

LESSON 1

INTRODUCTION



In this lesson, you will understand some of the important reasons to study exegesis and Greek. After finishing, you will express your own ideas about these reasons.

1.1 Why study exegesis?

Since every word of the Bible is inspired, we should handle it with extreme care. There is no more sober warning for pastors and teachers than James 3:1–2: “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. . . .” This should make us cautious and diligent in our study of the Word.

The work of exegesis is to *draw out* the meaning of the text. It is basically another word for *serious* Bible study. The word comes from the Greek word ἐξάγω (*exágō*), which means literally to “take out, carry out, or lead out.” When God inspired each text of the Scriptures, He had a message to communicate, and that is what we want to analyze. We do not want to add our own ideas or draw conclusions that are not expressed in the text, but to *draw out* what is already in the passage. Every time we preach or teach on a biblical text, the listeners should understand clearly that the main point of our message is based on the text. We are teaching the *Word of God*, and not our own ideas.

As we prepare a message or a class, we should apply the following guideline: Suppose someone hears the message and goes home to tell others what it was about. If they ask that person where the idea comes from, or how they could defend such an idea, the person should not hesitate in pointing to the Bible text. There should be no difficulty in demonstrating that the biblical text confirms the main point of the message. For example, if a pastor preaches from Ephesians 2:8–9 (*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.*), and the main point of his message is that we cannot earn our own salvation, the listener would have no trouble in showing that these verses express that idea. On the other hand, if a preacher’s main point is that “faith is believing the impossible,” the listener would not be able to demonstrate that idea from the passage. This example is obvious, but actually many pastors and teachers simply think of something they would like to communicate, then they look for some passage to support their own idea. Thus they frequently distort the point of the biblical text.

We should not forget that, as we interpret the Scriptures correctly, guided by the Holy Spirit, we will receive a great spiritual blessing and we will know Jesus Christ better, who is the central message of the Scriptures. Exegesis should never be converted into a mere intellectual exercise. We want to open the Scriptures, just as Jesus did with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, so that our hearts will be warmed.

Luke 24:27, 32

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. . . .

They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”

1.2 Why study Greek?

For some, learning a foreign language is a fascinating process, because it opens the door to a new world of ideas and customs. However, for others, it means getting lost in a linguistic labyrinth. I recognize that some people are not interested in studying a complete course in Greek. Others simply do not have time to learn a new language. This does not mean that they are not good students, or that they cannot become good pastors, preachers, or teachers.

Nevertheless, I believe that it is very helpful to know enough Greek to do a serious exegesis of a passage of the New Testament. Since the original manuscripts were written in Greek, you really need to know something of the language in order to seek the best interpretation. There are treasures of wisdom waiting to be discovered, but many people lack the tools to find them.

The purpose of this text is to train the student to do a serious analysis of New Testament passages, using a basic knowledge of Greek grammar and of linguistic tools. It teaches the fundamentals of Greek without pretending to provide a mastery of the language, and it also teaches the steps of exegesis. The hope is that the student will become motivated to continue a more complete study of Greek in the future.

1.3 Examples of the importance of Greek

There are many things that can be seen only in the Greek text.

a) Romans 1:17

For example, Romans 1:17 is difficult to understand in some translations.

For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, the just shall live by faith. (King James Version)

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "But the righteous man shall live by faith." (New American Standard Bible)

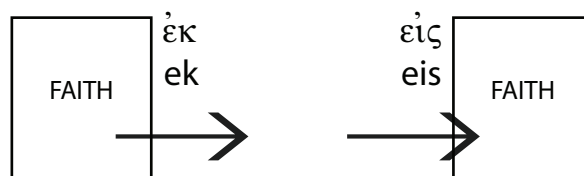
What does the phrase "from faith to faith" mean? At first it sounds nice, but when you think about it, you are not sure what it means. Is it talking about different kinds of faith or about passing the faith from one person to another? There are some loose translations that give totally different interpretations.

The good news tells how God accepts everyone who has faith, but only those who have faith. It is just as the Scriptures say, "The people God accepts because of their faith will live." (Contemporary English Version)

God's way of putting people right shows up in the acts of faith, confirming what Scripture has said all along: "The person in right standing before God by trusting him really lives." (The Message)

When we look at the Greek text, we find it very helpful. The phrase is ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν (*ek pisteōs eis pistin*). The word ἐκ (*ek*) is a preposition that is normally used to describe movement from inside to outside, for example to explain that someone went *out of* a house.¹ On the other hand, the word εἰς (*eis*) is a preposition that is normally used to describe movement from the outside in, for example, to explain that someone went *into* a house.

