

Philippians 3:10-11 in the Navajo Bible

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Christ íiyisí bééhasin doogi laanaa nisin, áádóó hadziil nilíinii bee dadziztsáádéé' náázdiidzáhígíí t'áádóo nídí shíł bééhózin doo, áádóó bik'ee ti'hodzooznii'ígíí hoł ałts'áá' anisk'iiz doo, dadziztsáago ájí't'é yéęgi át'éego áníst'ée doo, ¹¹ ts'ídá shá bohónéedzáago daneeznánii bitahdéé' náádideeshdáígíí laanaa nisin. (Philippians 3:10-11)¹

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:10-11)²

Introduction

From the passage quoted above it is clear that Paul expected to die before Jesus would return and looked forward to being raised to life again in the resurrection at the end of the age. He regards this as an accomplishment worth striving for ("and so, somehow, to attain to," *ts'ídá shá bohónéedzáago . . . laanaa nisin*). Paul, of all people, knew that resurrection was not a wage paid by God for good works, but he clearly saw it as a blessing God would bestow on those who loved and served Him. The wish he expresses in vs. 11 is a wish to remain faithful so as to receive this gift from God when the time should come for it. As such, it was something he wanted very much. Why?

We can say Paul wanted to take part in the resurrection because he wanted to be with Christ in heaven forever. Why? Not why did he want to be with Jesus, but why did he feel that resurrection would be necessary in order to get there? There must be some reason, and the subject matter is important enough that we ought to know what it is.

Resurrection

Paul uses the word "resurrection" ten times in nine passages. These passages occur in four of this letters. Five of them are found in one chapter (1 Corinthians 15). I list all ten for the reader's convenience below.

and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 1:4)

If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. (Romans 6:5)

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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But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? (1 Corinthians 15:12)

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. (1 Corinthians 15:13)

For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. (1 Corinthians 15:21)

Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them? (1 Corinthians 15:29)

So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; (1 Corinthians 15:42)

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who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some. (2 Timothy 2:18)

Natural Immortality

In two places (2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:23) Paul gives the impression that resurrection might not an issue after all, i.e., that we can go and be with Christ immediately. Is this impression accurate? Does Paul believe two things? Is he saying there is a resurrection in the above ten verses, and that there is not a resurrection in two others? Or are we missing something that would enable us to bring all twelve together into one model? The first passage that makes it seem no resurrection is necessary is this one from 1 Corinthians: "We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8). The other passage is from Philippians. I give it here with some extra verses to provide context and underline the words of special interest.

I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.²¹ For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far;²⁴ but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith,²⁶ so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me. (Philippians 1:23)

Is there a way to interpret the first ten verses in a way consistent with the popular understanding of the last two? Another way to ask the same question is whether there is any

way to interpret Paul's resurrection passages in such a way as to make resurrection no longer necessary? Reinterpreting the ten to accommodate the two might be difficult.

Alternatively, is there a way to interpret 2 Corinthians 5:8 and Philippians 1:23 in a way consistent with the idea of a resurrection? On the face of it this would be the easier approach. Interpreting two to accommodate ten makes more sense than interpreting ten to accommodate two. But how would we do this? There is a method that can be used. Find another passage that explains the first. In the present case, that passage is Romans 6:5.

If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. (Romans 6:5)

On the one hand Paul wants "to depart and be with Christ" (Philippians 1:23); on the other he assures us that we "will be united with him [i.e., Christ] in his resurrection" (Romans 6:5). "Be with"; "be united with." Is there any similarity here? The two phrases are virtually identical. So if the words are almost identical, why do the passages they come from seem so different? The element that separates them is time. It is crucially important how we map the passages onto time.

The meaning so many people find on the surface of Philippians 1:23 is that as soon as Paul breathes his last, he arrives in heaven. In this case, there is an irreconcilable difference between Paul's saying, "depart and be with Christ," on the one hand and, "be united with him in his resurrection," on the other. The one happens 2000 years ago while the other happens in the near future. Such an understanding imposes 20 centuries of separation.

But is this only way to understand the passage? Would it not be possible to reverse the association and say that when Paul is awakened at the resurrection, it is as though he had just breathed his last? In this case there's no conflict. Paul falls asleep in Jesus at his death (see 1 Corinthians 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20, 51; 1 Thessalonians 4:13, 14, 15; 5:6, 10), he rests peacefully in his grave until Jesus comes, with no awareness of the passage of time, and his next conscious thought is one of being taken up to meet the Lord in the air. It is true that being with the Lord in this sense is not consistent with remaining here in the body. But when do these things happen? This question helps answer our questions. Things happen at different times.

If Philippians 1:23 (or 2 Corinthians 5:8) were the only passage in the Bible dealing the future life, we would not interpret it as I have just described. But it is not our only passage. There are so many places in the New Testament where Paul, and other writers, speak of a resurrection at the end of the age that we can't ignore what they say. To make sense of all of Paul's instruction, we must seek some such accommodation. It will be much easier to interpret Philippians 1:23 (and 2 Corinthians 5:8) in the context of what the other ten passages undeniably say than it will be to interpret the ten in the context of the two.

Discussion

Consider the following passage from 1 Thessalonians, where Paul clearly associates the resurrection with the second coming of Jesus.

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. ¹⁴ We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵ According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage each other with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)

Notice that in this passage Jesus does two things: He dies, and He rises to life again. Paul says, "God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him" (vs. 14). To bring someone with Jesus, the bringing will have to involve going where Jesus goes, or doing what Jesus does. We just said what He does. He dies. And He rises again. When the saints fall asleep in Christ, they are joining Jesus in death. He dies; they die. That's one part of the parallel. What's the other part? Jesus rises again on the one hand; and "God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him." In this verse, the words "bring with" mean taking the saints from earth to heaven, not taking them from heaven to earth. They stand in parallel with the idea of Jesus rising again. He rises; they rise. That's the second part of the parallel.

"We who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord" (vs. 15) will not precede those who have fallen asleep in Christ. What does this mean? What it does not mean is that the die go directly to heaven when they die. If it did mean that, why would Paul use the word "sleep"? He makes clear in vs. 16 and 17 that when Jesus comes He first awakens the sleeping saints, then deals with those who are still alive. The words "rise first" in vs. 16 stand in parallel with "be caught up together with them in the clouds" in vs. 17. So rising has to do with leaving the earth, not just with leaving the grave.

The sleeping saints are awakened and caught up to be with Jesus in the clouds, then those who are alive and remain follow them. They too are caught up to be with Jesus in the clouds. That's what the word "together" means in the following sentence: "After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (vs. 17). Those who were just resurrected are caught up first, then those who remain are caught up next. They are "caught up together with them." The first group goes, then the second group goes, and when this happens they are together – with each other and with Jesus.

Conclusion

Paul's letters contain some things that are "difficult to understand" (2 Peter 3:16). But difficult to understand does not mean impossible to understand. What he says all makes sense when we consider all of what he says. If we take parts here and there, separate them from the rest, and make a theology out of that, we are headed for trouble. The bottom line in regard to how people get to heaven is, resurrection. Jesus taught that the dead fall asleep now and that they rise later by resurrection (see John 6:39, 40, 44, 54; 11:11-14, 24). Lazarus rose by resurrection. Jesus rose by resurrection. Paul hoped that he would one day rise by resurrection. There is a pattern here. Resurrection is a firmly biblical teaching. Modern attempts to set it aside should themselves be set aside. Our faith must rest solely on the Bible.