THREE OPTIONS

There is perhaps no biblical passage that the Christian world has misunderstood more than 2 Corinthians 5:1–10. There, the apostle Paul expressed his intense desire to be absent from the body and present with the Lord. The critical question in this passage is not whether Paul wanted to be absent from the body and present with the Lord, because he did. The big question is *when* Paul expected this to occur. Was it at the moment of death or was it at the end of the age, when his mortal body would be transformed into the likeness of Christ’s glorified body?

A close examination of these verses reveals that the apostle did not merely contemplate two options (present with or absent from the Lord) but rather three. There was the possibility of being present in the body on earth and absent from the Lord in heaven or absent from the body on earth and present with the Lord in heaven. Paul also described a third option, which he did not prefer—being found unclothed or naked.

What did the apostle mean by the word *unclothed*? In order to answer this question, we must carefully analyze the terminology, the immediate context, and other parallel passages in the writings of the apostle Paul. A careful study of this passage reveals that being found “unclothed” is synonymous with the “sleep” of death, that is, the period between this life in a corruptible and mortal body and the future life in our incorruptible and immortal body.
Write out 2 Corinthians 5:1–10 from the Bible translation of your choice. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
**A TENT AND A BUILDING**

In this passage, the apostle Paul compares our present corruptible and mortal body to a *tent* that is easily dissolved or destroyed at death (cf. Job 4:19; 10:9). Tents are not permanent structures; with the passing of time they tear and decompose. On the other hand, Paul compares the glorified body of the resurrected saints with a permanent, immortal, and incorruptible *building* in heaven not made with hands.

Peter, the other pillar of the New Testament church, also compared his fragile earthly body to a tent that he would put off at death: “Yes, I think it is right, as long as I am in this *tent*, to stir you up by reminding you, knowing that shortly I must *put off my tent*, just as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me. Moreover, I will be careful to ensure that you always have a reminder of these things after my *decease*” (2 Pet. 1:13–15; cf. John 21:18, 19). The word *decease* is also translated “departure,” meaning a departure from life, that is to say, death (cf. Luke 9:31).

While in his earthly tent—the corruptible and mortal body—the apostle Paul *groaned* for the building that God had prepared for him in heaven, his glorified body not made with hands (cf. Mark 14:58; Heb. 9:11; Dan. 2:34, 44). Elsewhere the apostle used the identical word “groan” to refer to the earnest longing for redemption of the body at the second coming of Christ (Rom. 8:23).

The apostle Paul then introduced a third option other than living in the present tent or receiving the building from heaven. There was also the possibility of being “unclothed” or “naked”: “For in this we *groan*, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven, if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked” (2 Cor. 5:2, 3). Thus, Paul weighed three options and considered one of them the best. He could live in the present body, or receive his glorified body from heaven, or be “unclothed.”

Paul’s most intense desire was to be absent from the body (the present tent) and present with the Lord (in the future building), but he explicitly stated that it was *not his preference* to be unclothed or naked (to die). He desired translation to heaven without seeing death. Having carefully studied the context and terminology, we can understand the controversial verse that most Christians misuse to teach the immortality of the soul. “We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body [the tent], and to be present with the Lord [in the building]” (v. 8).
GROANING FOR IMMORTALITY

The apostle Paul was not groaning to be unclothed, that is, to die, but rather to be further clothed with his resurrected body: “For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life” (2 Cor. 5:4). This verse contains some key words Paul used elsewhere that help us understand the passage we are reviewing. In Rom. 8:23 Paul wrote that he groaned, longing for the redemption of his body at Christ’s coming. First Corinthians 15:50–55 contains three key terms that are in the 2 Corinthians 5 passage: “mortal,” “clothed upon,” and “swallowed up.” Here is the Corinthian passage with my own explanatory notes in brackets:

Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood [the present tent] cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption [the present tent] inherit incorruption [the heavenly building]. Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep [be unclothed], but we shall all be changed [receive our resurrected body]—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye [instantaneously and miraculously], at the last trumpet [at the second coming]. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible [receive the heavenly building], and we shall be changed [from the tent to the building]. For this corruptible must put on [be clothed with] incorruption, and this mortal must put on [be clothed with] immortality. So when this corruptible [the tent] has put on [been clothed with] incorruption, and this mortal [the tent] has put on [been clothed with] immortality [the building] then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.” “O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?” (Emphasis added.)

The apostle Paul was clear that we do not receive our heavenly building when we die, but rather at the second coming: “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body [the tent] that it may be conformed to His glorious body [the building], according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself” (Phil. 3:20, 21).