¹ The word ἐκ can also mean "by means of."



Literally, the text says that righteousness is revealed “out of faith into faith,” or “from faith toward faith.” As we analyze the words in their normal use, we have a mental image of something: two areas of faith in which the righteousness of God is revealed. The phrase awakens an image of a journey that begins in an area of faith and ends in another area of faith, or possibly the image of a bridge that begins in an area of faith on one end and finishes in another area of faith at the other extreme. While the following is not exactly a literal translation of this verse, the New International Version communicates the idea:

For in the gospel a righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last.

The New Living Translation, even less literal, shares the interpretation:

This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith.

The context of the letter to the Romans supports these two translations. This verse is an introduction to the whole epistle, in which Paul deals especially with the themes of justification and sanctification. Verse 17 is announcing that righteousness comes from God, that it is received initially by faith (in justification), and that it continues to be nourished by faith (in sanctification) throughout life until the end. In other words, justification (righteousness in terms of our legal standing) is by faith, and sanctification (righteousness in terms of our personal walk in holiness) is also by faith, even until we are glorified in the presence of Christ! There is no righteousness that does not come from God by faith.

b) Cut off or lift up?

In *Secrets of the Vine*,² Bruce Wilkinson questions a common translation of a word in John 15:2. He suggests that, instead of saying, “He cuts off every branch in me that does not bear fruit” (NIV), or “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away” (NASB), it should read, “Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, *he lifts up*.” The author explains that when a vinekeeper finds a branch that is bent over and buried in the dirt, he often picks it up and shakes off the dust, making it capable of bearing fruit again. He says the word in Greek is ἀίρω (*airō*).

If the reader cannot look up the word in a dictionary, he or she will have to accept the author’s conclusion. In this case, the lexicon gives several definitions of ἀίρω (*airō*): “lift,” “take up,” “take away,” “destroy,” “remove.” Wilkinson’s translation is a valid option, and his arguments are worth considering.³ The point is not necessarily to solve this problem of interpretation here, but to show that any serious Bible student should at least know the Greek alphabet and know how to look up a word in the dictionary!⁴

² Sister, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2001.

³ Verse 6 of the same chapter definitely teaches that branches that are not remaining in Christ will be dried up and cast into the fire. However, verse 2 is speaking of a branch that is in Christ (“in Me”).

⁴ Another possible interpretation is that being “in Christ” does not necessarily mean being saved, but belonging to the “visible church,” that is, making a public profession of faith without truly being born again, such as the case of Judas.

c) “Full” of the Spirit or “filled” with the Spirit?

One of the most debated theological topics in our day is the meaning of being “filled with the Spirit.” There are different interpretations, especially of some passages in Acts. Without trying to resolve all of the issues, I would like to mention some linguistic factors that should help clarify the discussion.

Some try to make technical distinctions between terms such as “baptism of the Spirit,” “receiving the Spirit,” and “fullness of the Spirit.” Nevertheless, when we investigate the use of these phrases in Greek, it is clear that we cannot make such distinctions, because these phrases are used interchangeably. For example, the same event at Pentecost is described with four different phrases: “You will be *baptized* by the Holy Spirit” (1:5), “The Holy Spirit *comes on* you” (1:8), “All of them were *filled* with the Holy Spirit” (2:4), and “I will *pour out* my Spirit on all people” (2:17). Compare also Acts 8:14–18; 10:44–47; and 11:15–16. We must abandon any attempt to make clear technical distinctions between these phrases.

But there is one linguistic distinction that can be noted in Acts, a difference between the adjective “full” and the verb “filled.” On the one hand, the author speaks of someone being “full” of the Spirit as a *characteristic* of the person. This describes spiritual maturity. On the other hand, he speaks of someone being “filled” with the Spirit as an *experience*. This describes a special manifestation of the Spirit, enabling the person for a special task. This distinction is confirmed in the Greek.

When the author mentions the *characteristic*, he uses an adjective πλήρης (*plē’rēs*, full). This describes a more permanent situation. It is like saying someone is “tall” or “pretty.” In these cases, the person is “full” of the Spirit.

Luke utilizes the adjective to describe the men chosen to be deacons in chapter 6 of Acts.

