would make no sense to us if it was translated literally, without any explanation.

So, there are some times when the approach of dynamic equivalence can be helpful. It would be churlish to deny that. However, for every time we are helped by that approach, there are probably five or ten other occasions where we are hindered or even harmed by it. In particular we lose some of the precision of the real meaning, or it is modified, distorted or obscured in some way, however slight.

That loss of accuracy or precision would still matter, even if all we were reading was a Russian novel translated into English. But it matters infinitely more when it is God's Word that we are handling. Then, it is not just literature; it is the truth. Our own eternal life, and other people's eternal life, may depend on us understanding a verse or passage accurately.

Therefore, when you read the Bible in English, it is generally (but not always) much better to read a more literal, word for word translation, rather than one which aims to render the thought in a looser way. Dynamic equivalence or paraphrasing has its place, and the translators' motives may be sincere, but it is dangerous. Some translations go much further than others and take very significant liberties with the translation.

They can easily end up bending what the original Hebrew or Greek says to reflect the translator's own personal views, prejudices or denominational ‘blinkers’. These can prevent him seeing what the text actually says because he is so used to reading it through the lens of what his own denomination says

about it. That 'lens' problem can affect translators just as much as it does ordinary readers of the Bible. As we have seen, if we were to read the Bible in its original Hebrew or Greek, then it would be infallible and perfect. However, if we read it after it has been translated into English, then it is not. That is the case whatever translation you choose, and whatever approach the translators may have taken.

Although God inspired the original writers of the books of the Bible, He has not necessarily inspired those who do the translating. Sometimes He very obviously hasn't. Therefore, it is up to you to make sure you read the most reliable and accurate translation available.

They differ greatly in their accuracy and in their faithfulness to the original text. Moreover, they vary in accuracy, even within the one translation, because even the best translators make errors and have their '*off days*'.

### **Bible translations that I *would* recommend because they tend to take a more literal, word for word, approach to translation**

In view of that problem of the potential for errors or even just differences of opinion, it is a very good idea to read the Bible in more than one version, i.e. not to use just one version all the time. Why not alternate between each of the *first seven* versions recommended below? Then you will see how different translators have tried to render difficult passages or phrases.

Each version can also help you to notice the errors or confusing sections in the other versions. That is a wise and helpful safeguard. Let's now look at some of the best versions. The *first six* listed below are those which generally translate the Bible most accurately. They use an approach of formal equivalence, i.e. literal, word for word translation.

The first six versions set out below all take a more literal approach to translation, i.e. formal equivalence, rather than aiming for dynamic equivalency or paraphrasing. Though not perfect, these six versions are to be preferred, because they are literal, word for word translations, so far as possible:

#### **1) The New American Standard Bible (NASB) (1995)**

This is a modern American translation which gives a good, accurate, literal, word for word translation of the original text. That makes it less easily readable, but it is generally more reliable, and more faithful to the original text, than most other translations are.

#### **2) The English Standard Version (ESV) (2001)**

This, likewise, is in modern English and attempts to give a direct, literal, word for word translation rather than paraphrasing. It is a good translation and also relatively easy to read. You can also get it in either American or English editions

#### **3) The King James Version (KJV) also known as the Authorised Version (AV) (1611)**

This was written in 1611 by command of King James I. It is generally highly accurate, as well as being beautiful in its language. However, it is written in early seventeenth century 'Shakespearean' style English. In some ways that differs in meaning from modern English. Therefore some people find it confusing and difficult. Therefore I rarely quote from it, for the sake of those people who might struggle with it.

#### **4) The New King James Version (NKJV) (1982)**

This is an attempt to modernize the wording of the 1611 King James Version to make it easier to read. It is generally a good translation.

### **5) The Revised Standard Version (RSV) (1952)**

This was a revision produced in the 1880s, and revised again in 1952, to present the King James version in more modern English. It is the main version that I have used since 1981, but it is difficult to find now, as few shops stock it. However, you can get it on the internet.

