Dr. George Payton, Bible Translation, Session 23, Passive Constructions

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This is Dr. George Payton and his teaching on Bible Translation. This is session 23, Passive Constructions.

In this discussion, we're going to be talking about another translation difficulty, some communication challenges that we need to overcome, and that is passive constructions.

We get a lot of passive constructions in the Old Testament and the New Testament, and we need to know how to deal with them. So, what is a passive construction? Passive construction is a grammatical phrase, a form, and it's a form of the verb, where the subject of the sentence is not the one doing the action, but the subject of the sentence is the one that is receiving the action done to them. For example, the dog bit John.

We can say John was bitten by the dog. Part of the things that we try to do here is to realize this is, in fact, a passive construction, not an active construction. In other words, the verb is an active verb of the subject doing something or is the verb drawing attention to the person that's being done to and using another way to say it, to what the person that's being done to is passive in this action.

They, he or she, or they don't take action; it's just done to them, as in this case, John was bitten by the dog. So as we look at these, say to yourself, is this active or passive? Obviously, the dog bit John; that's a straight-up normal sentence. John was bitten by the dog.

That would be passive because the dog is the one that is the actual agent, and we use the terms agent and patient, the agent being the one doing it and the patient being the one done too. OK, the bones were visible in the compound. What do you think? Is that active or passive? In some ways, it's neither, and it's what we call middle voice.

It's in a state of visibility. They can be seen if someone cares to look at them, but it's not active or passive. So, we do get these in scripture as well, but we won't be talking about the middle voice today, the so-called middle voice.

I don't know why they call it middle. Maybe it's because it's between active and passive, and they call it in the middle. But you will hear the term middle voice, and this is one example.

So, it's in a state of being and not actually an action that's being done at that moment. OK, his bones were buried on the compound. That one is clearly passive because the bones aren't doing the burying.

Notice that in some of these, we have the agent mentioned, as in the second one, John was bitten by the dog. This one, we don't know who buried the bones. Someone buried the bones.

OK, here's another one. The man is digging a deep hole. Sounds pretty active.

He's doing the work. The children had eaten all the oranges. Some people say, well, that's passive because we had the word had eaten.

But actually, the children did the eating. So, the children are the agents, and the oranges are the patients. And so this is still active, even though it is said in a different way.

We call this the completed aspect. The oranges are done. So they were given the oranges, they had eaten them, and now they're outplaying.

So that is still an active construction, even though it's in the perfect aspect, perfective aspect. The flag was carried by the leader of the soldier, the leading soldier. We know that that is passive, with the agent being the leading soldier and the patient being the flag.

The truth is known by everyone. That's kind of either. Yeah, that's a little muddy.

We're not really sure. If you look at that, everyone knows the truth. You can say it that way in that regard.

It might resemble a passive construction. It could also be one of those middle-voice things. If we said everyone knows the truth, then that would definitely be both grammatically and conceptually an active thing.

But it doesn't say that. So, it's somewhere between middle and passive. The fishermen caught many fish yesterday.

And we know that that's active. The paper had been torn into small pieces. It's kind of passive with a completed aspect added to it.

Someone tore up the paper. The paper didn't do the tearing. So, because it's the subject that did not do the action, then we would qualify this to be passive.

Passive constructions are used for different reasons. One of the things that they use it for is to draw attention or focus onto the one receiving the action. It was John who received the passage, or it was John who the package was given to.

Rather than saying so-and-so gave John the package, we want to focus on John. Sometimes, the agent is mentioned, as we've said. Other times, the agent is left out for one reason or another.

Sometimes, the agent is left out because they're not known. Sometimes, the agent is left out because they intentionally draw attention away from the agent and want to keep that identity hidden. Here's an example.

My bike was stolen. If I knew who the agent was, I'd go after him. But I don't know.

We can say that my bike was stolen. If we had to say it in another way, we'd say, someone stole my bike. Other times, as I said, the agent is not mentioned to keep the identity hidden.

If the kids are playing and they break the window, who broke the window? All the boys playing baseball know exactly who broke the window, but they don't want to get their friend in trouble. So, what do they say? Yeah, the ball broke the window, or it got broken. Who did it? Yeah, somehow, somebody did it.

