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Conditionals in Galatians
A Guide for Translators

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Abstract: These notes cover every conditional sentence in Paul's letter to the Galatians. They are designed to give guidance to translators in the field, and to complement—rather than replace—*Translator's Notes* and other exegetical and translation helps. The emphasis in this study will be to show how Paul uses conditionals to argue, rebuke, exhort, etc., and to discuss how to translate these conditionals so that the translation achieves the same effect.

Introduction

There are twenty conditional sentences in the Letter of Paul to the Galatians (1:8, 9, 10; 2:14, 17, 18, 21; 3:4, 18, 29; 4:7, 15; 5:2, 11, 15, 18, 25; 6:1, 3, 9), plus an adversative use of the construction ἐὰν μή in 2:16 and an implied conditional in 6:9. These sentences play an important role in the development of Paul's arguments in the epistle. However, the way that conditional sentences are used in Koine Greek argumentation may very well differ from the way that conditional sentences are used in other languages. The aim of this article, therefore, is to shed light on the interpretation of these conditional sentences, and to discuss how they contribute to understanding Galatians as a whole, ultimately with the aim of helping translators find communicatively appropriate ways to express them.

While the Greek conditional particles εἰ and ἐὰν occur elsewhere in Galatians, those passages will not be discussed since they are part of constructions with specific, non-conditional meanings. For example, the construction εἰ μή (1:7; 1:19; 6:14) is usually translated as "except" (and in some places as "but" or "only"), and a relative pronoun plus ἐὰν expresses indefinite

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reference, translated as "whoever" (5:10) or "whatever" (5:17; 6:7). For further discussion of these constructions, see Nicolle (2022a) sections 3.4 and 3.6.2.

A note on terminology: *in a conditional construction, the 'if' clause is known as the* PROTASIS *and is labelled "p"; the main clause (usually following the protasis) is called the* APODOSIS *and is labelled "q". In the following Scripture quotations, the protasis and the apodosis have been enclosed in square brackets and labelled* ***p*** *and* ***q****, respectively.*

Galatians 1:6–10

Levinsohn (2020a, 2020b) treats Galatians 1:6-10 as the introduction to a "macro-unit" that extends to the end of chapter 2. These verses contain three conditionals: a concessive "even if" conditional in 1:8, a factual conditional in 1:9, and a non-factual conditional in 1:10.

> [6] I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— [7] not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. [8] But **[even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you,]***p* **[let him be accursed.]***q* [9] As we have said before, so now I say again: **[If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received,]***p* **[let him be accursed.]***q*
>
> [10] For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? **[If I were still trying to please man,]***p* **[I would not be a servant of Christ.]***q*[1]

Paul does three things in verses 6–10: (1) he introduces the main theme of the letter (vv.6–7), (2) he emphasizes how important this theme is and how wrong his opponents are by invoking a curse on them (vv.8–9), and (3) he corrects a false characterization of himself (v.10). Conditionals are used in (2) and (3).

Context: verses 6–7

Paul first introduces the main theme of the letter—that some in the churches of Galatia "are turning to a different gospel" (v.6) and that there are some who "want to distort the gospel of Christ" (v.7). Paul's original audience would have known immediately that this "different gospel" consisted of teaching that the followers of Jesus also needed to follow the Jewish law, and in particular that they needed to be circumcised. However, this is only spelled out later in the letter. We get a hint in 2:3, where Paul writes that "even Titus … was not forced to be

[1] All English Scripture quotations, unless otherwise stated, are from the *English Standard Version*. 2016. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles. Emphasis is my own.

circumcised," and Paul then describes his ministry to "the uncircumcised" in the rest of chapter 2. Chapters 3 and 4 contrast the Jewish law with the promise given to Abraham. Finally, in 5:2 Paul states, "Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you."

Galatians 1:8

The first conditionals occur in verses 8 and 9. The protasis in v.8 describes an imaginary future event, but the protasis in v.9 probably alludes to an actual, present time event. The apodoses of these verses are identical curses; this repetition shows how strongly Paul feels about the gospel. We will begin by looking at v.8 in detail.

> ἀλλὰ **[καὶ ἐὰν ἡμεῖς ἢ ἄγγελος ἐξ οὐρανοῦ εὐαγγελίζηται [ὑμῖν] παρ' ὃ εὐηγγελισάμεθα ὑμῖν,]*p* [ἀνάθεμα ἔστω.]*q*** [2]
>
> But **[even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you,]*p* [let him be accursed.]*q***

The conditional here is hypothetical: it refers to a very unlikely, future event—Paul and his associates, or an angel from heaven, proclaiming a different gospel—and is expressed not just with a third class[3] conditional with ἐὰν plus a subjunctive verb, but also with καὶ 'even' "to emphasize that a surprising suggestion is being made" (Armitage 2007:377).

The combination καὶ ἐὰν expresses a CONCESSIVE CONDITIONAL and is usually translated in English as "even if". In a concessive conditional, the protasis describes a situation that would normally be opposed to the apodosis, but the apodosis is nevertheless asserted. Here, Paul says that anyone—even Paul himself or an angel from heaven—who proclaims a gospel that is contrary to the gospel originally taught by Paul and his associates[4] should be accursed (which NIV expresses as "under God's curse" and NET as "condemned to hell").

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[2] Greek quotations are from Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger, eds. 2014. *The Greek New Testament.* 5th ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.

[3] There are three grammatical classes of conditional sentence in New Testament Greek. First and second class conditionals have the conditional particle εἰ but differ in terms of the tense/aspect of the verbs in the protasis and apodosis. Third class conditionals have the conditional particle ἐὰν plus a subjunctive verb in the protasis, and any mood or tense in the apodosis. For a detailed description, see Wallace (1996:690–697), Porter (1992:254–267), or Nicolle (2022a).

[4] See Acts 16:6.

In translation, if concessive conditional constructions do not occur in the target language, this verse could be translated as follows:

> "Whoever proclaims a gospel different to the one we proclaimed to you, including we ourselves or an angel from heaven, let him be accursed!"

