

Paraphrasing Scripture as a Way to Meditate

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Like a beautiful landscape or a good song, the riches of biblical literature can be experienced in multiple ways. You can read it closely, pencil in hand. You can memorize it, mulling over the verses. You can listen to it taught. Or you can simply lie on the couch and listen to it play on a phone or tablet. Every way is beneficial as it opens up new angles on the meaning of the text.



One particular way of engaging the Scriptures that has helped me immensely has been paraphrasing. This is not a new concept at all; it just means "putting it in your own words." You probably do this all the time in the course of your daily life—in the car, as you summarize a text or email for your husband while he's driving; at work, as you push for clarity in a meeting ("so what you're saying is . . ."); in school, when writing essays. Paraphrasing is a natural part of life and essential to clear understanding. They say you don't really understand something until you can explain it in your own words to a child. That may be a bit extreme, depending on the age of the child, but there's some truth in it.

That's why I love paraphrasing Scripture. It exposes what we don't understand and forces us to pursue clarity. Because of this, it sharpens the point of the text and drives it into the places in our lives that need it the most.

An Example

I'll show you how it works. Here is Philippians 1:3-5 in the ESV:

"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now."

Now this is a very good and faithful translation, but our goal is to take what Paul said and put it in our own words. "I thank my God" seems pretty straightforward so we will leave that as it is. However, "in all my remembrance of you" is definitely a bit cumbersome and confusing. It's also kind of Bible-ish language (who talks like that?), so we'll paraphrase it. Upon reflection, I think that Paul means "every time I remember you." There, that's starting to sound clearer.

Now what about the next part? Well, the main action clause is "making my prayer with joy." We can simplify that by saying, "I pray joyfully." When does he pray joyfully? "Always in every prayer of mine for you all." We could paraphrase that with "every time I pray for you all I pray joyfully."

The final phrase that we really need to work with is "partnership in the gospel." Comparing translations, we realize that the NASB has "participation in the gospel," which conveys a different nuance. Going with the NASB we might think that Paul is talking about how he and the Philippians are both participants in the benefits of the gospel. The translation "partnership," on the other hand, gives more of a sense that they are partnering together to do something in relation to the gospel. Paraphrasing forces us to think through which it is.

To find the answer, we have to go to the end of Philippians where Paul uses the same word as he thanks the Philippians for their financial support of him in the gospel ministry. "When I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving except you only" (4:15). Reading this verse back into 1:5, we can now hypothesize that Paul is emphasizing the way they have tangibly partnered with him in the advance of the gospel.

Bringing all of this together, we can give a full paraphrase of 1:3-5:

"I thank my God every time I remember you and every time I pray for you all I pray joyfully, because of the way you have partnered with me for the advance of the gospel from the time the gospel first came to you until now."

When we stop to paraphrase, many verses that we would have understood only vaguely begin to speak with clarity, like a song on the radio that you can barely hear through the static until you adjust the dial and the sound transmits clean and clear.

A Few Tips

- You don't have to paraphrase everything. I often do whole chapters or books, but you might just want to do it with a verse or section now and then.
- Do what works for you. It's not an exact science. Just try to take what seems vague or confusing and express it in a way that makes more sense to you. Of course, we want to clarify the meaning of the text, not change it, so take clues from the language and context to help you interpret faithfully.
- Write it down. You'll be glad you did when you see it in the margin of your Bible or can access it on your computer someday.
- Use it in your teaching. Sometimes it can really help people understand your interpretation of a text if you read them a paraphrase.