

Philippians 3:20-21 in the Navajo Bible

Copyright (c) 2009 by Frank W. Hardy, Ph.D.

Nidi nihí yá'aash dine'é daniidlí, áko áádéé' Yisdá'iinílti, Bóhólníhii Jesus Christ, t'áá íyisí nideínídlíigo biba' ádaniit'é. ²¹ Éí bibee adziilii bee t'áá ałtsoní nidi bídahólníhgo íidoolíilgo yíneel'á, éí nihits'íís doo dahayóígíí t'áá bí bits'íís ayóó át'éhígi át'éego nihá ánéidoodlít. (Philippians 3:20-21)¹

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. (Philippians 3:20-21)²

Introduction

The present contrast is between our "lowly bodies" and Christ's "glorious body." As in so many other cases, the Navajo translators have found a graceful way to convey their thought. Saying *doo dahayóígíí* captures the painful truth that our present bodies are not much. We live in them. We are grateful for them. God blesses us with health if we follow the rules He has laid down for their care and maintenance.³ But compared with Christ's glorified body, they are not very glorious and are often subject to infirmity, weakness, and disease.

Christ Has a Body

One point to notice about this comparison is that it is appropriate to make a comparison. Just as we have bodies, so Christ also has a body. It is true that "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24), and yet when Christ took human flesh and was born in Bethlehem – an event we celebrate every Christmas – He was not pretending. He actually took our humanity upon Himself. Otherwise He did not take it. In that event, what does the word "incarnation" mean? As one writer puts it so well,

Christ did not make believe take human nature; he did verily take it. He did in reality possess human nature. "As the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same." He was the son of Mary; he was of the seed of David according to human descent.⁴

This fact is bedrock for Christian belief. As Paul puts it, "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel" (2 Timothy 2:8). Our Savior is still

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

² 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.

³ See S. I. McMillen, M.D., *None of These Diseases* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1963).

⁴ Ellen White, *Review and Herald*, April 5, 1906, par. 4.

human today – and still divine. It is not the case that Christ stopped being human when He started living again after the cross. God gave His Son to the human race.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)

Nor did God give Him to us only to take Him back again. "God's gifts and his call are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29). If we can say this about any gift God has ever given, we can say it about this one. God's gift to us in Christ was not a loan. When Jesus was born and placed in a manger, He had a body. When He was crucified and rose to life again, He had a body (see Luke 24:39). Today, at the right hand of the Father, Jesus has a body. And when He comes again, it will be a bodily appearance.

We Will Have Bodies

There is a corollary to all of this. When we are raised to life again at the resurrection, we also will still have bodies – transformed "so that they will be like his glorious body" (Philippians 3:21, above), it is true, but bodies nonetheless.

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. ²² For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. ²³ But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. (1 Corinthians 15:20-23)

When Christ walked on water He was not a ghost, as the disciples thought (Matthew 14:26; Mark 6:49), and when He met with the disciples on the evening of the day He rose from the dead He was real. Otherwise He was unreal. If we think so, what does that say about our faith?

They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. ³⁸ He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." ⁴⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. (Luke 24:37-40)

Christ today has "flesh and bones"; He has "hands and feet." And when we are raised to life at the end of the age, so will we. The glorious body that Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 15 is not a disembodied spirit. It is not less of a body than we have now.

All of this speaks to the matter of what happens to people during the time between their death and their resurrection. During that time are they disembodied spirits, such that the body remains here but the soul goes there? Many people believe something along those lines, but it is only because they want to hold such beliefs. The Bible teaches nothing of the sort. It teaches that the body and the breath go together to make a soul, or "living being" (see Genesis 2:7). When the author of Ecclesiastes says "the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes 12:7), the word "spirit" just means "breath" (Hebrew *rû^{ah}*).

[T]he LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. (Genesis 2:7)

A person is no longer a living being when his breath (*רוח*) "returns to God who gave it." Before he got breath from God all Adam had was a body; all we have after the breath returns to God is a body. There is no such thing as a disembodied "soul" because the biblical definition of a "soul" is that it represents a combination of body and breath. When the breath returns to God, the soul ceases to be – until God reunites our bodies with breath again at the resurrection.

Consider an illustration. A table is a combination of boards and nails. When the nails are removed, the table does not go to be in some special place. It simply ceases to be. Boards without nails do not make a table any more. When those things are taken apart which make a table when they were together, the table is no longer has any existence. Only its pieces remain. Put them together again and you have a table again. That's what happens at the resurrection. The parts and pieces that make us what we once were are brought together and once more we become a living soul (or as the NIV says, "a living being"). The only difference between what we are before death and what we after resurrection is that the body God gives us when He raises us is now changed to be "like his [Christ's] glorified body" (Philippians 3:21).

Discussion

And what are we in between these two times? We aren't. The breath returns to God. The body turns to dust. We have no existence during this interim period. That is why we look forward to Christ's return, when He will raise our loved ones to life again and we can be reunited with them. If our dead are immortal and go directly to heaven at death, why should Jesus ever need to return? Removing Christ from the process of conveying our dead to heaven is no different from removing Him from any other part of Christian theology. We should not be in the business of removing Him from anything. He is the Resurrection and the Life. His appearing is the blessed hope – but not if He has no reason to come.

Jesus is not only the Resurrection and the Life. He is also the Way and the Truth. We need to tell the truth about the unconscious state of man in death when we talk about these things and not go beyond the plain, simple facts that Scripture gives us. We might think those facts are too plain and too simple. We might think they don't give us all the comfort we might wish to have. But the truth is the truth. The dead are dead. They sleep until the resurrection.

And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. (John 6:39)

For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." (John 6:40)

"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day." (John 6:44)

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. (John 6:54)

This is what Jesus clearly taught and this is what His followers understood Him to mean. Consider one other example.

Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." (John 11:24)

When our loved ones die, the message has not changed. The message is the same. Jesus will raise them up at the last day. Until then they have not been raised and have no way of going to heaven until Jesus comes personally to escort them there – when He raises them up at the last day.

Conclusion

The important point to notice is that going to heaven does not mean leaving the body behind. It means receiving a glorified body. Another way of saying this is that going to heaven does not mean having less than we had before; it means having more. What we had before was a body. When Jesus takes us to heaven He does not take our bodies away, but gives us better ones – ones that "will be like his glorious body" (Philippians 3:21).