

# ‘All Greek To Me’ : Children

Παῖς	<i>pais</i>	a child or servant – under discipline	24
Παιδίον	<i>paidion</i>	a little child (diminutive of <i>pais</i> )	49
Νήπιος	<i>nēpios</i>	an infant – unable to talk	10
Τέκνον	<i>teknon</i>	a ‘born one’	91
Τεκνίον	<i>teknion</i>	a little ‘born one’ (diminutive of <i>teknon</i> )	8

(Number of N.T. verses)

Even though the English language is rich, we can so easily miss out on distinct meanings which would have been **immediately obvious** to everyone who read or heard the original Greek words of the New Testament (N.T.). By looking into the Greek, we are not engaging in some high intellectual exercise, but are rather putting ourselves back into the simple understanding of everyday speech, familiar to those who heard the Lord Jesus and the apostles, or who read what was written by them.

*Pais* and *paidion* are the root from which we get our word ‘paediatric’ – to do with children, especially in medicine. But their own origin is less pleasant, linked with the word meaning to hit or beat and reflecting the fact that children and servants were under discipline – which was often physical.

The 12-year-old Jesus is referred to as *pais* in **Luke 2:43**, which fits neatly with the comment in **v.51**, that he was obedient to Joseph and Mary, putting himself under their authority, even though he was already aware that he was the Son of God. There are several other passages where *pais* is used for boys or children, but it is more often used to mean a servant, such as in **Acts 3:13, 3:26, 4:27 & 4:30**, all of which refer to Jesus as God’s ‘servant’.

A more commonly-used word for ‘child’ or ‘children’ in the N.T. is *paidion*, used for Jesus himself several times in **Matthew 2**, and for children playing in the marketplace in **Luke 7:32**. But Jesus also uses it as a term of endearment for his disciples in **John 21:5**, when he meets them after his resurrection as they are returning from a very unsuccessful fishing trip. John also uses it in his first letter, describing Christian believers who are very young in their faith (**1 John 2:13, 18**).

We find ourselves all included as ‘little children’ in **Hebrews 2:13 & 14**, where believers are referred to as children of the Messiah, quoting **Isaiah 8:18** and emphasising how the Lord Jesus identified himself with humanity by sharing our flesh and blood.

But even less developed than a *pais* or a *paidion* is a *nepios* – an infant. The word means simply ‘not having the power of speech’. We all know that very small children can express themselves quite well even before they master any speech but, as soon as they begin to get even a few words, the situation is dramatically changed. *Nepios* describes the stage before that happens!

*Nepios* is used in just 10 verses in the New Testament, plus one verse where *nepiazo* (to be and behave as an infant) is used. Not surprisingly, perhaps, it is used to great metaphorical effect when older children and especially adults are referred to as *nepios*! Here are some examples:–

**Matthew 11:25 & Luke 10:21**. Jesus thanks his Father for revealing things to the disciples – whom he describes as infants (*nepios*) – and not to ‘the wise and intelligent’. He emphasises how real knowledge of God comes by revelation, not by human ability: “no one knows who the

*Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal him.*” How good to be an ‘infant’ if it means that we receive revelation from our Lord and Father !

**Matthew 21:16.** The chief priests and scribes saw Jesus throwing out the dealers from the temple and healing people and didn’t like it, but what they really detested was that the children (*pais*) were running round the temple and calling out ‘Hosanna to the Son of David’ (a Messianic title) and Jesus wasn’t stopping them. He replied by quoting **Psalm 8**, which refers to praise coming from the mouths of nursing babies and non-speaking infants (*nepios*)!! Very similar to what he had said in **Luke 19:37-40**, just a few minutes earlier.

Paul repeatedly uses *nepios* as a word to mean an immature person, and the imagery is graphic: A small child, very definitely an individual but incapable of full expression or interaction with the rest of the family, the rest of the village or the rest of the world. All is well with such a child if they develop and grow to maturity, and Paul draws the same conclusion: Don’t remain as an infant, full of potential (and probably charm!) but stunted in development.

In **1 Corinthians 3:1-4**, as he grieves with the church in Corinth about their blatant disunity, he cites it as demonstration that they are immature and so cannot receive what he would have liked to pass on to them if they had been ‘spiritual’ instead of ‘fleshly’. Of course, he says, when they were new in their faith, he needed to ‘feed them milk’, as you would to an infant (*nepios*), but now as they are older he would have expected to feed them ‘solid food’. Their factionalism has consigned them to prolonged infancy, standing in the way of their spiritual growth.

