
CHAPTER 8

CATEGORIES OF VERBS

Norma Youngberg's instructions to neophyte writers can be just as appropriate to those learning how to interpret a biblical passage. "Every craftsman is concerned first of all with his material: the builder with wood, cement, brick; the tailor with cloth; the cook with food. Words are the writer's basic material. He must know words, their use and their quality, as a builder knows wood, as a tailor knows fabric, as a cook knows foods and seasonings.

Time and Kind of Action

"Words can kill and words can make alive. Every shade and degree of power between these two extremes is within the capacity of words. A writer must first of all have a working vocabulary. He must know the quality of words and their functions, methods of handling them, and their power or futility. . . .

"A writer needs to know the strength of simple words, the effectiveness of few words, the power of the unsaid word" (*Creative Techniques for Christian Writers*, p. 5).

So in trying to understand the meaning in any passage of Scripture, it is important to know how the verbs function. Because verbs express the action intended, they are extremely significant, and to give them slight attention serves only to hamper the communication process.

It is common knowledge that the Scriptures were written in two languages—Hebrew and Greek. (Aramaic, a cousin to Hebrew, is used in a few isolated instances.) What is not commonly known is that the rules governing verbs in Hebrew and, to a lesser extent, Greek are not the same rules describing English verbs. It is important, then, to understand how verbs functioned in these ancient languages.

New Testament Greek

Although Koine Greek actually has six tenses, the kinds of action found in the New Testament boil down to three groups:

1. momentary action that is frozen at a point in time includes (a) an action that is isolated at its beginning ("He began, or started, to teach") or at its end ("He effectively, or successfully, or completely taught"); (b) an entire action viewed at a glance, regardless of how long it actually lasted ("If he ever teaches" or "His teaching as a whole, or on the whole, is poor"); (c) an action captured as a single or one-time occurrence, regardless of when it happens ("If he teaches even once"); and (d) an anticipating action that is a fact or reality ("If he indeed, or in fact, or actually, or really does teach . . .").

2. persistent and ongoing action includes (a) continuous and uninterrupted action ("He continuously, or uninterruptedly, shines"); (b) action in progress ("He is already, or is constantly, or keeps on shining"); (c) recurring action ("He repeatedly

shines” or “He shines again and again” or “He keeps trying, or kept trying, to shine”); (d) customary or habitual action (“He customarily, or habitually, or regularly shines” or “He used to or began to shine”).

FIGURE 81

COMMANDS OR CHALLENGES		
POSITIVE		
Category	Momentary Action	Persistent Action
Purpose	urges to choose	commits to a process
Situation	particular, specific	general, recurring
Calls for	a decisive choice	a long-term plan
Focus	on the spot decision	a lifestyle commitment
Example	“Put on the whole armor.”	“Follow me.”
NEGATIVE		
Purpose	to prevent an action from ever occurring	to stop an action already in progress or to turn down an action each time it comes up again
Example to continue any longer.”	“Never begin to quarrel.”	“Stop being quarrelsome.”
	“Do not quarrel at all.”	“Do not allow quarreling

3. perfective or completed action includes (a) action that combines both of the above to express the continuation of a completed action or (b) action that focuses on either the complete and finished act, for which no further effort is required, or on the effect of that completed act, which lingers on.

Compare the verbs in your text with the examples in the catalog of tenses. Work through the various possibilities until you find the type of action for each one that is demanded by the context.

The Significance of Greek Voices—The *voice* of a verb tells us how the *subject* relates to the action.

Active—Here the subject produces the action, but the stress is on the action itself and not on the subject.

1. *The Simple Active*—When John wrote: “For God so *loved* the world that He *gave* His only begotten Son” (John 3:16, NKJV), he was not emphasizing the Creator as much as what the Creator did. In fact, John did not bother to explain why God loves the world or how God’s Son could allow Himself to be offered as a sacrifice. He simply announced the fact of God’s love and then traced Christ’s sacrifice back to it.

2. *The Causative Active*—Sometimes the subject *causes* the action to occur rather than personally performs it, as in 1 Corinthians 3:6. Taken literally, the text seems to say, “I planted, Apollos watered, and God *was growing*.” The verse makes better sense, however, if we translate the last verb *causatively*—“and God *caused the growth*,” so that God does not grow—He makes growth happen.

3. *The Reflexive Active*—When an active verb occurs with a reflexive pronoun, the subject acts upon itself, much as it does in the Reflexive Middle voice (see below). In Luke 23:39, for example, one of the thieves crucified beside Christ sarcastically tempted Him to use His power and so, avoid death: “*Save yourself* and us.” By choosing the *reflexive active* instead of the middle voice, Luke emphasizes the sinister nature of the temptation. Motivated by his own self-interests, the thief attempted to trick Jesus into saving him, by appealing to the basic human need for self-preservation. If Jesus had rescued Himself, however, He would have abandoned His sacrificial calling—and failed to save anyone else.

4. *Deponent-Active*—Deponent verbs are *middle* or *passive* in form—but *active* in meaning. Their subjects either *cause* the action or perform it in a *simple* or *reflexive* way.

Passive—Here the subject participates in the action, so the stress is usually on the agent that produces it.

