

# Why Are There So Many Bibles?

## *Lesson 2: Translation Philosophies, Bias & Choosing A Bible*

This lesson hopes to finish answering a question that was recently left in our Q&A box, “Why are there so many Bibles? In other words, why NIV, New King James, etc? Is there a translation we should not use?” In our first lesson we tried to answer the question of why there are so many Bibles, looking at the history of manuscript families and how different manuscripts are the basis of our modern English translations. Now we want to explore the second question: are there some translations we shouldn’t use? To do this we will look at the different translation philosophies used by the translators of the various versions and the theological bias that is found in some passages.

Before we move on to new material, I want to reiterate a point made in the first lesson: the differences in the Greek manuscript families do not change any of the theological truths of the Bible! For example, some manuscripts do not contain Acts 8:37 or Mark 16:16, but these truths are taught in other passages. God has insured that His Word is preserved for us, but we must remember that imperfect men were responsible for copying that Word over the centuries. I recommend the following resources for those who would like to explore this further:

- “How We Got The Bible” by Neil R. Lightfoot
- “A General Introduction To The Bible” by Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix
- From the South Bumby FAQ, “Is The Bible Reliable?” [http://bumby.org//faq/is\\_the\\_bible\\_reliable.html](http://bumby.org//faq/is_the_bible_reliable.html)
- Also from the South Bumby FAQ, “Is The NKJV The Word Of God?” (An answer to the KJV only advocates). [http://bumby.org//faq/is\\_the\\_nkiv\\_the\\_word\\_of\\_god.pdf](http://bumby.org//faq/is_the_nkiv_the_word_of_god.pdf)

### **“Word for Word” vs. “Thought for Thought”**

In our first lesson we noted that God wants two things from any translation: 1) a translation must accurately convey His will and 2) a translation must be understandable to the audience. Different translators have different philosophies as to how these two requirements are best accomplished. Some use a literal “word for word” translation philosophy, technically known as “formal-equivalence”. Others are more concerned with conveying the ideas in the text, seeking to give a “thought for thought” translation, also known as “dynamic equivalence”. Here is a better explanation of the differences between the two translation philosophies:

“The chief concern of the dynamic-equivalence approach is readability. This philosophy centers on conveying the thought of the original languages to the reader with the greatest possible clarity and gives little or no attention to obtaining a word-for-word correspondence between the original and the translation. It focuses rather on obtaining a correspondence of ideas between the two languages. The important consideration here is to produce an effect on the reader in the receptor language equivalent to what was produced on the original recipients of the message in the source language. If a free translation evokes the same response from its readers as the original did on the readers when the book was first circulated, it has accomplished its purpose. Most late-twentieth-century Bible translations are of this type.

“A formal-equivalence translation concerns itself primarily with accuracy or faithfulness to the original text. In both form and content it focuses attention on the original text being translated. It seeks as close a match as possible between the elements of the receptor language and those of the source language. Its reader can thus identify himself as fully as possible with someone in the source-language context and more fully comprehend the customs, manner of thought, and means of expression connected with the original setting. To accomplish this goal, the literal translation preserves as much of the source-language grammatical

structures and word usages as the boundaries of proper English will allow. Bible translations in the Tyndale tradition are of this type, but they are not the only literal translations.”<sup>1</sup>

Understand, none of our English translations are strictly literal, “word for word” translations. Differences in language and grammar would make such a translation unreadable to English speakers. However, there are translations that seek to be as close to the original as possible, while still understandable. Other translations place much more emphasis on readability at the cost of accuracy to the original text. Fortunately, one can find the translation philosophy of any translation by reading its preface or introduction. Here are some translations that seek to produce more of a “word for word” translation:

