

Theology

One Bite at a Time

**A Theology of
Rewards in Heaven**

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INTRODUCTION

*“Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man
the things which God has prepared for those who love Him...
But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit
searches all things, yes the deep things of God.” (1 Cor 2:9-10)*

All too often the first part of this Scripture in 1 Corinthians, taken in part from Isaiah 64:4, is quoted by those who claim that we should not delve into what God has planned for us in the world to come. They cite verse nine without reading verse ten. It is the Spirit of God that reveals to us through God’s Word the “*deep things of God.*” This passage tells us that it is the Spirit of God in each one of us that searches out what God has prepared for us – if we will hear His voice.

The promise of Heaven for the Christian should be compared to the Holy Land promised by God to the people of ancient Israel. It is a place that God has prepared for His children. He rescues them from their captivity and bondage in a hostile world. He preserves them through the wilderness journey of a difficult life. He then provides for them a place of rest and joy at the end of their journey – if they will but heed and obey His instructions – trusting Him to fulfill His promises.

Journey’s End should be on the heart and mind of every believer – constantly before us, beckoning to us. It should be that which we long for. But all too often this is not the case. Jesus spent much time teaching His Disciples about the Kingdom of God and Heaven, telling them that this earth was but a staging ground for the world to come. The Apostle Paul also spent a great deal of effort teaching that our life and actions here on this planet will have eternal consequences for every believer and non-believer alike.

What does the Bible teach about rewards? The word “reward(s)” and the various Greek words translated as rewards number at least twenty eight times with the large majority of those making direct reference to rewards in heaven paid out by God.

Will Heaven be a place of different kinds of rewards, crowns and levels of authority? Will there actually be human kings and queens ruling in Heaven with power over other believers? Or will Heaven be a place where everyone is treated the same, sharing equally in the wondrous inheritance which God will provide for His children?

Is the very concept of rewards in heaven to be taken literally, or is the NT teaching about rewards to be understood as merely a metaphor for eternal bliss, with no basis in reality? Will God and Jesus show partiality for the works of the Saints – giving greater or lesser praise for those who produced more or less fruit while here on earth? And finally will God and Jesus evaluate in a negative fashion the sinful acts of Christians who lived a life that was more carnal than other believers, thus causing them to suffer loss in heaven when they could have secured a richer eternity while on earth?

This paper will briefly explore the NT presentation of rewards in heaven. We will seek to establish a theology of rewards as understood by our Lord and His Apostles. A sampling of the Early Church Fathers will also be consulted as to what they understood concerning this subject. In the end it is hoped that this paper will serve to convict the reader about the crucial and eternal importance of both hearing and doing the Word, and in being obedient to the commands of Christ.

Affirmations and Denials

It is inevitable when holding discussions concerning the truth about rewards in heaven, the Bible teacher will be challenged with a number of objections.

- “You are teaching that works are necessary for salvation”
- “You are teaching Roman Catholicism”
- “God does not show partiality.”
- ”God loves all of His children equally – regardless of how they behaved on earth.”
- “Rewards in Heaven are the same thing – rewards are spiritual and not physical.”
- “We should never deliberately do anything for God that would profit us.”
- “God does not deny His Children rewards because of disobedience – they are forgiven.”
- “There is nothing I can do to please God.”

It is helpful from the outset to establish guidelines when studying rewards and punishment in the world to come. Below is a summary of affirmations and denials which were made clear by many of the experts consulted for this project.

It is affirmed that Salvation is by grace through faith “alone” and not by works - it is a gift from God.
It is denied that good and bad works committed on earth have little meaning or consequence in heaven.

It is affirmed that Salvation in Heaven and Rewards in Heaven are both promised in Scripture.
It is denied that Salvation in Heaven and Rewards in Heaven are the same thing.

It is affirmed that God does not show partiality as to the earthly status of individuals.
It is denied that God will reward or position everyone equally in heaven.

It is affirmed that at the Judgment Seat believers will receive rewards and suffer loss.
It is denied that to “suffer loss” implies we can lose our salvation.

It is affirmed that Heaven is a real place – both physical and spiritual.
It is denied that Heaven is solely a spiritual realm of eternal bliss as taught by Plato and the Gnostics.

It is affirmed that rewards in Heaven will be real, tangible and varied – different in quantity and quality.
It is denied that Biblical “rewards” are simply a rhetorical device denoting spiritual bliss.

It is affirmed that rewards should be actively sought by believers for personal benefit and to please God.
It is denied that to seek rewards in Heaven is a “selfish” endeavor, and not to be consciously pursued.

It is affirmed that there will be levels of authority held by believers in heaven based upon merit.
It is denied that God and Christ hold no regard for merit.

It is affirmed that for the unbeliever, meritorious works are insufficient to permit entrance into Heaven.
It is denied that after one becomes a believer he will escape accountability for evil committed.

Inequality in Heaven?