If curses in the target language stand alone as independent exclamations, another option might be:

> "May whoever proclaims a gospel different to the one we proclaimed to you be cursed! Yes, even if it is we ourselves or an angel from heaven who does this!"

Or following the NLT:

> "Let God's curse fall on anyone, including us or even an angel from heaven, who preaches a different kind of Good News than the one we preached to you."[5]

Note that although English uses a present tense verb, the time reference is to a potential future event.

Galatians 1:9

> ὡς προειρήκαμεν καὶ ἄρτι πάλιν λέγω, **[εἴ τις ὑμᾶς εὐαγγελίζεται παρ' ὃ παρελάβετε,]***p* **[ἀνάθεμα ἔστω.]***q*
>
> As we have said before, so now I say again: **[If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received,]***p* **[let him be accursed.]***q*

A different conditional construction is used in v.9. Here, Paul uses a first class conditional consisting of εἴ τις 'if anyone' followed by a present tense verb. There are two ways in which this Greek construction can be understood. One is that it refers to something that was actually happening. This is reflected in the English translation, "if anyone is preaching..." (ESV, NIV, NASB, NET), with the present progressive indicating an ongoing situation. It is clear from the context that some people were, in fact, teaching a different gospel, as we saw in 1:7 and as Paul clearly states in 6:12. This view is supported by Fung (1988):

> The different constructions used in the two conditional clauses indicate that, whereas the former [v.8] has in view a mere supposition made for the sake of emphasizing the uniqueness and inviolability of the gospel, the latter [v.9] refers to something that is more than a possibility, something which is assumed as fact.

[5] *New Living Translation*. 2015. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

This interpretation is followed by the majority of English translations and is also in line with the typical use of first class conditionals to describe situations that are known or assumed to be true.

Another interpretation—based on the indefinite subject τις 'anyone'—is that Paul does not have specific people in mind, but is instead expressing a hypothetical, gnomic (timeless) condition. This is reflected in the English translations "if anyone proclaims..." (NRSV) and "if anyone preaches..." (NLT) with the simple present indicating an unspecified time in either the present or the future. Armitage (2007:379) notes, "The context may suggest that this conditional clause referred obliquely to specific individuals, but the syntax alone cannot confirm this, although it allows for it." We view this interpretation as less likely.

If the grammar of the target language has a construction that allows both interpretations (as Greek does), this may be used. If not, but the grammar of the target language has a construction that expresses a factual conditional ("if anyone is preaching—and we know some are"), then this should be preferred over a hypothetical conditional construction. If the target language does not have factual conditionals, and so using a conditional construction means that Paul could not be referring to a real situation, then it may be necessary to restructure this verse. For example,

> "Let any person who is proclaiming a gospel different from the one you received be accursed!"

Or:

> "May God's curse be on those who are proclaiming a gospel different to the one you received!"

This should, however, be used cautiously; as Betz (1979:53) notes, by using a conditional, Paul avoids directly cursing others. As far as possible, make sure to use the same expression for "let him be accursed" in v.8 and in v.9.

Galatians 1:10

> Ἄρτι γὰρ ἀνθρώπους πείθω ἢ τὸν θεόν; ἢ ζητῶ ἀνθρώποις ἀρέσκειν; **[εἰ ἔτι ἀνθρώποις ἤρεσκον,]*p* [Χριστοῦ δοῦλος οὐκ ἂν ἤμην.]*q***
>
> For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? **[If I were still trying to please man,]*p* [I would not be a servant of Christ.]*q***

Most translations include v.10 in a separate paragraph within the introductory section 1:6–10. Although Groff (2016) initially groups v.10 together with the

following section (1:10–2:21), he later suggests that v.10 should form a paragraph of its own within 1:6–10 with a new section starting at v.11.

The Greek construction used here is a second class conditional expressing a non-factual condition. (Note: the past subjunctive verb *were* in the English translation indicates non-factuality, not past time reference.) It is part of an argument: what is at issue here is whether Paul is trying to please man, not whether he is a servant (or slave) of Christ. Galatians 1:1 has already established that Paul is a servant of Christ: "Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor from man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead..." The conditional sentence is therefore Paul's (negative) response to the previous rhetorical question,[6] "am I trying to please man?"

The argument here goes as follows:

Premise 1 (stated): *If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.*

Premise 2 (known from context): *I am a servant of Christ.*

Conclusion: *I am not still trying to please man.*[7]

In translating this verse, a non-factual, present time conditional construction can be used. If the target language does not have such a construction, or if Paul's argument is not clearly understood when presented conditionally, possible alternative reformulations may include:

"No, I am not trying to please man [people], because it is not possible both to please man and to be a servant of Christ."

Or:

"No, I am not trying to please man [people], because I cannot please man and also be a servant of Christ at the same time."

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[6] Although the previous questions are rhetorical, it is generally agreed (e.g., Bruce 1982; deSilva 2018; Fung 1988; Longenecker 1990; Schreiner 2010) that Paul may well have been echoing real criticisms levelled against him by his opponents. The sense would then be, "am I trying to please man, as some others have claimed?"

[7] This is a logically valid *modus tollens* argument: $p \rightarrow \neg q, q \therefore \neg p$ which reads as "If *p*, then not *q*; *q* is true; therefore *p* is not true." (E.g., "If it rained the grass is not dry; the grass is dry; therefore it did not rain.") Note that if Paul were trying to demonstrate that he is a servant of God, using the fact that he is not trying to please man as a premise, then the implied argument would be an inferential fallacy (known as "denying the antecedent") and the conclusion that he is a servant of God would not be logically valid (even though, as we know, it is true).

Galatians 2:11–21

This section contains four conditional sentences (excluding 2:16). In the Greek text, the first three (in 2:14, 17, and 18) are first class conditionals and the fourth (2:21) is either a first or second class conditional. (It is not possible to tell which it is, as there is no verb in the protasis.) However, the grammar of these conditional sentences does not fully determine what they mean, and all four express quite different types of condition.