1. *Emphatic Agency*—In Ephesians 2:13 Paul wrote: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off *have been brought near* by the blood of Christ.” The emphasis here is not on those who were once cut off or on their new status with God, but on Christ’s blood, which miraculously makes this happen. There are two possible agencies when the verb is passive:

Direct Agency—(1) when the agent that *personally* acts upon the subject

(a) appears without a preposition

“Come, you who have been blessed *by My Father*” (Matthew 25:34)

(b) is accompanied by one of the following prepositions:

[*apo*] “Let no one who is being tempted say, I am being tempted *by God*” (James 1:13) [emphatically denies that anyone can trace temptation back to God as its source]

[*ek*] “God sent forth His Son, made *by a woman*” (Galatians 4:4) [focuses on the incarnation by emphasizing Christ the man’s very human beginnings]

[*hupo*] “They were being baptized in the river Jordan *by him*” (Matthew 3:6) [emphasizes John the Baptizer as the primary agent who personally performed this rite]

[*para*] “This was done *by the Lord*” (Matthew 21:42) [emphasizes the Lord as the source of what was done]

(2) the agent that *impersonally* acts upon the subject is accompanied by the preposition:

[*en*] “For *by grace* you are saved” (Ephesians 2:8).

Intermediary Agency—when the agent that acts as the medium through which the direct agent acts upon the subject is accompanied by the preposition:

[*dia*] “. . . so that the world might be saved *through Him*” (John 3:17).

2. *Omitted Agency*—A passive sentence does not need to mention the agent. For example, “they will be shown mercy,” is the passive of, “God will be merciful to them.” The Bible writers omitted agents for *three* principle reasons: (1) to avoid repeating God’s name (the so-called, *Theological Passive*), (2) when the agent was irrelevant, or (3) when the agent was obvious from the context.

Thematic Passive—When authors wanted to keep the topic, theme, or previous subject as the subject of the sentence, they resorted to the passive voice. In Romans 1:17, for instance, the passive verb “*is revealed*” allows Paul to feature and

stay on the theme of *the righteousness of God* which he began to develop in verse 16.

Middle-Passive—Although it eventually replaced the middle, the passive had middle roots and Greeks commonly interchanged the two voices. It comes as no surprise then that there are occasions where a middle verb has passive overtones and vice versa. For instance, the verb *baptized* in Acts 22:16, normally translated *passive*, “*be baptized*,” is actually a *permissive middle*— “*get yourself baptized*,” and the verb *humble* in 1 Peter 5:6, normally translated *middle*, “*humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God*,” is actually a *passive of emphatic agency*— “*Become humble by the mighty hand of God*.” The sense is not so much passive, however, emphasizing God’s powerful agency, but middle, stressing the willingness of God’s people to accept what happens to them because it is all part of their powerful God’s plan. If they will do this, the God who resists the proud and “*gives grace to the humble*” (verse 5), will “*lift [them] up at an appropriate time*.”

Middle—Here the subject produces and then participates in or expresses deep concern for the results of the action. The stress is on the subject in one of four ways:

1. *intensive*, which is the most important of the four. It accents the subject’s role in producing the action, as in “Be imitators [yourselves] of God, therefore, as dearly loved children” (Eph. 5:1, NIV). Paul wanted the Ephesians to reflect personally the heavenly Father in their own lives; no one else could do it for them.

2. *reflexive*, which is second in importance to the intensive. It accents the subject’s participation in the results of the action (to act in one’s own interest). “Lay aside the old man *for yourselves*, from the old way of life . . . and put on the new man” (Eph. 4:22). Here Paul emphasized that the only way to make room for the new man is to personally discard the old one.

3. *reciprocal*, which accents plural subjects as they interchange action. “Submit [*yourselves*] to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21, NIV). Respect for Christ is the spirit in which the Ephesians could show humility to each other. Only as they bowed to Him would wives and husbands, children and parents, even servants and masters swallow their pride and serve other’s interests.

4. *permissive*, which accents the subject as he or she allows himself or herself to yield to the results of an action. “That we *permit ourselves* to be children no longer, tossed and carried about by every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14). If the Ephesians were tired of being pushed around like children, then all they had to do was allow the ministry of the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastor-teachers to equip them for service. As a result the church would grow and mature into a full grown person with the dimensions of Jesus Christ.

The Significance of Greek Moods—The *mood* tells us something about the psychology of the speaker or writer.

FIGURE 82

INDICATIVE	SUBJUNCTIVE	OPTATIVE	IMPERATIVE
Certainty	Probability	Conceivability	Intentionality
Factual	Objective	Subjective	Desirable
Actuality	Hinges on little	Hinges on much	Pure appeal
Reality	Objectively possible	Subjectively possible	Voluntary possible
Is happening	Should happen	Could happen	Let it happen
INDEPENDENT	D E P E N D E N T		

Indicative—In the form of simple statements or questions, the indicative mood expresses certainty or what is actually going on. All other moods depend on the indicative because it is the only one entirely rooted in the facts. Verbs in this mood set the time frame for the context.

Verbs in the indicative mood function in the following ways:

The *declarative* indicative states a simple fact: “We *have seen* His star and *have come* to worship Him” (Matt. 2:2).

The *interrogative* indicative asks a simple question in search of a factual answer: “Who *do men say* that the Son of Man is?” (Matt. 16:13).

The *cohortative* (future) indicative compels rather than predicts what will happen in the future: “You *shall call* his name John” (Luke 1:13).

The *potential* indicative expresses something that should, would, or could occur. Something in the nature of the verbal idea, the context or some other word in the sentence (usually the particle “an”) tempers its certainty with contingency:

Obligation—“It *should have appeared necessary* to you to have invested my money with the bankers” (Matt. 25:27).

Wish or impulse—“I myself *have been wanting* to hear the man” (Acts 25:22).

Condition—“If God so loved us, [and as a matter of fact, He did], we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11). “Lord, *had You been* here, [but we know that You were not], my brother *would not have died*” (John 11:21).

Subjunctive—The subjunctive mood expresses probability in the form of a thought presented as an objective possibility as the writer or speaker begins to speculate. The writer or speaker assumes that although the verbal idea is not yet a fact, it may become one—but the whole thing hinges on certain objective factors.