The writer of **Hebrews** makes a similar comment in **5:13** : *“though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant (nepios). But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.”* They had not just failed to grow up, they had regressed to infancy! How about ourselves?

In **1 Corinthians 13:11-12**, Paul contrasts the speech, thinking and reasoning of an infant (*nepios*) with the maturity of a grown man. He looks forward to the time when spiritual gifts, however great they may be, will give way to full revelation; when he will no longer know in part, but will really know as fully as he is already known by his Lord. By comparison with that revelation, his current revelation and prophecy will seem like the burlblings of a child who is just learning to speak – Wow!

As he continues writing about spiritual gifts in **1 Corinthians 14:20**, he urges them not to think like children, and actually uses both *pais* and *nepiazō*, a word that means to be and behave as an infant. ‘Don’t think like kids (*pais*)! As far as evil is concerned, be infants (*nepiazō*) – unable to express yourselves. But in your thinking, be mature!’

And as Paul writes to the believers in the churches in Galatia, trying to help them see that they have been set free from living under laws and expectations, he illustrates his point with the picture of an infant (*nepios*) who is the son and heir of a wealthy man. While the child is small, he is just like a slave, with no say in the running of the household. In fact, when he is a little older, he is even placed under the direction of a slave, whose responsibility is to make sure that the boy attends school, does his lessons properly and generally grows up to be a worthy son of his father. These trusted slaves apparently even used to sit at the back of the class to make sure that their masters’ sons behaved themselves! Understandably, they were often unpopular with their young masters!

The word for this slave is *paidagogos*, which has been wrongly translated as ‘tutor’, ‘schoolmaster’ and ‘instructor’ in **Galatians 3:24**. ‘Guardian’, ‘chaperone’ and ‘custodian’ are better, but it is

difficult to find a single word to translate this slave's role! Literally, 'child (*pais*) -leader'. In this verse, Paul says that the Old Testament Law was like a *paidagogos*, keeping us in line with the Father's wishes (perhaps even under duress?) "*But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.*" (v.25)

He goes on to complete the picture in **Galatians 4:1-7**. We were like a young heir who, as an infant (*nepios*) is little different from a slave, even though he is the owner (literally, 'lord!') of everything, and is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. What date is that? The day when he comes of age, when he steps into his adult role in the family and in local society. The Greek word is *huiothesia*, 'placing as a son', which has been repeatedly mis-translated as 'adoption'. Again, it's difficult to find a single English word to translate *huiothesia*, but it is light years away from our present-day understanding of adoption! The word *huios*, 'son', speaks of an heir who has been recognised as his father's junior partner in the family and in society in general. In the N.T., this word is applied to believers of either gender.

This isn't something **future** for us, says Paul. This has already happened! We are no longer '*held in bondage under the elemental things of the world*', as we were as infants, when we were subject to the Law, slaves to it. No, Paul says, "*when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'* Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God."

The Galatians were still thinking of themselves as being under the Law but they had **already** been released from it. No wonder Paul used such a graphic illustration, something that they would have seen around them all the time, to help them to see what was already theirs in Christ!

And he goes on! The drive towards spiritual maturity for every believer runs through all his letters. We sometimes think that the church in Ephesus was pretty well advanced, but Paul does not hesitate to encourage them to move forwards, no longer to be infants (*nepios*) "*tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming*" (**Ephesians 4:14**).

In fact, this passage (**Ephesians 4:11-16**) is all about the church fellowship maturing together, **all** becoming mature, **all** contributing to corporate growth, "*according to the proper working of each individual part*" (v.16).

So, we have looked at all the New Testament verses with *nepios*, except one. Perhaps a timely warning to any of us who might think that we have got it all worked out with our routines and religious observance, that perhaps we are "*a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature (nepios), having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth.*" Read the whole passage in **Romans 2:17-29**.

As *nepios* is often used to illustrate immaturity and encourage us towards spiritual growth, so *teknon* and *teknion* speak to us about **belonging and parentage**.

