

Romans 6:14 in the Navajo Bible

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Háálá bąąhągi át'éii doo nihee ádinááhólníh da doo. Jó, bee haz'áanii Mózes baa deet'áanii doo biyaa soonil da, nidi Diyin God bibee ajooba' baa dadzínóhłigo dahinohná. (Romans 6:14)¹

For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. (Romans 6:14)²

Introduction

In the Navajo Bible at Romans 6:14 some words are added. The text does not say *bee haz'áanii Mózes baa deet'áanii* ("the law given to Moses"). It just says *bee haz'áanii* ("law"). Does this make a difference?

Being Under Law

The extra words limit Paul's intent unnecessarily. Isaiah is saying more than just that when we are under grace we are not under the law of Moses. He is saying that when we are under grace we are not under any law. It sounds extreme to say it this way, but I didn't write the passage. Paul did. What does he mean?

What about us?

Let's start with what Paul doesn't mean. He doesn't mean that by being under grace we become lawless and obey nothing. It would be possible to misread Paul as saying, at one time we were lawless and that made God angry. Now we're lawless but it doesn't make God angry, because we're under grace. In this model the only change that occurs when a sinner comes under grace is on God's part. His attitude changes when we accept grace and that's what salvation is about. You can hear people say things like this in any number of Bible churches, but Paul is saying something quite different.

What Paul says is, "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ² By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" (Romans 6:1-2). He's not talking about whether to obey the law or break it. Of course we obey God! The obligation to obey God's law does not go away when one is under grace. What changes is the sinner's attitude.

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.

We were sinners before. That's why Paul asks, "Shall we go on sinning . . . ?" (vs. 2). And he answers, No, we must not go on sinning. So what is the alternative? Obedience. Grace does not change God, it changes us. It leads us to obedience. This is not something an unsaved person does.

[T]he sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. (Romans 8:7)

The question is not whether a saved person obeys God. He does. (An unsaved person certainly doesn't.) Instead, the question is whether the obedience of a saved person is the basis for his/her right standing with God. It is not.

What about Jesus?

Only one person has ever worked out a perfect righteousness while living under the law, and that is Jesus. Jesus was not under grace. Paul says,

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, ⁵ to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. (Galatians 4:4-5)

Jesus obeyed His Father's will perfectly. And so there was no need for grace in His case. He well deserved His right standing with God. We do not. For us right standing is a gift. It comes only by grace. But this was not true of Jesus.

At His baptism the Father said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). The favor He enjoyed from the Father was not a gift. He deserved it. And because His life illustrates perfect righteousness, He can offer that righteousness to us as a free gift.

When we are under grace, Christ's perfect holiness is credited to our account. It is as though we were just as holy as He is. And in Christ we are. In Christ the Father accepts us as though we had never sinned.

Being Under Grace

There are two questions to raise at this point. First, can we fail? Can we fall from grace? And second, can we succeed? Is it possible to obey God?

Can we fall from grace?

Can we fall from grace? Yes, by severing our relationship with Jesus we can fall from grace. Any relationship involves two parties. If it does not, it's not a relationship and we're fooling ourselves. But if there are two parties, either one can break the relationship. If a man and woman are married, they have a relationship. If the man divorces the woman, the relationship has been broken. If the woman divorces the man, the effect is the same. A relationship is something that must be maintained. If it is not maintained, it's capable of being broken. See appendix, below.

In the present case, God assures us that He will never be the one to end His relationship with us. He says, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). If this is what he says, there is something else that he does not say. What He does not say is: Never will you leave Me; never will you forsake Me. There's an important between "I" and "you." Don't confuse what God says about Himself with what He says about you.

Consider an example. Some argue that once a baby is born to an earthly mother and father, it cannot be unborn, and that this illustrates the nature of our relationship to God. Once we are born, in the second birth, we can't be unborn later. This is a strong argument, but it begs an important question. A baby, once born, can't be unborn. True! But it can die.

When I was just a few months old I got pneumonia in both lungs, and then developed croup. Croup is a medical condition that involves uncontrollable coughing.³ By itself it can be fatal. Combined with double pneumonia, I had only a limited chance of surviving. That night my mother and father took turns staying up with me, fearing that I wouldn't live until morning. I did live, and I thank God for this. But some children die. Unfortunately this happens all the time. It's not impossible.

I'm not talking about people who have never had a relationship with God in the first place, but about people who come to Christ and then turn their backs on Him. Any person who does this is back under the law again. There is no longer both justice and mercy in his or her relationship with God. There is only justice. Only law.

Nor am I talking about people who make mistakes, i.e., they have good intentions but slip up once in a while. Instead I'm talking about people who know God's way and then reject it, returning to the world and all it's wicked ways. This also is not impossible. Unfortunately people make bad choices like this all the time. When they do, that doesn't mean they never knew God in the first place. It means they fell from grace.

Is it possible to obey God?

