

Ephesians 2:1-10 in the Navajo Bible

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Jó, nihokáa'gi baahági át'éii bił nidahazt'i'ii bik'ehgo dayínóhkááh nít'ée', áádóó wódahgo bídahólníihii binanit'a'í, nítch'i bida'iiníziinii binanit'a'í, éi diné doo ak'eh dahól'iinii yiyi' naalnishii bik'ehgo naaldeeh nít'ée'. . . .⁸ Háálá oodlâ bee aa hodzódli binahji' Diyin God bibee ajooba' yee yisdánihiínil, áko díi doo t'áá nihí ádaahdzaa da, nidi Diyin God einíláii át'é.⁹ Doo bik'é na'azhnishii át'ée da, áko doo bee ádaa hojó'niih át'ée da. (Ephesians 2:2, 8-9)¹

[I]n which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. . . .⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:2, 8-9)²

Introduction

In the above passage (and I didn't quote it all) there are two sets of contrasts – between life and death, activity and inactivity. The Navajo translation throughout this passage is exemplary. For this reason it will be useful to examine some of the wording for insights into what Paul is saying here.

First Impressions

On the one hand we have things like, "you followed [*dayínóhkááh*] the ways of this world" (vs. 2), and, that Satan "is now at work [*naalnishii*] in those who are disobedient" (vs. 2). In the second example it is Satan who is "at work," but presumably his activity in tempting leads those he tempts to activity in sinning. Disobedience means doing bad things (or not doing good things).

On the other hand we have Paul's statement that, "it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast" (vss. 8-9). From this it might seem that when you're lost you do things, and when you're saved you don't. This raises a question as to the role of activity in the Christian's life, where by activity I mean activity on a spiritual level. We're not just talking about getting up in the morning or going to the grocery store, but doing things for God, or for other people on behalf of God.

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

² English Bible quotations are from *The Holy Bible: New International Version*®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.

A Closer Look

Transgression can be a very active thing (the word "transgress" literally means "go across"), it is true, and yet ironically those who live in transgression and sin are actually "dead in [their] transgressions and sins" (vs. 1). Dead doesn't sound active to me. The difference is, a person who is dead to Christ is alive to sin.

In regard to holiness, what does it mean that God "made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions-- it is by grace you have been saved" (vs. 5)? When we live for Christ we will do things for Him. To live means to be active. As we read in one place, "God's word is living and active" (Hebrews 4:12). Life and activity naturally go together. When we live for Christ we are dead to sin. Being dead to sin is not the same as being dead, period. Living for Christ means being active for Christ. Let me offer a few examples. Some of these go back to Old Testament times.

Noah

When God told Noah to build an ark he obeyed and built an ark. This ark was not just some little box. It was a boat "450 feet long, 75 feet wide and 45 feet high" (Genesis 6:15). That's long enough to cover four and a half football fields end to end. The ark took Noah and his three sons 120 years to build. Doing this was a major task.

The author of Hebrews says, "By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family" (Hebrews 11:7a). What an intriguing statement! By faith Noah built an ark. By hard work Noah built an ark. you could get heavy calluses exercising faith this way. So what does the Bible have to say about all this effort on Noah's part. Was this displeasing to God? On the contrary, "By his faith [Noah] condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith" (Hebrews 11:7b).

Abraham

Next consider Abraham when he offered Isaac as a sacrifice on Mt. Moriah (where the Jewish temple was later built). Both Paul and James refer to this story, and draw opposite conclusions. We'll start with Paul.

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? ² If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about- but not before God. ³ What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." ⁴ Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. ⁵ However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. (Romans 4:1-5)

Now James.

You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? ²¹ Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. ²³ And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God,

and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. (James 2:21-24)

So was Abraham's experience of offering Isaac an example of believing something, or doing something? It was an example of both. Abraham had an active – we might say living – faith. He was commended for this, just as Noah was. Noah "became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith" (Hebrews 11:7b) and Paul says that Abraham "is the father of us all" (Romans 4:16), i.e., he is the father of all who have faith – including especially us. If Christians don't have faith, who does? If we do have faith, and if our faith is genuine, it will resemble that of Abraham.

Paul

Having talked about Noah and Abraham, what shall we say about Paul? He was beaten, shipwrecked, . . . but let's let him tell the story.

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. ²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? (2 Corinthians 11:23-29)

Obviously Paul led a very active life. Does God condemn him for this? Did Paul himself feel guilty for all the hard work he did in preaching the gospel and telling others about Jesus? On the contrary, he says, "[W]hen I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Corinthians 9:16). Far from condemning Paul for his hard work, the Spirit of God was the One who compelled him to do it. "Compel" is not a popular word nowadays, but I am not the one who said it. Paul did.

