

Are Rewards Our Goal?

Introduction

As humans, we love recognition for our efforts. Rewards and awards are a means to celebrate our accomplishments and often motivate us to excel in our endeavors. In school (academics and athletics), sports, entertainment, and on the job, there is recognition for being the best and sometimes for coming in second or third place. In some cases, especially in sports and entertainment, substantial monetary rewards accompany the recognition. It seems that nearly every activity in life has been turned into a competition. It is who we are. Winning is something that a person (or a team) can be proud of and boast about. But where does pride and boasting fit into God's plan for us?

What if trying to do our best and the right thing in all of our endeavors goes unrecognized by our peers? Perhaps we are even ridiculed by others for doing so because of their jealousy or contempt for us. Is it OK to do the right thing, and do it to the best of our ability, simply because it is the right thing to do? Is there reward in that?

As believers, many of us have been taught that if we are obedient to God and do good works that we will receive rewards and crowns for our efforts at the judgment seat of Christ. Furthermore, some teach that if our works exceed those of other believers, we will attain greater positions in heaven than our lesser-performing brethren. As an extension of this thought, some believe that positions in heaven also vary in importance based on our level of understanding of Scripture (i.e., those who studied more will have higher positions than those who didn't study as much). Therefore, rewards are a motivation, and sometimes the primary motivation, to do good works or diligently study the word of God. Are rewards our goal? Let's examine Scripture to see if these things are correct.

Before getting into the details of judgment and rewards, I admit that I'm not certain regarding my conclusions. I don't presume to know and understand all the things that God has in store for us. However, the following study provides an examination of verses and passages related to God's judgments of individuals and my understanding of what they mean. I leave it to the reader to prayerfully consider the Scripture passages and my associated conclusions provided herein, thus leaving your understanding between you and God.

Starting Point

A scriptural discussion on believers' rewards must start with a person being a believer in the first place. So, what is a believer? A believer is a person who believes the gospel of salvation. The gospel of salvation is most concisely presented in I Corinthians 15:1-4, where the Apostle Paul reminded the Corinthian brethren how they were saved: they believed that Christ died for their sins, was buried, and was raised from the dead. Throughout Paul's epistles (letters—Romans through Philemon), he reminded the brethren that their salvation was based on believing this fact of God's indescribable gift to us (Romans 3:21-26; 4:5, 22-25; 10:9-10; Ephesians 1:13-14; I Thessalonians 4:14). Furthermore, Paul asserted that salvation from the consequences of our sin is a gift of God—it is by His grace because we cannot earn it (Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 4:4-5; 6:23; II Corinthians 9:15).

Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. (I Corinthians 15:1-4)¹

Please read the verses referenced above. If you already believe the gospel of salvation, take a moment to think on these things and thank God for what He did for us through our Lord Jesus Christ. Hopefully, it will spark a sense of humility and thanksgiving at the same time, for no one is worthy of the gift of salvation. If this is a new or abstract concept to you, this is an opportunity for you to contemplate your standing before Almighty God, recognize your need for salvation, and thank Him for sending His Son Jesus Christ to die for your sins. A sincere belief (faith) in what Christ did for us at the cross is the *only* thing necessary to become a child of God and have eternal life in Christ (Romans 6:23; 8:14-17; Galatians 3:26; Ephesians 1:3-6; Titus 3:4-7), because access to God is *only* through Jesus Christ (John 14:6). **Do you believe that Christ died for you?**

In Him [*Christ*], you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God’s own [the purchased] possession, to the praise of His glory. (Ephesians 1:13-14)

Are We to Do Good Works?

For some who truly believe the gospel of salvation, salvation is treated like *fire insurance*. They know that their sins are forgiven and that they (their soul and spirit) will ascend into heaven upon physical death (thus avoiding the eternal fire of hell—Revelation 20:11-15), but they live as if they weren’t believers. In other words, they continue to live sinful lives as they did before they were saved.

