

Booklet B

A Closer Look

(Supplement to lesson 9)

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Being Absent From the Body

In **2 Corinthians 5:8** Paul speaks of being “absent from the body” and “present with the Lord.” Does this mean that when a person dies, he leaves his body and goes to be with the Lord? Let’s read the whole context to see what the apostle is saying.

In Chapter 4 Paul discusses the trouble and affliction which come to us in this life. Yet, he says, this trouble is nothing when compared to the “far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (4:17) which we will receive in the future life. We don’t need to worry about what happens to this body. We are now but “earthen vessels” (4:7). The Lord will one day give us new bodies which will never deteriorate.

In Chapter 5 Paul discusses the two bodies, the “earthly,” and the “eternal.” He metaphorically refers to them as “houses.” “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” (5:1).

Next, the apostle speaks of his longing to be clothed with the immortal body. “For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven” (verse 2). To be “clothed” here means to be living in a body. In this life we are clothed in a *mortal* body. In the next life we will be clothed in an *immortal* body.

Now notice Paul’s emphasis in verse 3. “If so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked.” If clothed means to be in a body, to be naked is to be without a body. Notice that Paul makes it very clear that the future life is a “clothed” state and not a “naked” state! He gives absolutely no support to the teaching of life without a body. Speaking of the future life, he says, “Being clothed we shall not be found naked.”

In verse 4 he re-emphasizes the same thing. “For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: *not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon.*” It was not an “unclothed,” bodiless state which Paul anticipated, but a “clothed” state in a body.

The next question is, When will we receive the immortal body? When will mortality “be swallowed up of life” (verse 4)? To the Corinthians this was no question. Paul had already told them in his first letter. He had devoted the whole of 1 Corinthians 15 to the subject of the resurrection. There Paul had clearly told them when mortality is swallowed up in immortality: “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. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. 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*” (1 Corinthians 15:52-54).

When does it happen? At the last trump, at the resurrection, at the coming of Jesus. Then it will be said, “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” (1 Corinthians 15:55).

“For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ’s *at His coming*” (1 Corinthians 15:22, 23).

So far we have learned that: (1) There is no life in the “unclothed,” bodiless state; and (2) It is at the time of Christ’s coming that we will be made alive.

Let’s go back to 2 Corinthians 5. At this point in our passage Paul begins an evaluation of the two bodies—the *mortal* body which we have now, and the *immortal* body which we will receive at the resurrection. Keep in mind that the setting of this whole discussion is Paul’s encouragement to his readers not to become discouraged with present afflictions. Not only will the resurrected body be incorruptible and eternal, there is another factor which will make it far more to be desired than the present life. That factor is the presence of the Lord.

This theme of being “with the Lord” is found also in Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians: “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: 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*. Wherefore comfort one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18).

As Paul considered the two bodies, the present and the future life, he longed for the privilege available only in the future life, of being bodily with the Lord. “Therefore,” he continues in 2 Corinthians 5:6-8, “we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the [present] body, we are absent from the Lord: (For we walk by faith, not by sight:) We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.”

Keep in mind that Paul is not describing an “unclothed,” bodiless state. He is referring to the time when he will receive the immortal body. “The body” from which he will then be absent is his present earthly body, but he will not be bodiless (naked) at that time. He has made that very clear in the preceding verses.

Notice again in 1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17, how Paul expected to get “present with the Lord.” He describes the glorious coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the translation of the living saints. Then he says, “And so shall we ever be with the Lord.” That word “so” means, “thus,” “in this way,” or “by this means.” He is saying, “This is how” we will get with the Lord.

If, therefore, it is by means of the coming of Christ and the resurrection that we will get to be “with the Lord,” then it is obvious that we will not be “with the Lord” before that time.

It is clear from the above facts that when Paul spoke of being “absent from the body” and “present with the Lord,” he was not thinking of the time when he would be dead. He was not “earnestly desiring” death. He was looking beyond the grave, beyond the resurrection, to that glorious moment when he would greet Jesus face to face, and live with him for ever.

Paul's Desire to Depart and Be with Christ

Another passage which has confused some people is **Philippians 1:20-25**. Some have used these verses to promote a doctrine which is contrary to Paul's own clear teachings on the subject of death. But when we look at it objectively we find the passage to be fully consistent with the rest of the Bible.

Highlighting a few phrases in the passage will show us Paul's train of thought. He is discussing "my earnest expectation," "my hope," "what I shall choose," "having a desire," and "what is more needful." These are not expressions one uses when presenting a doctrinal discourse. He is opening to his readers his deepest personal aspirations.

Paul's greatest desire in this passage is that "Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death." The problem is that he cannot tell which is best, to live or to die. He wants to do that which will best glorify Christ.

He longs to be with Christ. He knows that he will be with Him in the next life. This thought is wonderful to him. Yet, realizing that his labors are still needed in this life, he concludes, "I know that I shall abide and continue with you all for your furtherance and joy of faith."

The phrase which some people have stumbled over is Paul's desire to "depart, and to be with Christ." Notice that he does not say that he will depart and immediately be with Christ. Neither is he discussing a bodiless presence with Him; for his desire was that "Christ shall be magnified in my *body*."

