

“Away from the Body and at Home with the Lord”: 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 in Context

Edwin Reynolds
School of Religion
Southern Adventist University

One of the primary biblical texts that has been used over the years to attempt to defend an intermediate state between this life and the eschatological resurrection of the body is 2 Cor 5:1-10. In an effort to clarify the real teaching of this section of text, it is my purpose to restudy the passage in its larger context to determine what Paul was endeavoring to say. Was he discussing anthropology? Was he discussing eschatology? Was he nuancing his earlier views expressed in 1 Thess 4 and 1 Cor 15, as some have argued, moving away from a biblical Jewish view of the state of the dead and the doctrine of the resurrection to a more Hellenistic view which proposes an immortal soul that escapes the body at death and assumes an intermediate state while waiting for the reunion of the soul with the body at the resurrection? Or did he have a different purpose that has often been hijacked for ulterior purposes? What was Paul’s real point in this passage?

A Brief Summary of Interpretations

There are three main ways in which 2 Cor 5:1-10 has been interpreted. (1) The first is to read Paul’s language there in anthropological terms as an attempt to describe an intermediate state between the death of the body and the resurrection of the body, in which an immortal soul continues in a “naked” state independent of the body until it is reunited with a glorified body at the resurrection of the dead. Jerry W. McCant states, “Throughout the history of the exegesis of this passage, ‘away from the body’ (v. 8) has

been assumed to describe the intermediate state.”¹ He cites Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian as early exponents of this view, as well as “the consensus of modern opinion.”² Such an interpretation creates a tension between this passage and Paul’s earlier views expressed in 1 Thess 4 and 1 Cor 15. Nonetheless, this has been the prevalent view.³ (2) Other scholars defend the consistency of Paul’s statements regarding the resurrection as it pertains to the body, particularly between 1 Cor 15 and 2 Cor 5. A number of studies have reached this conclusion, including some which continue to argue for an intermediate state.⁴ (3) A third group of scholars views Paul as talking about neither anthropology nor eschatology in 2 Cor 5 but merely as using the language of life and death for a different purpose, whether to express his confidence that his apostolic ministry is bearing fruit and will be crowned with glory, to express his hope in the face of death, or as part of an apology for his apostleship.⁵

¹ Jerry W. McCant, “Competing Pauline Eschatologies: An Exegetical Comparison of 1 Corinthians 15 and 2 Corinthians 5,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 29 (1994): 46.

² *Ibid.*, footnote 84.

³ See, e.g., Dale Moody, “The Double Face of Death,” *Review and Expositor* 108 (1951): 358; Joseph Osei-Bonsu, “Does 2 Cor. 5:1-10 Teach the Reception of the Resurrection Body at the Moment of Death?” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28 (1986): 89-95; N. A. Woychuk, “Will We Have Bodies in Heaven?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (1950): 99. M. J. Harris propounds a view of an intermediate state at death in which the believer is brought into presence with Christ by a kind of spiritual “resurrection-transformation” that he calls a “superinvestiture.” See M. J. Harris, “2 Corinthians 5:1-10: Watershed in Paul’s Eschatology?” *Tyndale Bulletin* (1970): 45-48, 56-57; *idem*, “Paul’s View of Death in 2 Corinthians 5:1-10,” in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 323-25; *idem*, “The New Testament View of Life after Death,” *Themelios* 11 (1986): 50, Internet, http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/life-after-death_harris.pdf (accessed 25 Mar 2012).

⁴ Paul Barnett, *The Message of 2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 97-99; John Gillman, “A Thematic Comparison: 1 Cor 15:50-57 and 2 Cor 5:1-5,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107 (1988): 439-54; Osei-Bonsu, 88-89; N. T. Wright with Patty Pell, *2 Corinthians: 11 Studies for Individuals and Groups*, N. T. Wright for Everyone Bible Study Guides (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP Connect, 2010), 25.

⁵ Karel Hanhart, “Paul’s Hope in the Face of Death,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (1969): 445-57; McCant, 23-49.

