

## **Rewards: What Does It Take to Motivate You to Live For Jesus?**

*by Geoff Volker*

### **Does the Bible speak of rewards for the believer? Several Bible passages leap to mind:**

"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad." 2 Corinthians 5:10 (NIV)

"For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done." Matthew 16:27 (NIV)

"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." Matthew 6:1-4 (NIV)

Yes, I think we can safely say the Bible teaches the believer will receive rewards for service to his King, Jesus Christ. What remains is to answer two questions.

1. Are these rewards our motivation for living the Christian life?
2. What are the rewards believers receive?

### **Are These Rewards Our Motivation for Living the Christian Life?**

It may seem surprising, but I say that the answer is NO! The reason for my answer can be found in an investigation of the GOOD WORKS of the believer. In Ephesians 2:10 we are told that the GOOD WORKS that we do have their origin in God.

"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." Ephesians 2:10 (NIV)

Even though we, as believers, are responsible to do good works, we can never really take the credit for the GOOD WORKS since it is God Himself who is ultimately responsible for bring these works to pass in our life. GOOD WORKS may be defined as doing something that the word of God calls you to do, the Moral Will of God, and doing it with the express purpose of pleasing Him.

"It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality." 1 Thessalonians 4:3 (NIV)

"So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." 1 Corinthians 10:31 (NIV)

### **What Are We Saying When We Thank the Lord?**

When we say "Thank You" to the Lord we are acknowledging that he is the ultimate cause. And if he is the ultimate cause then it seems a little strange for me to take any pride in my accomplishments.

"Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in you heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the father for EVERYTHING, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Ephesians 5:19-20 (NIV)

### **Our GOOD WORKS are Defective!**

Forgetting for the moment that our God is the source of our GOOD WORKS, let us now consider the quality of those works. According to Scripture it is impossible for a believer to do anything perfectly right. His best efforts are always tainted with sin.

"For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want." Galatians 5:17 (NIV)

"I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do -- this I keep on doing." Romans 7:18-19 (NIV)

If my best GOOD WORKS are tainted by sin, then why does God accept them? The answer to this lies in the gracious character of our God. Our acceptance by the Father is based on the perfect life and death of Jesus Christ, which was offered to the Father as a substitute for our wrath-deserving life.

"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Isaiah 53:6 (NIV)

Our GOOD WORKS are accepted as "good" works because we have been accepted by the Father into his family. Although we will never be able to produce any perfectly GOOD WORKS, we will be able to produce works that come from a heart that loves the Lords and desires to please him. Our Father accepts our tainted GOOD WORKS as truly "good" works because we are now "in Christ" and one of his children. To think that my GOOD WORKS in and of themselves really deserve any reward is hard for me to grasp.

### **What about the Crowns?**

Does not the Bible speak of various CROWNS that believers can receive as rewards? Yes, the Scripture does speak of believers receiving CROWNS, but I don't think that they are specific rewards but rather figures of speech for eternal life. Let's examine each of the major texts that speak of CROWNS and see what we might find.

#### **The Crown of Life**

"Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the CROWN OF LIFE that God has promised to those who love him."

James 1:12 (NIV)

"So not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the CROWN OF LIFE." Revelation 2:10 (NIV)

Both of these passages of scripture refer to the need for the believer to persevere to the end to be saved. This can't be a special reward for only some believers. In the letters to the seven churches in the Book of Revelation the one common theme that runs through these seven letters is that

unless you are an over comer, one who perseveres in the faith to the end, you will not be saved. This does not mean you won't be able to have assurance of salvation. The basis of our salvation is the finished work of Jesus Christ. When we repent of our sins, trusting in him alone for our salvation, and desire him to be our Lord, we can be sure that we will have eternal life. Because our entire salvation was purchased on the cross by Jesus Christ, our perseverance in the faith until the end was also purchased. We are called to persevere till the end, and our God has promised to preserve us till the end. Perseverance is not the cause of our salvation, it is the inevitable result of our receiving that salvation.

"Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Philippians 1:6 (NIV)

"Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed -- not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence -- continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." Philippians 2:12-13 (NIV)

### **The Tree of Life**

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." Revelation 2:7 (NIV)

The tree of life is a picture of eternal life. When Adam and Eve sinned in the garden of Eden they were banished from the garden and the tree of life. If you do not overcome, you do not eat from the tree of life. If you do not eat from the tree of life you do not have eternal life; you go to hell.