In *independent* [main] clauses

- the **hortatory** subjunctive encourages others to join the speaker or writer in a course of action: “Let us also *go*, that we may die with Him” (John 11:16).

- the **prohibitive** subjunctive (the aorist subjunctive with the negative particle *me*) attempts to head off an action before it has a chance to occur (see “Commands or Challenges,” *Negative, Momentary Action*, pp. 331, 332).

- the **deliberative** subjunctive allows the speaker or writer to ask a rhetorical question or challenge the audience to think something over carefully before they make a decision: “*Should I crucify* your king?” (John 19:15).

- the **emphatic negative** subjunctive (the aorist subjunctive with the double negative *ou me*) expresses the impossibility of something: “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you *will never enter* the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20).

In *dependent* [subordinate] clauses

- in a **purpose** clause the subjunctive expresses the purpose of the action of the main verb: “They love to pray standing . . . for the purpose of being seen by people” (Matt. 6:5).

- in a **result** clause the subjunctive indicates the results of the action of the main verb: “These things are contrary to one another, and *as a result* you *cannot do* what you want” (Rom. 11:11).

- in a **conditional** clause, the subjunctive expresses a probable future condition: “If her husband *should die* [and he probably will], she is released from the marriage bond” (Rom. 7:2).

- in an **imperative** clause the subjunctive expresses a command: “The wife *is to*

respect her husband” (Eph. 5:33).

- in a **relative** clause the subjunctive expresses either a probable future condition (as subjunctives in conditional clauses do) or results: “He is worthy and *as a result* you *should do* this for Him” (Luke 7:4).

- in a **comparative** clause the subjunctive compares the subject of the main verb with its own: “The kingdom of heaven is similar to a net that *was cast* into the sea” (Matt. 24:28).

- in a **temporal** clause the subjunctive expresses something probably in the indefinite future: “Whenever you *see* all these things, recognize that [the end] is near” (Matt. 24:33).

- in a **concessive** clause the subjunctive concedes something hypothetical: “Brethren, even if someone *gets caught* in [the act of doing] something wrong, you who are spiritual restore him” (Gal. 6:1).

- in a **substantival** clause the subjunctive supplies potential action to the subject of a noun clause:

1. when the noun clause acts as a *subject*: “That one of these little ones *should perish* is not the will of your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 18:14).

2. when the noun clause acts as a *predicate nominative*: “My meat is [that I am] *to do*” (John 4:34).

3. when the noun clause acts as an *object*: “If you are the Son of God, order that these stones *should become* bread” (Matt. 4:3).

4. when the noun clause acts as an *appositive*: “This is my commandment, [namely] that you *should love* one another” (John 15:12).

Optative—The optative mood is less optimistic and expresses something conceivable, but it hinges on many factors. It is possible as the writer or speaker sees it, and so he or she presents the whole thing in the form of a wish.

In *independent* [main] clauses

- the **voluntative** optative expresses a wish or a prayer: “There are times I *could almost wish to be accursed*” (Rom. 9:3).

- the **potential** optative expresses what would happen if an expressed or implied condition were fulfilled: “How *can* I unless someone will guide me?” (Acts 8:31).

- the **deliberative** optative expresses a very doubtful state of mind in the form of an indirect rhetorical question: “A discussion arose among them about which of them *was the greatest*” (Luke 9:46).

In *dependent* [subordinate] clauses

- in **conditional** clauses the optative expresses a possible future condition: “Even if you *should suffer* because of righteousness [and it is possible that you will], (you will be) blessed” (1 Peter 3:14).

Imperative—The imperative mood is the weakest of all moods because it expresses something that is entirely out of the speaker’s or writer’s control. What he desires or intends depends entirely on people or things outside of himself. He presents in the form of a command or urgent request that which he would like to see happen, but he knows that the whole thing is up to the other party or parties. The speaker or writer appeals to the indicative as the ground for the demand. That’s where he got the idea in the first place. He finds the possibility in the indicative fact, appeals to it, and intends for the audience to carry it out.

In *independent* [main] clauses

- the imperative of **command** expresses a direct appeal to the will of another per-

son either to commence and/or continue an action (see “Commands or Challenges, Positive” on p. 331).

- the imperative of **prohibition** (the present imperative with the negative particle *me*) expresses an appeal to another person to stop an action already in progress or to turn down an action each time it comes up again (see “Commands or Challenges, Negative, Persistent Action” on pp. 331, 332).

- the imperative of **entreaty** softens the force of the imperative to a request, sometimes with a note of urgency. It frequently occurs when a subordinate addresses a superior: “*Please give us this day our daily bread*” (Matt. 6:11).

- the imperative of **condition** causes an independent clause to function as though it were dependent and conditional. So the literal translation “*Destroy this temple, and I will rebuild it in three days*” is more accurately translated “*If you destroy this temple [hypothetical case], I will rebuild it in three days*” (John 2:19).

- the imperative of **permission** expresses compliance with the desire or consent to the request of another: “But if the unbeliever leaves, *let him go*” (1 Cor. 7:15).

- the imperative of **concession** concedes something hypothetical: “Be angry and sin not” would be better rendered “*Although you may become angry, you must not sin*” (Eph. 4:26).

In *dependent* [subordinate] clauses

- in a **relative** clause the imperative expresses duty or obligation toward or concerning the subject of the main clause: “Your nemesis the devil . . . whom you *must resist*” (1 Peter 5:8, 9).

The Significance of Greek Tenses—The **present tense** normally describes action going on in the present from the writer’s or speaker’s point of view. The present tense functions several ways in New Testament Greek:

1. The *descriptive* present—“Our lamps are going out” (Matt. 25:8). Although these lamps continue to burn at present, they *are growing* dim on the way to being extinguished.