REYNOLDS: 2 COR 5:1-10 IN CONTEXT

Context of the Passage

In order to assess accurately the validity, or lack thereof, of any interpretation, it is important to take very seriously the context of the passage. “Few New Testament texts have been severed from their context as violently as 2 Cor 5:1-10,” observes McCant.⁶

A major component of Paul’s second extant letter to Corinth is the matter of establishing his apostolic authority among the Corinthians. This theme pervades the epistle. One key evidence of his apostolic authority is what he has endured for the sake of the gospel. He introduces the theme already in chapter one by describing the hardships and troubles that he and his coworkers in ministry have endured for the sake of the gospel of Christ. “If we are distressed,” he says, “it is for your comfort and salvation” (1:6).⁷ He attributes this distress to the fact that “we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings” (v. 5). Then he adds that his readers can find comfort “when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer” (v. 6; cf. also v. 7). Thus they could understand that all who accept the gospel of Jesus Christ should expect to pay the price through participation in His suffering. They would therefore be sympathetic to his experience and would acknowledge that it was an evidence of his faithfulness to the calling of Christ in his life.

Paul goes on to speak about . . .

the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us (vv. 8-10).

The Corinthians, then, can hardly accuse Paul of somehow seeking his own glory in his ministry, for who would willingly choose to endure such sufferings if seeking only one’s own glory and power?

In 1:12-2:11 Paul discusses his relationships with the Corinthian believers, including his decision not to visit them as he had earlier planned, in order to spare them further grief and pain (1:15-2:2). He cites the reasons for writing to them instead (2:3-4) and gives instructions on how to deal

⁶ McCant, 43.

⁷ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture passages are quoted from the ESV.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

with someone who had caused the church grief through his actions (2:5-11). Then in 2:12-3:6 he talks again about his ministry of preaching the gospel, first in Troas (2:12), then in Macedonia (2:13), and finally “everywhere”: “But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere” (2:14). “For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life” (2:15-16).

This death/life motif, which reappears in chapters 4 and 5, is associated with Paul’s gospel ministry. Paul argues for the genuineness of his ministry in verse 17: “For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.” He asks, in 3:1, if it is necessary for him to seek letters of recommendation from them for his ministry, but he quickly responds that such is not necessary because “you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (3:3). This is not because of any competence that he can claim for himself, “but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant” (3:5-6).

Paul seems to digress briefly on “the ministry of death” (3:7), the old covenant, versus “the ministry of righteousness” (v. 9), the new covenant, in 3:7-18, but it is not entirely a digression, for he utilizes the contrast to focus on the theme of developing glory as one phase comes to an end and a new phase begins. Paul expresses the transformation this way:

Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses’ face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory (vv. 7-11).

The old covenant, associated with condemnation and death, has come to an end, while the new covenant, associated with righteousness, the Spirit, and life, has been established as permanent.

REYNOLDS: 2 COR 5:1-10 IN CONTEXT

Paul adds in v. 12, “Since we have such a hope, we are very bold.” Our hope is grounded in the elimination of what is inferior, subject to death, and passing away, glorious as it may seem at the time, and the arrival of what is superior, a ministry of the Spirit, full of righteousness, and resulting in eternal life and surpassing glory. This is the hope brought through the gospel that Paul preaches. Paul closes the section with an expression of the result of the gospel in the lives of its adherents: “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (v. 18).

In chapter 4 Paul moves to a conclusion regarding the nature of his apostolic ministry. He introduces the discussion with the causal phrase *dia touto* (διὰ τοῦτο: “on this account,” “for this reason,” “because of this”), followed by a causal participle. The NIV expresses it this way: “Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart” (4:1). He goes on to declare, “We do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (v. 2 NIV). This truth which he sets forth plainly is centered in Jesus: “For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (vv. 5-6).

Next Paul contrasts the “treasure” of the light of the knowledge of God’s glory as seen in the face of Jesus Christ with the inferior and corruptible containers used to convey it: “But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (4:7). With this statement Paul introduces his utter unworthiness as a human instrument to be the bearer of the good news of the gospel. Although he defends his message as an apostle called by God to this ministry, he does not exalt himself as the messenger. Rather, he cites his experience as a sharer in Christ’s sufferings as evidence that Christ’s life is revealed for their benefit through his suffering as a minister of the gospel on their behalf:

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you (vv. 8-12).

