

Dear Perry,

Thank you for writing us at Christian Questions Radio. You asked what the Apostle Paul meant when he said, "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." You also wanted to know what happens when we die.

The scripture you quoted, 2 Corinthians 5:8 is part of the much larger context of 2 Corinthians 5:4-10, which we will quote and explain below.

"For we that are in this tabernacle [earthly body] do groan, being burdened [oppressed by the evil influence of the world]: not for that we would be unclothed [lose our imperfect human bodies in death], but clothed upon [be clothed with our heavenly dwelling], that mortality might be swallowed up of [by] life [immortality]. Now he that hath wrought us for the selfsame thing is God [God has made us for this very purpose], who also hath given us the earnest of the Spirit [the holy Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come]. Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body [content with ourselves], we are absent from the Lord [not living near to him, not "walking with God" as we should]: For we walk by faith, not by sight: We are confident [have full of faith toward God], I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body [not carnally minded] and to be present with the Lord [spiritually minded]. Wherefore we labor [so we make it our goal], that whether present [in the present when we are away from home (in heaven)] or absent [when we reach our home in heaven], we may be accepted of him [always be pleasing to him]. For we must all [those who have the holy Spirit] appear before the judgment seat of Christ [those who are on trial now for their place in heaven]; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done [glory and honor in heaven is dependent upon how one's life was lived on earth], whether it be good or bad."

These scriptures clearly indicate that the Apostle Paul is talking to a special group (true Christians) who have received the holy Spirit and have given up their own human wills in order to follow after Jesus and do God's will in every aspect of their lives. What did Paul mean when he said "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord"? When we read the entire context above, we see that Paul had an earnest desire to be spiritually minded, not carnally minded so that he would be walking in the presence of the Lord. He also longed to be absent from his sinful mind and body so that he would be able to inherit the promised immortality and be present with the Lord in his kingdom in heaven.

What happens when we die? We believe that in order to go to heaven a person must be seeking the Lord and righteousness, believe that Jesus was the Messiah who died for the sins of the entire human race and be willing to sacrifice his will in order to do the will of God. If that person remains faithful to his covenant of sacrifice, he will obtain a heavenly reward upon death.

We know from the scriptures that there is only one call during the Gospel Age, and that is the high calling to be part of the bride of Christ. This very special call is mentioned many times in the New Testament letters. In fact, most letters open with greetings to the saints. (See Romans 1:7, 1 Corinthians 1:2, Philippians 1:1, 1 Peter 1:1-2, 2 Peter 1:1-4, and Jude 1:1.) “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” (1 Peter 2:9) The loftiness of the call requires total submission to the will of God and sacrifice of self will in every matter of life.

Although very few can reach this goal, the good news is that salvation is all-inclusive. There is also an earthly salvation. The subject of the two parts of salvation is basic and crucial for understanding God’s beautiful plan of the ransom for all. When Jesus died, he paid the price once for all. God has a place for everyone in either his heavenly or earthly kingdoms and Jesus’ sacrifice included all of humankind, regardless of when a person lived or whether he has accepted Jesus as his Savior now or not. “This is good and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given at its proper time. (1 Timothy 2:3-6) “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.” (1 Corinthians 15:22) These scriptures tell us that Jesus came to provide a ransom for Adam and all his progeny, some now, who are following Jesus and sacrificing their wills, and some later. Those who are sacrificing now have been called by God and look forward to a heavenly reward mentioned in John 13:33-36; 14:1-4; and 17:24. Although there is definitely a heavenly destination, it is only for a very select few who, if faithful, will have a change of nature from human to spiritual (Romans 6:5; 2 Corinthians 5:1-2; Revelation 3:20-21).

However, the vast majority of humankind will be awakened on earth to a period of judgment, or decision, in which they will have an opportunity to willingly follow God’s laws of righteousness and perfect their characters. Jeremiah speaks of this future time. “No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more.” (Jeremiah 31:34) God's purpose was not to have millions be born and die in this present evil world with no chance of salvation. Nor, was it God's purpose to destroy those who knew of Him, but sinned in this present life. When humankind is awakened on earth, there will be a period of judgment, the purpose of which will be to destroy sin and evil and bring everyone by his own free will to salvation. Although this will be a time of pruning, it will also be a time of great joy, in which everyone will understand God’s plan. (See Isaiah 11:1-9.) Bloodshed, hurting or destroying will be only a memory because the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord. God does not wish to destroy those who have sinned in this present life, but to destroy sin and evil and bring everyone to salvation. Would Jesus instruct us to pray for a kingdom to come on earth if there wasn’t going to be one? (Matthew 6:6-13)

For more on the peaceable kingdom soon to be established on earth in which all who are not of the heavenly class will come forth from their graves, read Isaiah 35:5-10, Revelation 21:1-4, Revelation 11:15, Isaiah 9:6-7, and Isaiah 65:21-25. We look forward with great joy to that day when all these scriptures will be fulfilled.

We hope we have answered your questions. For more information on the topic of what happens after a person dies, we suggest listening to "Am I Immortal?" (Program #668, July 17, 2011). You can find this program and many others on our web site at www.christianquestions.net. While on the web site, we also suggest that you sign up for CQ Rewind. The service is free without obligation and will provide you with scriptural perspective on many questions and topics.

Sincerely,

Christian Questions Radio