

GREEK FOR LIFE

Strategies for
Learning, Retaining, and Reviving
New Testament Greek

Benjamin L. Merkle
and Robert L. Plummer

Foreword by William D. Mounce


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FOREWORD

The goal of every pastor should be to preach “Thus saith the Lord,” though perhaps saying it in modern English. The goal should be to know the text so well, including its biblical and cultural contexts, and to know our own context so well that when we speak, we speak the words of God.

This was always my goal in preaching, and I was fortunate enough to be in a ministry situation that allowed time to study. Of course, on some Sunday mornings I had to correct something I’d said the previous week, but nevertheless I did my homework and was able to preach with confidence. I don’t believe this would have been possible without a competent knowledge of Greek. I am thankful for our English Bible translations, and if a diligent person studies from two of them, the meaning of the biblical text is almost always clear. But more is required of the preacher. Your people trust and look up to you, whether you deserve it or not. You are responsible before God to do the best you can, for God deserves nothing less.

I grieve for pastors whose professional responsibilities are so numerous that the only way to fulfill them all is to neglect their marriage and family and their own spiritual life, and often their preaching. This is one reason why only one out of ten seminary-trained pastors is still in the pulpit ten years after graduation and

why over 80 percent of their spouses want them to change professions. It is truly time for a biblical ecclesiology to irradiate human traditions that govern so many of our churches.

However, until that day comes—and I am not holding my breath—I delight in books such as *Greek for Life*. I resonate with the sentiment that “the end goal of studying Greek is to know the God who has revealed himself through his Word.” Greek is a necessary tool for proclaiming God’s Word from the pulpit every week, and I am thankful for this text and the encouragement it brings to the critical task of being a herald of the King.

William D. Mounce
president, BiblicalTraining.org, and author
of *Basics of Biblical Greek*

PREFACE

We want you to love the Greek New Testament. We want you to read, study, and enjoy the Greek New Testament for the duration of your ministry. We want you to look back at the end of your life and say, “I was faithful with the knowledge and training the Lord gave me.”

Both authors of this book have been teaching Greek for nearly twenty years. During that time, we have seen many students begin to use Greek effectively, only to see their skills slowly erode after graduation from college or seminary. This book is one of our efforts to arrest such linguistic apostasy before it takes place.

We wrote this book with several potential readers in mind:

1. If you are a *seminary or college student*, we hope to inspire you with many quotes and devotionals in this book, as well as equip you with the best study skills and lifetime habits to make reading the Greek New Testament a regular part of your life.
2. If you are a *teacher of Greek*, we hope this book provides ideas to incorporate into your classes. Perhaps you will consider using this book as a supplementary textbook for your Greek courses.

3. If you are a *pastor or Christian leader who is using Greek* in ministry, we want this book to encourage and sharpen you.
4. If you are a *lost Greek lamb* who has wandered from the fold, we are looking for you! If you are reading this sentence, we have found you! After reading this preface, you might consider turning directly to chapter 8, “How to Get It Back.” It is never too late to return to the Greek New Testament.

Regardless of your background, this book includes elements to both instruct and inspire you. Also, within each chapter you will find many sidebars with inspiring quotes about studying Greek or devotional insights from the Greek New Testament. Just as a chef-in-training is encouraged to keep laboring in the kitchen when he tastes the delicacies produced by chefs who have completed their training, we hope these insights will nourish your mind and spirit.

Below is a brief description of each chapter. Chapters 1 and 3–5 were written by Ben. The other chapters were written by Rob.

Chapter 1: *Keep the End in Sight*. This chapter shows you why knowing Greek matters in the life and ministry of future church leaders. If your goal is to be a better interpreter and teacher of God’s Word, then the goal should be to master Greek.

Chapter 2: *Go to the Ant, You Sluggard*. This chapter helps you think about laziness, diligence, distractions, and time management—specifically as they apply to Greek.

Chapter 3: *Review, Review, Review*. This chapter stresses the value and importance of reviewing vocabulary and paradigms. It will give you the proper strategy for studying Greek most effectively.

Chapter 4: *Use Your Memory Effectively*. This chapter demonstrates that anyone can memorize information by using the proper methods and offers several methods for memorizing Greek effectively.

Chapter 5: *Use Greek Daily*. This chapter suggests ways to use Greek in your personal devotions and in Scripture memorization to improve your knowledge of the Bible and of Greek.

Chapter 6: *Use Resources Wisely*. This chapter discusses resources (including smartphone apps, websites, and software) that can aid your study of the Greek New Testament, and it suggests strategies for using these resources effectively.

Chapter 7: *Don't Waste Your Breaks*. This chapter provides strategies to help you avoid losing your Greek skills over summer and winter breaks and suggests methods and resources to help you maintain your Greek.

Chapter 8: *How to Get It Back*. This chapter offers practical ways to resurrect your Greek if you have neglected it for a while.