The context in which these conditional sentences must be understood is found in the conflict between Paul, who believed that Jews and Gentiles alike are justified only by faith in Christ, and some men who had been sent from Jerusalem by James, who insisted that circumcision was also necessary (see 2:12). In these verses, Paul rebukes Peter (called "Cephas" here) and other Jewish Christians for giving in to the demands of the "circumcision faction" (2:14)[8] and then states plainly that people are justified by believing in Christ not by obeying the Jewish law (2:16). The circumcision faction said that those who believed they were "justified in Christ" were in fact sinners because they had abandoned the requirements of the Jewish law, but Paul argues that this is not the case (2:17). Instead, he states that it is those who try to reinstate the Jewish law who are really sinners (2:18). He concludes by stating that, if it is necessary to keep the Jewish law in order to be justified, then Christ died for no reason (2:21).

Galatians 2:14

> ἀλλ᾽ ὅτε εἶδον ὅτι οὐκ ὀρθοποδοῦσιν πρὸς τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου, εἶπον τῷ Κηφᾷ ἔμπροσθεν πάντων, **[Εἰ σὺ** Ἰουδαῖος

[8] In v.14 Paul reports what he said to Peter, but it is not clear where this speech ends. Although most English translations represent Paul's speech as ending after v.14 (and some even have a section heading at v.15), others continue Paul's speech up to the end of v.21. Because of the references to "we" in 2:15–17, and the fact that Paul is primarily addressing a Jewish audience here, Groff (2016) and Schreiner (2010) recommend treating 2:15–21 as part of Paul's speech to Peter and the Jewish Christians in Antioch. On the other hand, Betz (1979) and Longenecker (1990) argue that only v.14 is direct speech. Fung (1988) argues that Paul's speech continues at least to the end of v.16 (where NLT ends the quotation), but that after that it "gradually shades into a theological discussion with his readers." Similarly, Levinsohn (2020b:313) suggests that Paul's speech ends at the end of v.17. Arichea and Nida (1976) lean towards making just v.14 a direct quote, and note that the extent of the direct quotation will determine whether inclusive or exclusive "we" is used in vv.15–17 in some languages.

> **ὑπάρχων ἐθνικῶς καὶ οὐχὶ Ἰουδαϊκῶς ζῇς,**]*p* **[πῶς τὰ ἔθνη ἀναγκάζεις Ἰουδαΐζειν;]***q*
>
> But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, **[“If you**, though a Jew, **live like a Gentile and not like a Jew,]***p* **[how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?”]***q*

In v.12 Paul states that Peter (Cephas) had been eating with the Gentiles before men came from James, so the protasis here is factual. Paul is reminding Peter that he had been living like a Gentile; he “ate their food, and hence implicitly taught that observing purity laws was irrelevant for belonging to the people of God” (Schreiner 2010). In addition, the use of the present tense verb ζῇς ‘live’ in the protasis may imply that Paul believes Peter will revert to living like a Gentile once the men sent by James have left. The phrase “though a Jew” is embedded within the protasis, and as Groff (2016) suggests, can be moved to the start of the sentence if this is more natural.

In languages in which factual conditions cannot be translated using a conditional construction, it may be more accurate and natural to follow the NLT, which uses ‘since’, or to make the protasis into a statement: “You are a Jew, and yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. So how can you force the Gentiles to become Jews?”[9]

Galatians 2:16

> εἰδότες [δὲ] ὅτι **[οὐ δικαιοῦται ἄνθρωπος ἐξ ἔργων νόμου]***q* **[ἐὰν μὴ διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ,]***p* καὶ ἡμεῖς εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐπιστεύσαμεν, ἵνα δικαιωθῶμεν ἐκ πίστεως Χριστοῦ καὶ οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων νόμου, ὅτι ἐξ ἔργων νόμου οὐ δικαιωθήσεται πᾶσα σάρξ.
>
> yet we know that **[a person is not justified by works of the law]***q* **[but through faith in Jesus Christ,]***p* so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Galatians 2:16 is included here because it contains a construction with ἐὰν μή. This construction is usually translated “unless” or “if not” in English (see Nicolle 2022b), but in a limited number of cases (such as Mark 10:30) it functions like εἰ μή and expresses an exceptive meaning. If this meaning of ἐὰν μή were to be accepted here, it would mean that a person is not justified by the works of the

[9] The final word Ἰουδαΐζειν, which ESV translates as “live like Jews”, may actually be better translated as “become Jews” according to Longenecker (1990) and Groff (2016).

law *except* through faith in Jesus Christ (or *unless* they have faith in Jesus Christ), or put another way, that a person is justified by the works of the law *only if* they (also) have faith in Jesus Christ. This interpretation would, of course, run counter to a traditional reading of Galatians, including the second part of this verse.

Most translations and commentaries, therefore, interpret ἐὰν μή in 2:16 as having an adversative "but rather" meaning.[10] Bruce (1982:136) translates it as "but only", and the majority of English versions translate it with "but". Das (2000) suggests that ἐὰν μή in 2:16 is ambiguous between an exceptive and an adversative reading, but that Paul goes on to clarify his intended meaning in favor of an adversative interpretation in the remainder of the verse. Hunn (2007), however, argues from a linguistic perspective in favor of the traditional adversative reading. We find her arguments convincing, and therefore suggest that translators follow the interpretation chosen by the majority of translations and commentaries, in which ἐὰν μή here indicates that "a person is made right with God [i.e., justified] by faith in Jesus Christ, ***not*** by obeying the law" (NLT, my emphasis).[11]

Galatians 2:17

> **[εἰ** δὲ ζητοῦντες δικαιωθῆναι ἐν Χριστῷ **εὑρέθημεν καὶ αὐτοὶ ἁμαρτωλοί,]***p* **[ἆρα Χριστὸς ἁμαρτίας διάκονος;]***q* μὴ γένοιτο.
>
> But **[if**, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, **we too were found to be sinners,]***p* **[is Christ then a servant of sin?]***q* Certainly not!

This verse is difficult to understand and to translate. Most commentaries and translation helps discuss phrases such as ἐν Χριστῷ 'in Christ', εὑρέθημεν 'we were found', and ἁμαρτίας διάκονος 'servant of sin', so we will focus on the conditional.

