

“May” and “Might” in Scripture

How are we to understand the meaning of Bible verses that use the words “may” or “might”? For example, consider 1 Peter 3:18a in the English Standard Version (ESV).

Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, **that he might** bring us to God

Peter is writing to believers (1 Peter 1:1), but is he saying that in the suffering and death of Jesus He might bring us to God – **but He might not?**

The possible confusion comes from differences between the grammar of the original New Testament documents (by Peter and all the other writers of Scripture) and modern contemporary English.

In English, certain words (“may” and “might”) indicate uncertainty. The uncertainty includes the negative possibility (“may – but may not,” “might – but might not). In English versions of the New Testament these words are often used when the writer is expressing a purpose or an intended result.

- Christ suffered ... that he **might** bring us to God.

However, some modern versions use more clear-cut English¹ to avoid the possible misunderstanding.

- ... he suffered for those who are guilty **to bring you** to God... (NCV)
- ... Christ also suffered once for sins ... **to bring you** to God (NET)
- ... he died for sinners **to bring you** safely home to God (NLT)

Here is where the confusion comes in. English (at least the way we use English today) doesn’t have a way to express that Greek form without introducing the implied uncertainty of “may” or “might.” Some versions choose a more clear way to express the writer’s meaning. This is an example of the subtle shading between a translation and a paraphrase.

- An **exact translation** from the Greek New Testament carefully follows specific rules of grammar. A purpose or intended result is expressed in the form that requires “may” or “might” in English. That rule of grammar for a precise translation is true even if the purpose or result is absolutely certain. Not using that form would be wrong, possibly distracting or confusing the first-century readers. Think about your reaction if you read in a newspaper “they are busy” or any other example of bad grammar. You might be distracted or confused. The New Testament writers used good grammar to communicate God’s message to their Greek-speaking readers.
- A **good paraphrase**, on the other hand, may adapt the strict rules of grammar to conform to contemporary English usage. If the original writers used good grammar and did not intend to include uncertainty, the version can use “will” to remove the English ambiguity.

In a discussion of this issue, a Greek grammar text book clarifies: “We must not suppose that this use ... necessarily implies any doubt about the fulfillment of the verbal action on the part of the speaker.”²

A General Rule of Thumb

Think about this general rule of thumb for “may” or “might” in a Bible verse.

- When “may” or “might” are used, does the context clearly provide one or more conditions (“If ...”)? When the writer includes a condition, the “may not” is implied if the condition is not met.
- BUT, when the context is a statement of purpose or intended result (“That...,” “So that...,” “In order that...”), don’t add the “may not” or “might not” where the author didn’t.
- If you are still not sure, look at other translations³ for additional clarity.

The same Greek grammar textbook says, “the NT writers employ the language to reflect their theology: what God purposes is what happens.”⁴ “May not” and “might not” are not options for the results of God’s purposes.

¹ <https://www.biblegateway.com/verse/en/1%20Peter%201%3A7>

New Century Version, New English Translation, New Living Translation

² Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 473

³ <https://www.biblegateway.com/>

⁴ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 473, emphasis in the original.