Brethren, we should never put the grace of God to the test by proving how forgiving He is through living purposely sinful lives (Romans 6:1-2). Instead, we should be thankful for the forgiveness we have through Christ’s death for us and live our lives in a manner that is worthy of our salvation (Ephesians 4:1-3; Colossians 1:9-12; Romans 12:1-2; I Corinthians 6:19-20). When we are saved, we are in Christ and are His ambassadors (representatives) on earth (II Corinthians 5:20-21). Are we properly representing Him?

To walk, or live, worthy of our salvation involves many things, both in attitude and actions.² A proper attitude includes living and demonstrating a life of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (the fruit of the Spirit), considering others as being more important than ourselves, and being forgiving to those who hurt us (Galatians 5:22-23; Philippians 2:1-8; Ephesians 4:32). Proper actions consist of doing good works to help other people (Galatians 6:9-10; I Thessalonians 5:15; Titus 3:8). On the other hand, we are exhorted to stop living according to the

¹ All references are quoted from the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB 1996). Words in brackets are either equivalent words from the *King James Version* (KJV) or, if in italics, were added by the author for clarification.

² See the author’s **Walk Worthy** for a discussion on how we should live as believers.

deeds of the flesh—the sinful thoughts and actions for which unbelievers will be judged (Romans 6:1-2, 12-13; Galatians 5:16-21; Ephesians 4:17-31; 5:3-7).

Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith. (Galatians 6:9-10)

This is a trustworthy [faithful] statement; and concerning these things I want you to speak confidently, so that those who have believed God will be careful to engage in good deeds. These things are good and profitable for men. (Titus 3:8)

Judgment

There are two future judgments of individuals described in Scripture and, I believe, Christ is the judge at both of them. One of the judgments applies only to believers—those who have been saved by the grace of God. The other one, which we will briefly address first, applies to unsaved people.

The Great White Throne Judgment

At the close of the first 1,000 years of the reign of Christ in His kingdom, after He has totally defeated Satan and the nations outside of New Jerusalem (Revelation 20:7-10), the dead—those of all ages (dispensations) who died apart from God—will be raised up and will be judged by a judge sitting on a great white throne (Revelation 20:11-15). This resurrection is referred to in Scripture as *the resurrection of judgment* or *damnation* depending on the Bible version (John 5:28-29; 12:48; Revelation 20:5), and is distinguished from the prophesied first resurrection of kingdom believers who will be raised to enter into the messianic kingdom (Revelation 20:4-6; John 11:24-26). The resulting judgment, where all unbelievers will be judged for their works (*all* will be found guilty because their works were according to their sin nature) and they, death, and Hades (hell) will be cast into the lake of fire for eternal judgment. This judgment is called *the second death* (Revelation 20:14)³ and is often referred to by Christianity as the *Great White Throne Judgment*. **Brethren, we will not be judged at this judgment.**

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne [God], and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades [hell] gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. Then death and Hades [hell] were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:11-15)

³ Upon physical death—the first death—the souls of all unbelievers (all who are not saved by the grace of God) descend into hell, which is called *Sheol* in Hebrew and *Hades* in Greek, where they await judgment for their sin. It is a place of torment (Luke 16:19-31). These dead will be raised up for final judgment before the great white throne where they will be found guilty and cast into the lake of fire, which is called *Gehenna* in Greek. This is a total spiritual death (the second death), and they will be eternally tormented along with Satan and his beast and false prophet (Revelation 20:10; 21:8).

The One sitting on the great white throne is not clearly identified in Revelation 20:11. Some believe that God the Father is the judge on the throne.⁴ It is true that God is the ultimate judge because of His sovereignty (Hebrews 12:23), but it appears likely that Christ is the judge who will sit on the great white throne. Although Jesus came into the world to save it and not judge it (John 12:44-47), He was rejected by His people and the world. Upon reacquiring His rightful position in heaven after His ascension (Ephesians 1:18-21; Colossians 3:1), we are told that our Lord Jesus Christ is the judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42; II Timothy 4:1; I Peter 4:3-5). Furthermore, we're told that God will judge the world in righteousness *through* the Man that He raised from the dead, which would make Christ the in-person judge—God's representative (Acts 17:30-31; Romans 2:14-16).⁵ In fact, God the Father has given (authorized or appointed) all judgment to His Son Jesus Christ (John 5:19-30; Acts 10:42).