There are two ways to understand this verse, and in both, the conditional is factual. According to one interpretation,[12] it is as if we are hearing half of a

[10] This adversative interpretation also applies in John 5:19 and in John 15:4 because the preceding apodosis in both verses contains the phrase ἀφ' ἑαυτοῦ, translated "by himself" (NIV), "of his own accord" (ESV), or "on his own" (NRSV) in 5:19 and "by itself" in 15:4.

[11] As Goodwin (1886:126) puts it, "if ἐὰν μή may ever be rendered by *but* instead of *save* [or *except*], then, of all cases actual or imaginable, this in Galatians is the very case when it should, by all means, be so rendered." For defenses of exceptive readings, see Dunn (1983) and Walker (1997). I am grateful to Drew Maust for directing me to these discussions of Gal 2:16.

[12] Favored by Arichea and Nida (1976), deSilva (2018), and Longenecker (1990).

conversation, and Paul is responding to an accusation made by the circumcision faction. The accusation was that those who put their faith solely in Christ and not in following the Jewish law had become no better than "Gentile sinners". In other words, Paul and his associates were considered ("found") by some of the Jewish Christians to be "sinners". In this interpretation, the conditional is factual, because Paul and his associates were in fact viewed as sinners by the members of the circumcision faction.

The second interpretation[13] is that when Paul and other Jews put their faith purely in Christ, they realized ("found") that they too were sinners, just as much as the Gentiles who did not follow the Jewish law. In this interpretation also, the conditional is factual. In both of these interpretations, the phrase καὶ αὐτοὶ 'we too' (literally, 'also ourselves') looks back to 2:15 where Paul echoes the common Jewish expression, "Gentile sinners".

As in 2:14, there is a phrase embedded within the protasis: "In our endeavor to be justified in Christ," and (as in 2:14) this can be moved to the start of the sentence if this is more natural. Arichea and Nida (1976) suggest: "We endeavor to be put right with God by our being joined with Christ. But if as we do this, we are found to be..."

In languages in which factual conditions must be expressed as statements, this verse may need to be translated along the following lines:

> First interpretation
> "Now we have been regarded as (no better than Gentile) sinners because we endeavor to be justified (solely) in Christ. Does that make Christ a servant of sin? Certainly not!"
>
> Second interpretation
> "Now we realize that we are (no better than Gentile) sinners because we endeavor to be justified (solely) in Christ. Does that make Christ a servant of sin? Certainly not!"

Galatians 2:18

> **[εἰ γὰρ ἃ κατέλυσα ταῦτα πάλιν οἰκοδομῶ,]*p* [παραβάτην ἐμαυτὸν συνιστάνω.]*q***
>
> For **[if I rebuild what I tore down,]*p* [I prove myself to be a transgressor.]*q***

Although this is a first class conditional in Greek, as in 2:14 and 2:17, this verse expresses a very unlikely, hypothetical condition, rather than a factual

[13] Favored by Schreiner (2010).

condition. Here, Paul is using a metaphor: the building which he describes himself rebuilding or tearing down is the Jewish law. Some translations, such as NLT and TEV, make this explicit: "If I start to rebuild the system of Law that I tore down, then I show myself to be someone who breaks the Law."[14] Groff (2016) has various suggestions for how to translate this metaphor.

Paul switches to the first person singular ("I") here, but because this is a hypothetical use of the conditional, it does not apply only to Paul himself. It does, however, describe what Peter and some of the Jewish Christians had done (i.e., abandon the Jewish law and then later return to it). As Groff (2016) explains, "Paul used the pronoun *I* here to be polite and indirect." If a first person singular reference is confusing or inappropriate in your translation, it may be better to use an indefinite form ("someone", "a person", etc.) or to continue using the first person plural from v.17. However, in 2:19–21 Paul is writing about his own personal experience, and the first person singular reference should be kept in any translation of these verses.

Galatians 2:21

> οὐκ ἀθετῶ τὴν χάριν τοῦ θεοῦ· **[εἰ γὰρ διὰ νόμου δικαιοσύνη,]**$_p$ **[ἄρα Χριστὸς δωρεὰν ἀπέθανεν.]**$_q$
>
> I do not nullify the grace of God, for **[if righteousness were through the law,]**$_p$ **[then Christ died for no purpose.]**$_q$

There is no verb in the protasis in Greek, so it is not possible to determine whether this is a first or second class conditional, but it is clearly non-factual because Paul has already made it clear that righteousness does not come through the law (see 2:16). However, he presents this idea as "true for the sake of argument" to show how terrible the consequence of this would be. This has two effects. First, because Paul and his audience agree that Christ did not die for no purpose, the conditional sentence reinforces Paul's claim that righteousness does ***not*** come through the law. Second, it functions as a rebuke to those in the circumcision faction who insist that keeping the law is still necessary for a person to be righteous, by showing that this view undermines the central teaching of the Gospel, namely that Christ died to save sinners (6:14). As Arichea and Nida (1976) note, "this verse serves as a good summary of Paul's discussion in the entire second chapter, and it constitutes a prelude to his subsequent arguments in the next two chapters."

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[14] *The Good News Bible: Today's English Version*. 2nd ed. 1992. New York: American Bible Society.

In translating this verse, if testing shows that the target audience does not understand that Paul is simply presenting this situation (i.e., righteousness through keeping the law) for the sake of argument, then the translator may consider making this more explicit. For example,

> "For we are made righteous only by the grace of God; but if righteousness were achieved by keeping the law, then Christ died for no purpose."

Or:

> "For righteousness is not achieved by keeping the law; if it were, then Christ died for no purpose."

Galatians 3–4

In these chapters (which Levinsohn 2020b:315 calls a "macro-unit"), Paul develops and defends the true Gospel: that all people—Jews and non-Jews—are made right with God only through faith in Christ, and not through keeping the Jewish law or any other acts on their part. The conditionals in these chapters serve to reinforce specific points that Paul makes.

