

## Introduction to Prepositions

### *General Use*

“A preposition is a word which is used to help substantives [a noun or word used as a noun – mw] express their case function. It is so named because its position normally is immediately before the substantive with which it is associated.”<sup>1</sup>

For example, “The book is on the table.” The preposition “on” expresses something about the substantive (noun) “table.” Or, “The noise interfered with the singing.” The preposition “with” relates to the substantive (participle/gerund) “singing.”<sup>2</sup>

Summers continues, “They help substantives to express their relation to verbs or other parts of speech. They mark the direction and position of the action expressed by the verb.”<sup>3</sup> In the examples above, “on” describes the location of the book, “with” clarifies how the noise interfered.

### *Emphasis*

“One of the predominant uses of the preposition is its combination with a verb to express emphasis. The meaning of a verb may be altered to many shades by the use of prepositions. For instance βλέπω means ‘I see’ while διαβλέπω means ‘I see through’ and, hence, ‘I see clearly.’”<sup>4</sup>

Another example describes Joseph of Arimathea in Luke 23:51b:

he **was looking for** the kingdom of God (ESV)  
who **was waiting for** the kingdom of God (NASB)  
ὃς **προσεδέχετο** τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ

The verb δέχομαι typically is translated as “welcome” or “receive.” The intensified form προσδέχομαι has the meaning “wait for” or “look forward to.”<sup>5</sup> This may be an example of both uses of the preposition, direction and emphasis: προσ generally means “toward” or “forward,” and the preposition also intensifies the idea of waiting. “He was eagerly anticipating the kingdom of God” might be a reasonable expression of Luke’s description of Joseph.

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<sup>1</sup> Ray Summers, *Essentials of New Testament Greek* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1950), 32.

<sup>2</sup> A Greek participle or English gerund is a verb form, such as “to sing,” that is used as a noun. In English it seems this distinction is blurred, and the word “singing” is listed as a noun in most dictionaries. In Greek, a participle can express the idea of “the one who was singing.” More on participles later.

<sup>3</sup> Summers, 32.

<sup>4</sup> Summers, 33.

<sup>5</sup> See listings in John R. Kohlenberger III, et.al., *The Greek English Concordance to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997).

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Joseph took risks. He risked his reputation and standing with the other Jewish leaders. He risked his position on the high council. Perhaps he risked raising suspicion among the Roman soldiers. Going directly to Pilate (who may already have had enough of this Jesus person) may have been dangerous. Joseph was able to act even when it was risky because of his anticipation of the kingdom of God.

### *Elision*

“Prepositions ending in a vowel (except *περί* and *πρό*) drop the vowel when the next word begins with a vowel. Examples: *ἀπ’ ἀδελφοῦ*... Note the apostrophe which replaces the last vowel except in compound verb forms such as *ἀπὸ ἄγω*, which becomes *ἀπάγω*. This is called *elision*. [The letters] *τ* and *π* become *θ* and *φ* before rough breathing: [*ἀντό ἁμαρτίας* becomes] *ἀνθ’ ἁμαρτίας*, [*ἀπὸ υἱοῦ* becomes] *ἀφ’ υἱοῦ*.”<sup>6</sup> These changes do not affect the meaning, but without a familiarity with the variations, the Greek text may be unnecessarily confusing.

### *Translation*

“A very important fact to remember in studying prepositions is that each one, unlike the English use, may be used to express one or several either kindred or diversified ideas. The best way to determine the meanings of a preposition is to study it in its various contexts and note its various uses.”<sup>7</sup>

There are “numerous prepositions and other connective words that are often left untranslated in English versions, for the sake of literary style and fluency [or ‘understandability’ – mw]. But in reading only the English, we may miss altogether the originally intended relationship between sentences and clauses...”<sup>8</sup> I would add a caution to Mounce’s suggestion. It is important to see and understand (*not* to invent) nuances in the Greek text. That discovery is an incredible gift which God the Holy Spirit may grant us. But it is even more critical that we never communicate to others even the hint that the English versions are somehow inadequate or untrustworthy. God forbid that the blessings of Greek to us should ever diminish anyone else’s desire to read Holy Scripture in any language. *ἀνάγκη γὰρ ἐλθεῖν τὰ σκάνδαλα, πλὴν οὐαὶ τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ δι’ οὗ τὸ σκάνδαλον ἔρχεται*. “For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!” Matthew 18:7.

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<sup>6</sup> Summers, 33.

<sup>7</sup> H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1955), 98-99.

<sup>8</sup> William D. Mounce, *Greek for the Rest of Us* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003), 55.