

A Certain Mood: Improving Translation of the Greek Subjunctive in the New Testament

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Analysis indicates that biblical translators frequently misrender into English two cases of the Greek subjunctive mood, thereby diminish understanding of corresponding verses in the New Testament, and sometimes induce misinterpretation. This analysis entails study of three elements:

- Use of the Greek subjunctive mood in clauses expressing purpose or result.
- Definition of propositional knowledge implied by Scripture.
- Examples of revised translation and their implications.

The discussion that follows will address each of these in turn.

The Issue

Research on the Internet uncovered a discrepancy in definition of the meaning of a verb in the Greek subjunctive mood that significantly affects translation of Scripture into English. Out of 14 websites examined (see Appendix A), resources on 13 indicate that the subjunctive mood expresses uncertainty—potentiality, possibility, probability, doubt, contingency. Although this research is far from exhaustive, with many books on *Koine* Greek not even accessible online, it suggests the frequency of this teaching.

Information on the 14th website indicates, to the contrary, that this mood conveys surety in two¹ types of clauses:

If the subjunctive mood is used in a ‘purpose’ (or in a ‘result’) clause, then the action should not be thought of as a possible result, but should be viewed as the stated outcome that will happen (or has happened) as a result of another stated action. The use of the subjunctive [in these cases] is not to indicate that something ‘may’ or ‘might’ result from a given action, but it is stating the ‘purpose of’ or ‘reason for’ an action [emphasis added].²

In other words, the action stated in an independent clause of the sentence will cause or has caused to happen the action stated in this type of dependent clause. This latter action is not a mere possibility.

Moreover, this situation—the subjunctive mood used in a purpose or result clause—is no rare occurrence. According to one study, 574 such clauses appear in the New Testament.³

So, is this “outlier” correct? Yes, at least some of the time, according to the analysis below.

¹ Nomenclature may be an issue here. Mr. Keating (cf. footnote 2), in the text quoted above, indicates two kinds of clauses: purpose and result. Meanwhile, Mr. Boyer (cf. footnote 3), on p. 8 of his article, recognizes both kinds but groups them together and calls them “final clauses.” Ted Hildebrandt notes, “The difference between purpose and result is often subtle in English.” See *Mastering New Testament Greek Textbook*, pp. 175; accessed on March 23, 2024, at https://biblicalelearning.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/MNTG_Textbook_2017.pdf.

² Corey Keating, More Detailed Description of the Greek Subjunctive Mood, Resources for Learning New Testament Greek; accessed on March 20, 2024, at https://www.ntgreek.org/learn_nt_greek/subj-detail-frame.htm. In the initial upper frame, click on the link for “1. Purpose Clause.” In the subsequent lower frame, see paragraph d.

³ James L. Boyer, “The Classification of Subjunctives: A Statistical Study,” p. 8, footnote 17; accessed on March 20, 2024, at <https://biblicalelearning.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Boyer-Subjunctive-GTJ.pdf>. Originally published in *Grace Theological Journal* 7.1 (1986) 3-19. Boyer reports on p. 8 and footnote 17 that all 574 are dependent clauses and on p. 7 and footnote 16 that the New Testament contains 1,513 dependent clauses and 344 independent clauses that are in the subjunctive mood.

The Case for Certainty

Study of the Bible reveals an implicit definition of propositional knowledge that can be described as comprehended, proven truth—the mental state of certainty about the truth of a statement gained by acquiring and understanding proof of that truth. The Spirit in no way employs or supports in Scripture the traditional definition of propositional knowledge used by philosophers for centuries, called justified, true belief, which, analysis shows, is unbiblical.⁴ That analysis demonstrates that knowing always entails certainty, that knowing for sure is the only way to know, that knowing for unsure never happens.⁵ Thus, all verbs about knowing in Scripture communicate surety of meaning, even when they are Greek verbs in the subjunctive mood.

Consider four examples, first one appearing in Matthew 9:6, Mark 2:10-11, and Luke 5:24, quoted respectively from the English Standard Version, 2016 Edition⁶ (hereafter simply *ESV*):

⁶ But that **you may know** that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he then said to the paralytic—“Rise, pick up your bed and go home.”

¹⁰ But that **you may know** that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic—¹¹ “I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.”

²⁴ But that **you may know** that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the man who was paralyzed—“I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home.”

