

PROJECT TITLE: HOPE AFTER DEATH
PROGRAM TITLE: ABSENT FROM THE BODY?
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Where I live, by the time winter is half done I'm ready for it to be over. Cold temperatures, grimy slush on the streets, day after day of gray skies – it goes on forever. I can't help wishing I were somewhere else. A South Sea island, maybe? Somewhere with blue skies, green grass, and short-sleeve weather. Anywhere! But right now my life is here. Wishing I were there.

You ever been there? Wishing you weren't? Maybe it's not about climate or weather; maybe you've got a hundred other heavy-duty reasons for wishing you were somewhere else. Just the pressure and stress of our daily grind is enough to make a lot of us wish we had a different life.

But what about people whose lives are REALLY difficult, who live under the crushing weight of poverty or disease or abuse or persecution? Some of them survive on the hope of a future life – Heaven or Paradise or Nirvana. That's all that keeps them going. They would trade THIS life for THAT life in a heartbeat – if they could.

Think about Paul, St. Paul, the great missionary and theologian of the first century. Look at the kind of life he lived. His commitment to Christ cost him one hardship after another.

Check this out:

He was beaten more times than he could remember.

He was arrested and thrown into a jail cell again and again.

He was shipwrecked three times, including once when he was left adrift on the sea for a night and a day.

He was in danger of death from the elements,

threatened by robbers,

plagued by hunger and thirst.

Listen to what he wrote to his friends in Corinth: "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed" (2 Corinthians 4:8, 9).

What gave him that kind of hope? What kept him going? Look at this: "Knowing that he who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up..." (2 Corinthians 4:14 NKJV).

Paul believed there was a future life coming! His faith was fueled by the promises of Jesus Christ – promises foundational to the Christian religion. Promises like this: “I am the resurrection, and the life: he who believes in me, though he may die, he shall live” (John 11:25 NKJV).

“And this is the will of him who sent me, that everyone who sees the Son, and believes in Him may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:40 NKJV).

Considering Paul’s life, it’s no wonder He was looking forward to the day when “the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible” (1 Corinthians 15:52 NKJV).

He condenses his resurrection hope into pictures. Here it is, in the language of the New King James Bible:

“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” (2 Corinthians 5:1 NKJV).

He’s talking metaphorically, of course. The tent is this mortal body, subject to injury, disease, and death. God has something much better in mind for us, he says. Something permanent. Not another tent, but a solid building, created by God Himself to last forever. These dead-end, earthly bodies of ours are simply not fit for eternity.

This is how it works, he tells us: “For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:53 NKJV).

Paul pins his hopes on Resurrection Day, not on an immediate spirit-life with those who already died. He can hardly wait for his new, incorruptible, immortal body. In his own words, he was “earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven” (2 Corinthians 5:2 NKJV).

Maybe you noticed that Paul has shifted from the house metaphor to a clothing metaphor. He wants to shuck off this temporary, earthly body and be clothed with the permanent, undying heavenly body. What he wants to avoid is to be naked. “Naked” means “dead.” With no body at all.

Does it surprise you that Paul isn’t looking forward to an after-death spirit life? In fact, according to his metaphor, the after-death experience is undesirable – unwanted – like nakedness. Look at this:

“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” (2 Corinthians 5:4 NKJV).

This is a vivid reminder of Paul's belief in the Resurrection when the trumpet of God will sound, "and we shall all be changed" (1 Corinthians 15:51 NKJV).

Listen: "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'" (1 Corinthians 15:54 NKJV).

Paul wants this earthly battle to be over. But does he want to die? No. He doesn't want to be dead, naked, unclothed. He wants to be dressed in his heavenly, eternal clothes – without ever dying. He wants to skip the whole "death" thing. He wants his mortality to be "swallowed up of life." He is eager for the end of this story and the beginning of the next. So am I. Aren't you? Maybe God is, too.

Check this out: "Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God" (2 Corinthians 5:5 NKJV).

Living forever in perfect bodies? That's what we were made for. That was God's original plan for us. And Paul is certain that God's will for him will be done.

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

The plain truth is that while we are here in this world, in this time, in this space, in these earthly bodies, we are not in the immediate, visible presence of the Lord. We are exiles here, away from our true, heavenly home. We believers must live by faith – faith in things we cannot see. Faith in things to come. Faith in God's promises.

Paul is all in for faith. The visible things of earth don't attract him. He has no personal hopes or ambitions to hold him here. He has burned those bridges long ago.

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

Here Paul expresses his very human desire to be in a much better place. Me, too. How about you? Would you be willing to make that change right now? To leave this earthly body, these earthly clothes, and be "present with the Lord?"

Now, this verse is often misquoted like this: "*To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.*" But that's not what it says, is it?

It doesn't say that when believers die they go to heaven or paradise as disembodied spirits, free from the body. That can't be what Paul means. He has already told us he doesn't want to be dead, naked, unclothed, without a body. What he wants is his new body, his new, forever clothes.

What Paul really wants is the day when “the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17 NKJV).

Thanks, Paul. Amen to that!