

2 Timothy 2:11-13 in the Navajo Bible

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Kóhá'nínii éí t'áá aaníí: Hoł dasinii'náago, hoł ałdó' dahinii'náa doo; ¹² hada'íínílnúgo, hoł ałdó' nihídahólníih doo; doo hwééhasin da hodii'núgo, hó ałdó' doo hwééhasin da nihizhdidoonił; ¹³ hada'íínídlíi bi'oh náádleeł nidi, hó t'éí t'áá áłahjí' ha'ahódlí, háálá t'áá hó ts'ídá doo ats'áájí jódle' át'ée da. (2 Timothy 2:11-13) ¹

Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; ¹² if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; ¹³ if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself. (2 Timothy 2:11) ²

Introduction

There are two things to say about this passage. One is that in Navajo the wording is consummately beautiful. Explaining why I think so would take a separate paper, because there are symmetries and relationships among the different parts of the verses that would need to be pointed out in order to make my case. I won't try to do that here.

Here we discuss the doctrinal implications of what is being said so nicely. The particular doctrines I have in mind are those of salvation and of the perseverance of the saints. My problem with the perseverance of the saints, as taught in the Westminster Confession³ and by so many popular preachers today, is that it does not involve persevering. And yet it is a solidly biblical fact that persevering is a necessary aspect of salvation.

The popular version of the perseverance of the saints – which I oppose – is consistent with a surface reading of vs. 13 ("If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself"), but is not consistent with either vs. 11 or vs. 12, and I submit that it misunderstands the true significance of vs. 13 as well.

¹ Navajo Bible quotations are from *Diyin God Bizaad. The Holy Bible in Navajo*. Revised edition. New York: American Bible Society, 2000. I should point out that there's a typo in vs. 13. The word *ats'áájí* (with low tone on the first syllable) would have to mean, "against someone." But context requires that it mean, "against Himself." That would be *áts'áájí* (with high tone of the first syllable). Phonetically there is very little difference between these two forms. In terms of their impact on the meaning of the passage, however, the contrast between them could not be greater. That tone mark really does need to be there.

² English Bible quotations not otherwise marked 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 The Westminster Confession of 1646 is available on any number of websites. One of these is http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/documents/westminster_conf_of_faith.html. When it comes up, please select article XVII.

Verse 11

What does it mean to die with Christ? I didn't understand this until my brother passed to his rest a few months ago. Toward the end he couldn't speak, but in his hospice room I asked him, if was his desire to reaffirm his love for Jesus, to squeeze my hand. He did. Right up to the last his faith was anchored in Christ. I submit that this is what it means to die with Christ, in the sense of 2 Timothy 2:11. Physically my brother's response was very feeble, but the faith he expressed in this way was firm and strong. That experience taught me something. The verse says that if we died with Christ we will also live with Him. The reverse is also true. If we want to live with Christ, we must also die with Him. By this I mean we must remain faithful right up to the time when our life ends and we breathe our last.⁴

Article XVII of the Westminster Confession

To my mind this idea stands in stark contrast with article XVII of the Westminster Confession, which I now quote in its entirety.

I. They whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.

II. This perseverance of the saints depends, not upon their own free-will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ; the abiding of the Spirit and of the seed of God within them; and the nature of the covenant of grace; from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof.

III. Nevertheless they may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their perseverance, fall into grievous sins; ad for a time continue therein: whereby they incur God's displeasure, and grieve his Holy Spirit; come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts; have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded; hurt and prevalency others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves.

On one reading it might seem that what I'm saying, and what the confessors were saying in 1846, might be consistent with each other. The part about my brother persevering right up to the end and being eternally saved is what I just described. Or is it? Actually it isn't. What I said is that my brother persevered in faith. What the Confession says is that saved Christians will persevere in grace. There's a difference.

⁴ If a person starts out as a Christian, turns from Him, and then comes back at the end of his or her life, the passage applies which says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). If a person starts out as a Christian, turns from Him, and does not come back before dying, what then? 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess." It does not speak to the issue of what happens if we refuse to confess. God can forgive any sin we confess, but if we refuse to confess He will not impose forgiveness on us. We come to this point next in the discussion above.