2. The *progressive* present—“For three years, *I have been coming* . . .” (Luke 13:7, NASB). Here is an action from the past that continues into the present, and it is captured in a single expression. The gardener is not griping about a three-year journey, but he is expressing the frustration and disappointment from three unsuccessful annual attempts to find fruit on his fig tree.

3. The *iterative* present—“*I fast* twice a week” (Luke 18:12). The Pharisee here brags about his custom of fasting two times each week.

4. The *conative* present—“You . . . [*keep trying* to] stone me” (John 10:32). Jesus reminds the crowd that this is not the first time that they have tried—unsuccessfully—to stone Him.

5. The *historical* present—“And she . . . [*sees*] two angels in white” (John 20:12). Although John describes something that has already happened, he tells us about it as though we are there while it is going on. That makes the act from the past really come to life.

6. The *gnomic* (proverbial) present—“Every good tree *bears* good fruit” (Matt. 7:17). This is a timeless truth that even continues to be true in the present.

7. The *futuristic* present—“I . . . [*am going* to] rise” (Matt. 27:63). Instead of just announcing something in advance, Jesus adds a note of confident assurance here. Although the resurrection lies in the future—on the other side of the cross—Jesus gives it an unbroken connection with the present. It is one of the steps in the walk He

had already begun.

8. The *perfect* present—“Your brother *has come*” (Luke 15:27). Certain Greek verbs stress either the past verbal act or its results by using the present tense. This is one of those verbs that plugs into the present. The brother successfully ends his journey by arriving at the destination he intended to reach. But enough about the trip! The big news is that he is here!

The **future tense** generally refers to a point in time that is yet to come as far as the speaker’s or writer’s point of view is concerned.

1. The *volitive* (intentional) future—“You *shall call* His name Jesus” (Matt. 1:21, NKJV). The Father is determined that when His Son is born, Mary should call Him Jesus, and the angel communicates this divine intent in the form of a command.

2. Simple *futurity*—“For he *will save* His people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21, NKJV). Jesus will definitely rescue His people, but the day of their deliverance is still in the future.

3. The *deliberative* future—“How *shall* we . . . *live* any longer in it?” (Rom. 6:2, NKJV). Paul pondered how anyone who has died to sin with Christ and come alive to God can live any longer under the tyranny of sin.

The **imperfect tense** shows action going on in past time from the writer’s or speaker’s point of view.

1. The *inchoative* (inceptive) imperfect—“He . . . *began to teach*” (Mark 1:21, REB). When Jesus arrived at Capernaum, the first thing He did on the Sabbath was to head straight for the synagogue, where He spread the good news. Mark catches Jesus the teacher just as He begins His first class there in the synagogue.

2. The *progressive* imperfect—“Why *were* you *searching* for me?” (Luke 2:49). Jesus wanted to know why Mary and Joseph went about searching for Him. His question includes all the activity they had spent trying to locate Him—from the past right up to that moment—in a single expression.

3. The *iterative* (repetitive) imperfect—“A certain man . . . [*used to be*] *carried* . . .” (Acts 3:2). Luke wrote about a man lame from birth whom others carried to the Temple so that he could beg alms every day. This was a customary, habitual, repeated, ritual act carried out in the past, from the writer’s point of view.

4. The *desiderative* imperfect—“[There are times] I *could* [almost] *wish* that myself were accursed” (Rom. 9:3, KJV). Paul wrote about a feeling that he had felt for some time, though he did not cherish it at the time he was writing. Even though he still felt the same way, Paul realized that he could never carry it out. So he deliberately toned down a remark that would normally shock or offend God’s true people. This frees Paul to express how much he wanted to win his natural brothers to Christ while at the same time not compromising his loyalty to God.

5. The *conative* imperfect—“John . . . [*kept trying*] to prevent . . .” (Matt. 3:14, NKJV). John kept interrupting Jesus, trying to hinder Him from going under the water, but eventually John gave in and baptized Him.

The **orist tense** views action as a moment in time that was usually in the past from the writer’s or speaker’s point of view. In the imperative the orist calls for an immediate start or an abrupt end to something.

1. The *ingressive* orist—“Jesus *burst out weeping*” (see John 11:35). John looked at the action as it broke into the story to emphasize its suddenness. He caught Jesus about to have a good cry—just as He exploded into tears.

2. The *effective* orist—He “*has triumphed*” (Rev. 5:5, NIV). John looked at the

conclusion of an action to emphasize the success of an effort. He caught Jesus, “the Lion of the tribe of Judah,” at the glorious moment of victory, having won a smashing triumph over all the forces of darkness.

3. The *constantive* aorist—“Nevertheless death *reigned* from Adam to Moses” (Rom. 5:14, NKJV). Paul summarized what is happening for us by reducing the time of action to a point so that we can look at the entire period as a whole—at a glance. Here he spotlighted the stranglehold death had on humanity from the fall of Adam to the days of Moses by emphasizing the way it thoroughly dominated every person who lived throughout that period.

4. The *narrative* aorist—“We . . . *stayed* . . .” (Acts 28:12). Luke presented the real order of events by showing that one past event had preceded another that was either mentioned or implied in the context. Here he points out that he and Paul spent three days at Syracuse after a three-month stay at Malta and just before arriving by ship at Rhegium.

5. The *gnomic* aorist—“He is like a branch that *is thrown away* and withers” (John 15:6, NIV). Scholars are split over how to interpret this one. Some believe that the author chose the aorist instead of the present tense to express timeless truths in a more abrupt and startling way: Fruitless branches are good for only one thing—the woodpile. Others say that this is a dramatic New Testament version of the Hebrew perfect. John may have chosen the aorist to dramatize the seriousness of the situation by emphasizing the sudden end that awaits fruitless branches—how complete and final it is.