Galatians 3:4

τοσαῦτα ἐπάθετε εἰκῇ; **[εἴ γε καὶ εἰκῇ.]***p*

Did you experience so much for nothing?—**[if it really was for nothing.]***p*[15]

Paul uses the question here to rebuke the Galatian Christians. The following protasis (conditional clause) is not accompanied by an apodosis (consequence clause); instead, Paul uses it to express doubt that they experienced so much for nothing. The TEV translates this as a statement "Surely it meant something!" and NLT uses another question: "Surely it was not in vain, was it?"

[15] NRSV 1989. *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. I prefer the NRSV translation of this verse for two reasons: First, it translates πάσχω as "experience" (as in NIV, NLT, and TEV) rather than as "suffer" (as in ESV, NASB, and NET), which fits the context better given the mention of the Spirit and miracles in the next verse. This goes against the suggestion in Groff (2016), but is supported by deSilva (2018), Fung (1988), and Longenecker (1990). Second, NRSV translates εἰκῇ with the contemporary phrase "for nothing" whereas ESV uses the somewhat archaic expression "in vain."

Galatians 3:18, 21

According to deSilva (2018), these verses are best understood when taken together.

> **3:18**
> **[εἰ γὰρ ἐκ νόμου ἡ κληρονομία]***p* **[οὐκέτι ἐξ ἐπαγγελίας·]***q* τῷ δὲ Ἀβραὰμ δι' ἐπαγγελίας κεχάρισται ὁ θεός.
>
> **[For if the inheritance comes by the law,]***p* **[it no longer comes by promise;]***q* but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.

> **3:21**
> Ὁ οὖν νόμος κατὰ τῶν ἐπαγγελιῶν [τοῦ θεοῦ]; μὴ γένοιτο. **[εἰ γὰρ ἐδόθη νόμος ὁ δυνάμενος ζῳοποιῆσαι,]***p* **[ὄντως ἐκ νόμου ἂν ἦν ἡ δικαιοσύνη]***q*
>
> Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! **[For if a law had been given that could give life,]***p* **[then righteousness would indeed be by the law.]***q*

The conditional construction in 3:18 is very similar to the one in 2:21: "if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose." In Greek, both 2:21 and 3:18 have no verb in the protasis, νόμος 'law' is fronted, giving it prominence, and both express non-factual conditions that are presented as "true for the sake of argument".

To understand the connection between righteousness (mentioned in the protases of 2:21 and 3:21) and inheritance (mentioned for the first time in 3:18), we need to go back to 3:9 where Paul writes that "those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham," and 3:16 where Paul explains that God's promises were made not only to Abraham but also to his "seed" (meaning: descendant, offspring, child). As Schreiner (2010) puts it, "The inheritance is a gift of God's grace—the result of his promise to his people, and it is this promise that God gave to Abraham." DeSilva (2018) explains it as follows: "The word 'inheritance' here includes 'righteousness and life' (see 3:21) and, indeed, all the benefits (some presently enjoyed, some yet to come) of which Paul has spoken from the beginning: justification, the Spirit, and redemption."

Remember that Paul has already stated that righteousness does not come through the Jewish law (2:16) but by faith (3:11) through which we receive the promise of the Spirit (3:14). So his audience already knows that God's blessings (expressed here as "the inheritance", "life" and "righteousness") do not come through keeping the law. Paul is not using these non-factual conditionals to give new teaching about righteousness, or to rebuke people (as in 2:21), but rather as part of his argument that the law and the promise are distinct but not in

opposition to each other. In vv.23–24 Paul goes on to explain that the law was needed only until Christ, when people could be justified by believing in him. Groff (2016) suggests various ways to translate the non-factual conditional in 3:21:

- As a conditional.
- As a true statement followed by the conclusion: "Righteousness certainly does not come by means of the law that was given, so the law cannot give life."
- By stating the conclusion first and then stating the conditional clause: "The law which was given cannot give life. If it could [give life], then righteousness would certainly have come by means of obeying the law."
- As a rhetorical question followed by the consequence: "Do you think that the law that was given can give life? Then righteousness would certainly come by means of the law. [But it does not.]"

Regardless of the option chosen, translators should make it clear that Paul is not arguing that we need to keep the law.

Galatians 3:29 and 4:7

We will look at 3:29 and 4:7 together; not only are these verses both concerned with being heirs, but they are also both factual (first class) conditionals in which the truth of the protasis has just been explicitly stated (the underlined parts in the examples below).

3:28b–29
πάντες γὰρ ὑμεῖς εἷς ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. **[εἰ δὲ ὑμεῖς Χριστοῦ,]**$_p$ **[ἄρα τοῦ Ἀβραὰμ σπέρμα ἐστέ, κατ' ἐπαγγελίαν κληρονόμοι.]**$_q$

...for you are all one in Christ Jesus. **[And if you are Christ's,]**$_p$ **[then**[16] **you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.]**$_q$

4:7
ὥστε οὐκέτι εἶ δοῦλος ἀλλ' υἱός· **[εἰ δὲ υἱός,]**$_p$ **[καὶ κληρονόμος διὰ θεοῦ.]**$_q$

So you are no longer a slave, but a son, **[and if a son,]**$_p$ **[*also*[17] an heir through God.]**$_q$

[16] The English connective *then* translates the Greek connective ἄρα which expresses a consequence (Levinsohn 2014: 331).

[17] The ESV translation introduced the apodosis with the word *then*, but this has been removed because the Greek connective ἄρα is not used in Gal 4:7; instead, the word *also* has been used to express the sense of καὶ in Greek (see NIV, NRSV, NET).

Verse 29 summarizes and concludes Paul's teaching in chapter 3. Schreiner (2010) asserts that the major issue in chapter 3 is the question, "Who are Abraham's true sons and daughters?" Paul has argued that Christ is the only true son of Abraham (3:16), and now he states that those who belong to Christ (and not those who try to follow the Jewish law) are also true sons and daughters of Abraham. In 4:1–7, Paul explains what being an heir means, and in 4:7 he concludes his argument by stating that because we have been adopted as children into God's family, we are also heirs. This means that each person[18] who believes in Christ will receive the blessings promised to Abraham, and in particular the promised Holy Spirit.

