

# Galatians 4:24 in the Navajo Bible

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Áko díí hane' ch'íní'ánígíí bee ak'idi'dootííhi át'é. Jó, díí asdzání naakiígíí éí bee aha'deet'áanii naakiígíí yaa halne'. La' éí Héígar, Dził Sáinaidéé' bee aha'deet'áanii yaa halne', éí naalte' danilíi doo biniyé áhoolchíí. (Galatians 4:24)<sup>1</sup>

These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. (Galatians 4:24)<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

The Navajo translation of this passage is excellent, although I should mention that the words *Jew dine'é bi-* are added in vs. 21 preceding (*Jew dine'é bibee haz'áanii nihee ádíhólnííh danohsinii, bee haz'áanii áninígíí dasidoots'áá'*, "Tell me, you who want to be under the [Jewish] law, are you not aware of what the law says?"). It is the topic that requires comment in this case, rather than the wording.

We can keep the Ten Commandments in such a way that we feel in bondage to them. If they are not in our hearts, they can seem oppressive to us. But this is not the way things have to be. James refers in one place to "the perfect law that gives freedom" (James 1:25). And in the book of Hebrews we read this:

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 By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.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).

Are Paul, and James, and the author of Hebrews all talking about the same law? Well, yes. The perfect law that gives freedom – the law that God promises to write on our hearts, and without which we do not have a new covenant relationship with God –

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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.

that same law is one part of what Paul has in mind when he urges the Galatians not to be in bondage any more. (I say "one part." The other part – and it is the main part – has to do with circumcision.) Is there a conflict here?

## What Is It that Changes?

Actually there is no real conflict. Each writer is viewing the same set of facts from a different point of view. But it is the same set of facts in each case.

This last point requires further comment. Does the law say the same things when each of the above writers is looking at it? When James looks at the law and sees freedom, and when Paul looks at the law and sees the potential for bondage, is it the same law? Has the wording changed? For that matter, does the wording change when God writes His law on our hearts? The answer is concealed within the question. When we say the word "law" (not "laws") that already tells us nothing has changed. The law in the Old Testament still says what it says when God writes it on our hearts in the New Testament. Some things have reached their fulfillment, but not one word of it has changed. If my saying this takes anyone by surprise, notice Jesus was making a similar point when He said,

I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. (Matthew 5:18)

In regard to everything being accomplished, remember Jesus said many times that He would come again. This has not happened yet. We are still here. And so not everything is accomplished, none of the wording has changed; the law Jesus goes on to describe in the verses following this one is still in full force and effect today.

So what is it that makes the old covenant old and the new covenant new? The difference is that in the one case the law is written on stone and in the other case it is written on flesh – on human hearts and minds. The law itself does not change, but our attitude toward what He says does change. It is possible to be in bondage to a good and holy law. It is possible to do this, but not necessary. If our hearts are right with God, the same law we had served as slaves can bring freedom.

We speak of the old covenant and the new covenant as though the difference between old and new were a change of some kind in what God requires. That is not it at all. The change is in us. It is something the Holy Spirit does in our hearts. We now serve "in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code" (Romans 7:6). Notice that Paul speaks of a new "way," and not a new "code." The code does not change. (I'm talking especially about the Ten Commandments here.) But our way of approaching it does. The law God writes here is the same as the law He writes there. The difference between the two covenants is called conversion. In a miracle of grace God changes us so that in Christ we become new creatures – creatures on whose hearts He can write His law.

Christ died on the cross in order to change us, not His Father's law. He came to reveal the Father, not to change Him. God does not change. He loved us before and He loves us now, so we can be glad He doesn't change (see Malachi 3:6; James 1:17).

## Is There a Way to Get This Wrong?

If the law of God is oppressive to us, which part of it is disagreeable? Whichever part that is, that's the part the Holy Spirit has not yet been able to write on our hearts. There is still a work of grace that remains to be done. The Holy Spirit's work within us is not yet complete.

Paul addresses himself to "you who want to be under the law" (vs. 21). To those who want to be free from the law – if this were Paul's intent – I would ask, how much of the law do you wish to be free from? If being free from the law means breaking it, how much of the law must we break in order to achieve our desired freedom? Let us come down to cases. If being free from the law about the Sabbath means breaking the Sabbath, then being free from the law about honoring our parents must mean dishonoring them, but we are not through yet. At this point we are only free from two of the commandments. There are eight more to go. We must worship other gods, make idols, blaspheme God's holy name, kill, commit adultery, steal, lie, and even at this point we are not through. In addition to all this we must covet. Now at last we are free! Or did I get something wrong here?