“I’ve seen Christians become upset more than once with the idea of inequality in heaven. Most of them prefer the idea of a kind of bland socialism – where everyone is equal, where everyone possesses the same joy, and where everyone is rewarded with equal gifts.”¹

Valorie Emilio is not alone in expressing a kind of surprise when she hears that many Christians do not believe there will be inequality in heaven. In her article *Metachoi – Inequality in Heaven*, Emilio cites a number of modern day theologians and pastors who agree that the Bible is not vague in this matter;²

“There will be varying degrees of reward in heaven. That shouldn’t surprise us. There are varying degrees of giftedness even here on earth.” – *John MacArthur*

“There are degrees of reward that are given in heaven. I’m surprised that this answer surprises so many people. I think there’s a reason Christians are shocked when I say there are various levels of heaven as well as gradations of severity of punishment in hell.” – *R.C. Sproul*

“The kingdom of God will not be the same for all believers. Let me put it another way. Some believers will have rewards for their earthly faithfulness. Others will not. Some will reign with Christ. Others will not (see 2 Tim 2:12). Some will be rich in the kingdom of God. Others will be poor (see Luke 12:21, 33). Some will be given true riches. Others will not (see Luke 16:11). Some will be given heavenly treasures of their own. Others will not (see Luke 16:12).” – *Charles Stanley*

There is a significant body of Scripture which teaches the idea of heaven being a place where the saints hold unique positions of authority and different stewardships. These Biblical passages leave little room for the concept of an egalitarian utopia where everyone is rewarded the same regardless of what they did for the Lord while on earth.

¹ Valorie Emilio, *Metachoi - Inequality in Heaven*, RemnantReport.com, www.remnantreport.com/cgi-bin/imcart/read.cgi?article_id=292&sub=25 (accessed Dec 10, 2009).

² Ibid. – See article’s bibliography for citation sources. Also see Appendix for additional citations from theologians and Church leaders regarding rewards in heaven.

The Kingdom of God will be a real place with real people and real cities. Real kings and rulers will have authority under the ultimate authority of Christ and the Father.³

There are numerous passages in the Bible, especially the NT which describes distinctions in heaven - some people will be first and some last. In speaking about positions in the Kingdom Jesus stated:

“But many who are first will be last, and the last first” (Mt 19:30). *“Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”* (Mt 5:19) NKJV.

Rewards, both in kind and degree will not be equally distributed in heaven. In her article Valorie Emilio uses the business term “leverage,” taking note of how Christ rewards faithful stewards in heaven. The idea is that for a small amount of faithful service given here in on earth, an even greater abundance is given by God in return to the individual. *“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for my name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life”* (Mt 19:29).

The teachings in Scripture which describe greater and lesser status in heaven may be uncomfortable to us, but these passages in the NT cannot be ignored – they must be faced head-on. Perhaps the discomfort felt does not come so much from a sense of fair play, but the conviction that the sum total of my life may not be pleasing to my Lord – or that I am not doing all that I can to serve Him.

³ See section “To Reign in Heaven and on Earth”

To Reign in Heaven and on Earth

“What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him? For You have made him a little lower than angels, and You have crowned him with glory and honor. You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands: You have put all things under his feet.” Psalms 8:4-6

King David asks; what is the purpose of man? Why is he here? What is his destiny? David then proceeds to answer his own question. Mankind was created to have dominion or “reign” over creation as “Steward Kings” of the most High God. This is a staggering idea - one that is difficult to swallow. Especially when we evaluate the pool of human candidates from which God will choose His Kings and Queens!

Be that as it may, the Biblical teaching that men and women were ordained by God to rule over His creation is well documented in the Bible from beginning to end. God created man and woman in His image (Gen 1:27) and He commanded them to fill the earth and have dominion over the earth (1:28). What the brief rule of Adam and Eve looked like before the Fall, we do not know. Satan most certainly became the new ruler of this world (2 Cor 4:4), but his rule will end and be cast out (Jn 12:31). At the end of this age God will restore the rule of mankind over His creation. *“And they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years”* (Rev 20:4), and *“they shall reign forever and ever”* (22:5). Paul Benware states the following:

“As the Lord Jesus rules, there will be people who rule with Him... It is the subject of co-rulership that is closely connected with rewarding at the judgment seat of Christ. It is why Jesus spoke in terms of giving ‘authority over ten cities’ and of being ‘over five cities’ (Luke 19:17, 19) and why He promised the Twelve that they would sit on twelve thrones with Him in the coming kingdom (Matt. 19:28) and why Paul says ‘if we endure, we shall also reign with Him’ (2 Tim 2:12). Something magnificent is ahead if Christ and the apostles are to be believed. We suspect that to miss out on this is to miss out on much.”⁴

⁴ Paul Benware, *The Believer’s Payday* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG, 2002) 136. Benware states that reigning with Christ is “closely connected with rewarding at the judgment seat.” He stresses in his book that our good works and faithfulness will determine if we rule at all, focusing on that word “If.”

“If”

“Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is.” 1 Cor 3:12-13

There is a consistent message in the NT which can be troubling for those of us who have been trained in the Church to view salvation as a free gift from God – that there is nothing we can do to please Him. In the Church we often teach that salvation is ours without any strings attached save only that we “accept” His free gift. Is this teaching completely accurate? What about those passages that seem conditional?

This troubling message or theme is repeated over and over again, characterized by the word “if.” *“If anyone’s work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire”* (1 Cor 3:14-15). This verse and others like it state that there are conditions or works that we must do in order to win His approval and gain His rewards. More troubling are those NT passages which claim we can “lose” our rewards.

Troubling as these “if” passages are, they reveal a wonderful and yet sobering truth - there is a difference between “salvation in heaven” and “rewards in heaven.” Entrance into heaven is not conditional upon our works (Eph 2:8-9), but obtaining rewards and suffering loss are dependent upon our works. What we do after we become a Christian matters. What we do or fail to do for the Lord will have very real consequences both here on earth and in heaven. *“If we endure, we shall also reign with Him, If we deny Him, He will also deny us. If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself”* (2 Tim 2:12-13).