"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1, KJV). Faith is the gift of God (see Ephesians 2:8), but who exercises it? We do. If we accept the definition of faith given in Hebrews 11:1 it would be impossible for God to exercise faith, because faith involves not having and not seeing certain things. What does God not have or not see? God has all things and knows all things, so He has no need to exercise faith. Faith simply does not address His situation. But it does address ours. So that's one thing.

Then there's the matter of grace. What exactly is grace? I would suggest that grace is unmerited favor. It's acceptance and approval that we don't deserve. When grace comes into our lives, that's not us accepting God even though He doesn't deserve it. It's God accepting us even though we don't deserve it. As one author I respect puts it so well,

Christ was treated as we deserve, that we might be treated as He deserves. He was condemned for our sins, in which He had no share, that we might be justified by His righteousness, in which we had no share. He suffered the death which was ours, that we might receive the life which was His. "With His stripes we are healed."⁵

So let's be clear. God exercises grace. We exercise faith. Persisting in faith means we place our confidence in Christ right up to the end. Persisting in grace means God continues accepting us even though we don't deserve it. We continue not deserving His favor, and He continues extending it. What if our not deserving His favor includes turning our backs on Him altogether and actively rejecting Him as our source of salvation? According to the Confession, He saves us anyway. See paragraph 3 of the material quoted above. Such teaching is simply not biblical.

Please notice one more thing. I have said that we exercise faith (God does not) and that God exercises grace (we do not). So if anyone perseveres in grace, who is it? God is the one who exercises grace. And yet this article of the Confession is entitled, "Of the Perseverance of the Saints." Thus, the article is misnamed. What it describes is the perseverance of God in accepting us, not our perseverance in accepting Him. That kind of perseverance would have to be called "faith," not "grace." And so the "perseverance of the saints" has nothing to do with the saints – persevering or otherwise. They have nothing to do with entering a state of grace (paragraph II), and nothing to do with remaining in it (paragraph III). The saints are irrelevant to this whole process. Another way to say this is that faith is irrelevant to this whole process. Indeed, the word "faith" does not appear in any of the three paragraphs. When one speaks of the need for the saints (i.e., Christians) to remain faithful, there is a certain apprehension that doing so could play some part in salvation and therefore be dangerous.

Verse 12

Verse 12a

Paul does not share this fear of perseverance. What he says is that, "If we endure, we will also reign with him" (vs. 12a). This is consistent with Christ's words in Revelation 2:26, and with a number of other passages as well (below).

⁵ Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, p. 25.

All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. (Matthew 10:22)

but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. (Matthew 24:13)

All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. (Mark 13:13)

He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 1:8)

To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations— (Revelation 2:26)

Standing firm in faith is what the Bible means by persevering, but this is not any part of what the Confession has in mind. I grant that in all and every circumstance God remains true to us. That was never the question. The question is whether we will be to Him.

In Revelation 2:26 Jesus speaks of granting "authority over the nations," on condition that we overcome and do His will to the end. This is not just a matter of different rewards, such that if we endure we reign, but if we don't endure we get something else.

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." (Genesis 15:1)

When God saves us, there's no plan B. There's only Christ. He is it. Period, end of quotation. That's the Prize – not the means of obtaining the prize, but the Prize itself. The passage just quoted does not say, I will give you a very great reward. It says, "I am . . . your very great reward." "I am." We find these words in other passages, such as this one: "'I tell you the truth,' Jesus answered, 'before Abraham was born, I am!'" (John 8:58). If we miss this reward, we've missed the only reward there is. There is no such thing as receiving a higher reward if we're faithful and a lower reward if we're not.

I submit that starting with Jesus and then not carrying through (as in the parable of the sower)⁶ speaks directly to the matter of salvation. Consider Matthew 10:22 (above). There Jesus does not say, but he who stands firm to the end will get a better reward. He says, "but he who stands firm to the end will be saved." By implication, he who does not stand firm to the end will not be saved. He restates this same position in Matthew 24:13 and Mark 13:13. And in 1 Corinthians 1:8 "the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" is a filter through which we can only pass by being "strong to the end."

He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 1:8)

If someone does not remain "strong to the end," it is because he has lost connection with the One who could have done this for him. Notice that Paul gives the glory to God, but that what he's giving glory for is keeping us strong. On that day, we are strong in Christ and blameless in Christ or we are lost. Those are the choices. Remaining in Christ and turning away

⁶ See

from Him are two widely different things. By all accounts it is possible to turn away. At issue is how to account for this when it occurs. The Reformed position is that, when one turns away, he was never saved in the first place. This flies directly in the face of a word found in vs. 12b, to which we now turn.

