

Receiving the Prize: The Crown of Life (1 Cor. 9:24-27; Phil. 3:10-14)

I. ALL BELIEVER'S WILL STAND BEFORE THE JUDGMENT SEAT OF CHRIST

A. All believers will stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ (bema seat) to receive rewards.

¹⁰ 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. (2 Cor. 5:10)

¹² If anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw...¹⁴ If anyone's work...endures, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. (1 Cor. 3:12-15)

B. There will be a vast difference in our capacity to experience God's glory in the age-to-come. God's glory will be manifest in our resurrected body in different measures (Mt. 13:41-43, Dan. 12:2-3). Some believers will be called least and some greatest.

⁴¹ There is one glory of the sun...and another glory of the stars; for one star differs from another star in glory. ⁴² So also is the resurrection of the dead. (1 Cor. 15:41-42)

II. RECEIVING A CROWN IN THE AGE TO COME

A. There are nine NT references to believers receiving a heavenly crown (1 Cor 9:25; Phil 4:1; 1 Thes. 2:19; 2 Tim. 2:5; 4:8; Heb 2:7, 9; Rev. 3:11; 4:4, 10; 9:7; 12:1; 14:14). The crown is referred to as the "crown of life" (Jas 1:12, Rev 2:10), the "crown of righteousness" (2 Tim. 4:8) and the "crown of glory" (1 Pet. 5:4). The titles refer to different nuances of the same reward.

¹⁰ Do not fear those things which you are about to suffer. The devil is about to throw some of you into prison...be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. (Rev. 2:10)

B. The crown of life is a "crown for the way we lived" our life. It refers to the heavenly reward a believer receives for faithfulness in this life. It is not synonymous with being born again.

C. There are 2 Greek words describing 2 types of crowns in the NT. One is the crown of a ruler (diadem), the other is the crown of a victor (stephanos) who won a race in the athletic games. The 24 elders in heaven wear gold stephanos victors crowns (Rev. 4:4) rather than a king's diadem because they were rewarded for gaining significant victories over temptation in their life.

⁵ If anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned (stephanos) unless he competes according to the rules. (2 Tim 2:5)

D. Stephanos crowns are not given to all believers but only those who endure temptation by consistently walking in obedience. Jesus has a stephanos "crown" for enduring temptation.

¹² Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life (stephanos)...promised to those who love Him. (Jas 1:12)

¹⁴ On the cloud sat One the Son of Man, having...a golden crown (stephanos)... (Rev. 14:14)

- E. The crown focuses on our capacities to experience God's glory and the authority to impart it in our ministry to others in the age-to-come. There will be joy in participating in assignments that are near and dear to Jesus. Crowns are given to servant leaders who work with eagerness.
- ¹ The elders who are among you I exhort...2 shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving...not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; 3 nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; 4 and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away. (1 Pet. 5:1-4)*
- F. Our crowns (work assignment and authority over nations and tribes, etc.) will bring us in close proximity to Jesus (Mt. 19:28-30; 20:16, 27; 25:23; Lk. 19:17-19; 22:29-30; Rev. 2:26; 3:21; Dan. 7:22-27). This will influence the measure of impartation of power and wisdom that we operate in. Some will be exalted with authority and honor (Mt. 5:19; 18:4; 20:25-26; 23:11-12; Mk. 10:42-43; Lk. 6:23, 35; 9:48; Lk. 14:11; 18:14; 22:26). The measure of our anointing will affect our impact and what we impart to others. Some will have authority in the governmental infrastructure to make important life enhancing decisions that affect the quality of life for many.
- G. The crowns speak of one's accomplishments or acts done by the grace of God as a result of responding to Jesus in faith and obedience. The elders cast their crowns before God because their crown expresses their life of faithfulness and thus their reward in eternity.
- ¹⁰ The 24 elders fall down...and cast their crowns before the Throne... (Rev. 4:10)*
- H. I believe that a relatively small percentage of believers will receive this crown. I assume that the number is in the millions but when compared to the believers from all history (possibly several billion), the percent is relatively small. Paul compared our crowns to athletes winning a crown in ancient athletic games (1 Cor. 9:24-27). Today, medals (crowns) are given to less than 10% of the athletes in the Olympics Games. In the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens just over 11,000 athletes competed and just over 900 received medals (about 8%).
- I. The point of a crown is to indicate those who have substantial victory in a race, such as winning a medal in the Olympic games and not just crossing the finishing line without quitting the race entirely as thousands do in the Boston Marathon.
- J. Some believe that all who receive eternal life automatically receive this crown. They see the crown as synonymous with justification by faith or eternal life itself (since the Greek text uses the appositional genitive four times: Jas 1:12; Rev 2:10; 2 Tim. 4:8; 1 Pet. 5:4). This means that the word "of" in "crown of life" is meant to function like an equal sign (an apposition is a word placed next to another word that means the same thing, thus providing an explanatory equivalent). In other words, they read it as the "crown" which consists of "eternal life." Scripture also refers to this crown as the "crown of righteousness" and the "crown of glory."
- K. Crowns can be lost by allowing teachers to seduce us with deceptive doctrines of grace. Jesus exhorted us to not let anyone take our crown. He was not referring to them taking our salvation.
- ¹¹ Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown (stephanos). (Rev. 3:11)*