Warnings to Believers

“If anyone does not abide in Me, he will be cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.” Jn 15:6

“For if God did not spare the branches, he may not spare you either. Therefore consider good and severity of God; on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.” Rom 11:21-22

There are many sobering passages in the NT which warn believers that if they do not remain faithful they will suffer consequences both in this lifetime and when they appear before Christ at His Judgment seat. When Jesus warned His disciples and Paul warned the Church at Rome were they stating that a Christian can lose his salvation, or were they referring to something else that could be lost?

It has been the observation of this writer that when Christians are confronted by these warning passages and others like them, a kind of theological battle line is formed. Two familiar sides gather and begin to have at each other. Calvinists and Arminians thrust and parry around the doctrines of election and predestination.

For the purposes of this paper we will not engage in this discussion because it can deflect from the point of this paper: “In the end it is hoped that this paper will serve to convict the reader about the critical and eternal importance of both hearing and doing the Word, and in being obedient to the commands of Christ.”

For the early Christians, the Reformation and post-Reformation constructs of election, predestination and perseverance of the Saints had not yet been formulated as we know them today. As will be shown later in this paper the earliest Christians were more focused on living a life which was pleasing to God and helping fellow man than getting all of their theological and doctrinal “P’s & Q’s” in order.

If the “warning” passages to these apparent believers are to be taken at face value, there can be little doubt that the writers of the NT were concerned that Christians could indeed sin and in extreme cases “*fall away*” from their faith. “*You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked*” (2 Pet 3:17). It is difficult to deny that this passage and the others already cited were not written to “real Christians.” Both context and grammar do not support the assumption that only “unbelievers” are being addressed in the warning passages. Hence we are faced with a question, can a true Christian fall away from his faith?

Joseph Dillow makes this comment; “The term “fall away” does not refer to falling away from eternal salvation. It refers, rather, to a falling away from the path of growth, or forfeiture of eternal reward.”⁵ In making this point Dillow offers a perspective concerning the “warning passages” in the NT which is compelling.

“For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries” (Heb 10:26-27).

To those who interpret this passage to mean that a Christian can lose his salvation Dillow responds; “Does the writer of this epistle [Hebrews] doubt their salvation? No! What he worries about is their loss of reward. He says: ‘*Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise* (Heb 10:35-36).’”⁶

⁵ Joseph Dillow. *The Reign of The Servant Kings* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle, 1990) 209.

⁶ Ibid., 217

For Dillow the Christian cannot lose his salvation, but a believer can cast away his rewards and even suffer rebuke from God at the Judgment seat. When speaking of the consistently carnal Christian, Dillow says; “For some there will be a stinging rebuke. This is the meaning of the Lord’s warning that some will be ‘*cut into pieces*’ (Mt. 25:26), and of His stern denunciation, ‘*You wicked, lazy servant*’ (Mt. 24:51).”⁷

Paul Benware Ph.D. author of *The Believer’s Payday* agrees with Dillow that the NT warning passages are to be taken seriously by all Christians. For both Dillow and Benware there are real dangers that Christians should guard against. The NT admonitions and warnings against dangers like the false teachers of 2 Peter 2:1-21 and Jude are addressed to Christians who, though possessing eternal life, can have their witness and lives ruined, even to the point of physical destruction. Other warnings such as avoiding immorality and idolatry along with grumbling and divisiveness in the Church posed a real and eternal threat to believers of the first century and to us today.

According to Benware and Dillow the apostle Paul showed concern with his own walk and the fear of being disqualified. Holding himself up as an example, Paul let it be known that the possibility of being “disqualified” from Christian service was real. “*But I discipline my body and bring it under subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified*” (1 Cor 9:27). Benware states; “Great reward is possible for diligent faithful living, but great loss is possible for sluggish, sinful living. When these warning passages are coupled with Paul’s concerned discourse on disqualification, one cannot escape the fact that living the Christian life is considered serious business.”⁸

⁷ Ibid., 535

⁸ Paul Benware, *The Believer’s Payday* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG, 2002) 165.

Rewards

What are the “rewards” that the Father and the Son will dispense at the Judgment Seat? In the Bible it is seen that the Lord will indeed recognize each person as an individual – this is a consistent theme. *“And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it ”* (Rev 2: 17a). *“And behold, I am coming quickly, and my reward is with me, to give to everyone according to his work”* (Rev 22:12). So to begin with, we recognize that each believer is treated differently as an individual, but apparently the rewards to be dispensed will also be different – both in kind and degree.

“He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward. And he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man’s reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means loses his reward” (Mt 10:41-42).

Robert Govett, in his book, *Reward According to Works* makes a powerful point when discussing the degree and the kinds of rewards which will be dispensed in heaven:

*“Behold the mighty multitude of the saved! All enter into glory through Him that loved them, and washed them from their sins in his own blood. But will all be equal in station and reward? Will Paul, that laboured more than all the other Apostles, receive only the same degree of glory with the dying robber, who, an hour or two before his decease laid hold of Christ, and was saved? Scripture, I am persuaded, teaches the contrary.”*⁹

Govett is not alone, surprisingly this author was unable to find any sizable body of Orthodox Evangelical Christian Scholars who would affirm with conviction that there is equality in heaven or that rewards are of the same kind and nature.¹⁰

⁹ Robert Govett. *Reward According to Works* (Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle, 1989) 4. Govett’s first publication of this book was in 1870.

