

1 Corinthians 11:30 in the Navajo Bible

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Éí biniinaa nihitahgóó la'í doo dabidziil da áádóó ka nidaakai, índa la' **daneezná**.
(1 Corinthians 11:30)¹

That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you **have fallen asleep**. (1
Corinthians 11:30)²

Introduction

When the Navajo translation says *daneezná* ("they have died"), that's correct – in one way. When NIV says these same people "have fallen asleep," that's also correct. But if the Navajo and the English say different things, how can they both be correct? What are we missing?

More is involved here than the lexical meaning of words. There is also the matter of how those words are used. Bible writers often say "he fell asleep" when what they really mean is "he died." I'll give some examples of this below. But first let me illustrate my point about how words can be used in special ways.

In Navajo a person might say, *bizéé' hazlǫ́í'*. This is a kind, or gentle, or respectful way of saying that someone has died. If a student saw these words on a test and translated them literally as, "his mouth became [round]," or something of that sort, would they be right or wrong? Well, they would be right because the words taken literally have a meaning that's close to that. But in another sense they would be wrong, because it's not what people mean when they say this. The meaning goes beyond the words. We could call this sort of thing an idiomatic expression.

In the present case we have a Greek word (*koimōntai*) that literally means "they fell asleep." Translators will often just pass the words along and leave the rest to interpretation. That's what NIV is doing when it says, "and a number of you have fallen asleep." By contrast NRSV assumes that people won't know what this means, so it suggests, "For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died."³ NIV translates the word, NRSV translates the sense. When NRSV translates just the sense of the words, and not the words themselves, you can follow what Paul was saying but don't get the full flavor of how he said it.

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 For those interested in grammar, the Greek word *koimōntai* means "they [3rd person] fell asleep." NIV says, "some of you [2nd person] have fallen asleep." NRSV says, "some [3rd person] have died." NRSV is closer to the Greek here than NIV, and in this respect so is the Navajo (*daneezná* = "they [3rd person] died").

Two Ways to Get it Wrong

There's more than just flavor here. Many people seriously misunderstand what Paul was trying to get across. Consider a different passage that uses the same expression as what we find in 1 Corinthians 11:30. Here Jesus is the One speaking and He talks about a twelve-year old girl who has just died. A crowd of people is there mourning.

[H]e said, "Go away. The girl is not dead but **asleep**." But they laughed at him. (Matthew 9:24)

In this passage the Navajo gives the word "sleep" its literal meaning. [*Á*]ko ábizhdíiniid, Ch'ínóhkááh; jó, at'ééd doo daaztsáq da, t'óó ałhosh ("So He said to them, Go away; the girl is not dead, only sleeping") (Matthew 9:24).

Our understanding of this passage depends a lot on what we think Jesus meant. When He said, "The girl is not dead," was He saying, The girl is alive? That's what everyone thought He meant. That's why they laughed. But He knew, and they knew, this was not so. He was not trying to tell people the girl was alive. He was trying to tell them how to think about death. We should think of death the same we think of sleep. That's how Jesus finished His sentence. "The girl is not dead but asleep" (Matthew 9:24).

A person who dies in Christ will live again when He comes again in glory. Thus, being resurrected is like waking up after a night's sleep. For the Christian, death is a temporary thing. It's not the end, but it's not something we can ignore either. There's more than one way to get this wrong. The Sadducees thought death was the end. They thought that when a person dies there's nothing more. Ever. Clearly, that teaching is not biblical. So this is one way to get it wrong. There's another way.

Instead of saying death is the end and there's nothing more, people today say there is no such thing as death in the first place. You haven't heard that yet? But you really have. You've heard people say, "I know where aunt Susie is. She's in heaven with the Lord." In this model death is not real. There is no death. Death is merely living in a different place. Both of these alternatives to Jesus' teaching are equally wrong. They are wrong for different reasons, but the one is just as wrong as the other.

