

UPWARD CALL

Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but this is my one aim: to forget everything that's behind, and to strain every nerve to go after what lies ahead. I press on toward the finish line, where the prize waiting for me is the upward call of God

IN KING JESUS.

(Philippians 3:13-14)

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When Immortality is Put On

For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this house we groan, ***longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked.*** For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because ***we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed,*** so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge. (2 Corinthians 5:1-5 NASB [bold italic added])

These verses are most often quoted by those who hold that believers go to heaven immediately *in* death, and, it should be added, unbelievers go to hell immediately. According to them, Paul wanted to put off his earthly, physical body so he could go to heaven and be with the Lord. Some say that, in death, believers go to heaven as disembodied spirits; others say with new resurrected bodies. To be sure, Paul desired to be with the Lord, as we all should desire, but this does not mean that Paul taught that at death a believer immediately goes to heaven, either in a disembodied state or in a resurrected body. If this were so, then all that Paul taught on the future resurrection would be meaningless. Paul made *no such assertion* and placed *no immediacy* between being in the earthly body and receiving the dwelling from heaven (note: receiving from heaven, not going to heaven to receive it).

It is sown as the embodiment of the spirit. If ordinary nature has its embodiment, then the spirit too has its ***embodiment.*** ... But you don't get ***the spirit-animated body*** first; you get the ***nature-animated one*** later (1 Corinthians 15:44, 46 Kingdom-NT [bold italic added])

We need to be clear that Paul used the phrase *dwelling from heaven* to identify the source of the dwelling. We don't go there to get it; it comes to us. It is heavenly because it comes from God, and it is spiritual because God is spirit, and God's seed is planted within all who believe (1 John 3:9). However, this does not mean that the spiritual body is without form, that is, without physicality. The term *embodiment* means that the object in view has bodily form. The spirit-animated body will be like Jesus' body after He was resurrected when He revealed Himself to the disciples.

The only way to receive a spirit-animated body is through resurrection and transfiguration. In fact, the opening verses must be interpreted in light of Paul's defense of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. The two cannot and must not be separated. Paul was simply expressing what should be the desire of every believer, that is, immortality that comes through resurrection and transfiguration (transformation). We must put off corruption and put on incorruption, and we must put off mortality and put on immortality. The earnest (pledge) of the spirit within us groans for the spirit-animated body. Immortality, that is, a life beyond sin and death, relates to the body being raised from the dead.

It is vital to understand that Paul referred to the dead as being asleep: *God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus* (i.e., the dead in Christ) (1 Thessalonians 4:14, 16). Jesus made the same connection between death and sleep: *Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep. Lazarus is dead* (John 11:11, 14). But going back further, the oldest book of the Bible makes the same assertion: *So man lies down and does not rise. Until the heavens are no longer, he will not awake nor be aroused out of his sleep* (Job 14:12). Asaph declared: *Both rider and horse were cast into a dead sleep* (Psalm 76:6). David wrote: *As for me, I shall behold Your face in righteousness; I will be satisfied with Your likeness when I awake* (Psalm 17:15). According to Peter, *the patriarch David both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day, for it was not David who ascended into heaven* (Acts 2:29, 34). Solomon wrote that *the dead do not know anything* (Ecclesiastes 9:5). It is safe to state that the ancient Hebrews held this view of death.

Again, Job asked: *If a man dies, will he live again? All the days of my struggle I will wait until my change comes* (Job 14:14). Even Job expected a bodily change.

So, according to scripture, death is merely a sleep time for all mankind. One day, all will be awakened from their sleep to rise up and meet the Lord. The period of sleep will seem like a night, even though it might be a very long time, as in hundreds or thousands of years. The next moment of consciousness for all the dead will be in the presence of the Lord.

There can be no inconsistencies in Paul's writings. For believers, the heavenly body comes into view only at the resurrection and snatching away of believers. To the Philippians, he wrote: *For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself* (Philippians 3:20-21).

Consequently, 2 Corinthians 5 must be interpreted in light of 1 Corinthians 15, as well as 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and Philippians 3:20-21. Paul did not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. Why? *For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP in victory* (1 Corinthians 15:53-54). Mortality or death is swallowed up in immortality. According to Paul's evangel, there is no other way!

It is unfortunate, but many Christians believe in the immortality of the soul, and, on this basis, they have fallen into the error of the soul going to heaven in a disembodied state upon death. However, this belief comes from Greek philosophers (e.g., Plato), not scripture, who saw the body or material world as evil. The soul is connected to the body and its blood, for *the soul of the flesh is in the blood* (Leviticus 17:11). When the spirit of life was breathed into Adam, he became *a living soul*. Soul is not given by God; it comes about when life comes into the body. When the body dies, so does the soul, for the soul is the animation (sensations) or consciousness of the body. Pour out the blood of the body, and the body and soul die. Thus, the soul is nothing apart from the body.

Consider this: If the soul were immortal and went to heaven upon death, one would go to heaven unclothed, that is, disembodied. This means that the believer would be naked before God, for the soul does not exist apart from the body, which is the way that mankind is constituted. Some work around this difficulty by teaching that the soul is clothed with some intermediary covering. Their reasoning is based on *the parable* (not a literal story) of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31). However, this is based on a faulty understanding of this parable. The pagans believed in the immortality of the soul and, unfortunately, so do many believers.

Finally, some might argue that it is the spirit that is immortal, not the soul. In some measure this might be true. In speaking of death, Solomon wrote: *Then the dust [i.e., physical body] will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it* (Ecclesiastes 12:7). Our spirit simply returns to God who gave it in the first place. But we are not told what this looks like. Ask yourself this question: Do you have any recollection of the spirit prior to your birth? I surely don't! So, are we to believe we retain consciousness in death when scripture does not tell us so? If we do, in the absence of physical bodies, then praise God. However, scripture is rather silent on the matter. Those who believe we do, read this into scripture, not out from it. Of course, they do use scripture, but it is generally based on the many mentions of heaven in scripture, even if they do not connect directly with the actual state of the dead. By the way, theologians are divided on this matter; some choosing to ignore the subject altogether.

Paul's desire to be with the Lord could have simply been his way of saying that in death he was safe and secure in the Lord because he knew that he would be raised from the dead just as Jesus had been. This was Paul's expectation, and it should be ours as well. I suspect, but cannot prove it, that our memory and identity is somehow retained in the spirit (spirit-DNA) just as a computer retains memory after it is shut off; data is retained even with the power turned off. Let us keep in mind that we must be transformed into spirit-animated bodies, not simply some disembodied spirit being. As Paul wrote, *we are waiting eagerly for the redemption of our body* (Romans 8:23).