



Choosing a Bible

Randy A Brown

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Purpose of the Bible

There are many types of Bibles on the market and they are very different depending on their purpose and who would use them. You might find that you need more than one. Here are some things to consider:

Reading – good text and layout, multiple ribbons, reading plan, maybe easy to hold in one hand

Study – tools such as references, concordance, dictionary, topical index, commentary, lays flat, maybe wide margins for personal notes

Carry – hand size, durable, easy to replace

Witnessing – easy to carry, maybe some margin space for chain references

Journaling – wide margins, thick paper

Preaching/teaching – wide margins, thick paper, writing paper for outlines, large print, bold print, good tools for sermon prep, lays flat

Elements of a Good Bible

In choosing a Bible, there are several areas that you will want to pay close attention to:

Translation – it is important to choose a translation that you will be comfortable using for several years. I prefer a translation that is more literal (word-for-word) than functional (thought-for-thought).

Cover – there are lots of choices including imitation leather, bonded leather, hard-cover, genuine leather, calfskin, goatskin. In general calfskin and goatskin are more durable.

Binding – I recommend a binding that will allow the Bible to lay flat. For that you will need a sewn binding, known as Smyth sewn. Sewn bindings are far better than glued.

Paper – paper ranges from thin to thick and from opaque to see-through. The best paper is acid-free. I recommend a paper that is opaque and is not shiny.

Font – font size is a matter of personal preference but keep in mind that you might be using this Bible for many years. You will want a font that you will enjoy reading for years to come. The font doesn't need to be bold, but you do want a fairly dark print that is consistent. This insures the text is readable through your highlighting. If you are a teacher or preacher and you like to leave your Bible on the pulpit and glance down to read from it, you will want to consider a larger font.

Study helps – study helps include references, concordance, maps, lists, etc. It isn't necessary for these tools to be in your Bible but they do help. Some Bibles don't have any helps of any kind.

Price

Prices of Bibles range from a couple of dollars to a couple hundred dollars. In general, you get what you pay for. In general, the more expensive the Bible the longer it will last. I don't make this as a blanket statement – this is not a rule. Some Bibles are more expensive simply because the publisher prints them in low quantities. The main reason to buy an expensive Bible is because of quality. A higher quality cover, binding, and paper will last many years longer than that of lower quality. It is better to buy a Bible that will last than to go cheap and have to replace a Bible because it fell apart. Think of it like a good pair of shoes.

If I'm willing to spend \$50 on a pair of shoes that will last a year, I should be willing to spend \$50 on a Bible that will last several years. We won't even mention video game systems and TV's.

Bible Translations

Choosing a Bible translation is one of the most important decisions you can make in your Bible reading and study. The right translation can increase your understanding, help you to grow deeper, memorize, and stay excited about the Word of God. The wrong translation can keep you confused, and even worse, bored over God's Word.

Translating the Scriptures is not a simple task. Often, there is not a single word in English that means exactly what a word means in Greek or Hebrew. Words have a range of meanings, and the range of meanings can be much different from one

language to another. This requires a degree of interpretation on the part of the translator. Some translations have more interpretation than others.

There are two basic types of Bible translations: formal equivalent (literal, or word for word) and dynamic equivalent (thought for thought). Some versions attempt to bridge the two.

Formal Equivalence

Formal equivalence, also known as literal, or word-for-word, attempts to keep as close as possible to the original languages. The goal with formal equivalence is to make a text that is more accurate to the original and still be readable in the English language. They have a high reading grade-level. A formal equivalent doesn't work as well for idioms and expressions because sometimes the point gets lost in translation. However, formal equivalence is far better for serious study because of the accuracy of words and grammar.

Some basic literal translations include:

KJV (King James Version)

NKJV (New King James Version)

NASB (New American Standard Bible)

ESV (English Standard Version)

NRSV (New Revised Standard Version)

Dynamic Equivalence

Dynamic equivalence, also known as functional equivalence, or thought-for-thought, attempts to translate the thought of the passage rather than the actual words. This allows more room for interpretation by the translators. The goal with dynamic equivalence is to make the text more readable, resulting in a lower

reading grade-level. They can be better for expressions and idioms, but they're not as good for word studies because the words and grammar may have been changed to make the text more readable.

