

Romans 3:23 in the Navajo Bible

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Jó, diné t'áá ádzítso ádił nida'dziisdzí', áko Diyin God yee ayóó át'éii bi'oh dahiznil'aah. (Romans 3:23) ¹

[F]or all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God[.] (Romans 3:23, NIV) ²

Introduction

Most are familiar with the way KJV translates this verse. "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." I grew up assuming this meant, "For all have sinned, and [have] come short of the glory of God." In other words, everyone has sinned at least once. But that's not what it means.

KJV

For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God[.] (Romans 3:23, KJV).³

What throws one off in KJV is the word "come." It so happens that, by a quirk of English grammar, "come" can have present habitual meaning ("Every day I **come** back home from work at a certain time") or serve as a participle. As a participle it can be used in constructions such as, "I **have come**" (just now). Or it could be used to say, "I **had come**" (before the weather turned cold).

I grew up reading the King James Version (KJV) and in Romans 3:23 had always simply assumed that, because of the words "have sinned" in the first clause, the word "come" in the second clause really meant "[have] come." I assumed that the two clauses were directly parallel. Thus, "all [**have**] **come** short of the glory of God." The words supplied by KJV allow the reader to take the verse's meaning either way. But which is right? Before attempting to answer this question, let me list a number of English translations which, like KJV, use the word "come" in the second clause of Romans 3:23⁴

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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³ The King James Version is in the public domain.

⁴ CJB = *The Complete Jewish Bible* (Jewish New Testament Publications, 1998); DBY = *The English Darby Bible* (Online Bible Foundation and Woodside Fellowship of Ontario, Canada, 1884/1890); RWB = *Revised Webster Bible* (The English Revised 1833 Webster Update 1995 with Pierce's Englishman's-Strong's Numbering System) (Online Bible Foundation and Woodside Fellowship of Ontario, Canada, 1995); WEB = *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments, in the Common Version, with Amendments of the language by Noah Webster, LL.D.* (*The English Noah Webster Bible 1833*) (Online Bible Foundation and Woodside Fellowship of

since all have sinned and come short of earning God's praise. (Romans 3:23, CJB)

for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; (Romans 3:23, DBY)

For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; (Romans 3:23, RWB)

For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; (Romans 3:23, WEB)

for all did sin, and are come short of the glory of God – (Romans 3:23, YLT)

NIV

[F]or all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God[.] (Romans 3:23, NIV)

I repeat the NIV rendering of Romans 3:23 at the beginning of this section for the reader's convenience. In the New International Version (NIV) the verse is unambiguous because of yet another quirk of English grammar. I pointed out above that the participle of "come" is "come." The participle of "fall" is not "fall," but "fallen." From this we can see immediately that NIV is not using a participial form, nor for that matter is KJV. Both are in fact using a word which the translators indeed to be read as a present habitual. Thus, "all have sinned [in the past] and fall short of the glory of God [in the present]." Other English translations which use similar wording include the following.⁵

for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God; (Romans 3:23, ASV)

For all have sinned and fall short of the¹ glory of God. (Romans 3:23, CSB)

for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God; (Romans 3:23, ERV)

for ^oall have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (Romans 3:23, ESV)

Because all people have sinned, they have fallen short of God's glory. (Romans 3:23, GWN)

Ontario, Canada, 1988-1997); YLT = *The English Young's Literal Translation of the Holy Bible 1862/1887/1898, by J. N. Young.* (Online Bible Foundation and Woodside Fellowship of Ontario, Canada, 1988-1997).