At the end of each chapter, you will find a devotional reflection from the Greek New Testament. We hope these brief meditations will whet your appetite for a devotional life spent in the Greek text. We also want to keep before you the ultimate goal of your Greek study—to know and love the Triune God and to love people who are made in his image.



This book would not exist without the input of many people other than the two authors whose names appear on the cover. First, we give thanks to the Triune God, who graciously saved two sinners and then gave us the privilege of serving him. Second, we thank our teachers, colleagues, and students. The best ideas in this book are the fruit of communal learning and reflection. Third, we thank Jim Kinney, Bryan Dyer, and others at Baker who believed in this book and helped bring it to fruition. Fourth, we thank various friends or publishers who allowed their work to be quoted or featured within: William Mounce, William Varner, Todd Scaewater, Justin Taylor, and B&H Academic. Fifth, we

are grateful for various friends, research assistants, and secretaries who shared historical quotes, transcribed *Daily Dose of Greek* weekend editions, searched for citations, and carefully proofread the manuscript: Tom Lyon, James Sharkey, Jeremy Hetrick, Brian Dicks, Zach Carter, and Billie Goodenough.

Last of all, we dedicate this book to the memory of Brandon Merkle (1997–2016), who passed away during the writing of this book. How deeply he was loved. How deeply he is missed.

ABBREVIATIONS

General and Bibliographic

BDAG	W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
BDF	F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and R. W. Funk. <i>A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961.
BHGT	Baylor Handbook on the Greek Text
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example
EGGNT	Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (B&H Academic)
ESV	English Standard Version
etc.	<i>et cetera</i> , and so forth, and the rest
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible
i.e.	<i>id est</i> , that is
KJV	King James (Authorized) Version
LEB	Lexham English Bible
LXX	Septuagint, Greek Old Testament
NA ²⁸	Eberhard Nestle, Erwin Nestle, B. Aland, K. Aland, J. Karavidopoulos, C. M. Martini, and B. M. Metzger, eds. <i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i> . 28th rev. ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012.
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NET	New English Translation
NIV	New International Version
NKJV	New King James Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version

NT	New Testament
OG	Old Greek version of the Old Testament
RSV	Revised Standard Version
<i>SBJT</i>	<i>Southern Baptist Journal of Theology</i>
UBS ⁴	B. Aland, K. Aland, J. Karavidopoulos, C. M. Martini, and B. M. Metzger, eds. <i>The Greek New Testament</i> . 4th rev. ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994.
UBS ⁵	B. Aland, K. Aland, J. Karavidopoulos, C. M. Martini, and B. M. Metzger, eds. <i>The Greek New Testament</i> . 5th rev. ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2014.

Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis	Song	Song of Songs
Exod.	Exodus	Isa.	Isaiah
Lev.	Leviticus	Jer.	Jeremiah
Num.	Numbers	Lam.	Lamentations
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Ezek.	Ezekiel
Josh.	Joshua	Dan.	Daniel
Judg.	Judges	Hosea	Hosea
Ruth	Ruth	Joel	Joel
1–2 Sam.	1–2 Samuel	Amos	Amos
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kings	Obad.	Obadiah
1–2 Chron.	1–2 Chronicles	Jon.	Jonah
Ezra	Ezra	Mic.	Micah
Neh.	Nehemiah	Nah.	Nahum
Esther	Esther	Hab.	Habakkuk
Job	Job	Zeph.	Zephaniah
P ^s (s).	Psal ^m (s)	Hag.	Haggai
Prov.	Proverbs	Zech.	Zechariah
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes	Mal.	Malachi

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew	1–2 Thess.	1–2 Thessalonians
Mark	Mark	1–2 Tim.	1–2 Timothy
Luke	Luke	Titus	Titus
John	John	Philem.	Philemon
Acts	Acts	Heb.	Hebrews
Rom.	Romans	James	James
1–2 Cor.	1–2 Corinthians	1–2 Pet.	1–2 Peter
Gal.	Galatians	1–3 John	1–3 John
Eph.	Ephesians	Jude	Jude
Phil.	Philippians	Rev.	Revelation
Col.	Colossians		



Keep the End in Sight

Since the Bible is written in part in Hebrew and in part in Greek, . . . we drink from the stream of both—we must learn these languages, unless we want to be “silent persons” as theologians. Once we understand the significance and the weight of the words, the true meaning of Scripture will light up for us as the midday sun. Only if we have clearly understood the language will we clearly understand the content. . . . If we put our minds to the [Greek and Hebrew] sources, we will begin to understand Christ rightly.

—Melancthon (1497–1560)¹

What Is the Goal?