¹⁰ The primary area of contention relates not to rewards but to its sister teaching of inheritance. Who will inherit the Kingdom and can we lose our “inheritance?” Which is to say, that we can be saved in heaven but be left outside of an inner circle of “Partakers and Overcomer’s,” i.e. *Metachoi*,” because our works were unworthy. This debate involves many, especially Calvinism and Arminianism, along with competing schools of eschatology. This subject will not be dealt with in this paper – *thankfully!*

Rewards are characterized in the NT in a number of ways primarily with respect to kinds and the quantity of rewards. There are two principle Greek words used in the NT, (1) *misthos* (wages), (2) *apodidomai* (to payback or repay).

“*Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your wages [misthos] are great in heaven*” (Lk 6:23).” Wages are payment for work done. It is that which may be considered an obligation on the part of the employer to his employee.¹¹ “*The Laborer is worthy of his wages*” [*misthos*] (1 Tim 5:18). Paul, in making this point in 1 Timothy appears to be paraphrasing Jesus in Matthew 10:41-42, “*He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward*” [*misthos*].

Paul and Jesus employed the positive “laborer” motif when affirming that rewards are paid for meritorious service. This particular kind of reward was given because the recipient earned it. “Jesus never described His reward as a charitable tip (“Here’s a little something extra”), or a token of appreciation (like a plaque for thirty years at the factory). He called it wages – something you earn resulting from something you do.”¹²

We have seen how rewards given by God are positive, but rewards can also be applied in the negative sense in the form of just retribution for evil; “payback” – both to individuals and nations. “*Reward [apodidomai] her even as she rewarded [apodidomai] you, and double unto her double according to her works: in the cup which she hath filled, fill to her double*” (Rev 18:6) KJV. Here Babylon is paid back for her sins and the evil done to the Saints – notice that the penalty is doubled.

¹¹ Some here may balk at the idea that Jesus “owes” us anything! Of course He does not, however these are His words and it is by His choice that He obligates Himself. His possessions are His to give to whom He will, (cp. Mt 20:1-16). It is the gracious promise to recompense His children, for good works that binds God, and not anything that we can hold over His head.

¹² Bruce Wilkerson. *A Life God Rewards* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2002) 35.

Paul Benware characterizes positive Biblical rewards in three categories; (1) Commendations, (2) Companionship and (3) Crowns.¹³

Commendations are from God and Jesus wherein faithful believers are praised by God and Christ for a job well done. “*Well done good and faithful servant (Mt 25:21).*

Benware paints the picture of the faithful believer standing eye-to-eye with the “Lord of Hosts” as the commendation is given before the entire universe;

“It is probably a good thing that [believers] will be in their resurrected bodies at that moment because the old body would probably experience a meltdown due to extreme joy and gladness of heart. Surely, nothing in this universe will rival a word of praise from the King Himself. At that moment any pain, any sacrifice, any striving against sin, any labor for the Lord will be more than worth it.”¹⁴

Rewards in the form of companionship are defined as companionship with Christ on an intimate level which may be greater for some than others. This is in keeping with structure of the disciples as portrayed in the gospels. While there were seventy disciples that Christ sent into the country (Lk 10:1-24), not all of them were in the inner circle such as John and Peter and James. According to Joseph Dillow this companionship is better defined as a partnership with Jesus using the Greek, a *metachoi* to describe the relationship. Dillow states that in the NT and classic Greek *metachoi* can be a business partner, a wife, joint owner of a house or a close confidante who shares personally in the affairs and experiences of another. For example, passages such as Romans 8:16-17 point to rewards for suffering for the sake of Christ; “...*joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him that we may also be glorified together.*”¹⁵

¹³ Paul Benware, *The Believer's Payday* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG, 2002) 118.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁵ Dillow's concept of an “inner circle” is not without controversy and is not shared by all. But the fact remains that many texts in the NT imply that the quality of a believer's relationship with Christ may in part be conditional upon how they represented Christ here on earth.

The awarding of Crowns at the Judgment Seat of Christ is another category of rewards in the Bible. There are to a small degree, differing opinions as to the number of crowns and the works required to receive one. There is general acceptance that the crowns (Gk *stephanos*) describe recognition for meritorious acts. They are honorific but do not signify authority such as the crown (Gk *diadema*) of a king.

Benware says there are four specific crowns with a fifth being somewhat general in its description. Govett specifies five crowns as does Dillow.

