

# Philippians 1:23

## What do those who believe in psychopannychy/soul sleep do about Philippians 1:23, and with Paul desiring to depart and be with the Messiah?

Philippians 1:23 is the second most commonly quoted passage about the afterlife (after 2 Corinthians 5:8) that one will probably encounter. Many Believers throughout history, when presented with a likely death, have been able to identify with the same series of choices that the Apostle Paul had to make when he wrote his letter to the Philippians from prison in Rome. Paul asserts that death for him would be “gain” (Philippians 1:21), but that to continue living will mean “fruitful labor” (Philippians 1:22) and that continuing to live is necessary for the Philippians’ sake (Philippians 1:24). Yet if given the choice, Paul expresses how “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Philippians 1:23, RSV).

People instinctively do not want to have to go through the process and the pain of death. People generally want to keep on living, and they want to remain with their families and friends. They want to watch their children and grandchildren grow up, and they want to take advantage of the wonderful opportunities and beauty God has provided us on Planet Earth. Our mortality, though, will always catch up with us. Given Paul’s remarks in Philippians 1:23, does he at all see an unconscious blackness to be anticipated after his departing? Or, does Paul envision being welcomed into the presence of the Messiah Yeshua in Heaven?

Most Bible readers have rightly concluded that aside from the Second Coming taking place in their lifetimes, death is the means by which a born again Believer is ushered into the realm of the Lord. It is to be recognized how in ancient times the verb *analuō* (ἀναλύω), rendered as “depart,” regarded either a ship weighing anchor or of an army being transported from one location to another (2 Maccabees 9:1).<sup>1</sup> Peter T. O’Brien also notes how “ἀναλύω was used in the Greek world as a euphemistic metaphor for death.”<sup>2</sup> It would be quite appropriate to view Philippians 1:23 as Paul saying, “I desire to depart/die and [as a result I will]<sup>3</sup> be {immediately} with Messiah.”<sup>4</sup>

The Apostle Paul recognizes that whether he lives or dies—regardless of what happens to his body—“Messiah will even now, as always, be exalted...” (Philippians 1:20). If he should die, then such a death would represent “gain” (Philippians 1:21). While Paul would certainly leave behind a martyr’s testimony that others could gain encouragement from, going to be with the Lord Yeshua he loved so deeply makes death that much more “gain” for him.

Paul’s choices of location (Philippians 1:22, 24 and 23) are two-fold: “to live *on* in the flesh” (*zēn en sarki*, ζῆν ἐν σαρκί) or “to remain on in the flesh” (*epimenein [en] tē sarki*, ἐπιμένειν [ἐν] τῇ σαρκί)—in contrast “to depart and be with Messiah” (*analsai kai sun Christō einai*, ἀναλῦσαι καὶ σὺν Χριστῷ εἶναι). Paul can continue to live in the body, performing critical ministry work on the Philippians’ behalf, or he can die and be with the Lord. Of significant notice should be Paul’s usage of *tēn epithumian* (τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν) or “I desire” (Philippians 1:23, NIV), pointing to an

<sup>1</sup> Gerald F. Hawthorne *Word Biblical Commentary: Philippians*, Vol. 43 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 48; F.F. Bruce, *New International Biblical Commentary: Philippians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1989), 54; Peter T. O’Brien, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 130.

<sup>2</sup> O’Brien, 130.

<sup>3</sup> This conclusion is allowed by the conjunction *kai* (καὶ) functioning as a resultative: “to introduce a result that comes fr. what precedes” (BDAG, 495).

<sup>4</sup> “I am torn in two directions on the one hand I long to leave this world and live with Christ, and that is obviously the best thing for me” (Phillips New Testament).

The related noun *analsis* (ἀνάλυσις) is employed in 2 Timothy 4:6, where Paul later observes, “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure [*analsis*] has come” (NASU).

individual longing.<sup>5</sup> Philippians 1:23 represents an individual eschatology; Paul will get to see the Lord *before* those reading his letter. A corporate eschatology of all the saints is reflected elsewhere in his writings, in how both deceased and living Believers will together “always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:17) at the resurrection and Second Coming.