6. The *dramatic* aorist—“I *know* what I will do!” (Luke 16:4, TEV). Sometimes writers or speakers use the aorist in place of the present tense in order to more graphically present a state of mind just reached or an act that expresses it. Here the manager is about to lose his job. Unable to perform manual labor—and ashamed to beg—he hits on a shrewd idea. Luke dramatically interrupts the text to capture vividly the way that the idea suddenly popped into the manager’s head.

7. The *epistolary* aorist—“See what large letters I use as I *write* to you” (Gal. 6:11, NIV). Paul here put himself in the place of his readers by describing his present writing activity as though it were in the past—the way it was by the time the Galatians actually received it. In this case Paul took the pen from his scribe’s hand to write the closing paragraph himself with noticeably larger letters.

The **perfect tense** describes an action completed in the past that may have results that continue into the writer’s or speaker’s present. Whereas the aorist testifies that something actually did happen, the perfect tense confirms that it reached the normal result.

1. The *extensive* perfect—“I *have fought* . . . I *have finished* . . . I *have kept* . . .” (2 Tim. 4:7). Paul described a completed effort. Nothing remained undone to reach the intended result. God had given him a task and had the means to accomplish it. When Paul summed up his life as one big thrust toward winning the contest, finishing the course, and keeping the faith, he meant that he had carried things out God’s way. As a result, no additional effort was required. The task stood completed.

2. The *intensive* perfect—“That he was buried, and . . . [*remains raised* since] the third day” (1 Cor. 15:4). Sometimes the past act disappears from view, leaving only its results. Here Paul testified that Christ really died, because He was buried (aorist), and he assured the readers that the Saviour truly accomplished His earthly mission through the Resurrection. The only successful way for Jesus to finish His ministry on

earth was to conquer death. Since God had rescued Jesus from the grave (the act) on the third day, Jesus had remained triumphantly raised to life (the abiding result) since.

3. The *iterative* perfect—“Did I exploit you through any of the men I *sent* you?” (1 Cor. 12:17, 18, NIV). This is a special use of the extensive perfect, which indicates repeated action in the past at intervals. Unlike the present or imperfect, this iterative perfect does not necessarily refer to the same act performed again and again. But it does spotlight action that was repeated at intervals, and these repeated actions worked toward the same goal and had the same normal result. Paul first, then Titus and Timothy, whom he sent, all worked in the same spirit and pursued the same course. They all strengthened and built up the Corinthian church and never took advantage of the Corinthian Christians.

4. The *dramatic-historical* perfect—“John bore witness of Him and *cried out* . . .” (John 1:15, NKJV). This use of the intensive perfect dramatizes a narrative by vividly bringing a past event into the speaker’s or writer’s present. John wrote his Gospel nearly 70 years after John the Baptist’s death. Yet the use of the perfect tense here allowed him to vividly bring the forerunner’s testimony out of the past and dramatically into the present. The apostle had heard those immortal words back then, and now his readers could also hear John “cry out” on behalf of Messiah Jesus.

5. The *gnomic* perfect—“A woman *is bound* to her husband as long as he lives” (1 Cor. 7:39, NKJV). This use of the perfect describes a custom of society that is the abiding result or state left behind by some past action. In this case the marriage vow had established a state of affairs that remained in effect until the husband died.

6. The *allegorical* perfect—“But God *dealt* graciously with Abraham through a promise” (see Gal. 3:18). Some Bible writers used the perfect tense for a New Testament exposition of an Old Testament verse. Since the perfect expresses continuation from the past to the present time, this particular usage represents Old Testament events as more than history—they stand recorded in the abiding Christian tradition, contemporary with and relevant to New Testament people. References to Christ or the church, however, are more than relevant; they are still in operation (abiding results). In this passage, Paul told the Galatian Christians that because even Abraham had nothing more than God’s word for it, the covenant promise always was, still is, and ever shall be the only means by which human beings can receive the title to the inheritance. The law determines only their fitness to keep it.

7. The *prophetic* perfect—“And I *am glorified* in them” (John 17:10, KJV). Jesus confidently expressed His expectation that the disciples would do Him honor in the future—expressed it as though it had already happened.

The **pluperfect tense** normally represents a state or result in the past that was generated by a completed action that was still further in the past. (Note that the perfect tense represents a present state resulting from a past action, but the pluperfect tense represents a past state resulting from a yet previous action.)

1. The *extensive* pluperfect—“It *had* its foundation” (Matt. 7:25, NIV). The builder completed the foundation of the house prior to the flood. Designed to withstand the flood, it did not fall because the builder’s efforts had reached their normal result—a foundation built to last.

2. The *intensive* pluperfect—“For the Jews *had already* agreed” (John 9:22). Verbs that express the present intensive aspect of the perfect also stress the past intensive aspect of the pluperfect. When the Pharisees investigated the healing of a man born blind, his parents denied knowing by whom he had been healed or how this mir-

acle had happened. And verse 22 explains why. They were afraid (still) of the Jewish leaders, based on a previous agreement with them that anyone who acknowledged Messiah Jesus should be barred from the synagogue.

Old Testament Hebrew

The Hebrew language has only two tenses—the *perfect* and the *imperfect*, either of which can occur in the past, present, or future. In other words, the tense does not determine when the action occurs. It reveals only the *kind* of action: (a) the short or decisive tense expresses an action complete and finished, rounded off to a point in time, or (b) the long or continuous tense expresses an incomplete and ongoing action.

The context and certain grammatical devices decide whether the verbal idea occurs in the past, present, or future. Generally speaking, time depends on whether a *chain of verbs* begins with either a perfect (short) or an imperfect (long) verb. Unless the context indicates otherwise, the short tense is in the past and the long is in the future, and the verbs that follow connect their kind of action to the time set by this first verb with the conjunction *waw* (and). For example: [long] + [*waw* + short] = [long] + [long].