- Crown of Life – To those who have suffered and endured great trials for their faith and not faltered but persevered, the crown or wreath of life is given. Jesus said “*be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life*” (Rev 2:10). Benware states that every believer can receive this crown because everyone suffers various trials and temptations. Yet not all Christians will endure. They are still Christians but do not receive this very special recognition.¹⁶
- Crown of Joy or Rejoicing – This crown is the joy a Christian will receive when he sees other Christians standing at the Bema seat. This is the crown for the faithful witness who leads others to their Lord. “For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? For you are our hope and joy (2 Thess 2:19-20).
- Crown of Righteousness – According to Benware this crown does not refer to the imputed righteousness of all believers but rather to the righteous living of the Saints who lived their lives in anticipation of the Lord’s return. They kept themselves in a state of readiness.¹⁷ See 2 Timothy 4:8 where the crown of righteousness is awarded “*to all who loved His appearing.*”
- Crown of Glory – 1 Peter 5:1-4 written to the elders who are the shepherds of the flock, admonishing them to care for those who have been entrusted to their care. These elders are to be examples to the congregation. It is through the winning and caring for the souls of the Church that the Crown of Glory is awarded.
- Crown of Incorruption – In 1 Corinthians 9:25-27 Paul desires a crown that is imperishable, and to obtain it he disciplines his body and brings it under subjection. Govett believes that this is a crown for those who deny themselves and avoid the lusts of the flesh and worldly pursuits in a culture that feeds on self satisfaction.¹⁸

¹⁶ Paul Benware, *The Believer’s Payday* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG, 2002) 125

¹⁷ Ibid., 124

¹⁸ Robert Govett. *Reward According to Works* (Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle, 1989) 11.

It was somewhat vague in doing the research for this project to clearly discern if the awarding of a crown included something akin to a reward or payment (*misthos*), or if it was more a case of recognition like an insignia denoting status or even authority of rule. Also, there does not seem to be clear and complete descriptions of the crowns and their nature. Some of these descriptions given by scholars seem to overlap.

There are those who hold that the crowns given to individuals along with rewards are temporal and less important eternally. They cite Revelation 4:10-11 where the elders will cast their crowns at the feet of Jesus. But Erwin Lutzer disagrees that the crowns are temporal and feels crowns will have permanent significance in reigning with Christ.

If we are given actual crowns in heaven, I'm sure that we shall gladly lay them at Christ's feet. But it is wrong to think that our rewards are crowns and nothing more. If we join the elders I casting our crowns before Him, I believe He shall give them back to us so we can join Him in ruling 'forever and ever' (Rev 22:5). Whatever might happen to the crowns, our rewards are eternal. Rewards are primarily not medallions, but specific honors."¹⁹

It is sufficient to say that receiving a crown is to be likened to a commendation made by our Lord to those have persevered under trials and encouraged the Saints. There is no doubt that Paul compared life to running a race in the stadiums of Rome and Greece. The race Paul ran was to be run in a deliberate manner with one thing in mind – to win! “*Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it*” (1 Cor 9:24).

¹⁹ Edwin Lutzer. *Your Eternal Reward* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1998) 152

Wanting and Working for Rewards – Is it Self-Centered?

“Resolved: To endeavor to obtain for myself as much happiness in the other world as I possibly can, with all the power, might, vigor and vehemence, yea violence, I am capable of, or can bring myself to exert, in any way that can be thought of.” *Jonathan Edwards*²⁰

If nothing else, the Bible teaches that we are to be “deliberate Christians” and not “accidental Christians.” God is deliberate in what He is doing in redemptive history and we are to be the same. It is obvious to even a casual reader of the Bible that both Father and Son expect us to perform good works regardless of our emotions or those external obstacles which may confront us. The essence of perseverance and endurance demand that we be deliberate in our Christian walk.

Some may say that it is “selfish” to do good works in order to obtain rewards from our Lord, insisting that our works should come from our hearts. To this critic one could respond; what could be more selfish, (or absurd), than to say, “I will withhold from doing God’s will until my motivations are pure.” Or “my good works mean nothing if I do it solely to obtain Jesus’ promise of a reward” – tell that to the hungry person whom God has placed before you as you relieve their suffering. There is an old adage; “Never let your sense of morality get in the way of doing what is right!”

The final evaluation of our motives and our deeds, are the prerogative of God alone and not us. “*Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand*” (Rom 14:4). In a very real sense we are not very good judges of our own character or motives - and we do not see all ends from our works.

²⁰ Quoted in Edwin Lutzer. *Your Eternal Reward* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1998) 18.

We do not fully understand why the Lord has seen fit to offer us heavenly rewards for godly behavior. Nor do we fully understand why He encourages us to seek these rewards for our own benefit as well as His good pleasure - but this He has done.

To be sure, we are to examine ourselves (2 Cor 13:5, 1 Cor 11:28-32), and if our motives are impure we are to repent (1 Cor 11:31, 1 Jn 1:9). But this process of self-examination does not change the clear teaching of scripture that we are to be deliberate, even ambitious in seeking God's approval and His reward. "*Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him*" (2 Cor 5:10) NASB.

In Luke 14:12-14, Jesus had been invited to a Sabbath meal by a Pharisee. This supper was attended by prominent people and by all accounts appeared to be amiable. We do not see the adversarial tug-of-war that characterized many encounters between Jesus and some Pharisees. During the meal Jesus taught these men a number of lessons using demonstrations and parables. The lessons included the great importance of kindness and good works to others by healing on the Sabbath. He also taught them the practical advantages of being humble by using the illustration of sitting at the lowest place at the table so that they would be the exalted by those immediately around them.

But the lesson which concerns this report is His advice of being deliberate in doing good works in order to obtain rewards in heaven. Jesus states; "*When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brother, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid*" (14:12).

Jesus is not saying 'never invite your friends or relatives for dinner.' He is doing His hosts a favor by instructing them how they can obtain rewards in heaven. He is in effect teaching them how to create a situation in which they cannot possibly profit from men but where they can profit from God.

“But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just ” (14:13-14).

It is remarkable that Jesus does not address the issue of motives for doing good works. He is telling the Pharisees to be deliberate about gaining rewards at the Resurrection. This must be the Bema Seat because this event is attended by “the just.”

