

Greek Verbs (Tense)

Now that you have a feel for aspect, we can delve into the tenses and see how they combine time and aspect. While a tense may have a general meaning, you'll discover that it may have many nuances and variations.

- 20.1 This chart is the key to this chapter, showing the relationship between the tenses and aspects. You should memorize it (but not the Greek example), and I will explain it throughout this chapter.

<i>tense</i>	<i>time (normally)</i>	<i>aspect</i>	<i>example</i>
<i>Present</i>	present	continuous	λύω
<i>Future</i>	future	undefined	λύσω
<i>Aorist</i>	past	undefined	ἔλυσα
<i>Imperfect</i>	past	continuous	ἔλυον
<i>Perfect</i>	past and present	perfective	λέλυκα

- 20.2 What follows are some of the more common ways in which tenses and aspects work together. The primary function of these examples is to give you a feel for the variety of usages and to see why so much of translation is interpretive and therefore why translations are often different.

Remember the different ways that aspects function that we saw in the last chapter:

- Instantaneous happens immediately
- Progressive happens over a period of time
- Ingressive emphasis is on the beginning of the action
- Iterative happens repeatedly
- Customary happens on a regular basis, not thinking of any one instance
- Gnomic happens without any time constraints

20.3 I will not show you all the usages; there are too many. But I have picked the common usages to give you a feel for the tense. This means you will come across passages in the Bible that illustrate one of those omitted uses. There are Greek grammars that discuss all the uses (such as Daniel Wallace's *The Basics of New Testament Syntax*, and his larger *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*).

20.4 How do translators decide which of these usages is correct in any one instance? It's easier than you may think, but it does involve some "linguistic sensitivity," otherwise known as "interpretation." We look at the context and especially the meaning of the word, and make a decision. But learning a language is both a science (i.e., there are rules to follow) and an art. It's the art side that takes years to develop, and it's the art side that ultimately enables the translator to make these types of decisions.

20.5 Let's take a break and talk about humility. I have heard too many people who know too little Greek abuse the information in the rest of the chapter. So here are three principles.

- You don't know enough Greek to say a verbal form has a certain nuance if you can't find the same thing being said in a commentary. What you will know is enough Greek to be able to understand the nuances of the different translations.
- You don't know enough Greek to say that a standard commentary is wrong if you can't find your opinion voiced in another commentary. What you will know is enough Greek to be able to follow a commentary's discussion.

- You don't know enough Greek to say that a translation is wrong. I have never seen a random translation in a Bible that was not a possible interpretation. It doesn't mean you have to agree with a certain translation. You can certainly prefer one translation's interpretive position over another, but you don't know enough to say that one translation is necessarily wrong.

It's not a little knowledge that is dangerous. It is a lack of humility that is dangerous.

PRESENT

- 20.6 In 8.17 we saw that the present tense describes an action normally occurring in the present time; its aspect covers the gamut from instantaneous to gnomic.

NARROWBAND

- 20.7 **Instantaneous.** Sometimes a Greek present describes an action that happens immediately. In other words, it has no discernable continuous nature.

τέκνον, ἀφίενταί σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι.
 child they are forgiven your the sins
 My son, your sins are forgiven (Mark 2:5).

Once Jesus made the pronouncement, the sins were instantly forgiven.

- 20.8 **Progressive.** The Greek present can describe an ongoing action, even though in real time the action does not last very long. This is the default category for the present tense.

ἐὰν γὰρ προσεύχωμαι γλῶσση, τὸ πνεῦμά μου προσεύχεται
 if for I am praying tongue, the spirit my is praying
 ESV: For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays (1 Cor 14:14).

The prayer is an ongoing action, but probably for a short time.

BROADBAND

20.9 **Iterative.** Some actions occur repeatedly.

πολλάκις γὰρ πίπτει εἰς τὸ πῦρ
often for *he falls* into the fire

For often *he falls* into the fire (*Matt 17:15*).

The boy is not constantly falling into the fire (an impossible notion), but he falls in time and time again.

20.10 **Customary.** Actions can occur regularly but not necessarily constantly.

νηστεύω δις τοῦ σαββάτου
I fast twice the week

I customarily fast twice a week (*Luke 18:12*).

NIV: I fast twice a week.

It's not that he fasts constantly, but that this is his regular habit.

20.11 **Gnomic.** The Greek present tense can express a timeless fact.

ἰλαρὸν δότην ἀγαπᾷ ὁ θεός
cheerful giver *he loves* the God

God loves a cheerful giver (*2 Cor 9:7*).

Paul is not thinking of any one specific response of love, but rather of God's constant response to cheerful giving.

20.12* **Historical.** Because the Greek verb system views time as secondary to aspect, it's possible for the Greek present tense to refer to an action that occurs in the past. The idea is to make the telling of the past event more vivid by using the present tense. We have the same construction in English, but the Greeks used it much more than we do, so this usage is often translated with the past tense.