- NKJV: “Where new translation has been necessary in the New King James Version, the most complete representation of the original has been rendered by considering the history of usage and etymology of words in their contexts. This principle of complete equivalence seeks to preserve all of the information in the text, while presenting it in good literary form.”
- NASB: “The purpose of the Editorial Board in making this translation was to adhere as closely as possible to the original languages of the Holy Scriptures, and to make the translation in a fluent and readable style according to current English usage.”
- ESV: “The ESV is an “essentially literal” translation that seeks as far as possible to capture the precise wording of the original text and the personal style of each Bible writer. As such, its emphasis is on “word-for-word” correspondence, at the same time taking into account differences of grammar, syntax, and idiom between current literary English and the original languages. Thus it seeks to be transparent to the original text, letting the reader see as directly as possible the structure and meaning of the original. In contrast to the ESV, some Bible versions have followed a “thought-for-thought” rather than “word-for-word” translation philosophy, emphasizing “dynamic equivalence” rather than the “essentially literal” meaning of the original. A “thought-for-thought” translation is of necessity more inclined to reflect the interpretive opinions of the translator and the influences of contemporary culture. Every translation is at many points a trade-off between literal precision and readability, between “formal equivalence” in expression and “functional equivalence” in communication, and the ESV is no exception. Within this framework we have sought to be “as literal as possible” while maintaining clarity of expression and literary excellence. Therefore, to the extent that plain English permits and the meaning in each case allows, we have sought to use the same English word for important recurring words in the original; and, as far as grammar and syntax allow, we have rendered Old Testament passages cited in the New in ways that show their correspondence. Thus in each of these areas, as well as throughout the Bible as a whole, we have sought to capture the echoes and overtones of meaning that are so abundantly present in the original texts.”

As you can see, the above translations try to adhere strictly to a “word for word” translation, while admitting that idioms and grammar must be updated to make the translation readable. However, other translations decline to follow a strictly literal philosophy and seek to convey the thought of the original manuscript:

- NIV: “The first concern of the translators has been the accuracy of the translation and its fidelity to the thought of the Biblical writers. They have weighed the significance of the lexical and grammatical details of the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts. At the same time, they have striven for more than a word-for-word translation. Because thought patterns and syntax differ from language to language, faithful communication of the meaning of the writers of the Bible demands frequent modifications in sentence structure and constant regard for the contextual meaning of words.”

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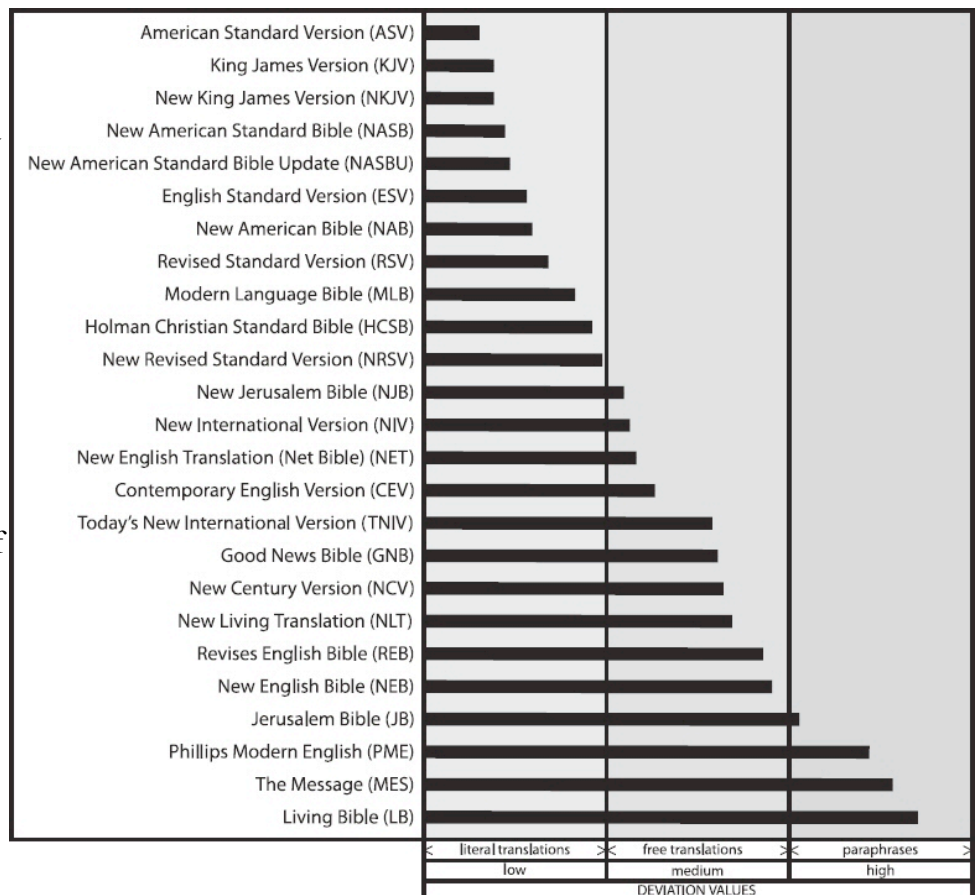
<sup>1</sup> Thomas, R. L. (2000). *How to choose a Bible version : An introductory guide to English translations* (89–90). Fearn, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications.