Bruce Wilkinson comments about this story of the Sabbath meal in Luke;

“No one in the room could have missed Jesus’ astonishing revelation – God will repay you for a good work *after you are dead*. This contradicts what most people believe today and everyone in that room believed – that God rewards people only on earth for the good they do in this life.

Jesus revealed just the opposite. His words show that when you do a worthy deed for a person who cannot repay you: (1) You will be repaid. (2) Your payment will come in the next life. (3) When you receive it, you will be blessed.

Certainly, God blesses us here on earth out of His unmerited grace and goodness. God may also give us temporal rewards for right choices or faithful service to Him in the here and now. But the rewards Jesus reveals in this story – and the ones He talks about most – are different... These rewards come not from asking, but from doing – and not now, but after death.”²¹

²¹ Bruce Wilkinson. *A Life God Rewards* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2002) 33-34.

Treatment of Selected Passages

2 Corinthians 5:10 – Appearing Before the Judge – Receiving Our Due

“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body according to what he has done, whether good or bad.” NKJV

In this passage we do not see the more positive word *reward*, either the Gk *misthos* or *antapodosis* used in connection with the Judgment Seat (*bema*) of Christ. Rather the context suggests a time and a place where a full disclosure of committed acts followed by personal accountability before God will occur. The sum total of a Christian’s work, both good and bad, will be judged. This includes every believer, “*we must all appear*”.

In this text we see the Judgment Seat is not restricted to an award ceremony occasioned solely for the dispensing of rewards and crowns for meritorious acts. Both good works and bad works are brought before the Lord Christ. He will evaluate those works and impose some form of accountability on every Christian.

“...that ***each one*** may ***receive***,” “Receive” (Gk - *komizo*) “to bring to”. The ESV renders the phrase; “*so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.*” These are the works of believers, “*done in the body*” during the Christian’s life here on earth. The ESV is helpful in showing that Christ will deliver or “bring to” each believer what is due as a direct consequence for good and bad behavior. It can be seen in this verse and others like how the judgment seat of Christ may hold out more for the believer than positive rewards. It will also involve a painful confrontation with one’s own sinful past, exposed for all to see.

Josef Ton points out that the phrase “*we must all appear*” is the Greek word *phaneroō*, “To make manifest.” Ton looks to Philip Hughes for a clear definition of the word, *manifest*. “To be made manifest means not just to appear, but to be laid bare, stripped of every outward façade of respectability, and openly revealed in the full reality of one’s character.” Ton goes on to add; “It is crucial for us to be aware of the things that will come under scrutiny at that judgment. It will be a judgment of every man, ‘according to what he has done, whether good or bad.’”²²

The prospect of a face-to-face encounter with our Savior which may involve pain and or shame is not a pleasant one. Paul himself treated the Bema Seat of Christ with a great deal of concern and the utmost gravity. When speaking of this encounter at the Judgment Seat, Paul states; “*Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men*” (5:11a), NKJV, KJV. The Reformation Study Bible (ESV) is quick to point out that the “terror” or as they translate it “fear” of the Lord, is not a fear of eternal condemnation or the sufferings of hell. It is rather a healthy and reverent fear which Paul held and concerned him greatly.²³ Using the word “fear of the Lord” rather than “terror of the Lord” tends to diminish the severity of the phrase. But in either case, what is in view is a judgment of Christians’ behavior and actions which will involve both reward and loss.

2 Corinthians 5:10 affirms two future events; 1) Every Christian will appear before the Judgment Seat and be examined. 2) Every Christian will receive what is due to them (i.e. rewards and/or loss) for acts both good and evil done in this life time.

²² Josef Ton. *Suffering, Martyrdom, and Rewards in Heaven* (Wheaton, IL: Romanian Missionary Society, 2000) 167.

²³ R.C. Sproul, ed. *The Reformation Study Bible* (Orlando, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2005) 1678.

I Corinthians 4:5 – A Time of Examination & Disclosure

“Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who both will bring to the light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each ones’ praise will come from God.” NKJV

Paul is speaking about that specific time, *“until the Lord comes.”* This judgment is identified by Govett as an examination rather than a judicial decree.²⁴ A judicial decree will indeed follow the examination, but this is not the primary focus at this point. The secret counsels of the heart²⁵ and the hidden things of the believer’s life are made known and brought out into the light of God’s truth.

*“Until the Lord comes, **who both will bring to the light...**”* Both the Lord Jesus and God the Father will examine the hearts of all believers. That the Father and the Son will be present and active in this process points to the importance of its fulfillment.

This verse (4:5), and indeed the whole of Chapter four is within the greater context of Paul’s admonition to the Corinthians to maintain a life free from immorality and to live a life of purity toward God. Chapter four is theologically “bracketed” between chapter three which speaks about the carnality of the Corinthian Church and Chapter five which condemns the sexual immorality of an individual and the complacency of the Church congregation in dealing with the offender. Verse 5 of Chapter four is clear that sinful acts on the part of the Corinthian Christians would not be swept under the rug, but exposed down to the last detail. It is not just the act of immorality itself, but the very purposes and attitudes of the congregation.

²⁴ Robert Govett. *Reward According to Works* (Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle, 1989) 4. Govett’s book includes a great deal of Scripture in making his points and argues effectively for his interpretations.

