

Mark 2:27-28 in the Navajo Bible

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Áádóó anéidoo'niid, Háá'áyííh jí éi diné bá ályaa, nidi diné éi háá'áyííh jí doo bá áho'diilyaa da; ²⁸ éi baa Diné Silíí'ii háá'áyííh jí nidi bee bóhólnííh. (Mark 2:27-28)¹

Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸ So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27-28)²

Introduction

Some passages seem to have waited for the day when they could be translated into Navajo, and this is one of them. The Navajo 2000 *Diyin God Bizaad* translation captures the intent beautifully. But what is the passage's intent? What does it mean? Is Jesus saying here that He, as the Son of Man, has the authority to make something even so important as the Sabbath change or go away? If this is not it, then what is He saying?

What Jesus says about the Sabbath is one thing. Another is what the Sabbath says about Him. We think of Jesus as One who was born a human child, lived a sinless life, and died on the cross for our sins. And of course it is true that He did these things. But there is much more to learn about Jesus than that He was born, lived sinlessly, and died. Some of what we need to know about Him can only be seen clearly through the lens of the Sabbath.

The Cross

The death of Jesus

In our study of Mark 2:27-28 we'll be talking about some broad themes and to do this we need background information. To understand the Sabbath, with all that that says about Jesus, we must understand the cross, and the reverse is also true. So let us start at the cross and ask what exactly was happening there. We know that Jesus died on the cross, but what role did the Father play? Or was He involved at all?

About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"- which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46; see Psalm 22:1)

When Matthew quotes Jesus as saying that the Father had forsaken Him, that's not a figure of speech. It really happened, and had to happen if Jesus' death was to have saving

¹ Navajo Bible quotations are from *Diyin God Bizaad. The Holy Bible in Navajo*. Revised edition. New York: American Bible Society, 2000.

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value for sinners. The death Jesus died had to be that of sinners who are finally rejected by God and cut off from Him, without hope. If Jesus had not died a sinner's death, He would not be able to offer sinners life (see 2 Corinthians 5:21). On the cross, Jesus took our place and died as we would have to die if He had never come to save us. What would our situation be without Him? That's what Jesus had to experience on our behalf.

On earlier occasions Jesus predicted not only His death but His subsequent resurrection on the third day. So He knew what would happen (see Luke 12:49-50), i.e., that He would die on Friday, remain in the tomb over Sabbath, and rise again Sunday morning (see Matthew 27:63; Mark 8:31; Luke 18:33). But on the cross this knowledge was withdrawn. On the cross Jesus was not merely enduring pain and dying for a while, but was extinguishing His own existence in order to establish ours. If it were necessary He would completely and permanently cease to be, if only we could live. This is the gospel. As one writer puts it,

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."³

The English word "forsaken," used in Matthew 26:46, is translated from Greek *egkataleipō* ("leave behind; forsake, abandon, desert"). The clause it appears in was not original. Jesus was quoting a Psalm, where the Hebrew word is *āzab* ("leave, forsake, loose").⁴ In context Jesus was not saying, Where are you? as in, Where have you gone? I can't feel your presence. He could feel it. Instead He was saying, Why have you rejected me? At the cross the Father was treating Jesus as though He had personally committed all the sins ever done by a human being (see 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 John 2:2). If not, then what does "forsaken" mean? On the cross Jesus was truly taking our place, by which I mean He was experiencing not God's absence, but His wrath. This is the same wrath that those will feel who reject His mercy and are finally lost.

The death of the wicked

As strange as it might seem to say so, the only way to understand the death of those who die in a lost condition – separate from God – is by studying the death of Jesus on the cross. In the same way, the only way to understand the life God requires of the obedient Christian is by studying the life of Jesus before the cross. In either case we don't understand ourselves until we understand Him. Christ must be the starting point and the ending point of our discussions concerning human nature, holiness, life, death, and everything else that concerns us.