Several years ago when I (Ben) lived in Southeast Asia, I decided to climb Mount Kinabalu in Malaysia, the highest peak in the

1. From Melancthon’s inaugural address on “The Reform of the Education of Youth” (1518), cited in Hans J. Hillerbrand, ed., *The Reformation: A Narrative History Related by Contemporary Observers and Participants*, new ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 59–60.

region at 13,435 feet (4,095 meters). I had seen amazing pictures and heard personal testimonies of those who made it to the summit. But then one of my friends told me just how difficult the climb is. It is a two-day, 13.4 mile (21.6 km) round-trip climb with a 7,313 foot (2,229 meter) vertical ascent. The first day includes hiking about 5–7 hours up the mountain to the resting point called Laban Rata (10,730 feet or 3,270 meters). Here hikers who made advanced reservations find a bed to rest and sleep, but not for the entire night. The guides wake up the hikers at 2:30 a.m. so that they will be able to reach the summit before sunrise (about 5:30 a.m.). This last three-hour hike proves to be the most difficult because of exhaustion and, especially, altitude sickness. In relaying this story, my friend told me that he made it about 100 meters from the summit but just could not climb any farther.

My personal experience quickly confirmed that it was a difficult journey. It seemed that every step I took was uphill. Throughout the day it would occasionally rain, each time a tropical downpour. I was often tired and hungry. I made it to the resting place just before nightfall, had dinner, and tried to get some sleep. As expected, I was awakened by my guide at 2:30 a.m. to finish the hike. Many people who start the hike simply do not persevere to the peak, but I was determined. I kept thinking of being on top of the mountain with the amazing beauty of God's creation all around me. Knowing where I was going and what I would experience when I got there fueled my desires and motivated me to persevere. Now, this does not mean that I found no pleasure in the journey up the mountain. The flora and fauna along the path were often spectacular, as were the occasional glimpses of streams or stunning vistas. Most of the time, however, my view of the mountain was limited to the surrounding trees. But nothing compared to the view from the mountaintop, and it was the knowledge of what lay ahead that inspired me to continue up the path.

The study of Greek is not an end in itself. The end goal of studying Greek is to know the God who has revealed himself through his Word. God chose to use the Greek language to convey his will for

his people through his apostles and prophets. The goal of learning Greek (or Hebrew) is not to parade one's knowledge before others, seeking to impress a congregation or friend. Rather, the goal of learning Greek is first and foremost born out of a desire to behold unhindered the grandest sight: God himself. Therefore the journey of learning Biblical Greek has as its goal the most important thing in all of life: the knowledge of God as revealed in the New Testament. Although we don't need to read the Bible in the original languages to learn about God, as we will discuss below, some things are lost in translation. In addition, for those who are planning to preach or teach God's Word on a regular basis, reading the Bible in its original languages is of utmost importance.

Is the acquisition of the Biblical Greek language difficult? The acquisition of any language involves hard work and constant attention. If we don't keep the end in sight, we will certainly lose motivation and consider abandoning the path. Yet this does not mean we must wait a semester or year to see the benefits of knowing Greek. There is joy in the journey! But we also must remember that a solid knowledge of Greek will produce a lifetime of benefits both to us and to those we can influence.

The remainder of this chapter consists of three sections. First, I will offer four reasons why the study of Greek is needed. Second, I will answer three objections of some who claim that studying Greek is not necessary. Finally, I will conclude this chapter by encouraging readers to take the responsibility and privilege of studying Greek seriously. Throughout the chapter I will also bring in the testimony of others who likewise see the importance of knowing the language that God chose to use to convey his Word to the world.

Why Study Greek?

Greek Is the Language of the New Testament

In the Old Testament, God chose to reveal his Word (and thus his will) to his people in the Hebrew and Aramaic languages. But

the New Testament was written in Koine (or common) Greek. And although we have dozens of good English translations of the Bible, all translations are interpretations. This is because no two languages have exactly matching vocabulary, grammar, and idioms. Thus something is inevitably lost when one language is translated into another.

“Reading the Bible in translation is like kissing your new bride through a veil.”

—Hayyim Nahman Bialik, Jewish poet (1873–1934)

Translations are good and helpful, but they are only God’s Word insofar as they accurately reflect the Hebrew and Greek original.

Translations contain the word of God, and are the word of God, perfectly or imperfectly, according as they express the words, sense, and meaning of [the] originals.²

The real New Testament is the Greek New Testament. The English is simply a translation of the New Testament, not the actual New Testament. . . . There is much [in New Testament Greek] that cannot be translated. It is not possible to reproduce the delicate turns of thought, the nuances of language, in translation. The freshness of the strawberry cannot be preserved in any extract.³

In a very real way, then, the biblical languages are the means by which the gospel message is preserved. The great reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546) testified to this reality:

We will not long preserve the gospel without the languages. The languages are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit [Eph. 6:17] is contained; they are the casket in which this jewel is enshrined; they are the vessel in which this wine is held; they are the larder in which this food is stored; and . . . they are the baskets in which are kept these loaves and fishes and fragments. If through

2. John Owen, “The Hebrew and Greek Text of the Scripture,” in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 17 vols. (1678; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), 16:357.

