

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)

#13-1911

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July 24, 2019

Conformed to the Body of His Glory

Pharisees believed in a future bodily resurrection, and Paul, as a former Pharisee, did not depart from this belief but, in fact, defended it in 1 Corinthians 15 and emphasized it in Philippians 3:11, 20-21 and Romans 8:23, and elsewhere. Of course, true to form, some dispute this as they insist Paul's emphasis on resurrection was entirely spiritual, having nothing to do with the body. Along with this is the doctrine of an *afterlife* in death. This then raises the question of whether Paul emphasized an afterlife, either in a new body or as a disembodied spirit.

To be clear, it is not my intent to argue for or against an afterlife, or what it looks like, if there is one. I leave it alone! My intent is to prove that this was not a major component of Paul's good news. He stayed true to his Pharisee roots.

First, did Paul emphasize an afterlife, that is, a life after death but before bodily resurrection, as a disembodied (i.e., naked) spirit in heaven? To be sure, Paul never stated there is the possibility of three bodies. He only spoke of two: nature-animated and spirit-animated (1 Corinthians 15:46). However, Paul did offer a word about nakedness (unclothed): *At the present moment, you see, we are groaning, as we long to put on our heavenly building, in the belief that by putting it on **we won't turn out to be naked*** (2 Corinthians 5:2-3). If Paul actually expected a disembodied (naked) afterlife, he surely didn't loudly and clearly state so. Fact is, it wasn't high on his list of expectations. If anything, he didn't want to be naked. Besides, a naked disembodied spirit clearly contradicts Paul's emphasis on bodily resurrection and transformation. Now, let's see what Paul did emphasize.

Therefore, being always of good courage, and 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 of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be ***absent from the body*** and to be ***at home with the Lord***. Therefore, we also have as our ambition, whether ***at home or absent***, to be pleasing to Him. (2 Corinthians 5:6-9 NASB [bold italic added])

The first part is very obvious: if we are in the body, which is our earthly home, we are absent or away from home with the Lord. In the meantime, the earnest of the spirit leads us to walk by faith. Faith says that one day we will be with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:17). On the basis of faith, Paul's preference was to be away from these bodies of humiliation and to be at home with the Lord. Notice that Paul in no way stated that death is the way that leads *immediately* to being at home with the Lord. One must read this into Paul's words.

In verse 8—preferring to be absent from the body *and* to be at home with the Lord—Paul joined the two thoughts with the conjunction *and*. I have heard it preached: "Paul taught that to be absent from the body *is* to be with the Lord; therefore, you go to heaven when you die." The problem is that this is not what Paul wrote. Please note that the verb *is* is not in Paul's words, and by using this verb, the meaning (i.e., timing) of the phrase changes. Paul made no such connection, as if one immediately leads to the other. Absent from our mortal body means we are dead or asleep in Jesus until the resurrection, at which time we will be at home with the Lord in our spirit-animated body. This gives little, if any, indication of an interim state of the believer.

Paul's final words of this section refer back to verse 6. We are ambitious, whether at home, that is, *at home in the body*, or away from home, that is, *away from the Lord*, to be well-pleasing to Him. It is merely the same thing expressed from different angles. Being ambitious and well-pleasing can only refer to our current walk of faith and not to life after death.

Now, as further proof, let us consider Paul's heart as expressed to the Philippians.

For to me to be living is Christ, and to be dying, gain. Now if it is to be living in flesh, this to me means fruit from work, and what I shall be preferring I am not making known. ***(Yet I am being pressed out of the two, having a yearning for the solution and to be together with Christ, for it, rather, is much better.)*** Yet to be staying in the flesh is more necessary because of you. (Philippians 1:21-24 CLV [bold italic added])

These verses are often used as one of the proofs that Paul's expectation was a disembodied afterlife. There is no doubt whatsoever that Paul wanted to be with the Lord, but his desire to be with the Lord cannot conflict with his desire for the resurrection when all will be changed, and this mortal puts on immortality (1 Corinthians 15:53).

Simply, Paul was contrasting two conditions, both of which would bring glory to Christ. If Paul lived, his life would be gain for the cause and glory of Christ; if he died as a martyr, this too would be gain for the cause of Christ. Throughout his epistles, Paul never wrote of seeking gain for himself; it was always for Christ and His people (e.g., 1 Corinthians 15:31; 2 Corinthians 8:23; 11:23-29; 2 Thessalonians 1:12; 2 Timothy 2:10), as he died daily and suffered tremendously for the cause of Christ. In spite of all his trials and even being jailed at the end of his life, Paul remained fruitful in the work of the Lord, and all of us are recipients of that fruit, even after 2,000 years. We could say that Paul was caught between two outcomes, the better and the much better. He desired that in life or death he would bring glory to Christ; he never desired glory for himself. If he lived, he would be fruitful in Christ's service; if he died as a martyr, this too would bring glory to Christ (and, frankly, his suffering would end). Either way, it would be gain to Christ and not to him. However, there was a much better.

Paul yearned for the much better solution, or, we could say, the very best solution, which is to be together with Christ. In other words, Paul injected a third option to remaining alive or dying. The much better option was to be together with Christ which, according to Paul, comes at the resurrection, transfiguration, and the snatching away to meet the Lord in air. *And so we shall always be with the Lord* (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). This is the comfort Paul gave the saints. It was *not* death and then immediately going to heaven. It was death, resurrection, transfiguration, and glorification in the presence of the Lord. Notice that Paul never mentioned "going to heaven" to the Thessalonians. The air is not heaven! Paul's solution was the resurrection, for this was and is the hope of the evangel with which he was entrusted to take to the nations. This is the much better solution with which Paul very clearly encouraged the Thessalonians who were *waiting for the Son to come from heaven* (1 Thessalonians 1:10).

But there are two more proof-positive verses in Philippians that explain Paul's solution, the much better. In Philippians 3:11, Paul sought to attain to the out-resurrection from among the dead. Many see this as a spiritual resurrection, not a bodily one. However, the second proof contradicts such a view as it pulls together verses 1:21-23 and 3:11; it speaks to what was on Paul's heart as he wrote the Philippians. Again, as with the Thessalonians, the Philippians were waiting for the Savior to come from heaven (also, see Titus 2:13).

For our realm is inherent in the heavens, out of which we are awaiting a Saviour also, the Lord, Jesus Christ, Who will ***transfigure the body of our humiliation, to conform it to the body of His glory***, in accord with the operation which enables Him even to subject all to Himself." (Philippians 3:20-21 CLV [bold italic added])

Most translations read that our citizenship is in heaven, which leads many to believe that our destiny is heaven. This is not the intent of Paul's citizenship. We are a colony on earth of Jesus' realm, and we are seated with King Jesus in His heavenly realm (Ephesians 2:6). When Rome established colonies in Paul's day, the Romans that occupied the new territory were not expected to return to Rome but to live in the colony and establish Rome's rights over it. This is the thought behind Paul's citizenship. When we are snatched away in clouds (witness) to meet Jesus in air (atmospheric event) (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18), we escort Him to earth to reign over the nations. Heaven is destined to come to earth. In order for this to take place, we who are His body must be changed into the body of His glory, individually and corporately. It is not about us going to heaven; it is about heaven coming to earth, and this is our destiny that comes about through bodily transfiguration. When we are embodied with glorified bodies, we manifest to the world the new creation that embodies both heaven and earth. This is the glorious picture that Paul paints for us.

Dear saints, our destiny is to be like Jesus, imaging Him throughout His creation, both in heaven and on earth!