I remember a certain comic strip. It was about a family, and Mr. Nobody was the one who always did the things that went wrong in the house. Okay, who stole that, or who broke that, Mr. Nobody? Who left that dish sitting on the sofa? Yeah, Mr. Nobody.

So sometimes, the writer will intentionally keep that identity secret for one reason or another. Passive constructions are really common in Greek, and we find them throughout the New Testament. They commonly occur together with our favorite friends that we've just been talking about, abstract nouns, participles, and generative constructions.

So, the interpretive challenge is identifying who the agent is and who's being acted upon. And as we said, this can be a gap in the communication that we want to then try to discover. Once we discover it, we want to make it clear to the reader so we can make it explicit.

So, we then try to clearly communicate with the participants using the active voice of the verb, using the active form of the verb. Okay. One of the difficulties that comes up is some languages don't have a passive verb.

They don't have a passive voice of the verb. In this case, you can never use a passive. The purpose of this lecture and all the others is not to say you have to do it this way.

The purpose is to say, if you had to, here are some suggestions on how to do it. These are best practices that we have used and are common around the world in Bible translation and translation circles. In addition to being involved in Bible translation, since coming back to the U.S. in 2010, I've been involved in secular translation.

So, someone will send me something in Swahili. They say, will you please translate this into English? And so I use all those same principles in doing that. It depends on the kind of text that it is. I've had things like a birth certificate, which is exactly cut and paste.

This is this over here, that's that over there. I've had other things that I've had to translate. I've also had to do verbal interpretation, where I'm there on behalf of a Swahili speaker who then is in some kind of situation.

One time, I was there at a doctor's office because the patient was from East Africa, and he did not know English well enough to understand what the doctor was telling him. And so, how is he going to get treated if he doesn't understand? And so I was there as the go-between. So all these principles of communication, all these principles of making things clear, saying them in a straightforward way rather than using another form that's maybe less straightforward.

All of those apply whether I'm speaking a translation, whether I am writing a translation, or whether it's secular, or whether it's scripture. There are a lot of commonalities there. In this case, what do you do when a language doesn't have the passive? In this case, Orma, the language I worked with, does not have passives.

So, what do you do? Well, let me give you an example of what that looks like. So, we have the sentence in the man, Goyo danen. The people beat Goyo.

And we know that the people are the ones doing the beating because there's an N-I on the end of it. That's the thing that shows us that's the subject. That's the subject suffix.

Okay? Second one. Goyon gurba dane. Which means Goyo is the one who beat the boy.

Goyo beat the boy. And again, we know that because the N-I is on the end of Goyo. Goyo is a man's name.

Here we have Goyo danen. Same resemblance to the verb form in the first sentence, right? Is the N-I on Goyo? No. So Goyo is the one being beaten here.

Goyo is the patient. Who is the subject? The subject is unspecified. This is the formal way of saying somebody beat Goyo.

So they, indefinite, not mentioned, outside the context. So, if you say, Somebody stole the bicycle. They use the third person plural.

They stole, they beat, as the indicator that this was done by someone else, and we don't know who it is. Or, it's not mentioned. So that's how the Ormas do that.

And we call this a pseudo-passive. It functions like a passive, but the form is not a passive, specifically passive form. As I said, the daneni is the same in the first sentence and the third sentence, which means that's an active verb form, but the construction is used in a passive way.

And so sometimes I could say things in Orma using this to communicate some of the biblical passives that we came across. Okay. So, what are some examples of passives in the scriptures that we get? Mark 1:14 Jesus was in the wilderness 40 days, being tempted by Satan.

So, who is the subject of the verb tempting? That would be Satan. And so, he was in the wilderness for 40 days as Satan tempted him. Now, one of the things that we get from the original text, being tempted by Satan, sounds like an ongoing thing.

It wasn't a thing that happened at one point in time. He was in the wilderness as Satan was tempting him or as Satan tempted him. Somehow, we need to communicate that we are of a durative nature rather than a particular point in the past.

The Greek uses the -ing form uses the participle. But we can try to say it in a different way. As long as we keep that part, a really important piece of information is that it was a durative action that took place.

That it was not just a one-time thing, little things like this, you think, gosh, how many pastors have preached on this? Probably not a whole lot. It's not important to do that.