NB Do not confuse the RSV with the *New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)* which was published in 1989. It claims to be a successor to the KJV and RSV and to take a literal approach to translation. However, I would avoid the NRSV because its proudest boasts about itself are that:

- a) It is an '*ecumenical*' translation. By that they mean that it was produced by a committee created from scholars from the Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox branches of the church. They may see that as an advantage. However, anybody who loves the truth and wants to see the Bible translated with truth as the main aim, rather than fudge and consensus, will recoil from the idea of an ecumenical Bible, or an ecumenical anything;
- b) It inserts *gender-inclusive* language in many of the verses where the male gender is referred to in the original Hebrew or Greek text. There is no valid reason for doing that. It is taking liberties with the text.

Moreover, they also produce a version of the NRSV (called the NRSV common Bible) which contains the *Apocrypha* and the *Deuterocanonical books* (see below). That fact alone ought to make us steer clear of this translation, particularly as they do nothing to draw attention to the fact that these extra books are *not* Scripture.

On the contrary they give it the title '*NRSV Common Bible*', which strongly implies that all of those extra books are Scripture, when, in fact, they are not. They are just ordinary, man-made works of literature and are not divinely inspired. Their inclusion is therefore sure to mislead some people.

### **6) The American Standard Version (ASV) (1901)**

This was produced in 1901 primarily for an American Audience. The language is still quite old fashioned, resembling the King James. Therefore some people struggle with it. Yet, it is said by some to be the most accurate Bible translation of all. Few shops sell it now, even in America. You would have to buy it on the internet.

**A Bible version (number 7) which claims to take a middle path between literal, word for word translation and dynamic equivalence.**

### **7) The New International Version (NIV) (1978 and 1984) (revised again in 2011)**

The NIV was the result of a major project in the 1970s to translate the Bible into modern English, for both British and American readers. This version aims to steer a middle path between formal, literal, word for word translation and dynamic equivalency.

Thus there is an element of paraphrasing in the NIV, though far less than in some of the versions listed below, which veer heavily towards that. The NIV is easier to read than the six versions listed above, but some of the accuracy is lost. Nonetheless, it is still a reasonably good translation, on the whole.

It is currently the most popular English version. It has sold more than 215 million copies worldwide. Therefore, I have used the NIV for some of the quotations in this series, especially in Book One, where I have assumed a less experienced reader. From Book Two onwards I use the NIV much less.

The seven versions above are ones which I would recommend. However, those set out below are not accurate enough, in my view, and I would *not* recommend them.

**Bible translations which I would *not* recommend, principally because they take the approach of dynamic equivalency or paraphrasing, but also for some other reasons**

**8) Today's New International Version (TNIV) (2005)**

This is a variation of the NIV which was completed in 2005. Like the NIV, it claims to steer a middle path between literal, word for word translation and dynamic equivalency. Even so, it is claimed that 70% of the changes that have been made move it further in the direction of literal word for word translation, rather than dynamic equivalence. So that would be an improvement, at least in that regard.

It also uses the Hebrew word 'Messiah' instead of Christ. That is a helpful change, since that Hebrew title is less misunderstood than the Greek equivalent, 'Christ'. However, one of the weaknesses (in my view) of the TNIV is that it also uses gender-inclusive language, i.e. avoiding masculine words and using neutral "inclusive" words instead. That suggests that both males or females are being referred to, which may not be the case.

That may appeal to some, but it brings with it the serious risk of misrepresenting what God is saying. It's true that sometimes when God says "man" He means mankind, i.e. both sexes. But sometimes He doesn't. Sometimes He is intentionally referring only to men. Therefore to tamper with the wording, for such politically correct reasons, could easily mislead the reader.

The Bible versions in this section may sometimes be easier to read. Indeed, some of them assume that you only have a primary school reading age. However, they are not as accurate as the ones listed 1-7 above. In fact, each of these versions contain a significant amount of very loose paraphrasing.