Quite apart from occasional slip ups – or constant slip ups – can we obey the law of God? Is God's law something people can keep? By ourselves, no, we can't keep it. But that's not our context. At issue is not whether a godless person can keep God's law, but whether a converted Christian can keep it. There's a big difference between these two cases and that different is the Holy Spirit.

Where does God say that His law is impossible to keep? I don't recall seeing such a passage. What God does say – in the second commandment of the law – is this:

"[F]or I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing love to thousands who love me and keep my commandments." (Exodus 20:4-6, NIV 1976)

Some translations say "a thousand generations," but this is not accurate. The Hebrew simply says *ʾalāpîm* ("thousands"). Is this true? Do thousands love God and keep

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Croup>.

His commandments? Paul says, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Both statements are true. But if we want examples, there are over thirty of them in Hebrews 11. "By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did" (vs. 4). "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going" (vs. 8). And so on. Abraham is not the only one whose faith was counted as righteousness. Each person mentioned in Hebrews 11 as an example of faith obeyed God and was accounted righteous – just like Abraham (see Romans 4:3).

Notice how this works. "By faith Abel . . ."; "By faith Noah . . ."; "By faith Abraham" Is there a pattern here? These people were under grace. Their relationship to God was based on faith. It was not mediated by law alone. And their faith was counted for righteousness, just as our faith. By faith these people did what God said to do, and by faith we also can do what God says.

Discussion

But doesn't what we have been saying defeat the purpose? What's the point of being under grace if we still have to obey? Doesn't grace set us free from the law? Not for a moment! It sets us free from sin, which is the breaking of the law.

If I have this wrong, what does Paul mean when he says, "What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!" (Romans 6:15). For Paul, being under grace was not a license to sin. Paul's concept of grace does not free us from obedience. Our concept might, but his does not.

For Paul, being under grace does not mean that we continue in sin. On the contrary, to be free from the condemnation of the law we must obey it. The reason why "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1) is that, by grace through faith, they stand obedient in Christ. If we choose sin, that choice takes us back under the condemnation of the law. Grace makes us free to obey.

Conclusion

Freedom is something God wants us to have. But to free us from the ten commandments God would have to free us from Himself. That's not what the gospel is about. God sent His Son to set us free – not from Himself, but from sin. In the new covenant God does not promise to erase the law, but to write it on our hearts. "Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law" (Romans 3:31).

Appendix

I believe in eternal security, but my concept of eternal security is that security is eternal because Christ is eternal. There is nothing fatalistic about such a concept. We have security if we have Christ. Our security is in Him. Who would wish to say that our security has some other basis? No, if we cling to Christ, we are secure in Christ. If we do not cling to Him, we have let go of the only One who can make us secure.

It may be that the word "if" will make some people feel uncomfortable. If we cling to Christ . . . , if we do not cling to Him But "if" is a biblical word and the use I'm making of it is a biblical concept. Consider the following verses, drawn from a radio sermon by the late Joe Crews.⁴

All these verses are really saying the same thing. Willful sin shatters the relationship by which eternal life is obtained. There is an eternal "if" in every consideration of eternal security. "If we walk in the light . . . the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin." 1 John 1:7. "If that which ye have heard from the beginning shall remain in you, ye also shall continue in the Son, and in the Father." 1 John 2:24. "If any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him." Hebrews 10:38. "If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch." John 15:6. "If a man keep my saying, he shall never see death." John 8:51. "If thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off." Romans 11:22. "If ye do these things, ye shall never fall." 2 Peter 1:10. "For we are made partakers of Christ, If we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end." Hebrews 3:14. "If we endure, we shall also reign with him: If we deny him, he also will deny us." 2 Timothy 2:12 (RSV). "If we sin willfully . . . there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins." Hebrews 10:26. "If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." 1 John 2:15. "Ye are my friends, If ye do whatsoever I command you." John 15:14. "If ye live after the flesh, ye shall die." Romans 8:13.⁵

I hope that statements about having security only in Jesus will not make anyone feel uncomfortable. If we want to be secure with or without Jesus, we're asking for something that God does not offer us. Our security is wrapped up in and abides exclusively in Christ. "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:12).

My problem with the popular concept of eternal security, or the perseverance of the saints, is that it does not involve persevering. Once obtained, it operates whether a person perseveres or not. Those who believe in the perseverance of the saints should not be offended when I talk about clinging to Jesus, as a branch clings to its vine.

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

⁴ If anyone wishes to look down on the idea of quoting a radio preacher, Joe Crews had an M.A. in systematic theology.

⁵ "Can a Saved Man Choose to Be Lost?" Library of Sermons #2. Amazing Facts, Inc. You can read the entire sermon online. I know, the link is too small to read, but it needs to be on one line or the computer won't know how to interpret it correctly. Just click on the following link:
<http://www.amazingfacts.org/FreeStuff/OnlineLibrary/tabid/106/ctl/ViewMedia/mid/447/ID/14/LNG/en/SC/R/Default.aspx?7=Can-a-Saved-Man-Choose-to-be-Lost?>