

1 Thessalonians 5:10-11 in the Navajo Bible

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Éí nihá daaztsá, áko dahinii'náago doodaléi' danee'náa nidi nádzáago bił dahinii'náa doo.¹¹
Éí baa t'áá ádaah'tínigi át'éego chánah ída'ahołne' índa ahíłká anáhjahgo nihidziil
áda'ahołnééh. (1 Thessalonians 5:10-11)¹

He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.¹¹
Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. (1
Thessalonians 5:10-11)²

Introduction

The tone of this passage is similar to that of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, where at both the beginning and the end Paul emphasizes hope or courage. In vs. 13 he speaks of those who have no basis for hope and in vs. 18 he ends by saying, "Therefore encourage each other with these words." That's chap. 4. And here, "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing" (5:11).

The ideas of courage and hope supply one link to the earlier passage. Another is the context of the second coming. What Paul describes in chap. 4 is the glorious return of Christ with all the angels of heaven, to raise the righteous dead. "And so we will be with the Lord forever" (4:17). There are the words with which we should encourage each other, i.e., Jesus is coming. And here, "He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him" (5:10). The connection between Christ coming and us living together with Him is that He raises those who fall asleep in Him. That's the resurrection of the body.

It is not surprising that these passages would be so similar. They are only a very few verses apart. We could point this much out and let the matter rest if it were not for two things.

The Word "Sleep"

In 1 Thessalonians 5:10 NIV says, "whether we are awake or asleep." This is a straightforward translation of the Greek original, which says *eite grēgorōmen* [whether we are awake] *eite katheudōmen* [or we are asleep]. The Navajo focuses on the sense of what's being said rather than the words that bring that sense to us. There we have, *áko dahinii'náago* [we are living] *doodaléi' danee'náa nidi* [or we are dead].

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.

Table 1
Select Terms From 1 Thessalonians 5:10

	First Term	Second Term
Greek	grēgorōmen ("we are awake")	katheudōmen ("we are asleep")
English	"we are awake"	"or asleep"
Navajo	dahinii'ná ("we live")	danee'ná ("we are dead")

It is clear from table 1 that there is a difference between the Greek and the English on the one hand, and the Navajo on the other. In Greek and in English the passage talks about being "awake" or "asleep." In Navajo it talks about being "alive" or "dead." Do these translations conflict with each other? Actually not. The thought is the same, even though the words used to express it are different.

Once we move beyond the present passage, the word "sleep" only means sleep about half the times it appears. The rest of the time it refers to other things like laziness (x), sexual relations (x), or being dead (x).

[Bar Chart]

In summary, the Navajo translators have given us, not the words of the original, but the sense. When Paul says "awake" (x) in 1 Thessalonians 5:10 he means "alive," and when he says "asleep" he means "dead." So the Navajo is worded freely, but it is not wrong.

A Supplied Word

There is another place in vs. 10 where the Navajo is worded freely, and here also it is not wrong. Where the Navajo has, *áko dahinii'náago doodaléi' danee'náa nidi nádzáago bit dahinii'náa doo* ("so if we remain alive or die, when He returns we will live with Him"), the word *nádzáago* ("when He returns") is supplied. It is not in the original.

Normally a translator would want to minimize the number of supplied words in any given passage. There are times when adding something is necessary, but all other things being equal one likes to work with what the text provides. In this case, however, add *nádzáago* ("when He returns") allows us to connect with the text in a way that could be missed otherwise.

Conclusion

1 Thessalonians 4 is talking about more than hope and courage. It is talking about the basis we have for hope and courage, i.e., the second coming of Jesus in power and glory. This is the reason why Christians can have hope in a hopeless world. They know something better is coming. What they lack here, they will have when Jesus comes. And in the present case, if some of our loved ones have died believing in Jesus, we will see them again – when He returns. That's chap. 4.

So now we go on to chap. 5, and Paul is supposed to be saying something different? No! He meant what he said the first time. "So if we remain alive or die, [when He returns] we will live with Him" (adapted from the Navajo). This was exactly what Paul meant before, and now he says it again. Even if the words "when He returns" are left out, we would still have to understand the passage as though they were present. Any other sort of interpretation would do violence to Paul's thought. So I submit that the Navajo translators have this one just right.