

2 Corinthians 5:8

What do those who believe in psychopannychy/soul sleep do about 2 Corinthians 5:8, and in being absent from the body *and* present with the Lord after death?

2 Corinthians 5:8 is the first most commonly quoted passage about the afterlife that one will probably encounter. Addressing the subject of the Heavenly dwelling that born again Believers will one day possess (2 Corinthians 5:2), the Apostle Paul discusses the more probable likelihood of how rather than living long enough to be further clothed by it over our mortal bodies, we are more likely to die. Death, aside from its many unknowns, is not something that Believers are to fear. Paul expresses confidence in asserting that if death comes to us before the Second Coming, “we are confident and satisfied to be out of the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8, HCSB). As you will see, advocates of psychopannychy (or “soul sleep”) who think that when a person dies, he or she enters into a state of complete unconsciousness until the resurrection, have **a very difficult time** with this verse. Paul affirms that not only can Believers enter into a disembodied condition prior to the resurrection, but it is one where we will be found to be in the company of the Lord Yeshua in Heaven.

No one instinctively wants to die, *including* those who believe in a conscious intermediate afterlife in Heaven prior to the resurrection. The Apostle Paul was no exception to this, expressing in 2 Corinthians 5:2, 4: “Here indeed we groan, and long to [further] put on our heavenly dwelling [to *oikētērion hēmōn to ex ouranou*, τὸ οἰκητήριον ἡμῶν τὸ ἐξ οὐρανοῦ]...For while we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety; not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life” (RSV). Paul details how “we have a building from God [*ek Theou*, ἐκ θεοῦ], a house not made with hands” (2 Corinthians 2:1, NASU),¹ which we should all eagerly desire to be clothed with. The important verb appearing in both vs. 2, 4, to describe this being clothed is *ependuomai* (ἐπενδύομαι), actually meaning “**to put a garment on over an existing garment, put on (in addition)**” (BDAG).² F.F. Bruce describes what this communicates: “[I]t almost suggests that the new body could be put on like an overcoat, above the clothes already being worn.”³ As the NEB renders 2 Corinthians 5:4: “we yearn to have our heavenly habitation put on over this one.”

Why someone like Paul wants to be further clothed with an immortal body originating from Heaven is patently obvious: **he does not want to die** (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:51). This is not only due to the pain and unpleasantness frequently caused by death, which for Paul personally would later have meant martyrdom (2 Timothy 4:6a), but also because at the Second Coming of the Lord—when living Believers are *further clothed*—we see the next major stage of salvation history occur! When given the choice of death, *or* seeing Yeshua return and one’s mortal body be further clothed with immortality, the resurrection of deceased holy ones, and His Kingdom reign fully coming to Planet Earth—**it is pretty obvious which option we should naturally choose.**

Paul describes the mortal body we possess to be a *skēnos* (σκήνος) or “tent.”⁴ In the estimation of Bruce Milne, “Being a tent-maker by trade (cf. Acts 18:3), this image would have been an obvious one for the apostle...[T]ents are exposed to storms and other external forces. They provide no great security, as every camper has learned. By the same measure, life here is vulnerable, subject to chance and change.”⁵ At the *parousia* or

¹ Noting the different clauses in 2 Corinthians 5:2, 1, Paul Barnett, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 261 fn#31 indicates:

“Gk. ἐξ οὐρανοῦ should be matched with ἐκ θεοῦ (v. 1). The dwelling is ‘from heaven’ because it is ‘from God.’”

² BDAG, 361.

³ F.F. Bruce, *New Century Bible: 1 and 2 Corinthians* (London: Oliphants, 1971), 203.

⁴ A related term, *skēnōma* (σκήνωμα), is employed in 2 Peter 1:14, where the Apostle Peter says, “I will soon lay aside my tent [*skēnōma*], as our Lord Jesus Christ has also shown me” (HCSB), as his death is surely in view.