Because the immediate context expresses the truth of the protasis in each verse, there is very little chance that these conditionals will be understood as expressing doubt. However, translators are still advised to translate them using the most natural construction for factual conditionals in their language. Most English translations use *if* in 3:29, but Arichea and Nida (1976) suggest using a causal construction, such as "because you belong to Christ…"; NLT rephrases this as a statement:

> And <u>now that you belong to Christ</u>, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and God's promise to Abraham belongs to you. (NLT)

In 4:7, some English translations (NIV, NLT, TEV) use *since*:

> So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; [and <u>since</u> you are his child,]*p* [God has made you also an heir.]*q* (NIV)[19]

Galatians 4:15

> ποῦ οὖν ὁ μακαρισμὸς ὑμῶν; μαρτυρῶ γὰρ ὑμῖν ὅτι **[εἰ δυνατὸν]*p* [τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς ὑμῶν ἐξορύξαντες ἐδώκατέ μοι.]*q***
>
> What then has become of your blessedness? For I testify to you that, **[if possible,]*p* [you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me.]*q***

This non-factual (second class) conditional occurs in the middle of a section (4:12–20) where Paul makes a personal appeal to the Galatian Christians.[20] Like other "if possible" clauses in the New Testament,[21] it signals the improbability (or, in this case, impossibility) of the apodosis. It is likely that Paul is speaking

[18] Note that Paul uses a singular *you* verb form here.

[19] *The New International Version*. 2011. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

[20] NLT has a conditional in 4:18 that is not in the Greek.

[21] Mt 24:24/Mk 13:22; Mt 26:39/Mk 14:35, 36; Acts 20:16; Acts 27:39; Rom 12:18.

metaphorically here. Many commentators (Arichea and Nida 1976; Bruce 1982; deSilva 2018; Fung 1988; Longenecker 1990; Schreiner 2010) suggest that this is not a reference to Paul suffering from an actual eye disease, but rather a vivid way of describing the Galatians' willingness to help Paul even if this required a painful sacrifice. As a possible translation, Arichea and Nida (1976) suggest:

> "You would have done anything for me; why, you would even have taken out your eyes and given them to me if you could."

Galatians 5

In chapter 5, Paul directly addresses the issue of circumcision (5:2–12[22]), and exhorts the Galatians to serve one another (5:13–15) and to be controlled by the Holy Spirit (5:16–25). Conditionals occur in each of these sections.

Galatians 5:2

> Ἴδε ἐγὼ Παῦλος λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι **[ἐὰν περιτέμνησθε,]***p* **[Χριστὸς ὑμᾶς οὐδὲν ὠφελήσει.]***q*
>
> Look: I, Paul, say to you that **[if you accept circumcision,]***p* **[Christ will be of no advantage to you.]***q*

This is a third class conditional, which expresses a hypothetical but likely situation; the Galatians have been listening to teachers who advocate circumcision, and it is likely—but not certain—that some may have accepted this teaching. The *you* here is plural. Some of the non-Jewish Galatian Christians might have already been circumcised; others probably had not yet been circumcised but were apparently considering it. Paul is addressing all of these people. Circumcision was the sign that a person had decided to follow the Jewish law, and so Paul uses this conditional to explain that for a Gentile to be circumcised meant that he was choosing to be made right with God by following the law instead of by trusting in Christ's sacrifice.

The introduction to this verse is emphatic; most English versions translate Ἴδε 'look' as "Listen!" (NIV has "Mark my words!") and this is followed by "I Paul" which reminds the readers of Paul's authority as an apostle (1:1) and also of his

[22] Schreiner (2010) states that 5:1 functions as a transitional verse between 4:21–31 and 5:2–6. NRSV starts a new section at 5:2 and puts 5:1 in the section starting at 4:21 (see also Bruce 1982; Fung 1988).

personal concern for them. Any translation of the conditional should express just how important this is to Paul.[23]

Galatians 5:11

> ἐγὼ δέ, ἀδελφοί, **[εἰ περιτομὴν ἔτι κηρύσσω,]***p* **[τί ἔτι διώκομαι;]***q* ἄρα κατήργηται τὸ σκάνδαλον τοῦ σταυροῦ.
>
> But **[if I**, brothers, **still preach circumcision,]***p* **[why am I still being persecuted?]***q* In that case the offense of the cross has been removed.

Paul starts this verse with "But I" to indicate a switch from talking about the false teachers to talking about himself. He then uses a complex conditional construction in which the non-factual protasis "if I am still preaching circumcision" is followed by two separate apodoses. The NASB retains the structure of the Greek; the second apodosis is introduced by ἄρα which is translated as "then".

> But I, brethren, **[if I still preach circumcision,]***p* **[why am I still persecuted?]***q*1 **[Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished.]***q*2[24]

Other English translations translate ἄρα as "in that case" (ESV, NET, NIV, NRSV) or "if that were true" (TEV):

> Brothers and sisters, **[if I am still preaching circumcision,]***p* **[why am I still being persecuted?]***q* **<u>In that case</u> the offense of the cross has been abolished**. (NIV)

The protasis "if I am still preaching circumcision" describes something that is not true. Before he met Jesus, Paul did preach that only people who were circumcised (that is, Jews) were accepted by God, but he no longer preaches this. Possibly some of Paul's opponents were saying that he was still preaching that circumcision was necessary, and this is made clear in the NLT translation: "if I were still preaching that you must be circumcised—as some say I do..."

The question, "Why am I still being persecuted?" presupposes that Paul is being persecuted. Paul assumes that his audience knows that the people who are persecuting him are those who are teaching that circumcision is necessary (first mentioned in 1:7). The fact that these people are persecuting Paul shows that he

[23] NLT also uses conditionals in verses 3 and 4, which echo and elaborate v.2, but these are not conditional sentences in the Greek text.

[24] *New American Standard Bible: 1995 update*. La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

is still refusing to preach that circumcision is necessary. Groff (2016) has various suggestions of how to translate this rhetorical question.