Modern examples

These things were included in the Bible so they would serve as examples for us, which raises an interesting point. When these stories were written down, they were written in languages we don't speak. How easy was it to translate them? Consider an example.

The first Navajo New Testament was published in 1956, but that's not when the work on it began. You might say that's when it ended. The work of the first translation team, lead by Faye Edgerton and Faith Hill, began in the mid-1940s. It generally takes about ten years for a team of translators to produce a New Testament. And notice, this was the *first* Navajo New Testament.

After the Navajo New Testament was published in 1956, a revision team spent several years going back over every verse, while Edgerton and Hill went elsewhere to work on a Western Apache New Testament. (That one was published in 1966.) The revised Navajo New Testament came out in 1975. What we're talking about here is the *New Testament*. I should mention that it also included Psalms and Proverbs.

The first complete Navajo Bible appeared in 1985. It was a terrific accomplishment to translate and publish the entire Bible in a Native American language. In the years since 1800 this had only been done three times before (Labrador Eskimo 1871, Dakota 1879, Greenlandic Eskimo 1900).³ But this is not the end of the story. The translators did not complement themselves on a job well done and quit. Instead, they took the next 15 years going back over everything they had already done and revised the 1985 Bible. The results of this further effort were finally published in the year 2000. This then is some of the background for the excellent Navajo Bible (*Diyin God Bizaad*) that we have and use today.⁴

Summary

We've been talking here about people of great faith accomplishing some very difficult things, like Noah building the ark, Abraham sacrificing his son (although God stopped him at the last minute from actually doing this), keeping up with Paul, and in our own day translating the entire Bible into Navajo. You probably got tired just from reading about all this. What is God's attitude toward such intense effort? Was He displeased with Noah, and Abraham, and Paul, and those who gave us our Navajo Bible at such cost? Does grace require inactivity? Does faith lead us to do nothing? It didn't lead these people to do nothing.

Did translating the Navajo Bible save those who worked on the project? Of course not. Why should it have to? These people who were already in Christ when they did it. If they hadn't been, they would have done something else with their lives. They were working – laboring, exerting every energy, exercising the greatest care for more than half a century – because they loved the Navajo People, and because they loved God and delighted to serve Him.

Legalism

I laid out this background information for a reason. Now that we have discussed the activities and accomplishments of some people who obviously had great faith, let me ask, exactly what is legalism? It just won't do to say that if people serve God actively they are legalistic. That is not it at all. Activity is not the same as legalism, nor is inactivity the same as grace. God absolutely saves us by His grace, through faith. That was never the question. These

³ In 2008 there will be an Eastern Canadian Eskimo Bible (translated by people who are both trained Anglican priests and native speakers of Inuktitut) and in about 2010 there should be a complete Bible in Century Yupik Eskimo.

⁴ The translation team was based in Farmington, New Mexico, and worked under the capable direction of my friend and first teacher of Navajo, David Tutt. It takes nothing away from Dave to point out that the Native resource whose knowledge provided the bedrock of competence that characterizes *Diyin God Bizaad* was the blind Gernimo Martin. Martin read his own Bible in Braille. It was a *Revised Standard Version*. It occupied a shelf of space and its pages were well worn. Martin knew his Bible and he knew his Navajo. There were others. The group that produced *Diyin God Bizaad* was a solid team. God bless them for their efforts.

things are givens. On this much we all agree. But what is the role of spiritually significant activity in a Christian's life? And what is the role of obedience for people of faith?

The word "legalistic"

The word "legalistic" occurs in only one passage of the New Testament, so if we want biblical definitions for our terms, this is it. In this one passage Paul is describing his earlier life in Judaism: "as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless" (Philippians 3:6).

I should add that only two versions I know of use a form of this word. CJB says, "the righteousness demanded by legalism." NIV says, "legalistic righteousness" (quoted above). So it's just one verse, and within that verse just two versions (CJB, NIV).⁵ That's not much to go on. All the rest find other equivalent expressions. Other translations have expressions such as, "the righteousness which is in the law" (ASV, DBY, ERV, GNV, KJV, NAS, NKJ, PNT, TNT); "the righteousness that is in the law" (CSB); "the justice that is in the law" (DRA); "righteousness, under the law" (ESV); "the righteousness of the law" (MRD); "righteousness based on the law" (NAB); "the righteousness stipulated in the law" (NET); "the uprightness embodied in the Law" (NJB); "righteousness under the law" (NRS, RSV); "the righteousness which is by the law" (WEB); "righteousness that is in law" (YLT) ."