Thought-for-thought translations include:

NIV (New International Version)

NLT (New Living Translation)

NET (New English Translation)

HCSB (Holman Christian Standard Bible)

The NIV, NET, and HCSB attempt to combine elements of both types of translations. The HCSB attempts to remain as literal as possible by only using

thought-for-thought translation where necessary for clarification. Holman calls it an optimal equivalent.

Paraphrase

Another type of Bible, though not actually a translation, is the paraphrase. This includes The Message and the Living Bible. Paraphrases are not translations and are not based on manuscripts. An example of making a paraphrase might be taking the NIV and rephrasing it in your own words. There's nothing wrong with reading a paraphrase but I would not use them in place of an actual translation. They might be useful as commentaries.

Choosing a Bible Translation

No translation is perfect. The fact that it's a translation requires there to be a degree of interpretation, and no one's interpretation is perfect. Every translation

ever published has gone through revisions to make them better and correct mistakes. I won't say that every translation is good. Some are better than others.

For Bible study I recommend a literal translation because of their accuracy. The KJV, NKJV, NASB, and ESV are all good choices. I use the KJV (just my personal preference). My next favorites are the NKJV and ESV because they retain accuracy and readability.

Translation Overview

This is a short summary of some of the major translations in use today, with a sample from 2 Timothy.

KJV

The KJV celebrated its 400th anniversary in 2011. There's a good reason it's been popular for that long. It's had a major impact on the English language, and

is very elegant in its style. It has gone through several revisions. Probably the most popular edition is the 1769. It is a literal translation and is the translation I use most for reading, memorization, and study.

2Ti 2:15 KJV Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

2Ti 3:16-17 KJV All scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: ¹⁷ That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.

NKJV

The NKJV from Nelson publishers is an update to the KJV. It contains manuscript notes that show textual variations. While updating the text, other manuscripts were taken into consideration. It is also a literal translation and is the 2nd translation I use for reading, memorization, and study.

2Ti 2:15 NKJ Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

2Ti 3:16-17 NKJ All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

NRSV

The NRSV is an update of the RSV, which itself is an update to the KJV. The NRSV uses newer manuscript discoveries, but also uses exegetical insights and linguistic theories, which tend to make it less accurate because of theological bias. It is also a literal translation.

2Ti 2:15 NRSV Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.

2Ti 3:16-17 NRSV All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

NASB

The NASB is an update to the ASV, which is also a revision of the KJV. The NASB is less archaic and more theologically conservative, but is so literal that it feels stiff, or inexpressive. It is perhaps the most literal modern translation. It's more literal than the KJV, which makes it good for study, but perhaps not as good for reading and memorization.

2Ti 2:15 NAS Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.

2Ti 3:16-17 NAS All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ¹⁷ that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

ESV

The ESV is essentially a revision of the RSV, which retains its KJV heritage. It attempts to be a new translation, but still uses theological terms in the same way that the KJV does (such as justification, sanctification, etc.). It is more literal than the KJV and still maintains its literary excellence. It is becoming very popular with scholars. It is very accurate and readable, making it a great choice for reading, memorization, and study. I use it along with my KJV and NKJV.

2Ti 2:15 ESV Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.

2Ti 3:16-17 ESV All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

NIV

The NIV contains elements of word-for-word and thought-for-thought translation, though it leans more toward thought-for-thought. It is probably the most popular translation today. It saw a major revision in 2011. Although translators have taken some liberties, it is conservative in its translation. It can sometimes be too simple, causing it to not be as accurate as it could have been. It tries to be gender-neutral (though not as neutral as the TNIV). It is a good translation for reading and study, although I prefer a more literal translation for study.

2Ti 2:15 NIV Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

2Ti 3:16-17 NIV All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

NLT

The NLT is a functional equivalent translation. The translators have gone to great lengths to convey the thoughts of the writers, and it is therefore highly interpretive by the translators. It is a useful translation for reading, but I would prefer a literal translation for study.

2Ti 2:15 NLT Work hard so you can present yourself to God and receive his approval. Be a good worker, one who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly explains the word of truth.

2Ti 3:16-17 NLT All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are

wrong and teaches us to do what is right. ¹⁷ God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.

HCSB

The HCSB by Homan Publishers uses a translation theory they call 'optimal equivalence'. They use a literal translation where possible, and use thought-for-thought where it is needed to clarify the text. It uses new manuscript discoveries and is a good choice for study and reading.

