

# Absent From The Body & Present With The Lord

Clergy and laity alike have often stumbled over some of the writings of Paul the Apostle. Scattered among the letters which he addressed to the churches are a few verses that almost seem to contradict what he wrote in other epistles. At least they have been interpreted as contradictions. But did the great, spiritual, straight-thinking Paul write confusing things? Or is the contradiction only in the way readers have twisted his words?

## **The apostle Paul wrote some things which are difficult to understand.**

2 Peter 3:15 And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; 16) As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.

A perfect example misunderstanding Paul appears in the first few verses of 2 Corinthians 5 where he speaks about life and death. His language has been understood by many to teach that the reward of the righteous is bestowed at the moment of death and that an immortal soul leaves the body to face an immediate reward or punishment. If this is the true meaning of Paul's words, we are faced with some serious inconsistencies within the epistles. Let us examine the verses in 2 Corinthians 5:1-8 and discover what Paul actually did teach on this crucial subject.

## **Let us first consider how Paul contrasts time, now [the things that are seen] and then [the things that are not seen].**

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. 17) For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; 18 While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.

## **Paul introduces an earthly house which is mortal, subject to death and dissolves, and a heavenly house which is immortal and eternal, not subject to death.**

2 Corinthians 5:1 For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

### **Important terminology:**

*Skene* ("tabernacle") = Transitory tent or house made with hands, easily dissolved on earth

*Oikoterion* = We have a permanent and incorruptible building not made with hands in heaven

Contrast: Earthly house, tent, dissolved vs. Heavenly building, eternal

### **An important fact:**

We **already have** the building in heaven **while we still live in the tent** on earth. Israel camped in tents during her pilgrimage across the desert. When they entered the Promised Land they built permanent buildings. While we are strangers and pilgrims on earth we live in our **bodily tent** but when Jesus comes we will receive our **permanent building**.

## What is the earthly tent?

Job 4:19 How much less in them that dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, which are crushed before the moth?

Job 10:9 Remember, I beseech thee, that thou hast made me as the clay; and wilt thou bring me into dust again?

## Peter and the earthly tent

2 Peter 1:13-15 Yea, I think it meet, as long as I am in this tabernacle, to stir you up by putting you in remembrance; 14) Knowing that shortly I must put off this my tabernacle, even as our Lord Jesus Christ hath shewed me. 15) Moreover I will endeavour that ye may be able after my decease to have these things always in remembrance.

Peter stated, "that shortly I must put off this my tabernacle, (tent)." Key question: When will he put on his building which God has in store in heaven? Answer: . . . "after my decease," or *exodov* = **departure**.

## The expression "made without hands"

Mark 14:58 We heard Him say, "I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands."

John 2:19-21 Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. 20) Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days? 21) But He spake of the temple of His body.

Hebrews 9:11 But Christ being come an High Priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building;

Jesus had a real body after His resurrection but it was an incorruptible, immortal, glorified body. It was not the result of human procreation but of a supernatural miracle of God who made His resurrection body.

Luke 24:39-43 Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have. 40) And when He had thus spoken, He shewed them His hands and His feet. 41) And while they yet believed not for joy, and wondered, He said unto them, Have ye here any meat? 42) And they gave Him a piece of a broiled fish, and of an honeycomb. 43) And He took it, and did eat before them.

## Paul states our condition while in the earthly house.

2 Corinthians 5:2 For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven:

Romans 8:19, 23 For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. . . . 23) And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.

These two scriptures are speaking of the same experience. The ultimate object in both cases is to change this mortal body into the immortal body and to change this "earthly house" into the "house eternal in the heavens." Please notice that in one verse Paul was "earnestly desiring to be clothed" with his house from heaven, and in the

other verse his “earnest expectation” was the “redemption of the body.” The comparison proves that this clothing from heaven takes place at the “redemption of the body.”