βλέπει τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐρχόμενον πρὸς αὐτόν
he sees the Jesus coming to him

ESV: The next day he *saw* Jesus coming toward him (*John 1:29*)

As John is recounting the event, the time frame was past, but using the present βλέπει makes the story more vivid.

20.13* **Futuristic.** The present tense can also refer to a future event, and the fact that it is present tense emphasizes the immediacy or certainty of the event.

Χριστὸς ἐγερθεὶς ἐκ νεκρῶν οὐκέτι ἀποθνήσκει
Christ having been raised from dead never *dies*

NASB: Christ, having been raised from the dead, *is* never to die again (*Rom 6:9*).

NRSV: We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, *will* never die again.

Paul is convinced that Christ will never die, not now nor in the future.

FUTURE

20.14 Of all the Greek tenses, the future has the strongest emphasis on time, describing an action that will occur in the future. As a general rule, the future is translated with the undefined aspect (“I will eat”) rather than the continuous (“I will be eating”).

20.15 **Predictive.** In 8.18 we saw that the basic use of the future is to describe something that will happen in the future.

ὁ ἐναρξάμενος ἐν ὑμῖν ἔργον ἀγαθὸν ἐπιτελέσει
the one beginning in you work good *will complete*

He who began a good work in you *will bring it to completion* (*Phil 1:6*).

20.16 **Imperative.** As in English, the Greek future can express a command.

ἀγαπήσεις κύριον τὸν θεόν σου
you will love Lord the God your

ESV: You shall love the Lord your God (*Matt 22:37*).

NET: Love the Lord your God.

Because we use the future in English the same way, this usage is easy to understand.

20.17 **Gnomic.** The future can state that a generic event will occur. It does not say that a particular occurrence is in mind, but that such events do occur.

οὐκ ἐπ' ἄρτω μόνῳ ζήσεται ὁ ἄνθρωπος
not on bread alone *will live* man

NASB: Man *shall* not *live* on bread alone (*Matt 4:4*).

NRSV: One *does* not *live* by bread alone.

Jesus is not thinking of one particular meal, but of how life should be lived.

AORIST

20.18 The aorist tense describes an action normally occurring in the past time; its aspect is always undefined (8.20). Remember that the aorist is the default past-time tense; there may be no real significance to the fact that a particular verb is aorist other than time.¹

20.19 **Constative.** The aorist looks at an action as a whole and does not necessarily tell us anything about the precise nature of the action. This is the default category for the aorist tense.

ἐνέβη εἰς τὸ πλοῖον καὶ ἦλθεν εἰς τὰ ὄρια Μαγαδάν.
he got into the boat and *he went* into the region of Magadan
He got into the boat and *went* to the region of Magadan
(*Matt 15:39*).

Even though getting into the boat and traveling across the Sea certainly was a continuous action (lots of rowing or working with the sails), it was not important for Matthew to convey this emphasis, so he uses the aorist.

¹ There is meaning in the fact that a verb is aorist, but it's often so subtle a nuance that for now you should view it as the default past tense and let it go at that.

20.20 **Ingressive.** The aorist can place emphasis on the beginning of an action.

ὁ δὲ βασιλεὺς ὠργίσθη
the but king he was angry

NLT: Then the king *became* furious (Matt 22:7).

RSV: The king *was* angry.

This is a matter of interpretation, but the NLT thinks that the emphasis was on the fact that he started to get angry (“became”), not the simple fact that he was angry.

20.21 **Gnomic.** The aorist can be used to describe a timeless truth. These are often translated with the English present tense. This use of the aorist is rare; Greek tends to use the present tense to express the gnomic idea.

ἐξηράνθη ὁ χόρτος καὶ τὸ ἄνθος ἐξέπεσεν
withered the grass and the flower *fell off*

NET: The grass *withers* and the flower *falls off* (1 Pet 1:24).

Peter is not thinking of any one event in which the grass and flowers die, but rather of the timeless truth that this is what happens.

20.22 **Punctiliar.** One of the primary areas of confusion in Greek exegesis comes when people confuse the Greek aorist with the English punctiliar aspect. The English punctiliar describes an action that occurs in a single point of time. “The tidal wave *hit* the boat.” However, the Greek aorist is not necessarily punctiliar. It tells you nothing about the action of the verb other than it happened.

It is interesting that Luke’s version of Jesus’ statement on discipleship is a little different from Mark’s. He says,

If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself
and *take up* his cross *daily*, and follow me (Luke 9:23).

Luke includes the adverb “daily” to emphasize that the action of “taking up” occurs every day, even though the verb is aorist.

Does this contradict the Markan account (Mark 8:34) that simply says “take up” using the aorist? No. Both Mark and Luke use the

same undefined aspect—the aorist—when saying “take up.” The verb does not specify the nature of the action; it merely says it should occur. But Luke includes the adverb “daily” to clarify that this action is a daily action. He could have just as easily used the continuous aspect for “take up” and arrived at the same meaning.