As we think of the connection between the way Jesus died and the way lost sinners die, consider where Jesus' death occurred. He died on a cross. This point might seem so obvious as not to require comment, but in fact it is worth stating and deserves considerable emphasis. Do sinners who reject salvation die on crosses? No, they burn in hell. But in some profound sense that we might not fully understand, Jesus' death is like theirs. If it were not, His death would not be an appropriate substitute for theirs (or ours) and we, like them, would all be lost and damned, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). So in what way was Jesus

³ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1898), p. 25.

⁴ See Psalm 22:1. Actually this entire psalm describes the events surrounding Christ's death. To get the most out of it, read Psalm 22 together with the crucifixion story in the gospels. You'll see what I mean.

taking our place when He died on the cross? Where is the similarity? In what way does Jesus' death (by crucifixion) resemble that of sinners (by burning)?⁵

Jesus was not burned on the cross, and sinners are not crucified in hell. But in both cases the death we are talking about is one of complete separation from God. At the cross, when the Father poured out all His wrath on the Son just when He needed Him most, that separation – combined with the weight of all the sins we have committed, and that everyone else has committed, or ever had, or ever will commit – crushed out His life. Separation on this scale was not something the Son could deal with.

I should clarify that that the Father did not take Jesus' life on the cross; Jesus Himself freely gave it (see John 10:17), but the separation from the Father that He experienced there provides the context in which the events occurred. Jesus once said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). And yet at the cross they were wrenched apart and became, as it were, two. This is not the type of death people die when they grow old or have some sort of fatal accident. It is what John calls the "second death" (see Revelation 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8). On the cross, Jesus could no longer see beyond the grave. He died in a state of complete, and to all appearances final, separation from God.

Jesus' sacrifice for us withheld nothing and its value extends to every person living in every age of history (see Hebrews 7:25) – anyone who will respond with faith. In John 3:16 this is what the word "whosoever" means. There is nothing limited or limiting about the atonement Jesus provided for mankind on the cross. If you are a sinner, He died for you. His life can be yours.

What do these things tell us
about Jesus?

The things we are saying would be true in any context, but why are we saying them here in a paper on Mark 2:27-28? What Jesus was willing to do for us on the cross tells us much about who He is. The cross reveals something about God's love for mankind that could not be made known in any other way. It was the focal point of every aspect of Christ's life while among us (see Luke 12:49-50). That's where His path led *to*. But, if I could say it this way, where did His path lead *from*? We have talked about the one. Let us now talk about the other.

⁵ It might seem odd to say that sinners die in the flames. If the fires of hell burn on forever, and if sinners who go there keep on suffering forever, how can we say that they ever reach the point of death? But if they don't die, then they never receive the punishment for sin that Paul describes 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). The punishment for sin is not eternal dying, but eternal death. Eternal dying would mean eternal living, but eternal living (eternal life) is the gift of God. At least Paul says it is. The popular assumption is that people enter the flames when they die. I challenge that notion. People enter the flames alive. Otherwise their experience in hell would be no more remarkable than cremation. Daniel 12:2 says the wicked dead "awake . . . to shame and everlasting contempt." Notice that the fire comes *down* on those who are destroyed by it. They do not go down to the fire, nor does the fire come *up* to them. "But fire came down from heaven and devoured them" (Revelation 20:9). When John goes on to speak of fire falling on "the dead" (vss. 13-14), these are those who Daniel says "awake . . . to shame and everlasting contempt" (emphasis added). The passages we have reviewed here will appear confusing only until such time as they are studied together.

The Son

"Son of Man"

Consider the Navajo term *Diné Siljí'ii*. In the context of Mark 2:27-28, the word *Diné* ("man") tells us that the Sabbath was provided to meet, not just our needs, but also those of Jesus. If the Sabbath was made for man, and if Jesus was a Man, then the Sabbath was made for Him as well as for us. His needs, on the day the story of Mark 2:27-28 took place, included getting some lunch. By rubbing enough grain between His hands to satisfy hunger, He was not breaking the Sabbath and neither were His disciples.⁶ The Sabbath commandment does not require us to go without food. It was made to supply our needs, rather than prevent us from satisfying them. It does not take, but gives. Here our focus is on the word *Diné* ("man").