He then introduces the resurrection as the goal of their collective faith: "Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, 'I believed, and so I spoke,' we also believe, and so we also speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God" (vv. 13-15). The message of the gospel Paul preaches focuses on the hope of the resurrection, based on the accomplished resurrection of Jesus Christ, and it is a message of bodily resurrection to glory, a contrast with the current mortal flesh in which the message of hope is being proclaimed.

Paul reaches another conclusion in 4:16, introduced in Greek with *dio* (διό: "therefore," "for this reason," "consequently"). "So," he writes, "we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (vv. 16-18). In this conclusion we find the heart of what Paul is trying to get across to his readers: The things that are of lasting value are not those that pertain to this temporal life, but the eternal realities transcend anything we can experience in this life. The gospel that Paul preaches is about those eternal realities, and they can be seen only with the eye of faith. His readers may despise the weakness of his mortal flesh, as they see his outer self, his body, apparently wasting away through affliction and distress, but this very affliction is but a fleeting experience that is preparing him for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, since his inner self is being renewed day by day by the message of the gospel that he preaches. And they can have the same experience, if they allow the message of the gospel to transform their own lives. As Paul declared elsewhere to the Romans, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom 1:17).

REYNOLDS: 2 COR 5:1-10 IN CONTEXT

Living by Faith, Not by Sight

Having considered the context prior to our passage, we can now more fully appreciate the passage itself, for it is integrally related to its context, especially its preceding context.⁸ Paul connects his thoughts here with the foregoing section by use of the postpositive causal conjunction *gar* (γάρ: “for,” “since,” “because”). He asserts in 2 Cor 5:1, “For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” Two dwellings (*oikia*, οἰκία) are contrasted here: the first is temporary—a tent (*skēnos*, σκήνος)—and earthly (*epigeios*, ἐπίγειος), while the second is eternal (*aiōnion*, αἰώνιον) and heavenly (*en tois ouranois*, ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς), described as a building (*oikodomēn*, οἰκοδομήν) from God not made with hands (*acheiropoiēton*, ἀχειροποίητον).⁹ The contrast between the two dwellings here parallels the contrast between the things which are seen, which are “transcient” (*proskaira*, πρόσκαιρα), and the things which are unseen, which are “eternal” (*aiōnia*, αἰώνια),¹⁰ in the previous verse (4:18), clearly pointing the reader back to that important principle, as the causal conjunction also implies. Indeed, Paul restates the principle in 5:7: “for we walk by faith, not by sight.” What Paul is declaring is that the principle of faith, which the gospel introduces, moves the believer from the realm of the transcient, which includes this mortal, fleshly existence, with its affliction and distress, to the realm of the eternal home prepared for us by God, an “eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (4:17).

⁸ McCant, 40, states correctly that “5:1-10 belongs more to what precedes than to what follows,” although there is also some connection with what follows. W. Larry Richards, *2 Corinthians: God’s Way is the Best Way*, Abundant Life Bible Amplifier (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1998), 106-7, following many older commentaries, introduces a second context from outside the text, namely, gnosticism, but this is difficult to verify, especially in light of recent studies that argue that gnosticism was not a significant factor before the second century A.D., although there may have been some proto-gnostic ideas already circulating in the first century.

⁹ There is a clear parallel here with the language of Heb 11:9-10,13-16, which contrasts a pilgrim life here on earth, living in tents, often afflicted and oppressed, with the promise of a permanent dwelling in a heavenly homeland prepared by God for people exercising faith in Him.

¹⁰ Another concept found throughout Heb 11 (see especially vv. 1, 3, 6, 7, 8, 10, 13, 26-27, 39).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

The only question is when this transformation takes place. The text says that we obtain this building from God “if” (*ean*, ἐάν)—not when¹¹—“the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed” (5:1). Can we know from the language of the text when Paul expects this change to take place?