**A third option is now introduced, being unclothed or naked. While Paul is in his earthly house, he desires to be clothed with his heavenly house and not be unclothed or naked, [that is, without a body].**

What is meant by the term “unclothed”? Notice that Paul specifically declared that he did not desire to be naked or unclothed. We can be certain, then, that the unclothed state did not involve being with the Lord, since Paul did not desire it. In fact, the apostle made reference to being clothed with only two houses, the earthly and heavenly. In the unclothed state, he was neither in the earthly body nor clothed with the heavenly. That leaves only one possible explanation. To be “unclothed” or “naked” is the condition of death that is the interlude between the dissolving of the earthly house and putting on the heavenly.

2 Corinthians 5:2, 3 For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven: 3) If so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked.

### **When are we naked?**

Genesis 3:19 In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

### **There are three possible options:**

- 1) Living in the present tabernacle (clothed)
- 2) Being clothed upon with the heavenly building
- 3) Being in a state of nakedness (unclothed)

Some have claimed that the house which we have “eternal in the heavens” is the immortal soul with which we immediately enter into heaven when the earthly house is dissolved. But this could not be. The fact is that Paul is not talking here about the soul at all. He does not even once mention the soul in the passage or its context. He is simply contrasting the present life with the far more glorious life to come in heaven. He did not look forward to the sleep of death (being “unclothed”) when he would not be with the Lord, but he did long for the redemption of the body when he would be clothed with the “house eternal in the heavens.” While still in this life he would be clothed with a mortal body; and after mortality is “swallowed up of life,” he would have a heavenly, immortal body. But whether in the earthly tabernacles or house from heaven he would still have a body. Nowhere does Paul separate a soul from the body. It is either a body on this earth and being absent from the Lord, or it is a redeemed body in heaven and being present with the Lord.

All the individuals that the Bible records as having gone to heaven, have gone with their bodies. These would include: Enoch, Elijah, Moses, and even Christ Himself. The saints who resurrected with Christ must have also gone with their bodies along with Him when He went to heaven and waved the firstfruits of the harvest to come before the Father.

Matthew 27:52, 53 And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, 53) And came out of the graves after His resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many.

**Paul repeats these three options once again in verse 4 along with his desire for the heavenly body.**

### **Let us notice the link between 2 Corinthians 5 and 1 Corinthians 15:50-55**

2 Corinthians 5:4 For we that are in this tabernacle do [1] groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but [2] clothed upon, that [3] mortality might be [4] swallowed up of life.

## Key expressions in 2 Corinthians 5:4:

1. “unclothed”
2. “clothed upon”
3. “mortality”
4. “swallowed up”

1 Corinthians 15:50-55 Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood **[mortality]** cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption. 51) Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, **[being unclothed with no body in the grave]** but we shall all be changed, **[clothed upon with our heavenly bodies]** 52) In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. 53) For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. 54) So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. 55) O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?

Now let us take note that Paul used an argument that forever does away with the doctrine of the soul going to heaven at death. In one simple statement, Paul shattered the popular argument for natural immortality. He said, “we . . . do groan that mortality might be swallowed up of life.” 2 Corinthians 5:4. Obviously, mortality can only be swallowed up by immortality, or eternal life. Is this the passing of the soul from the mortal body at the hour of death? Let us look at it. What is there about man, according to the common view, which is mortal? The body. In addition, what is immortal? The soul. Assuming for a moment that this is true, then what happens at death? At death the body, which is mortal, does not become immortal, but loses all its life and crumbles back to dust in the grave. Moreover, the soul, which was immortal before, is no more than immortal afterwards. Is there any “swallowing up of mortality by life” here? Just the reverse! Mortality, or the mortal part, is swallowed up by death! There is not as much life afterward as there was before, because after death only the soul lives, while the body which was alive before, is now dead. That view is in contradiction to what the Word of God actually says. We must reject it.

Paul knew the Corinthians would not be confused by his language in 2 Corinthians 5 about mortality being swallowed up by immortality, because he had already written his first epistle to them explaining when that immortality would be put on. “. . . in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump . . . this mortal must put on immortality. THEN shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.” 1 Corinthians 15:52-54. When would death or mortality be “swallowed up?” “THEN,” Paul said. When is THEN? “In the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump.” How can anyone stumble over the plain language of these verses?

