

What about... I desire to depart and be with Christ?

20 I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. 21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 22 If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! 23 I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; 24 but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. 25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith... (Philippians 1:20-25 NIV)

On the surface these verses are the best evidence I've seen that Paul believed that at death some part of us would go to be with the Lord. By all appearances Paul desired to depart this world and be with Christ in heaven. That is what it says, isn't it? Well...let's look a little deeper.

There's lots of speculation of what Paul meant in these verses. Some scholars even believe Paul was contemplating committing suicide. Why else would he say he didn't know whether he would choose to live or die? Wow, enough scholarly speculation! Especially when Paul himself elaborates later in chapter three of this same letter on what he meant in these verses.

What did Paul mean when he said, “for me to live is Christ and to die is gain?” [see [Philippians 1:21](#)] Did he mean if he died he would gain by his soul going to heaven. Or did he mean (according to some who don't believe we have an immortal soul) that he would be freed from sin, from doubt, from temptation, from his enemies, from suffering and anxieties. Well, according to Paul, it was none of these. Paul said, the value of knowing Christ is what he truly considered gain [see [Philippians 3:7,8](#)]. And, he wanted to further know Christ and the power of his resurrection by sharing in Christ's sufferings and the manner of his death; with his ultimate hope being the resurrection of his body being raised from the dead [see [Philippians 3:10,11](#)]. In his own words, that was gain!

Paul desired to depart and be with Christ. [see [Philippians 1:23](#)] What did he mean by depart? Here the Greek word means to “unloose for departure,” I envision unloosing the moorings on a boat as it leaves the dock. The word depart was commonly used to describe death in ancient Greek literature. This reflects the Greek belief that the soul began a journey after death. As with the Greek word “Hades,” the Greek word used here for “death,” contains pagan meanings not necessarily endorsed by early Christians. I think Paul described death using this word in Philippians 1:23 because it better conveyed the concept of either “staying,” if he lived or “leaving,” those whom he ministered to, if he died. In what way did Paul mean, being “with” the Lord when he died? Did he mean his soul would go to be with the Lord in heaven or something else? For an understanding based on Paul's own words we have to look at Philippians chapter three again. In chapter three Paul expounds on what he meant by “gain,” and he explains why he wanted to die. While giving more details he mentions nothing about his soul going to heaven to be with Jesus. Instead Paul said he wanted to share in Christ's sufferings and become like Christ in his death; that he might know him better and experience the power of his resurrection and be resurrected from the dead [see [Philippians 3:10,11](#)]. The Greek word translated “with,” in Philippians 1:23 means to be “associated with,” or “identified with.” It does not necessarily mean close physical proximity, but in all fairness neither does it absolutely exclude it. That would have to be determined by context. When Paul said he wanted to die and be with Christ, I think he meant he wanted to die and be even more closely “identified with” Christ by experiencing some of what the Lord experienced when he died. It was all part of Paul's desire to know the Lord better.

In his second letter to Timothy as the time of his death approached, Paul again described it as departing and once again he spoke of looking forward to events which surround the return of the Lord [see [2 Timothy 4:6-8](#)]. In Philippians it was the resurrection and in 2 Timothy it was the reward he would receive at the Lord's appearing. I hope you are beginning to see the pattern here --- no mention of going to heaven when he dies but plenty of talk about coming back to life again at the resurrection and other extraordinary events that would affect Paul and all believers at the return of the Lord.