²⁵ The ESV translates “counsels of the heart” as the “purposes of the heart.” This speaks well to the very motivations of the heart. So it is not only our actions but our motives that will be exposed and examined. This seems to be a necessary and gracious act by our Lord. He will not permit us to bring even the smallest of unworthy thoughts to His table. After this process of examination and disclosure we will be freed from their hold on the conscious. He will have revealed them to us and then forgiven us!

The purposes and attitudes of the congregation speak to motives. It is not just what we did but why we did it. But to judge our motives is a very difficult thing to do.

Paul Benware says;

“Motives are difficult for us to evaluate because our flesh is a potent reality in our lives. Our pride, desire for personal comfort, and a host of other wrong motives seem to be lurking nearby at all times. There may well be a mixture of motive in what we do. While we may not always understand our motives with absolute clarity, we are wise to give thought to why we do what we do.”²⁶

In summary, 1 Corinthians 4:5 reaffirms that each and every Christian will come under an intense examination, and a full disclosure of their most intimate thoughts, motives and deeds. Those sinful deeds and thoughts which we hope will be overlooked or forgotten, will not be swept under the rug. Good and evil must be evaluated and exposed for what they truly are. Actions, motivations, thought, and the consequences of the believer’s life, be they good or bad need to be revealed. This is not done for the sake of some abstract judicial construct, but for the sake of the Children of God.

Imagine trying to live for eternity in His perfect and holy presence with a secret sin or thought constantly condemning us so as to taint our relationship with Him. It is only through this process of ultimate truth telling and accountability that we can be thoroughly healed and cleansed – made acceptable to share perfect intimacy with our Lord. There will be no secrets or “little white lies” that come between us. This is the Church – made ready as a bride is made ready for intimacy with her groom.

²⁶ Paul Benware, *The Believer’s Payday* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG, 2002) 81-82.

Early Christian Beliefs – Rewards and Punishment

The theological discussion regarding rewards and punishment on Judgment Day, based upon good and bad deeds, was not lost on the early church fathers. Notables such as Eusebius, Theophilus, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origin, (to mention only a few), contributed a good deal of opinion and teachings on this subject.

Their topics included differing levels of authority and habitation in heaven apportioned by God to individuals based upon works done on earth. The Fathers also wrote about varying degrees of punishment based upon the quantity and severity of sinful actions. Early Church leaders such as Irenaeus wrote of proportional compensation by God, in terms of the quality of life in heaven based upon merit.

The following is a sampling of quotations by some of the Fathers with comment.

“There is a distinction between the habitation of those who produce a hundred-fold, and the habitation of those who produce sixty-fold, and the habitation of those who produce thirty-fold. For the first class will be taken up into the heavens. The second class will dwell in Paradise. And the last will inhabit the city. It is for that reason the Lord said, ‘In my Father’s house are many mansions.’” *Papias (c 120 A.D.) as quoted by Eusebius.*²⁷

Papias, in this quotation, points to our habitation in heaven as being the result of the fruits or works of an individual Christian.

²⁷ David Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998) 242. It is always helpful to remember that the early church father’s writings were “pre-Nicene” and over 1000 years before the Reformation, which formed the basis for much of our systematic theology and doctrinal statements of today. It is therefore difficult and somewhat disingenuous to try and accept or reject a particular statement of an early church writer as being doctrinally correct or not. The value in reading these writers as Bercot states is to realize that “these early Christians’ interpretation of the Scriptures is among the most valuable commentary on Scripture anywhere.” While the early Church fathers never claimed divine inspiration, “they did, however, claim that they were faithfully passing along the faith that the apostles had delivered to the Church.”

Additional Quotations by Early Church Fathers; ²⁸

- 1) “The reward or punishment for lives that are either ill or well spent is proportionate to the merit of each.” *Athenagoras* (c. 175)

- 2) “We affirm that a judgment has been ordained by God according to the merits of every man.” *Tertullian* (c. 197)

- 3) “God would be unjust if anyone were not punished or else rewarded in the very condition by which the merit was itself achieved.” *Tertullian* (c. 207)

- 4) “The blessed rest that is to found in the kingdom is reserved for those who are worthy of becoming His subjects.” *Origen* (c. 250)

- 5) “We indeed believe that the merits of martyrs and the works of the righteous are of great avail with the Judge. However, that will be when the Day of Judgment comes.” *Cyprian* (c.250).

In doing the research for these quotations, it was interesting to note that none of the Church fathers ascribed to an egalitarian kind of heaven wherein all saints would be equal. Rather, all of them saw heaven as an abode of saints who kept their identity and whose rewards and position in heaven were determined upon merit. ²⁹

The encouragement and admonition to live a Godly life here on earth was of the utmost importance in the minds of the early Church fathers – as it was with the writers of the NT.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 446.

²⁹ It is again important to stress that what is being proposed here is not a “works = salvation” gospel. The doctrine of rewards being granted in heaven after one has already been saved by grace and the election of God should not here be confused.

From a doctrinal perspective, the tension which has existed during the Reformation – i.e. the debate about the doctrine of “salvation by grace through faith alone” verses “salvation through works,” does not appear to be addressed as such by the early fathers. These men were focused more on living a holy life before God.

Bercot explains the essence and ethos of early Christianity;

“The ethos [of early Christianity] can be summarized in two basis principles: (1) the earliest Christians focused on living in the light of the Christian message and explaining that message to nonbelievers rather than on sharpening their theological prowess; and (2) early Christian doctrine is less elaborate and less defined than later formulations.