In all three instances, the verb in the subjunctive mood, translated as “you may know,” is *eidó*,⁷ which in the perfect tense, *oída*, as here, means to know by direct observation.⁸ The clause combining this verb with the proposition to be known conveys the purpose of the miracle that Jesus is about to perform: to prove His authority on Earth to forgive sins—and, by implication, His deity.⁹ When Jesus states this purpose to those listening to Him, it is a future certainty that in short order becomes a present reality. When the witnesses see the paralytic get up and walk as commanded, they have proof of the proposition, understand the proof, and thus know for sure, without a doubt, that the proposition is true. In other words, the verb in the subjunctive mood here communicates certainty.

However, on its face, the translation expresses the opposite. As rendered, in the normal way for this mood, Jesus appears to be saying, “To make it possible for you to know that the proposition is true, I will heal this man.” This thought does not indicate the purpose of inducing surety in the onlookers’ minds. If He intended to do only that, the witnesses could question His stated proposition: Did the miracle just prove His authority or not?

⁴ Scott Schafer, *So Long, Plato; Hello, Spirit: Knowing Knowledge by Reading Scripture*, chapters 1 and 2; available free of charge at <https://solongplato.info>.

⁵ *Ibid.*, chapter 3.

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of Scripture herein are from this edition of the English Standard Version and accessed on March 21, 2024, at <https://www.biblegateway.com/>.

⁷ Matthew 9:6, Interlinear Bible; accessed at <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/matthew/9-6.htm>. Mark 2:10, Interlinear Bible; accessed at <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/mark/2-10.htm>. Luke 5:24, Interlinear Bible; accessed, at <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/luke/5-24.htm>. All accessed on March 21, 2024.

⁸ Gary Hill, 4920 *syniēmi*, HELPS Lexicon, *The Discovery Bible*. See also 1492 *eídō* (*oída*), HELPS Lexicon, *The Discovery Bible*, available in part at <https://biblehub.com/greek/1492.htm>. See also STRONGS NT 1492: εἰδῶ, Thayer’s Greek Lexicon, also available at <https://biblehub.com/greek/1492.htm>.

⁹ Each of Jesus’ miracles demonstrated His divine nature.

In short, Jesus' intention must be to show the truth to them in no uncertain terms, so that they *do* know, not to leave them doubting, so that they simply *may* know.

A second example is John 10:37-38:

³⁷ If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; ³⁸ but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that **you may know and understand** that the Father is in me and I am in the Father."

This time, the verb in the subjunctive mood of concern here¹⁰ is *ginóskō*,¹¹ which means to know by personal experience.¹² It occurs twice in the phrase in bold, which is in the dependent clause describing Jesus' purpose for the works He has done before the Jews. Again, although the translated word *may* implies potentiality as His purpose, His true goal must be surety: that the works prove the truth of the proposition *the Father is in me and I am in the Father*, a proof that, once obtained and comprehended, yields knowledge about God and Jesus.

A third example is 1 John 5:13:

¹³ I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that **you may know** that you have eternal life.

Once more the verb in the subjunctive mood (and perfect tense) is *eidō*,¹³ and John's aim must be to assure believers in Jesus that they have eternal life, not merely to suggest that they do. John wants them to be certain of it.

A fourth example is 1 John 5:20:

²⁰ And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that **we may know** him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

As in the second example above, the verb in the subjunctive mood here is *ginóskō*,¹⁴ and again John intends to communicate certainty, not mere possibility, so that his readers know for a fact. His statement is complicated, however, and requires some unwinding.

John first declares that he and his intended readers know the truth of the explicit proposition *the Son of God has come and has given us understanding*. He then explains the purpose of knowing that truth, which is to know God Himself. This second statement, however, carries three more propositions, the first and third of which are not completely stated: *God is true, John and his intended readers are in God, and they are also in God's Son, Jesus Christ*. John concludes with two more explicit propositions that further define Jesus: *He is the true God, and He is eternal life*. Altogether, John is saying, in effect, "We know proposition 1 in order to know God, which entails knowing propositions 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6."

¹⁰ The verb *pisteuō*, "believe," in verse 38 is also in the subjunctive mood, according to an interlinear Bible; accessed on March 21, 2024, at <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/john/10-38.htm>.

¹¹ John 10:38, Interlinear Bible; accessed on March 21, 2024, at <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/john/10-38.htm>.