Verse 12b

In vs. 12b Paul says, "If we disown him, he will also disown us." If He disowns us, we are not His and have no place in heaven. If He does not disown us, we are His and spend eternity with Him. Can one disown what was never his? If Christ disowns someone, the clear implication is that that person was truly and fairly in Christ at some time in the past. Otherwise, "disown" (Greek *arnesētai*) is the wrong word – not just the wrong English word, the wrong Greek word, the wrong idea. One can't disown the members of someone else's family. That's not what disowning means. What Paul describes here is having Christ, and then at a later time not having Him. It is not that we thought we were His (and learned we were wrong), or that it seemed we were His (and others discovered they were wrong about us).

Being disowned by Christ can only mean that we were once His but have lost our connection with Him. May this not happen to anyone, but what I'm saying is that it's possible. Any theology which says it's not is the wrong theology.

But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven. (Matthew 10:33)

But he who disowns me before men will be disowned before the angels of God. (Luke 12:9)

The experience of Peter

In this case, how do we explain the experience of Peter? Peter denied Christ three times, with cursing. The word Matthew uses to describe this is a form of the same Greek word that Paul uses in 2 Timothy 2:12b. In Matthew it's translated "deny," in 2 Timothy 2:12 "disown." But the meaning is the same. And Peter was not merely denying Christ, he was disowning Him – severing his connection with Him. And yet Peter came back and became a leader in the church, eventually dying a martyr's death for Christ. Notice the angel's words:

But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" (Mark 16:7)

In Mark 16:7 there are two classes of people. On the one hand there are "his disciples," on the other there's Peter. Is Peter one of the disciples in Mark 16:7? No. But this is not the end of the story. In John 21:15-19 Jesus asked Peter three times for a confession of faith – one confession for each denial – and thus reinstated him. Three times Jesus gave Peter an opportunity to affirm his faith, giving him a work to do each time ("Feed my lambs" [vs. 15]; "Take care of my sheep" [vs. 16]; "Feed my sheep" [vs. 17]). "Then he said to him, 'Follow me!'" (John 21:19). Why did Jesus reinstate Peter? Because He loved Peter. But my question is, Why was it necessary to reinstate him? Peter ended his life as a disciple, not on the basis of his first call in Matthew 4:18-19, but on the basis of his second call in John 21:19. When Jesus reinstated him He was being both faithful and just. Peter had truly repented from his sin and turned from it. Christ forgave Peter and purified him from all unrighteousness (see 1 John 1:9).

Paul's point – Peter's experience notwithstanding – is that, "If we disown him, he will also disown us" (2 Timothy 2:12b). What this means is that He will respect our decisions concerning Him, even if they are unwise. When Jesus disowns one of His former followers because that follower has rejected Him, and persists in rejecting Him, is that a breach of faithfulness on His part? This question brings us to vs. 13.

Verse 13

In vs. 13 Paul says, "if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself." Is this the same as saying, If we are faithless He will save us anyway? If so, why didn't Paul say it that way?

Paul's statement in vs. 13 was made in the context of what he says earlier in vs. 12b, i.e., it is made in the context of stating that He will disown those who disown Him. Is it an act of faithlessness on God's part when He does what He says He will do? That's not normally what we mean by "faithless." Being faithless means *not* doing what you say you're going to do. People who know Christ – "who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age" (Hebrews 6:5) – and eventually disown Him, are in turn disowned by Him. Paul says so. But he also says that in all of this Christ remains faithful. How can this be? In any event, that's what the text says. Disowning those who disown Him is consistent with God's faithfulness.

It is also consistent with receiving them back when they repent and ask to be forgiven. Just here there is a problem, because another passage says it is impossible, "if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace" (Hebrews 6:6). How can we explain this? We can explain it by first reading what the verse says. What do the words "are crucifying" mean? Do they mean something different from "have crucified"? Is there any difference between present and past?

From Peter's experience I can only assume that Hebrews 6:6 means while they continue subjecting Him to public disgrace the above result follows. It does not apply to those who *have subjected* Him to public disgrace, but only to those who persist in doing so. Notice the wording: "because . . . they are crucifying [*anastaurountas*] . . . and subjecting [*paradeigmatizontas*] . . ." What it does not say is "crucified" and "subjected." What if, having done horrible things (as Peter did), a person repents of his sin and sincerely confesses it (as Peter did)? In that event, 1 John 1:9 again applies (as we have seen that it did in the experience of Peter).