2Ti 2:15 HCSB Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who doesn't need to be ashamed, correctly teaching the word of truth.

2Ti 3:16-17 HCSB All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Conclusion

For Bible study it's best to stay close to the literal side of translations. The most popular translations are KJV, NKJV, ESV, and NASB. I recommend using a single translation for your main study and memorization and use other translations for reference. During study it is best to focus on one translation and refer to other translations as needed for clarification.

Avoid translations that were written by certain groups in order to prove their own doctrines. These translations are skewed toward theological biases even at the expense of accurate translation.

The Bible translation you use is an important part of your growth and devotion to God. If you don't enjoy reading it, or if you don't like how it sounds, study will be a chore instead of something you enjoy. The translation needs to be one that you're comfortable with. It's simple: If you enjoy it, you will do it; if you don't enjoy it, you won't do it.

I don't recommend using what everybody else uses just because they use it. Read as many translations as you can and make educated choices. And once you've chosen- read, study, and hide the Word in your heart. Choose your translation carefully. You might be using this Bible for years to come.

Cover and Binding

The cover of the Bible is a very important feature and should be chosen carefully. I recommend buying the best cover you can afford. A badly made cover will greatly shorten the life of the Bible, whereas a Bible with a high quality cover has a better chance of lasting a lifetime. Here is a short glossary of Bible cover and binding terms.

Smyth Sewn – also known as 'Section Sewn'. This is the highest quality book-binding available. It is library quality and archival safe. The pages are physically

sewn together in sections, known as signatures, using binders thread. Usually around 24 pages, the signatures are folded over to make individual sections of the book. The sections are then sewn together, creating the text block. The text block is then glued into the cover using a fabric backing, imitation leather, bonded leather, or real leather.

Genuine Leather – pigskin. This is the cheapest and most popular of real leathers.

Berkshire – pigskin. Another term for Genuine Leather.

Bonded Leather – left-over leather pieces of pigskin are glued together using glues and resins to form a leather-like cover. My wife calls it 'chopped ham'. In general, bonded leathers will not last. They tear apart under regular use. Like all leathers, there are various qualities of bonded leather. Cambridge uses 100% real leather fiber. Cambridge bonded leathers will outlast some genuine leathers.

Calfskin – this is a higher quality leather used for fine bindings. It is usually soft and flexible, which increases with use. Calfskin is one of my favorite leathers.

Goatskin – Goatskin and Highland Goatskin (also known as Real Morocco, or simply Morocco) have a natural grain. All other leathers have a grain that is stamped onto the leather. Goatskin is very durable and soft.

Calf-split – Calf-split is a higher quality grade than French Morocco. It is tanned to approach the quality and feel of full-grain calfskin. It is stiffer than goatskin and has an elegant feel to the grain.

French Morocco – taken from calfskin. Durable and flexible, though not as soft and flexible as calfskin, it is still a high-quality leather. It is an economical alternative to calfskin.

Imitation Leather – imitation leather is a man-made material that is made to look and feel like leather. There are many variations of imitation leather and they have different names such as TruTone, Kirvella, and Leatherflex. Usually, the higher quality imitation leathers will look and feel soft and be very durable. The cheaper imitation leathers will feel like tough plastic.

Hardcover – hardcover Bibles are made like any other hardcover book. This is one of the most economical covers. Hardcover Bibles are not usually made with the same quality bindings as leather-bound covers. One exception is Cambridge. Cambridge hardcover Bibles are made at a very high standard of quality. If you don't want to spend \$100 or more on a higher quality cover, I recommend Cambridge hardcover Bibles. Just keep in mind their selection of translations is more limited in hardcover. I like hardcover editions because they lay flat and are easier to use.

Paperback – Bibles in paperback are glued. They are useful, but not very good quality. Just don't expect them to last very long. I don't know of any wide-margin Bibles in paperback, but there are many study Bibles. I recommend paperback if they are significantly cheaper than the next cover option. Just keep in mind that paperback is the least durable cover available.

Vinyl – vinyl is a more durable and flexible material than paperback and is very inexpensive. Local Church Bible Publishers sells a vinyl version of their better quality Bibles. These Bibles are less than \$10 and still of decent quality.