- NLT: “The translators of the New Living Translation set out to render the message of the original texts of Scripture into clear, contemporary English. As they did so, they kept the concerns of both formal-equivalence and dynamic-equivalence in mind. On the one hand, they translated as simply and literally as possible when that approach yielded an accurate, clear, and natural English text. Many words and phrases were rendered literally and consistently into English, preserving essential literary and rhetorical devices, ancient metaphors, and word choices that give structure to the text and provide echoes of meaning from one passage to the next. On the other hand, the translators rendered the message more dynamically when the literal rendering was hard to understand, was misleading, or yielded archaic or foreign wording. They clarified difficult metaphors and terms to aid in the reader’s understanding. The translators first struggled with the meaning of the words and phrases in the ancient context; then they rendered the message into clear, natural English. Their goal was to be both faithful to the ancient texts and eminently readable. The result is a translation that is both exegetically accurate and idiomatically powerful.”

Still, others abandon any semblance of giving a literal translation, seeking to convey only how the translator interprets the text. The Message is an example of such a translation: “The Message is a reading Bible. It is not intended to replace the excellent study Bibles that are available. My intent here (as it was earlier in my congregation and community) is simply to get people reading it who don’t know that the Bible is read-able at all, at least by them, and to get people who long ago lost interest in the Bible to read it again. But I haven’t tried to make it easy—there is much in the Bible that is hard to understand. So at some point along the way, soon or late, it will be important to get a standard study Bible to facilitate further study. Meanwhile, read in order to live, praying as you read, ‘God, let it be with me just as you say.’”

## How Much Do Translations Deviate From The Original?

This question must be answered if we are to determine how accurately a translation conveys the will of God. Scholars conduct tests on every translation to determine how faithful it is to the original manuscripts. This chart was taken from “*How to choose a Bible version : An introductory guide to English translations*” and shows how major translations deviate from the Greek manuscripts in the book of Romans. You will note that every translation deviates some because a little deviation is necessary to make a translation readable. Their conclusion is worth noting: “The above comments regarding the Deviation Value Diagram highlight an advantage of literal translations that is badly lacking among free



translations. A literal translation provides a reliable tool for studying the text, because it is close to the original text. The more remote a translation is from the original, the less it reflects the precise meaning of the original and the more it reflects the interpretations of the translator(s). That remoteness entails a hindrance if one's purpose is to discover the meaning of the Bible. The translator's interpretations loom larger in the translation in proportion to the amount of freedom exercised in the translation technique. The reason for this is that the translator chooses his own ideas about the meaning of the text to replace the literal rendering of the text. A student of Scripture usually seeks the meaning of the text, not an interpretation of the translator. If he wants someone's interpretation, he will consult commentaries on the text. Free translations and paraphrases are especially harmful where the translator has erred in his interpretation. That misleads a student of the Bible as to what God actually said without the reader being aware that he is accepting someone's interpretation rather than what the original text says."<sup>2</sup>

I find this quote from the preface to "The Living Bible" illuminating as well: "There are dangers in paraphrases, as well as values. For whenever the author's exact words are not translated from the original languages, there is a possibility that the translator, however honest, may be giving the English reader something that the original writer did not mean to say. This is because a paraphrase is guided not only by the translator's skill in simplifying but also by the clarity of his understanding of what the author meant and by his theology. For when the Greek or Hebrew is not clear, then the theology of the translator is his guide, along with his sense of logic, unless perchance the translation is allowed to stand without any clear meaning at all."

