

Romans 5:13 in the Navajo Bible

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

Diyin God yee has'aanii t'ah doo Mózes yeidee'aah yéedáá' nahasdzáán bikáa'gi ádił ni'iidziíh hóló, nidi bee haz'aanii ádinđáá' ádił ni'iidziíh doo ach'į' wólta' da nít'ée'. (Romans 5:13)¹

[F]or before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law. (Romans 5:13)²

Introduction

A quick glance at the Navajo and then at the English will show that some words have been added in the Navajo. The English (and the Greek) just says, "law given." The Navajo says "[God's] law given [to Moses]."

It is true that the law comes from God. It is also true that the law was given to Moses. I'm not saying that either of these additions is wrong. But there are some things here that could be, and frequently are, misunderstood. For example, saying that Moses received the law from God at a moment in time is not the same as saying the law came into existence then.

There is a parallel between the written word and the living Word. When Jesus was born to Mary His human life began. But that is not when He came into existence. "He was with God in the beginning" (John 1:2). In the same way, God's law did not come into existence at the moment when God wrote it down for Moses on tablets of stone.

Was There Law Before Sinai?

Paul says sin was in the world before the law was given. And yet "sin is not taken into account when there is no law" (Romans 5:13, above). So when sin is taken into account, that should be evidence that God had made clear what His requirements were and that people ignored them. For example, when Cain killed his brother Abel, was that wrong? It was not wrong if there was no law against killing. And yet God held Cain responsible for what he did. This shows that he knew right from wrong and that there was a standard of right and wrong which he knew about and could learn from.

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

Similarly in the story of the flood, God sent water on the earth to destroy the people who lived long ago. Why? Were they sinful? They weren't if there was no law to tell them what they did was wrong. I believe God sent the flood for good reason, and hope we can agree that the people who died in the flood were sinful. If they were, there was sin. And if there was sin, there was law, because "sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). God had a standard of right and wrong before Sinai. Another line of evidence supporting this position is what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah (see Genesis 18-19).

What Is Law?

There are many ways to approach the question of what law is, and there are many different laws we could talk about, but ultimately the law of God is a description of God (see Exodus 2:1-17). It is a description of what God wants us to do, yes, but it is more than this. The reason why it says what it says, is that God is who He is.

Ultimately the question is whether God existed before Moses. If the law is a description of God, it has existed as long as He has – not in written form perhaps, but the principles it contains were there from the beginning (see John 1:2)..

If the law is an expression of God's character, the principles it contains are timeless. They do not come into existence at a moment of time, as for example when Moses climbed Mt. Sinai, nor did they change because Jesus died on the cross. The only way to change God's law is to change God, and God does not change. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). This is why Jesus tells us, "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).³

What About the Sabbath?

What about the Sabbath? That part of the law seems changeable, doesn't it? Wasn't the Sabbath just for the Jews? And because we are not Jews, we shouldn't have to keep that commandment any more. True or false?

Before going further, let's remind ourselves what the Sabbath is and then we'll be in a better position to ask whether this is something that could change or that we would want to change, and whether Jews are the only ones to whom it should apply.

The Sabbath is a twenty-four hour period of time – from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday. What makes this time special? The short answer is, God made it holy. "And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done" (Genesis 2:3). God established the first Sabbath by setting all His work aside and making Himself available to Adam and Eve in Eden.

³ If someone claims that everything was accomplished at the cross, I point out that Jesus promised to come again. He has not done it. We are still here. Not everything is accomplished.

Is this something we would want to change? Would we really want God to be too busy for us? If He *were* too busy, we would be wishing He weren't. Again, would we want God to spend time only with Jews? I doubt it. But in any event, the fact is He desires the companionship of all His human children. That's why the Sabbath is not just for the Jews. We are all His children. The commandment says, "nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates" (vs. 10). The commandment does not exclude any living thing. The alien who works for us is to be allowed to rest. Even the animals who work for us are included. No one is to be made to work all the time. God made mankind and every other living thing, and for this reason all are to rest.

Actually, two social institutions come down to us from a time before sin. The Sabbath is one, and the other is marriage. In this context, the Sabbath is no more Jewish than marriage. Jews kept the Sabbath. They also practiced marriage. So how is the one institution any more Jewish than the other? Both were designed to be universal.