3. A. T. Robertson, *The Minister and His Greek New Testament* (1923; repr., Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2008), 17. He continues, “It is good that the New Testament has been translated into so many languages.”

our neglect we let the languages go (which God forbid!), we shall . . . lose the gospel.⁴

Luther later added, “It is inevitable that unless the languages remain, the gospel must finally perish.”⁵ For Luther, it was while reading the Greek New Testament that his eyes were opened to the reality of God’s righteousness being revealed in the gospel. To put aside the Greek language is to put aside our surest guide to the truth.

“As we value the gospel, let us zealously hold to the languages.”

—Martin Luther
(1483–1546)⁶

Greek Increases Our Ability to Rightly Interpret the Bible

Although knowledge of Greek increases our ability to rightly interpret the Bible, the knowledge of Greek (or Hebrew) does not guarantee that we will come to a correct interpretation. Knowing Greek does not solve all interpretive questions. It does, however, help us to eliminate certain interpretations and allow us to see the strengths and weaknesses of various possible positions. Jason DeRouchie rightly declares, “Knowing the original languages helps one observe more accurately and thoroughly, understand more clearly, evaluate more fairly, and interpret more confidently the inspired details of the biblical text.”⁶ The goal of the exegete is to be able to carefully evaluate the text by using all the tools at one’s disposal. Scott Hafemann convincingly states that studying the Bible in the original languages

provides a window through which we can see for ourselves just what decisions have been made by others and why. Instead of being a second-hander, who can only take someone else’s word for it, a

4. Martin Luther, “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools” (1524), in *The Christian in Society II*, ed. Walther I. Brandt, trans. Albert T. W. Steinhäuser and Walther I. Brandt, vol. 45 of *Luther’s Works* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1962), 360.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Jason S. DeRouchie, “The Profit of Employing the Biblical Languages: Scriptural and Historical Reflections,” *Themelios* 37, no. 1 (2012): 36.

knowledge of the text allows us to evaluate, rather than simply re-gurgitate. . . . [Consequently] we will be able to explain to ourselves and to others why people disagree, what the real issues are, and what are the strengths of our own considered conclusions. It will allow us to have reasons for what we believe and preach, without having to resort to the papacy of scholarship or the papacy of personal experience.⁷

“Secondhand food will not sustain and deepen our people’s faith and holiness.”

—John Piper^b

Those without knowledge of the original languages are necessarily limited and must rely on others for the interpretation of various texts. Thus they become secondhanders. J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937) states that the student without knowledge of the original language of the New Testament “cannot deal with all the problems at first hand, but in a thousand important questions is at the mercy of the judgment of others.”⁸ A. T. Robertson explains, “The only alternative is to take what other scholars say without the power of forming an individual judgment.”⁹ Our goal is to be able to evaluate and thus come to a studied and reasoned opinion regarding the meaning of a text. But neither the gift of the Holy Spirit nor personal piety assures a correct interpretation. We study Greek so that we can better interpret God’s holy and infallible Word.

Of course, the end result is not merely to interpret the Bible correctly, but to better know the God who revealed himself to us in the Bible. Thus we learn the biblical languages so that we

7. Scott Hafemann, from “The SBJT Forum: Profiles of Expository Preaching,” *SBJT* 3, no. 2 (1999): 87–88.

8. J. Gresham Machen, afterword to *The Minister and His Greek New Testament*, by A. T. Robertson, 144. In his first presidential convocation address at Westminster Theological Seminary in 1929, Machen said, “If you are to tell what the Bible does say, you must be able to read the Bible for yourself. And you cannot read the Bible for yourself unless you know the languages in which it was written. . . . In his mysterious wisdom [God] gave [his Word] to us in Hebrew and in Greek. Hence if we want to know the Scriptures, to the study of Greek and Hebrew we must go.” “Westminster Theological Seminary: Its Purpose and Plan,” in *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. D. G. Hart (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 188–89; orig. published in *The Presbyterian* 99 (Oct. 10, 1929): 6–9.

9. Robertson, *Minister and His Greek New Testament*, 81.

can learn of the Triune God of Scripture. But as A. M. Fairbairn (1838–1912) once stated: “No [one] can be a theologian who is not first a philologist. [A pastor] who is no grammarian is no divine.”¹⁰

Greek Saves Time in Ministry

Almost everyone recognizes that pastors are typically extremely busy, with many important issues vying for their time. Preparing sermons, counseling church members, visiting the sick, attending various meetings, and answering phone calls and emails are just some of the duties that consume a pastor’s time. With all of these responsibilities, is it realistic for someone in ministry to spend valuable time in the original languages of the Bible?

