

Looking Up God's Word

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*How to Use Greek and Hebrew Word Tools Without
Knowing Greek and Hebrew*



A handbook for preachers, Bible class teachers, and serious students

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Looking Up God's Word: How to Use Greek and Hebrew Word Tools Without Knowing Greek and Hebrew

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CHAPTER 8

Three Greek word studies, worked from start to finish



Method is learned by watching it done. In this chapter we take three Greek words through the seven steps, using only tools that are free. Follow along on your phone or computer. Check every number and every quotation yourself. That is the point of the exercise.

Study one: hupogrammos, “example”

Verse	1 Peter 2:21
English (ASV)	example
Greek	ὑπογραμμός
Say it	hoo-pog-ram-MOSS
Strong's	G5261
Times in the New Testament	1

Read the passage first. Peter is writing to Christians who are suffering, and in chapter 2 he speaks directly to household servants who are being treated unjustly by harsh masters. Then he lifts their eyes to Christ.

“For hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that ye should follow his steps” (1 Peter 2:21).

The English word “example” is good, but it is general. Is there a picture behind it? Click G5261 on Blue Letter Bible. Strong’s calls it “an underwriting,” a copy for imitation. Thayer goes further. He says the word first meant a writing copy that held all the letters of the alphabet, given to beginners so they could learn to draw them, and then came to mean any example set before a person to follow.

Now check a second witness. On STEP Bible, click “example” in 1 Peter 2:21 and read the brief lexicon and the LSJ entry. You will find the same picture: a model or pattern set out to be copied, as in teaching children to write. BDAG, if you can reach it, describes the word the same way, as a model or pattern to be copied in writing or drawing, and then more generally an example to be followed.

The third witness is the Bible’s own usage, and here we meet something important. The concordance shows the word only once in the whole New Testament. There is nothing else in Scripture to compare it with. When a word is that rare, two things follow. The lexicons and the wider Greek evidence carry more weight, and the context of your own passage carries even more. So read on.

“who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously” (1 Peter 2:22-23).

Now the picture is complete, and the text itself tells you which letters to trace. He did no sin. There was no deceit in His speech. When they insulted Him, He did not insult them back. When He suffered, He made no threats. He handed Himself over to the God who judges justly.

Check the English translations. The ASV, KJV, NKJV, and NASB all say “example.” Others say “model” or “pattern.” Every one of them sits within the meaning the lexicons gave. The word study adds color to the translation. It does not overturn it. That is what a sound word study usually does.

Here is the finding in one sentence. Peter pictures Christ as the teacher’s copy at the top of the page, and the suffering Christian as the student who traces over the letters, and verses 22 and 23 tell us exactly what those letters are.

That is a sermon. And every part of it can be checked by anyone in the pew with a phone.

Study two: ekklesia, “church”

Verse	Matthew 16:18
English (ASV)	church
Greek	ἐκκλησία
Say it	ek-klay-SEE-ah
Strong’s	G1577
Times in the KJV New Testament	118 (church 115, assembly 3)

“And I also say unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).

This study will test the method, because it touches a word study that many of us have preached for years. It is often said from our pulpits that ekklesia means “the called-out ones,” because the word is built from ek, “out of,” and a form of kaleo, “to call.” The church, we have said, is the people God has called out of the world.

Let us state the best case for that teaching in its full strength. It is not foolish. Strong’s own definition begins with “a calling out.” The word is in fact built from those two parts. And the idea behind it is

thoroughly biblical. God did call His people through the gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:14). Peter says God “called you out of darkness into his marvellous light” (1 Peter 2:9). A preacher who says Christians are called out of the world is teaching something true.

The question in front of us is narrower. Is “called-out ones” what the word *ekklesia* meant to a first-century reader? That is a language question, so we take it to the lexicons and to usage.

Thayer’s first sense is an assembly of the citizens of a Greek city, called together to deliberate. BDAG, which is built on a far wider base of ancient evidence, gives as its first meaning a regularly summoned political body, an assembly. LSJ shows the same thing across classical Greek: the *ekklesia* of Athens was the citizens’ assembly. In the Greek Old Testament, the word translates the Hebrew word for the congregation of Israel gathered before God. In the New Testament, Stephen calls Israel at Sinai “the church in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38), and Hebrews 2:12, quoting Psalm 22, renders the same word “congregation.”

Now answer the question from Chapter 6. Where are the three places the King James translators rendered *ekklesia* “assembly”? All three are in Acts 19, in the riot at Ephesus.

“Some therefore cried one thing, and some another: for the assembly was in confusion; and the more part knew not wherefore they were come together” (Acts 19:32).

“But if ye seek anything about other matters, it shall be settled in the regular assembly” (Acts 19:39).

“And when he had thus spoken, he dismissed the assembly” (Acts 19:41).