## How Readable Are The Translations?

It is important for a translation to accurately convey God's will, but it must also be understood by the audience. Readability is the reason why new English translations have been needed over the years. The KJV is a very accurate translation, but since the English language has changed over the centuries it is not suitable for the needs of many English readers today. As is seen in the chart, modern translations seek to be more readable. Personally, I find the NASB to be very readable, but also readily admit that some readers might find the ESV, NKJV or NIV easier to understand. It is also important to remember that the NASB, ESV and NKJV aim to

Version	Reading Grade-Level
KJV	12
NASB	10
ESV	8
NKJV	7
NIV	7
The Message	5

provide a literal translation of God's word, and have done so while making a very readable translation. The NIV gravitates more to the "thought for thought" translation philosophy and so it should not surprise us that it is a very readable translation. Paraphrases like The Message will certainly be the most readable, but they do not attempt to give a literal meaning of the text.

While any translation of God's word needs to be understandable to the audience, over-emphasis on readability can lead to some problems. First, if a translation's primary goal is to make a translation easily read, it may come at the expense of accuracy. Closely related to this is the over-simplification found in some of our modern versions. For instance, I was recently introduced to the God's Word translation, a translation that aims to be very readable. But, to achieve this it has over-simplified some key concepts in Scripture. For instance, the God's Word translation consistently translates "sin" as "failure". While sin is certainly a failure to keep God's will, we don't always use "failure" that way. One may try his best to achieve something, but fail. However, sin often involves intentional rebellion against God, a concept not accurately reflected in the word "failure." The God's Word translation also translates "grace" as "kindness." While God's grace certainly involves kindness, grace is so much more. Grace is God lifting us out of the mire and making us part of His family, forgiving our sins with the blood of His Son,

<sup>2</sup> Thomas, R. L. (2000). *How to choose a Bible version : An introductory guide to English translations* (97-98). Fearn, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications.

doing for us what we do not deserve. “Kindness” does not adequately convey what God does for us. Finally, the God’s Word translation renders “justify” as “God’s approval.” Yes, justification does involve our gaining the approval of God, but only when He forgives and redeems us from our sins. For us to gain God’s approval, a price had to be paid; He had to justify us.

A Bible needs to be readable, but we must also accept that many key concepts in God’s will necessitate language that is higher than a 5th grade level. Rather than settling for translations that “dumb down” God’s Word, let’s turn these into learning opportunities. If you come across a word in the Bible that you don’t understand, look it up in a good Bible dictionary or ask your Bible class teacher, preacher or elder. It may open up a whole new level of meaning and appreciation of God’s Word.

## Theological Bias?

The translators of the Bible are men and as such they have a theological perspective. So, it should not surprise us that the theological perspective of the translators is sometimes inserted into the text. This is true of all translations, including the KJV. However, the level to which theological bias can be inserted into the text is dependent on how literal the translation aims to be. Since the KJV, NKJV, NASB, and ESV aim to render a literal translation of the Greek manuscripts, the amount of theological bias within the translation will be very low. While the NIV is generally accurate, it gravitates more toward the “thought for thought” philosophy which leads to some poor translations. Romans 7:5 is one of the better known instances. Here is the verse in both the NASB and NIV translations.

- NASB: “For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death.”
- NIV: “For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death.”