### **Does this change happen at death or at the second coming of Christ?**

Philippians 3:20, 21 For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: 21) Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto Himself.

### **The down payment guarantees that we will receive the heavenly building. Jesus is the firstfruits of the resurrected and the Holy Spirit is the guarantee that we will also be resurrected.**

2 Corinthians 5:5 Now He that hath wrought us for the selfsame thing is God, who also hath given unto us the earnest of the Spirit.

Phillips: Now the power that has planned this experience for us is God, and He has given us the Spirit as a guarantee of its truth.

2 Corinthians 1:21, 22 Now He which stablisheth us with you in Christ, and hath anointed us, is God; 22) Who hath also sealed us, and given the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts.

1 Corinthians 15:17-23 And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. 18) Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. 19) If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. 20) But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept. 21) For since by man came death, by Man came also the resurrection of the dead. 22) For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. 23) But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at His coming.

Romans 8:11 But if the Spirit of Him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, He that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by His Spirit that dwelleth in you.

Here is further positive proof that Paul was referring to the resurrection as the TIME to put on that eternal house. To both the Corinthians and the Romans, Paul emphasized that the Spirit was a pledge that they would be clothed with immortality. What did he mean? Of what is the Holy Spirit in our hearts and earnest or pledge? Is it a proof or assurance that we have immortal souls that will live on when the body is dead? Is that what Paul meant? No. The apostle makes it abundantly clear that the Spirit is a pledge of the redemption of our bodies at the resurrection.

Ephesians 1:13, 14 In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise, 14) Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of His glory.

### **At home in the body [our earthly body] and absent from the Lord**

While we live in this present, weak, temporal, corruptible tent we are absent from the Lord because we don't have our future, heavenly, incorruptible, immortal building.

2 Corinthians 5:6, 7 Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord: 7) (For we walk by faith, not by sight:)

Here we walk by faith because we are absent from the Lord. There we will walk by sight because we shall be present with the Lord.

Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Romans 8:24 For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?

### **Paul repeats his desire to be absent from the body and present with the Lord and not to be unclothed waiting in the grave.**

2 Corinthians 5:8 We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.

## **Please take note what it does not say.**

2 Corinthians 5:8 We are confident, I say, and willing rather **[that our immortal soul]** to be absent from the body, **[immediately after death]** and to be present **[immediately after death]** with the Lord.

Paul did not say that, “to be absent from the body” is “to be present with the Lord,” but that he **desires** or is **willing rather** “to be absent from the body” “and to be present with the Lord.”

## **When did Paul expect to be present with the Lord?**

1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent **[precede]** them which are asleep. 16) For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the Archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: 17) Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

## **Paul's three options:**

- 1) The living are now present in the body [the house or tabernacle] and absent from the Lord
- 2) When Jesus comes back, both groups will be absent from the body [tabernacle] and present with the Lord [in the building made without hands]
- 3) The dead in Christ are naked or asleep [no tabernacle or building]

## **The critical issue is to be accepted of Jesus**

2 Corinthians 5:9 Wherefore we labour, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of Him.

## **Paul's Earnest Expectation**

A related text that Paul penned to the Philippians has been twisted and misinterpreted much like 2 Corinthians 5. Here again Paul speaks of his “earnest expectation.”

Philippians 1:20-24 According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death. 21) For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. 22) But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour; yet what I shall choose I wot not. 23) For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: 24) Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you.”

First, let's clarify what Paul's “earnest expectation” really was in regard to being with Christ. Did he expect to be with Him at death? Not one text of the Bible teaches such a thing. Let the apostle answer for himself concerning his “earnest expectation.”

Romans 8:19 For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God.

What was that manifestation when the sons of God would be revealed? Verse 23 answers,

. . . we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body. Romans 8:23

Paul's earnest expectation and hope was for the time when his body would be redeemed.

