

Rewards and Inheritance

Since this is the last in a four part series on heaven I hope you have learned enough to avoid some of the pitfalls that people get into:

Two men who hadn't seen each other for a very long time ran into each other one day. "How's your wife?" the man asked his friend. "She's in heaven," replied the friend.

The first man thought for a moment and said, "I'm sorry." Then he realized that was not the thing to say, so he added, "I mean, I'm glad." He thought about that but it didn't seem like a very nice thing to say, either. Finally, he said, "Well, let me put it this way. I'm surprised."

I hope you will avoid those types of pitfalls and that you will become something of an expert on the biblical teaching concerning heaven.

As we conclude this series we will take a look at what the Bible says about the rewards and inheritance belonging to those who are bound for heaven.

There are several biblical teachings concerning rewards. First of all, in Matthew we are told that rewards will be given to God's saints for faithful endurance. In Matthew 5:10-12 we have the words of Jesus recorded:

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Here is the first of several items we can list from the New Testament examples where special rewards will be given in heaven to individuals who are counted among God's saints. We see here that God recognizes the difficulties of living the Christian life in a society which in so many ways is

opposed to the Christian message and to Jesus Christ himself. So God promises to specially reward those who are true to him in the midst of adversity. That may not seem very important to someone who is not struggling with adversity. But for those who have suffered for their Christian testimony this is a tremendous promise from the lips of Jesus Christ.

Several years ago when plane loads of prisoners of war returned from Vietnam to the United States they were given much honor and numerous awards. It wasn't so much because of their heroic deeds in battle, although some of them had been heroic in battle, but it was primarily because of their faithfulness, loyalty and heroism in the midst of adversity. Under terrible circumstances they had remained true to their country.

In the same way God promises special rewards to us if we are faithful in the midst of adversity that comes to us because of our faith in Jesus Christ.

The Bible also promises that rewards will be given for good deeds. Luke 6:35 says:

But love you your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.

Who is your enemy? Maybe it's someone who is different from you ra-

cially, politically, economically or religiously—someone who represents everything contrary to who and what you are. But God has commanded us to love our enemies. The Bible reminds us that it is relatively simple to love those we like and feel positive toward, but it takes God's help to love those we would ordinarily hate. In fact, Luke 6:35 goes so far as to say that we have a responsibility to meet their needs, even to the point of lending them what they need without expecting that we will ever be paid back.

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That's what Jesus did. The Bible plainly teaches is in Romans 5:8 that "*While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*" So he asks that we follow his example, and he promises rewards for those who do. I suspect some Christians will be deprived of some of heaven's rewards simply because we have not taken the opportunities God has given us to do good to others.

Of course, all Christians will have their works judged before the judgment seat of Christ. In 2 Corinthians 5:10 we read, "*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*" That will be an enlightening experience! Many will hang their heads in shame and embarrassment while many will be honored as we never imagined!

This is not judgment in the sense of condemnation. The Bible promises us in Romans 8:1 that "*there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,*" but it is judgment to discern what we have done as far as the opportunities God has given us to serve our fellow men and women. We have a heavy responsibility, but we also have a great opportunity. And God guarantees that anything that seems to be lost in good works for other people God will more than reimburse as far as the rewards of heaven are concerned. You simply can't beat a deal like that!

Well, rewards will be given for those who remain faithful through difficult times and rewards will be given for those who do good deeds. Rewards will also be given for those who are faithful stewards.

The parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30 indicates that men will be judged not on the basis of how much they had but on the basis of what they did with what they did have. In Matthew 6:19-21 we find the familiar words that tell us:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

You might say that God checks bank accounts! We may not be able to take it with us, but we can send it on ahead!

We can all take inventory of the material things as well as the spiritual blessings that we have. Then we need to look forward to the day that God will reward us on the basis of what we have done with what he has given to us. It's interesting that the promise isn't that those who have a lot will be well rewarded and those who have a little will be poorly rewarded. The issue is what we do with what we have, regardless of how much it is. God is keeping track of how we handle the resources we have. That extends from our bank accounts to our Christian witnesses. God has given us everything we have and God will reward us some day on the basis of what we do with the gifts he has given to us.

But the concept of heaven and heaven's wealth is tied more to a concept of inheritance than a concept of reward. We read in the book of Revelation, for example, strong indications that many of the rewards that are given to believers in heaven, such as crowns, are laid at the feet of Jesus. So, perhaps they are not even kept beyond our early days of heaven's experience.

But that would not be the case with our inheritance. Inheritance is different. A reward is something like a paycheck, something we've worked for, something we have received as a result of what we have done. But an inheritance is drastically different. An inheritance is wealth or accumulation of resources that comes, not from work we've done, but from the relationships we have had.

The New Testament was written within a Roman culture and a Roman law. During the Roman rule of the Mediterranean world Roman law had specific guidelines regarding inheritances. One of those guidelines was that the recipient of an inheritance was regarded as the continuator of the benefactor's personality. Therefore, if you had a grouchy but rich uncle who left you a lot of money, under Roman law you were to carry on his grouchiness because he gave you the money to carry on his richness. In other words, you were supposed to be like him.

Christians are continuators. We are heirs of God's great wealth. We are also to be the continuators of the personality, the witness and the testimony of Jesus Christ. We are to live out the life and the personality of Christ here on earth. The apostle Paul wrote in Romans 8:16-17:

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

The basis of the inheritance is simple. John 1:12 tells us that *“to all who received him, to those who believe in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”* That means that the rich inheritance of God's heaven belongs to each and all who receive Jesus Christ as personal Savior. It is not on the basis of any works that we do. All Christians are joint heirs with Christ. And Jesus Christ is described in Hebrews 1:2 as the *“heir of all things.”* There is no way we could ever earn or deserve all God has in store for us. We cannot earn our way into God's family and inheritance. We must be spiritually born into his family.

That's why the Bible talks about being born again. This new birth brings with it not only a joyous life now and eternal life forever but also all the inheritance of heaven. In

1 Peter 1:3-5 we see a description of the quality and character of this inheritance God has for us.

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Here it says:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

This inheritance is incorruptible; it's not defiled; it isn't depleted in any sense. It is actually guarded by God himself. It is more secure than any savings account that's insured by the FDIC. God's guarantee is on our inheritance in heaven. It's an inheritance that won't even be decreased by division. We won't have a lot less simply because so many people took advantage of it. God's unlimited resources are given to us, his people!

What a prospect! What a guarantee is ours! The greatest wealth of this world will be less than the

greatest poverty of heaven. One poet has described it this way:

Just a few more years
with their toil and tears,
And the journey will be
ended;

Then I'll be with Him,
where the tide of time
With eternity is blended.

I'll exchange my cross for a starry crown,
Where the gates swing outward never;
At His feet I'll lay every burden down,
And with Jesus reign forever.

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