⁵ Bruce Milne, *The Message of Heaven & Hell* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 263.

coming of the Lord, He brings with Him permanent security. The analogy of being further clothed would be like the present tent of the body being further established into a sturdy temple. Yet, as much as both Paul and many others may have wanted to go immediately from tent to temple, an existence defined as being “naked” (2 Corinthians 5:3) is instead what they have had to experience. Paul is quite clear, “we do not want to be unclothed” (2 Corinthians 5:4, NASU), with the verb *ekduō* (ἐκδύω) meaning “to put off one’s clothes, strip” (LS),⁶ as death will result in a person being stripped from his or her tent/body,⁷ losing what we already have. Far be it from those who die becoming like a permanent stone temple, they instead may be likened to a piece of Tabernacle/Temple furniture—quite useful and valuable, but undeniably incomplete.

One of the main reasons why God has implanted His Spirit, within the hearts of His people (2 Corinthians 5:5), is to give them the faith and assurance not only that “what is mortal will be swallowed up by life” (2 Corinthians 5:4, NASU) at the Second Coming, but all of the attendant events involving the establishment of the Messianic Kingdom and restoration of Israel will occur. The salvation of “all Israel” is a definite feature of Paul’s eschatology (Romans 11:25-26). Yet from an individualistic perspective, as much as he might want to see Yeshua return and Believers enter into His Kingdom on Earth, a condition of nakedness or being unclothed is far more probable. Paul says how when one is at home in the body, a Believer is separated from the Lord—but contrary to this is how when one is separated from the body, a Believer is at home with the Lord:

“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” (2 Corinthians 5:6-8, NASU).

Two locations of existence are contrasted here:

1. *endēmountes en tō sōmati* (ἐνδημούντες ἐν τῷ σώματι), “in home,⁸ in the body” (literal translation).⁹
2. *ekdēmēsai ek tou sōmatos* (ἐκδημησάει ἐκ τοῦ σώματος), “out of home,¹⁰ out of the body” (literal translation).

As long as Believers are “in home, in the body,” they are *apo*¹¹ *tou Kurion* (ἀπὸ τοῦ κυρίου) or “away from the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:6). Yet should a period of being “out of home, out of the body” present itself, then this can hardly be something to complain about, as it means being *pros ton Kurion* (πρὸς τὸν κύριον), “with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8). The preposition *pros* (πρός), occurring with an accusative case noun (indicating direct object), can indeed regard to “be (in company) with someone” (BDAG).¹² Being “out of the body” for the Believer definitely means being with the Lord. If death arrives for a born again individual prior to the Second Coming, it is not something to be feared, even if it means a temporary disembodied period in Heaven with Him. Reflecting on 2 Corinthians 5:8, John Wesley was entirely correct to conclude, “This demonstrates that the happiness of the saints is not deferred until the resurrection.”¹³

Most interpreters up until today rightly acknowledge that when Paul testifies, “we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8, NASU), that he is speaking of a temporary condition of disembodiment with Yeshua the Messiah in Heaven prior to the resurrection.¹⁴ Most appropriately, commentators who recognize an intermediate state in Heaven, making reference of 2 Corinthians 5:8 and deceased Believers being “out of home, out of the body,” **never lose sight of the**

⁶ LS, 237.

⁷ Previously in 2 Corinthians 4:16, Paul has noted a kind of outer and inner dualism present in the human being: “Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day” (NASU). The aging process might bring with it physical deterioration of one’s body, but does not bring with it a deterioration of one’s personality of self, which is to continually be empowered by a vibrant relationship with the Heavenly Father through His Son.

⁸ Grk. *endēmeō* (ἐνδημέω); “to live in a place” (LS, 260).

⁹ This is comparable to “in the tent,” *en tō skēnei* (ἐν τῷ σκηνεῖ; 2 Corinthians 2:4).

¹⁰ Grk. *ekdēmēō* (ἐκδημέω), “be in a strange land”..**be away**” (BDAG, 300).

¹¹ The preposition *apo* (ἀπὸ), occurring with a genitive (indicating possession), is often used as “a marker to indicate separation from a place, whether person or thing, from, away from” (Ibid., 105).

¹² Ibid., 875.

¹³ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, reprint (Peterborough, UK: Epworth Press, 2000), 655.