Loose-Leaf – the pages in a loose-leaf Bible are placed into a notebook. This has the benefit of letting you add sheets between the pages, removing the pages for use on the go, etc. Loose-leaf pages have to be of higher quality or they will tear easily. Hendrickson makes a great loose-leaf Bible that is available in several translations.

Lining – the lining is the material on the inside of the cover. It ranges from paper to calfskin leather. Many Bibles use bonded leather or imitation leather for the lining, but there are some Bibles that have real leather. Leather liners will allow the leather cover to be more flexible. More flexibility might be harder to hold in one hand. Paper liners will make the cover feel stiffer, making it easier to hold open in one hand.

Edge Lined – this is the binding style that Allan and Cambridge use in most of their goatskin editions. There is a piece of leather from the liner that is glued between two pages. This takes the stress off of the text block and lasts much longer.

Yapp – this is the leather that goes beyond the edge of the pages. It is available as full Yapp and semi Yapp. A full yapp covers the edges of the paper, offering more protection.

Overcasting – This is vertical stitching that is inserted at the middle of the first and last section to add strength to the binding. Overcasting is mostly found in higher quality sewn Bibles.

Glued binding – this is where the end signatures (the paper that is glued to the spine of the cover) are cut flat and glued to the spine. One major complaint about glued bindings is the Bible will not lay open (except for maybe in the middle of the Bible). I like to open the Bible to Genesis 1:1 and lay it on the table to see if it will stay open. Almost all inexpensive Bibles are glued and will not last as long as sewn bindings.

Paper and Print

The type of paper a Bible has will depend on the purpose of the Bible. If the Bible is thin for carrying, the paper will be thin. Most of the time this means the paper

will not be very opaque. In other words, you'll easily be able to see the print on the other side of the page. This is distracting and not good for marking. Some publishers use a more opaque paper even if it's thin. Many Bibles from RL Allan has paper like this. Readability can be improved if the publisher uses line-matching so that the line of text on the page lines up with the line of text on the other side of the page. If you want paper that is thick and opaque, and good for writing, the Bible will be thicker. Paper that is more opaque allows for print that is bolder.

Red-Letter vs Black-Letter

I own and use both red-letter and black-letter editions of the Bible. I don't really have a favorite between the two for several reasons. I use one for reading and another for serious study.

There are different versions of red-letter printing. For example, some Bibles only have the words of Christ on Earth in red, while others have all the words of Christ in red- including from Acts to Revelation. I prefer all of the words of Christ in red, not just while Jesus was on Earth. One problem with this is that there is some controversy with a few verses (particularly in Revelation).

There are many shades of red that publishers use. Some publishers' red-letter is closer to the pink range. Other publishers use a faint print that is hard to see. Still others use a shade that looks more brown than red. My hat goes to Cambridge. Red-letter text in Cambridge editions are a bold red. Cambridge has by far my favorite shade of red. LCBPs red-letter edition looks to be on par with Cambridge (from the pictures I've seen).

There are sometimes problems with consistency. This goes for both black and red-letter. Some Bibles have dark text on one page and a lighter text on another (some are much worse than others).

I like red-letter for reading, but for marking and study I prefer black-letter- specifically for color-coding (and most of my marking is color-coding). With black-letter, my colors only have to work with one color of text. With red-letter, my colors have to work with two colors- and the red is different from one publisher to the next, so what works in one Bible might not work in another.

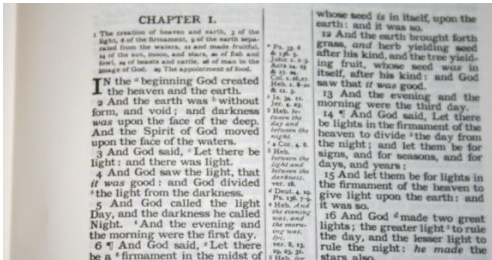
If I have red-letter I want a nice rich red that is consistent in shade and includes the words of Jesus throughout the NT. The words of God in the OT in red would be nice too. For study I prefer black-letter, but I want that to be a nice, bold black (none of this faint text that's hard to see), but not too bold to the point that it hurts my eyes. In know... I'm picky, but if I'm paying good money for a Bible, I want what I want.

Page Layout

Paragraph vs Verse-by-Verse

Page layout describes how the verses appear on the page. The two primary layouts are paragraph and verse-by-verse. They both have advantages and disadvantages. Here's a description of each.

