

2 Corinthians 5:3 in the Navajo Bible

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[Á]ko éí biih dahisiikaigo doo ats'íís t'áágééd danihidi'dooltséel da. (2 Corinthians 5:3) ¹

[B]ecause when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. (2 Corinthians 5:3) ²

Introduction

In a number of papers we have discussed the metaphor of death as sleep. Here we have a different metaphor. Here Paul speaks of death as nakedness. Like the first metaphor (death = sleep), this one contains a beautiful thought – and also has the potential for being truly and fairly misunderstood.

The Problem

The problem with the metaphor we're dealing with here (death = nakedness) is that people will think one of two things: either (1) that we don't have bodies at all in heaven, whereas Paul clearly says that we do, or (2) that we do have bodies there – bodies much better than what we have now – but receive them immediately at death.

The Navajo translators do a good job of protecting against the first misconception by adding the word *ats'íís* ("flesh"). Thus, *doo ats'íís t'áágééd danihidi'dooltséel da* ("we will not be seen without flesh"). This understanding of the text makes clear that we will definitely have bodies in heaven – made of flesh.

But this leaves open the question of how to account for the timing of the events we know will occur from other passages in the New Testament, still working within the context of the metaphor Paul uses here. We wear one body here. We wear another better body there. But what about the period of time during which we wait in the grave for Jesus to come? The teaching about the second coming won't just go away while we study this other teaching about being clothed with glorified bodies in heaven. So how can we bring all the pieces together into one unified system of belief?

The Metaphor

First, please notice a number of passages with me. The one we're considering (2 Corinthians 5:3) is not the only place where Paul compares death with nakedness. Here are four other passages that do so.

¹ Navajo Bible quotations are from *Diyin God Bizaad. The Holy Bible in Navajo*. Revised edition. New York: American Bible Society, 2000.

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For the perishable **must clothe itself** with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. (1 Corinthians 15:53)

When the perishable **has been clothed with** the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." (1 Corinthians 15:54)

Meanwhile we groan, longing **to be clothed with** our heavenly dwelling, (2 Corinthians 5:2)

For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but **to be clothed with** our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. (2 Corinthians 5:4)

The metaphor of clothing oneself or being clothed is used more than one way. We have the passages quoted above, but there are others which use the same metaphor, but not in the same way, i.e., not in reference to death.

Rather, **clothe yourselves** with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature. (Romans 13:14)

for all of you who were baptized into Christ **have clothed yourselves** with Christ. (Galatians 3:27)

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, **clothe yourselves** with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. (Colossians 3:12)

Here Paul speaks of being clothed with Christ (Romans 13:14; Galatians 3:27), or of being clothed with Christian virtues such as "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (Colossians 3:12).

The Solution

First, it's important to remember that we're dealing with a metaphor here. Paul is not speaking literally when he says we are "clothed" with flesh. So that's one thing. The second point is that the metaphor Paul uses is not the problem. It's actually the solution, as I hope to show below. The problem is that people misunderstand him and come to wrong conclusions, but that's not his fault.

I said the metaphor Paul uses is not the problem but the solution. How? Well, think for a moment about what's involved in changing clothes. (In Paul's metaphor he talks about exchanging a perishable body for an imperishable one, a mortal body for one that's immortal.) Whenever you change clothes there's a time when you're no longer wearing the clothes you take off and you're not yet wearing the clothes you put on. During this transitional period you are unclothed, in whatever degree. How could you possibly change clothes without experiencing such a transition?

In the same way, exchanging our mortal bodies for ones that are imperishable and immortal must involve some in between time. Returning to Paul's metaphor, no one can change clothes instantaneously. It takes time – sometimes more time, sometimes less. This transition is exactly what both Jesus and Paul have in mind when they use the different metaphor of comparing death with sleep. The whole point of that comparison is that we should think of death as something temporary. It's just in between time.

For those who have died and are sleeping in Jesus the way they experience this time is like a person who falls asleep at night and the next thing they know it's morning. They might have spent hundreds of years in the grave, but if they're asleep the next thing they know Jesus is calling them and His face is the next thing they see. So even if a lot of passes, they don't know it. They just go to sleep, and then wake up.

Conclusion

What Paul says about death as nakedness is fully consistent with what he says about death as sleep. In both cases death is real, but temporary. In both cases there's something better to look forward to, and yet there's a transition period during which the good things promised have not yet been received. I submit that this model is biblical and that it's reasonable. Our God is a good God and a merciful God. The way He does things is always the right way to do them.