In this verse the Greek word *sarx* is translated as “flesh” in the NASB, “sinful nature” in the NIV. The literal definition of *sarx* is “flesh,” but Paul uses it to denote several ideas in his writings: “‘Flesh’ is a Pauline word (it occurs 91 times in Paul out of 147 in the New Testament; the most in any non-Pauline writing is 13 in John), and the apostle uses it in a variety of ways. It may refer to the soft constituent of the human body (1 Cor. 15:50), and thus to a human being (1 Cor. 1:29). It may mean human nature (Rom. 9:5), or this earthly life (Phil. 1:24), or human attainment (Phil. 3:3), from which it is not a long step to outward appearance (1 Cor. 1:26).”<sup>3</sup>

So, how did Paul use *sarx* in Romans 7:5? Note this explanation: “The connection between sin and the law is elaborated in v 5. The niv ‘when we were controlled by the sinful nature’ is better translated, more literally, ‘when we were in the flesh’ (en tē sarki; see the niv marginal rendering). In texts like this, Paul uses the word ‘flesh’ to denote not a sinful propensity within a person (as the niv suggests) but the ‘power sphere’ in which a person lives. Since its root theological idea is that which is typical of this world in distinction from the spiritual realm, ‘flesh’ can be used as shorthand for the old regime. ‘When we were in the flesh’ means basically, ‘when we were living in the old, non-Christian, regime’. In this regime the law was instrumental in arousing sinful passions; for it stimulated our innate rebelliousness against God. Now, however, we have died to that law and can serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code. As in 2:29, the contrast between ‘written code’ (gramma) and ‘Spirit’ is the contrast between the Mosaic law as a determining power of the old age and the Spirit, the ruling agent of the new.”<sup>4</sup> The NASB translates the passage correctly, giving a literal rendering of *sarx* as “flesh” and allowing the reader to determine what “flesh” means from the context. However, the NIV reflects a Calvinist bias by translating *sarx* as “sinful nature” and going further to say that we are controlled by that nature. The book of Romans does deal with the struggle between flesh and

<sup>3</sup> Morris, L. (1988). *The Epistle to the Romans* (274). Grand Rapids, Mich.; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>4</sup> Carson, D. A. (1994). *New Bible commentary : 21st century edition* (4th ed.) (Ro 7:1–6). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press.

spirit, but it does not teach that man has a depraved nature. So, unfortunately the NIV offers a poor translation in this case.

Again, the amount of theological bias within a text is dependent on how literal the translation aims to be, so translations that use a “thought for thought” translation philosophy will have more theological bias.

However, I have had no problem showing someone the gospel using the NIV, NLT, etc. To me, a greater problem is the use of study bibles and relying on the “notes” found along side the Bible text. Several examples follow. You will note that for each passage the actual text accurately reflects God’s will, while the study notes promote error.

1. Mark 16:16 in the Life Application Study Bible (NLT)

- NLT text: “Anyone who believes and is baptized will be saved. But anyone who refuses to believe will be condemned.”
- Study notes: “It is not the water of baptism that saves but God’s grace accepted through faith in Christ. Because of Jesus’ response to the criminal on the cross who died with him, we know it is possible to be saved without being baptized (Luke 23:43).”

2. Romans 6:3-4 in the NIV Study Bible

- NIV text: “Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”
- Study notes: “although baptism is not a means by which we enter into a vital faith relationship with Jesus Christ, it is closely associated with faith. Baptism depicts graphically what happens as a result of the Christian’s union with Christ, which comes with faith - through faith we are united with Christ, just as through our natural birth we are united with Adam. As we fell into sin and became subject to death in father Adam, so we now have died and been raised again with Christ - which baptism symbolizes.”

3. Acts 8:13, 22-24 in the MacArthur Study Bible (ESV)

- ESV text: “Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed... Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.” And Simon answered, “Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.”
- Study notes: “His belief was motivated by purely selfish reasons and could never be considered genuine, cf. John 2:23-24. He saw it as an external act useful to gain the power he believed Philip possessed. By following Philip, he also was able to maintain contact with his former audience... Although Simon was certainly fearful, he was unwilling to repent and seek forgiveness, wanting only to escape the consequences of his sin.”

