

“Absent from the body and present with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8)

This phrase is commonly used to teach that at death a Christian transcends this world to be with Jesus in a bodiless state. But a bodiless state is definitely not what Paul desires. He affirmed that the one thing he did not desire was to be “unclothed,” i.e. disembodied. Paul points to the new body, an immortal body which we “will be clothed with: our house which is from heaven” (2 Cor. 5:2).

An immortal soul or spirit that survives the body as the living, functioning, essential person results from the Greek influence that entered the Church centuries ago (actually from the 2nd century) and has devastated the Gospel message. Paul uses the same expression about being “clothed” in 1 Corinthians 15:54 (NIV) and explains the sequence of events by which we achieve immortality. Immortality is acquired, not at the time of death, but at the resurrection when Jesus returns. The context both in this popular passage (2 Cor. 5:1-5) and in 1 Corinthians 15:53 along with many Bible texts gives us “the rest of the story.” As they say, a text without a context is often a pretext. 2 Corinthians 5:8 has been yanked from its context and made to say what it cannot possibly mean. Our reward (2 Tim. 4:8; Rev. 22:12) is to be raised from death (1 Cor. 15:23) at Christ’s return. Our entrance into the eternal Kingdom of God and His Christ (2 Tim. 4:1; 2 Pet. 1:11) must also await his return. However this single phrase in 2 Corinthians 5:8 is constantly quoted to prove that *at death* Christians immediately go to their reward in heaven in a disembodied state without benefit of Jesus’ return or the resurrection. Such an idea contradicts the rest of the New Testament and expressly Jesus’ statement that rewards occur “at the resurrection of the just” (Luke 14:14) and “when the Son of Man comes in glory” (Matt. 16:27).

Paul begins his discussion in 2 Corinthians 5 simply by explaining his desire to be absent from this present body, this frail, mortal, dying body in which we “groan” (v. 4; cp. “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” Rom. 7:24). Paul desires to be “clothed with our heavenly dwelling...because we do not wish to be unclothed [absent from the body] but to be clothed” (2 Cor. 5:2, 4), i.e., with our resurrected body (1 Cor. 15:21-23). To represent this temporal body, Paul uses figures such as “earthly tent” and “tent.” To represent our resurrected, undying body he uses more substantial figures such as “building,” “eternal house in heaven” and “heavenly dwelling” (twice).

Indeed, when we die this present earthly (mortal) body is “destroyed” (v. 1). That in itself is not what Paul desires. That condition is likened to being “unclothed” and “naked” (having nothing). To the contrary, Paul desires the opposite of “unclothed” and “naked.” He desires to be “clothed,” dressed up, so to speak, in our “heavenly dwelling.” “Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked” (v. 2-3).

The great resurrection chapter in 1 Corinthians 15 explains this further. “For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory’” (1 Cor. 15:53-54). Compare this with our text: “what is mortal will be swallowed up by life” (2 Cor. 5:4).

Our hope is not to become a disembodied spirit. Our hope is to have a new body, a substantial body, a “glorious body.” For that, we must wait for Jesus to come from heaven. “But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, 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” (Phil. 3:20-21). Paul was expressing his longing to be absent from this present “body of death.” He consistently desired the moment when he and all the believers will be present with the Lord, because to be present with the Lord is to be in possession of a body like his. Christians look forward to being present with Jesus *at his return*, equipped then with a new spiritual body. Only by this process can we come to be with the Lord. Paul said exactly that, too, in 1 Thessalonians 4:17: “**In this way** [and by no other] we will always be with the Lord.” ✧