Acts 6:3

Choose seven men from among you who are known to be full [πλήρεις, plē’reis] of the Spirit and wisdom.

One of the deacons was Stephen, “a man full [πλήρης, *plē’rēs*] of faith and the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5).

Barnabas was “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith” (Acts 11:24). Here again, the adjective is used, πλήρης (*plē’rēs*).

By contrast, when Luke speaks of certain *experiences* in Acts, he uses a *verb* (usually πίμπλημι, *pímplēmi*, but sometimes πληρόω, *plērōō*), normally in passive voice. The passive voice indicates that the subject is receiving the action, such as when we say that a book was “purchased” by someone, or that a house was “painted.” In this case, a person is “filled” with the Spirit. This subtle distinction may go unnoticed if we are not careful.

The following passages are examples where the verb is used. Notice that the person filled with the Spirit immediately ministers to others, usually by speaking the Word of God.

Acts 2:4

All of them were filled [ἐπλήσθησαν, eplē’sthēsan, from πίμπλημι, pímplēmi] with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Acts 4:8

Then Peter, filled [πλησθείς, plēsthēis, from πίμπλημι, pímplēmi] with the Holy Spirit, said to them . . .

Acts 4:31

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled [ἐπλήσθησαν, eplē'sthēsan] with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

Acts 9:17–20

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled [πλησθῆς, plēsthē's] with the Holy Spirit.” Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God

Acts 13:9

Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled [πλησθεῖς, plēsthēis] with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said . . .

Acts 13:52–14:1

And the disciples were filled [ἐπληροῦντο, eplērūnto, from πληρόω, plērōō] with joy and with the Holy Spirit. At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed.

The evidence is clear enough to establish a distinction in concepts, based on a distinction in the grammatical forms. The grammatical difference is between adjectives and verbs. The theological distinction is between spiritual maturity as a characteristic of the person and a spiritual experience to prepare a person for a special ministry.⁵

d) The kingdom of God is “within” you or “among” you?

Luke 17:21

*Nor will people say, “Here it is,” or “There it is,” because the kingdom of God is **within** you. (NIV)*

*Nor will they say, “Look, here it is!” or “There it is!” For behold, the kingdom of God is **in your midst**. (NASB)*

The last clause of this verse has been translated basically two different ways, one represented by the NIV, “within you,” and the other represented by the NASB, “in your midst.” This makes a significant difference in meaning, and each translation may lead to different theological conclusions. The first translation (“within”) may point to inner spiritual renewal as the driving force for changing the world, while the second translation (“in your midst”) may point to the importance of interpersonal relationships. Which is correct?

The Greek word ἐντός (*entós*) is found in only one other place in the New Testament, Matthew 23:26. “Blind Pharisees! First clean the *inside* [ἐντός *entós*] of the cup and dish, then the outside also will be clean.” However, according to the dictionary, *entós* can mean either “among” or “within.”

⁵ Ephesians 5:18 can also be a confusing verse. It is usually translated, “. . . be filled *with* the Spirit,” suggesting that the Spirit is the *content* with which we should be filled. However, some Greek scholars consider that the Greek phrase ἐν πνεύματι (literally “in Spirit”) indicates *means* and not *content*, and should be translated, “. . . be filled *by* the Spirit.”

Without being dogmatic, I would suggest that in the context of Matthew 23:26, it apparently means “within.” Going back to the context of Luke 17:20–21, we see that Jesus was talking about the fact that the kingdom of God was not externally visible (“The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed,” verse 20, NASB).

William Hendriksen, in his commentary on the Luke passage, explains that some prefer the translation “among you,” because they think Jesus was speaking to the Pharisees, who were not converted, and thus did not have the kingdom of God “within” them. But Hendriksen still prefers the translation “within.” He considers that Jesus was speaking generally, saying that the kingdom of God is in peoples’ hearts, that He was not speaking exclusively to those who were listening to Him at that moment.

Another commentary, *The Expositors Greek New Testament*, also prefers the translation “within.” The commentator argues that this statement is applied to the disciples and not to the Pharisees.

e) Justification according to Paul and James

One of the most important exegetical dilemmas is the comparison of Paul and James on justification. At first sight, these two authors seem to contradict each other. Compare for example Romans 3:28 (“*For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.*”) with James 2:24 (“*You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.*”).

However, when we study the various meanings of the word δικαίωω (*dikaiōō*) translated in these verses as “justify,” we see an important distinction: Paul uses the term in a legal sense, communicating the idea of a divine verdict, while James uses it in the sense of daily life, communicating the idea that a man’s righteousness is shown through his deeds.