Learning Greek well enough to use it effectively, however, can save time in sermon or teaching preparation. The danger of relying on commentaries is that they often do not agree at certain points. Thus, when preparing a message, the pastor is often compelled to read commentary after commentary to make sure something is not missed. Instead of reading the opinions of others, it would be better—and much quicker—for pastors to be like the Bereans and check the Scriptures for themselves to see whether these things are so (Acts 17:10–15).

In his inaugural address at Southern Seminary (Oct. 3, 1890), “Preaching and Scholarship,” A. T. Robertson observed, “If theological education will increase your power for Christ, is it not your duty to gain that added power? Never say you are losing time by going to school. You are saving time, buying it up for the future and storing it away. Time used in storing power is not lost.”¹¹

“One hour in the text [in the original languages] is worth more than ten in secondary literature.”

—Scott Hafemann^c

10. Address before the Baptist Theological College at Glasgow, reported in *The British Weekly*, April 26, 1906, as cited by A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), x. Also cited in Robertson, *Minister and His Greek New Testament*, 81.

11. S. Craig Sanders, “A. T. Robertson and His ‘Monumental Achievement,’” *Baptist Press*, September 22, 2014, <http://www.bpnews.net/43400/at-robertson-and-his-monumental-achievement>.

Greek Demonstrates the Importance of God's Word

For the Christian, the ultimate source of authority is God's Word. One way a pastor communicates to the congregation that the Bible is the foundation of all we believe is by carefully preaching and teaching it weekly. Additionally, when a pastor labors in the original languages to carefully exegete the text, it highlights that the pastor's authority is found in the Bible. Hafemann explains this reality:

Learning the languages affirms the nature of biblical revelation, restores the proper authority of the pastor as teacher, and communicates to our people that the locus of meaning and authority of the Scriptures does not reside in us, but in the text, which we labor so hard to understand. We learn the languages because we are convinced of the inerrancy, sufficiency, and potency of the Word of God.¹²

Our authority is not our favorite scholar, commentary series, or the commentary that's in our library. As Enoch Okode states, "It is hard to maintain the centrality of the Word if we view biblical languages as a non-essential and optional extra. Similarly, if preachers don't invest in Hebrew and Greek, their hearers will be deprived of some of the treasures of the Word as well as the informed and informative exposition that they deserve."¹³

Objections to Studying Greek

Greek Is Too Difficult

A. T. Robertson relates an inspiring story in a short chapter titled, "John Brown of Haddington, or Learning Greek without

12. Scott Hafemann, "The SBJT Forum: Profiles of Expository Preaching," *SBJT* 3, no. 2 (1999): 88.

13. Enoch Okode, "A Case for Biblical Languages: Are Hebrew and Greek Optional or Indispensable?," *African Journal of Theology* 29, no. 2 (2010): 92.

a Teacher.”¹⁴ Although John Brown became the greatest preacher and scholar in Scotland during his day, his beginnings were very humble. He was born in 1722 in Carpow, Scotland. His father, a poor weaver and fisherman who taught himself how to read, died when John was eleven, followed by his mother a short time later, and so he was left an orphan. He was converted at age twelve and took employment tending sheep from a man who was an elder at the local church. Because his employer could not read, he had John read to him daily. John also used his two hours at midday to study Latin instead of resting. After mastering Latin, he decided to teach himself Greek by comparing both the Latin and English to the Greek New Testament that he borrowed.

When he was sixteen (1738), he decided that he would like to own his own copy of the Greek New Testament. After finding a friend to take care of his flock for the day, he walked twenty-four miles to St. Andrews through the night to purchase a copy for himself. When he arrived, the owner of the bookstore was surprised to see such a young, raw-looking lad asking for a book he presumably could not read. Meanwhile, a few professors entered the bookstore and began questioning the boy. One of them declared that if John could read the Greek New Testament, he would buy the book for him. So John eagerly took up the book and read a passage, to the amazement of those in the bookstore. That day he happily walked home, clasping the book he had won. John Brown later became a pastor, and for twenty years he served as professor of theology to about thirty students each year who desired to study under this dedicated servant of God.

John Piper conveys a more recent surprising example of someone who learned the biblical languages. His name was Heinrich Bitzer, and he was a banker. In 1969 he published a book of daily Scripture readings in Hebrew and Greek titled *Light on the Path*. The goal of this work was to help pastors both preserve and improve their skills of interpreting the Bible from the original languages. Bitzer

14. Robertson, *Minister and His Greek New Testament*, 103–8.

writes, “The more a theologian detaches himself from the basic Hebrew and Greek text of Holy Scripture, the more he detaches himself from the source of real theology! And real theology is the foundation of a fruitful and blessed ministry.”¹⁵

Why don’t pastors keep up their Greek? One reason is that they never learned enough Greek to be confident in their skills. We recommend at least one semester of syntax beyond the foundational semester or year of elementary Greek. Robertson proposes another possible cause: “The chief reason why preachers do not get and do not keep up a fair and needful knowledge of the Greek New Testament is nothing less than carelessness, and even laziness in many cases.”¹⁶ Ouch! Most pastors are definitely not lazy, but if they lack a purposeful and strategic plan to use their Greek, it will certainly fall by the wayside. Greek is difficult, but it is definitely attainable for most people.