That means that words and phrases are used which do not actually appear in the original Hebrew or Greek at all. That is the most dangerous feature of all, i.e. *adding* to what the Bible says. This is done because it reflects what the translators feel is the underlying meaning of the original words or phrases used.

At times that can be helpful, and sometimes essential, because Hebrew and Greek are both very different from English and words sometimes have to be inserted to make the sentence make sense. However, it is also dangerous at times.

You can end up missing the precise meaning of some of those words or phrases that were in the original text. It can change the meaning of a whole passage if fine details are added, omitted or altered for the sake of simplicity. That is too high a price to pay just to make the Bible easier to read.

**9) The Good News Bible (1966 and 1979)**

This was first published in 1966 and was originally called "*Good News for Modern Man*". This version leans heavily towards dynamic equivalence and also reflects some liberal/sceptical influence. For example, in Isaiah 7:14, instead of using the word '*virgin*' it says '*young woman*' in relation to the prophecy about Jesus' birth and His mother Mary.

Possibly that had something to do with the influence of one of the translators, Robert Bratcher. He caused controversy when he announced that he did not accept that Jesus was divine. He also rejected the idea of the infallibility and inspiration of Scripture. Some people believe that his liberal/sceptical views influenced the translation, making it reflect his doubts and errors.

Another concern about the GNB is that, since 1979, it has included the Apocrypha and the Deuterocanonical books, which are not part of the Bible. (These are ancient Jewish books which are of historical interest. But they were not inspired by God and are not ‘Scripture’.)

These books were belatedly inserted into the Bible by the Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth century, as a reaction to the Reformation. But they do not belong in the Bible at all, because they are *not Scripture*. They are not inspired. Thus they contaminate rather than enhance the Bible. Yet they are assumed by many readers to be equal to Scripture, which they aren’t.

This grave error undermines people's confidence in the Bible as a whole. You should therefore avoid any version which includes these extra books. Thus, the Good News Bible is a version to avoid. If you have it, why not swap now to one of the first six versions above which translate word for word? Or, perhaps you could try the seventh version, the NIV if you are a new Christian or if your English is not strong.

#### **10) The New Living Translation (NLT) (1996)**

This is a revision of what used to be called *The Living Bible*. It mainly aims for dynamic equivalence and paraphrasing. Another problem is that it also leaves out a lot of verses, or parts of verses, which the other versions include. This is another translation which you ought to avoid. If you have it then I suggest you swap to a more literal version from those numbered 1-6 above, or to number 7, the NIV, if you need something simpler.

#### **11) The New English Bible (NEB) (1970)**

This came out in 1970 and was called *The New English Bible*. It leans heavily towards dynamic equivalence/paraphrasing. It also makes the major error of including the Apocrypha and the Deuterocanonical books which are not Scripture. (See the comments made above re the Good News Bible)

#### **12) The Revised English Bible (REB) (1989)**

This is a revised version of the New English Bible referred to above. It takes a very similar approach to the NEB and therefore has the same faults. Again, it should be avoided.

#### **13) God’s Word Translation (GW) (1995)**

This version adopts the approach of dynamic equivalence although they have coined a new phrase for that. They call it the ‘*closest natural equivalence*’. All they really mean is that they seek to convey the *overall thought* rather than translate the literal words used. Some say it takes liberties with the text and over-simplifies it, so as to deviate from the real meaning. In any case, who are they to decide what the ‘overall thought’ is? That is the job of the *reader* more so than the translator.

#### **14) The Contemporary English Version (CEV) (1995)**

This version is also known as the “*Bible for Today’s Family*”. Although it is a new translation in its own right, not just a revision, it is very similar to the Good News Bible (GNB). And it is aimed at an even lower reading age. It veers strongly towards dynamic equivalence and paraphrasing.

It takes further liberties by adding words by way of explanation which are not in the original text. It is one thing to do that in marginal notes, which are plainly the commentator's view. But it is quite another thing to do it within the text of the Bible itself. That is very dangerous.