Many grammarians say that the conjunction *waw* converts one tense into the other. Actually, the *waw* doesn't convert. It *connects*:

1. the *completeness* of the perfect (usually past; for instance, Gen. 1:5; Ex. 1:1) with:
 - a. the *present* to express decisiveness (Ex. 3:7, 9) or
 - b. the *future* to express certainty (Ex. 4:9; Lev. 4:20) or decisiveness (Ex. 3:20) or
2. the *incompleteness* of the imperfect (usually future; for instance, Gen. 9:26; Ex. 3:19) with
 - a. the *present* to express habit, custom (Gen. 10:9; Ex. 13:15), or persistence (Ex. 5:4; 14:15) or
 - b. the *past* to express long-lasting activity or results (Ex. 3:17) or permanency (Gen. 1:3).

At times both tenses can work together, as in the case where something in the future depends on whether certain conditions are met first. For example, when Moses said, “If a priest who is anointed *should sin* [imperfect, long tense] then *let him bring* [perfect, short tense] a sin offering” (Lev. 4:3), he meant that if an anointed priest should sin tomorrow, the next day, or later, the Lord expects him to bring an appropriate sin offering to the sanctuary/Temple and do so without delay.

Sometimes the Old Testament writers omitted verbs from the text to focus attention on the condition or state of the characters rather than on their activity. In such cases the translator supplies the missing verb. (In most King James Bibles, this verb is in italics.)

Characteristically, however, the *perfect* (short and decisive) tense translates as the simple past (“I wrote”) or the present perfect (“I have written”).

With verbs that signify *perception* or the *attitude* of the subject toward an object (rather than an action performed on the object), the *perfect* can be translated as “I love,” “I loved,” or “I have loved”; or “I know,” “I knew,” or “I have known.”

With verbs that signify the *mental or physical state* of the subject and consistently do not have a direct object, the *perfect* can be translated as the present of the verb “to be” plus an adjective (“I am old,” “I have become old,” or “I grew old”) or as “I aged.”

With verbs that frequently occur in *poetic and proverbial expressions* but only

rarely in prose, the *perfect* expresses habitual activity with no specific tense value and so is translated in the general present (“I write”).

The *imperfect* (long and continuous) tense expresses specific and simple futurity (“I will write”).

If the *imperfect* refers to a general and nonspecific action that occurs by *force of habit* or is a *regular, customary* action, it is translated as “I write” or “I used to write.”

If the *imperfect* refers to a *potential or probable action*, It can be translated “I can (or could or may or might or would or should or will or shall [probably] write.”

Sometimes the *imperfect* is used in a special manner, as when it is used to *challenge* others to take up a certain course of action: in the *first person* it is *cohortative* (“Let us stand firm!”) and in the *second person* it is *imperative* (“[You] stand firm!”) and in the *third person* it is *jussive* (“Let him stand firm!”).

When the *imperative* is part of a verb chain, there are four possibilities: **time**—(a) the imperative plus imperative with the *waw* indicates a list that *may be* in chronological order, or (b) the imperative plus the perfect with the *waw* indicates a list that is *definitely* in chronological order; or **intention**—(a) the imperative alone or (b) the imperative plus the imperative or the jussive alone or the jussive plus the cohortative indicates purpose or result.

FIGURE 83
OVERVIEW OF THE HEBREW TENSES
 (Adapted from the Newberry Bible)

TENSE	TIME OF OCCURRENCE		
	PAST	PRESENT	FUTURE
Short w/o <i>waw</i>	Complete, finished action or event	Decision	Certainty or probability
Long w/o <i>waw</i>	Incomplete action still in progress	Incomplete action, habit, custom, or practice	Promise or prediction
Short with <i>waw</i>	Complete, finished action or event	Contemporary with chain	Decision, certainty, or probability
Long with <i>waw</i>	Permanence; establishes a fact; long-lasting act or results	Contemporary with chain	Futurity or contemporary with chain

The Significance of Hebrew Voices—Hebrew also employs the active, passive, and middle voices but in a more restricted manner than in New Testament Greek. The **active** expresses itself in the *Qal*, *Piel*, and *Hiphil* themes; the **passive** in the *Qal*, *Niphal*, *Pual*, and *Hophal* themes; and the **middle** in the *Niphal* theme.

The Significance of Hebrew Verb Themes—The simplest form of a Hebrew verb normally consists of three letters. This root provides the fundamental idea of the verb and acts as a stem to which are added prefixes or suffixes that modify its form and develop its idea along seven basic lines or *themes*.

The *Qal*

- The **stative Qal** expresses a state or condition: “So he and his garments *shall*

be holy” (Ex. 29:21).

- the **fientive Qal** expresses an action: “In the beginning, God *created* the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1).

The *Niphal*

- the **resultitive Niphal**. Passives normally reverse the active sense. For instance, in the active sentence “The boy *walked* the dog,” the boy is the subject who walks the dog. In its passive counterpart “The dog *was walked* by the boy,” the boy still walks the dog, but the dog, formerly the direct object, is recast as the subject in order to emphasize it. For example, in the question “Why *is* the house of God *neglected*?” (Neh. 13:11), Nehemiah features the deplorable condition of the Temple as the result of withholding tithe from God’s workers and he does so to rekindle the spirit of giving among the people.

- the **passive Niphal** stresses the agent (in the following case the agent is “my glory”) that acts upon the subject: “And [the tabernacle] *shall be treated as holy* by my glory” (Ex. 29:43).

- in the **middle Niphal** the subject acts in its own interest: “I *will prove Myself holy* in you, before their eyes” (Eze. 36:23).

- in the **reflexive Niphal** the subject acts upon itself: “*Hide yourselves* there three days” (Josh. 2:16).

