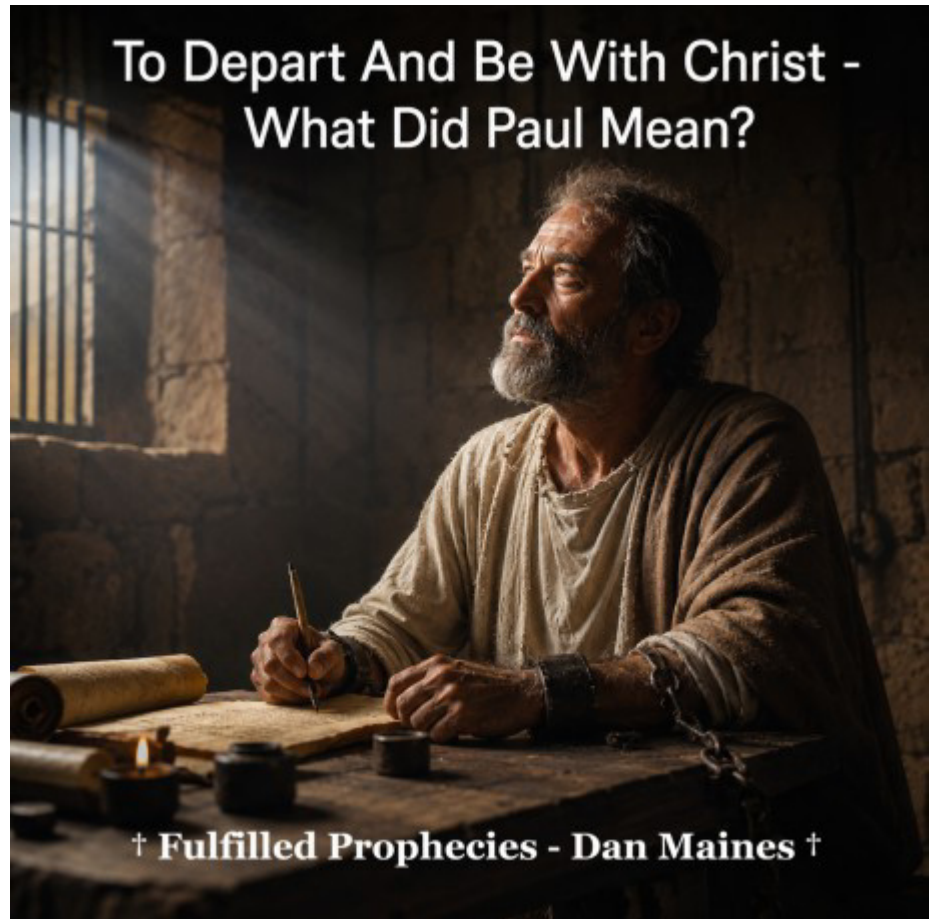


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To Depart And Be With Christ - What Did Paul Mean?



By Dan Maines

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Introduction

† Some have suggested that when Paul spoke of his desire "to depart and be with Christ," he was not speaking about physical death, but about being set free from the Old Covenant.

† While the end of the Old Covenant was certainly approaching in Paul's day, the context of Philippians shows that Paul was discussing whether he would continue living and ministering or whether he would die and be with Christ.

† The question is not whether the Old Covenant was passing

away. The question is whether Philippians 1:21-23 is discussing covenant transition or Paul's personal life and death.

Philippians 1:21-24

For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sakes.

† Paul contrasts two possibilities, continuing to live in the flesh or departing to be with Christ.

† Remaining alive would allow him to continue fruitful ministry among the Philippians.

† Departing would place him in the presence of Christ, which he says is "very far better."

† The contrast only works if Paul is speaking about physical life and physical death.

† The Philippians were already New Covenant believers, so Paul was not deciding whether to remain in the Old Covenant (Philippians 3:3).

Philippians 1:25

Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith,

† Paul concludes that he will remain and continue ministering among them.

† This confirms that the discussion concerns remaining alive versus departing from this life.

† His confidence was that continued life would benefit the believers under his care.

† The contrast remains physical life versus physical death.