Greek Is Not Necessary

With over fifty English translations of the Bible and hundreds of good commentaries that rely on the original languages, is it really necessary to spend years learning the biblical languages? This is perhaps one of the most common objections offered. While this objection may initially seem to have teeth, its bark is far worse than its bite. Hafemann explains:

It is precisely because there are so many excellent commentaries available today that the use of the biblical languages in preaching becomes more important, not less. The proliferation of commentaries and resource materials simply means a proliferation of opinions about the biblical text. The same reality confronts us with the expanding number of English translations, since every translation is the embodiment of thousands and thousands of interpretive decisions; a translation is a commentary on the Bible without footnotes.

15. Heinrich Bitzer, ed., *Light on the Path: Daily Scripture Readings in Hebrew and Greek* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 10.

16. Robertson, *Minister and His Greek New Testament*, 16.

What this means is that the busy pastor will be confronted with an ever expanding mountain of secondary literature on the Bible, not to mention different renderings of the Bible itself. Thus, given the many commentaries and Bible resources available today, not to use the languages in our preaching will either cost us too much time and cause frustration in the end, redefine our role as pastors altogether, or deny the very Bible we are purporting to preach.¹⁷

In other words, there is no perfect translation of the Bible, and there are no perfect commentaries. More translations and commentaries may make our library look well stocked, but they do not ensure that our interpretation of the Bible will be correct. Our point is not to out-translate the translations (or out-comment the commentaries) but to see for ourselves how exegetical decisions are made by others and why.

My brother-in-law's wife is from Honduras. They met through a mutual friend who set them up. At that time, my brother-in-law didn't know any Spanish. But after he decided that he wanted to pursue a relationship with her, he did the only reasonable thing an eligible bachelor would do: he learned Spanish! Why? Because he wanted to communicate with her in her heart language. He didn't want to rely on a translator to communicate his thoughts and feelings. He wanted to be able to read the letters she wrote to him without relying on a translation. If my brother-in-law was willing to go through all the work of learning a language to read her letters, shouldn't we be willing to read God's love letter to us in the original language?

Another illustration is provided by Jacques B. Doukhan. He writes, "Who would question the pertinence of learning the English language in order to understand the world of Shakespeare? Or, to be more up to date, who would ignore the need for learning English to be able to understand and handle the current intricacies

"Something is always lost in the process of making translational or interpretive decisions."

—Enoch Okode^d

17. Hafemann, "SBJT Forum," 86–87.

of the political and economic life in America?”¹⁸ He adds, “Yet, when it comes to the Bible, it seems that ignorance is allowed and even recommended.”¹⁹

It is abundantly true that the English language possesses many very helpful tools that aid one in using the original languages of the Bible. Consequently, some argue that students should not spend their time and resources learning the grammar and syntax of Greek. Instead, in one semester (or less) they can simply learn to use the most important tools. But according to Okode, such an approach is misguided: “It is a mistake to introduce students to [the] ‘tools-approach’ after one semester of Hebrew and/or Greek. Tools are for experts who have gone through the required training. Without adequate training tools can be dangerous.”²⁰ A good friend of mine is an expert carpenter. Occasionally he will help me with a project at my house. We have some of the same tools: the same tape measure, the same carpenter’s square, and nearly identical hammers. I know how to use all of these tools, but not like my friend. Because of his detailed knowledge of how houses are constructed and his years of experience and constant practice, he is able to wield those tools in a way that helps him avoid making costly mistakes. Similarly, just because I know what a Greek tool can do doesn’t mean I will use it properly. Without a proper knowledge of the big picture (including Greek grammar *and* syntax), such tools will be of little value and might end up doing more harm than good.

Greek Is Not Practical

A final objection is that the study of Greek is not practical. It consists merely of memorizing vocabulary, paradigms, and complex grammatical rules. Now, I have no doubt that some professors

18. Jacques B. Doukhan, *Hebrew for Theologians: A Textbook for the Study of Biblical Hebrew in Relation to Hebrew Thinking* (New York: University Press of America, 1993), ix–x.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Okode, “Case for Biblical Languages,” 93.

are guilty of teaching Greek as a dry, lifeless academic exercise. But it certainly doesn't have to be (and shouldn't be) this way! Furthermore, those who teach Greek cannot simply assure students that somewhere down the road (in a semester or two) they will see the payoff of learning Greek. Indeed, it is the job of the teacher to demonstrate *from the first week* that Greek is not only immensely important but also extremely practical.

