

Conditional Sentences in Biblical Greek

Introduction:

Conditional Sentence: “If – then” sentence

“If I were you, then I’d watch out for that speed trap.”

Protasis: If-clause – “If I were you. . .”

Apodosis: Then-clause – “. . .then I’d watch out for that speed trap.”

Order of protasis and apodosis can be reversed:

“I’d watch out for that speed trap if I were you.”

According to Daniel Wallace, there are over 600 of these types of sentences in the New Testament plus other sentences that resemble these to some extent.

In FGG 39 Voelz identifies four types of conditional sentences: (1) simple particular (SP), (2) contrary to fact (CTF), (3) present general (PG), and (4) future more vivid (FMV).

Wallace uses a traditional classification of (1) first class conditional sentences (same as SP), (2) second class conditional sentences (same as CTF), and (3) third class conditional sentences (includes both PG and FMV).

1. Simple Particular or “First Class” Conditional Sentences

Protasis: εἰ + indicative mood verb

Apodosis: typically an indicative mood verb, but sometimes imperatives.

The “if-clause” is assumed true for the sake of the argument. It is not necessarily true, but it is assumed to be true. Often (but not always) these conditional sentences do deal with real situations. Context will tell whether the “if-clause” is true/real.

Romans 8:13

εἰ κατὰ σάρκα ζῆτε, μέλλετε ἀποθνήσκειν.

“If you are living according to the flesh, then you are about to die.”

In the context of this sentence, are the people addressed (“you”) actually living according to the flesh?

Matthew 4:3

καὶ προσελθὼν ὁ πειράζων εἶπεν αὐτῷ· εἰ υἱὸς εἶ τοῦ θεοῦ, εἰπέ ἵνα οἱ λίθοι οὗτοι ἄρτοι γένωνται.

“And after he came [to Him] the tempter said to Him, ‘If you are the Son of God, then tell these stones to become bread.’”

In this sentence is the if-clause true? Is Jesus the Son of God?

Note in this example that the devil is not trying to get Jesus to doubt that He is the Son of God. Rather, the devil is assuming that Jesus is the Son of God for the sake of the argument.

What then is the temptation here? How will you preach or teach this passage?

2. Contrary to Fact or “Second Class” Conditional Sentences

Protasis: εἰ + indicative mood verb (imperfect or aorist)

Apodosis: indicative mood verb (imperfect or aorist) with the particle ἄν.

The particle ἄν in the apodosis tells the reader that the *protasis* is **not** real/true. This particle is not translated into English; it merely shows that the sentence is CTF.

The “if-clause” is assumed true for the sake of the argument, but in this case the reader clearly knows that, in fact, the “if-clause” is not true.

John 5:46

εἰ γὰρ ἐπιστεύετε Μωϋσεῖ, ἐπιστεύετε ἄν ἐμοί· περὶ γὰρ ἐμοῦ ἐκεῖνος ἔγραψεν.

“For if you were believing Moses, then you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me.”

In this sentence it is clear that the protasis is not true: The people Jesus is addressing do not believe Moses!

The idea is “If you believe Moses (you don’t, but for the sake of the argument let’s assume that you do), then you would believe in Me (but you don’t).”

Note: This is an example of a **present contrary to fact conditional sentence**. We know this because the verbs used are imperfect tense. Yes, the imperfect tense is used to show PRESENT contrary to fact conditional sentence.

1 Corinthians 2:8b

εἰ γὰρ ἔγνωσαν, οὐκ ἄν τὸν κύριον τῆς δόξης ἔσταύρωσαν.

“For if they had known, then they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”

What relationship is the protasis and apodosis here?

Note that in this case the readers know that they [the rulers of this age from 1 Cor. 2:8a] did not know.

Note: This is an example of a **past contrary to fact conditional sentence**. We know this because the verbs used are aorist tense. Here we translate the aorist verbs as pluperfect tense verbs.

3. Present General or (one type of) “Third Class” Conditional Sentences

Protasis: εἰ (εἰ + ἄν) + subjunctive mood verb

Apodosis: present indicative mood verb.

Presents a condition in the “if-clause” that is not real (thus the subjunctive mood), but it could be real. Whenever it is fulfilled, the then clause will also be true. This type of conditional sentence is often (but not always) used to lay out something that is generally true.

John 11:9c

εἰ τις περιπατῆ ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ, οὐ προσκόπτει. . .

“If (ever) someone walks in the day, then he does not stumble. . .”

When the “if-clause” is true, the “then-clause” is also true. But the speaker (Jesus) is not assuming the “if-clause” is true here, just noting that when it is true, the “then-clause” is also true. This is a general truth.

4. Future More Vivid or (another type of) “Third Class” Conditional Sentences

Protasis: ἐάν (εἰ + ἄν) + subjunctive mood verb

Apodosis: future indicative mood verb.

Presents a condition in the “if-clause” that is not real (thus the subjunctive mood), but it could be real. Whenever it is real then the “then-clause” will be true in some future time.

Mark 5:28

ἔλεγεν γὰρ ὅτι

ἐάν ἄψωμαι καὶ τῶν ἱματίων αὐτοῦ σωθήσομαι.

“For she was saying, ‘If I even only touch His garment, then I will be saved.’”