Actually, the language of the text is quite clear, as several studies have shown. In verses 2-4 Paul begins using the language of clothing in connection with this transformation: “For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.” The expression translated “put on” in verse 2 is *ependusasthai* (ἐπενδύσασθαι), meaning to put clothes on or to put clothes on over (something),¹² while the expression “be unclothed” in verse 4 is *ekdusasthai* (ἐκδύσασθαι), to take clothes off. The former is associated with assuming the heavenly dwelling, while the latter is not actually associated with anything, but merely contrasted with the former—“not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed”—apparently arguing that the transformation does not involve taking

¹¹ Harris, “2 Corinthians 5:1-10: Watershed,” 35, argues that *ean* (ἐάν) here “approximates to ὅταν [*hotan*] in meaning” and that “the conditionality of the protasis is not necessarily compromised by the notion of temporality,” since “it was when, but only when, the tent which formed his earthly house had been dismantled that Paul was to become a possessor of the οἰκοδομή ἐκ θεοῦ.” However, that is not Paul’s point. Had he wanted to make that point, he could have used *hotan* [ὅταν] and made it clear, as Harris admits: “He did not write ὅταν . . . καταλυθῆ [*hotan . . . katalythē*] because only the actual arrival of death would frustrate his natural desire to be alive to witness the Parousia” (ibid.). Conditionality is much clearer in the context. Richards, 108, asserts, “Paul does not address the question of how much time will pass before the heavenly body replaces the earthly—we only know that it occurs at the resurrection (1 Cor 15).”

¹² Some, like Barnett, 99; C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, Harper’s New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 152-53; Colin G. Kruse, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1987; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Erdmans, 1987), 115; and Richards, 109, have argued that it means to put clothes on over or to further clothe, as opposed to the simple *endusasthai* (ἐνδύσασθαι) in 1 Cor 15:53-54, which means merely to put on clothes. But others, like Osei-Bonsu, 88-89, and Harris, “2 Corinthians 5:1-10: Watershed,” 43-44, argue against this interpretation. The word seems to be used as a synonym for *endusasthai* (ἐνδύσασθαι), at least in 5:2, where there is no apparent attempt to suggest that clothing was put on over something else, though the text does allow for that reading.

REYNOLDS: 2 COR 5:1-10 IN CONTEXT

off anything, so that “we may not be found naked,” but only putting on the heavenly clothing, being “further clothed.” What is it that we are to be “further clothed” with? Paul tells us, “so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.” In other words, we are “further clothed” with immortality, or eternal life. The mortal is “swallowed up” by immortality. All of this language is familiar to the Corinthian believers, since Paul used it to describe the resurrection in 1 Cor 15.

In his first epistle to the Corinthians, Paul addressed a problem that was troubling some in the church there. Some were saying that there was no resurrection of the dead (1 Cor 15:12). So Paul made a strong defense of the resurrection, beginning with the facts of Christ’s resurrection (vv. 3-8) and arguing therefrom for a general resurrection of those who believe and hope in Him (vv. 13-23). After submitting additional pragmatic arguments for the resurrection (vv. 29-34), he turned to the question of the nature of the resurrection and of the resurrection body (v. 35). After comparing different kinds of bodies in the natural world (vv. 36-41), and after contrasting the earthly, mortal, and corruptible body represented by the first man Adam (after his sin) with the heavenly, immortal, and incorruptible body represented by the resurrected and glorified Christ (vv. 42-49), Paul announced that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable” (v. 50). As evidence in support of this premise, he described the process of transformation which is necessary for mortal, corruptible flesh and blood to be able to inherit the kingdom of God: “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 imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory’” (vv. 51-54).