For the purposes of his present discussion he sees no need to digress into the details of the decomposition of his body, the oblivion of death's sleep, and the specifics of the resurrection. That is not the subject at hand. Yet, even so, the words he uses describe the experience of death most explicitly. To the individual's consciousness, death does not register at all. Thousands of years may pass. The dead know nothing of it. Their first conscious moment at the resurrection knows of no lapse since their last conscious moment before death. After Paul's death, the next thing he would know, he would be with Christ. His description is experiential rather than technical, and thus perfectly harmonizes with his direct doctrinal instruction on the state of the dead.

When did Paul expect to be with Christ? In 2 Thessalonians 2:1 he clearly explains that "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" and "our gathering together unto him" take place at the same time.

In Colossians 3:4 Paul says, "When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory." We will not be with Christ in glory until His appearing, His glorious return in power and majesty.

Paul also speaks of the appearing of Christ in 2 Timothy 4:8. "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." Paul realized that his crown of righteousness would be "laid up" in store for him, until the coming of Christ, not to be received until "that day."

The Transfiguration

Does the appearance of Moses and Elijah at Christ's transfiguration (**Matthew 17:3**) prove that the saints of olden days are now in heaven?

The case of Elijah is easy when we remember that Enoch and Elijah never died, but were translated to heaven (Hebrews 11:5; 2 Kings 2:11).

Moses, however, did die (Deuteronomy 34:5); but then something very interesting happened. Jude 9 mentions a dispute between Michael and the devil over the dead body of Moses. The devil was rebuked, and the Lord's plan prevailed. Deuteronomy 34:6 says that Moses was buried, "but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day." David, on the other hand, "is both dead and buried, and his sepulchre is with us unto this day" (Acts 2:29). Why the difference? Moses' appearance on the mount of transfiguration indicates that he was bodily resurrected from the dead.

Moses did not go to heaven as a bodiless spirit; the Lord claimed his body as well (Jude 9). Neither did Elijah leave his body on earth; for fifty strong men searched for him for three days and found nothing (2 Kings 2:17). Jesus Himself ascended bodily to heaven. In all the Bible there is not a single example of anyone ever going to heaven except as a living body.

Moses is not the only one who has been resurrected and taken to heaven. When Jesus died, "many bodies of the saints which slept arose, and came out of the graves after his resurrection" (Matthew 27:52, 53); so that "when he ascended up on high, he led a multitude of captives" (Ephesians 4:8, margin).

The fact that Moses was alive and bodily present when Jesus was transfigured provides support, not for the doctrine of natural immortality, but for the doctrine of the resurrection.

The Thief on the Cross

Some people have suggested that the dialog recorded in **Luke 23:42, 43** indicates that the righteous go immediately to paradise when they die.

If so, in order for Christ to be true to His promise, both He and the thief would have to make it to heaven before the sun set that very day.

Let's see if they actually did. First, did Jesus go to heaven that day? The Bible tells us that He did not. For when He was resurrected He said, "I am not yet ascended to my Father" (John 20:17).

So Jesus didn't go to heaven that day. What about the thief, did he? The Bible tells us in John 19:31-34 that at the end of the day the soldiers went and found the two thieves still hanging there on the cross, both still alive. Then they broke their legs and let them down off the cross for the Sabbath. So the thief didn't make it to heaven that day either.

Well then, did Jesus tell a lie? No. The problem is easily solved when we realize that when the Bible was written, there were no punctuation marks. Commas were added hundreds of years later when the Bible was translated into English. In Luke 23:43 the comma should have been placed after, rather than before, the word "today." It actually reads, "Verily I say unto thee today, thou shalt be with me in paradise."

Jesus promised him that day a promise He will not break. For “when the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him,...*then* shall the King say...Inherit the kingdom prepared for you” (Matthew 25:31-34). “For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and *then* he shall reward every man according to his works” (Matthew 16:27).

And that’s all the thief was asking for anyway. He didn’t ask to go to heaven that day. He simply said, “Lord, remember me *when thou comest into thy kingdom*” (Luke 23:42).

Jesus Preaching to Dead People

Some have wondered if while Jesus was dead He could have taken the opportunity to preach to other people who were also dead. The question comes from **1 Peter 3:18-20**, a passage which now deserves our close attention.

It is always important to remember that the Bible does not contradict itself. Whatever this verse says must be in harmony with what the rest of the Bible teaches on this subject. Otherwise it could not be the inspired word of God.

Isaiah 38:18 says, “The grave cannot praise thee, death can not celebrate thee: they that go down into the pit *cannot hope for thy truth.*” There would be no point in Jesus preaching to those who cannot have hope.

The Bible also says that “the dead know not any thing” (Ecclesiastes 9:5). Preaching to the dead does not fit in with the Biblical description of death.

Let’s look at 1 Peter 3:18-20 to see what it says and does not say. Verse 18 tells us that Jesus was “put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit.” The word “quickened” means “brought to life.” It is when they are raised to life again that the dead are “quickened” (John 5:21).

