

## 2 Peter 2:20-21 in the Navajo Bible

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Háálá nihiBóhólníhii Jesus Christ Yisdánihiinííhii t'áá aaníi yéedahoosíidgo, nahasdzáán bikáá' baahági át'éii yits'ádahaazhjee'dóó bik'iji' baahági át'éii bik'eh náádadeesdlíí'go, átséédáá' ádaat'éé nít'éé'ii yiláahdi t'óó yówehda ádaat'é daaleeh. <sup>20</sup> Háálá bił béédahoozindóó bik'iji' diyingo bee haz'áanii baa dadeest'ánéé yits'áaji' nídaazyizjí éi t'áá ákogi át'éego honít'i'ii ts'ídá t'áadoo bił béédahoozíidjí agháago bá yá'át'éeh doo nít'éé'. (2 Peter 2:20-21)<sup>1</sup>

If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. <sup>21</sup> It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. (2 Peter 2:20-21)<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

There are two ways to approach this passage in a model where people can choose to come to God but cannot choose to leave Him, or have no choice in doing either. On the one hand, one could say that because the false teachers Peter mentions were once saved, as vs. 20 suggests, they receive a reduced reward. Because they fell back into a bad relationship with God, they will do less well when they get to heaven. On the other hand, one could say that, even though these men were teachers, because they were false teachers they will not be in heaven and were never saved in the first place. The passage does not say they are worse off at the end than they were after first believing. It says they are worse off at the end than if they had never known the way of righteousness.

What was the situation of these teachers before knowing the way of righteousness? What was their starting point? They started where everyone else starts. They were born lost. Even those God calls to be saved are born His enemies. No one is born saved. That's why Jesus came and died for all mankind on the cross – because all mankind was lost and would remain lost without Him. What was the condition of the false teachers, then, before they ever knew the gospel? Their condition in the end will be worse than that. Not equally bad. Worse.

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

<sup>2</sup> English Bible quotations not otherwise marked are from *The Holy Bible: New International Version®*. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.

## Problems

The above statement might seem reasonable enough, but what does it imply? It implies two things. First, not every punishment is the same. If these people are lost and their situation is worse than if would have been under other circumstances, it follows that there are different degrees of punishment. One punishment does not fit all crimes. We can be glad for this, because not all crimes are equally bad. And second, it implies that the relationship one has with God can change over time. We talk about being saved. That's a change. We can be saved, but not lost? Change can occur in this way but not that way? At one time the false teachers had truly known the Lord. Now, however, their situation changed and they were lost. Both of the above points run counter to popular teaching.

### First problem

If the false teachers were lost when they were born and lost when they became teachers, telling people (falsely) about Jesus, and at death they went to hell where they will burn forever, how is that any different from never knowing the way of righteousness, going to hell, and burning forever? In either case you burn. In either case forever is forever. So what difference does it make whether you knew the gospel or not? The result is the same. And yet Peter says the result is not the same. He makes a distinction. If the popular model doesn't allow a distinction, but Peter insists that there be one, something's wrong with the popular model.

There are many references in the Bible to the destruction of those who reject God and are lost. Some of these references leave the impression that the fire never stops burning – that the result is permanent because the fire never goes out.<sup>3</sup> Other references state that the wicked are totally consumed and become like ashes under our feet. The result is permanent because the fire does its work completely and is no longer needed. Let us look at some of them.

For evil men **will be cut off**, but those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land. (Psalm 37:9)

A little while, and the wicked **will be no more**; though you look for them, **they will not be found**. (Psalm 37:10)

But all sinners **will be destroyed**; the future of the wicked **will be cut off**. (Psalm 37:38)

The Light of Israel will become a fire, their Holy One a flame; in a single day **it will burn and consume his thorns and his briers**. (Isaiah 10:17)

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<sup>3</sup> "And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind" (Isaiah 66:24; see also Mark 9:48). "They will be punished with everlasting destruction [*olethron aiōnion*] and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power" (2 Thessalonians 1:9). "He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. <sup>11</sup> And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name" (Revelation 14:10-11).

For lo! That day is at hand, burning like an oven. All the arrogant and all the doers of evil shall be straw, and the day that is coming – said the LORD of Hosts – **shall burn them to ashes** and leave of them neither stock nor boughs. (Malachi 3:19, TNK)

"Then you will trample down the wicked; **they will be ashes under the soles of your feet** on the day when I do these things," says the LORD Almighty. (Malachi 4:3)

What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? **Those things result in death!** (Romans 6:21)

Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; **and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.** (James 1:15)

if he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by **burning them to ashes**, and made them **an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly;** . . . (2 Peter 2:6)

In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as **an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.** (Jude 1:7)

When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison <sup>8</sup> and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth– Gog and Magog– to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. <sup>9</sup> They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven **and devoured them.** (Revelation 20:7-9)

Is there a difference between the popular interpretation and the one represented in the passages quoted here? If you've ever had a house burn down, you'll know what the difference is. When I was young our family lost a shed where a lot of our belongings were stored because of a fire. No one could put the fire out. That's why we lost the shed and everything in it. The loss was permanent, and yet the fire is not still burning. There were pictures in that shed, for example, that could never be replaced. We will never get those pictures back. They're gone forever. The fire produced a lasting result, but to do this it was not necessary for the fire to burn forever. A brief fire can do lasting damage.

