

# Romans 10:4 in the Navajo Bible

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Bee haz'áanii Mózes baa deet'áanii bee t'áá ákogi ádajít'é ídazh'dilnééh nít'é'ígíí éí Christ niinít'i', áko t'áá'á'í jínítínigo oodla' bee baa deijólííi ts'ídá t'áá ákogi ádajít'éego Diyin God há hahadziih. (Romans 10:4)<sup>1</sup>

Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. (Romans 10:4)<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

There is more than one way to translate the present passage. At one extreme is the Revised Standard Version ("For Christ is the end of the law, that every one who has faith may be justified"), which strongly separates the clauses. Other translations, the 2000 Navajo *Diyin God Bizaad* among them, lean toward bringing the two clauses together. If the clauses are separated, "end" must be translated in the sense of reaching a goal. If the clauses are joined, "end" can mean stop or terminate. It matters what the word "end" refers to and this affects how it must be interpreted. If one were to translate our passage from Navajo into English, it would read approximately as follows:

Christ brought to an end the earlier attainment of righteousness by the law given to Moses, so that God could declare righteous everyone who believes. (Navajo to English)

Here, the clauses are joined, the word "end" refers to our natural human willingness to trust in law as a source of righteousness, and I discuss the passage from the perspective of something terminating, or stopping.

It is true that Christ brings the law of Mosaic ceremonies to an end (although the words *Mózes baa deet'áanii* ["given to Moses"] have been unnecessarily added).<sup>3</sup> It is also true that He brings to an end any human reason we might have had previously to rely on obeying law of any kind as a means of attaining righteousness.

The Navajo version includes both points. The second is the one I wish to emphasize here. The matter of Mosaic ceremonies is less of an issue today, first, because these pointed forward to Christ and we no longer observe them, and second, because so much more is involved than Mosaic ritual.

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

<sup>3</sup> See also Romans 2:12, 17, 25; 3:28; 5:13; 6:14; 7:4.

If Christ brought the need for human reliance on law to an end, when did that reliance begin? We are not asking here when the law began, because the law itself does not come to an end in our passage. Instead the question is when people started relying on obedience to law, or on any other form of human activity, as a means of achieving right standing with God. This is what Christ brings to an end – not right standing, not the law, but any need people might ever have had to rely on law in their efforts to be right with God. He does this by simply giving us, as a free gift, everything we could possibly have hoped to earn through our own efforts.

## The Old Covenant

People have relied on what they do to be right with God as long as there have been people – well almost. Actually, it would be more correct to say that they have done this for as long as there has been sin. For example, Cain brought an offering of garden vegetables when (reading between the lines) God requested a sacrifice with blood – one that would be able to represent the sacrifice of Christ as the Lamb of God (see Genesis 3:15, 4:3-5). Even earlier, Adam and Eve had made garments for themselves out of fig leaves, when they sinned and realized they were naked (see Genesis 3:7). They didn't ask God for a covering; instead they hid and made coverings for themselves.

At a later time Israel promised to obey God before they had any idea what was involved in doing that (Exodus 19:8; 20:3, 7). Unfortunately, it was not a promise they could keep.

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him." (Exodus 32:1)

The very first commandment says not to have any god besides the Lord. We'll be talking about the concept of a covenant in what follows. A covenant is a promise made by two parties. They had just entered a covenant with God that they would worship only Him, and now here they were, dancing around a golden calf.

The Bible speaks of an old covenant and a new covenant. The old covenant is not old because it was established long ago. It is old because it has been superceded by something better.

There is another thing about covenants that we need to notice. One person making a promise is not a covenant. A covenant always involves two parties. It's a mutual promise – a double promise if you like. So the old covenant includes both what God said (i.e., His law) and what the people said. It is important to realize this, because some people misunderstand what it means when we read that the old covenant is obsolete (see Hebrews 8:13). They think this must mean that part of what God said needs to change. But this does not follow. What needs to change is the human response to God, not God's requirements for mankind.