Paul prefers the choice of departure/death to be with the Messiah; contrary to this the Philippians would not depart/die, but instead would continue on with their lives. In the estimation of R.P. Martin, “Any idea of an unconscious state following death...is denied by the sheer simplicity of Paul’s expectation.”<sup>6</sup> Paul would die, and he would be departing to the realm of the Messiah in Heaven. J.A. Motyer describes how, “Scripture leaves so much about life after death undescribed, but on this central fact there is no hesitation: the Christian dead are ‘with Christ.’”<sup>7</sup> A personal departure to going to be “with Messiah” should correctly be understood as dying and going to Heaven—where Yeshua presently is—and there should be no surprise why Believers facing death **have taken so much comfort and encouragement** from Philippians 1:23! Gordon D. Fee observes that for Paul,

“His present existence ‘in Christ’ makes it unthinkable that he would ever—even at death—be in a ‘place’ where he was not ‘with Christ.’ Hence death means ‘heaven now.’ At the same time, a person’s death did not usher him or her into ‘timeless’ existence. Hence the bodily resurrection still awaits.”<sup>8</sup>

It is thought among various interpreters that Paul’s desire to depart and be with the Messiah in Philippians 1:23 causes a potential conflict of views: death ushers a Believer into the presence of the Lord, yet Paul eagerly anticipates the resurrection of the dead. There is, actually, no tension within the Pauline letters as long as it is emphasized that dying and going to Heaven is not the permanent condition of deceased saints. Gerald F. Hawthorne is proper to remind us, “the intermediate state is not in itself a separate ground for comfort...; it has no independent existence apart from the resurrection.”<sup>9</sup> Fee further states, “this is a tension of our making, not of Paul’s...These two ideas rest easily side by side in Paul because ‘being with Christ’ at death is not the final goal; resurrection is. But the former is nonetheless ‘gain’ to Paul, precisely because Christ is the beginning and end of all for Paul.”<sup>10</sup>

We have problems when verses like Philippians 1:23 are read and expounded upon isolated by themselves, as the goal of a person’s existence is thought by some to mean to die and go to Heaven—where elsewhere in Paul’s letter there is most certainly an emphasis on the resurrection of the dead (i.e., Philippians 3:20-21). The resurrection of the dead is the consummation of our salvation (Romans 8:23), and it is only at the time of the Second Coming when the company of *all Believers*—both those who have died and those still living—can be *with the Lord*. A disembodied state for those who have died must always be emphasized as being **temporary** (although it does assure us without any doubt that the same person, who had once lived on Earth, is the same authentic person who will be resurrected).

Death, as opposed to the resurrection, is the means by which an *individual* Believer can enter into the presence of the Messiah. A reading of the Epistle to the Philippians, though, demonstrates that the Apostle Paul clearly **never** expected to depart/die and be ushered into endless disembodiment. He firmly anticipated that at the resurrection the Lord “will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself” (Philippians 3:21, NASU).

The psychopannychist is familiar with Philippians 1:23, and with Paul’s expectation to depart/die and be with the Messiah. He will argue against a conscious intermediate afterlife for Believers in Heaven, saying something like, “Their relation with Christ is one of immediacy, because they have no awareness of the passing of time between their death and resurrection.”<sup>11</sup> It is recognized that Paul surely expected to depart and be with the Messiah, but is claimed that it would only take place after a long unconscious period, and then be a reality at the resurrection. If Paul had written “I desire to depart and rest/sleep in Messiah,” then there would be fewer

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<sup>5</sup> Here ἐπιθυμία has a positive connotation, signifying a particularly strong desire on the part of the apostle...a longing for that which he earnestly and continuously (if the present tense of ἔχων, ‘having’, is pressed) desired” (O’Brien, 129).

<sup>6</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians*, Vol 11 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 79.

<sup>7</sup> J.A. Motyer, *The Message of Philippians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), 89.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 149.

<sup>9</sup> Hawthorne, 51.