¹² 1097 *ginóskō*, HELPS Word-studies; accessed on March 21, 2024, at <https://biblehub.com/greek/1097.htm>.

¹³ 1 John 5:13, Interlinear Bible; accessed on March 21, 2024, at https://biblehub.com/interlinear/1_john/5-13.htm.

¹⁴ 1 John 5:20, Interlinear Bible; accessed on March 21, 2024, at https://biblehub.com/interlinear/1_john/5-20.htm.

In other words, the purpose of Jesus' first coming and of the understanding He has given to believers is to know God and Jesus, which is eternal life (John 17:3). John wants his intended readers to be clear and sure, without any doubt, about their situation. God has saved them.

The Problem's Extent

The ESV is not alone here. A sample of translations—32 selected automatically on Bible Hub's website¹⁵—indicates that misrendering of these verses into English happens often:

- In 25 of the 32 versions for Matthew 9:6.
- In 27 of the 32 versions for John 10:38.
- In 28 of the 32 versions for 1 John 5:13.
- In 20 of the 32 versions for 1 John 5:20. (See Appendix B for details.)

Nor are verbs of knowing the only ones affected; so is the verb for believing, *pisteuó*. Below are four instances from the ESV, with commentary.

John 11:14-15 - ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, ¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that **you may believe**. But let us go to him."¹⁶

Jesus intends to induce the certainty of belief in Him as "the resurrection and the life," not the mere possibility of it, in those who are about to witness His raising of Lazarus.

John 11:41-42 - ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that **they may believe** that you sent me."¹⁷

Jesus thanks His Father out loud so that the witnesses believe for sure the proposition *God sent Him* after they see the miracle.

John 13:18-19 - ¹⁸ I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, 'He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.' ¹⁹ I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place **you may believe** that I am he.¹⁸

Jesus tells the disciples in advance of the betrayal of Him by one of them because He wants them, after the fact, to believe with certainty, without a doubt, that He is the Messiah and Yahweh, the eternal, self-existent One.

John 14:28-29 - ²⁸ You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I will come to you.' If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father

¹⁵ See <https://biblehub.com/>. After one uses the "Verse Chooser" in the initial webpage's top line, the site displays 32 translations—the same 32 for any selected verse. At the bottom of the list, the site offers the option to see an additional 18 translations, plus some of the 32, listed in seven categories.

¹⁶ John 11:15, Interlinear Bible; accessed on March 21, 2024, at <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/john/11-15.htm>.

¹⁷ John 11:42, Interlinear Bible; accessed on March 21, 2024, at <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/john/11-42.htm>.

¹⁸ John 13:19, Interlinear Bible; accessed on March 21, 2024, at <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/john/13-19.htm>. The renderings "will be fulfilled" and "it does take place" of verbs in the subjunctive mood already convey surety.

is greater than I. ²⁹ And now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place **you may believe**.¹⁹

Again, Jesus informs the disciples beforehand, this time of His coming departure and later return, so that they *do* believe His statement about these events after each one happens. He seeks not merely possible belief in the two propositions *I am going away* and *I will come to you*.

The Solution

The ESV's translation of the verbs in these eight instances is inadequate and misleading. The simplest fix is to drop the word *may* in each case and adjust the remainder as needed. Then the meaning expressed changes respectively from *may know* and *may believe* to *do know* and *do believe*. (See the summary in Figure 1.) In the cases involving knowing, this meaning agrees with Scripture's implicit definition of propositional knowledge. In the cases involving believing, this meaning accords with logic.

Figure 1: The “Rule of Subjunctive Certainty” as Applied to Verses Considered Above

Passage	ESV's translation of the stated outcome that will happen or has happened	Revised translation of the stated outcome that will happen or has happened	The other stated action from which the stated outcome will result or has resulted
Matthew 9:6	you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins	you know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins	Jesus' healing of the paralyzed man (unstated here but done later).
John 10:37-38	you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father	you know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father	Jesus' doing of His Father's works. ²⁰
1 John 5:13	you may know that you have eternal life	you know that you have eternal life	John's writing of “these things” to believers in the Son of God's name.
1 John 5:20	we may know him who is true	we know him who is true	Knowing “that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding.”
John 11:14-15	you may believe [that Jesus is the resurrection and the life]	you believe [that Jesus is the resurrection and the life]	Jesus' raising of Lazarus (unstated here but done later).
John 11:41-42	they may believe that you sent me	they believe that you sent me	Jesus' thanking of the Father out loud for having heard Him before raising Lazarus
John 13:17-19	you may believe that I am he	you believe that I am he	Jesus' prediction of Judas' betrayal, in fulfillment of Scripture.
John 14:28-29	you may believe [that Jesus went the Father]	you believe [that Jesus went the Father]	Jesus' going to and returning from the Father.