Look at verse 32 again. The crowd in the theater at Ephesus is called an *ekklesia*, and most of them did not even know why they had come. Nobody had called them out of anything. They were a crowd shouting for Diana. Luke, writing under inspiration, used the same word for that mob that Jesus used for His church. And in

verse 39 the town clerk refers to the city's lawful, regular ekklesia, the official assembly of citizens.

So what did the word mean? The evidence is clear and it is consistent across every lexicon: ekklesia meant an assembly, a gathering of people. The pieces “out” and “call” had long since faded from the ordinary meaning of the word, the way “butter” and “fly” have faded from butterfly. This is the root fallacy we met in Chapter 7.

Does that take anything away from the church? Not at all. It gives something back. When Jesus said, “I will build my church,” a Jewish hearer who knew the Greek Old Testament would have thought of the congregation of Israel assembled before the Lord. Jesus was saying He would build His own assembly, His own congregation, His own people gathered to Him. That is a greater thought than a word-picture, and it is the thought the text actually carries.

And the doctrine of God's calling does not need the word ekklesia to prop it up. It stands on 2 Thessalonians 2:14 and 1 Peter 2:9, which say it plainly. That is how it should be. Let each truth stand on the text that teaches it.

Here is the finding in one sentence. Ekklesia means an assembly or congregation, and the church is the assembly Jesus Himself builds and owns.

Study three: agapao and phileo, “love”

Verse	John 21:15-17
English (ASV)	love, lovest
Greek	ἀγαπάω and φιλέω
Say it	ah-gah-PAH-oh and fih-LEH-oh
Strong's	G25 and G5368
Times in the KJV New Testament	agapao 142, phileo 25

This is the most preached word study in the New Testament, and it is a perfect test case for trap four, drawing a line the author did not draw.

Read John 21:15-17. Three times Jesus asks Peter whether he loves Him. In the first two questions, Jesus uses agapao. In the third, He uses phileo. Every time, Peter answers with phileo.

“So when they had broken their fast, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of John, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs” (John 21:15).

The popular sermon says that agapao is the higher, divine, self-giving love, and phileo is the lower love of friendship and feeling. Jesus asks Peter for the highest love. Peter, humbled by his denial, can only offer the lesser. Finally Jesus comes down to Peter's level and asks, “Do you even love me as a friend?”

State the best case for it. The two words are different words, and John chose them. Strong's own dictionary, on the Blue Letter Bible page for phileo, says that phileo is a matter of personal sentiment and feeling, while agapao reflects judgment and the deliberate assent of the will. Richard Trench's Synonyms of the New Testament, free on the same site, argues for a real difference between the two. Many good preachers have taught it. It is not a foolish reading.

Now go to the third witness, the usage. John is the author, so start with John.

“The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand” (John 3:35).

“For the Father loveth the Son, and sheweth him all things that himself doeth: and greater works than these will he show him, that ye may marvel” (John 5:20).

The same author says the same thing about the same relationship, the Father's love for the Son. In John 3:35 the word is agapao. In John 5:20 it is phileo. If phileo were a lesser love, John would be saying that the Father loves the Son with a lesser love. He is not. He is using two words for the same love.

Keep reading in John. When the sisters sent word about Lazarus, they said, "Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick" (John 11:3). The word is phileo. Two verses later, John tells us that Jesus loved Martha, her sister, and Lazarus (John 11:5). The word is agapao. Same Lord, same family, same week.

And agapao is not always a noble love.

"And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their works were evil" (John 3:19).

That is agapao, the supposedly divine love, used for men loving darkness. Paul uses it the same way of a man who fell away: "for Demas forsook me, having loved this present world" (2 Timothy 4:10).

What have we learned? The two words overlap heavily in the New Testament, and especially in John. John varies his vocabulary often in this last chapter. In the same three verses he uses two different words for "feed" and two different words for the sheep. D. A. Carson, in *Exegetical Fallacies*, treats the sharp distinction in John 21 as an example of reading a difference into overlapping words. Some careful scholars still see a shade of difference in John 21. You may hold that view if you wish. But you may not preach it as if the Greek demands it, because John's own usage shows that it does not.

What does the passage plainly teach, then? Three times Peter denied the Lord beside a charcoal fire (John 18:18, 25-27). Three times, beside another charcoal fire (John 21:9), the Lord asks him to confess his love. Three times He gives him a charge: feed My lambs, tend My sheep, feed My sheep. And John tells us exactly

what grieved Peter: that the Lord asked him the third time (John 21:17). It was the third asking that cut him. The count of three is the thing John points to.

That is the sermon. The Lord restores the fallen disciple as many times as he fell, and He restores him to service. Nothing in it depends on a disputed word, and every part of it is in the text.

Here is the finding in one sentence. In John, *agapao* and *phileo* overlap so fully that no sermon should hang on the difference, and John 21 is about the threefold restoration of a fallen disciple to the work of feeding Christ's sheep.

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