"If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him." (Luke 17:4)

There is one standard for all – Jew and Gentile, then and now. God is who He is and He doesn't change. In every generation He will call sin what it is, and will freely forgive us if we confess our sins and forsake them.

Discussion

The real question is whether God can be consistent while accepting a person who comes to Him at one time and rejects Him at another. But this I don't mean exhibiting weaknesses, but actually disowning Christ. Can God have one attitude toward such an individual while accepting him now and not accepting him later?

The answer yes, and the reason why this is so brings us to the heart of the matter. If we confine ourselves to the person as such, then no, a different status as regards salvation would represent a change in God. But if we broaden our perspective to include the person's behavior, it is perfectly possible to see God as being consistent while both accepting and rejecting this hypothetical individual. Perhaps I should quote a passage at length. It is from Ezekiel. This will help us understand how God's relates with man and show how what seems like different attitudes on His part really are not. I'll take in three parts. Please read each of them.

"Suppose there is a righteous man who does what is just and right. ⁶ He does not eat at the mountain shrines or look to the idols of the house of Israel. He does not defile his neighbor's wife or lie with a woman during her period. ⁷ He does not oppress anyone, but returns what he took in pledge for a loan. He does not commit robbery but gives his food to the hungry and provides clothing for the naked. ⁸ He does not lend at usury or take excessive interest. {⁸ Or take interest; similarly in verses 13 and 17} He withholds his hand from doing wrong and judges fairly between man and man. ⁹ He follows my decrees and faithfully keeps my laws. That man is righteous; he will surely live, declares the Sovereign LORD." (Ezekiel 18:5-9)

"Suppose he has a violent son, who sheds blood or does any of these other things {¹⁰ Or things to a brother} ¹¹ (though the father has done none of them): "He eats at the mountain shrines. He defiles his neighbor's wife. ¹² He oppresses the poor and needy. He commits robbery. He does not return what he took in pledge. He looks to the idols. He does detestable things. ¹³ He lends at usury and takes excessive interest. Will such a man live? He will not! Because he has done all these detestable things, he will surely be put to death and his blood will be on his own head." (Ezekiel 18:10-13)

"But suppose this son has a son who sees all the sins his father commits, and though he sees them, he does not do such things: ¹⁵ "He does not eat at the mountain shrines or look to the idols of the house of Israel. He does not defile his neighbor's wife. ¹⁶ He does not oppress anyone or require a pledge for a loan. He does not commit robbery but gives his food to the hungry and provides clothing for the naked. ¹⁷ He withholds his hand from sin {¹⁷ Septuagint (see also verse 8); Hebrew from the poor} and takes no usury or excessive interest. He keeps my laws and follows my decrees. He will not die for his father's sin; he will surely live. ¹⁸ But his father will die for his own sin, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother and did what was wrong among his people." (Ezekiel 18:14-18)

If anyone thinks that such instruction is for people living in Old Testament times and that a different standard applies now, that really would make God changeable!

"I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed." (Malachi 3:6)

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. (Hebrews 13:8)

Conclusion

We might think Ezekiel is severely confused, that he is not confining himself to the issue at hand, i.e., God's immutable will. But please notice the quotation marks. Ezekiel is not speaking on his own authority here. These are not the reflections of a prophet living in exile. They are a window into God's mind. In the above set of passages God is explaining how He thinks, not how Ezekiel thinks.

It does indeed matter how we relate with God. How God relates with us is not the only factor, and it is not based on a simplistic model. ("I accept this person, but don't accept that person." Why? "I just do.") If God takes human behavior into account, as the above passages clearly show He does, our theology must do that as well. If we see our relationship with God as only consisting of God's attitude toward us, then we have no relationship with God. A relationship works two ways. Does this mean salvation has two sources? No. One source. How can we reconcile these apparently contradictory ideas? It is the task of theology to figure such things out. But what I'm saying is, let's not give up half way through and map our incomplete understanding back onto God, as though He were less than He reveals Himself to be. Our theological systems must be rich enough and complete enough to account for what God actually says – as for example in Ezekiel 18. If we can't do this yet, we're not through.