4. Acts 2:38 in the Apologetics Study Bible (HCSB)

- HCSB text: “‘Repent,’ Peter said to them, ‘and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus the Messiah for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’”
- Study notes: “Though repentance/faith and baptism go together in Ac, baptism is an indication of belonging to Christ, not a condition for it. For example, Cornelius and his relative believed and received the Spirit before receiving water baptism (10:44-48).”
- Caption within the text under the title *Twisted Scripture*: “many groups use these verses to teach that baptism is essential to salvation. Yet Paul made a distinction between the two when he wrote, ‘For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel’ (1Cor. 1:17). He then described the gospel as ‘the message of the cross,’ which is ‘God’s power to save (v. 18). Baptism and the gospel are thus set in opposition to each other. Paul explained that ‘the gospel... is God’s power for salvation’ (Rm 1:16).”

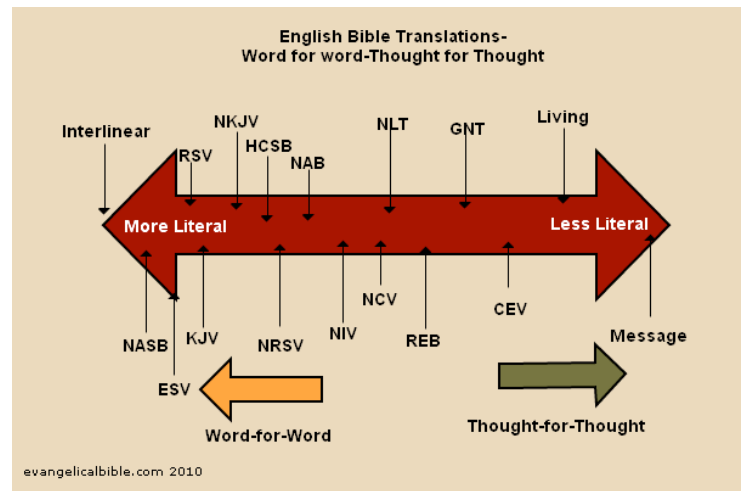
5. Acts 10:47 in the ESV Study Bible

- ESV text: “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”
- Study notes: “Baptizing these people would be an outward sign of an inward work of God in their hearts and of their personal commitment to Christ.”

## So, Which Bible Should I Use?

Given the multitude of translations and Bible formats, this can be a daunting question. While there is not a single, right answer, the principles we have discussed in this study should help us when choosing a Bible. So, with much thought I offer these suggestions:

1. **Don't rely on a study Bible.** I have several study Bibles in my library and have found many useful insights in their notes. However, as we have seen study Bibles are often filled with theological bias and could lead into error someone who is not grounded in God's Word. My suggestion would be to use a standard text/reference Bible as your main Bible. This way when you read God's Word you will not be tempted to constantly check what some man says about the passage. If you have a study Bible you like, fine, but always remember that the comments and notes are the words of men, not God. Make sure that you test all that men say against the truth of God's word.
2. **Use a Bible that follows a word for word translation philosophy.** Again, translations are the products of men, men who have theological viewpoints. It is difficult for the theological viewpoints of men to creep into the text if the translators follow a literal translation philosophy. When translators use a “thought for thought” method of translating, it is easier to insert the theology of the translator into the text. If I were to recommend a translation, I would recommend the NASB, ESV, NKJV, and possibly the HCSB. I would also recommend the KJV for anyone comfortable and familiar with the language.
3. **Select a word for word translation that you can understand.** God wants you to understand His will. For this reason, the KJV is an unsuitable translation for many. Likewise, some might find the NASB hard to understand in some places or find the NKJV easier to understand than the ESV. Test them all. Try reading Romans 6, 1John 3, etc. in each of these translations. Which was most understandable to you? That is the Bible you should use.



## A Final Word

You have just read the thoughts of one man. I believe my research and conclusions to be valid and have made suggestions based on that understanding. However, I do not have the authority to tell anyone what translation to use. While the NIV is not my preferred translation, I know several sound Christians who use it as their translation of choice. I have no problem with them continuing to do so, given that they continue to study all that God says on any matter, which we must all do regardless of translation preference. Our God is powerful, and I am confident that His providence will guide into truth anyone who desires to know His will. May we praise Him every day by reading and contemplating His Word! *“How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the Lord, And in His law he meditates day and night.”* (Psalm 1:1–2, NASB95)