The word *Siljí'ii* ("The One who Became [*siljí'*"]") goes further to emphasize that Jesus, although a Man, was not always so. He became the Son of Man by reason of human birth, but from eternity He has always been – and remains – the Son of God. There is no new doctrine here. And yet Mark 2:27-28 is the perfect place to say these things and to emphasize them, because Mark 2:27-28 says them in the context of the Sabbath. The Sabbath shows that Christ is One with the Father, and has been so from the beginning, which in turn shows that to be a man He had to *become* a man. Hence the special significance of the Navajo term *Diné Siljí'ii*.

"Son of God"

Consider for a moment the corresponding term, "Son of God." Saying that Jesus is the Son of God does not mean He comes after the Father or is anything less than the Father. It does not imply that the Father and Son have different characteristics, but just the opposite – that their essential characteristics are the same. In saying this it is not my purpose to diminish the force of the passage where Jesus says, "The Father is greater than I" (John 14:28). Instead my point is that in a sense we can't fully understand, Jesus is equal with God. This is a New Testament teaching that we can accept or reject, but it is there. As the Son of God, the pre-existent Word participated with the Father in the creation of our world, and in fact was the active Agent of creation.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.² He was with God in the beginning.³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. (John 1:1-3)

Thus, when God said "Let there be light" (see Genesis 1:3), the voice we would hear if we could be there to hear it, was not the voice of the Father, but of the Son – expressing with perfect fidelity the will of the Father. In creating our world the pre-existent Word was the audible expression of God's will, just as in saving our world this same holy Being became its visible, bodily expression. The great God of the universe created our world (and every other) through His Son. He created everything. And yet without the Son, He created nothing. All this is directly related to our understanding of the Sabbath.

⁶ Jesus' reference to David's act of going into the sanctuary and taking the consecrated bread, which only the priests could eat, must be interpreted as a legal hypothetical. Thus, Even if I were doing something on the same level as what David did, I would be justified in doing so. But that is not the case.

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways,² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. (Hebrews 1:1-3)

In the context of Mark 2:27-28, Jesus could claim to be Lord of the Sabbath because He brought the Sabbath into existence. He did this by creating the world and all it contains in six days and resting on the seventh. He set the seventh day apart and made it holy (see Genesis 2:1-3), consecrating it to the task of reminding us where we came from, i.e., that we are here because of His creative act.

Why would God (Father or Son) want us to forget that we owe our existence to Him?⁷ Is this somehow unimportant to know? Throughout the Bible, idolatry is portrayed as the worship of anything other than God. Why is idolatry wrong? For that matter, why should God care of we worship idols or not, so long as we worship Him too? Because the things we make did not make us. We made them. People make idols; idols do not make people. So idols can never deserve human worship. This in turn is why God can never fail to deserve human worship – because He made us. The Sabbath is a weekly assertion of our dependence on God. Rightly kept, it is a wall of protection against every form of idolatry, because it constantly reminds us that we owe our existence to God.

The Sabbath

The thoughts put forward here are built into the text of the passage we are studying. How could Jesus be Lord of the Sabbath, as the text says He is, without being Lord of the six days which preceded the Sabbath? And how could He do this if He – in union with the Father – had not done the creating that took place then? Is it harder to rest (on the seventh day) than to bring a world into existence (on days one through six)? No! If Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath, He is Lord of creation, which the Sabbath commemorates, and is one with the God of the universe. The claim Jesus makes in Mark 2:27-28 is equivalent to saying, "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30). The Sabbath is both from Him and for Him. All its significance revolves around Him. Christ's words in this passage are a claim to deity.

The Sabbath does not merely satisfy our need to understand God. It satisfies our need for companionship with God – to spend time in His presence, apart from any distractions that could pull our attention off in other directions. If God is leading us by His Spirit, we need Him and have an awareness that we need Him. We have not only the need but the desire to spend time with Him. He has a similar desire to spend time with us. For these reasons He does not offer Himself grudgingly. He does not offer to meet with us for a moment or two at a shrine. He offers us an entire day – twenty-four hours. On the cross He gave everything to mankind that an infinite God could give. No Christian would reject the cross, and yet many think nothing of rejecting the Sabbath. Anyone tempted to do this should consider his or her actions carefully. God wants us and offers Himself to us. Beyond a certain point, to reject what He offers is to reject the One who offers it.