He did not say one word in Philippians 1:20-24 about the TIME he would be with the Lord. Some have attempted to interpret this text as though Paul said he wanted to depart and be with Christ immediately, but the word immediately is not in the scripture. In these verses, Paul does not specifically state WHEN he will be with the Lord.

He only states his "earnest expectation" to be there. We have found from other scriptures that his expectation centered on the resurrection or translation of the body. Other passages further clarify without any question when the great apostle expected to be with Christ.

Romans 8:23 At the redemption of the body

1 Corinthians 5:5 In the day of the Lord Jesus

1 Corinthians 15:51-55 At the last trump

Colossians 3:4 When Christ our life shall appear

1 Thessalonians 4:16 When the Lord descends with a shout

2 Thessalonians 2:1 At the coming of the Lord

2 Timothy 4:7, 8 At "that day" (by which Paul means the second coming of Christ)

Paul had two conditions in view: to live or to die. Between these two, he was in a strait. The cause of God on earth drew him here, but he was weary from beatings, stonings, and bodily suffering. He almost felt that death would be desirable over the struggle of living. So evenly balanced were the influences drawing him in both directions that he hardly knew which course he preferred. Nevertheless, he said it was more needful for the church that he remain here to give them the benefit of his counsel and labor.

### **To Live Or to Die?**

Paul expressed the hope that "Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death." Paul tied life and death to a physical body, not some soul or spirit. The alternatives that drew him were either "to live" or "to die." He was "in a strait" between these two. If he lived, Christ would be magnified, and if he died a martyr's death, the cause of Christ would be magnified. It would be "gain" either way, both for him and for Christ.

But after considering the two alternatives, upon which he could not make up his mind (to live or to die), Paul is suddenly struck with a third choice, which he quickly declares to be "far better" than the other two. He described it as "having a desire to depart and to be with the Lord, which is far better." Better than what? Clearly, than either of the two he had just mentioned (living or dying). Again, we are reminded of Paul's overwhelming desire to be translated without passing through the "unclothed" state of death. That was his deepest desire. Once more, we are constrained to ask: When did Paul expect this translation to take place? Moreover, when did he anticipate the change from mortality to immortality? He answers:

Colossians 3:4 When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, THEN shall ye also appear with Him in glory.

When is THEN? At His second Coming. When will we appear with Him in glory? It will happen THEN, when He shall appear.

John agrees with Paul,

1 John 3:2 But we know that, WHEN HE SHALL APPEAR, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.

Think for a moment about the implications of that statement. John could not have believed that the righteous dead were already in the presence of the Lord. If so, they were able to see Him "as He is" at that very moment, and

they would already be changed into the “likeness” of Christ. However, he refutes the idea that any have seen Him yet and declares that it will all happen “when He shall appear.”

### **Translation or Resurrection?**

Finally, let us take note that in case Paul was not permitted to depart this life by translation and had to depart by death, he did not expect to be with Christ until the resurrection. He clarifies this in,

2 Timothy 4:6-8 For I am now ready to be offered, and the time for my departure is at hand. 7) I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: 8) HENCEFORTH there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me AT THAT DAY: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love His appearing.”

In the clearest possible language, Paul not only explains but also emphasizes that his reward will be given at the coming of Christ. Even though his departure in death was “at hand,” he did not expect to be with Christ immediately. He expected it “henceforth.” The crown of immortality was “laid up for me,” he said. He would receive it “in that day” with others who would “love His appearing.” Surely, those of us living today should anticipate that same glorious appearing when we too shall receive, with Paul, the crown of righteousness, which fadeth not away.

**In Paul’s writings the judgment was always in the future on a certain day. The judgment does not take place at the moment of death.**

2 Corinthians 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.

Acts 17:31 Because He hath appointed a day, in the which He will judge the world in righteousness by that Man whom He hath ordained; whereof He hath given assurance unto all men, in that He hath raised Him from the dead.

### **We can have the assurance of life even now**

John 5:24 Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on Him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.

John 6:40 And this is the will of Him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on Him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day.

1 John 5:11, 12 And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. 12) He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.

John 11:25, 26 Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: 26) And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?