

TOPIC XXI

HEAVENLY REWARDS

We often hear of the rewards that will be given to the faithful in heaven. This image is often taught from childhood in Sunday school, and too often used as a motivation to good behavior. Children are often taught that if they are good they will have a reward in heaven and if not they are in danger of losing their reward in heaven. Adult Christians frequently think of the future rewards and many books have been written about this theme or included this theme in the narrative. Recently popular is Randy Alcorn's book entitled "Heaven" wherein he portrays a great deal of fanciful imaginings and visions about the subject. Many of these are not Biblical at all, but his own ideas. We sing songs like, "When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be..." and so on.

But do all the images and portraits of things to come have Biblical foundations? Let's begin by noting that the mention of "rewards in heaven" is indeed a Biblical phrase. It is found one time - in Matthew 5:12.¹

In 6:1, Jesus describes it as a "...reward with your Father who is in heaven."

But, is this "reward" something we go to heaven to receive? Or is it reserved in heaven for us to receive later? The assumption seems to be that we go to heaven to receive the reward. Yet there is no mention of anyone ever "going to heaven" in the Bible. It is indeed the reward that is reserved in heaven for us that is the context. Peter puts it this way,

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." I Peter 1:3-5

The "going to heaven after we die" idea comes from, can you believe it, a theological doctrine, not a Biblical one. For example, in Matthew 19:23 Jesus said to His disciples, "Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." ..." People assume from this that when we die we go to the "kingdom

¹ Also in Luke 6:23 but in the same context.

of heaven." However, what are ignored are two issues. First, Matthew, a dedicated Judean Jew, uses the term "kingdom of heaven" as a euphemism for "kingdom of God" due to his sensitivity to misusing the name "God" in what he might write. He only uses "God" when he is sure he is quoting Jesus and only in the most important places. Second, the exact same quotation and context is used by Luke who has no such qualms. He quotes Jesus in the same context, "And Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God! (18:24) Mark likewise writes, "And Jesus, looking around, said to His disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!' The disciples were amazed at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!'" (10:23-24)

And in Matthew 8:11 Jesus is quoted as saying, "I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" while in Luke 13:29 we read, "And they will come from east and west and from north and south, and will recline at the table in the kingdom of God."

Matthew is the only New Testament writer that employs the term "kingdom of heaven." Everyone else uses the phrase "kingdom of God." What dispensational theology teaches is that there are two kingdoms. One in heaven for those saved before the tribulation and caught up in the "rapture" and another one for those Jews who convert to Christ during the tribulation. That is why there are two comings of Christ according to this doctrine. This, of course, is nonsense. Both statements, whether stating it as the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God, are speaking of the same kingdom. And, as we shall see, it is to be an earthly establishment, not a heavenly one.

Another passage that is used all the time to teach that we "go to heaven" when we die is a distortion of II Corinthians 5:8. You may have heard the statement, "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." However, that is not exactly what the Paul says. He says in 5:6-9,

6: "Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord-- 7: for we walk by faith, not by sight-- 8: we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be

absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. 9" Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him."

The assumption is that since Jesus is in "heaven", that all who are in Him go to heaven when depart this earthly life. That is not necessarily what Paul has in mind when he speaks of being "home" with the Lord. For example, Jesus told the thief that he would join him in "Paradise" not heaven. However, all this is discussable. Bottom line, there is no specific teaching that when we depart this life we are ushered into "heaven."

There is also the phrase referring to "treasures in heaven." It is found in: Matthew 19:21 (duplicated in Mark 10:21 and in Luke 18:22). The same theme is alluded to in I Timothy 6:17-19. However there is no inference that those who have this treasure stored in heaven will go there to possess it after death. It corresponds to Peter's comments quoted above.

Now, here is some information and my opinion on the subject of rewards. First, the English word "reward" translating both Old and New Testament original words is found 50 times in the Bible, 26 time in the Old Testament and 24 in the New Testament.

There are no specific references to a "reward" beyond this life in the Old Testament.

In the New Testament, of the 24 references, 14 are in the gospels. Of those 14, 11 are in Matthew. The other 3, in Mark and Luke are duplicates of those in Matthew. John has no references to "rewards" at all. Of the 11 in Matthew, only 3 refer specifically to a "heavenly reward"; 5:12, 6:1 and an inference in 18:4.

In the rest of the N.T., Paul and the other writers refer to a reward only 9 times and none are spoken of as being given out in heaven. I Cor. 3:8; I Cor. 3:14; Colossians 3:24; Hebrews 10:35; Hebrews 11:26; II John 1:8; Rev 11:18; 22:12.