We just say Satan tempted Jesus for the whole time. We are limited in what we can do in a Bible translation because we don't have a flowing written commentary on every verse. Okay.

Mark 13: 9. You will be flogged in the synagogues. Actually, before that, it says they will bring you to court, which is actually the literal sentence before you get to this, and you will be flogged in the synagogues. It doesn't say who they is.

So, in one sense, maybe that's kind of like the Orma thing where you just say they, and we don't know who it is. But here, you'll be flogged in the synagogues. Someone will flog you.

And who will flog you? They. And then it's somehow the authorities or the leaders or something like that will flog you in the synagogues. Okay.

Why has she been wasted? In Mark 14, about the woman who poured the perfume on Jesus' feet, saying it in an active way, why has she wasted this perfume? Now, one of the things we need to remember is that this culture in the Bible and non-Western cultures where respect is highly valued, and I mentioned in a previous discussion, you don't call someone out when they're right there face-to-face. Was that why this is used in the passive? Perhaps. We don't know.

But the woman broke it. Why was this perfume wasted? All right. The next verse says For this perfume might have been sold for over three hundred denarii, i.e., eight months of salary. If you remember the denarii discussion and the money be given, the two passives might have been sold, and the money might have been given. So, if you wanted to change that, who would have sold it? Well, the one asking the question was Judas, and Judas was the keeper of the disciples' treasury, so maybe it was I could have sold it, and I could have given the money to the poor.

We don't know. Again, this is unspecified from the doer, but somebody would have sold it, and somebody would have donated. We might have sold the perfume and then given the money to the poor people.

There might be one way to render that, and we could have given the money to the people. Acts 4:11 He is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, but became the chief cornerstone. The passive voice that was rejected and the one that's speaking is saying you, in my audience, are the ones who rejected, and you are also the ones who are the quote-unquote builders.

And you are also the quote-unquote builders. And so, he's using some metaphorical stuff. There's intertextuality here going on with the Old Testament quotation.

And Jesus used this quote of himself, and now the disciples are using it to talk about Jesus. So Jesus is the stone which you builders rejected. But he has become the chief cornerstone.

Again, it has become kind of like a passive thing. And possibly God made him to be the chief cornerstone. Again, the chief cornerstone and stone are very figurative and very much, again, pointing back to the Old Testament.

What's he talking about? He's talking about building the temple. And the temple, you lay a foundation stone. The way that the building works is that they had this stone, which was perfectly square.

Perfectly, well, rectangular, if you will, or something. But the angles on it were exactly straight on every side. And they would put that down first.

And you're laying a brick wall. And they would put that down first. And then, for every wall going from one side to the other side and up, they made sure that everything was exactly perfectly straight according to that basic cornerstone.

So, he's talking about building the temple. That's the illusion here. And the chief cornerstone is that central stone.

And then all the other three corners are going to be straight because you have the first one perfectly straight. So that's the imagery here. And all of that is couched in this little phrase, the chief cornerstone.

So again, what we need to do in all of these situations here with passives, what we need to do with the verbal ideas and the genitive constructions, especially when they occur together like this, we really do need to remember you have the possibility of adding something in the footnote. In adding it in the footnote can then clear up some of the misconceptions that people might have. It can even put in a cross-reference to the Old Testament passage.

It can put a cross-reference here in Acts to the passages in the Gospels where Jesus talked about himself. Then, you can explain that Jesus is talking about himself being the key person in the religion, the Jewish faith. So all of that is wrapped up in there.

So we need to remember to use para-textual information, use your footnotes, use your glossaries, and whatever we need to use in order to supply the people with information if they need it. Now, let me say that people could say, well, nobody reads footnotes. Okay.

Apart from that being a gross overgeneralization. If that is the case, why are study Bibles so popular? People read footnotes because they want to know, and they can't go out and buy a commentary. Or maybe they don't want to go out and buy a commentary, and they just want some help as they read it.

Okay. So, this is a perfect place to put a footnote. This is a perfect place to put cross-references.

Okay. All right. Acts 10.29, this is why I came, even without raising objection, when I was sent forth.