¹⁹ John 14:29, Interlinear Bible; accessed on March 21, 2024, at <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/john/14-29.htm>. Again, the rendering “it does take place” of a verb in the subjunctive mood already conveys surety.

²⁰ The logic underlying verse 37: When Jesus does His Father's works (miracles), He proves Who He is, at which point witnesses know propositional truth: Jesus is the Son of God (verse 36). Jesus then calls on them to believe in Him *at least* on the basis of this knowledge, which comes from the proof that they have and understand, “the works,” even if they do not believe knowledge that they have from another proof, His words (cf. verses 24-27).

In other words, implement “the outlier’s” instruction: consider the action in a purpose or result clause that is in the subjunctive mood to be “the stated outcome that will happen (or has happened) as a result of another stated action”—namely, the action in the related independent clause—and render accordingly the verb in the subjunctive mood. Call this teaching “the rule of subjunctive certainty” or “the principle of subjunctive surety.”

Hypothetically, some exceptions to this rule exist, since the research done for this study was not exhaustive. However, after having assessed several dozen verbs that are in the subjunctive mood and in purpose or result clauses, and having found none that defy the rule, such exclusions look very unlikely. The burden of proof lies with translators. They must find and document any cases where the rule does not apply.

The Relevance

Applying this rule throughout the New Testament should clarify the meaning in context of relevant verbs. See the difference it makes in one of the Bible’s most familiar passages, John 3:14-17:

¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him **may have** eternal life. ¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him **should not perish but have** eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to **condemn** the world, but in order that the world **might be saved** through him.²¹

- Why must the Son of Man be lifted up? So that everyone who believes in Him *has* eternal life.
- Why did God give His only begotten Son to the world He loved so much? So that everyone who believes in the Son *never* perishes but *has* eternal life.
- Why did God send His Son into the world? Not so that the Son *condemns* it but so that it *is* saved through Him.

Again, these purposes are the stated outcomes that will or have happened because of the other stated actions. They are not mere possibilities.

The ESV’s translators already, in effect, apply this rule at times, as in John 17:15, for example:

¹⁵ I do not ask that **you take** them out of the world, but that **you keep** them from the evil one.²²

A traditional rendering of the two verbs here would be *You should take* and *You should keep*.

Moreover, applying this principle can yield not only clarity but new insight. Below are several examples.

Employing rule to Hebrews 9:15 reveals support for TULIP.

¹⁵ Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called **may receive** the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.²³

²¹ John 3:15, Interlinear Bible; accessed at <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/john/3-15.htm>. John 3:16, Interlinear Bible; accessed at <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/john/3-16.htm>. John 3:17, Interlinear Bible; accessed, at <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/john/3-17.htm>. All accessed on March 21, 2024.

²² John 17:15, Interlinear Bible; accessed on March 21, 2024, at <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/john/17-15.htm>.

²³ Hebrews 9:15, Interlinear Bible; accessed on March 21, 2024, at <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/hebrews/9-15.htm>.

According to the rule, Jesus' mediation of the new covenant, through His death that redeems transgressors of that covenant, is the stated action ensuring that those who are called *do receive* the promised eternal inheritance—not “may receive” it. This means that God's calling always has His intended effect and always ends in salvation for the one called. This verse, so translated, is consistent with “irresistible grace” and strongly supports it, if not outrightly proving it.

Luke ends the opening four verses of his gospel with a dependent clause that explains his purpose for writing the book. The verb is in the subjunctive mood.