The statement "the offense of the cross has been abolished" also follows from the protasis "if I am still preaching circumcision". What Paul means here is that if he were preaching that circumcision was necessary to be accepted by God, then the message that Christ died on the cross to save people—that some people find so offensive—would no longer be needed. But, as Arichea and Nida (1976) note, "since his preaching is still causing trouble, it is not true that he continues to advocate circumcision."

Galatians 5:15

> **[εἰ δὲ ἀλλήλους δάκνετε καὶ κατεσθίετε,]*p* [βλέπετε μὴ ὑπ' ἀλλήλων ἀναλωθῆτε.]*q***
>
> **[But if you bite and devour one another,]*p* [watch out that you are not consumed by one another.]*q***

In Greek, this is a first class conditional, which usually describes an actual situation or something that is assumed true for the sake of argument. Paul is probably thinking of the divisions and fighting caused by the false teachers mentioned earlier. The NLT expresses the idea that this is an ongoing situation with "if you are always biting and devouring one another..." The verbs translated "biting" and "devouring" are usually used to describe fierce wild animals (see TEV). In some languages, the force of Paul's warning may be best expressed with a direct command, for example:

> "Stop biting and devouring one another, or you will be destroyed by one another!"

Or:

> "Stop attacking each other like wild animals! Otherwise/If not, you will completely destroy one another."

Galatians 5:18

> **[εἰ δὲ πνεύματι ἄγεσθε,]*p* [οὐκ ἐστὲ ὑπὸ νόμον.]*q***
>
> **[But if you are led by the Spirit,]*p* [you are not under the law.]*q***

Arichea and Nida (1976) note: "This verse is almost universally regarded as a summary of Paul's argument in the whole chapter." In v.16, Paul had exhorted his readers ("you" here is plural) to "walk by the Spirit"—in other words to "let the Spirit direct your lives" (TEV, NLT). Now in v.18 he states one consequence of this: that those who are led by the Spirit are not required to follow the Jewish

law. Although v.18 is a first class conditional in Greek, the fact that Paul has just exhorted the Galatians to "walk by the Spirit" indicates that possibly this is something that is not always happening, and so "if you are led by the Spirit" describes a situation that is very likely but not a known fact. It may be possible to translate this as "when you are led by the Spirit" (see NLT and Groff 2016); some languages have a construction that can be translated as either "if" or "when" depending on the context, and this could also be used.

Galatians 5:25

[εἰ ζῶμεν πνεύματι,]*p* [πνεύματι καὶ στοιχῶμεν.]*q*

[If we live by the Spirit,]*p* [let us also keep in step with the Spirit.]*q*

This verse is similar to v.18, but where v.18 stated a fact, v.25 is used to exhort. There are two ways in which ζῶμεν 'we live' can be interpreted, and these determine whether the conditional is understood as very likely or factual.

One interpretation is that living by the Spirit is something that the believer chooses to do, just like "walk by the Spirit" in v.16. If this interpretation is chosen, the situation described in the protasis in v.25 is very likely, rather than a known fact.[25] If the target translation follows this interpretation, the same construction used in v.18 may be possible here as well.

Alternatively, some commentators argue that, as Fung (1988) puts it, "living" by the Spirit is different from "walking" by the Spirit. According to this interpretation, ζῶμεν 'we live' should be understood as describing how the Spirit is the source of life for a believer, and so the conditional is factual. This view is reflected in the use of "since" in the NIV, NLT, Groff (2016), and the statement "The Spirit has given us life" in the TEV.[26] In our view, this second interpretation is to be preferred.

This conditional sentence has a chiastic (A-B-B-A) structure:

εἰ	ζῶμεν πνεύματι,	πνεύματι	καὶ	στοιχῶμεν.
if	we live by/with [the] Spirit	by/with [the] Spirit	also	let us keep in step

This structure makes the sentence especially forceful in Greek. In particular, the chiastic structure results in a marked constituent order in the apodosis which,

[25] In support of this view, Schreiner (2010) writes: "The word 'if' (εἰ) should not be translated 'since.' The condition is intentional, for Paul wants the Galatians to ask themselves if they do indeed live by the Spirit. He expects, of course, that they will answer affirmatively, but as interpreters we should pay heed to the grammar of the text instead of leaping ahead to the expected affirmation." See also deSilva (2018).

[26] See also Arichea and Nida (1976), Bruce (1982), Fung (1988), Longenecker (1990).

together with the adverbial καὶ ‘also’, indicates that the verb στοιχῶμεν ‘let us keep in step’ is being emphasized (Stephen Levinsohn, personal communication 10 August 2022). Translators should try to express a similar emphasis using the resources of the target language.

Galatians 6

Galatians 6:1

Levinsohn (2020a; 2020b:324) argues that the conditional clause in 6:1, together with the vocative, the lack of a connective, and the change from first to second person, all constitute evidence of the start of a new section. Following the Greek text, two versions (ESV and NLT) of this verse are given below, representing two ways in which the protasis can be interpreted.

> Ἀδελφοί, **[ἐὰν καὶ προλημφθῇ ἄνθρωπος ἔν τινι παραπτώματι,]***p* **[ὑμεῖς οἱ πνευματικοὶ καταρτίζετε τὸν τοιοῦτον ἐν πνεύματι πραΰτητος]***q* σκοπῶν σεαυτὸν μὴ καὶ σὺ πειρασθῇς.
>
> Brothers, **[if anyone is caught in any transgression,]***p* **[you who are spiritual should restore**[27] **him in a spirit of gentleness.]***q* Keep watch on yourself lest you too be tempted. (ESV)
>
> Dear brothers and sisters, **[if another believer is overcome by some sin,]***p* **[you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path.]***q* And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself. (NLT)

The ESV and most English translations (including NASB, NET, NIV, NRSV, and TEV) describe a person who is discovered (by other people) committing a sin. On the other hand, Groff (2016) (in line with Fung 1988, Longenecker 1990, and Schreiner 2010) suggests that this is better translated “overcome by sin” (as in the NLT). Both interpretations are possible (see Arichea and Nida 1976, deSilva 2018). The Greek here is a third class conditional which is purely hypothetical (although likely, as sin is part of the universal human condition); whichever interpretation is chosen, Paul is not referring to a specific person.