2 Corinthians 5:6-8

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 - but we are of good courage

and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.

† Paul uses similar language here to describe being absent from the body and present with the Lord.

† The subject is clearly physical life and physical death.

† This passage helps explain Philippians 1 because both passages express Paul's confidence about being with Christ.

† Paul did not fear death because his life was hidden with Christ (Colossians 3:3-4).

Romans 7:24-25

Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.

† This passage concerns deliverance from sin and the struggle between flesh and spirit.

† Paul is describing deliverance from the power of sin through Christ.

† He is not defining the meaning of "depart" in Philippians 1.

† Different contexts should not be merged into a single interpretation.

2 Timothy 4:6-8

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is reserved 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.

† Near the end of his life Paul again speaks of his departure.

† The context is his approaching death, not leaving the Old Covenant.

† This later statement helps explain the meaning of departure in Philippians 1.

† Paul consistently viewed death as departing to be with the

Lord.

Philippians 3:20-21

For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our lowly condition into conformity with His glorious body, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.

† Paul reminds believers that their true citizenship is in heaven.

† Their hope was centered in Christ, not in the Old Covenant order that was passing away.

† Throughout Philippians, Paul's confidence is found in Christ Himself.

† The focus remains union with Christ and the completion of God's redemptive work.

Greek Word Study

† The Greek word *anulusai* can mean to depart, loosen, or break camp.

† Words are defined by their context, not merely by every possible dictionary meaning.

† In Philippians 1 Paul is deciding whether he will continue living and ministering or depart and be with Christ.

† The context determines the meaning, making physical departure from this life the natural understanding of the passage.

Historical References

† Clement of Rome referred to Paul enduring suffering and then departing to the place of glory prepared for him.

† Polycarp spoke of Paul as having gone to the place due him with the Lord.

† John Chrysostom understood Philippians 1:23 as Paul's desire to leave this present life and enter the presence of Christ.

† Early Christian writers consistently understood Philippians 1:21-23 as referring to physical death and being with Christ.

How It Applies To Us Today

† Believers do not need to fear physical death because our life is found in Christ.

† Our hope is not based on earthly circumstances but on our relationship with the risen Lord.

† Whether we live or die, we belong to Christ (Romans 14:8).

† We can serve faithfully in this life while knowing that Christ remains our eternal hope.

Q & A Appendix

Q: Does the word "depart" mean leaving the Old Covenant?

A: The context shows Paul contrasting remaining alive in the flesh with being with Christ. The discussion is life versus death, not covenant membership (Philippians 1:21-25).

Q: Was the Old Covenant passing away in Paul's day?

A: Yes. Hebrews says it was becoming obsolete and ready to vanish away (Hebrews 8:13).

Q: Why doesn't Hebrews 8:13 define Philippians 1:23?

A: Because words must be understood within their immediate context. Philippians discusses Paul's life, ministry, and possible death, while Hebrews discusses covenant transition.

Q: Doesn't the Greek word *anulusai* mean to be set free?

A: The word can have several related meanings, but context determines which meaning is intended. In Philippians 1 Paul contrasts remaining alive in the flesh with departing and being with Christ, making physical death the natural meaning of the passage (Philippians 1:21-25).

Q: What comfort did Paul have regarding death?

A: Paul believed that to depart from this life was to be with Christ, which he described as very far better (Philippians 1:23; 2 Corinthians 5:8).

Q: Does Paul mean it is better to die to self so he could more fully experience Christ in the present?

A: No. Paul was already living for Christ and had already died to self in the sense of discipleship (Galatians 2:20). In Philippians 1:21-25 he contrasts two possibilities, remaining alive in the flesh to continue fruitful ministry or departing to be

with Christ. The passage is not about a deeper spiritual experience in the present life, but about the contrast between continuing earthly ministry and departing from this life to be with Christ.

† This is the fulfilled perspective we proclaim at Fulfilled Prophecies †

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Source Index

† Philippians 1:21-25, 2 Corinthians 5:6-8, Romans 7:24-25, 2 Timothy 4:6-8, Philippians 3:20-21

† Clement of Rome, Polycarp, John Chrysostom

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