

Doesn't Paul say that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord?

Text in question: 2 Corinthians 5:8

"We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord."

Proof texts: 1 Corinthians 15:51-54

The apostle Paul appears to tell us here that something better than our current lives, namely being in the presence of God, awaits us after death, when we depart from our bodies. The language he uses seems to imply that life after death exists apart from our bodies and will continue on in spiritual form. To understand this passage, we must learn what the Bible says about the human body and also about Paul.

Bible students must be careful when using one or a handful of verses written by Paul to prove a point of doctrine, especially when the language used is ambiguous. The apostle Peter warns us in **2 Peter 3:15, 16**.

"As also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures."

If we aren't careful, we might end up twisting Paul's writings to our own destruction.

Instead, we must be critical about the text and examine it to see what it truly says. We see that the text in **2 Corinthians 5:8** does not say that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. One does not equal the other. Here is the entire passage in question so that we can understand the full context:

"For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven, if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked. For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life. Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God,

who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight. We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:1-8)

Paul likens our existing mortal bodies with an “earthly tent,” and says we should not worry if it is destroyed because we have a “building from God” that awaits us. The context does not support the claim that we will be in God’s presence without a body; rather, Paul simply says we will not have THIS body. He likens our bodies to clothing that we must wear. In verse 4, Paul specifically says he does not want to be unclothed (without a body), but rather further clothed (different body). That’s quite a different picture than a disembodied spirit that lives on after death!

When we compare this language to 1 Corinthians 15:51-54, also written by Paul, it becomes even clearer. The passage reads:

“Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ ”

Here, as in his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul uses clothing imagery to describe our bodies. We currently wear a mortal body, but in God’s presence at the resurrection we “must put on” an immortal one.

So Paul makes a true statement when he says he prefers to be absent from the body and ... present with the Lord. When we stand in God’s presence, we will not be in the same body we have now. And the Bible tells us that this transformation will happen in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. Although we all will die, we will sleep in death, and the next conscious thought we will have after death is when Jesus sounds the trumpet of God, when we are raised from the dead, when we put on immortality forever.

When we consider all of Paul’s writings as a whole representation of his theological position, we see that his position on life after death supports the notion that deceased people go to sleep at death and await their bodily resurrection at the return of Jesus Christ.