Nobody has the right to add words to the Bible, unless they are very clearly implied and are essential to give the correct meaning. However, if the translators are doing it because they wish to give added explanation, they should limit themselves strictly to footnotes or marginal notes, not within the text itself.

#### **15) The New American Bible (NAB) (1970)**

This is actually a Roman Catholic Bible. It was produced as a result of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Although it claims to aim for formal equivalence, i.e. word for word translation, it actually reflects the views and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. It also contains the Apocrypha and the Deuterocanonical books which are not Scripture (see above).

If that was not bad enough, it also uses gender-inclusive language. It should be avoided. (However, do not confuse this with the New American *Standard* Bible, (NASB), which is a very good translation - See number one above.)

#### **16) The New English Translation (NET) (2005)**

This is rather unusual. It is a completely new 'on line' English translation of the Bible which anybody can download. In its approach to translation this version leans towards dynamic equivalence/paraphrasing. However, it makes up for that, to some degree, by including a vast array of footnotes which explain why it has translated phrases as it has and offers alternative renderings. Even so, it should be avoided.

#### **17) The Jerusalem Bible (JB)**

This is another Roman Catholic version and reflects their views and practices. It also contains all of the Apocrypha and the Deuterocanonical books. It should be avoided.

#### **18) The New Jerusalem Bible (NJB) (1985)**

As the name suggests, this is an updated revision of the Jerusalem Bible. It is therefore equally Roman Catholic and also contains the Apocrypha and the Deuterocanonical books. It is largely based on dynamic equivalence and also uses some gender inclusive language. It should be avoided.

#### **19) The Complete Jewish Bible, translated by David H. Stern**

This is an unusual Bible version. It was translated by a Messianic Jewish believer called David H. Stern. That means he is a Jew who has accepted that Jesus (Yeshua) is the Messiah. He did so when he was 37 years old, having been brought up as a Jew. He produced his version of the Bible because he felt, with substantial justification, that most versions fail to recognize the Jewishness of the Scriptures because they are translated solely by Gentiles.

David H. Stern is clearly a good and honest man. Moreover, in many ways his translation can be helpful, especially for certain passages where the Hebrew tone or character of what is being said gets missed by other translators. However, his version is very much a paraphrase. That is he focuses on trying to convey what he believes is the intended meaning, rather than the exact words used.

For example, he says in his own introduction that he feels that the usual translation of the Greek words '*upo nomon*', which are generally rendered as '*under the law*', has caused much confusion. He believes that many people have seen that as a basis for being averse to the five books of Moses. So, to



counteract that, David H. Stern translates those two Greek words as: “*in subjection to the system which results from perverting the Torah into legalism.*”

That elongated phrase may well be useful and enlightening. However, it travels far beyond what the actual words of the Bible say. In a sense it is almost a commentary on those words rather than a translation of them. That is fair enough if you *know* that that is what you are getting. In that case, you may well find it useful. However, it is a danger if you wrongly think that it is a translation of the words actually contained in the Bible.

Therefore, although David H. Stern himself is a sincere man, I would recommend that you avoid his translation. You might use it as a quasi-commentary if you are a mature believer and want his input on a complex passage, but it is not a good translation to use a Bible for day to day use.

## **20) 'The Message' by Eugene Peterson (2002)**

I would particularly advise you *not* to read a version of the Bible called “The Message” by Eugene Peterson. It is not even a translation. It is a very distorted paraphrase which heavily reflects the author's own opinions rather than the original text. He changes and simplifies things all over the place and injects his own ideas and theories.