The Judgment Seat of Christ

The Apostle Paul, and only Paul, spoke of the judgment seat of Christ. Let's first read the two passages that specifically mention this judgment.

Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him [God].⁶ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. (II Corinthians 5:9-10)

But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God [Christ].⁷ For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God. (Romans 14:10-12)

Other passages that appear to be directly related to the judgment seat of Christ are as follows:

According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. (I Corinthians 3:10-15)

Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy [faithful]. But to me

⁴ In the KJV, Revelation 20:12 says that the dead will "stand before God," whereas the NASB and several other modern translations say they are standing "before the throne." I believe that they stand before the throne of God that is occupied by Christ, who is the judge of the living and the dead as explained in the text.

⁵ These verses do not specifically say that they are referring to the judgment at the great white throne (I believe they do), but they do establish that God has appointed His Son to be judge (see also Revelation 19:11-16).

⁶ Our desire should be to please God as faithful bond-servants of Christ (Galatians 1:10; I Thessalonians 2:4; 4:1).

⁷ As previously discussed, only unbelievers will stand before the judgment of God (through Christ) at the great white throne. Therefore, I believe that the KJV translation of *the judgment seat of Christ* in this verse is correct because Paul is writing to believers.

[Paul] it is a very small thing that I may be examined [judged] by you, or by any human court [man's judgment]; in fact, I do not even examine [judge] myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted [justified]; but the one who examines me is the Lord. Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God. (I Corinthians 4:1-5)

What can we learn from the above passages?

- We will appear before the judgment seat of Christ.
- Each one of us will give an account of ourself to God (through Christ).
- Each one of us will be recompensed for our deeds in the body, according to what we have done, whether good or bad.
- Our works built on the foundation of Christ will be tested by fire to determine their quality.
 - If any of our works remain, we will receive a reward.
 - If any of our works burn up, we will suffer loss but still be saved.
- The motives of our heart in the performance of our service to God will be revealed, and we will receive praise, as appropriate, from God (through Christ).

Please note that these passages do not say that we will be judged for our sins. This is because our sins were forgiven by God when we believed the gospel of salvation (Romans 3:23-26; Colossians 1:13-14; Ephesians 4:32). At that moment we were justified, glorified, and made righteous in Christ—God sees us in Christ (Romans 4:5; 4:23 – 5:11; 8:29-30; Ephesians 2:4-6). However, because good works can be motivated by sinful desires (pride and monetary gain), it *appears* that our sin may still be a factor in the judgment process. Something that is missing from these passages are descriptions of rewards—what can we expect?

Who and When?

As mentioned above, Paul is the only one to describe the judgment seat of Christ. His letters were written to the believers who were established through the gospel of the grace of God that Paul was appointed by God and Christ to proclaim. Therefore, his letters apply directly to us, too. Consequently, members of the body of Christ, in which all believers in this dispensation of grace belong, will stand before the judgment seat of Christ.⁸

When will we face the judgment seat of Christ? Will it be a specific day in the timetable of God? Scripture doesn't say. It is true that I Corinthians 3:13 says that "the day will show (declare) it," but is it referring to a specific time that all believers will stand before Christ or is it referring to whatever time each of us stands before it?⁹ *I don't believe that it matters either way.* We do know that when we are absent from the body (at the moment of our physical death) we are present with the Lord (II Corinthians 5:6-8). We are also told that, at the *rapture*, the dead in Christ will be raised up and that they, as well as those who are still alive and caught up at the time of His return for us, will be changed from a body of

⁸ See the author's **The Two Messages of Our Lord Jesus Christ, The Mystery (God's Secret Plan)**, and **Follow Paul** for discussions on Paul's apostleship and God's message for this dispensation of grace.