This is Cornelius calling Peter, and Peter agrees to go. Peter meets Cornelius and everyone that's in the room with Cornelius, and Cornelius has his whole family and friends and everybody there sitting waiting for Peter to arrive so that Peter could then give them the message that Peter was given. Passive here when I was sent forth. In other words, when you sent for me.

And then the next sentence is, tell me why you sent for me. So, you have to make that all flow together. If we say, you sent for me, you sent for me, would that flow? I don't know.

But the idea here is, when it's passive, should it be passive, or should we say it in an active way? Okay. Someone was cursed by Paul, and he fell over and died, and it says he was eaten by worms and died. Eaten by worms is passive.

Died is obviously active. He died. What happened first? My guess is maybe he died first, and then his body was eaten by worms.

I think if you asked a Jewish person of that day that question, was he eaten by worms first or died first, they'd probably say yes. I don't know that it matters, but to my mind, that doesn't make sense. He died, and worms ate his body.

It might be another way to say it. Again, these are just suggestions, things to think about, especially when you're trying to communicate it in another language. One of the ways that we can tell whether or not it communicated well was to read it to people and ask them content questions.

Can you tell me what happened in your own words? What happened to this guy? And if they say, well, the worms ate him, and the worms killed him. Therefore, he died. Then we know that was our perception. If we look at Mark 9, which talks about where the flame never ceases, and the worm never dies, that gives the impression that people are burning in the eternal fire of damnation, plus being eaten by worms after they die.

So, we do have intertextual support that he died first. Again, I'm not going to die on that hill. I'm not going to be forceful that this is exactly what it means, but it's something we need to think about.

And what sounds normal in the language that you're communicating in. Okay, another one. Acts 16, speaking of Timothy 16:2, and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium.

The passive is was spoken well of. Another way to rephrase it is that the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. Acts 22:1, for them I also received letters to the brethren and started off for Damascus in order to bring those who were there to Jerusalem bound to be punished.

Bound is passive; to be punished is passive. And these are direct translations from the Greek. It's actually the Greek verb passive, being bound and being punished.

You read English translations, and they might say things differently. One of them says, as prisoners. Okay, another one says, in chains for the bound.

Okay, are they prisoners? Yes. Does the word prisoner give the idea that they were bound? Maybe, maybe not. If it's here in America, they're probably in handcuffs unless they're very wealthy and don't need to be in handcuffs.

Were they metal? In chains, we were taking a bit of a jump, a bit of a leap. Maybe they were tied, maybe their hands were tied with rope or leather strap, or who knows what else. The point is that this says bound, and that is a passive.

How do we then work around this? We have a couple of things, and I want to reiterate that we're not just looking at this troublesome thing like passives or whatever. We're also looking at how the whole sentence flows in the information in the sentence and whether there are any other gaps that are not one of these that we are in the category of, that really don't communicate well that it would be good to know. For example, received letters from them.

If we read the preceding verse, he talks about the chief priests in Jerusalem. We know that them refers to them. That one is okay.

I received, I was, they gave me. So, receive is an active verb to the brethren.

Who does that refer to? It's unclear. And start it off for Damascus. Okay, so who are the brethren, and where are they? Remember what we said who, what, where, when, why, how? Who are the brethren? Some versions make it explicit for Jewish brethren.

Which Jewish brethren? And if you read the article, it is actually Paul telling the story about his conversion. And so, if you go back to that, it says the Jewish chief priests in Jerusalem gave Saul, at that time, letters to take to the Jewish leaders in Damascus. So, if we keep in mind the whole book of Acts, then we get this.

But now Paul is saying it in a shortened way, and he leaves out information. And when you look at this, it would really help to know the Jewish brethren. And where were those Jewish brethren? The Jewish brethren in Damascus.

But all of that is said in a different way. So how do we unpack and sort out and make all of these different pieces of information smooth and flow? Here's one possibility. From them, i.e., priests, I also received letters to the Jewish brethren in Damascus and started off there, i.e., Damascus, in order to bind.

You bind first before you bring them to Jerusalem. Bind and bring those who were there, i.e., those who followed Jesus, to Jerusalem and then to be punished by the authorities to punish them. Again, we're trying to come up with a way that's smooth, clear, that sounds natural and normal, that is the way that we normally talk in English, and that is also understandable.

And so, in making some of these things explicit, again, we're not adding anything to the text that's not already there. Something that's implicit is actually in the text. It's just not mentioned, and that's why we need to make up for that.