That is, the Greek word δικαίωω (*dikaiōō*) does not always indicate forgiveness of sin or freedom from guilt. In fact, some passages tell us that God Himself is “justified” (Psalm 51:4). Obviously, God does not need forgiveness! In these cases, the idea is that God is *shown to be* righteous. The NIV translates the same verb δικαίωω (*dikaiōō*) in James 2:21 as, “Was not our ancestor Abraham *considered righteous* for what he did.” For some reason, it does not translate the same verb in the same way a few verses later, in James 2:24, choosing instead to use “justified.”

This interpretation fits the context of James better, where he is trying to avoid a misunderstanding. Because James is trying to correct the problem of libertinism, he shows that true faith is manifested through works, through a changed life. However, he certainly is not contradicting Paul’s teaching that our legal standing before God is by faith alone.

The reader may or may not agree with these interpretations. However, the purpose of mentioning these passages is to show the importance of learning Greek in order to deal with difficult exegetical problems.

f) Reading commentaries

Many serious Bible commentaries make reference to Greek words and Greek grammar. The reader who doesn’t know anything about the language will be limited in his ability to make use of these resources. For example, William Hendriksen, F. F. Bruce, and John Calvin frequently mention Greek. Many theological books give definitions of Greek words to argue their point or to explain the importance of a grammatical form. If the reader knows nothing of Greek or does not know how to use the proper tools to research the point, he or she will have to blindly accept the author’s point of view.

It is a serious thing to stand before a congregation to preach the Word of God, or to explain the Word in a class or Bible study. If we interpret a passage incorrectly, we are distorting what God wants to communicate to His people.

g) The richness of words

Even when we are studying texts that are not so difficult or polemical, often a study of the words in Greek will enrich our understanding of a passage. For example, when we study the Greek words in John 1:14 (*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*), we notice that the phrase “made his

dwelling” is the translation of a single Greek word that literally means “tabernacled” (ἐσκήνωσεν, *eské'nōsen*). This reminds us of the meaning of the tabernacle in the Old Testament and stirs us to think of many ideas and applications. In what sense was the tabernacle a figure of Christ? In what sense did Jesus fulfill the purpose of the tabernacle?

In John 1:1, Jesus is called the “Word.” This term in Greek (λόγος, *lógos*) has an enormous linguistic background. Philosophers would recognize the term, because ancient Greeks had used it frequently. The concept of the “Word” was also important in the Old Testament. However, while taking this background into account, John was using *lógos* in his own unique way to refer to the revelation of God in Christ.

Terms such as “world” (κόσμος, *kósmos*), “flesh” (σάρξ, *sarx*), and “encourage” (παρακαλέω, *parakalēō*, literally “alongside calling”), are full of meaning, both because of their use in the non-Christian world, and because of their use in the Bible. When we study them, using dictionaries and concordances, we open a treasure chest of meaning.

“Worship” (προσκυνέω, *proskunēō*) comes from πρὸς (*pros*, meaning “toward” or “before”) and κυνέω (*kunēō*, meaning “kiss”), which suggests the idea of kneeling before someone and kissing his feet. This graphically illustrates the meaning of worship. Whereas some commentators place emphasis on the origin of the English word (“worth” plus “ship”) and the consequent implication that worship is a celebration of the *worthiness* of God, the Greek word reminds us of the aspect of *submission* to God.

In John 21:15–17, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. The first two times, Jesus uses the verb ἀγαπάω (*agapāō*) and Peter answers that he loves him, but he uses another word φιλέω (*philēō*). The third time, Jesus changes the word and uses the same verb that Peter had been using, φιλέω (*philēō*). Throughout centuries, theologians have debated the possible distinction between the Greek words used here. Some consider that Peter used *philēō* because it was somewhat weaker, and that after denying Jesus, he did not dare to say that he loved Jesus with the stronger *agape* love. Then, as they say, Jesus showed His grace, accepted Peter’s humble answer by using the same word, and restored him as shepherd of His sheep. Others, and especially more recent scholars, have denied a clear distinction in the meaning of the two verbs, saying that the change was stylistic, possibly to avoid repetition. Whatever your conclusion, the study is fascinating.

EXERCISE

Write down the reasons you think it is important to study exegesis and Greek.
(You may choose to write the answers to the exercises on your computer.)