Three readings that fall outside the above syntactic pattern are: "all the righteousness of the law to the last detail" (BBE); "as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault" (NLT); and, "When it comes to winning God's approval by keeping Jewish laws, I was perfect. (GWN).

Jewish legalism

Paul. We have quoted a number of translations which all show that Paul kept the law to the very letter under Judaism, but at a later time Paul says, "Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief" (1 Timothy 1:13). Outside, Paul (Saul) was doing all the right things, as he understood them, and yet he was "a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man." Is there a contradiction here? There certainly is a contrast between what was happening on the outside and what was happening in Paul's heart. And notice this one: "I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief." Unbelief! For all his external doings, Paul was no child of Abraham at this period of his life.

This raises an important question. Was Paul really obeying the law before he knew Christ? He speaks of "legalistic righteousness," but was this the same as actual obedience? And the answer is a clear, No. "Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died" (Romans 7:9). In Judaism he was doing many things that made him feel good about himself, and that earned the respect of others, but at this point in his life he did not have the commandments. Otherwise, why would he say, "but when the commandment came"? It had not yet come. Paul was living in legalistic righteousness, but in the fullest sense he did not have the commandments. They had not yet come.

⁵ CJB is *Complete Jewish Bible*, copyright © 1998 by David H. Stern. Published by Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc. NIV is *New International Version*, copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.

Other Pharisees. Consider another example from Judaism. The Pharisees were extremely careful in the way they paid tithe. They would make great show of counting the individual seeds of their garden herbs to make sure God got one out of every ten. In view of this practice, Jesus said,

Woe to you, experts in the law and you Pharisees, hypocrites! You give a tenth of mint, dill, and cumin, yet you neglect what is more important in the law— justice, mercy, and faithfulness! You should have done these things without neglecting the others. ²⁴ Blind guides! You strain out a gnat yet swallow a camel! (Matthew 23:23-24)

Jesus condemned these Pharisees and experts in the law, but what did He condemn them for? Notice this carefully. He condemned them for neglecting "justice, mercy, and faithfulness." He did not condemn for tithing ever so carefully. He says, "You should have done these things." *Should* have! True, they were carrying things to an extreme, but in response to an actual command. What Jesus condemns is not careful obedience. He condemns the lack of "justice, mercy, and faithfulness." It is an important distinction. Obedience is not legalism. Or at least obedience is not something Jesus condemns.

Discussion. In case there is any confusion on this point, the big transition in Paul's life occurred on the road to Damascus. In the verse just quoted he was going from living to dying, which sounds like a big transition. If Romans 7:9 is a description of Paul's experience outside Damascus when he went there to hunt down any Christians he might find, then his life of legalistic righteousness was actually a life without law. That's what he says. "Once I was alive apart from law; . . ."

Then we turn over to Matthew 5 and read Jesus' commentary on the last five commandments where He says, "You have heard that it was said to an older generation, 'Do not murder,' and 'whoever murders will be subjected to judgment.' ²² But I say to you that anyone who is angry with a brother will be subjected to judgment" (Matthew 5:21-22). Paul at this time was "a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man" (1 Timothy 1:13, above). In another place Luke says,

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. (Acts 9:1-2)

Murderous threats. Alright. And Jesus says, "anyone who is angry with a brother will be subjected to judgment" (Matthew 5:22, above). I return to my earlier question. Was Paul really obeying the law that he appeared outwardly to be obeying? Not at all. Nor does saying this do anything to contradict him. This is exactly what he himself means in the sentence quoted above: "Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died" (Romans 7:9). When the commandment came. What does this mean? It means he finally learned what the commandment had been saying all along. On the road to Damascus he came to see the law as speaking to spiritual issues he had not known before, and not just externals.

Christian legalism

Again, what exactly is legalism? We haven't answered that question yet. Or maybe we have. Obedience is not legalism. Activity is not legalism. Nor is the absence of activity legalism, when God commands it (as in the case of the Sabbath). Instead legalism is a religion of externals. It is adding to the law, and at the same time taking away from the law. It is a show of compliance with God's will without any heart response. This makes a mockery of religion. Or as a modern Christian writer puts it,

There are those who profess to serve God, while they rely upon their own efforts to obey His law, to form a right character, and secure salvation. Their hearts are not moved by any deep sense of the love of Christ, but they seek to perform the duties of the Christian life as that which God requires of them in order to gain heaven. *Such religion is worth nothing.* When Christ dwells in the heart, the soul will [45] be so filled with His love, with the joy of communion with Him, that it will cleave to Him; and in the contemplation of Him, self will be forgotten. Love to Christ will be the spring of action. Those who feel the constraining love of God, do not ask how little may be given to meet the requirements of God; they do not ask for the lowest standard, but aim at perfect conformity to the will of their Redeemer. With earnest desire they yield all and manifest an interest proportionate to the value of the object which they seek. A profession of Christ without this deep love is mere talk, dry formality, and heavy drudgery.⁶

This in turn is what Christ meant when He spoke to Paul outside Damascus and said, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads" (Acts 26:14). In all the externals that made Paul look so good to himself and to his friends, he was actually disregarding the law and crafting his own death sentence. When he realized this, the commandment came and he died.