⁹ The day of our Lord Jesus Christ mentioned by Paul *might* be another name for the judgment seat of Christ (I Corinthians 1:8; 5:5; II Corinthians 1:14; Philippians 1:6; 2:16).

flesh to a body of the glory of Christ (I Corinthians 15:50-53; I Thessalonians 4:13-17; Philippians 3:20-21).

Our concept of time is far different than that of God's (II Peter 3:8). However, it would seem strange to think that we would carry along works motivated by pride in the presence of God. Would believers who died a couple of thousand years ago still be waiting to have their works and motives judged? It doesn't seem likely, so perhaps each of us will have our works judged at the time we die (but, again, time is different to God than it is to us). This is conjecture, though, and it is best if we simply acknowledge that God will accomplish all things exactly as He has planned.

Rewards

As we have seen, we are exhorted to do good works. For what purpose are we to do them? Can we expect to be rewarded for our good works? If so, can we expect them now or later? Also, what kinds of rewards can we expect? Are we getting crowns? Finally, should we do good works in order to be rewarded?

Because Paul was the only one to speak of the judgment seat of Christ, we will look at what he said regarding rewards. According to I Corinthians 3:10-15, each person's work on the foundation of Christ (our works for the Lord) will become evident because it will be tested with (as though by) fire. If *any* work remains, the person will receive *a reward*. If *any* work is burned up, he will suffer loss but remain saved. This passage does not refer to multiple rewards, or that more rewards will result in a greater position in heaven. In fact, the word *rewards* doesn't occur in the New Testament.¹⁰

In an attempt to understand what kind of reward Paul referred to, we need to understand how the word was used in his letters. Furthermore, we need to look at its derivatives or what is considered by many to be included as part of our reward. Such words are *crown*, *prize*, *praise*, and *reign* (i.e., reign with Christ). The Greek words are from *The Englishman's Greek Concordance of the New Testament*, and their associated definitions are abbreviated from *Abingdon's Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. The reference number associated with each Greek word (enclosed in parentheses) corresponds to both of these sources.

Verses or passages in Paul's letters for each Greek word are provided below and are quoted from the NASB (see Footnote 1 on Page 2). The English translations of the Greek words are in bold italics; if a different word is used in the KJV, it follows the NASB word in brackets. Additional references from the New Testament are also discussed as appropriate to provide a fuller understanding of the uses of these words.

Reward

misthos (3408): pay for service (literally or figuratively), whether good or bad; hire, reward, wages

Now to the one who works, his *wage* [reward] is not credited as a favor, but as what is due.
(Romans 4:4)

¹⁰ Within the KJV and NASB, the word *rewards* is only used in Numbers 22:7, Isaiah 1:23, Daniel 2:6, Daniel 5:17, and Hosea 2:12, and has nothing to do with service to God.

If we could earn righteousness or salvation through works, then our reward wouldn't be reckoned as by grace but as what is due to us. That is, God would owe salvation to us just as an employer owes wages to his employees for their work. However, we can't earn salvation—it is by grace through faith apart from works (Romans 4:5; Ephesians 2:8-9).

I [Paul] planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own *reward* according to his own labor.
(I Corinthians 3:6-8)

The context for this passage is about Paul chastising the Corinthian brethren for their foolishness in aligning themselves with men (instead of giving the credit to God for their growth), just as we do with our denominations and pastors today (I Corinthians 1:10-13; 3:1-5). It is possible that the reward spoken of here refers to some unspecified spiritual reward or praise that Paul and Apollos would receive for their service to God (see the next passage). However, based on the context, it could also simply refer to the intangible reward of willingly (voluntarily) serving the Corinthian brethren without charge (I Corinthians 9:16-18), or possibly (though doubtful) to the wages that the Corinthian brethren should have been providing to these men for their particular service to them (I Timothy 5:17-18).