This book is popular at the moment, but it is *not* an accurate translation of the Bible. I would recommend that you avoid it. Strangely, even the author, Eugene Peterson, expressed his own unease at the idea of The Message being read out in churches as if it was a reading of God’s Word. He once said in an interview in Christianity Today:

*“When I’m in a congregation where somebody uses [The Message] in the Scripture reading, it makes me feel a little uneasy. I would never recommend it be used as saying “Hear the Word of God from The Message”. But it surprises me how many do”.*

## **The errors of the 'King James only' school of thought**

You may have heard of a group of people who argue that it is only the King James version of the Bible which can be relied on, and that all other versions are inadequate, or even false. This school of thought is known as the “*King James only*” movement. There are actually many different strands of opinion within that broad group. Some are more extreme than others.

Some even go so far as say that God inspired the King James translators, such that the King James translation itself is the ‘real’ Bible, rather than the original Hebrew and Greek texts. That view is plainly ridiculous. Other advocates of the King James Version are more moderate.

They just feel that the scholarship, faithfulness and sincerity of the KJV translators were higher than anything we have seen since. That may well be true, as the KJV, which closely follows the earlier translation made by William Tyndale, is a superb translation. However, just like all the others, it is not perfect, and it would be foolish to suggest otherwise.

It has its own errors and badly phrased verses. For example, one of its most unfortunate and misleading errors is that it uses the phrase “*possessed*” when speaking of demons. Instead it should simply say “*demonized*,” which is what the Greek says. (See Books Seven and Nine for more detail on this and on why it matters).

In short, the KJV is a very good translation, but it is not right for it to be idolized, or praised in an unbalanced or unhealthy way. Those who go that far are misguided. Do not allow yourself to be talked into thinking that nothing else can be trusted other than the King James. That is not the case.

Indeed, few people realise that King James himself was both a freemason and a homosexual. Those facts do not undermine the Bible that was translated on his orders. But they may help you to put into proper perspective the question of whether the King James Version should be revered above all other translations. The answer is that it should not.

**Always read every verse of the Bible in its own context. Find out who is speaking, who is being spoken to, and also who, or what, is being spoken about, and why. It may, or may not, apply to you.**

One of the biggest errors we can make when reading the Bible is to be egocentric. By that I mean to make the assumption, usually unconsciously, that what is written on the page was written *to you* and *about you* and is *intended for you*. Many of us make the mistake of thinking that every promise, warning or assurance and also all advice, guidance or instruction, is intended for us personally and is speaking of our circumstances.

So, for example, God might make a promise to a particular person or group. We might then wrongly imagine that that same promise is automatically applicable to us personally. If so we may assume that we can and should act upon it or be guided by it today, in the particular circumstances that we face. But our own situation may well be entirely different from that faced by the specific person or group to whom the promise, instruction or guidance was originally given.

More to the point, the promise or statement made in the Bible was originally made to *the person concerned* and it might not necessarily apply to anybody else. It depends on the context and on whether it is a general statement which applies to us all, or one made solely to the particular person or group concerned. You must always ask yourself that question. Take for example Jeremiah 1:19. This is a verse which contains a wonderful promise, but it is one that God made *to Jeremiah personally*:

***They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the LORD, to deliver you."***

***Jeremiah 1:19 (RSV)***

The question is to what extent, if at all, can you or I, when reading that verse, assume that the promise made to Jeremiah is also applicable to us? It was written to Jeremiah, not to us. That said, it does have some general application, because God will generally assist and protect His other children, not just Jeremiah. So, we can be aware that this is a general statement of how God ordinarily acts, but that still doesn't make it a *specific promise to you*.

However, having said that, it is entirely possible that God could speak to you individually through that verse by causing it to *come alive* for you personally. The instant you read it you might know in your spirit that God has just spoken to you through it. He does that occasionally, though it is the exception, not the rule.

Nevertheless, where it happens, it is valid. It is definitely one of the many ways that God can speak to us and it would be wrong to deny that. I have myself, on many occasions, had a verse or passage come alive to me, or *leap out* at me, such that I know that God has just spoken *to me* through it, even though, in the Bible, it is quite clearly only promised or said to the person to whom God was speaking.