This description of the perishable putting on the imperishable and the mortal putting on immortality is just what Paul is describing also in 2 Cor 5:4. Even the quotation from Isa 25:8 is reproduced in paraphrase in 2 Cor 5:4: “so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.” The reader can hardly miss the connection. It is at the resurrection at the last day, when the last trumpet sounds, that the mortal body is clothed with immortality and death is swallowed up in victory by life.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Significant Greek parallels between 2 Cor 5:2-4 and 1 Cor 15:53-54 include the following:

2 Cor 5:2-4	1 Cor 15:53-54
ἐπενδύσασθαι . . . ἐκδυσάμενοι . . . ἐκδύσασθαι . . . ἐπενδύσασθαι . . . καταποθῆ τὸ θνητόν	ἐνδύσασθαι . . . ἐνδύσασθαι . . . ἐπενδύσῃται . . . ἐπενδύσῃται . . . καταποθῆ ὁ θάνατος

These parallels demonstrate conclusively that Paul’s language in 2 Cor 5:2-4 is drawn from 1 Cor 15:53-54.¹³ It is the language of the resurrection, not of some purported intermediate state.¹⁴

Another evidence that Paul has no idea of an intermediate state is the set of contrasts which he presents in 2 Cor 4-5. These are alternative conditions, with no third option presented.¹⁵

Paul’s experience as apostle	The benefits of Paul’s gospel
we have this treasure in jars of clay (4:7)	<i>to show that the surpassing power belongs to God (and not to us) (4:7)</i>
We are afflicted in every way (4:8)	<i>but not crushed (4:8)</i>
perplexed (4:8)	<i>but not driven to despair (4:8)</i>
persecuted (4:9)	<i>but not forsaken (4:9)</i>
struck down (4:9)	<i>but not destroyed (4:9)</i>
always carrying in the body the death of Jesus (4:10)	<i>so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested (in our bodies) (4:10)</i>
we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake (4:11)	<i>so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested (in our mortal flesh) (4:11)</i>
in our mortal flesh (4:11)	<i>but life [is at work] (in you) (4:12)</i>
death is at work in us (4:12)	our inner self is being renewed day by day (4:16)
<i>Though</i> our outer self is wasting away (4:16)	<i>is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison (4:17)</i>
this light momentary affliction (4:17)	<i>but to the things that are unseen (4:18)</i>
we look not to the things that are seen (4:18)	

¹³ Gillman, 449, has also pointed out these parallels.

¹⁴ Hanhart, 451, asserts that the concept of the immortality of the soul, which requires an intermediate state between death and the resurrection, is not only never mentioned in the New Testament but, “though well known in the hellenistic [*sic*] world of educated men, is not taught in the NT.”

¹⁵ The contrasting alternatives are highlighted in bold font for easier comparison, and the conjunctions and expressions of condition, concession, or purpose are emphasized in italics.

REYNOLDS: 2 COR 5:1-10 IN CONTEXT

the things that are seen are transient (4:18)	<i>but</i> the things that are unseen are eternal (4:18)
<i>if</i> the tent that is our earthly home is	we have a building from God, a house not made
destroyed (5:1)	with hands, eternal in the heavens (5:1)
in this tent we groan, longing to put on	our heavenly dwelling , <i>if</i> indeed by putting it
(our heavenly dwelling) (5:2)	on we may not be found naked (5:2-3)
while we are still in this tent , we groan,	(not <i>that</i> we would be unclothed, but) <i>that</i> we
being burdened (5:4)	would be further clothed , <i>so that</i> (what is
what is mortal (5:4)	mortal) may be swallowed up by life (5:4)

These parallels reveal by the adversative conjunctions and the expressions of condition, concession, or purpose that there is no middle ground. Every statement about Paul's mortality has a parallel statement regarding the benefits to accrue as a result of the hope of the gospel that he preaches. The difficulties he has been experiencing are nothing compared to the benefits he expects to reap from God through the life of Jesus. Also, his use of the first person plural throughout conveys to them that their experience can be the same. There is a stark contrast between this transient mortal existence, with its afflictions and burdens, and the eternal weight of glory promised by God in the next life, beginning with the resurrection as the point in time when we put on the new clothing of immortality and inhabit our heavenly dwelling, the eternal building from God. Paul draws his readers into identifying with this hope of glory, the promise of the gospel, of which he has been the apostle to them. The proof of his apostleship is that he bears in his own body the evidence of suffering and death for Christ's sake, so that while death is at work in him, the life of Jesus is at work in them through the gospel. Paul is willing to endure it all for the sake of providing them with the opportunity for eternal life through Jesus. That life is the resurrection life in a glorified body, clothed with immortality, as taught in 1 Cor 15. It is obtained only by faith in the gift of God: "He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. . . . [F]or we walk by faith, not by sight" (5:5-7).