The conditional marker ἐὰν ‘if’ is followed by the connective καὶ, which most English translations do not attempt to translate. The string ἐὰν καὶ occurs only here in the New Testament. However, it resembles concessive conditional constructions that are usually translated “even if” (see the discussion of 1:8

[27] For a discussion of how “restore” in the apodosis is understood in different cultures, see Matthews, Rountree, and Nicolle (2011:41).

above). A few English translations (including the American Standard Version, NASB, English Revised Version, and the Lexham English Bible) translate ἐὰν καὶ as "even if", and deSilva (2018) argues that a concessive interpretation is possible in this context. Concessive conditionals have an exceptional and/or unexpected protasis that would normally make the apodosis less likely. However, the apodosis is nonetheless asserted. The protasis "even if a person is caught in/overcome by a sin" is unexpected given that in 5:24 Paul wrote that "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." Also, in 5:21, after giving a long list of sins, Paul stated, "those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."

One way to interpret 6:1, then, is that Paul is saying that a Christian is unlikely to sin, and those who habitually sin will not inherit the kingdom of God, but even so, anyone who is caught in/overcome by sin "through error, neglect, lack of vigilance, or sheer weakness rather than willful transgression" (deSilva 2018) should be restored to fellowship. An alternative interpretation is that this is a case of adverbial καὶ functioning as a marker of confirmation (Levinsohn 2000 §6.2) referring to "the works of the flesh" listed in 5:19–21 (Bruce 1982). In this case, it could be translated using "indeed" (as in the Analytical Greek New Testament Plus interlinear English translation) or a similar expression.

This is a lot to try to express in a translation, and it may be best to translate this verse in the target language with a regular hypothetical conditional construction, particularly if a) a concessive construction does not sound natural (which may be the case when the apodosis is an exhortation), or b) no national or regional language translations use a concessive conditional.

Galatians 6:3

> **[εἰ γὰρ δοκεῖ τις εἶναί τι μηδὲν ὤν,]*p* [φρεναπατᾷ ἑαυτόν.]*q***
>
> **[For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing,]*p* [he deceives himself.]*q***

The main question about how to interpret this verse concerns whether Paul is repeating a well-known saying or proverb, or whether he has specific people in mind. If this is a saying or proverb, then Paul is warning everyone not to be proud; if Paul has specific people in mind, then he is rebuking those people.

Longenecker (1990) presents various reasons why this verse should be treated as "a traditional maxim of the Greco-Roman world", that is, as a saying or proverb that may have been familiar to Paul's audience. One reason is that the Greek word translated as "deceive" (φρεναπατάω) does not occur anywhere else in the New Testament, or in the Greek translation of the Old Testament

(Septuagint). If this interpretation is followed, the conditional is hypothetical (with a neutral probability) rather than factual. Some languages use a special style for proverbs and sayings, and it may be appropriate to translate this verse in such a way.

It is also possible to interpret this verse as referring (indirectly) to specific people. Although there is nothing in the immediate context to indicate that Paul has specific people or a specific situation in mind, the Greek expression δοκεῖ τις εἶναί τι 'thinks anyone to be something' strongly resembles the words that Paul used in 2:6 τῶν δοκούντων εἶναί τι 'those seeming (lit., thinking) to be something'. This expression was used to describe influential leaders of the church in Jerusalem, and Paul probably specifically had James in mind (see 2:12), and so this may be a subtle reference to James and those who were claiming to act with his authority. These people were teaching that it was necessary to follow the Jewish law (and specifically to be circumcised), and an additional reason to think that Paul may have had these people in mind is his use of the expression "the law of Christ" at the end of v.2. In addition, this conditional is similar to 1 Corinthians 8:2 "if anyone imagines (lit., thinks) that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know." This verse is clearly addressing a specific situation relating to food offered to idols.

Probably the best way to interpret this conditional sentence is to say that it has two functions: one direct and the other indirect. The more direct and obvious meaning is that Paul is warning all the Galatian Christians not to be proud. At the same time, he is using a familiar saying (or something that is in the style of a traditional proverb) to indirectly rebuke the people sent by James.

Galatians 6:9

The final example is an implied conditional; the Greek has a participle verb μὴ ἐκλυόμενοι 'not giving up' rather than a conditional particle. However, all English translations consulted use an "if" conditional here.

> τὸ δὲ καλὸν ποιοῦντες μὴ ἐγκακῶμεν, **[καιρῷ γὰρ ἰδίῳ θερίσομεν]**q **[μὴ ἐκλυόμενοι.]***p*
>
> And let us not grow weary of doing good, **[for in due season we will reap,]**q **[if we do not give up.]***p*

According to Arichea and Nida (1976), "become tired" [ESV "grow weary"] and "give up" are similar in meaning, both containing the elements of fatigue and exhaustion. The first verb puts emphasis on losing interest (for example, "spiritless") and the second on becoming discouraged or relaxing one's efforts." Groff (2016) suggests that this similar expression "is repeated for emphasis."

Some languages have a strong preference, or even a requirement, for the protasis to come before the apodosis. In this case, the order of the apodosis and protasis may need to be changed, as in the TEV:

> So let us not become tired of doing good; for **[if we do not give up,]***p* **[the time will come when we will reap the harvest.]***q*

Conclusion

Paul's letter to the church in Galatia is a tightly argued, passionate appeal in which he urges new Gentile believers to put their faith in Christ rather than in the requirements of the Jewish law. He also uses the letter to indirectly rebuke those who are teaching that it is necessary to follow the Jewish law. Paul uses conditional sentences throughout his letter and, as we have seen, many of these occur at crucial points in the argument. These conditional sentences play various roles, and the differences between them may not always be obvious to a modern reader. It is my hope that these notes will help translators to understand how Paul uses conditional sentences, and how best to translate them so as to achieve similar effects.

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