Having said this, let me offer a clarification. If disregarding what the law actually says is the problem, what is the solution? Further disregard will not help. So when Christians assume that focusing on Christ means ignoring the law, that is not really a bible model. Christ's holy character is what the law describes. So the law drives us to Christ in more than one way. It points out our sin and shows us that our wound is incurable, i.e., that we cannot cure it. This knowledge of condemnation gives the law its force and its great value. The law provides no solution; it can only condemn. But what it does do, if we allow it to, is to show us our need of Christ. This knowledge keeps us close to Him.

If we have no sin, why would we need a Savior? But there is another way to say this. If we have no awareness of sin, how would we feel our need of a Savior? If it is true that, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (X), it follows that there is a constant need to be aware of the fact that we fall short. That what the law does. And in this way it drives us to Christ. Turning to Christ does not mean turning away from the law. Doing that only invites more condemnation. We must constantly be aware of our reasons for turning to Him. Is such knowledge useful? Certainly. Knowing that we have sinned does not remove the sin, but it drives us to the only One who *can* remove it, i.e., Christ.

⁶ Ellen White, Steps to Christ, pp. 44-45. Emphasis added.

Discussion

This is already a long paper, but if I don't finish the thought, I will not have accomplished anything. So bear with me for a couple more paragraphs. In many people's minds the Sabbath is the fountainhead and ultimate source of all legalism. But why? If legalism involves works, how does something that removes work promote legalism? To keep the Sabbath, even if we only keep it outwardly, involves the absence of activity – rest. And when we keep it in its true spiritual context, it means resting in our knowledge of what Christ has already done for us. How is this legalistic? Anything can be done wrong, I suppose, but I'm talking about what the Sabbath means when we keep it as originally intended. Done right, the Sabbath is a celebration of faith, an acknowledgement of grace. It is an outer sign of inner rest and peace.

People rise up against the Sabbath because they don't want to keep it. Abraham didn't want to sacrifice Isaac. Christ did not want to go to the cross (see Matthew 26:39, 42). These were very unpleasant responsibilities. Was it legalistic of Christ to follow His Father all the way to the cross? If it was, we are all lost and damned. But don't let that thought detain you for long, because nothing Jesus did was in any way merely external, devoid of the Spirit, an inner rejection of God. So which is harder? Going to the cross, or taking a day off? By that I mean a whole day – twenty-four hours for spiritual rest, starting sunset Friday and ending sunset Saturday? You might think this would be inconvenient, but try to keep perspective. Jesus says,

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

I submit that the yoke of Christ is the law of God. It is the vehicle by which we acknowledge that He is God and we are His subjects. By submitting to His will in this way (the way He requests) we take His yoke upon us. This places us in a position of service, true, but notice who the other ox is in this comparison. It is Jesus. The yoke Christ offers brings close to Himself in service. If we work together with Christ, is that works? If it is, how does it give us rest? We need some definitions. Struggling with God is work. Submitting to His will and doing whatever He tells us to is rest. When we accept God's will and do it, we have rest even in labor, because we are no longer fighting against God. This is real rest – the kind of rest the Sabbath represents and symbolizes. Accept Christ's yoke "and you will find rest for your souls."

Conclusion

Let us serve God energetically, doing what He asks us to do. And when He invites us to rest, as Jesus did in Mark 6:31 ("Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest"), let us not be on our guard against Him. Worse yet, let us not resist His will and go our own way. There is no rest in independence from God's will. Real rest only comes from being at the center of God's will. Wrestling with God is hard, grinding labor, as Jacob discovered (see Genesis 32:24-25), and it is entirely futile. So we can say, "grace," and yet find no inner rest if our concept of grace leads us to disregard a clear command of God, hoping that if we ignore it long enough it will "pass from the law" (Matthew 5:18). This hasn't happened yet and it won't until Jesus comes. For that matter, even after Jesus comes we'll still keep the Sabbath in heaven (see Isaiah 66:23). If you know you'll keep the Sabbath then, why not keep it now?