Three Illustrations

Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6a). It's important to get this right because the rest of the verse says, "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6b). If coming to the Father is important, then understanding what Jesus meant by "way," "truth," and "life" are also important. Let me show three illustrations that capture the differences between the three models for life, and its opposite counterpart death, that we've been talking about in the paper far.

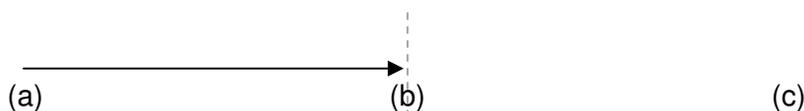


Fig. 1. The Sadducees' concept of death.

In fig. 1 a person is born (a) and then dies (b), and that's the end. There's nothing more. Let (c) represent the second coming of Jesus. But of course the Sadducees didn't believe in the second coming of Jesus.

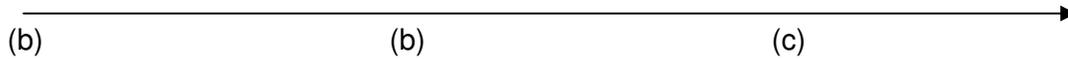


Fig. 2. Most Christians' concept of death.

In fig. 2 a person is born (a) and then dies (b), but death doesn't change anything. He continues living, but in heaven. Jesus comes again (c), but this doesn't change anything either. It's kind of irrelevant whether He comes again or not. If you're already in heaven, why should it matter?

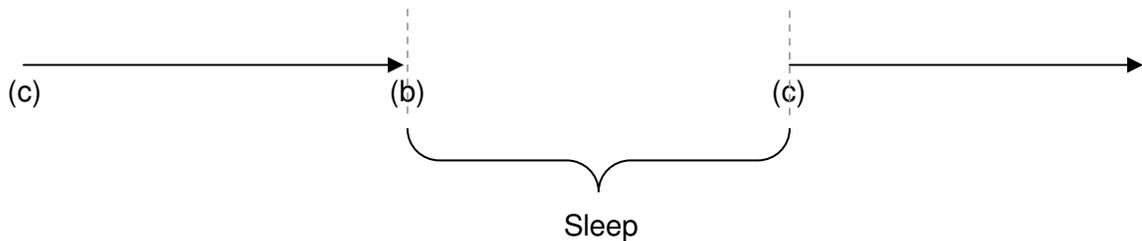


Fig. 3. Jesus and Paul's concept of death.

In fig. 3 a person is born (a) and then dies (b), and sleeps in the grave until Jesus comes to wake him or her to life again (c). In this model the second coming of Jesus is supremely important. If Jesus comes again, we live; if He doesn't come again, we don't. That's a pretty important difference. As Christians we know He will come again, so we call this the "blessed hope." When Jesus comes again we who die in faith will live again. And also, when He comes, we will see our loved ones who have died in faith.

Discussion

This makes a lot of sense out of a topic that could be twisted, turned, and distorted out of all recognition. At one funeral I attended, a husband had lost his wife. He was a Christian, but didn't know his Bible very well. At one moment he was saying, "I know my wife is right here with me." At another moment he was saying, "I know my wife is in heaven with Jesus." Here? There? Where? He didn't know. But the Bible makes clear where our loved ones are when they die. Good or bad, lost or saved, they are sleep in the grave until Jesus wakes them. He does this at different times.

The death of the righteous

When Jesus comes again He raises those who loved Him. After the thousand years of Revelation 20 He brings all His saints back to the earth, and also brings the holy city New Jerusalem to the earth, and resurrects those who did not love Him. The one group receive life,

the other receive death. Let me clarify what I mean. By death I mean a death that never ends, that goes on without end, through eternity, forever and ever. Death is for those who are lost. By life I mean a life that goes on without end, through eternity, forever and ever.

The death of the wicked

Just as the life that Jesus gives those who love Him never ends, so the death that He imposes on those who do not love Him never ends. Their punishment is eternal, but we need to understand with exact clarity what their punishment is. Paul tells us in the following passage.