To say that the early Christian focused on living the gospel rather than on theological hair-splitting does not mean that individuals taught whatever they wanted. There were recognized boundaries that prevent such a laissez-faire attitude. Nonetheless, to the early Christians, the heart of their faith consisted of an obedient love relationship with Christ, not the ability to articulate dogma.”³⁰

In summary, we can affirm that the early Church believed that the way a person lives a Godly life here on earth – or not, will have eternal consequences in heaven and hell. This teaching of rewards and punishment (loss) in heaven, based upon merit, was understood and taught by Jesus, His apostles and those who followed them.

³⁰ Ibid., vii

Appendix I

Citations from noteworthy theologians and Church leaders both past and present; ³¹

Jonathan Edwards – *“There are many mansions in God’s house because heaven is intended for various degrees of honor and blessedness. Some are designed to sit in higher places there than others; some are designed to be advanced to higher degrees of honor and glory than others are; and, therefore, there are various mansions, and some more honorable mansions and seats, in heaven than others. Though they are all seats of exceeding honor and blessedness yet some more so than others.”*

John Wesley – *“God will reward everyone according to his works. But this is well consistent with his distributing advantages and opportunities of improvement, according to his own good pleasure.”*

Theodore H. Epp – *“God is eager to reward us and does everything possible to help us lay up rewards. But if we are slothful and carnal, so that our service counts for nothing, we shall be saved, yet so as by fire. Let us determine by the grace of God not to be empty handed when we stand before the bema, the Judgment Seat of Christ.”*

C.S. Lewis – *“If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is not part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak.”*

³¹ Four of the above quotations were taken from Bruce Wilkerson’s book, *A Life God Rewards* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah 2002) 118-122.

Appendix II

Recommended Books for further studies of rewards in heaven.

The books listed below were studied and are briefly reviewed below. I would suggest that all of them are excellent resources for anyone wishing to understand more about the Biblical teachings concerning rewards in heaven.

Joseph C. Dillow Th.D. *The Reign of the Servant Kings – A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man* (Schoettle Publishing, 2006). Dillow's book is one of the most scholarly books on the subject. Dillow takes pains to meticulously develop the concepts of rewards, loss and levels of authority in heaven. He does this with a great deal of Scripture – his exegesis of the Bible is clear and concise.

Josef Ton. *Suffering, Martyrdom, and Rewards in Heaven* (Romanian Missionary Society, 2000). Ton is another, like Dillow who presents his material in a scholarly manner. He blends the Biblical teachings about suffering and martyrdom with the promises of rewards. Ton gives great hope to those who suffer for Christ's sake, assuring them that the Lord will reward in great abundance. His book is an excellent resource tool with a great deal of information.

Paul N. Benware Th.D. *The Believer's Payday – Why Standing Before Christ Should Be Our Greatest Moment* (AMG Publishers, 2002). Dr. Benware is currently Professor of Bible and Doctrine at Philadelphia Biblical University, and has held Professorships at Moody Bible Institute and Master's College. While a short work, *The Believer's Payday* is perhaps one of the best on this subject because it is written in a comfortable style and yet is very thorough in its presentation of his views. Rewards, reigning with Christ, loss at the Judgment Seat and other related topics are presented in a manner that everyone can read and profit from.

Robert Govett M.A. *Reward According to Works* (Schoettle Publishing, 1989). Robert Govett (1813 – 1901) first published this book in 1870 so his writing style and vocabulary may at times appear odd. That said I would highly recommend his work. Govett's style is to debate with and respond to letters from critics who disagree with his views on rewards and punishment for believers in heaven. His method is one of exegeting specific texts and pointing out where his critics' arguments are flawed, based more upon tradition than Scripture. This is a short collection of actual letters and articles about the subject.

Appendix III

Recommended Study Guides and Materials for Teaching Study Groups about Rewards.

The resources below were studied and selected as excellent study guides and books, with companion audio and visual materials for teaching small home Bible studies.

Bruce Wilkinson with David Kopp. *A Life God Rewards – Why Everything You Do Today Matters Forever* (Multnomah Publishing, 2002). Wilkinson's book and his accompanying lecture tapes and CD's are excellent tools for teaching and leading small groups or private studies. For teaching new and old Christians who are not familiar with the Biblical concepts of rewards and loss in heaven, I can recommend none better.

Randy Alcorn. *Heaven.* Alcorn's best selling book and his audio tape are a valuable tool for fostering discussion among believers about the subject of heaven and rewards. While Alcorn's work is not as specific to rewards as Wilkinson's work it does cover the subject.

Chuck Missler Ph. D. and Nancy Missler. *The Kingdom, Power & Glory – The Overcomer's Handbook* (The King's Highway Ministries, 2009). Chuck and Nancy Missler present an in-depth look at the Biblical approach to two critical areas (1) Rewards (2) Inheritance. They explain that one can enter heaven and yet lose rewards and inheritance because of sin committed here on earth. The Kingdom, Power and Glory is actually a series of materials including a well written book, audio CD's and DVD's with complimentary notes. This is a study for serious Bible students who want to take a deep and often controversial look at this critical subject. Very appropriate for home and small groups who are open to new approaches in Biblical research.

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- ESV *Reformation Study Bible, English Standard Version*. Wheaton: Crossways, 2003.
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