1 Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, ²just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, ³it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴that **you may have** certainty concerning the things you have been taught.²⁴

This rendering, “that you may have certainty,” is misleading and greatly understates Luke's emphasis. His choice of words here compounds the meaning. First, the verb, translated as “you may have,” is *epiginóskō*,²⁵ which means to know thoroughly, accurately, well, by personal experience, in a way that is apt, fitting, appropriate.²⁶ It intensifies the degree of knowledge conveyed by the verb on which it is based, *ginóskō*, to know by personal experience. Second, this verb is in the subjunctive mood and, according to the principle described above, calls for the translation to convey surety. Third, Luke adds two more Greek words, the definite article and the noun *asphaleia*, which together mean *the certainty*.²⁷ Thus, the combined effect of the full phrase is: ***so that you are personally, thoroughly, fittingly certain of the certainty of the things you have been taught.***

The Amplified Bible, Classic Edition, summarizes the full impact of Luke's text in this way:

⁴ [My purpose is] that you may know the full truth *and* understand with certainty *and* security against error the accounts (histories) *and* doctrines of the faith of which you have been informed *and* in which you have been orally instructed [verbatim].²⁸

However, the principle requires removal of the word *may* above.

Finally, Luke identifies the “you” in verse 4 as “most excellent Theophilus.” Because the study of this gospel induces Theophilus to know well and for sure the surety of what he has learned, he, if he is an actual person, must be elect, since only those whom God has chosen come to know, by the Spirit's ministry, that Scripture's statements are true.²⁹

And so it is for other elect readers, who too love God.

²⁴ Luke 1:4, Interlinear Bible; accessed on March 21, 2024, at <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/luke/1-4.htm>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ STRONGS NT 1921: ἐπιγινώσκω, Thayer's Greek Lexicon; 1921 *epiginóskō*, HELPS Word-studies; both accessed on March 21, 2024, at <https://biblehub.com/greek/1921.htm>.

²⁷ STRONGS NT 803: ἀσφάλεια, Thayer's Greek Lexicon; Cognate: 803 *aspháleia*, HELPS Word-studies; both accessed on March 22, 2024, at <https://biblehub.com/greek/803.htm>.

²⁸ Accessed on March 21, 2024, at <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+1%3A4&version=AMPC>.

²⁹ Cf. Schafer, *So Long Plato*, p. 29.

Applying the rule to John 20:30-31 produces similar insight.

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these are written so that **you may believe** that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing **you may have** life in his name.³⁰

Implementing the rule here reveals John's aim for his book: so that his readers *do believe* that Jesus is the Christ and *do have* life in His name. Moreover, this status of belief in Christ and life in His name is not only intention but the sure outcome of the stated action, namely, of John's writing about some of the signs that Jesus did in front of His disciples. The "you" who read John's book are sure to obtain this status. Again, as Scripture demonstrates, God fulfills this purpose only in readers whom He has chosen to save. Therefore, John's intended audience is God's elect, and them alone. John does not write also for the unelect, whom God has not predestined to believe—and yet that is the meaning suggested by the normal translation of the verbs, as in the ESV above.

John relays the same message, although more concisely, in 1:7:

⁷ He came as a witness, **to bear witness** about the light, that all **might believe** through him.³¹

By applying the rule here, John's two verbs can be rendered respectively (with the attending conjunction and nouns) *so that he testifies* and *so that all believe*. Again, the "all" who do believe through John the Baptist's sure witness cannot include people whom God has not chosen to save. They must be the elect alone.

John makes the point a third time, in 19:35:

³⁵ He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also **may believe**.³²

John tells the truth about Jesus' crucifixion, and he knows without a doubt that he is doing so, so that his intended readers *do believe* it, not "may believe" it. Those readers cannot be the unelect. The sure outcome of John's testimony to elect unbelievers is salvation. That is the purpose of his book.

When the rule is used, verses such as John 10:10, 1 John 4:9, and 2 John 1:6 also imply the election of John's intended audience.

Applying the principle to Romans 11:28-32 clarifies who, in this context, receives God's mercy.

²⁸ As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. ²⁹ For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰ For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹ so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also **may now receive mercy**. ³² For God has consigned all to disobedience, that **he may have mercy on all**.³³

³⁰ John 20:31, Interlinear Bible; accessed on March 21, 2024, at <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/john/20-31.htm>.

³¹ John 1:7, Interlinear Bible; accessed on March 21, 2024, at <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/john/1-7.htm>.

³² John 19:35, Interlinear Bible; accessed on March 21, 2024, at <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/john/19-35.htm>.

³³ Romans 11:31, Interlinear Bible; accessed at <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/romans/11-31.htm>. Romans 11:32, Interlinear Bible; accessed at <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/romans/11-32.htm>. Both accessed on March 21, 2024.