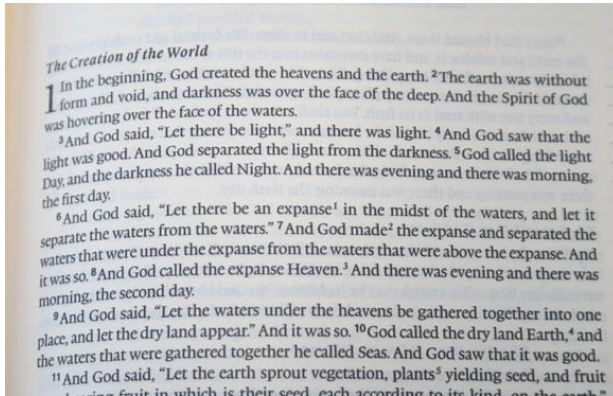
Verse-by-verse



With verse-by-verse format, simply known as verse format, each verse begins on a new line. Finding the verses is much easier but readability is more difficult because the flow of thought from one verse to another is

broken. Most KJV's are in verse format.

Paragraph

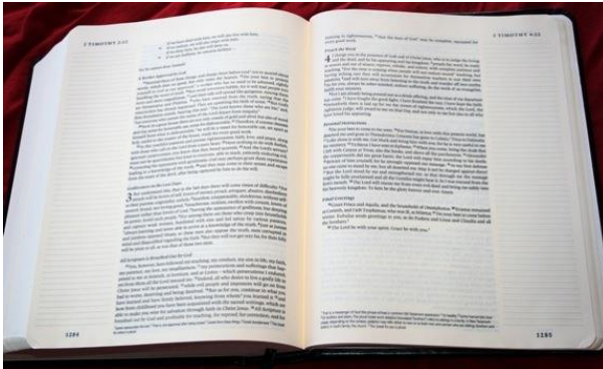


With paragraph format the verses are arranged in paragraphs just like a standard book. This greatly enhances the readability of the text. Paragraph format can take some getting used to if you mainly use verse-by-verse format.

Single-column vs Double-Column

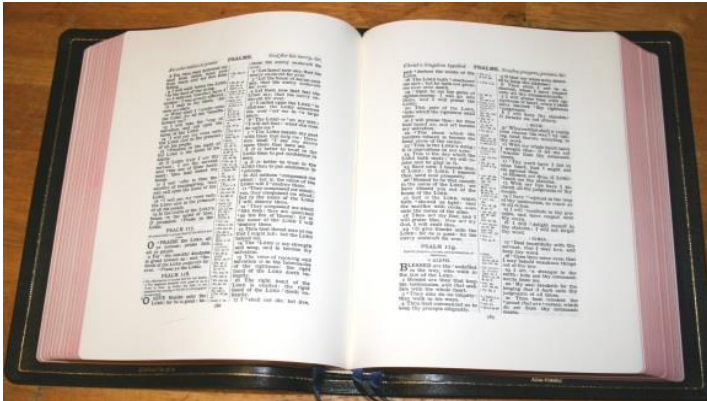
The text on the page is lined in columns. There two choices: single column and double column.

Single-column



Single-column has one column of text. References can be located on the inside margin, on the outside margin, or at the end of the verses.

Double-column



Double-column format has two columns of text per page with wide margins on the inside and outside of the page. References are usually in a center column between the columns of text.

Margins

Margins are useful for making notes, writing your own chain references, and for getting the text out of the inner gutter. Bibles with thumb-index need a little more margin just so the indexes don't cut into the text. Wide-margin Bibles have at least an inch margin just for writing. These Bibles are great for making your own study Bible and for preaching and teaching.

Study Helps

Not every Bible has study helps and depending on the purpose of the Bible you might not even want them. Here is a short list of the most common study helps.

References – References are some of the most useful study tools because they allow you to compare Scripture with Scripture. There are several styles and

layouts of references. Some include footnotes and translation notes. Sometimes they are keyed to the text with letters and numbers. The most popular seems to be center-column. Another style is end-of-verse. These usually don't have footnotes or translation notes. No reference system is perfect. Alternatives include using another Bible to help in your study, using software that includes references, or using tools such as Treasury of Scripture Knowledge (which has 500,000 cross-references).

