

Vocabulary

Since languages consist of words, vocabulary is obviously important. You can always look up unfamiliar words (in a dictionary or lexicon or on-line), but looking up every word makes reading or study a slow, lengthy process. (There have been times when I have to look up several words in a verse. By the time I get to the end of the verse, I have forgotten what the first word meant!) The benefit of building a vocabulary is avoiding that drudgery, making reading or Bible study more productive.

The English language includes a large vocabulary:

Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged, together with its 1993 Addenda Section, includes some 470,000 entries. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition, reports that it includes a similar number.¹

The Greek vocabulary of the New Testament is considerably smaller, 5,436 words.² Even with the variations in forms of the same word (verb endings, noun cases, etc.), the total is about 18,873.³ That still sounds like a lot of words, but almost certainly fewer than you use in your first language.⁴ So be encouraged about learning Greek vocabulary.

And there is more good news (really)! Once you have the general idea of verb forms and noun endings, you will realize that knowing the stem or root word gives you the meaning no matter what the endings change to. Also, just as there are words in English you use frequently, and other words you use rarely, the same pattern is true in the New Testament. Of the 5,436 words, only about a thousand words occur more than ten times. A logical approach is to concentrate on the words that are used most frequently. Then, on those occasions when you find a word that is only used one time in the New Testament (referred to in commentaries as *hapax legomena*, “one time words”), you can stop and look that one up.

There are various sources for word lists, arranged by frequency, with the most frequently used words first, etc. A printed resource is Bruce Metzger's *Lexical Aids for Students of New Testament Greek*, referenced earlier. A similar on-line list (along with other helpful reference material) is found at the Institute of Biblical Greek: <https://biblicalgreek.org/grammar/vocabulary-frequency-list/>

There are about 170 words that occur one hundred times or more. According to Metzger, knowing those 170 words means that you will be able to read about 75% of the New Testament. A number of those top 170 words are almost immediately recognizable from English derivatives (θεός, *theos*, God; theology; πνεῦμα, *pneuma*, spirit; pneumatic; ἄγγελος, *angelos*, messenger; angel; etc.). Learning a workable vocabulary for studying the New Testament Greek text becomes more and more manageable. Using the list on-line or in Metzger will increase your familiarity with words you will see as we look at passages in the Greek text. That familiarity will help build momentum in your study and understanding of Scripture.

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/help/faq-how-many-english-words>, accessed September 18, 2017.

² Bruce M. Metzger, *Lexical Aids for Students of New Testament Greek* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1998), 1.

³ <http://thelibrarybasement.com/2015/01/04/how-many-unique-words-in-the-greek-nt/>, accessed September 18, 2017.

⁴ “The average active vocabulary of an adult English speaker is of around 20,000 words.” <https://www.lingholic.com/how-many-words-do-i-need-to-know-the-955-rule-in-language-learning-part-2/>