Okay, so what's the process that we looked at? Identify the verb and identify the participants. We restate the sentence using an active verb, not a passive one, and we make the participants explicit. So we might ask, why use the active form? Why don't we just keep it passive if it's passive and there's a passive in both languages? That is certainly an option. Why do we need to mention the participants explicitly? It's not a matter of having to; it's a matter of which works best.

What if the target language does have passives, and is that used? Well, one of the reasons why we use actives and not passives is because the active voice is preferred in good writing, even in our language in English. And so, if you write a term paper in college and your professor goes, just say this straight up, and say it in an active voice. So, I think active voice and active verbs also tend to be how we talk.

We don't talk in passives as much, but it's definitely a preferred way in writing. Second of all, the active voice tends to be more vivid and can be stronger or more powerful, more impactful. These are general tendencies and not hard and fast rules.

The active voice might be expected to be more normal in the target language. If we have it that way in English, maybe it's that way in other languages as well. Make the participants explicit if the text will be more understandable by doing so.

Even that little sentence that we just dealt with, with Saul going to Damascus, it actually in my, I was able to track with it better by making some of those things explicit and by adjusting the order of the words. Sometimes, we change the order of

the clauses, or we put one clause that's later in the sentence to the front of the sentence so we can change things around. So, we can say, I went home because I was hungry, or you can say, I was hungry, so I went home.

So, you can change things around, and that doesn't change the meaning; it's just adjusting the grammar. In some ways, that is a personal preference that the translator can choose. Sometimes, it's the preferable way that the translator and others in that group say, yeah, that really does sound better.

And we translate the scriptures so they can be read out loud. So, we read it out loud. One of the things that I like to do when I'm a consultant is to go and check someone else's translation, we'll go, and we'll work on a particular passage.

We make all these adjustments, and we'll do three or four verses together. Once we've made all the adjustments, you have to go step by step. Sometimes, you can't deal with something in verse three until you've dealt with things in verses one and two. Then, the whole thing has to flow together; the information has to flow, and all the grammatical connections need to be there.

And then I'll say, can someone please read this out loud? Then, that person reads it out loud. And then I'll ask the audience, how did your ears like that? How did that sound to you? Was that sweet-sounding? Then, I'll ask the reader how it felt to read it out loud. How did it flow off of your tongue as it were? And that's where we're getting this beautiful text, a smooth text, a coherent text that sticks together. And that makes sense all the way through.

And you can follow the train of thought. So, we keep all of those things in mind. So everything that we've been talking about in this whole series is a key point as to how we judge. Did we reach our goal?
Sometimes you don't make it explicit if the writer wanted to keep the identity of the person secret for one reason or another. If we make it explicit, we could be then, I don't want to say doing damage to, but impacting it in a way that the author didn't intend it. So sometimes we don't change the text.

We leave it just like it is. For example, when Jesus said to the disciples after they fed the 5,000, then they got on the boat, and they're on the boat, Jesus said to them, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees. So, if we say, well, most people won't understand that.

The leaven of the Pharisees, leaven is a figure of speech of the Pharisees, right? And so, well, it means the influence of the Pharisees. Great, we agree on that. Then we say, let's make that explicit in the translation because that will make it clearer.

So, here's what it would sound like. Beware of the influence of the Pharisees. In the next verse, the disciples were confused because they thought that he was talking about bread.

We removed the figure of speech. We removed the vivid imagery of leaven. In doing so, we removed the possibility that they would misunderstand his statement about bread.

And so, we keep it in there because Jesus wanted to be cryptic. Jesus wanted to say it in a way that used the imagery of the leaven and bread. And the disciples, God bless them, they said, he's mad because we left bread.

That whole thing hangs together if they don't understand the image. So sometimes, we don't make things explicit. We leave in metaphors and other figurative imagery because it was intended to be like that.

And we can't just across the board say, well, if every time there's image that's not understandable, then we should take it out. This could also be a teaching point. And this is what I think we, as Christians, in having the Bible in our language for our whole lives, get used to certain things in the Bible that then become normative.

Just think of how many sayings in the Bible are common language with people in our culture. So, there's something to be said for people learning these different expressions, learning a different way to say it, even though it may not be the way that the average person might think of saying it. It still becomes more normative and more common.

