

# PRESENT WITH THE LORD

By

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While the Bible consistently teaches that life after death is obtained by a resurrection from the dead, the general tradition encourages the thought that the next life begins immediately at death without a resurrection. The usual proof-texts for this claim are Luke 16 (The Rich Man and Lazarus) and II Cor. 5:8, where the apostle Paul expresses his willingness “to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.”

Upon these two passages of scripture has been based what Professor R. L. Whitelaw has labeled the I.C.A.D. Theory (Instant Consciousness After Death). While space does not permit dealing with the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, in this article I will show that the I.C.A.D. Theory cannot be based upon Paul’s statement in II Cor. 5.

All Bible scholars agree that a text taken out of context becomes a pretext. The context of II Cor. 5:8 includes chapter 4 and the first twelve verses of chapter 5. In chapter 4, Paul details the affliction and tribulation he and his companions endured for the sake of preaching the gospel. He is in constant danger of death (Vs. 11–12) but his faith carries him through all such threats because that faith is grounded in the resurrection. “Knowing that He that raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise up us also with Jesus, and shall present us with you” (V. 14).

Without question he expects the fulfillment of his hope to be by a resurrection, at which time the other saints also will be resurrected; “and will present us with you,” he declares. Then he writes that the affliction he endures is light by comparison to the glory he will have in the resurrection. “For our light affliction, which is for the moment, works for us more and more exceedingly and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.” Paul is looking toward the glory of the resurrection at the coming of Christ. Who, he says, “Shall fashion anew the body of our humiliation, that it may be conformed to the body of His glory” (Phil. 3:21).

This brings him to the statement in Chapter 5 where he writes of the earthly house of our tabernacle being dissolved that we may “have a building from God, a house not made with hands” (V. 1). This speaks, not of immediate consciousness and bliss at death, but of the new and glorious body to be received in the resurrection.

Note verse 4: “That what is mortal may be swallowed up of life.” This is the language of I Cor. 15:53–54 where he speaks of putting on immortality and of death being swallowed up in victory, not at the time of one’s death but at the time of Christ’s return, when the dead are raised and the living saints are changed “in the twinkling of an eye.” It is then and not until then that this mortal shall put on immortality and that “what is mortal may be swallowed up of life.”

This is in perfect accord with Paul’s statement in I Thess. 4:13–17. Here the apostle Paul writes to comfort the brothers “concerning them that fall asleep; that you sorrow not.” Here would be the ideal time for the apostle to explain to them that the saints who have died are enjoying a conscious bliss with the Lord. However, he doesn’t

even give a hint of this but instead explains that those who are “fallen asleep in Jesus” will be resurrected from the dead when the Lord comes. “For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first; then we that are alive, that are left, shall together with them be caught up in clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord” (Vs. 16–17). The statements, “and so shall we ever be with the Lord,” expresses the fact that this is the way we get to be with the Lord, through a resurrection at His coming.

Many who read about Paul’s “willing rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord” stop too soon. Two verses following he writes, “For we must all be made manifest before the judgment-seat of Christ; that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether it be good or bad” (V. 10). Paul’s focus in the entire paragraph is on the judgment-day appearing of Christ, and his aim is to be accepted by the Lord that he may have life through the resurrection.

Compare his thought here with Hebrews 9:27, “and inasmuch as it is appointed unto men once to die, and after this comes judgment.” Now, we know very well that the judgment-day is still in the future. It is a day appointed (Acts 17:31). All must be present. Therefore the judgment is not something which immediately takes place at the time of a person’s death. Yet, it does say, “to die, and after this comes judgment.” What the Hebrew writer is saying is totally consistent with all other scriptures regarding death and judgment, that after death, the next conscious instant for every person is judgment-day.

Many are repulsed by this doctrine for one reason only, the fear of being labeled as a “soul-sleeper.” It is true that some cults have emphasized the doctrine of soul-sleeping, but we do not reject the virgin birth just because most of the false religious systems of the world include the story of a virgin birth. How can a serious student of scripture discredit a Bible doctrine on the basis that it is also taught by the opponents of the faith?

Is it not the honest way to objectively consider the terms God has chosen and the hope that the Bible supports in plain language? In 52 scriptures God chose to use the expression “sleep” with reference to the death of man, both saved and lost: 41 passages in the Old Testament and 11 in the New. All these passages refer to the whole person, and not just the body, as being asleep in death, a sleep that continues until the day that Christ descend and with a shout—“the voice of the archangel” and “the trumpet of God”—awakens all (both the saved and the lost) to rise and meet the Lord.

We cannot find even one verse of scripture in the Old or New Testaments which states or even implies that at death one becomes instantly conscious or that at death the saints go immediately to heaven to “receive their reward,” as is so often heard.

Professor R. L. Whitelaw (in a manuscript soon to be published) writes: “In short, every one living believes in ‘soul-sleep’ when he puts his head upon his bed at night; for ‘sleep’ in modern psychotherapy is now recognized as a mysterious function, not of the body, but of the central life-principle or ‘soul’; i.e., nothing in the body changes measurably at the moment of passing from being awake to being asleep. How logical, then, that our Creator should label the mystery of death as ‘sleep’ when man’s life-principle is suspended from consciousness, whether for a night or until Judgment Day.

“We must also assert that those who hold the I.C.A.D. Theory, in effect, teach that in the 52 texts cited God really meant something other than the word ‘sleep’ which He

carefully chose. The burden of proof therefore lies on them to show why God not once shoes another word, neither in Greek nor Hebrew, of the many available. Until such proof is forthcoming, elementary Christian decency should restrain them from smearing or labeling as ‘heretic’ those who choose to believe that God meant exactly what He said.”

When Christ called Paul to preach He said He would “show him how many things he must suffer for my name’s sake” (Acts 9:16). Indeed, Paul’s ministry was one of great suffering, affliction, and persecution. He was beaten and slandered, often in need of standard living arrangements, deprived of fellowship and the help of loved ones, and finally imprisoned. Besides all this there was given him a “thorn in the flesh,” some kind of physical ailment that meant constant pain. No wonder he was ready to see an end to earthly life, that he might join the other saints who had “fallen asleep in Christ,” ready for that next event—the resurrection, when he would be raised in a new body, powerful, glorious, and immortal (I Cor. 15:43–44).

Paul was confident that resurrection would mean eternal life to him because he knew the meaning of the gospel (I Cor.4:3–4) and had been obedient to it. Christ had already suffered death to meet the penalty for sin, and Paul had been united in that death by faith at the time of his baptism (Rom. 6:3, 7). The loss of the mortal would be welcome since the very next event for him would be the resurrection and the putting on of immortality.

It is the common lot of all to die, to fall asleep. But there is a vast difference in the conditions, since only those who are Christians “fall asleep in Christ” and will awake in His likeness. All the rest die in the fear of awaking to judgment and condemnation to the punishment of destruction. Only the Christian, redeemed from sin and its penalty has any promise that his mortality may be “swallowed up of life.”

This is the essence of the Gospel, the Good News of life that is everlasting, the ultimate fulfillment of the purpose of God to have man in His own image, perfected and made eternal. Paul was committed to this purpose and the preaching of it to Jew and Gentile. It was this hope that he expressed in his desire to be “present with the Lord.”

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