In this last verse. "Jesus says, Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done." So it would seem we could deduce that any "reward" will actually be here after Jesus returns and establishes His kingdom here on earth as He promised.

It is important to note that the core Jesus' teaching was regarding the "Kingdom of God" (or "heaven"). Luke 4:43, 8:1, 9:2, 9:11, and Matthew 3:2, 4:17, 10:7 tell us of this and the parables Jesus used were about the kingdom. That the kingdom is to be an earthly entity is easily demonstrated in Scripture. A few verses are, Isaiah 9:6-7; Isaiah 24:23; Daniel 7:13-14; Micah 4:6-7; Matthew 6:10; 16:28; Luke 1:31-33; 22:15-30; Acts 2:30; I Corinthians 15:22-25; Revelation 2:26-27, 21:1-4 and many more.

Now, the word in the Greek translated "reward" is the Greek for "wages".

Again, this is inadequate as, in the Old Testament the English translation "reward", is an English translation of many different Hebrew words. Of the many different Hebrew words translated "reward" in English, the meanings include "gift", "benefit", "good news", as well as "wages" or "compensation." It is difficult, if not impossible to ascertain what word was thought of by Jesus and the apostles when they put down the Greek.

Bottom line, there are only about 12 references to a post life reward in the entire Bible, excluding duplications, give or take. Not a real important topic.

Now, second my opinion. I believe way too much emphasis is placed on this "reward" idea. As I said, books have been written about this alone with much speculation and imagination about what this could involve. Yet we are not given much Biblical information. A "wedding feast", "Fellowship with the Lord", "Paradise", "Tree of Life"; "Streets of gold", "Inheritance in the kingdom of God", the narrative in Isaiah 11:1-10 and so on are mentioned. But in I Corinthians 2:9 (quoting Isaiah 64:4 from the LXX) Paul writes, "...but just as it is written, **THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.**"

So we really have no complete idea what will happen. I heard one person speak the other day about a "worthy" person getting more "stars in their crown." You might guess where this popular concept comes from, but it isn't from the Bible.

There is also the adjective "great" in association with "your reward" used a time or two; (Matthew 5:12; Luke 6:35) and also the idea of reward according to deeds is mentioned a few times, (Matthew 16:27; Romans 2:6; II Corinthians 5:10; Ephesians 6:8 (maybe) and so on.

But here is my problem. One day I was told by a person in our class that what he does to serve the Lord is so that he will get a "reward" from God in heaven. My problem is, that if we are motivated solely by hoping to get a reward from God, then what we do and how we think is totally motivated by self-interest, the very thing that is the worst element in God's sight for a motive to do good or serve Him. We are supposed to allow the Lord, His Word and Spirit to mold our hearts into a genuine love for others so that our actions will stem from a true motive of concern and love for others, not for ourselves.

So the entire "reward" concept is distorted (once again) into "works" to gain something for ourselves and that makes us no better than the Pharisees.

Jesus made it clear, "Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me." Matthew 16:24 And in Luke 9:23-25, "And He was saying to them all, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it. For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself?"

Paul wrote, "Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Philippians 2:1-8

Then Jesus said, and said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 18:3-4

Then in I Corinthians 13:5, Paul teaches that love does not seek for itself.

And so on. My goal is to be a genuine person with a genuine love for God and others and be motivated to do what I do because that is who I really am. There is always a way to go in this, for sure. And it is a more difficult process than just doing for a reward - which anyone Christian or not - can do. That's religion, not what Christians are supposed to be about.

Wouldn't it be better to live and do so that another person would receive a "reward" from God not ourselves? How about that idea? Different huh? Sort of like what Christ did.

So I ignore the idea of personal rewards altogether so I won't be corrupted in my journey in Christ by self-interest, something Jesus did not have. He made it clear, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." Mark 10:45.

And Peter said,

"For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed." I Peter 2:20-24

So I leave any thought of a "reward" to God. Forget about it. If Christians would spend more time seeking how to come to be a truly genuine and loving person rather than spend time considering what their reward may or may not be, I believe this would be a more worthy endeavor. But a lot more difficult, right?

So, how many sermons have you heard on how to become a more genuinely loving person led by the Spirit of God than you have heard on heaven and rewards?

How many books on each of these subjects have been written and which topic do you think has more written about them? Maybe the "What's in it for me" attitude needs to change. But books sell when they appeal to the worst in us rather than prompting virtue and holiness.