Our passage in 1 Peter 3 does not tell us *when* Jesus was quickened. We are simply told two things: (1) that Jesus was put to death, and (2) that He was brought back to life. To find out *when* He was brought to life we must go to the actual account in the gospels. It tells us that He was crucified on “the day of the preparation” (Matthew 27:62), and brought back to life on “the first day of the week” (Matthew 28:1). The Scriptural account is clear.

Our passage says that Jesus was quickened “by the Spirit.” That is, the Holy Spirit. Jesus Himself declared that “it is the spirit that quickeneth” (John 6:63).

So by comparing Scripture with Scripture we have a very good explanation of verse 18. Jesus was put to death in the flesh on Friday afternoon, and raised to life again by the Spirit on Sunday morning.

The next three words in our passage are “by which also.” The word “also” indicates the introduction of a different event, the common factor being the involvement of the Holy Spirit. Christ was resurrected by the Spirit, He also by the Spirit preached.

Christ, by the Spirit, preached “unto the spirits in prison.” The word “spirits” in this verse simply means “people.” Often in the Bible a figure of speech is used by which a characteristic part of a thing stands for the whole. Since the spirit or breath of a person is a characteristic part of the person, the word spirit

is sometimes used to represent the person. For example, in 1 Corinthians 16:18 “my spirit” simply means “me.” In Galatians 6:18 and 2 Timothy 4:22 “your (thy) spirit” simply means “you.”

The “prison” concept is elsewhere used in the Bible in reference to the condition of those who are entrapped in sin. “The wicked . . . shall be holden with the cords of his sins” (Proverbs 5:22). “For of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage” (2 Peter 2:19). The work of the gospel is “to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound” (Isaiah 61:1. See also Isaiah 42:7, 22).

With that thought, 1 Peter 3:19 simply says that it was through His Holy Spirit also that Christ preached to people bound in sin. Notice that verse 19 does not tell us when this preaching took place. To find that out we must go to verse 20 which says: “Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing.” There it is. Verses 19 and 20 are talking about what happened in the days of Noah!

Noah was called “a preacher of righteousness” (2 Peter 2:5). Through his preaching the Holy Spirit worked upon the hearts of the people. But because of the wickedness of that generation and their refusal to obey God, the Lord said, “My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years” (Genesis 6:3). For 120 years Noah preached. Those people had more opportunity to hear and accept the gospel than any other generation. Yet, “few, that is, eight souls were saved.” When those 120 years were up, their opportunity for salvation was forever gone. They would hear no more preaching.

Peter does not say that Jesus did anything while He was dead. He, by the Spirit, preached to the people in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing.

And that’s all the text says. It says nothing about a purgatory. It makes no mention of disembodied spirits. It says nothing about preaching to dead people.

1 Peter 4:6 tells us that the gospel “was” (past tense) preached to people who “are” (present tense) dead. They are dead now, but nowhere does it say that they were dead at the time the gospel was preached to them. Such a claim would contradict everything the Bible teaches about death, salvation, and the justice of God. “The living, the living, he shall praise thee, . . . the father to the children shall make known thy truth” (Isaiah 38:19).

Stephen’s Spirit

What happened to Stephen’s spirit when he died? The same thing that happens to everyone else’s spirit when they die. The verse is **Acts 7:59, 60**. As Stephen was being stoned, he was “calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

Your “spirit” is simply the spark of life which belongs to God. You lose it when you die. When the Bible says that the breath of life returns to God, it does not say that it carries with it any portion of your mental capacity. Human consciousness is a physiological process which is dependent upon nerve and tissue. In reference to man, the Bible never speaks of any consciousness of disembodied spirits.

Baptism for the Dead

Does Paul teach in **1 Corinthians 15:29** that we should be baptized for the dead? No, he does not.

This chapter is discussing the resurrection. Whatever conclusion we reach as to the meaning of the verse, we must recognize it as an argument in favor of the resurrection. The line of reasoning goes as follows: “Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? Why are they then baptized for the dead?” He is promoting, not consciousness during death, but resurrection after death.

Paul here may have been referring to a pagan custom of being baptized for the dead. Notice that he uses the word “they” rather than “we.” He does not say, “we should be” baptized for the dead. He simply says that “they” are. Without actually endorsing their practice, he was saying, “Even the pagans who are baptized for the dead believe there will be a resurrection. Else why would they be baptized for them?” The argument is similar to verses 16-18 where Paul says, “For if the dead rise not, . . . then they also which are fallen asleep . . . are perished.” The only hope for the dead is in the resurrection.

The Bible clearly teaches that a man must personally repent, believe in Christ, confess his sins, and be baptized in order to be saved (Acts 2:38; John 3:16; 1 John 1:9). You can only “work out your *own* salvation” (Philippians 2:12). “They shall deliver neither son nor daughter; they shall but deliver their *own* souls by their righteousness” (Ezekiel 14:20). “None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him” (Psalm 49:7). “The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him” (Ezekiel 18:20).

Those who die in sin have no more opportunity to repent. “Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2). “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest” (Ecclesiastes 9:10). Now, while we are still alive, while the blood still flows in our veins, while we are still capable of responding to Christ’s invitation—now is the time for us to give ourselves fully to Jesus.