So the people in the cultures where we're translating for can get used to these terms and become somewhat normative in those cultures. Do you remember our passage from one of the previous lectures on the passive constructions and other things in Romans 1:1 to 7? I wanted to revisit them for a couple of reasons. One is that these are passive constructions. How do we deal with them in the context of the whole passage, in the context of several sentences together, and how do they hang together? We're not going to go through the whole thing, but I think giving a couple of illustrations on how to translate it after having broken it down might be helpful.

So, first of all, Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God. So, if we look at each verbal action, verbal concept, and bondservant, a servant is one who serves. So, Paul serves Jesus Christ, Christ Jesus.

Called as an apostle, this is a passive. Who called? Who called Paul? Presumably Jesus, Jesus slash God. As an apostle, apostle is a verbal noun, the one who was sent.

Who sent Paul? Jesus did. And if we read about Paul's life, everywhere he went, he says the spirit led us to here, the spirit prevented us from going there. Set apart is actually the verb to sanctify, to set apart as unique.

Who set whom apart? Jesus set Paul apart. And then it says for the gospel of God, and that's the reason for being set apart, and how does the gospel of God, the gospel of God being the gospel about God, information about God, that Paul is then going to preach, but that part that I should is somehow hidden in there and it's implied as the reason for being set apart and being called and being sent. So here is one option.

I, Paul, sometimes you need to do that depending on the culture, it sounds really weird to have somebody start a letter with their name, Paul. Paul, that guy that you guys know, he's writing you a letter, no, we don't talk like that. Okay, so sometimes you need to add I. Who serves Christ Jesus? I, Paul, who serves Christ Jesus.

I, whom he called and sent, whom he set apart. So again, we're making them still these relative clauses, it's not a main thing and saying it says, he called me, and he sent me, and he set me apart. If we did say those things, those probably would be okay, but we want to make sure that the focus is, Paul is describing what happened to him and his relationship to Jesus.

So, there's a bit of latitude here, but the idea is that we need to reflect and make it really clear who it was who called Paul, who sent him with specific work to do, and who set him apart. And why did Jesus set him apart? So, he whom he set apart for me to spread the gospel of God, or so that I could spread the gospel of God. There's all that for in there, that for has that hidden information that's implied for the reason of me going out and preaching the gospel elsewhere.

Spread the gospel, preach the gospel. Okay, another one in verses six and seven. You also are the call of Jesus Christ.

Called of Jesus Christ is both a passive and a genitive construction. You also are the ones Christ Jesus called. Again, we're using, rather than saying Jesus called you, it's referring to them, and this is describing them, and so we use the ones who, to all the beloved of God in Rome.

So, this is Paul in verse seven, after he goes through one of six all these things. Now he says, these are the addressees of my letter. Paul, why didn't you just say so? I think Paul should have had a translation consultant check his work or an editor or something before he sent out these letters.

Okay, so this is kind of a wrap-up before getting into the content of his letter. I write, or I am writing, to all of you in Rome who love God, whom God loves. I am writing to all of you in Rome whom God loves.

There's another way to work around it. And I just want to reiterate that these are hard verses. There's so much there.

There's so much that could be missed if people read it too quickly. Or don't understand this difficult language or grammar. And I want to reiterate, going back to the Greek and saying, well, the Greek is the thing that we need to know in order to figure this out.

Actually, the Greek's the problem. So just remember that we have that paratextual space in our translation, either in footnotes, section headings, study guides, or book introductions. What about glossaries? And then we also have, I didn't put it here, but we also have all of that extra, outside the Bible, scripture engagement material to help us out.

So, the people doing the translation need to keep in mind what else our people need in order to understand this text. That is why paratextual material should be written and translated so that it will help people. And all these other extra things that we talked about in the previous message can be intentionally thought about, planned, written out who it's for, and all of that, and then actually produced in the language of the scripture that's being translated. So, all of that ties together, and especially with these difficult concepts, difficult nouns, and all the rest, people need help.

And we want what? Effective communication. So, we do all that we can to make that happen. Thank you.

This is Dr. George Payton and his teaching on Bible translation. This is session number 23, Passive Constructions.