- L. Some who are justified by faith will suffer loss yet will still be saved (1 Cor. 3:15).
¹⁵ *If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved... (1 Cor. 3:15)*
⁸ *Look to yourselves, that we (you; NAS, NIV) do not lose those things we (you; NIV) worked for, but that we (you; NAS, NIV) may receive a full reward. (2 Jn. 8)*
- M. Many teachers will arise in the Church in the End-Times with a large following who will subtly yet dangerously distort God's grace (2 Pet. 2:1-3, 13-18). They promote deceptive doctrines of grace. They pervert God's grace by reducing it to receiving forgiveness without repentance and making people comfortable about continuing in sin. Grace enables us to overcome sin (Tit. 2:12).
⁴ *For certain men have crept in unnoticed...ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny... our Lord Jesus Christ. (Jude 4)*
- N. Eternal life (zoe) is a vast subject. Some verses emphasize the entry point to eternal life or being justified by faith. The pinnacle of eternal life is to know and experience God (Jn. 17:3).
- O. Since we interpret Scripture through our established paradigm of salvation, it is not surprising that many make receiving the crown synonymous with being forgiven. Thus, they view salvation mostly through the lens of "gaining entrance" into the kingdom having little thought of salvation in terms of how it provides a way for us to reign with Jesus on the Millennial earth.
- P. My premise is that the early apostles had a view of salvation with a strong hope of reigning in an earthly kingdom with Jesus. Many today automatically reduce their words to only gaining entrance into God's kingdom or to justification by faith. Most commentaries nearly ignore the truths about gaining eternal rewards or they keep their explanation of them to a sentence or two.

III. PAUL'S TWO PRIMARY ANALOGIES: RUNNING A RACE AND FIGHTING A BATTLE

- A. Paul saw his life as one long race that resulted in one appearance before the "Olympics Judge" at the Bema Seat of Christ. He compared his life to a marathon runner who was greatly disciplined. Paul probably wrote his first Corinthian letter around 53-54 AD.
²⁴ *Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize (stephanos crown)? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. 25 Everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown (stephanos), but we for an imperishable crown (stephanos). 26 Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty (lack of focus)...27 I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified. (1 Cor. 9:24-27)*
¹ *Lay aside every weight, and sin...run with endurance the race set before us... (Heb. 12:1)*
- B. Paul ran the race with temperance (diligence) in all areas of his life specifically to win a prize that he referred to as his crown (v. 25). Paul was not referring to gaining justification by faith. The issue is in running the "right way" not in "outdoing others." Our race is against darkness (not against others). There are plenty of crowns (gold medals) for all who are faithful.

- C. In Phil. 3, Paul had not yet won the prize of the crown of righteousness because his life-long race was not yet completed. (Some champion athletes stumble at the end of a race they were to win). In 60-62 AD, Paul wrote to the Philippians about not having yet won the prize. He was determined to continue to press on to gain it. The crown was the specific prize he had in mind.
- ¹⁰ *...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, 11 if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. 13 I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, 14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God...15 Let us, as many as are mature, have this mind... (Phil. 3:10-15)*
- D. Paul wrote that he pressed toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God which was to receive the crown of life (v. 14). This prize is given to us at the judgment seat of Christ. The prize is to receive the fullness of what God ordained for our life. The attaining to our “upward” call refers to receiving the “highest” and most “heavenly” dimension of one’s calling in the age-to-come. Our prize then, is to walk in the fullest dimension that God has ordained for our calling in the age-to-come (2 Thes. 1:11). Paul was not assured of finishing the race with the highest reward until his final days in prison in Rome (2 Tim. 4:8) to a crown of righteousness.
- E. “Running so as to win” is a phrase that most are unfamiliar and uncomfortable with. What does winning mean? Paul is already saved. Winning in this sense, is not about going to heaven, because Paul had assurance of that. He wrote about suffering the loss of all things to “win Christ (Phil.3:8)”. Paul wrote that he would give his very best efforts to run in a way to win his race.
- F. While in a prison in Rome (shortly before he died), Paul knew that he had won the prize (crown). Many believe that Paul was in prison in Rome twice. His first imprisonment was in 60-62 AD (Acts 28:30). During this time he wrote Philippians. He was imprisoned again in Rome during which time he wrote his final letter (2 Timothy) before he was executed in the summer of AD 68.
- ⁶ *I am being poured out (imprisonment) as a drink offering, and the time of my departure (death) is at hand 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord...will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.... (2 Tim. 4:6-8)*
- G. King David and the first apostles also had this same assurance of receiving their heavenly crown.
- ⁴ *The LORD God of Israel chose me...to be king over Israel forever... (1 Chr. 28:4)*
- ²⁸ *In the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the Throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (Mt. 19:28)*
- H. We are to pray for the saints to walk in complete obedience and thus, to be found worthy of ruling in the age-to-come. This purposeful living challenges aimlessness so common today.
- ¹⁰ *When He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints...11 Therefore we pray always for you that our God would count you worthy of this calling... (2 Thes. 1:10-11)*