"And the Lord God said, 'The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever'." Genesis 3:22 (NIV)

It also needs to be pointed out that James 1:12 gives the crown of life to those who love the Lord. Is it possible for someone to be a believer, and not love Jesus Christ, yet go to heaven? No! It is inconceivable in Scripture for someone to truly be a believer and not love his Lord. To love God is to obey him. A desire to obey is given to all believers.

"We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did." 1 John 2:3-6 (NIV)

### **Crown of Righteousness**

"For now I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store 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 longed for his appearing." 2 Timothy 4:6-8 (NIV)

The subject of this section of Scripture, like that of the crown of life passages, is the necessity for the believer to persevere to the end to be saved. The Apostle Paul describes how he has kept the

faith, and as a result he is going to receive the CROWN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS. He then goes on to say that all those who long for the second coming of Jesus will also receive this crown. Surely, to long for the return of the King is to show your love for him. The natural response of a believer is to want to be with Jesus, and that is exactly how the apostle Paul puts it.

"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! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far." Philippians 1:22-23 (NIV)

Therefore, it does seem that this crown is also another figure for eternal life. No one gets into heaven without persevering to the end, and no one gets into heaven without loving Jesus Christ.

### **The Reward of Ruling**

If the crowns are only another way of referring to eternal life, we still have to contend with the notion that the rewards refer to an opportunity for the believer to rule with Jesus Christ in the world to come. This idea persists in certain evangelical circles. If you are a good believer you will rule over much. If you are a not-so-good believer you may get into heaven but you will not rule at all. I believe that this is a false notion of rewards. The Bible doesn't say much, but it does say in the letter to the church at Thyatira that all believers will rule with Christ.

"To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations." Revelation 2:26 (NIV)

Since all believers will persevere to the end, all believers will rule with Jesus Christ.

### **The Biblical Motivation for Living for Jesus**

In Hebrews chapter eight the salvation which the Son of God purchased on the cross is referred to as the New Covenant. This salvation consists of two parts. The first is the forgiveness of our sins. The second is the giving to each believer a new heart. This new heart consists of a Holy Spirit-led desire to love Jesus Christ and to obey him. This new heart or set of desires will drive the believer on to live for Jesus Christ and to persevere to the end. Since every believer gets a new heart, every believer will experience a transformed life, and every believer will be motivated from the inside out to live for Jesus.

"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." Hebrews 8:10-12 (NIV)

### **What are the Rewards Believers Receive?**

The one thing we can be sure of is that PRAISE will be given to believers when they stand before the Lord at the judgment seat of Christ. Beyond PRAISE, we can be sure of nothing else.

"Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his PRAISE from God." 1 Corinthians 4:5 (NIV)

"In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith -- of greater worth than gold, which perishes

even though refined by fire -- may be proven genuine and may result in PRAISE, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed." 1 Peter 1:6-7 (NIV)

### **Why Make a Big Deal About Rewards?**

Why are some segments of evangelicalism so adamant about REWARDS? To answer this question we need to understand something about the theological makeup of those folks who major on rewards. The vast majority who see REWARDS in this light are called dispensationalists. One significant theological feature of Dispensationalism is its understanding of conversion. They hold that a person can become a believer by embracing Jesus Christ as their Savior but not necessarily as their Lord. Embracing the Lordship of Christ is an optional commitment that is not necessary for salvation. Therefore, because the desire for the Lordship of Christ is a fundamental part of the salvation that was purchased by Jesus Christ on the cross [this is called the new heart] to embrace Jesus as your Savior only would leave you with somebody who thinks that he is a believer but is not internally, Spirit-led, motivated to live for Jesus. The result would be an individual who needs some sort of motivation to live for Jesus. Hence, this great emphasis upon REWARDS. REWARDS function as a carrot to push the professed believer on to obedience. But, a true believer needs no carrot. He has a new heart. He recognizes that whatever GOOD WORKS he is able to muster are tainted with sin and owe their goodness to our Heavenly Father.

### **Why Does the Bible Speak of Rewards?**

My best guesstimate as to why the Lord spoke of rewards has to do with the fact that the believer is prone to get discouraged because his best efforts are always falling short of what they ought to be. The mention of REWARDS tells the believer that he ought not to give up, for all of life counts. Even though he may not be able to do anything just right it still does matter. But this is not what drives him on. What drives the believer on is that Spirit-led desire to love and please our Lord that cannot be extinguished.