The best way that I can describe this phenomenon is to say that it is as if the verse goes '*bold on screen*' or becomes '*fluorescent*'. It leaps out from the page and hits me as something that God is saying *to me, today*. I sense in my spirit that I can claim it for myself and rely upon it. So, that experience *can certainly* be valid. But whether it is actually valid on any *given occasion* is a matter for personal judgment and discernment.

You may be right in thinking that God is speaking to you through that verse. Alternatively, you may be wrong. It depends on how mature, honest and balanced you are and whether you are genuinely hearing God, or are mistaken, or even deceived. It would therefore make sense to ask a mature believer to help you and to give their view as to whether God has really spoken into your situation or not.

As a general rule, in the absence of a clear prompting from God, you should assume, the vast majority of the time, that passages such as the one quoted above where God spoke to Jeremiah, are a message from God to Jeremiah alone. They are not a message to you personally, except insofar as they are relevant to us all in a general, broad sense.

In short, more than 99% of the time you should just seek to absorb the original meaning of the passage and be aware that God made that promise to Jeremiah at that time. God wants you to know what He said and did in the life of Jeremiah. Then you can apply it in your own life, by inference, *to the extent that it is appropriate to do so*. But you cannot usually take it as a direct or personal message to you. It is not a direct reference to the situation you face today, unless God gives a direct prompting to you personally, which most of the time He will not do.

Another example would be where God says something to the people of Israel which is right for them, but not necessarily right for you. The most stark example would be the passages where God tells the Israelites, after they leave Egypt and are about to enter the Promised Land, that they are to drive out and destroy the various Canaanite people. At that time they were entering the Promised Land, which God had set aside for His chosen people, Israel.

It would be very wrong for you to read those verses containing those instructions, which were validly given to the Jewish people, and to assume that God is saying the same thing to you about your enemies, or the people who stand in your way. God did want the Israelites to destroy the Canaanites because they were very wicked and He wanted to judge them. They were also God's enemies and they stood in the way of God's plans for the nation and land of Israel.

However, those points are not true of your enemies or of the people who get in your way at work. Thus to apply such verses to yourself, as if they had been personally written to you, and as if they authorized you to fight and destroy your own personal enemies, would be a grave error. This is not just an academic point. Many people have actually made this very error with these very passages. For example they were used by the Boers in South Africa to justify seizing the land of indigenous black people, as if God had told them to do it.

They are not alone. The same has been done by the British as the Empire was being built and by the Americans as the native Americans were moved off their land and/or wiped out. The mistake has also been made by private individuals who have imagined that those instructions given to Israel applied to them in their own private conflicts and rivalries.

The only way to learn how to hear God's voice and how to recognise those occasions when He is speaking to you personally is to grow in experience and maturity. In part, you will have to learn from your mistakes, as I have had to do. You will gradually become more tuned in and more discerning as time goes by, provided you have a strong desire to know the truth for its own sake, rather than just to reinforce your own opinions, preferences and desires.

**Be very careful about seeing personal messages to you in the Bible. It can sometimes occur, but is not the norm.**

Anybody who does *not* have the 'love of the truth' will be tempted to find personal messages from God all over the Bible, and elsewhere, telling them to do all the things that they have already decided

they want to do. Such people are often just looking for a basis to justify doing what they already want to do. When you read the Bible you are meant to understand, accept and believe all that it says.

However, you must always put at the centre whoever it is that the passage is speaking to, or about, not yourself. Then ask yourself who is speaking - is it God Himself, or a person on His behalf? Or is it just someone speaking his own opinions, of which God may not necessarily approve?

A good example of this is the book of Job, where a series of different people speak, including God, Satan, Job, Job's wife and Job's four friends. The point is that they, and the statements they make, are not all equal in accuracy or value. Therefore what they each say is not meant to be treated as being what *God* is saying.