The normal rendering of the verb in the subjunctive mood in verse 32, *eleeó*, as found above, gives the impression that God has consigned *all people* to disobedience, to make it *possible* for Him to have mercy on *all people*. Indeed, the following translations³⁴ make plain this interpretation.

Amplified Bible, 2015 Edition: ³² For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all [Jew and Gentile alike].

Amplified Bible, Classic Edition: ³² For God has consigned (penned up) all men to disobedience, only that He may have mercy on them all [alike].

Berean Standard Bible: For God has consigned everyone to disobedience so that He may have mercy on everyone.

Contemporary English Version: All people have disobeyed God, and that's why he treats them as prisoners. But he does this, so that he can have mercy on all of them.

GOD'S WORD® Translation: God has placed all people into the prison of their own disobedience so that he could be merciful to all people.

Good News Translation: For God has made all people prisoners of disobedience, so that he might show mercy to them all.

International Standard Version: For God has locked all people in the prison of their own disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.

Majority Standard Bible: For God has consigned everyone to disobedience so that He may have mercy on everyone.

NET Bible: For God has consigned all people to disobedience so that he may show mercy to them all.

New Heart English Bible: For God has bound everyone over to disobedience, that he might have mercy on all.

New International Version: For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.

New Living Translation: For God has imprisoned everyone in disobedience so he could have mercy on everyone.

In context, however, not one of these translations results from a careful walk with logic. In verses 30-32, the mercy that Paul is discussing is God's grant of salvation,³⁵ and its recipients are Paul's Gentile readers in Rome (the "you") and the Jews he has in view here (the "they"). These recipients, in other words, are all elect. Thus, from this context, concluding that "all" in verse 32 refers to all *people* makes zero sense: *non sequitur*. And, yet, the normal translation of the subjunctive mood in this verse (and verse 31) aids and abets this interpretation.

³⁴ All accessed on March 21, 2024, at <https://biblehub.com/romans/11-32.htm>, except for the Amplified Bible, Classic Edition, accessed on March 21, 2024, at <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+11%3A32&version=AMPC>.

³⁵ STRONGS NT 1653: ἐλεάω, Thayer's Greek Lexicon; accessed on March 18, 2024, at <https://biblehub.com/greek/1653.htm>. STRONGS NT 1656: ἔλεος (2), Thayer's Greek Lexicon; accessed on March 18, 2024, at <https://biblehub.com/greek/1656.htm>.

Implementing the rule, however, clarifies the situation and rectifies the problem. Applying it to the ESV's rendering of this verse yields:

For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he *has* mercy on all.

This change implies that "all" must mean *all of the elect*, for the unelect never receive this special form of God's mercy,³⁶ which entails "the gifts and the calling" that He never revokes (verse 29). Thus translated, this verse now flows logically from the previous ones. A more explicit rendering could be:

For God has consigned to disobedience *all of these*, so that he *has* mercy on *them* all.

For God has consigned to disobedience *all of His elect*, so that he *has* mercy on *them* all.

For God has consigned to disobedience *all of His chosen*, so that he *has* mercy on *them* all.

The Conclusion

The analysis above shows that the principle of subjunctive certainty makes sense in all cases considered. This is good evidence that translators should follow "the outlier's" instruction.

However, this analysis is not exhaustive, and translators will need to examine all appropriate instances in the New Testament for possible exceptions to the rule.

- Again, such exceptions must exclude verbs of knowing.

³⁶ As opposed to its common form, in which God withholds justice, instant physical death, in response to any sin.