⁵ ASV = *American Standard Version* (Public Domain, 1901); CSB = *Holman Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003); ERV = *English Revised Version* (1885); ESV = *English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books/Good News Publishers, 2007); GWN = *God's Word (God's Word to the Nations, 1995)*; NASV = *New American Standard Version* (The Lockman Foundation, 1986); NET = *The NET Bible* (Biblical Studies Foundation, 2004, 2005); NKJV = *New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982); NLT = *New Living Translation*, 2nd ed. (Tyndale House Publishers, 2004); NRSV = *New Revised Standard Version* (National Council of Churches, 1989); RSV = *Revised Standard Version* (National Council of Churches, 1952, 1971).

for ¹all ^ohave sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (Romans 3:23, NAS)

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23, NET)

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (Romans 3:23, NKJV)

For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. (Romans 3:23, NLT)

since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; (Romans 3:23, NRSV)

since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (Romans 3:23, RSV)

Other

for they have all sinned, and failed of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23, MRD)⁶

All of the translations mentioned above give the predicate in the second clause of Romans 3:23 a present meaning. In KJV this may or may not be immediately clear, but that is the meaning the translators had in mind.

There is one translation that runs contrary to this current of opinion. It gives the predicate in question a participial meaning ("and [have] failed of the glory of God"). But in this opinion it stands alone.

Navajo

Jó, diné t'áá ádzíłtso ádił nida'dziisdzíí', áko Diyin God yee ayóó át'éii bi'oh dahiznil'aqah. (Romans 3:23)

The Navajo translation is quite explicit about the meaning of Romans 3:23 and captures the intent of the Greek, if not the exact nuance. *Jó, diné t'áá ádzíłtso ádił nida'dziisdzíí'* means, "For all have sinned." This is the part that tells us everyone has sinned in the past. It then goes on to say, *áko Diyin God yee ayóó át'éii bi'oh dahiznil'aqah*. This means roughly, "and each one [*da-*], time after time [*hi-*], falls short [*-'aqah*] of God's greatness." The Navajo verb stem *-'aqah* is imperfective, which would be consistent with the idea of actions taking place over a period of time in the present.

The difference between this and the Greek is that the Greek word *husterountai* (< *hustereō*), because it is passive, means "to lack, be lacking, go without." So here the idea is not that an action takes place over time, but that a state of affairs persists over time. The difference between an action and a state of being is the difference between "do"

⁶ MRD = Murdock (Murdock Translation of the Peshitta) (Public domain, 1851). The Peshitta was an early translation of the entire Bible into Syriac – a language similar to the one Jesus spoke.

and "be." But the intent is the same. And when we take not just the stem (-'aqh), but the whole word (*dahiznil'aqh*), and not just the word but the whole expression (*bi'oh dahiznil'aqh*), one would have to look a long time to find a better rendering. The post position *bi'oh* in itself means almost exactly, "to lack, be lacking, go without [it]."

The point that I'm making, and the point of the verse under review, is that sinners do not merely offend once; they offend in an ongoing manner over time. I should say that differently. We offend in an ongoing manner over time.

Conclusion

So where does this leave us? Are we in an endless sin loop from which there is no escape? No! We would be if it weren't for Jesus' intervention in human history. But Paul tells us, "For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace" (Romans 6:14).

If this seems confusing and you're very aware of your faults, thinking it might be impossible to overcome them, consider an example – Paul. Paul is the one who led out in the first persecution of Christians in Acts 8:1-3. Looking back on his earlier life Paul says, "Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief" (1 Timothy 1:13). Toward the end of his life Paul wrote the short letter that we know as the book of Philemon. Below let me share two excerpts from this letter.

Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints. ⁸ Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹ yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul— an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— ¹⁰ I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. (Philemon 1:7-10)

I am sending him— who is my very heart— back to you. ¹³ I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴ But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. (Philemon 1:12-14)

Who wrote this passage? Was it "a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man"? No. That man was gone and an entirely different man had taken his place. What happened to the Paul (Saul) we see in Acts 8:1-3 that transformed him into the Paul we see in the book of Philemon? Christ. Christ changed Paul, over time, into a kind, loving, considerate person.

If we fix our attention on Jesus (as Paul did) and think of others instead of ourselves (as Paul did), Christ can change us too – just as He changed Paul. Jesus can change the way we think, what we want, and our relationships with other people. It is possible to learn to love what God loves and to hate what He hates. Was Paul without sin? No. But he had the transforming power of Christ in his life.