The difficult expression in verse 6, "while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord," appears in this context, namely, the contrast between the present life and the resurrection life promised to the believer. "At home in the body" is equivalent to previous expressions such as "in our body" (4:10), "in this mortal flesh" (4:11), "in this tent" (5:2,4), "the tent that is our earthly home" (5:1), or even "in jars of clay" (4:7). This condition is described as being at the same time "away from the Lord," which is, in turn, a contrast to the resurrected state described in 1 Thess 4:17: "and so we will always be with the Lord." Similarly, "in this mortal

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

flesh” in 4:11 is in contrast to the resurrected state described in 1 Cor 15:50: “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.” In other words, “at home in the body” and “away from the Lord” describe the present, temporal life of the believer in contrast to the post-resurrection life. Paul states in 2 Cor 5:8 that “we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord,” signifying that he would prefer to move from this temporal life to the promised eternal life that comes at the transformation at the time of the first resurrection.

This becomes especially clear through study of a parallel found later, in Paul’s epistle to the Philippians. In Phil 1 beginning in verse 19, the apostle begins to explain his conviction that he will be released from his imprisonment in Rome, and he hopes that he will not be ashamed in any way, but that through his courage in the face of death Christ will be exalted in his body, whether by life or by death. “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (v. 21). Then he goes on to express the ambivalence he feels between the two possible fates that lie ahead of him: “If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account” (vv. 22-24). These two options, namely, to continue to live in the flesh versus to depart and be with Christ, are parallel to the two states Paul describes in 2 Cor 5:1-10. Here death (vv. 20-21) is described as departing and being with Christ. Many have interpreted this according to their own presuppositions regarding the immediate release of an immortal soul from the body to ascend and be with Christ. However, if we allow Paul to explain his own words, he does.

In Phil 2:16 Paul refers to “the day of Christ” as the day on which he will be able to boast of his successes in saving the Philippian believers as God’s children and as stars shining amidst the blackness of the universe. “The day of Christ” refers to the return of Christ in judgment at the Second Coming. It is associated with the resurrection. This becomes quite clear in 3:10-11, where he says, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead” (NIV). His goal will be finally realized when he attains to the resurrection from the dead at “the day of Christ.” If this is not clear enough, he spells it out even more clearly in 3:20-21: “But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus

REYNOLDS: 2 COR 5:1-10 IN CONTEXT

Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (NIV).

Paul does not expect any meeting with Christ prior to the Second Coming and the general resurrection of the righteous. His departure from this life and His being with Christ, as described in 1 Thess 4:13-17, is separated by a “sleep,” the first death, from which Jesus Christ, the Lifegiver, will awaken them at His coming when the trumpet blows. This is when the believers will be gathered, both dead and living, and “together” they will “meet the Lord in the air.” “And so,” Paul concludes, “we will always be with the Lord” (v. 17).

Some have taken the position that 1 Thess 4:14 points to God bringing back from heaven with Jesus at His coming those who have fallen asleep, implying that they must have ascended to heaven at death in order to be brought back with Jesus at His return. However, this is not the intent of the text. Those who are “asleep,” like Lazarus in John 11, are not conscious, since “the dead know nothing” (Eccl 9:5). They remain in the grave awaiting the resurrection. Paul’s point in 1 Thess 4:14 is made clear by two parallel statements that create an analogy:

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again,
even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

There is an inverted parallelism here in which the death of Jesus is parallel with those who have fallen asleep, and the resurrection of Jesus is parallel with God’s bringing the believers (from the grave) with Him (Jesus). Structurally, it can be arranged thus:

A Jesus died
B rose again
B’ God will bring with Him
A’ those who have fallen asleep

