

Paul's Desire to "Depart and Be With Christ"

Many have assumed from Paul's words in Philippians 1:23-24 that he believed that at the moment of his death his consciousness would leave his body to join Christ in heaven. But is this the case?

The apostle Paul dedicated his life to preaching [the gospel of the Kingdom](#) of God (Acts 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). In the process he was subjected to persecution, beatings and several periods of imprisonment. When he wrote his letter to the Philippians, he was enduring a period of house arrest in Rome. Paul knew that the Roman government had authority to put prisoners to death. Paul knew what the future might hold for him, whether it be execution on the one hand or his release on the other.

In Philippians 1:23-24 he writes of the two possible outcomes: "For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you."

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Before focusing on what this scripture says, let's notice what it does *not* say. It does *not* say *when* or *where* Paul would be with Christ if he departed. Neither is the terminology of departure intended to be geographic—as in leaving the earth to go to heaven. There is no reference to heaven in these verses. To conclude otherwise is to read assumptions into Paul's words. Paul is simply referring to departing from his present, physical life—leaving it behind through death.

When writing to the Philippians here, Paul was struggling with two desires. He wanted to be done with his fleshly life and be with Christ, but he also wanted to remain with God's people.

In his second letter to Timothy he speaks dogmatically of what lies ahead, knowing the end of his physical life is near and he is ready to depart: "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me *on that Day*, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

Paul, then, understood that he was not to receive his reward *immediately at death*. He knew that if executed, he would go to the grave, and there his remains would lie until the time of his resurrection. He understood that, since the dead have no thought processes whatsoever, in his next waking moment he would be with the returning Messiah, Jesus, joining Him along with the other saints at the time of the resurrection.

As he wrote to Timothy, he knew there was laid up for him a crown of righteousness that he would be given "*on that Day*" of Christ's appearing— at Jesus' second coming. As Paul noted, Jesus will bring Paul's reward with Him. Paul will receive it *at that time*, not before, along with all others who will be resurrected at Christ's return.

Describing this resurrection, Paul explains to the church in Corinth: "Behold I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed" (1 Corinthians 15:51-52). Paul knew he would receive his reward—his "change"—at Christ's coming. He also knew that death before that time would mean "sleep," unconsciousness, until the resurrection.

The time from Paul's death until his resurrection at the same time as all of Christ's followers will seem to him but a mere moment. He will be with Christ as a glorified son of God in the next moment of his consciousness. No wonder Paul, weary of his sufferings in this life, desired to depart from it and to be with Christ!