In the case of the fire that destroys the wicked, if the fire burns forever, how can one person's punishment be worse than another's? On the other hand, if the fire consumes people and they become ashes under our feet, one person could last longer than another before dying in the flames and so one person's situation could indeed be worse than another's. But the end result lasts forever. When the wicked are consumed in the fires of hell, no one will be able to put out the fire and rescue them, nor will they ever be resurrected. The second death is the end. So the punishment does truly last forever, but we need to be clear what the punishment is and is not. It is not the pain brought about by fire. It's not the process. It's the result. The punishment for sin is death, i.e., eternal separation from God.

Is this position biblical? Consider Jesus. Did He endure the penalty for human sin – the penalty we would be doomed to suffer if we did not have Him? Yes! Otherwise, His death would not have saving value. He endured the penalty for human sin. Next question. Did He burn on

the cross? No. And yet we just said that He endured the penalty for our sins. If He endured the penalty for sin, but did not burn, then burning is not the penalty for sin. So what is? Death. Full and final separation from God that results from rejecting God and ultimately being rejected by Him. The wicked will be aware of this as they die, and they will feel physical pain – some more than others. All of this is included, but ultimately this is not the penalty for sin. At least Paul does not say it is. The penalty is not a particular manner of dying, but death itself.

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

Here the contrast is between death and life. It is not between death and dying. Eternal dying would mean eternal living. This is not how God punishes sinners. Paul says, "the wages of sin is death." In regard to the manner of death, notice that sinners are not crucified in hell just as Christ did not burn on the cross. He did not need to, because burning is not the punishment for sin. The punishment for sin – the wages of sin – is death. Christ endured this punishment, not by burning or by feeling the pain of the nails being driven through his hands and feet, although it is true that He felt such pain. What made this pain especially hard was feeling His Father's rejection and wrath. Here is the meaning of the words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46; see also Mark 15:34). Having felt this rejection, Jesus tasted death for all mankind.

But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. (Hebrews 2:9)

The death Jesus died was not the same as what we experience when we grow old or have some fatal accident. It was not merely the cessation of life. It was what the Bible calls the second death. Christ died completely rejected and forsaken by His Father. *That* is the penalty for sin. The position set forth here is entirely biblical and is the consistent teaching of both the Old and New Testaments.

## Second problem

If the false teachers could have one relationship with God at one time, and another relationship with God at another time, this shows that is possible for our relationship with God to change. When Peter says the false teachers "are again entangled in [the corruption of the world] and overcome" (vs. 20), he doesn't mean they slipped up or made some unfortunate mistake. That's not what "overcome" means in this context. He means they lost what they once had with Christ. If they ever truly knew the Lord – and he says they did – this is a change.

Thus, it is not the case that people can't change. It is not the case that our relationship with God can't change. It is not the case that we can neither gain nor lose salvation (or that we can gain it but not lose it). It is not the case that men and women who at one time "have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 2:20) can't lose their way and in the fullest sense become lost again – worse off than before. When Peter says "knowing," this is not the same as knowing about. These people did not merely know about the Lord. They truly knew Him. That's what *t'áá aaníí* means in the clause that says, *nihíBóhólníihii Jesus Christ Yisdánihiinúitii t'áá aaníí yéédahoosíjđgo* ("having truly known our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ"). *T'áá aaníí* means "truly." Their knowledge was not an imitation of faith. It was faith.

Is it possible to lose what we once had? How would it be possible to lose what we did not once have? There is a theology which teaches that once you have right standing with God, it can never be lost. Peter says it can be. And the position he takes is both reasonable and biblical. Consider Adam. Did he at one time have right standing with God? Certainly. He started out in life perfect and sinless and holy. He and his wife, Eve, were the only human beings, apart from Jesus, who have ever been sinless at any time. And yet they were the first to fall. We do agree, I hope, that Adam and Eve fell. That was a change. Our first parents lost their right standing with God. And we can't? They could fall, but (once saved) we can't fall – losing what we once had? If you believe you're saved and can't fall, that's just what Satan would want you to believe, because believing this makes you especially vulnerable to falling – just like the false teachers Peter talks about, just like Adam and Eve in paradise. Just like Lucifer in heaven. Trust me. *It is possible to fall. We have too many examples to deny this.*

So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! (1 Corinthians 10:12)

This warning would make no sense if falling were impossible. Eve might have thought that falling was something which could never happen to her, but she was wrong. If anyone has ever been wrong, she was wrong.