In fact, God specifically tells us in the book of Job that what Job's friends say, which takes up many chapters of the book, does *not* represent God's view. In short, what each of them said was wrong and God wants you to realise that what they said was wrong:

***After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eli'phaz the Te'manite: "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.***

***Job 42: 7 (RSV)***

So, the mere fact that Job's four friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar and Elihu, are quoted (at length) in the Bible does *not* mean that God agrees with them. On the contrary, when we get to chapter 42 we are told very plainly that God *disagrees* with them. He says that what they have said is not right.

Therefore we would be rather foolish if we relied upon the advice given, and the opinions expressed, by Job's friends. So, we must be very careful indeed about gaining specific *individual guidance* for our personal day to day decisions from reading the Bible.

There is a time and a place for doing that. It can sometimes be valid, but it can also be very invalid, depending on how you go about it. What you *can* validly do is see a passage which sets out a *general principle* and then apply that general principle to yourself. That is legitimate, because you are going *from the general to the particular*.

So if you see a passage which indicates that it is wrong to lie or steal or worry or fear or whatever else, then you can validly say:

- a) The Bible says it is wrong for *anybody* to lie;
- b) Therefore it is wrong for *me* to lie;
- c) Therefore it would be wrong for me to tell *this particular lie* that I am about to tell.

What you *cannot* safely do is to go *from the particular to the general*, even where it is God who is speaking. For example, He may be giving a specific instruction to some individual or group. It may well be that that instruction or promise is only for *them*, or only for *that time*, or only for *those circumstances*. So you could not validly say:

- a) God told *Solomon* to build a house for God, i.e. the Temple;
- b) Therefore, as I read that passage, God is telling *me* to build a house for Him.

You may think that to be an unrealistic and far-fetched example, but there have probably been a great many people who have wrongly thought that God was telling them to build a church building simply because they wrongly applied to themselves an instruction that God gave only to Solomon. Thus we

must be very careful indeed before we take specific guidance about our own lives from particular statements made to individuals or groups in the Bible.

The only wise and appropriate way in which it could be done would be where it comes by way of additional confirmation. But that would need to be confirming something which already makes sense and is already evidently God's will for other valid reasons and based on other solid evidence.

A Bible passage should not be relied upon for specific personal guidance in your own individual situation where the passage itself is your *only* reason or basis for thinking that God wants you to do a particular thing or make a specific decision. The more important or life-changing the step or decision is, the more you would need to see other factors or additional evidence to prove that it is God's will, and the less you would want to rely on a given passage as your only authority for taking a step.

In short, always remember that although, in the broadest sense, you are definitely *one of* the people *for whom* the Bible was written, that does not mean that it was written *to or about you* in particular. To assume that it was would be foolishly egocentric and would lead you into many errors and deceptions.

Therefore, to summarize, we can say that with any passage that we read we should ask ourselves the following questions, amongst others:

- a) Who is the *person speaking* in this passage?
- b) Are they *right or wrong*? In other words, is the passage setting out what is *true*, or merely telling us what someone actually *said or did*, which could be either right or wrong, or a mixture?
- c) Who is being written *about*?
- d) *When* and in what *circumstances* was it written?
- e) What general *principle* is stated or illustrated by the passage?
- f) What relevance or *application* does that general principle have for me, or for my particular situation?

So, when reading the Bible it is valid, and even essential, to *end* with personal application, i.e. asking yourself what you need to do as a result of reading the passage. But it is very wrong to *start* with that question. The former approach puts the Bible at the centre. The latter puts you at the centre. But that is a place where none of us should ever be.

Please note that a real Christian will never be entirely right in all that he thinks, but he will be getting more right, or less wrong, as each year goes by. It's like a person who is not yet *at* the North Pole but is always getting farther North. In other words, he is not right about everything but he is continually discovering, and removing, his own errors. Therefore he is getting more and more accurate in his understanding of Scripture.

That happens because he has the Holy Spirit, loves the truth, and studies the Bible diligently. Those three features don't make you infallible, but they do ensure that you discover some of your own errors and correct them every year. By doing that, you increase the range and accuracy of your own beliefs and become much more capable of distinguishing truth from error when listening to the teaching of others