*Teknon* means 'a born one' and *teknion* is the diminutive of that, so a 'little born one'. Bound up in the word is the sense of parentage, the parents **to whom** the child is born, and that is how these words are used throughout the New Testament, the commonest words used for 'child'. One exception is where Jesus calls a paralysed man 'child' (*teknon*) when he sees his faith and the faith of those who have brought him to be healed. (**Matthew 9:2, Mark 2:5**)

But there are some very special parent-child relationships! The most important one is described in **John 1:12**, a verse that we probably know well: "*As many as received him, to them he gave the authority to become **children (teknon) of God**, to those who believe in his name.*" One who

is born – with God as their parent!

Sometimes people say something like “Well, we are all God’s children, aren’t we?”, and there is a sense in which that is true for every person in the world. Paul tapped into that understanding when he spoke on the Areopagus (‘Mars Hill’) in Athens: “. . . *that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children.’ Being then the children of God . . .*” (**Acts 17:27-29**)

But the word he uses here is not *pais*, *paidion*, *nepios*, *teknon* or *teknion*, but *genos*, which is much more detached – ‘race’, ‘offspring’. Very much that all of us have been created by God and so we are all his ‘children’ in that sense. This is the only passage where this word is translated ‘children’. In other passages, it is used to mean ‘type’, ‘kind’ or even ‘nation’ – e.g. ‘one of his own kind’. Paul’s use of this word here seems to link to the fact that God has created man ‘in his own image’, in other words sharing some of God’s characteristics, such as individuality and the power of choice.

The contrast with *teknon* and *teknion* could hardly be clearer! One of God’s ‘born ones’ has the right to call God ‘Father’ in a way that a ‘created one’ certainly does not.

There are too many occurrences of *teknon* and *teknion* to try to quote them all here, but there is a list <sup>1</sup> at the bottom of this page of some of the main passages where *teknon* is used to mean ‘child of God’ or ‘children of God’ – his own ‘born ones’.

Knowing that *teknon* and *teknion* mean ‘born one’ and ‘little born one’ also opens up a beautiful understanding of the relationships that existed between the apostles and those whom they led to the Lord. Calling someone ‘my child’ or ‘my little child’ here means more than just an affectionate term for them. It speaks clearly of parentage.

Jesus calls his disciples ‘little children’ (*teknion*) in **John 13:33**, and John continues that affectionate use himself when he is writing his letters, specifically referring to his readers as ‘my children’ (*teknon*) (**3 John 1:4**) and ‘my little children’ (*teknion*) (**1 John 2:1**). There is another list <sup>2</sup> at the bottom of this page of the verses where John calls his readers ‘little children’ (*teknion*), which seem to show that he was probably the one that led them to the Lord and so was like a spiritual parent to them.

Paul is also very clear about his relationship towards those whom he brought to the Lord. In **1 Corinthians 4:15** he writes: “*For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet not many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father (literally, ‘fathered you’) through the gospel.*” He continues to refer to the believers in Corinth, Galatia and Thessalonica as his children (*teknon*), again making it clear that he was responsible for their spiritual birth. The list of Paul’s use of ‘my children’ (*teknon*) verses is also at the bottom of the page <sup>3</sup> and includes Timothy, Titus and Onesimus, all of whom he evidently personally ‘fathered’ in Christ; Timothy and Titus as fellow-workers and Onesimus as Philemon’s escaped slave whom Paul led to Christ while he was in prison.

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<sup>1</sup> God’s ‘born ones’: **John 1:12, John 11:52, John 13:33, Romans 8:16, 17, 21, Romans 9:8, Galatians 4:28, 31, Ephesians 5:1, 8, Philippians 2:15, 1 Peter 1:14, 1 John 3:1, 2, 10, 1 John 5:2**

<sup>2</sup> John’s ‘little born ones’: **1 John 2:1, 12, 28, 3:7, 18, 4:4, 5:21**

<sup>3</sup> Paul’s ‘born ones’: **1 Corinthians 4:14, 17\*, 2 Corinthians 6:13, 12:14, Galatians 4:19, Philippians 2:22\*, 1 Thessalonians 2:7, 11, 1 Timothy 1:2\*, 18\*, 2 Timothy 1:2\*, 2:1\*, Titus 1:4\*, Philemon 1:10\*** \* refers to individuals whom Paul regarded as his ‘children’.