

Hebrews 9:27 in the Navajo Bible

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Áko nihokáá' dine'é t'ááłáhídi dazdootsaałgo bee há haz'á, áádóó bik'iji' Diyin God há nihodoo'áál. (Hebrews 9:27)¹

Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment[.] (Hebrews 9:27)²

Introduction

Hebrews 9:27 says that everyone will face judgment. And yet we know that not everyone will face punishment. Some people are saved – the apostle Paul for example.

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day– and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. (2 Timothy 4:6; see also Revelation 7:9; emphasis supplied)

Actually, many people are saved. John says there are so many no could count them.

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. (Revelation 7:9; emphasis supplied)

Being punished in hell is not at all the same thing as being saved. So there must be a form of judgment that is not also a form punishment. What sort of judgment could this be? The expression *há nihodoo'áál* ("to set a date or period of time, impose a term or sentence, reach a decision") offers some important clues.³ The Navajo translation of this verse exactly captures the correct sense of what NIV calls "judgment" (Greek *krisis*). In this sense of the word, "judgment" refers to the action of a judge.

Is Judgment the Same as Punishment?

A number of years ago I met a young Pentecostal pastor. When I introduced myself as a Seventh-day Adventist he said, Oh, I know what you believe. You believe that hell is burning

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.

³ Robert W. Young and William Morgan, Sr., *Analytical Lexicon of Navajo* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992), stem 'ǵ, p. 17, section (82).

now. I assured him that was not the case, but it took a while before I could work out what he was thinking of. Undoubtedly what he had in mind was our teaching on the judgment.

Judgment as a session of the heavenly court before the second coming

Because of certain prophecies of the Bible I believe that the judgment is in session now, during the time just before Jesus comes again in glory. One of these prophecies is found in Daniel 7:

"As I looked, "thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. ¹⁰ A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened." (Daniel 7:9-10)

Because judgment meant punishment to the young man I met, it seemed to him that if the judgment is already in session, then the wicked are already being punished in hell. But remember what we read in Hebrews 9:27. All face judgment. But not all face punishment. There's a difference between judgment and punishment. They are not always the same. Remember what Paul said about receiving the crown of righteousness (repeated here for the reader's convenience).

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day- and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. (2 Timothy 4:6)

When does Paul expect to receive his crown? "[O]n that day." On which day? The day when "the Lord" acts in His capacity as "the righteous Judge," i.e., the day of judgment. In Paul's case the day of judgment was not something to fear, because he had kept the faith. (Not every decision handed down in the judgment is hostile to our interests. If we think it is, what is our concept of God?) Instead it was the time when Paul would receive "the crown of righteousness." And notice, this crown is given not only to Paul, "but also to all who have longed for [Jesus'] appearing."

The second coming of Jesus before the 1000 years

One reason why I do not believe that hell is burning now is that Jesus has not yet come again in glory. What do these two things (hell and glory) have to do with each other? Potentially a great deal. When Jesus comes the second time the wicked are destroyed "by the splendor of his coming."

And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming. (2 Thessalonians 2:8)

When the wicked who are alive at Jesus' coming are destroyed in this way, that's not the final punishment for their sins. It is simply the way their natural lives come to an end. They are not ready to meet Him in peace, and so they meet Him in a spirit of adversity and are destroyed by His glory. John describes such people in the following passage:

Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. ¹⁶ They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! ¹⁷ For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" (Revelation 6:15)

Again, this is not what the Bible calls the "second death" (Revelation 20:6). It's the first death. Their punishment comes later – after the 1000 years of Revelation 20:6-7.

Destruction of the wicked after the 1000 years

After the 1000 years, God's enemies are all brought back to life and they march out to fight against God – something that, in one way or another, they had been doing all their lives. That's why we call them "wicked." It's the reason why they're lost. Now these people all march out together as a body. John says,

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 20:9)

Notice that the fire in this passage comes "down from heaven." When the fire comes down, that's not the same as coming up. The fire does not come up from the earth; it comes down from heaven. Nor do the wicked go down into hell. Instead, according to Revelation 20:9, the fire of hell comes down upon them. The resulting conflagration is what the Bible calls "the lake of fire."

Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. (Revelation 20:14)

Discussion

After the 1000 years God brings the Holy City down from heaven to earth (see Revelation 21:2). The wicked try to capture it in one last desperate struggle against God. This is what John is talking about when he says, "They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves" (Revelation 20:9, above). Not until this point does God bring fire down upon those who have rebelled against Him, just as He brought fire down on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah long ago (see Jude 14). So before we can speak about hell, the 1000 years must begin and end, the Holy City must come down from heaven to earth, and the wicked of all ages must try to attack it. Then, when the fire starts to fall, that's when we can speak about hell. Hell, in this sense, covers the entire surface of the earth as God cleanses it from every trace of sin. Not only will the wicked be utterly consumed by this fire, but "the elements will melt in the heat" (2 Peter 3:12).

When this work of cleansing is finally complete, God recreates our planet so it can fulfill His original purpose for it. This is what John calls "a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21:1). In this "new earth" the only reminder of sin will be the scars in Jesus' hands, side, and feet. Every other mark of sin will be gone forever. The cleansing of the earth by fire is probably what our young pastor thought of as judgment, but my point is that God's decisions are announced at one time and carried out at another. They are announced before the 1000 years begin and are carried out after they come to an end.

Conclusion

It is true that judgment can sometimes be directly associated with punishment, as when God "hold[s] the unrighteous for punishment until the day of judgment" (2 Peter 2:9, margin).⁴ Another similar passage is this one, "For we know him who said, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' and again, 'The Lord will judge his people'" (Hebrews 10:30). So I grant that it is possible for the word "judgment" to mean "punishment."⁵ But in other passages, such as Hebrews 9:27 (quoted above), the two ideas are quite different. There all "face judgment," although not all face punishment. Some, like Paul, receive the crown of righteousness "on that day" (2 Timothy 4:8), i.e., on the day when God sits as Judge of both the living and the dead. And the same reward will be given to us as well, if we love Jesus and long for his appearing.

⁴ We have to take the marginal reading at this point, because that's the only way to make sense out of two other passages by the same writer (2 Peter 2:4; 3:7). We'll discuss these verses in another paper.

⁵ Notice in this verse that the Navajo says, *Bóhólníihíí éí bidine'é yaa nídóot'íít*. This sounds like, "the Lord will pass judgment on His people," but actually the meaning is that God will punish those who have harmed His people.