According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw [stubble], each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a *reward*. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. (I Corinthians 3:10-15)

This is a key passage when discussing rewards, but first note that it refers to a *reward* and not to rewards. The most common interpretation of this passage is that, when tested by fire, our good works (gold, silver, and precious stones) will remain, while our bad works (wood, hay, and straw) will burn up. Consequently, it is taught that we will receive rewards for our good works. However, the context of this passage suggests another possible interpretation.

First of all, Paul begins this letter to the Corinthian brethren chastising them for their pride—their arrogance. In fact, this is a theme throughout the letter, for their pride was the root of all of their fleshly (carnal) behaviors (e.g., I Corinthians 1:10-13; 3:1-4; 4:6-10; 5:1-6; etc.). Paul differentiated between man's work and God's work, who causes our spiritual growth, in the verses previous to this passage. Therefore, who should receive the praise for the good works that build on the foundation of Christ? Us, whose works are through our own efforts (i.e., each man's work), or God, who performed them through us (Philippians 1:6; 2:12-13; Ephesians 2:8-10)? I believe that it is God who should receive the praise.

Furthermore, we are told that our faith is even more precious than gold, which is consumed by fire (I Peter 1:6-9). Yes, even gold, silver, and precious stones change into their vapor phases at specific temperatures—by all appearances they are consumed by fire. Perhaps, then, this passage is a lesson to the Corinthian brethren (and us), that all of our self-motivated works for our Lord, regardless how good we think they are (i.e., gold, silver, and precious stones), will be consumed. This will be the ultimate

proof to us that we are saved by the grace of God apart from any works of our own. What is left by this testing of fire? I believe that the works that God accomplished through us will be revealed to us, for which we will praise Him. This will leave absolutely no room for boasting on our part (or comparison to other brethren), except to boast in the Lord (I Corinthians 1:26-31).

For if I [Paul] preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel. For if I do this voluntarily, I have a *reward*; but if against my will, I have a *stewardship* [dispensation of the gospel] entrusted to me. What then is my *reward*? That, when I preach the gospel, I may offer the gospel without charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel. (I Corinthians 9:16-18).

Paul was chosen to preach the gospel of the grace of God, and he understood that God would accomplish His will through him whether he wanted to or not. However, by doing so willingly (voluntarily, because he wanted to) Paul had a reward. His reward was offering the gospel without charge; he did so without thought of personal gain (see vs. 6-15 and I Timothy 6:3-6). Not only is this not usually considered to be a reward, this passage does not imply a future reward for Paul's work. Paul was experiencing this reward as he served the Corinthians and other brethren (I Corinthians 4:11-13; Acts 18:1-3).

The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching [labor in the word and doctrine]. For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing," and "The laborer is worthy of his *wages* [reward]." (I Timothy 5:17-18)

Those who labor well in the spiritual needs of others are worthy of their wages. This is referring to payment by those who are being served, and not to a future reward (Galatians 6:6).

In the KJV, the Greek word *misthos* is also translated as *reward* in the following passages: Matthew 5:12, 46; 6:1-2, 5, 16; 10:41-42; Mark 9:41; Luke 6:23, 35; Acts 1:18; II Peter 2:13; II John 8; Jude 11; and Revelation 11:18; 22:12. Except for Acts 1:18, which refers to Judas' reward or price for his wickedness (death), the context associated with these verses refer to conditions in the great tribulation and the kingdom of heaven. The hypocritical and evil men will receive their reward (judgment—death), and those who are faithful and righteous will receive their reward. The reward of the faithful appears to be realizing their promised eternal life by entering into and residing in the kingdom; no type of specific reward is mentioned. None of these verses apply to us in this dispensation of grace because we have a heavenly hope and not an earthly hope as the kingdom believers had, and will have.¹¹ The word *misthos* is also translated in the KJV as *hire* (i.e, wages) in Matthew 20:8, Luke 10:7, and James 5:4, and as *wages* in John 4:36 and II Peter 2:15.

katabrabūo (2603): to award the price against, i.e., figuratively to defraud

Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival [holyday] or a new moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one keep *defrauding* [judging] you of your prize

¹¹ See the author's **The Two Messages of Our Lord Jesus Christ** that explains the differences between *the gospel of the kingdom* as proclaimed by John the Baptist, Jesus while on earth, and His disciples, and *the gospel of the grace of God* that was revealed to us by our risen and glorified Lord Jesus Christ through the Apostle Paul.