Learning Greek is practical for the following reasons. First, it can be the source of personal, spiritual blessing. After all, the very reason for learning Greek is to be able to read the New Testament in its original language. Since when is reading and studying the Bible not practical? A. T. Robertson comments, "There is no sphere of knowledge where one is repaid more quickly for all the toil expended." He calls the study of Greek grammar "a means of grace." Later he adds, "The modern minister should find grammatical research a gold mine for his soul and for the sermon."²¹

Second, the knowledge and use of Greek gives confidence to one who preaches or teaches the Bible. Piper argues that when "the original languages fall into disuse, . . . the confidence of pastors to determine the precise meaning of Biblical texts diminishes. And with the confidence to interpret rigorously goes the confidence to preach powerfully."²² In addition, by becoming less dependent on others, and consequently borrowing less from the thoughts of others, our preaching will become increasingly fresh and original. Luther believed this to be true when he stated,

"What is more important and more deeply practical for the pastoral office than advancing in Greek and Hebrew exegesis by which we mine God's treasures?"

—John Piper^e

Although faith and the gospel may indeed be proclaimed by simple preachers without a knowledge of languages, such preaching is flat and tame; people finally become weary and bored with it,

21. Robertson, *Minister and His Greek New Testament*, 15, 23, 88.

22. John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry*, updated and expanded ed. (Nashville: B&H, 2013), 99.

and it falls to the ground. But where the preacher is versed in the languages, there is a freshness and vigor in his preaching. Scripture is treated in its entirety, and faith finds itself constantly renewed by a continual variety of words and illustrations.²³

Knowing the biblical languages “provides a sustained freshness, a warranted boldness, and an articulated, sure, and helpful witness to the truth.”

—Jason DeRouchie^f

Indeed, “preaching without original language exegesis is like wielding a blunt sword.”²⁴ E. Earle Ellis tells of a pastor who confided in him that he never made use of the biblical languages in his preaching. Ellis commented: “Having heard him preach, I have no doubt that he was telling the truth.”²⁵

Third, the Greek language is practical in ministry because it helps those who use it to defend the truth of the gospel. In order to adequately and compellingly refute false teachings, a knowledge of the original languages is necessary. This includes not only the ability to defend the truth against cults such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses but also against the more subtle intrusion of liberal theology. Piper explains, “Weakness in Greek and Hebrew also gives rise to exegetical imprecision and carelessness. And exegetical imprecision is the mother of liberal theology.”²⁶ He then elaborates,

Knowing the biblical languages “equips one to defend the gospel and hold others accountable in ways otherwise impossible.”

—Jason DeRouchie^f

Where pastors can no longer articulate and defend doctrine by a reasonable and careful appeal to the original meaning of Biblical texts, they will tend to become closed-minded traditionalists who clutch their inherited ideas, or open-ended pluralists who don’t put much stock in doctrinal formulations. In both cases the succeeding

23. Luther, “To the Councilmen of Germany,” 365.

24. DeRouchie, “Profit of Employing the Biblical Languages,” 49.

25. E. Earle Ellis, “Language Skills and Christian Ministry,” *Reformed Review* 24, no. 3 (1971): 163.

26. Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*, 100.

generations will be theologically impoverished and susceptible to error.²⁷

The Privilege of Studying Greek

Not everybody who desires to study Greek has the opportunity. Several years ago I received a random letter from a prison inmate pleading with me to send him a Greek New Testament and a Greek lexicon. Those who have the opportunity to study with all the tools and qualified teachers need to take their privilege seriously. Many people wish they were in such a situation. In a letter Luther exhorts believers:

Since it becomes Christians then to make good use of the Holy Scriptures as their one and only book and it is a sin and a shame not to know our own book or to understand the speech and words of our God, it is a still greater sin and loss that we do not study languages, especially in these days when God is offering and giving us men and books and every facility and inducement to this study, and desires his Bible to be an open book. O how happy the dear fathers would have been if they had had our opportunity to study the languages and come thus prepared to the Holy Scriptures! What great toil and effort it cost them to gather up a few crumbs, while we with half the labor—yes, almost without any labor at all—can acquire the whole loaf! O how their effort puts our indolence to shame! Yes, how sternly God will judge our lethargy and ingratitude!²⁸

If Luther could make such a statement in the sixteenth century, how much more could we make it in the twenty-first century!