¹⁴ Ralph P. Martin, *Word Biblical Commentary: 2 Corinthians*, Vol 40 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1986), pp 111-113; Colin Kruse, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp 116-117; Ben Witherington III, *Conflict & Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 391; Barnett, pp 270-272; N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), pp 364-370.

eventual resurrection of the dead. Ralph P. Martin indicates, “The point [here] is that Paul sees nakedness as a state not to be feared ultimately because it looks forward to a prospect of embodiment.”¹⁵ With the whole of 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 in view, Ben Witherington III asserts how for Paul, “His point is that he longs to bypass the intermediate condition altogether and allow this mortality to be swallowed up by real life—life in the resurrection body. In short, he would rather live on earth till the resurrection.”¹⁶ Still, with death most likely to intervene, being disembodied and present with the Messiah, is something from which one can derive great joy and comfort!

What does the psychopannychist do with 2 Corinthians 5:8, who thinks that when a born again Believer dies, he or she falls into complete unconsciousness until the resurrection? Does the psychopannychist really deny what Paul says in terms of the Believer being “out of home, out of the body,” and in the company of the Lord Yeshua in Heaven? Certainly, there might be a few out there who would say that it is appropriate to interpret Paul as believing that he thought that he would go to be with the Lord in a disembodied state, but that Paul might have been wrong. *This would betray a liberal bias, though.* Most psychopannychists you encounter, given the impossible situation they face in trying to reinterpret 2 Corinthians 5:8, simply avoid it. Still, there are a few who try to offer what they think is a valid alternative interpretation.

In their theological textbook *Across the Spectrum*, Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy do their best to respond to the view that “out of home, out of the body” (2 Corinthians 5:8, lit.) means something other than a temporary disembodied state prior to the resurrection. They propose,

“The present time is a time of struggle in our fallen bodies. It is a time when we are only partially clothed with Christ and when we are in a significant sense ‘away from the Lord.’ When the eschaton arrives, however, we will be ‘away from the body’ and fully clothed with the Lord (if we are faithful). We will at that time be ‘at home with the Lord.’”¹⁷

While it may be true that our current lives on this side of the Second Coming may include various struggles with sin and temptation, the mode or quality of one’s existence is *not the issue* which has prompted Paul’s discussion on being clothed or unclothed, appearing in the larger context of 2 Corinthians 5:1-10. The question in view is: “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” (2 Corinthians 5:1, KJV). What is to be done if the tabernacle of the body is “torn down” (NASU),¹⁸ that which is “mortal”¹⁹ (2 Corinthians 5:4; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:53-54), or as Peter says, what occurs after his “put[ting] off my tent” (2 Peter 1:14, NKJV)? The issue of 2 Corinthians 5:6-8 is *locational*.

For an audience like the Corinthians, who really struggled with the doctrine of resurrection and the reality of the Second Coming (1 Corinthians 15; cf. 2 Timothy 2:18), what is going to happen? If people die, they are by no means to think that this is the end of their bodies. From Heaven at the time of the Second Coming and resurrection they will be given immortal bodies. We cannot avoid recognizing that this discussion has been prompted by addressing what occurs in relation to death, the resurrection, and the time in between. Psychopannychists, given the strong evidence from 2 Corinthians 5:1-10, in support of an intermediate afterlife before resurrection, have literally no choice but to try to claim that a different subject matter is being addressed. The locational nature of the verbs and prepositions employed (2 Corinthians 5:2, 4, 6, 8) has to basically be ignored.

The real challenge to what Boyd and Eddy have said above is very obvious. They claim that in the eschaton Believers “will be ‘away from the body’ and fully clothed with the Lord.” Exegetically speaking, this is a completely untenable position. The desire of the Apostle Paul was not to die, but to instead be further clothed and be

¹⁵ Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 112.

He further states, “to die was not the consummation of salvation for the Christian, but it was, in terms of fellowship with Christ, better than staying in the body.”

¹⁶ Witherington, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, 391.

¹⁷ “The Human Constitution Debate,” in Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy, *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 98.

Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Immortality or Resurrection? A Biblical Study on Human Nature and Destiny* (Berrien Springs, MI: Biblical Perspectives, 1998), pp 184-186 follows a similar line of reasoning, that Earthly and Heavenly modes/qualities of existence are instead in view.