If this is God's ideal for mankind, surely society has achieved it. One Christian writer puts it this way:

Those who teach the people to regard lightly the commandments of God sow disobedience to reap disobedience. Let the restraint imposed by the divine law be wholly cast aside, and human laws would soon be disregarded. Because God forbids dishonest practices, coveting, lying, and defrauding, men are ready to trample upon His statutes as a hindrance to their worldly prosperity; but the results of banishing these precepts would be such as they do not anticipate. If the law were not binding, why should any fear to transgress? Property would no longer be safe. Men would obtain their neighbor's possessions by violence, and the strongest would become richest. Life itself would not be respected. The marriage vow would no longer stand as a sacred bulwark to protect the family. He who had the power, would, if he desired, take his neighbor's wife by violence. The fifth commandment would be set aside with the fourth. Children would not shrink from taking the life of their parents if by so doing they could obtain the desire of their corrupt hearts. The civilized world would become a horde of robbers and assassins; and peace, rest, and happiness would be banished from the earth.<sup>3</sup>

Is this a form of Christianity Paul would recognize? Is it God's ideal of freedom for mankind? If it is, why would Christ have to come and die? We were already in a condition like the one described above before He came to our world. Indeed, the fact that we had gotten ourselves into a mess like this is the reason why He came! This is

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<sup>3</sup> Ellen White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 585.

exactly the kind of situation He came to reverse. So saying Paul's gospel points us back into this type of anarchy seriously distorts what the apostle was saying.

Christ did not die on the cross in order to set us free from the law, but from sin, which is the breaking of the law (see 1 John 3:4). "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Being free from sin is one thing, but being free from the law itself (as opposed to the condemnation of the law) would mean being free from God, because the law of Ten Commandments is a description of God. It tells us what He is like.

People routinely miss Paul's intent when he speaks of the law as he does. Even while he was alive people were quoting him as saying, "Let us do evil that good may result" (Romans 3:8a). Notice what his response to this was: "Their condemnation is deserved" (vs. 8b). Yes, it is possible to misunderstand Paul. People have been doing it for a long time.

Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. <sup>16</sup> He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. (2 Peter 3:15-16)

No one would claim that Paul actually wanted us to lead sinful, lawless lives. My thought experiment above was hypothetical. Many, however, would like to split the difference with Paul. They want him to authorize freedom from the Sabbath and then the rest of the law is something they could deal with. But God's government doesn't work like that. Once we start disobeying the commandments, it doesn't matter which one.

For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker. (James 2:11)

## Is There a Way to Get It Right?

Paul's readers were turning to a religion of externals – to circumcision, to a calendar full of special feast days and fasts, to a religion devoid of faith. We must understand the nature of the problem he was dealing with if we wish to understand his response to it. In Galatians 5:2 Paul does not say,

Neeznáago bik'eh ó'oo'nííhii bik'eh dahinoohnáá ládáá', Christ éi t'áadoo biniyéhi da nilí.<sup>4</sup>

A rough gloss of this would be, If you live according to the Ten Commandments, Christ will be of no value to you at all! I repeat, that's what he *didn't* say. What he did say was this:

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<sup>4</sup> For the term *neeznáago bik'eh ó'oo'nííhii* see Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13; 10:4.

Nihaah nídahidínóolgish ádanihi'diilyaa ládáá', Christ éí t'áadoo biniyéhi da nilí. (Galatians 5:2)

NIV translates the verse like this: "Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all" (Galatians 5:2). These words are so pointed and so powerful that we should take special care to apply them within the context he himself is developing. If misapplied, such words could be misunderstood, and not only that, they could be dangerous. The idea Paul was driving at – with all available force – was that circumcision must not be allowed to compete with faith. Anything that competes with faith competes with Christ, and this must go.

Does obedience to God's commandments compete with faith? We should be careful how we answer this question, because it is clearly unbiblical to pit the Son against the Father. Jesus submitted to His Father in everything. They were one in heart and purpose (see John 10:30) and in other ways that go beyond human understanding.

When He was here on earth, the Son's topic was the Father, and after Jesus returned to heaven and poured out the Holy Spirit on the disciples, the Spirit's topic was the Son. Let us be very clear that the Son did not come to revise His Father's will (or testament), as though the Father requires this and this, but the Son requires something else. He came to carry out His Father's will, and to show us how to carry it out. Let us not develop a theology that destroys the close relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for the sake of our convenience. That's not the right way to do theology.

Taking the words that Paul points in one direction and pointing them in another, will bring us to conclusions other than those he had in mind. Getting people to ignore the commandments of God was no part of Paul's intent – on this occasion or any other.

## Conclusion

Paul's theology is immensely rich and deep, and we know that God revealed the gospel to him for the purpose of passing it on to others. So Paul was making exactly the points in his letter to the Galatians that God wanted him to make. And yet, having said this, we must bear in mind Peter's remark that Paul's "letters contain some things that are hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16). If we understand Paul in a way that's too easy (Just get rid of the Sabbath, how hard is that?), we may not be understanding him correctly. Some things Paul writes will always be "hard to understand." A facile understanding of Paul is generally not a correct one. We must preserve all the inherent difficulty in his writings as part of our heritage from this great apostle.

It is the work of the Holy Spirit to help us rightly divide the Word of truth. Sometimes the Spirit strikes heavy blows, as needed, but we must not lose our balance when He does this. The truth is always humbling and sometimes it not easy to discern. It took a special revelation from the Holy Spirit for two early disciples to realize that Jesus was sitting in front of them at their own dinner table (see Luke 24:30-31). How much more do we need the Holy Spirit to help us understand the deep things of God!