Appendix A: Websites Examined in This Study

Name	Web address
Resources for Learning New Testament Greek	https://www.ntgreek.org/learn_nt_greek/subj-detail-frame.htm
<i>The Classification of Subjunctives: A Statistical Study.</i> James L. Boyer	https://biblicalelearning.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Boyer-Subjunctive-GTJ.pdf
Bible Greek VPOD: Keeping Biblical Languages Simple with John Pappas Th.D.	https://biblegreekvpod.com/GreekII/GreekII_lesson16.pdf
<i>Ancient Greek for Everyone: Essential Morphology and Syntax for Beginning Greek.</i> Wilfred E. Major and Michael Laughy	https://pressbooks.pub/ancientgreek/chapter/46/ https://pressbooks.pub/ancientgreek/chapter/48/
Quartz Hill School of Theology	https://www.theology.edu/greek/gk24.htm
Blue Letter Bible	https://www.blueletterbible.org/resources/grammars/greek/simplified-greek/greek-verbs-pt2.cfm
<i>Mastering New Testament Greek Textbook.</i> Ted Hildebrandt	https://biblicalelearning.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/MNTG_Textbook_2017.pdf
Precept Austin	https://www.preceptaustin.org/greek_quick_reference_guide https://www.preceptaustin.org/1peter_verse_by_verse_21-12#conditional
<i>An Overview of Greek Grammar: Syllabus of NT Greek.</i> Prof. Dean Deppe	http://study.calvinseminary.edu/content/resources/docs/greekgrammar.pdf
Life-Everlasting.net	https://www.life-everlasting.net/pages/greek/greek_verb_subjunctive.php
<i>The Study Bible Commentary Series, New Testament.</i> Bob Utley	https://bible.org/seriespage/appendix-4-brief-definitions-greek-grammatical-terms
unfoldingWord Greek Grammar	https://ugg.readthedocs.io/en/latest/mood_subjunctive.html#subjunctive-of-purpose-result
Greek Classes. The Seminary of the Christian Community of North America	https://www.naseminarygreek.com/grammar/verbs/subjunctive-mood
New Testament Greek: Course II	http://ntgreek.net/lesson29.htm

Web addresses may require manual entry.

Appendix B: Comparison of Translations of Greek Subjunctive Mood in Selected Purpose Clauses

Verse	Translations expressing uncertainty	Translations expressing certainty
Matthew 9:6	AB, ABPE, ASV, BLB, BSB, CSB, DRB, ERV, ESV, HCSB, KJB, LSB, LSV, MSB, NAB, NASB, NASB 1995, NASB 1977, NETB, NHEB, NKJV, NRSV, WBT, WEB, YLT	CEV, GNT, GWT, ISV, NLT, NIV, WNT https://biblehub.com/matthew/9-6.htm ; accessed on March 24, 2024.
John 10:38	AB, ABPE, ASV, BLB, BSB, DRB, ERV, ESV, GNT, ISV, KJB, LSB, LSV, MSB, NAB, NASB, NASB 1995, NASB 1977, NETB, NHEB, NIV, NKJV, NRSV, WBT, WEB, WNT, YLT	CEV, CSB, GWT, HCSB, NLT https://biblehub.com/john/10-38.htm ; accessed on March 24, 2024.
1 John 5:13	ASV, BLB, BSB, CSB, DRB, ERV, ESV, GNT, HCSB, ISV, KJB, LSB, LSV, MSB, NAB, NASB, NASB 1995, NASB 1977, NETB, NHEB, NIV, NKJV, NLT, NRSV, WBT, WEB, WNT, YLT	AB, ABPE, CEV, GWT https://biblehub.com/1_john/5-13.htm ; accessed on March 24, 2024.
1 John 5:20	AB, BLB, BSB, CSB, DRB, ESV, HCSB, ISV, KJB, LSB, LSV, MSB, NASB, NASB 1995, NASB 1977, NIV, NKJV, NRSV, WBT, YLT	ASV, CEV, ERV, GNT, GWT, NHEB, WEB, WNT Close calls: ABPE, NAB, NETB, NLT https://biblehub.com/1_john/5-20.htm ; accessed on March 24, 2024.

Key to Acronyms

AB = Amplified Bible	GWT = GOD’S WORD® Translation	NETB = NET Bible
ABPE = Aramaic Bible in Plain English	HCSB = Holman Christian Standard Bible	NHEB = New Heart English Bible
ASV = American Standard Version	ISV = International Standard Version	NIV = New International Version
BLT = Berean Literal Bible	KJB = King James Bible	NKJV = New King James Version
BSB = Berean Standard Bible	LSB = Legacy Standard Bible,	NLT = New Living Translation
CEV = Contemporary English Version	LSV = Literal Standard Version	NRSV = New Revised Standard Version
CSB = Christian Standard Bible	MSB = Majority Standard Bible	WBT = Webster’s Bible Translation
DRB = Douay-Rheims Bible	NAB = New American Bible	WEB = World English Bible
ERV = English Revised Version	NASB = New American Standard Bible	WNT = Weymouth New Testament
ESV = English Standard Version	NASB 1995 = New American Standard Bible 1995	YLT = Young’s Literal Translation
GNT = Good News Translation	NASB 1977 = New American Standard Bible 1977	