[reward] **by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen [i.e., figments of his imagination], inflated without cause by his fleshly mind.**
(Colossians 2:16-18)

This is the only passage in which this Greek word is used. In this passage and its context, we are urged to not lose sight of, or our strength in, our completeness in Christ apart from the Law of Moses—our reward or prize—as those around us (brethren and unbelievers) judge us otherwise. This passage is not about losing a future reward for our works (Colossians 2:6-15).

antapodosis (469): requital; reward

Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the *reward* of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality. (Colossians 3:23-25)

This is the only passage in which this Greek word is used. We should do all things for the Lord rather than for men (Colossians 3:17), *knowing* that we will receive the *reward of the inheritance*. We have already inherited all things in Christ (based on nothing we have done—Ephesians 1:3-14). Therefore, all believers will receive this reward that apparently refers to eternal life or possibly the crown of righteousness—or both (II Timothy 4:8).

If we do our work for men (to please them—Galatians 1:10), we will receive the consequences. This appears to refer to discipline from God during our earthly lives (Galatians 6:7-9; Hebrews 12:5-11). The goal is to work for the Lord (to walk worthy of our salvation) and not the reward itself that we will obtain regardless of our works or walk.

apodidōmi (591): deliver, give, pay or repay, perform, recompense, render, requite, restore, reward, sell, yield

But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will *render* to each person according to his deeds. (Romans 2:5-6)

From Romans 1:18 through Romans 3:20; we learn that all people are unrighteous and separated from God. Furthermore, we are all without excuse, even the people of Israel who rejected or corrupted the Law of Moses. Based on the context, therefore, the *rendering* in this passage is referring to the final judgment of all who died without Christ—they will be judged for their deeds, which were all motivated by, or emanated from, their sin nature (Revelation 20:11-15). Beginning in Romans 3:21, we find out the remedy for mankind's hopeless condition: Christ died for our sins.

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure [*death*] has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will *award* [give] to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.
(II Timothy 4:6-8)

When Paul wrote this letter to his beloved coworker Timothy, he was in a prison in Rome and knew that he would be put to death soon. He was at peace knowing that he had faithfully served our Lord.

Furthermore, he was looking forward to receiving the crown of righteousness from our Lord, apparently at the judgment seat of Christ. This passage does not imply that Paul earned this crown through his works, because he said that all believers will receive it. How is it possible that *anyone* could receive this crown, since no believers, because of our sin nature, righteously serve our Lord? Even Paul admitted his own sinfulness (Romans 7:14-25). All members of the body of Christ will receive it because God already considers us to be righteous in Christ (Romans 4:5; 8:9-10)—no believer is more righteous than another believer. Although we continue to sin while in our bodies, we will attain (realize) our full righteousness when we are present with Christ, whether through death or the rapture (Philippians 3:20-21).

It is possible that the crown of righteousness is equivalent to eternal life in Christ—they *may* be two names for the same thing. All those who believe that Christ died for our sins are considered by God to be alive in Christ and righteous in Christ. Consequently, we will inherit eternal life and righteousness in Christ at the time of our physical death or the rapture, whichever comes first. In this sense, therefore, eternal life can be considered a reward—that which we can look forward to without any doubt because of what Christ accomplished for us at the cross.

Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm [evil]; the Lord will *repay* [reward] him according to his deeds. Be on guard against him yourself, for he vigorously opposed our teaching. (II Timothy 4:14-15)

Alexander apparently was an unbeliever, perhaps falsely claiming to be a believer, who was serving Satan's purposes by actively opposing Paul and his message (I Timothy 1:18-20). However, as we too often see today, he could have been a believer who opposed the truth of Paul's message of grace and, therefore, was unwittingly serving Satan's purposes. Regardless, Paul knew that our Lord would repay him for his deeds. If Alexander was a believer, he would be disciplined in some measure during his life (Galatians 6:7-8); if an unbeliever, he would receive his *reward* at the great white throne judgment.

There are numerous references where this Greek word is used, most of which do not refer to any type of judgment. Passages outside of Paul's letters that use this word regarding future payment (judgment) or reward include: Matthew 6:4, 6, 18; 12:36; 16:27; I Peter 4:5; and Revelation 22:12. These verses don't refer to the judgment seat of Christ, but I'll leave it up to the reader to examine them.

misthapodosia (3405): requital (good or bad); recompense of reward

This word appears only in the following verses: Hebrews 2:2; 10:35; and 11:26. In these verses, written to the kingdom believers of Israel, it refers to the just penalty for sin and the reward of eternal life. These verses don't refer to the judgment seat of Christ. However, all unbelievers of all ages will receive the just penalty for sin, and all believers of all ages will receive eternal life.

axios (514): deserving, comparable or suitable; due reward, worthy or unworthy

In the KJV, this word is translated as *due reward* in Luke 23:41, where the repentant criminal on the cross recognized that he and the other criminal were receiving what they deserved. In no other instances is it translated as *reward*, but as something to do with being worthy. Only in Revelation 16:6 is this word used in relation to judgment, where it refers to the unrighteous people deserving judgment during the great tribulation.

Crown

stephanos (4735): a wreath as a badge of royalty, a prize or a symbol of honor; crown

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable *wreath* [crown], but we an imperishable [incorruptible]. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified. (I Corinthians 9:24-27)

In the days of the Greek games, the winning athlete would receive as the prize a crown-like wreath that would soon dry up and be worthless. In this passage, Paul said that we would receive an imperishable (incorruptible) wreath, which figuratively is contrasted to the athlete's wreath that is perishable. He didn't say that we would receive it if we out-perform our fellow brethren, and he didn't say that we would receive more than one. Brethren, all believers will receive this crown. We have already *won* because we are in Christ. Nowhere in Scripture, however, is this crown described; although, or because, it is imperishable, it may be something figurative or symbolic (representative) with no physical properties, such as a blessing.

Our race is how we live as believers. We are exhorted to walk worthy of our salvation (Ephesians 4:1-3; Colossians 1:9-12) and to stand fast in the truth of God's word, always abounding in the work of the Lord (I Corinthians 15:58; 16:13-14; Ephesians 6:13-14; Colossians 3:17, 23-24). *Because* we will receive this crown, it should be our desire and goal to apply the same level of focus and discipline in our daily walk that an athlete exercises to win a competition.

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure [*death*] has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the *crown* of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award [give] to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing. (II Timothy 4:6-8)

The *crown of righteousness* has already been briefly addressed under *reward*. This crown appears to be the same as the *imperishable crown* referred to in I Corinthians 9:24-27, and the *reward of the inheritance* in Colossians 3:23-24. Paul knew that he would receive the crown of righteousness, and he exhorted us to do all things for the Lord rather than for men, *knowing* that we will receive the reward of the inheritance. Like Paul, we, too, should fight the good fight of faith. We should serve the Lord as a soldier who devotedly serves his or her commander, as the winning athlete who competes honorably (according to the rules), and as a farmer who deserves to receive the first share of his crops through hard work (II Timothy 2:1-6).

Again, and contrary to popular teaching, this crown is *not* something we can earn. We don't and can't earn our righteousness—it is only through the righteousness of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are never exhorted to out-perform our fellow brethren to win or gain something more than them. Because of our sin nature, trying to do so would only lead to pride, boasting, and associated sins (Romans 12:3, 16). Unfortunately, the believers of today, in general, have the same problems with pride as did the Corinthian brethren.