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

Death is not the same as dying. Eternal dying would mean eternal living, but eternal living (or eternal life) is a punishment for sin. It's the gift of God to those who love him. Death is not the same as living. Those who are lost will have a painful transition into their final sleep, but it is not an endless transition. They burn, and burn up, and die. The resulting condition – the result of their dying in the flames of hell – is that through the ceaseless ages of eternity they are, and permanently remain, dead. "For the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

The death of Jesus

The only to know ourselves is to know Jesus. Was Jesus' death real? If He was never dead, how could He could be raised from death? It is extremely important to realize that Jesus really did die and that He really did rise again from death to life. These facts mean everything to us as Christians.

And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. (1 Corinthians 15:17)

Jesus' own experience illustrates the reality, and the importance, of what we are talking about here. Satan's first lie was to claim that death is not real. Is there a reason for this? Why was it so important for him to make this particular point and to try to get Eve to believe it? If Satan is "the father of lies" (John 8:44), and if the issue before us is the starting point for all his lying (see Genesis 3:4), that should tell us something about much he wants us to misunderstand the topic of death and how important it is for us to get it right.

More examples

Consider some other passages written by Paul which use the word "sleep" (or "asleep," or "sleeping," or whatever). The one we're considering in this paper is not the only one.

That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you **have fallen asleep**. (1 Corinthians 11:30)

After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some **have fallen asleep**. (1 Corinthians 15:6)

then those also who **have fallen asleep** in Christ are lost. (1 Corinthians 15:18)

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who **have fallen asleep**. (1 Corinthians 15:20)

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all **sleep**, but we will all be changed—(1 Corinthians 15:51)

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who **fall asleep**, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13)

We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who **have fallen asleep** in him. (1 Thessalonians 4:14)

According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who **have fallen asleep**. (1 Thessalonians 4:15)

He died for us so that, whether we are awake or **asleep**, we may live together with him. (1 Thessalonians 5:10)

Paul uses this comparison more than any other New Testament writer. Paul only uses the word "sleep" to mean literal sleep in three passages (see 2 Corinthians 6:5; 11:27; 1 Thessalonians 5:7). He also uses the term to refer to people who aren't paying attention (see Ephesians 5:14). In the nine passages quoted above, when he says "sleep" he means death.

Conclusion

Death interrupts life, just like a night's sleep interrupts work. Sleeping all night is different from working all night. But when we go to bed at night we know that sleep is not the end. In the morning we wake up and go about our work another day. The Bible says that when someone dies, that person's thoughts come to an end. They "perish" (see Psalm 146:4, KJV).⁴ The reason why Jesus saw death as something temporary is that, when He comes again in glory, He will resurrect those who died in faith. Resurrection is like waking up in the morning. It brings the sleep-like interruption of death to end.⁵

⁴ NIV says the person's "plans come to nothing" (Psalm 146:4, NIV), but that may or may not be true. A person's plans might succeed wonderfully after he dies. What about David, who made all the necessary plans for building a temple for God. He died, Solomon, built the temple according to David's plan, and it was one of the most beautiful buildings in antiquity. So did David's plans come to nothing? No. Did his thoughts perish? Yes. KJV got this verse right.

⁵ We need to understand what happens when people die, including what happens when people die who do not know or love Jesus. We need to understand this, but it's a topic I'd like to save for another paper.

There's no reason to use different words when we translate passages that use the word "sleep." The meaning is clear just as it stands. The truth about death is simple, understandable, and important. It shows God to be both fair and merciful.

Christ truly did live and He truly did die. On the third day an angel came and told Jesus it was time to wake up. If Christ's resurrection was not real – which it could not be if His death were not real – our faith is not real and the whole business of being a Christian is not real. But no! Christ's death was real and His life after His resurrection is real. The life He gives us is real, just as heaven is real. And we will go there to be with Him when He comes. Until then, if we die beforehand, we will sleep peacefully in our graves until He personally comes to wake us – with all the angels of heaven, in indescribably glory and power.