Notably not present in either one of these analyses is *any examination* of the Greek source text, in particular what *ekdēmēsai ek tou sōmatos*, “out of home, out of the body,” really means.

¹⁸ Grk. *kataluō* (καταλύω).

¹⁹ Grk. *thnētos* (θνητός); “pertaining to being liable to death (that which will eventually die)” (*BibleWorks 7.0: Louw-Nida Lexicon*).

swallowed up in immortality (2 Corinthians 5:4).²⁰ No one on any side of the debate honestly believes that at the resurrection, those whose physical bodies are reanimated, exist in any kind of condition, or even quality, that can be legitimately described as “away/absent from the body.” In the resurrection age, **the opposite is true:** the righteous will have a *fully and permanently embodied* condition, as their salvation has been fully consummated with the redemption of their bodies (Romans 8:23). Psychopannychists themselves especially and most correctly argue that physical matter and the human body are good, and not evil.²¹ Boyd and Eddy have played a real theological shell game by actually suggesting that being “out of home, out of body” in 2 Corinthians 5:8 means the *fully embodied* future state, and could be legitimately accused of sounding Gnostic.²²

The only real exegetical option, before the psychopannychist, is for them to propose that being “out of the body” is an unconscious period of being held in a bodiless state of suspended animation with the Lord in Heaven prior to the resurrection. This might not do real justice to how being “out of the body” results in being “present with the Lord,” but it would not try to avoid how the subject of 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 actually pertains to the state of the dead.²³

Just like the Apostle Paul, we should to a degree not look forward to the thought of our Earthly tabernacles/bodies being torn down (2 Corinthians 5:1)—and should instead desire to be further clothed, as the Messiah returns from Heaven (2 Corinthians 5:2, 4), never having died (1 Corinthians 15:51). Reality being what it is, most of us are probably going to die before the Second Coming, and we will experience a season of being “away from the body.” Acknowledging that our current life “at home in the body” means that we are “away from the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:6), we should not at all find it displeasing that a temporary disembodied state means being “with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8) we serve and love, in Heaven. But as always, it is our responsibility to remember that going to be with the Lord in Heaven is not the ultimate destination—because the resurrection and Messianic Kingdom and Earth and into eternity is where redeemed humanity is going. As Milne properly concludes,

“[T]he intermediate state...while offering a new sense in the presence of the Lord, is an another sense ‘less’ than life here because of the loss of embodied existence. This lack will be more than corrected when the provisionality of the intermediate state gives place to the full life of glory, and we reach the true goal of existence...”²⁴ (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:44b-49).

In the meantime as we edge closer and closer to the future, there is much important work that needs to be accomplished. As Paul plainly emphasizes, “whether at home or absent, [we must] be pleasing to Him” (2 Corinthians 5:9, NASU). There is a time coming, whether one lives or dies, where all will have to answer for the works they have done in the body (2 Corinthians 5:10).

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:50 also states a corresponding thought: “Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable” (NASU). A physical transformation must occur in order to enter into the eschaton and Messianic Kingdom on Earth.

²¹ If a mode or quality of existence were really in view in 2 Corinthians 5:1-10, then it would have been far more appropriate and normative for Paul to have used *sarx* (σάρξ) or “flesh.”

²² It is worth noting that their chapter in *Across the Spectrum*, “The Human Constitution Debate,” pp 87-100, has been removed from its 2009 Second Edition.

²³ Another way 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 has been interpreted has been from the vantage point of an instantaneous resurrection. It is thought that Believers have new bodies already awaiting them in Heaven upon time of death. Cf. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, pp 203-205; Paul Beasley-Murray, *The Meaning of the Resurrection* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), pp 152-155.

While the position of an instantaneous resurrection does much better justice to passages like 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 or Philippians 1:23, and by no means advocates an unconscious period for the deceased, its significant weak point concerns what happens to human remains, which are presumably to be reanimated at the time of resurrection (i.e., Ezekiel 37:5-6; Daniel 12:2).

²⁴ Milne, 264.