- in the **reciprocal Niphal** plural subjects interact: “Provide me a man that we *may fight one another*” (1 Sam. 17:10).

- in the **tolerative Niphal** the subject allows itself to yield to the results of an action: “But if the watchman sees the sword coming . . . and the people *do not let themselves be warned . . .*” (Eze. 33:6).

The *Piel* and *Pual*

For every Piel verb there is also a passive counterpart (the Pual).

- The **factitive Piel/Pual** forms active transitive verbs from roots that appear as intransitive or stative verbs in the Qal. For instance, the root *qadosh* (to be holy) in the Qal becomes “to sanctify” in the Piel/Pual: “I *will sanctify* My great name” (Eze. 36:23).

- The **causative Piel/Pual** (rare) takes roots that appear as fientive verbs in Qal and forms verbs that express the person or thing that produces an effect. In this way the root *yalad* (to bear a child; to beget) becomes “to assist or attend as a midwife” in the Piel/Pual: “When you *help* the Hebrew women *at childbirth . . .*” (Ex. 1:16).

- The **intensive Piel/Pual** pluralizes or magnifies the action that roots express in the Qal. The root *shaal* (to ask) in the Qal, for instance, becomes “to beg” in the Piel/Pual: “Let his children wander about and *beg*” (Ps. 109:10).

- The **delocutive Piel/Pual** transforms idiomatic expressions into verbs. So, for example, the root *tsaddiyq* (right, which also came to mean innocent or in the right) becomes “pronounce innocent” or “pronounce in the right” in the Piel/Pual: “Speak, because I want to *pronounce* you *in the right*” (Job 33:32).

- The **privative Piel/Pual** recasts the root idea in a privative (deprived) sense. Thus the root *caqal* (stone) expresses the loss or absence of stones in the Piel/Pual: “And he *rid* it *of stones*” (Isa. 5:2).

The *Hiphil* and *Hophal*

For each Hiphil verb there is also a passive counterpart (the Hophal).

- The **causative Hiphil/Hophal** forms verbs (from their Qal counterparts) that express the person or thing that produces an effect. Consequently, the root *'alah* (to go up, to ascend, to climb) becomes in the Hiphil/Hophal “to bring up” or “to cause to as-

cead or climb”: “For this man Moses who *brought us up* out of the land of Egypt . . .” (Ex. 32:1).

- The **permissive** Hiphil/Hophal is closely related to the causative. Is Jeremiah saying “The Lord *showed* [caused me to see] me” (causative) or “The Lord *allowed me to see*” (permissive) “two baskets of figs set before the temple of the Lord” (Jer. 24:1)? The context is the decisive factor in cases like this.

- The **delocutive** Hiphil/Hophal transforms verbs derived from idiomatic expressions into causative verbs. As a result, the root idea of *qalal* (to be small or to be of little account) becomes “to belittle” or “to treat with contempt” in the Hiphil/Hophal: “Why then did you *treat us as insignificant* [and therefore make us small or of little account]?” (2 Sam. 19:43).

- The **factitive** Hiphil/Hophal produces stative verbs from roots that are also stative in the Qal. The root idea of *qarab* (to draw near or to approach), for example, becomes “to bring near” in the Hiphil/Hophal: “And when Samuel *brought* all the tribes of Israel *near* . . .” (1 Sam. 10:20).

- The **intransitive** Hiphil/Hophal—The Hiphil/Hophal can develop verbs that are doubly transitive (that is, that take *two* objects). One is the object of what is caused; the other is an object of the root verbal idea. In the case of “I will *make* them *hear* my words” (Deut. 4:10), God reminds Moses of the day at Horeb when He made the people (*them*, the object caused) hear what He had to say (His *words*, the object of the root verbal idea). If the second object is missing, however, the verbal idea is intransitive. Intransitive Hiphil/Hophal verbs chronicle a person’s or thing’s entry into a lasting state or condition: “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he *is old*, he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6). In this case, the Hiphil verb points to that time in life when a child grows up, enters adulthood, and remains an adult.

- The **denominative** Hiphil/Hophal transforms a noun root into a verb, as in the case of the root *qaran* (horn). When the psalmist says that “this also shall please the Lord better than an ox or a bull that *displays horns*” (Ps. 69:31), he explains that God appreciates praise and recognition through song and gratitude more than the sacrifice of costly, fully grown animals (whose maturity is indicated by the horns that have been caused to grow until they show).

The Hithpael

Hithpael verbs are intransitive. Their subjects always participate in the action.

- The **reflexive** Hithpael may have a direct or indirect sense. In “Let the priests also . . . *sanctify themselves*” (Ex. 19:22), the subjects act directly upon themselves. In “So Abraham *prayed* to God” (Gen. 20:17), however, the patriarch engages in an activity either on his own behalf (“Abraham *himself prayed*”) or for his own benefit (“Abraham *prayed for himself*”). The context helps decide which is the proper sense in the passage.

- The **reciprocal** Hithpael expresses interaction, as in Ezekiel 2:2, where the prophet says that after the Spirit entered him and set him on his feet “I heard him *conversing* with me.” That is, he heard the Spirit and himself speaking back and forth to each other.

- The **iterative** Hithpael expresses repetitive action: “And they heard God’s voice as they *walked about* [walked here and there in] the garden” (Gen. 3:8).

- The **denominative** Hithpael expresses action from noun roots. Hence, the root *nabiy*’ (prophet) becomes in the Hithpael “to prophesy,” “to behave or speak as a prophet,” or “to behave or speak under the influence of the divine Spirit” as in: “So

I *prophesied* as He ordered me” (Eze. 37:10).