Concordance – Not every Bible includes a concordance. Many concordances are too simple to be helpful beyond some simple searches. I like to use the word 'God' to compare concordances. Most have 12-24 entries. The Concord has over 50. I look for a concordance that has around 200 pages. External concordances are better than concordances that are included in Bibles. External concordances include Strong's Exhaustive Concordance, Young's Analytical Concordance, and Cruden's Concordance. You can also search with Bible software. If you are using your Bible as your carry Bible, it is nice to have a concordance built in.

Maps – Maps range from 4 pages in black and white to 32 pages in full color. There are theological differences with maps. One example is the placement of Mt. Sinai. I prefer maps that include an index.

Section headings – Section headings are small summaries of the next passage of Scripture. They can help break up the page into segments that helps the passages be more readable. They also help when scanning the page for specific events or topics. However, there is the possibility of theological bias.

Self-pronouncing text – self-pronouncing text includes pronunciation marks for some of the less common words that explain how a word should be pronounced. Rather than pronunciation marks, some Bibles have accent marks for some words that show which part of a word should be spoken with more emphasis. Accent marks are helpful, but they're not as helpful as a full self-pronouncing text. I prefer to have the words listed in the back with a pronunciation guide and leave them out of the text itself. This makes the text easier to read.

Writing paper – some Bibles include ruled paper in the back for writing. This is a nice feature. Some teachers and preachers keep outlines here.

Ribbons – Look for a Bible with at least two ribbons. Many RL Allan Bibles have three. Having at least two will be helpful for reading, study, marking, etc.

Glossary – Glossaries are most important for words that are no longer in use. This is especially helpful for Bibles in King James Version. The Cambridge Concord includes a glossary. The KJV Clarion and Pitt Minion have a Reader's Companion that is a cross between a concordance and dictionary.

In my opinion, this list is the most important study tools that you can get in your Bible. No one Bible has all of these tools, but I try to find as many of these tools as possible.

Summary

Translation

For study, choose the most literal (word-for-word) translation you can feel comfortable with. KJV, NKJV, ESV, and NASB are good choices. For choosing one Bible for reading and study, stick with the literal translations.

Text

Look for at least an 8 point font with a 9 point leading (the space between the spaces). A good quality Bible should have a consistent print-quality. The text should not fade from one page to another. Red letter is another key area for reading Bibles. Some Bible's red letters are more pink than red. That's OK too if you like the text, but red letters make it more difficult to highlight and color code. I prefer red letter for reading and black letter for marking.

Notes

Notes are someone else's Bible study. I do not recommend using these Bibles for personal study as they include the writer's biases. They can be handy as a commentary if needed, and some of them have some useful dictionaries and word studies.

Features

Not all Bibles have study tools built in, but some do. Good Bible study comes through the use of good study tools. Tools are:

- Concordance
- Dictionary
- References
- Maps
- Self-pronouncing text

- Ribbon marker (preferably 2 or more)

A good Study Bible is a Bible that will give you the tools you need to do your own study and come to your own conclusions. It will give you the tools you need to compare scripture with scripture.

Quality

The Bible you choose should be purchased with the idea that it's going to get a life-time of use. For this reason you will want a Bible that will last. Some areas to pay attention to are:

- Binding
- Cover
- Paper

A good binding will be sewn and have good stitching. This allows the Bible to lay flat when open.

The cover should be leather or hard cover. Bonded leather is OK, but do not expect it to last even if the Bible is kept in a Bible case. Bonded leather is very cheap material and will not hold up to heavy use. An exception to this is the bonded leather available from Cambridge. The higher-end materials are not a requirement for a quality Bible, but in general the higher quality the cover the longer it will last. Calfskin, goatskin and Morocco leather will last for many years. A good quality hard cover can also last many years, and is far less expensive than leather.

A good wide-margin Bible will give you good paper and plenty of room to write on. Text from the other side should only be slightly visible. There will be some visibility, but the paper shouldn't be so thin that the text is distracting. A thicker

paper is better for writing. Thin paper will allow your pens and pencils to bleed through and leave indentions in the page.

The Most Important Thing

Even though we have lots of great choices and things to think about when choosing a Bible, the most important thing about a Bible is reading it, studying it, hiding it in our hearts, living it, and sharing it.

Final Thoughts

Thanks for reading. For reviews and photos of Bibles of all types and translations please visit BibleBuyingGuide.com.