

Acts 20:7 in the Navajo Bible

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Damíigo azlíí' góne' bááh ninádahiitihgo biniyé álah siidlíí'go Paul yiskáago dah diigháahgo bił ałch'í' hadadzisdzíí', áko t'áá yáti'go t'é'íímní'. (Acts 20:7)

On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight. (Acts 20:7, NIV)¹

Introduction

When we say "*Damíigo azlíí' góne'* " (or *Damóo azlíí' góne'*), that would normally be taken to mean Sunday morning. Both the English and the Greek and say, "On the first day of the week," so the Navajo translation is not wrong when it says *Damíigo* ("Sunday"), but there's more to the story than this. Even though the translation of the word appears to be correct, there is a question when the events take place. Let me explain what I mean.

There are ways to misunderstand what happened. On Sunday morning ("*Damíigo azlíí' góne'* ") a group of Christians come together. They share a meal, which if this is Sunday morning would be breakfast. Paul is there and he talks on until . . . midnight? Does this passage teach that Paul spoke for eighteen hours (from sun up Sunday to midnight Sunday)? Something's wrong with this picture.

In the New Testament – and the Old Testament – each day ends at sunset. When does the next day begin? The next day begins when the previous day ends – at sunset. This system makes sense when you think about it. It's different from the way we count time, but in a society where people don't have clocks, it makes sense to say that if you want to know whether the day is over, look out the door. If the sun is down, the day's over. This much sounds like common sense, but there's much more to it than that.

Why Did Days End at Sunset?

There's a reason why days do not start at sun up in the Bible. It has to do with the fact that many people in those times knew nothing about God and they worshiped the sun, moon, and stars. God knew that people would fall into sin, that they would lose their knowledge of Him, and that idolatry would be a problem. So He established the pattern of starting each new day, not when the sun came up, but when the sun went down.

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The time in history when He established this pattern was right at the start, in the creation story. "God called the light 'day,' and the darkness he called 'night.' And there was evening, and there was morning-- the first day" (Genesis 1:5). Notice that the first day was not a morning and then an evening, it was an evening and then a morning.

Notice one other thing about the creation story. The words "sun" (*šémeš*) and "moon" (*yarēh*) do not appear there. To be sure, God made these things, but when describing them He does not say *šémeš* ("sun") and *yarēh* ("moon"). When this story was written down "sun" and "moon" were the names of pagan gods. They used these terms when they worshiped the sun and moon. If these words occurred in the creation story, someone would say Moses worshiped the sun and moon. We know he didn't, but just to make things perfectly clear he didn't use these words. Instead the sun is called "the greater light" and the moon is called "the lesser light" (see Genesis 1:14-19).

A similar type of reasoning can be seen in the story of desert sanctuary. When God commanded the Israelites to build Him a sanctuary in the desert, He told them it must point west – away from the rising sun. Not east. If it pointed east there would be a temptation for people to go there and worship the sun as it came up each morning. God wanted to avoid the problem altogether and so He told Moses exactly how He wanted the sanctuary to be built – facing west.

So this is why the day ends at sunset in the Bible. And in this story also (the one involving Paul) the first day of the week began at sunset. When I say sunset I don't mean sunset Sunday, but sunset Saturday.

Why Are These Things Important?

The reason why it is important to understand when days began and ended in the New Testament, and in the Old, is because the day that was just ending when Paul started speaking until midnight was a Sabbath.

The Sabbath is a reminder that God as our Creator. It is the birthday of the world celebrated on a weekly cycle. The fact that God made us is actually the only reason why we worship Him. Take this fact away and we might still worship, but the deepest reason for doing that is gone. Think about it. What is the difference between idols and the true God of heaven? Idols can't do anything, or make anything, but God made all things. We worship God because He made us.

Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.
² Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song. ³ For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods. ⁴ In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. ⁵ The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land. ⁶ Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker; ⁷ for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care. (Psalm 95:1-7)

Returning to our story now, why did Paul start speaking around sundown Saturday evening? Is it that all the Christians in Philippi were busy at their shops and

businesses all day and then, when they had finished their work, they finally had enough time to come and listen to Paul until midnight? If we were telling a story about ourselves this might be the way it would go. But that's not how they did things in New Testament times. These believers were resting on the Sabbath and when the Sabbath was over they were already together. So they shared a meal. They were ushering out the Sabbath and, since Paul had to leave the next day, they cherished every moment they could have together. Moments became hours and Paul talked on until midnight.

We can say, This is all fine. They did things one way, we do things another. They worshiped on Saturday, we worship on Sunday. A lot of things are different now. Taking one example, back then they didn't have blue jeans. Now we do. Some things are different and it's OK if they're different. After all, there's no command in the Bible about wearing blue jeans. True. But there is a command about keeping the Sabbath day holy.

