The Perfect and Pluperfect Tense

The Greek perfect tense expresses a completed act with continuing results. The word perfect comes from the Latin perficere meaning, “to bring to an end, complete, finish.” The perfect and pluperfect are similar and are identical in aspect though different in time. That is to say, both the perfect and pluperfect indicative speak of the event as accomplished in the past and the results existing afterwards, but the perfect sees the results existing in the present, while the pluperfect sees the results existing in the past. However, make no mistake, the perfect is the tense of completed action. The action is seen as coming to a state or point of completion with the result existing in its finished state.

Uses of the Perfect

Intensive perfect. The intensive perfect is the usage closest to its base meaning. The primary focus of the intensive perfect is upon the existing results as finished. The intensive perfect is sometimes called the resultative perfect for this reason. Examples include:

Rom. 3:10: καθὼς γεγραπται ὅτι οὐκ ἔστιν δίκαιος οὐδὲ εἰς (Just as it is written, “there is none righteous, no, not one.”).

1 Cor. 15:3-4: παρεδόθη γὰρ ὅτι ἐν πρώτοις, ὅ καὶ παρελαβόν, ὅτι Χριστὸς ἀπέθανεν ὑπὲρ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν κατὰ τὰς γράφας καὶ ὅτι ἔταφε καὶ ὅτι ἐγερθεὶς τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ τρίτῃ κατὰ τὰς γράφας (For I delivered to you as of the first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.).

Consummative perfect. The consummative perfect emphasizes the completed action of a past act that had continued for a while but has now come to an end. An example is 2 Tim. 4:7: τὸν καλὸν ἄγωνα ἤγνωσαμι, τὸν δρομὸν τετέλεκα, τὴν πιστὶν τετηρήκα (I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith). Another example is John 1:34: καὶ ἠκούσαμεν καὶ μεμαρτυρήκαμεν ὅτι ὁ θεοῦ ἐστιν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ (And I have seen, and I have testified that this is the Son of God).

Iterative perfect. The iterative perfect emphasizes the “recurrent intervals” rather than continuous progress. For example, 1 John 1:1 ὅ ἐγὼ ἀρχής, ὅ ἄκηκοαμεν, ὅ ἠκολουθεῖ τῶν ὁφθαλμῶν ἡμῶν, ὅ ἐθέασαμεν καὶ ἔμεινεν ἡμῖν ἐνθατάσσομεν περὶ τοῦ λόγου τῆς ζωῆς (That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes,
which we looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life). The perfects are expressing the abiding effects of hearing and seeing.

Dramatic perfect. The dramatic prefect is used when the author wishes to describe a past event in a vivid though realistic way. Since the perfect represents an existing state, this usage is the most forceful way of expressing an historical event viewing an existing state. An example is John 1:15: Ἰωάννης μαρτυρεῖ περὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ κεκραγέν καὶ εἰμι, ὁ ὅπισώ μου ἔρχομεν ν σουτας ἵνα ὑμᾶς ἐπιτευγνωμον ὅτι πρῶτος μου ὑμῖν. (John testified concerning him and cried out, saying, “This was He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.”’). Another example is found in Rev. 5:7: καὶ ἔλθεν καὶ ἔλαβεν ἐκ τῆς δεξιᾶς τοῦ καθήμενου ἐπί τοῦ θρόνου. (Then He came and took the scroll out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne).

Uses of the Pluperfect

Consummative pluperfect. The consummative pluperfect emphasizes the completion of the action in reference to past time. An example is found in John 11:13: εἴρηκεν δὲ τοῦ Ἰησοῦς περὶ τοῦ θανατοῦ αὐτοῦ, ἐκεῖνοι δὲ ἔδοξαν ὅτι περὶ τῆς κομισμοῦ τοῦ ὑπού λεγεῖ. (Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep).

Intensive pluperfect. The intensive pluperfect emphasizes the result of the action that existed in past time. Drs. Dany and Mantey write, “Here stress is laid upon the reality of the fact, which enables it to be presented with more force than could be done with the aorist, but the only device for construing it in English is the simple past.” An example is found in Luke 4:41: ἔξηραν δὲ καὶ δαμωνιά ἀπὸ πολλῶν κραυγάζοντα καὶ λεγοντα ὅτις γε ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, καὶ ἐπιτιμῶν ὅτι αὐτα λαλεῖν, ὅτι ἠδικοῦν τὸν χριστὸν αὐτον εἶναι. (But demons also came out of many, crying out and saying, “You are the Son of God!” And rebuking them, He would not allow them to speak, because they knew that He was the Christ.)