We've talked about God setting time aside for us. There's another side to this. We need to set time aside for Him. This requires planning. God has told us what bloc of time He will be setting aside, and if we really want to meet with Him, we'll have to choose the same time. If we want to meet with Him at a time other than the one He specifies, we could end by missing the appointment. Anyone who has ever traveled by air – or bus, or train, or whatever – knows how this works. When an airline publishes its schedule, it will not be useful to try to argue by saying, You can schedule the flight when you wish, but I have my own plans and will be expecting the plane two days from now. We meet the plane when it comes, not when we have time to go to the airport. Is meeting an airplane something we take more seriously than meeting with God? He has published His schedule in advance. Here's what it says:

Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. (Exodus 20:9-10)

If we say we love Him, but show by our actions that we are unwilling to meet His schedule – the day He has specified – how much depth is there is such love? His love for us ran deep enough that it led Him to spend a lifetime here – in the person of His Son, under conditions that didn't make it any fun. And we can't spend a day with Him? Something doesn't add up here.

If we look forward to being in heaven and spending time with Jesus there, but are unwilling to spend time with Him here, could it be that what makes heaven attractive to us is something other than Jesus? If so, something's wrong in our hearts and we need to know it. For example, if it's the beautiful golden streets, or the home Jesus promises to give us (see John 14:1-3), or the fact that all our friends will be there, or whatever, these things are good, but they are not what make heaven what it is. They're just extras. Fringe benefits.

The heart of God yearns over His earthly children with a love stronger than death. In giving up His Son, He has poured out to us all heaven in one gift.⁴

⁴ Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 21.

This one gift pays our entire debt, so there's nothing left to owe. That's from our point of view. But on God's part, there's nothing left to give. What He offered at the cross was His Son. That's the entire package – all heaven in one gift.

Having bared His heart to us on the cross, Jesus wants to know our hearts in return. If the question whether we would enjoy spending time with Jesus, this is a fair question to ask and He lets us express an opinion every Friday evening at sunset, when the Sabbath begins. We are free to answer His question in any way we see fit. He does not try to prompt us, or trick us, or put words in our mouths. He really wants to know our hearts. The cross shows how Jesus feels toward us and He has a right and a need to know how we feel toward Him. Our answers are our own and they accumulate gradually over the course of a lifetime. It is entirely fair of Him to search out our hearts in this way.

In this context, the Sabbath is not just any test. It is an absolutely perfect test. I say this for more than one reason. One reason is that it is so completely evenhanded and fair. When the Sabbath comes each week, where is the quadriplegic in a wheelchair who can't rest by faith in what Jesus has done (and continues doing) on his or her behalf? What God requires in the Sabbath commandment is not a pilgrimage to Mecca or any other difficult thing. What He asks, instead, is the absence of doing. He asks us to set aside our busy preoccupations and take a break. Rest. And spend that time in spiritual communion with Him.

One way to do this is by worshiping with others who share our faith in Christ. Another is by going for a walk where you, and the whole family, can admire the things God has made in nature. In both cases, these are perfect times for fellowship. Worship with others. Get out and enjoy nature. These times are refreshing on more than one level and can be deeply spiritual. The fact that the whole day is available keeps things from seeming hurried. We all need times like this.

Discussion

So is this hard? Is it too much for people to handle? What a burden to have to rest once a week! But of course whether it is a burden or not depends on where our hearts are. Must we always think of the Sabbath as an obligation? Is spending time with the One who made us (see John 1:3) just another rule to follow – or to set aside for sophisticated theological reasons? Why shouldn't we consider it a privilege that the Creator of the universe is so interested in us that He wants to spend twenty-four hours with us?

In my view, the fellowship and mutuality that follows from heartfelt Sabbath keeping is one reason why God created our world. He did not create man for the Sabbath (see Mark 2:27), but He did create the world so He could enjoy our company – and not just on the way to town or during half time at some sporting event. He created planet Earth because He knew the man and the woman would need a place to stand. He created air because they would need to breathe. He created food because they would need something to eat. But the point of all this enormous amount of work was so that God would have someone whose companionship He could enjoy and who would enjoy being

with Him in return. This is not about rules. It's about relationships. The Sabbath is one of most spiritual of the commandments.

God made us because He wanted to be with us. In return He wanted us to know Him and have a close relationship with Him. Isn't this what the cross is all about, i.e., reestablishing a set of relationships broken by sin?

Conclusion

If we're talking about the Ten Commandments, Moses is not the point. His role in the production of the law was to stand there watching while God wrote it out. The other thing he did was to carry the tablets down the mountain, but none of this added anything to what they say. It's not his law. It's God's law. When we keep the law we are not expressing loyalty to Moses. We are expressing loyalty to God. The words the Navajo translators added in Romans 5:13 are accurate, but unnecessary. The passage would say what it says without them.