The Sabbath is the seventh day of the week – the day before Sunday. Sunday is the first day of the week. The Sabbath begins, not at sun up Saturday morning (or at midnight), it begins at sunset Friday. And it extends for a full twenty-four hours – from sundown Friday until sundown Saturday (see Leviticus 23:32).

The Sabbath has gotten a lot of bad press, and for no reason. It's not about Jewish laws and restrictions, about working our way to heaven, or about getting along without faith. It's about building a relationship with the One who made us. And who is that? What does the following verse tell us? "Through him all things were made. Without him nothing was made that has been made" (John 1:3). It's telling us that God created our world through His Son, and that's Jesus. So the Sabbath is about honoring Jesus.

Jesus is more than just our Friend and Savior. He is these things, it is true, but He is more. He is also our life Giver. He is the One through whom God made all things (see Hebrews 1:1-3). Is this something we can afford to forget? And if you think this is something people could never forget, let me ask, did you know that the Son was involved in creation before I mentioned it and quoted verses supporting this idea from both the gospel of John and the book of Hebrews? Did you know before reading this paper that the Son is the One through whom God made the world? If this came as a surprise to you, that's pretty good evidence that the religious world has forgotten it. That's why you didn't know these things before. (If you did know them already, I commend you for being an unusually careful Bible student. These are points many people miss.)

In our day and time we don't have many actual idols. But in every school our children are being taught that God did not make the world, that the world made itself. That's called evolution. Satan is trying his level best to take from mankind every awareness of the fact that God is our Creator, that we owe our existence to Him.

Jewish laws? The Sabbath was given to mankind in Eden long before there were Jews. Human works? The word "Sabbath" means "rest." How is resting the same as working? A lack of faith? "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible" (Hebrews 11:3). Speaking for myself now, when I keep the Sabbath I can afford to rest because I believe in what God has already done for me through Christ and that what He has done for me is a completed work. (There are other things He is still doing for me. See Hebrews 8:1-3.

But those things don't compete with what He has already done. Christ is not at cross purposes with Himself.)

Can we keep the Sabbath every day? Some people might want to say so, but then how would you get any work done? And if you never worked, you wouldn't be obeying the Sabbath commandment. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work" (Exodus 20:9). So if someone did try to keep the Sabbath every day, doing that would actually break the Sabbath commandment. The commandment says to rest on the seventh day, but it also says to work on all the other six days. God wanted the seventh day to be different from other days. He wanted it to be special – a day we would spend with Him. Why do we need laws to make us want to do this? Isn't Jesus our Friend? If we love Him, why wouldn't we want to spend time with Him? It puzzles me why people try so hard to remove what is actually an opportunity to spend a whole day with Jesus.

Can we keep the Sabbath by worshiping on Sunday? I'm sorry. It escapes me how anyone can keep the seventh day holy by worshiping on the first day.

All such arguments take us precisely nowhere. The only way to please God is by doing what He says. Not once in all the Bible does God ever condemn someone for obeying Him. He condemns people for having hard hearts, that's not obedience, and anyway, why can't we obey God with a sense of overflowing gratitude and thankfulness for what He has done? Resting on the Sabbath means resting in God's completed work. It means believing that what He did through Christ was for us. That's why we can sink back into His love and be at peace. God doesn't ask us to make the Sabbath holy. He has already made it holy. What He asks is that we keep it holy by spending that day with Him in loving obedience to His will.

Conclusion

If we want to be New Testament Christians, we should do the things New Testament people did. I'm not talking about wearing strange clothes. Some things change and it's OK for them to change, but there are other things that have not changed and will never change. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). The fact that we need to obey God is another thing that never changes. He won't tell us what kind of pick up truck to buy. On a spiritual level it doesn't matter. But He does tell us (and has already told us) what day to set aside for worship.

That's what Paul and the others were doing in the story we've been discussing in Acts 20:7. When Paul spoke until midnight it was because he was going to leave the next day. He spent the night hours of the first day of the week with fellow believers. He was getting ready for a trip that would continue as soon after the Sabbath as he had enough daylight to travel. He and the others were together at supper time because they had spent the seventh day together keeping the Sabbath holy.

In the present case, it would normally be correct to translation "first day" as *Damíigo azlíí' góne'* – especially if we're describing the light hours of the day. Sunday is the first day of the week. But when we look closely at Acts 20:7 this way of translating the expression gives a wrong idea. In the present context, it would be more accurate to say, *Damóo Yázhí i'ú'áqgo*.