Part of the misconception surrounding the aorist and its aspect is because it *can* be used to describe a punctiliar action. However, such a verb is punctiliar not because it is an aorist but because of the context and the meaning of the word. You will find this mistake in many commentaries, so be careful.

IMPERFECT

20.23 In 8.21 we saw that the imperfect tense describes an action normally occurring in the past time; its aspect is always continuous.

NARROWBAND

20.24 **Progressive.** The imperfect tense describes an ongoing action that generally happened in the past. This is the default category for the imperfect.

ἐδίδασκεν τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ

He was teaching the disciples his

NIV: He was teaching his disciples (Mark 9:31).

KJV: He taught his disciples.

“Teaching” is by definition an ongoing activity.

20.25 **Ingressive.** The imperfect tense can also place emphasis on the beginning of the action.

ἄγγελοι προσῆλθον καὶ διηκόνουν αὐτῷ

angels they came and *they were ministering* to him

NASB: Angels came and began to minister to Him (Matt 4:11).

NIV: Angels came and attended him.

It’s an exegetical decision as to whether Matthew’s emphasis is on the angels ministering to Jesus over a period of time, or whether Matthew emphasizes the beginning of the action, that they began to minister.

BROADBAND

20.26 **Iterative.** Some continuous actions do not occur constantly but rather repetitively.

ἤρχοντο πρὸς αὐτὸν καὶ ἔλεγον· χαῖρε
They were coming to him and they were saying Hail!

NRSV: They kept coming up to him, saying, "Hail" (John 19:3).

NIV: (They) went up to him again and again, saying, "Hail."

NASB: They repeatedly came up to Him and said, "Hail."

The imperfect makes it explicit that they taunted our Lord over and over.

20.27 **Customary.** Other actions occur regularly, such as expressed by the English "used to."

Κατὰ δὲ ἑορτὴν ἀπέλυεν αὐτοῖς ἓνα δέσμιον
at now feast *he was releasing* for them one prisoner

NASB: Now at the Passover feast he used to release for them any one prisoner (Mark 15:6).

NET: During the feast it was customary to release one prisoner to the people.

NIV: Now it was the custom at the festival to release a prisoner.

KJV: Now at that feast he released unto them one prisoner.

20.28* The imperfect can describe what a person wishes to do (**voluntative**), tries to do (**conative**), or almost does (**tendential**). Often it is difficult to tell the difference between these three, and, as always, context is the guide.

ἠύχόμην γὰρ ἀνάθεμα εἶναι αὐτὸς ἐγώ
I was wishing for curse to be myself I

NASB: For I could wish that I myself were accursed (Rom 9:3).

NLT: I would be willing to be forever cursed.

ἐδίωκον τὴν ἐκκλησίαν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἐπόρθουν αὐτήν
I was persecuting the church of God and *I was destroying* it

NASB: I used to persecute the church of God ... and tried to destroy it (Gal 1:13).

ESV: I *persecuted* the church of God ... and *tried to destroy* it.

NRSV: I *was violently persecuting* the church of God and *was trying to destroy* it

ὁ δὲ Ἰωάννης διεκώλυεν αὐτόν
the but John *he was preventing* him

NIV: But John *tried to deter* him (Matt 3:14).

ESV: John *would have prevented* him.

PERFECT

20.29 In 8.23 we saw that the perfect tense describes a completed action, with the results of that action felt in the present (of the speaker).

20.30 **Consummative.** Sometimes the emphasis is on the fact that the action was completed.

ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ ἐκκέχυται ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ἡμῶν
the love of the God *has been poured* in the hearts of us

ESV: God's love *has been poured* into our hearts (Rom 5:5).

KJV: The love of God *is shed abroad* in our hearts.

While the effects of that love are still felt by Paul, the context requires that the emphasis is on the accomplished fact that the love has in fact been poured out. The KJV disagrees.

20.31 **Intensive.** Other times the emphasis is on the continuing effect of the past action and is generally translated with the English present.

ἄνθρωπε, ἀφέωνταί σοι αἱ ἁμαρτίαι σου
man *have been forgiven* to you the sins your

ESV: Man, your sins *are forgiven* you (Luke 5:20).

The forgiveness is an accomplished fact, but contextually the emphasis is on the man's current state of being forgiven, as evidenced by his getting up and walking out of the house.

SUMMARY

20.32 Summary chart

	<i>Present</i>	<i>Future</i>	<i>Aorist</i>	<i>Imperfect</i>	<i>Perfect</i>
<i>Narrowband</i>					
Instantaneous	✓		(punctiliar)		
Constative			✓		
Progressive	✓			✓	
Ingressive	✓		✓	✓	
<i>Broadband</i>					
Iterative	✓			✓	
Customary	✓			✓	
Gnomic	✓	✓	✓		
Consummative					✓
Intensive					✓
Predictive		✓			
Imperatival		✓			
<i>Advanced uses</i>					
Historical*	✓				
Futuristic*	✓				
Voluntative*				✓	
Conative*				✓	
Tendential*				✓	