Those who study the Bible, especially in a theological college or seminary, should make the most of the opportunity that God has given them. We must be good stewards of the gifts that God has

27. *Ibid.*

28. Luther, “To the Councilmen of Germany,” 364.

given to us and remember that the purpose of studying the Greek language is to draw us closer to the one who spoke the Scriptures. In a lecture delivered to the students of Princeton Seminary on October 4, 1911, titled “The Religious Life of Theological Students,” Benjamin B. Warfield made this impassioned plea to the students:

Are you alive to what your privileges are? Are you making full use of them? Are you, by this constant contact with divine things, growing in holiness, becoming every day more and more men of God? If not, you are hardening! And I am here today to warn you to take seriously your theological study, not merely as a duty, done for God’s sake and therefore made divine, but as a religious exercise, itself charged with religious blessing to you. . . . You will never prosper in your religious life in the Theological Seminary until your work in the Theological Seminary becomes itself to you a religious exercise out of which you draw every day enlargement of heart, elevation of spirit, and adoring delight in your Maker and your Savior.²⁹

Chapter Reflections

1. Are you convinced that a knowledge of Biblical Greek can provide a lifetime of fruitful study of God’s Word?
2. What reason do you think is the most compelling for learning Greek? What other reasons can you think of?
3. What are some examples of how knowing Greek helps to properly interpret the Bible?
4. Do people ever tell you that they never use their Greek? What strategies can you put into place so that this never happens to you?
5. Do you truly believe that studying Greek is a privilege? Does your resolve to study Greek reflect that reality?

29. Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Religious Life of Theological Students* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), 7.

Somebody Is Changing My Bible!

Rob Plummer

Ἦκούσατε γὰρ τὴν ἐμὴν ἀναστροφὴν ποτε ἐν τῷ Ἰουδαϊσμῷ, ὅτι καθ' ὑπερβολὴν ἐδίωκον τὴν ἐκκλησίαν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἐπόρθουν αὐτήν. (Gal. 1:13)

For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. (ESV)

Greek matters.³⁰ Greek matters not only for reading, loving, and understanding the Greek New Testament but also so one can be a reliable resource to others who have questions about what the Bible means. I recall a random telephone call I received from a stranger. (You might be surprised how many people randomly call a seminary to ask questions!) This man had a question about a recently updated translation of the Bible (his favorite version). A specific verse was bothering him. In an earlier version of the translation, a person in the biblical narrative was *doing* something. In the newer version, the text said someone was *trying* to do something. Understandably, this gentleman was quite confused, and he wondered whether people were changing the Bible. “What is going on?” he asked in consternation.

I explained to the caller that there is no exact match between the imperfect tense in Greek and the past progressive in English. It is not like algebra where $2 = 2$. Instead, the Greek imperfect tense has a range of meaning that does not correspond exactly to the English past progressive. When a biblical author employs the imperfect tense, sometimes, based on the context, he may be indicating simply a progressive idea. That is, the author chooses to paint the action as it is unfolding. Other times (again determined by context) an imperfect verb can focus on the beginning of an action (an inceptive idea). The

30. Adapted from *Daily Dose of Greek*, February 28, 2015, <http://dailydoseofgreek.com/creative-learning/weekend-resource-galatians/>.

imperfect can also be used to express an iterative idea, reporting a customary or habitual action. Or the imperfect might have a tendential or conative nuance, the idea of attempting or trying something. As I explained to the man who called me, the translation committee of his favorite Bible version apparently decided that the relevant biblical author had given contextual clues that the imperfect form in question was conveying the idea of attempting or trying. This nuance is something that an original hearer or reader of that text would have unconsciously understood from literary clues. But because we speak English as our first language, we must think more deliberately about the Greek. Our language does not match up exactly with the Greek language.

Let us briefly consider Gal. 1:13 as an example of a tendential or conative imperfect. Ἦκούσατε γὰρ τὴν ἐμὴν ἀναστροφὴν ποτε ἐν τῷ Ἰουδαϊσμῷ, ὅτι καθ' ὑπερβολὴν ἐδίωκον τὴν ἐκκλησίαν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἐπόρθουν αὐτήν. Paul says, “I was persecuting the church of God and ἐπόρθουν it.” The Greek word ἐπόρθουν is from the verb πορθέω, which means to destroy. Without any further context, we would translate it “I was destroying.” But from the context of Galatians, we know that the pre-Christian Paul was not actually destroying the church but that he was surely trying to do so. When writing Galatians, Paul now has a postconversion perspective. He has a more objective and positive evaluation of the church in this world. Looking back, he could say he was persecuting the church and was *trying* to destroy it. This tendential or conative idea is determined from the context. Virtually all modern English Bible translations recognize that ἐπόρθουν here carries a tendential sense.

As ministers of the gospel, we want to be able to answer questions like the one I received from the random telephone inquiry. If this man had called you, what would you do if you did not know Greek? “Wow!” you might say, “They are changing the Bible! Grab the pitchforks and torches, and let’s march to the publishing house!” Let’s arm ourselves with a nuanced knowledge of Greek grammar so that we can responsibly answer questions and allay confusion.