We can't turn from self reliance, realizing it can't work, until we gain a fuller idea of what is involved in obeying God. People must have a high concept of the law before they will rely on a power outside themselves in order to keep it. If the law is a simple list of things to do, why look beyond ourselves for help to obey it? If that's all that's involved, why not just do it and be done? It's only when we start seeing Christ in His law that we realize the Holy Spirit is going to have to help us if we ever hope to measure up to such a standard. What we're talking about is not just difficult, but infinite, because the law is a description of God.

Pause with me on this last thought a moment more. What makes the law so spiritual is also makes it unchangeable. If God's own holy character were not written into His law, we would have no difficulty keeping it. In that case it might be subject to change. But God's character is in fact written into every aspect of His law, and so the same set of facts that make the new covenant necessary also demonstrate that the change from new to old cannot involve changing what the law says. If we think the wording God supplied must change before the old covenant can become the new covenant, we will never understand the covenants. That's not the nature of the change.

## The New Covenant

The promise of a new covenant is introduced for the first time in Jeremiah 31:31-34 and is subsequently quoted in Hebrews 8:9-12 (see vs. 8-13) and 10:16-17. Notice the wording.

But God found fault with the people and said: "The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. <sup>9</sup> It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. <sup>10</sup> This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. <sup>11</sup> No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. <sup>12</sup> For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." <sup>13</sup> By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear. (Hebrews 8:8-13)

What makes the old covenant obsolete has nothing to do with the substance of what God said at Sinai. Instead it has everything to do with what the people said in reply, which then became the basis, on their part, of their covenant relationship with God. Jeremiah, quoted by the author of Hebrews (above), makes clear that the problem was "because they did not remain faithful to my covenant" (vs.9). It was not God's part of the agreement that needed revision, but the basis on which the people accepted it. God has always been faithful. His words are faithful. That was never the problem. The problem at Sinai was not what the law said, but the fact that the people "did not remain faithful" (vs. 9). This is a distinction we must grasp.

The new covenant promise is not that God will erase His law, or that He will change the wording. God does not promise to revise His law when He writes it on our

hearts and He doesn't promise something else. It's the same law that has always been the law. The law of God does not change. But two other things do change.

First, in the new covenant the law is written in a different location. Notice that at Sinai the law was written on stone, whereas in the new covenant it is written on flesh – on our hearts and minds, so that carrying out God's is something we do gladly. And second, there is the question of who takes responsibility for the results. At Sinai we read about what the people would do. "We will do everything the LORD has said" (Exodus 19:8; see also 20:3, 7). In the new covenant we read about what God will do. "I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people" (vs. 10). There is a big difference between us and God. When we speak, the room gets slightly warmer, because God has given us breath. When God speaks, worlds come into existence. God can get things done; we can't.

Even with the law written on our hearts, we still need the Holy Spirit's presence and help in order to do what God says, because what we're obeying is not some human code but the words of a holy God. It is one thing to admit that we have no ability to obey God in our own natural selves. That is humility. But it's quite another thing to say that we can't obey God with or without His enabling help. That's arrogance. Having Christ and not having Christ are two entirely different things. It does make a difference whether we have the Spirit of God enabling us to live a Christian life or do not.

## Conclusion

What God calls obsolete and aging and promises to bring to an end is not His law, but any willingness we might previously have had to trust in ourselves to obey it. It is our reliance on an inferior power that must change, not the substance of what the law says. There was never anything wrong with God's words in the first place and there is nothing wrong with them now. As Paul says, "So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good" (Romans 7:12). The problem is not there (with God), but here – deep within ourselves.

Bringing our self-reliance to an end is not at all the same as bringing the law to an end. Far from erasing His law as a way of fulfilling His new covenant promises, God multiplies copies and scatters them from east to west, and north to south, wherever His true hearted followers are found. So now instead of just one reference copy on stone, under the new covenant God has thousands of identical copies of His law, all written with His own finger (we can't write it) on our hearts and on the hearts of others all over the world who serve Him. The Holy Spirit makes this law a living force in our lives, and gives us glad and willing hearts to obey everything God commands.