In other words, the death and resurrection of Jesus forms the basis for the analogy of the death and resurrection of the believer.¹⁶ “Even so” means

¹⁶ Harris, “2 Corinthians 5:1-10: Watershed,” 48, argues on the basis of the parallelism in this analogy that this verse (1 Thess 4:14) does not teach that the saints return from

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

“in just the same way.” Those who have fallen asleep, just as Jesus died, will be brought *from the dead*—not back from heaven, for there would be no analogy there—along with Jesus by the same power that raised Him from the dead. Jesus did not go to heaven at death and return from heaven at His resurrection to be reunited with His body, for after His resurrection, He stated plainly to Mary in the garden, “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father” (John 20:17). Making a similar point, the apostle Peter declared at Pentecost regarding the prophet David, “Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day” (Acts 2:29). He clarified what he meant in v. 34, adding, “For David did not ascend into the heavens.”

Another parallel passage in Paul’s writings comes shortly after his second epistle to Corinth. Paul declares in Rom 8:18-19, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.” He continues this thought in verses 22-23: “For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” Here Paul is pointing to the Parousia as the time toward which we and the whole creation eagerly look for the end of suffering in the flesh and the glory of receiving redeemed bodies, when God adopts us as His children and transforms us fully into His likeness (cf. Ps 17:15; 2 Cor 3:18; 1 John 3:2).

Paul, in 2 Cor 5:1-10, is not in conflict with either his earlier or his later writings, or with any other apostolic teaching in the New Testament. The consistent testimony of Paul, and of the New Testament, is that death, whenever it may come, is a sleep from which one may be awakened at the resurrection—whether of the just or the unjust. Paul himself looked forward to receiving his reward at the resurrection. As he was facing his imminent martyrdom, he wrote to Timothy in 2 Tim 4:6-8, “For I am already being

heaven with Jesus: “It should be noted that in this verse ἄξει [He will bring] is parallel to the earlier ἀνέστη [He rose again] and is therefore equivalent to ἔγερει [He will raise].” He adds in a footnote on the same page that “it is more probable in the context that ἐκ νεκρῶν [from the dead] . . . should be supplied than ἀπ’ οὐρανοῦ [from heaven].”

REYNOLDS: 2 COR 5:1-10 IN CONTEXT

poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.” His departure from this life was at hand, but the reward was reserved for “that Day,” the day of “his appearing,” the Parousia, the day of the great resurrection. That would be when He would receive the crown of righteousness which was “laid up” for him. It was toward that Day that all of his hopes of glory were affixed. That Day was for Paul, and still is for all Christians, “our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).

Conclusion

The immediate literary context of 2 Cor 5:1-10 is Paul’s defense of his apostleship by reminding his readers that he has been suffering for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ which he preaches, walking in the footsteps of his Lord, and facing death in the pursuit of the promise of life beyond the grave, namely the hope of the resurrection. The language he uses is, in part, the language of putting on the clothing of immortality and of death being swallowed up by life, found in 1 Cor 15:51-54, and of being forever with the Lord, found in 1 Thess 4:17, confirming that Paul had the resurrection in mind as he wrote about being away from the (mortal) body and present with the Lord. He subsequently used similar language also in Phil 1-3, again in explicit connection with the resurrection at the last day. This is the larger context in which Paul’s statements in 2 Cor 5:1-10 must also be understood. Paul did not change his theology or his anthropology over time. He remained consistent in his understanding that death is a sleep from which the believer will be awakened immortal and imperishable at the resurrection of the just. There is nothing whatsoever in the passage or in its context to suggest that Paul was speaking of an intermediate conscious state between death and the resurrection. Although the passage is not primarily about either anthropology or eschatology, it does lend insight into both anthropology and eschatology as Paul unpacks the role of his humanity in his proclamation of the gospel as an apostle of Jesus Christ, in whose footsteps he follows, keeping his faith fixed on the hope of the resurrection and the glory of eternal life with God.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Edwin Reynolds is Professor of New Testament and Biblical Languages and Graduate Program Coordinator for the School of Religion at Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee.
reynolds@southern.edu