⁷ Recall that the first word of the Sabbath commandment is, "Remember . . ." (Exodus 20:8).

The Sabbath, like the cross, tells us important things about who Jesus is, it helps us understand our own thoughts and attitudes toward Him, and ultimately it provides a test of our loyalties to Him. If we truly believe that Jesus is coming soon (as I do), and if we believe that when He comes He will take His people to be with Him, is that something we look forward to? Or would being with Jesus in heaven, or anywhere else, merely be a perpetual interruption keeping us from things we would rather do? Pushed to an extreme, it's not just a matter of preferences. When He comes, some will want to flee from Him (see Revelation 6:15-16), and some will be overjoyed to see Him (see Isaiah 25:9).

Every Friday evening when the sun goes down we have an opportunity to reflect on our attitudes toward spending time with Jesus. How do we feel about devoting a whole day to Him, instead of just a worship hour, and not just anytime, but on the day He chooses rather than the one we might pick? When we finish thinking through these issues, that's how we would feel about spending eternity with Him. The Sabbath is an especially appropriate test for God's people living now, in the years just before the long awaited second coming.

The Sabbath tells us who Jesus is. It satisfies our need to understand Him and to be with Him. It also tests our willingness to obey Him, but there's so much more than obedience involved when we see beyond what some perceive as merely letters on stone and trace the words back to the hand that wrote them. When we love Jesus and really want to be with Him there's a glad response and a desire for fellowship with Him that is impossible to achieve in odd moments borrowed from an otherwise full schedule. Relationships take time. Thus, the Sabbath is not about how words are spelled, or where Moses put his commas. It's about relationships, or rather about one very special relationship. It's about Jesus.

Conclusion

There are wrong ways to keep the Sabbath and we should avoid these. But what reason would God have for telling people not to keep the Sabbath at all, or to keep it on a day that breaks the connection between it and His role as Creator? If we keep Sunday (the first day) because Jesus rose from the grave, that looks back 2000 years on the basis of redemption. If we don't keep a rest day at all, or admit that we're keeping one, but merely meet on Sunday because it's convenient, that looks back to nothing. In that case why meet at all? Doing so has no significance. But if we keep the Sabbath (the seventh day) because the Son in union with the Father called our world into existence, and with it our first parents, that looks back some 6000 years on the basis of creation. Since the Sabbath looks back, rather than forward, I don't see how anything that happens later could change what the Sabbath looks back to.

And why should God want us to forget what it looks back to? Why should He want us to forget who He is or the reason for our existence? Jesus died to save us, but also created us in the beginning as the preexistent Word (see John 1:3). Does it make our salvation any more secure to lose our awareness of the exalted relationship the Son had with the Father before the world began and still has now? What do we gain by ignoring such things?

You can turn away from the Sabbath without turning away from Jesus. Generations of Christians have done this, not realizing what their actions imply. But you can't turn away from the Sabbath without having a diminished concept of who Jesus is. The Sabbath must be brought together with the cross in order to capture in its fullness the biblical teaching of who God sent into our world to be our Savior.

As regards Jesus' own Sabbath keeping, we need to be clear that eating a handful of grain does not break the Sabbath now and it didn't then. The Pharisees might have thought it did, but what does that demonstrate? Are the Pharisees our standard of right and wrong? Jesus did not break the Sabbath in our story or on any other occasion. Instead He showed by His example how He had always intended it to be kept – something far different from the Jewish concept.

I like the way the Navajo translation of Mark 2:27-28 portrays Christ. First, the expression *Diné Silǫ́'ii* ("The One who Became a Man [*Diné*]") resonates nicely with the statement that "the Sabbath was made for man [*diné*]" (vs. 28) – something the English does as well. But more than this, it tells us that, while Jesus was a man and had human needs, He was not always so. Before becoming a man He created all mankind. This brings Jesus into our discussion of what the Sabbath is, it brings the Sabbath into our discussion of who Jesus is, and it places all of this in the context of how our world came to be. The way the passage is translated into Navajo brings with it a flood of insight into these important themes.