Auxiliary Verbs

Bible verbs generally demand more than one word to express themselves in English, so translators frequently resort to auxiliary verbs to help bring out the fullest sense of the text. Although an auxiliary verb can stand alone as an independent verb (for instance, “He *is* Lord”), as a helper it exists for the sole purpose of clarifying the meaning of the main verb in the sentence (as in “The king *is* coming”). For example, the verb “will” in the clause “He *will* return” grammatically tells us that Christ’s return is *still future*, but also in the context it helps communicate that His coming is *sure*.

In using or understanding auxiliary verbs, select from the following possibilities the meaning that best fits the context.

1. *Be, being, been, am, are, is, was, and were* (in all tenses) (a) describe position, quality, condition, or state; (b) express continuous or repeated action with the present and imperfect tenses, regardless of voice; (c) form intensive perfect verbs in all voices (for instance, “He *is* risen”); and (d) form the passive voice in all tenses (for example, “has been,” “is being,” and “will be.”)

2. *Can* and *could* occur with the present, imperfect, and aorist (past) tenses in the indicative and optative moods. *Can* is used with the present tense, implying ability, know-how, right, or permission. *Could* is the past tense of *can* and represents a less certain condition than does the word *can*.

3. *Continue* and *keep* occur with the present tense and express (a) repeated, regular action in the present (“He continues to . . .”) or (b) ongoing action from the present and into the future (“Keep on going”).

4. *Do* and *does* (with the present tenses) or *did* and *done* (with past tenses) (a) add force to commands, pleadings, promptings, and challenges; (b) emphasize action (“I *do* believe”—Mark 9:24, NIV); (c) substitute for another verb to avoid repetition (“does not live” means in Acts 7:48, NIV, “is not living”); and (d) put Greek sentences into question form (“Did you offer?”—Acts 7:42).

5. *Has, have, and had* form extensive perfect and pluperfect verbs in all voices (for instance, “Your faith *has* saved you”) and imply possession, prominence, relation, experience, or obligation.

6. *Let* is used with the present and aorist tenses of the imperative and hortatory subjunctive moods and serves to lay down a challenge or extend an invitation with respect to the verbal idea (“*Let us consider* one another”—Heb. 10:24, NKJV).

7. *May* is used in the present tense and *might* in the past tense. *Might* expresses more doubt and a greater dependence on circumstances than does *may* in the imperative, subjunctive, and optative moods. The two words express likelihood, possibility, or probability; concession or contingency; purpose or expectation; a wish or desire in prayer, an imprecation, or a benediction; and an implied doubt, permission, or possibility.

8. *Remain(s)* and *stand(s)* occur in the present and perfect tenses. They strengthen commands or challenges to stick things out (for instance, “Remain firm”), or they emphasize the intensive aspect of the perfect tense (“It *stands* written” instead of “It *has been* written”).

9. *Shall* appears in the future tense and expresses a command, prompt, or challenge; what is mandatory (for instance, laws, regulations, or directives); what seems inevitable or likely to happen in the future; simple futurity (in the first person); or de-

termination (in the second and third persons).

10. *Should* is the past of *shall* and rarely expresses time past. It occurs in the aorist and present tenses in the subjunctive and optative moods, and it appears in all three persons—singular or plural. *Should* implies duty or fitness, doubt or hesitancy, and supposition or condition. It expresses condition (“If such-and-such *should* occur, then . . .”); obligation, propriety, or expediency; futurity (from a point of view in the past); what is probable or expected; a polite request; or a direct statement made in a softer way.

11. *Used (to)* occurs in the past tense and expresses customary or habitual action as in “He *used to* go down.”

12. *Will* appears in the future tense. It expresses desire, choice, willingness, consent, or refusal in a “will not” construction; frequent, customary, habitual action, or a natural tendency or disposition; simple futurity in the second and third person; capability or sufficiency; probability or inevitability; determination, insistence, persistence, or willfulness when used in the first person; or a command, challenge, or charge.

13. *Would* is the past tense of *will*. It expresses futurity from a point of view in the past; preference with the words “rather” or “sooner;” wish, desire, or intent; willingness; plan or intention; custom or habitual action in the past (“I *would* go to the store . . .”); consent or choice (“I *would* do anything for you”); contingency or possibility in a conditional sentence (“If such-and-such *should* happen, then I *would* . . .” or “If he *would* do such-and-such, then I could . . .”); a statement of desire, request, or advice to completion in a noun clause (“We wish that he *would* go”); probability or presumption in the past or present; a request that expects voluntary compliance (“*Would* you . . .?”); or doubt or uncertainty.

14. *Wish* occurs in the optative. It expresses a desire for something that appears unattainable, confers something unwanted on a person (“It is my *wish* that you . . .”), or invokes something good or evil on a person.

Here is a simple and effective procedure for interpreting verbs:

1. Work one sentence at a time.
2. Make a note of all the verbs in each sentence.
3. Are the verbs transitive or intransitive, expressing action, or copulative, expressing state, condition, or character?
4. Record each verb’s tense, voice, and mood or theme.
5. Does the *voice* emphasize (a) the action, (b) the subject, or (c) an agent? In what way?
6. What kind of action, state, condition, or character does the *tense* indicate? (a) momentary/complete—isolated at its beginning, viewed in its entirety at a glance, captured as a one-time occurrence, or anticipated? (b) persistent/incomplete—interrupted, in-progress, recurring, customary, or habitual? or (c) perfective/complete—finished or lingering?
7. Does the *mood* relate the action or state/condition/character to reality or to some degree of possibility?
8. Along what lines does the *theme* develop the action?
9. What do auxillary verbs, if any, help bring out?
10. Can you derive any insights from the order in which these verbs appear? Do they contrast, complement, or compound each other? Do they indicate chronological order, purpose, or result?
11. What influence does the context have on the verbal idea?