<sup>10</sup> Fee, *Philippians*, 149 fn#48.

<sup>11</sup> Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Immortality or Resurrection? A Biblical Study on Human Nature and Destiny* (Berrien Springs, MI: Biblical Perspectives, 1998), 179; cf. Morna D. Hooker, “The Letter to the Philippians,” in *NIB*, 11:491.

problems with his “departure” via death involving a long, unconscious period prior to the resurrection. **But Paul did not say this.** Paul did not say “I desire to depart and be raised in Messiah,” either. Paul said that his desire was to depart/die and as a result go somewhere: the presence of the Lord Messiah.

If Paul had ever written “I desire to depart and be with Timothy” or “I desire to depart and be with Priscilla and Aquila,” from his setting, no one would ever question the fact that he would be transported somewhere. All Paul would have to go do was pack his bags and make his way to the nearest port and hop on a ship, or just start walking, to go see his dear friends. But since Philippians 1:23 is talking about a departure to be with Yeshua the Messiah, who resides in the dimension of Heaven, psychopannychists want us to think that humans (made in God’s image with a unique supernatural imprint, no less) cannot cross over into that dimension. They would actually ask us to look at this verse as meaning, “I desire to depart and *eventually* be with Messiah,” which would occur sometime after Paul’s death and confinement in the grave, now being a period of almost two millennia.

The psychopannychist may ask us to look at Philippians 1:23 as a statement of relationship: Paul only desires a closer communion with the Lord Yeshua, and he is not making any kind of claim as to the post-mortem condition. No one can deny how Paul in Philippians is motivated by his relationship with the Messiah, so much so that he wants to emulate His sufferings, death, and resurrection as closely as he can in his ministry service (Philippians 3:10-12). Yet, if one’s relationship with Yeshua is everything for a person—**why would one not expect to be with the Lord immediately upon time of death?** A cursory reading of various psychopannychists’ writings will demonstrate how many of them do not seem to be motivated by that close a walk with the Lord, but rather proving anyone who holds to an intermediate afterlife in Heaven prior to the resurrection as being dreadfully wrong.<sup>12</sup>

While psychopannychists think they are doing us all a service, by drawing our attention to overlooked and underemphasized Biblical passages on the resurrection of the body—they go too far in arguing against an intermediate afterlife in Heaven. *They actually argue against born again Believers who love the Lord going to be with Him at the earliest possible moment.* What might this say about their relationship with the Lord, and of their wanting to “depart” and be with Him? Thankfully, the psychopannychist’s personal relationship with the Messiah is something that only he or she can work out with Him.

While Paul was released from his confinement in Rome and was able to conduct more ministry work, he would find himself imprisoned again. Communicating to his dear friend Timothy in his final days, he said, “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure [*analysis, ἀνάλυσις*] has come” (2 Timothy 4:6, NASU). According to Church tradition, Paul was executed by Nero in Rome (Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 2.25.5). One of Paul’s immediate successors in Rome, Clement, communicated how he was a man of faith worthy of emulation by all, and who died an appropriate death:

“He was in bonds seven times, he was exiled, he was stoned, He preached in the East and in the West, winning a noble reputation for his faith. He taught righteousness to all the world; and after reaching the furthest limits of the West, and bearing his testimony before kings and rulers, **he passed out of this world and was received into the holy places.** In him we have one of the greatest of all examples of endurance” (1 Clement 5).<sup>13</sup>

When the Apostle Paul was executed, he was finally able to depart and be with the Lord Yeshua in Heaven whom he had served with such steadfastness and vigilance. Yet nowhere did the good Apostle ever expect to remain in Heaven forever (cf. 1 Thessalonians 3:13). While being with the Lord was extremely important to him, it is only at the resurrection of the dead *when all the saints* get to be with Him and we will get to *all* enter into His Kingdom! Then, the world system that murdered Paul will finally have to be subdued by the Master of Heaven.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 189, and his actual usage of the description “deadly heresy.”

<sup>13</sup> Maxwell Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1968), pp 25-26.