## Discussion

The two problems mentioned above are not problematic because Peter says what he says. They are problematic because later writers contradict him. Over time we have developed theological systems in which it is impossible to account for the natural sense of what he says. Fortunately, there is a solution to all of this. The solution is to accept at face value the very words Peter wrote down, with all their implications. What he wrote is Scripture. The writings of the theologians who contradict him are not.

## Some Terms

### The way of righteousness

What is the way of righteousness? There are two parallel passages in Proverbs and one in Matthew that can give us insight into this. In the one passage from Proverbs "the way of righteousness" is equivalent to "the paths of justice," i.e., righteousness is the same as justice. In the other passage, "the way of righteousness" is associated with both "life" and "immortality." Does this sound like the false teachers only had a surface knowledge of Christ?

I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice, (Proverbs 8:20)

In the way of righteousness there is **life**; along that path is **immortality**. (Proverbs 12:28)

"Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered. Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are **entering the kingdom of God** ahead of you. <sup>32</sup> For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not **believe** him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not **repent and believe** him." (Matthew 21:31-32)

Does a person who is unregenerate and unsaved walk "along the paths of justice" (Proverbs 8:20)? Does a lost man have "life" and "immortality" (Proverbs 12:28)? Does a lost man "believe" (Matthew 21:32) and enter "the kingdom of God" (Matthew 21:31)? All of these things are associated with walking in the way of righteousness.

## Knowing

What does it mean to "know" the way of righteousness, or to "know" the Lord? It means to experience these things. Knowing means more in the Bible than it does today. When Adam "knew" Eve (Genesis 4:1, KJV), she became pregnant. Adam experienced Eve by having sexual relations with her. But the word used to describe this is "know" in the Hebrew (*yāda*<sup>4</sup>). In the same way, people can only "know" the Lord by taking Him into every aspect of their lives and experiencing His love and power in a spiritual way.

This is widely different from knowing about the Lord. Demons know *about* God far more accurately than we do, but do not "know" Him in any saving way.

You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that- and shudder. (James 2:19)

Even if we say the expression *t'áá aaníí* is added to the text in the Navajo translation, it does no violence to the sense. Our first assumption, in the New Testament, should be that "knowing" means truly knowing – with or without added words.

## Discussion

The way of righteousness is not worn down like a path because we have walked it so many times before, doing right things. Without Christ no one does right things, or if they appear to, it's for the wrong reasons. Our situation before (or "at the beginning" as the text says) was that we were lost. Instead this way is worn down like a path because Jesus walked it before, doing right things – including what He did for us on the cross. Anyone who is capable of thinking that righteousness is what we ourselves do does not know the Lord and is himself a false teacher. Walking in the way of righteousness means following Jesus. These teachers did at one time follow Him. The passage says they did. But now they don't. Things changed.

Some commentators point out that the clause, "It would be better for them not to have known . . ." is contrary to fact in the Greek. This is true. An earlier clause in vs. 20 is not. The words, "If they have escaped the corruption of the world . . ." (vs. 20), imply that someone has escaped the corruption of the world.<sup>4</sup> The words, "It would be better for them not to have known . . ." (vs. 21), are contrary to fact and imply that they *have* known the way of righteousness. This contrary to fact statement in the Greek shows that the false teachers' knowledge of the way of righteousness was genuine and real. How mysterious is this? These teachers who are false when Peter describes them, were not always so. They knew and followed the way of righteousness, but turned back. They left the way of righteousness and lost their right standing with God – their salvation.

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<sup>4</sup> The same phrase occurs in this verse: "Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires" (2 Peter 1:4).

## Conclusion

This topic might seem depressing. But stop and think. If I'm right in saying that one's salvation can indeed be lost, and we realize this and keep our guard up to protect against the enemies lies and deceptions, this is one of the surest ways to ensure that his plans for our destruction don't happen. Salvation can be lost, but if we remain in Christ, as a branch remains in the vine, we are safe and nothing can pluck us out of His hand.

I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. (John 10:28)

Notice the part about Jesus' hand. This is the hand that was nailed to the cross for us. If we decide that staying in Jesus' hand is too restrictive, we can leave, and there is no safety if we do. Eternal security is only for those who remain in Jesus' hand. If we remain in His hand, no one can snatch us away. My point is that there is safety only in Christ. I referred to a branch and its vine. Jesus uses this figure to make the same point I'm making here.

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned." (John 15:5-6)

The vine does not burn. So long as we remain in the vine, we do not burn. It is when we separate from the vine that we are in danger. Our security must be rooted and grounded in Christ – not in the knowledge that we once came to Him, but in the living reality of remaining in Him. If a person is unaware of a danger that concerns him or her, that fact does not remove the danger, nor does it make them any more secure. In the same way, being on one's guard does not make a person any less secure. The point is: Remain in Christ. You'll always be safe there.