Unfortunately, most Christians embellish the text by inserting words that are not there. This is how they interpret it: “We are confident, yes, well pleased rather that our immortal soul be absent from the body and be present immediately at death with the Lord.” The words “soul,” “immortal,” and “immediately” are not present in the text. When did Paul expect to be present with the Lord? First Thessalonians 4:17 tells us that it was at the second coming.
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

2 Corinthians 4:16–18
Romans 8:19–24
Philippians 3:20, 21
2 Peter 1:13–15
1 Thessalonians 4:15–17
2 Timothy 4:6–8

What other verses come to mind in connection with 2 Corinthians 5:1–10?

Review your memorized verse from 2 Corinthians 5:1–10.
WELL PLEASING TO GOD

As we have seen, the apostle knew that while he lived in his corruptible tent, he was absent from the Lord (2 Cor. 5:6, 7). He was confident, however, that God had a building in store for him in heaven. At present we walk by faith because we are physically absent from the Lord and groan for our building (v. 7). When we receive our heavenly building, we will no longer need to walk by faith because we will be physically present with the Lord. Hebrews 11:1 tells us that “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen,” and Romans 8:24 assures us that we now live in hope: “For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees?” This is not some “pie in the sky” hope. God has given us His Spirit as a guarantee or down payment, thus assuring us that He will give us our building when hope meets fulfillment (2 Cor. 5:8). God is not about to lose His down payment!

Paul considered it most important, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to the Lord (v. 9), because believers must appear before the judgment seat of Christ to render an account for what they did while they lived in the tent (v. 10). Pleasing God means keeping His commandments and doing what is pleasing in His sight (1 John 3:22). In Colossians 1:10–12 the apostle explained what he meant by pleasing the Lord. It means to “walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy; giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light” (emphasis supplied).

In the judgment, God will take into account what we did and what we should have done and did not do. Jesus taught this lesson in the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31–46). Ellen White wrote, “We need not go to Nazareth, to Capernaum, or to Bethany, in order to walk in the steps of Jesus. We shall find His footprints beside the sickbed, in the hovels of poverty, in the crowded alleys of the great city, and in every place where there are human hearts in need of consolation. In doing as Jesus did when on earth, we shall walk in His steps” (The Desire of Ages [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1898], 640).

God calls upon His people to live like Enoch, who pleased God and was the first to receive his heavenly building: “By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death, ‘and was not found, because God had taken him’; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God” (Heb. 11:5, emphasis supplied; cf. Gen. 5:21–24).
CAPTIVATED BY CHRIST

Now, just now, is our time of probation, wherein we are to prepare for heaven. Christ gave his life that we might have this probation. But so long as time shall last, Satan will strive for the mastery over us. He works with power to lead men to become absorbed in money-getting. He invents many kinds of amusement, so that their minds may be engrossed with worldly pleasure. He would have them forget all about the inward adorning,—the adorning of a meek and quiet spirit, which in the sight of God is of great price. He is determined that every moment shall be filled with efforts to carry out ambitious projects or to amuse and gratify self. He is determined that men shall find no time to study the Word of God, no time to realize that they have been bought with a price, even the blood of the Son of God.

Satan uses his influence to drown the voice of God speaking to the soul; and the world acts as if under his control. Men have chosen him as their leader. They stand under his banner. They will not come to Christ that they might have life. Infatuated with schemes for pleasure and amusement, they are striving for that which will perish with the using.

At this time the message of mercy and warning is to go forth to awaken the world from its sleep of death. A work is to be done today that will live through the eternal ages. As watchmen entrusted with a special message, we are to keep before the people the nearness of the end. “Wherefore we labor, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of him. For we must all appear before the judgment-seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.”

The fast-fulfilling signs of the time declare that the great day of the Lord is right upon us. In that day shall it be said of any of us, “This man was called by God, but he would not hear, he would not give heed. Again and again the Spirit moved upon his heart, but he said, ‘Go thy way for this time; and when I have a more convenient season, I will call for thee.’ This man saw the Saviour's sacrifice in a beautiful light; but some matter of minor importance came in, and his heart was captivated. When the Spirit spoke again, the call was not respected. Every gracious, heavenly influence was dismissed”? (Ellen G. White, “Laborers Together with God,” in Advent Review and Sabbath Herald [March 10, 1904].)
inQuire

Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

Why is our “earthly house” described as a tent and our “heavenly house” as a building?

Why does Paul write that our present tent burdens us? Why is living in our tent burdensome?

What does Paul mean by the words unclad and naked? When are persons “unclad” and “further clothed”?

According to Paul, when will mortality be swallowed up in life?

What has God given us as an assurance and comfort that someday soon we will receive our heavenly building? Can you honestly say that you have that assurance and comfort now?

In light of the entire passage, what does Paul mean by the expression “absent from the body”?

Why does Paul include the parenthetical statement, “For we walk by faith, not by sight”?

Absent from the Body. When?