



OUR HEAVENLY HOME | AWAY FROM THE BODY?

(From Chapter Four: Alive in Christ by Warren Prestidge)



The Apostle Paul clearly teaches that even the Christian dead “sleep” till the resurrection at Christ’s return (I Thess. 4:13-19, I Cor. 15:20-23); that, apart from resurrection (Christ’s and ours), even the Christian dead “have perished” (I Cor. 15:18). Yet there is a persistent belief that II Corinthians 5:1-10 says otherwise: that at death the saved go immediately to be “at home with the Lord” (verse 8). Biblical scholars, however, are far less confident of this interpretation than formerly – with good reason! In one recent major commentary, V. P. Furnish denies that the passage makes any reference at all to the condition of the dead before Christ’s return.¹

Most scholars today would agree that II Cor. 5:1-5, at least, refers to the prospect of a resurrected, re-embodied life, and not to any disembodied state. Actually, the case is overwhelming! The hope in view in the context is resurrection: “...we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence” (II Cor. 4:14). The clothing metaphor with which Paul here indicates the future state (“further clothed”, II Cor. 5:2-4) matches I Cor. 15:53-54 (“put on immortality”), where it clearly refers to receiving the resurrection body. Similarly, the “swallowing up” of the “mortal” by “life”, in II Cor. 5:4, occurs at resurrection, according to I Cor. 15:54. The “glory” awaited (II Cor. 4:17) is resurrection as part of God’s new creation, according to Romans 8:18-23, and it is in anticipation of this hope, through the Holy Spirit (II Cor. 5:5, Rom. 8:11, 23), that we “groan” (II Cor. 5:2, Rom. 8:22-23) and “sigh” (II Cor. 5:4 RSV, Rom. 8:26). The parallels with I Cor. 15 and Rom. 8 are decisive, that our “heavenly dwelling” (II Cor. 5:2) is our future resurrected state.

What, then, of II Cor. 5:6-8, where Paul speaks of being “away from the body... at home with the Lord”? Could it be, that Paul is writing here of the Christian going to be with the Lord at death, in a pre-resurrection, bodiless condition? Surely not. “Dualistic separation into soul and body is no part of his [Paul’s] anthropology {doctrine of the human person}.”² II Cor. 5:6-8, which continues to express Paul’s positive expectation, follows straight on from verses 1-5 and surely presupposes what those verses say. Well then, Paul’s whole longing up to now has been directed towards resurrection. Furthermore, it seems clear that Paul has just raised the possibility of a disembodied soul-life – only to reject the whole idea! “...we will not be found naked,” he has just said (v3); “...we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed” (v4). The term “naked” here surely refers to a state of disembodiment, such as Paul’s Greek-educated readers might well have regarded as desirable.³ In contrast, Paul has just insisted upon resurrection!⁴ It is impossible that now, just two verses later, he has completely changed his tune and is contemplating a disembodied state with satisfaction!

What, then, does Paul mean when he writes that he would rather be “away from the body and at home with the Lord”? As usual, it is the context that gives the answer. In verse 10 Paul says:

For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

The “body” he is referring to is the body in which we have acted in this life for “good or evil”. Paul desires to have done, not with bodies in general, but simply with life in this present world, this “earthly tent” as he calls it in verse 1, as opposed to life in the coming age.

Well then, is Paul suggesting that we receive our resurrection bodies immediately we die? Again, the answer is surely, no. Can we suppose that Paul is now contradicting what he taught explicitly just a year or so earlier (I Cor. 15: 23, 51-54), or even a few years earlier (I Thess. 4:13-17): that “the dead in Christ” rise at the second coming of Christ? Not without very strong reasons. And there are none. On the contrary, as verse 10 also makes clear, Paul is writing about the time we must all appear for judgment. The time of this judgment, as Paul always teaches elsewhere, is at Christ’s return.⁵

Yet II Cor. 5:1-10 does convey the impression that we are “with the Lord” immediately at death. The same impression is given in Philippians 1:23. Part of

the explanation, in the case of II Corinthians at least, may be that Paul saw no reason why Jesus might not actually come in his lifetime.⁶ However, the main point is surely, that Paul simply ignores the intervening “sleep” of death here. And this he may do precisely because the intervening state is not consciously experienced at all by the dead! After death, the next thing we know is that we are summoned by Christ. On this basis, we can endorse the suggestion that “in the consciousness of the departed believer there is no interval between dissolution [i.e. death] and investiture [i.e. resurrection], however long the interval may be in the calendar of earth-bound human history.”⁷

In the case of Phil. 1:23, again, there is no reason to doubt that what Paul anticipates is resurrection at Christ’s return. This is clearly the case later in the same letter:

But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.⁸

In Phil. 1:23, Paul speaks of his desire to “depart” to be with Christ, but he uses the same term, “departure”, in II Timothy 4:6-8, where he is clearly looking beyond death, to the “Day” of Christ’s return. It is then, “on that day”, that he expects to receive “the crown of righteousness”. Yes, Paul desires to be “with Christ” (Greek sun christo), but he simply does not say how or when this will occur in Phil. 1:23. As we have already seen,⁹ those questions are addressed in I Thess. 4:13-17: it is through resurrection, at Christ’s return, that we will be “with the Lord” (Greek sun kurio).

“...there is no New Testament warrant for holding that there is an interim existence between death and resurrection.”¹⁰

References:

¹ V. P. Furnish, II Corinthians, New York: Doubleday, 1984.

² R. P. Martin, 2 Corinthians, Waco: Word Books, 1986, p.111.

³ M. J. Harris, Raised Immortal, p.223.

⁴ As he does also in I Corinthians 15 (see Chapter Three).

⁵ Acts 17:31, Rom. 2:16, I Cor. 3:13, II Tim. 4:1-8. See also Matt. 16:27, John 5:28-29. See Chapter Three for a fuller discussion of why the idea of an immediate resurrection at death is unbiblical.

⁶ See I Thess. 4:17 (“we who are alive”), I Cor. 15:51 (“We will not all die”). So R. P. Martin, 2 Corinthians, p.105; J. A. T. Robinson, *In The End, God...*, London: James Clarke & Co., 1950, p. 95.

⁷ F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, London: Oliphants, 1971, p.204. Cf. Martin Luther: “For just as a man who falls asleep and sleeps soundly until morning does not know what has happened to him when he wakes up, so we will suddenly rise on the Last Day; and we shall know neither what death has been like or how we have come through it.” WA 17:11, 235; quoted in P. Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, p.414.

⁸ Phil. 3:20-21; see also Phil. 3:11, 14.

⁹ See Chapter Three.

¹⁰ B. Reichenbach, *Is Man the Phoenix?*, Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1983, p.186.