Finally, is the crown of righteousness something of substance or physical? It is difficult to picture all of us wearing a physical crown in heaven, considering that all believers have been blessed with all spiritual blessings in Christ (Ephesians 1:3-6) and that all of us have been made righteous in Christ. As discussed earlier, the crown of righteousness may simply be a descriptive name for eternal life—they may be one and the same. We could not have eternal life without being made righteous in Christ by the working of God (Romans 5:20-21; 6:20-23; Titus 3:5-7).

Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and *crown*, in this way stand firm [fast] in the Lord, my beloved. (Philippians 4:1)

Because of their faithfulness (Philippians 1:3-8), the Philippian brethren were Paul's joy and crown. Just as *joy* is not something of substance, neither is *crown* in this context. Crown was being used as a figurative symbol of honor—the Philippian believers were evidence of the effectiveness of the gospel preached by Paul. He was so thankful to God for the Philippians that Paul was referring to a blessing he was experiencing at the time and may not have been implying any future reward in this specific instance.

For who is our hope or joy or *crown* of exultation [rejoicing]? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? For you are our glory and joy. (I Thessalonians 2:19-20)

As with the Philippians, the Thessalonian brethren were also considered by Paul to be his joy and crown. Paul was thankful to God for their work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ (I Thessalonians 1:2-4). Through their faithfulness, they were not only good examples for other brethren, they also suffered severe persecution for their faith (I Thessalonians 1:6-7; 2:14-15). Besides being a blessing to Paul at the time, it appears that he knew that the Thessalonian brethren would also be a blessing to him when all believers are gathered in the Lord at the time of the rapture. This passage doesn't say that Paul will receive a reward or crown at the rapture, and it isn't talking about the judgment seat of Christ. In this sense, Paul considered the Thessalonian brethren to be his current and future blessing. It is most likely that Paul considered his faithful coworkers in the same way, as well as other brethren who remained faithful in their walk and service to our Lord.

These are the only references to crown in Paul's epistles. Therefore, as pertains to a reward we will receive, we can be assured that we will receive the imperishable crown of righteousness—the reward of our inheritance, which appears to be referring to eternal life. However, there are other crowns mentioned in Scripture with regard to rewards. Can we look forward to receiving them?

The *crown of life* is mentioned in James 1:12 and Revelation 2:10. As with righteousness, all brethren are alive in Christ, so one could conclude that we will receive the crown of life, also. However, though possible, the context of these passages implies otherwise.

Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial [endureth temptation]; for once he has been approved, he will receive the *crown of life* which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. (James 1:12)

I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested [tried], and

you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the [a] crown of life. (Revelation 2:9-10)

Both of these passages refer to the time of the great tribulation. During that time, which will be after the rapture, all of the believers will be believing Jews and Jewish proselytes, and they will be controlled by the Holy Spirit.¹² Their salvation in Christ—their coming Messiah and King—will be proven by their works (James 2:18-26; I John 3:4-10; 5:18-20).¹³ Also, during that time, Satan, through his *beast* (his representative—a king) and *false prophet* (Antichrist), will severely persecute and wage war against the people of Israel. Many of the believers of the children of Israel—none of whom will wear the mark of the beast—will be put to death for their allegiance to God instead of to Satan and his representative. It is those who are put to death for their faith who are promised to receive the crown of life.¹⁴ Believers in this dispensation of grace, though alive in Christ, have no such promise.

One other crown that is mentioned in Scripture is the *crown of glory*. As with righteousness and life, all brethren have been glorified in Christ (Romans 8:28-30). Will we receive the crown of glory, also? Apparently not.

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. (I Peter 5:1-4)

The Apostle Peter exhorted the elders—the spiritual leaders—of the kingdom brethren to faithfully shepherd their flocks of believers. They were to lead and take care of the spiritual needs of those in their charge voluntarily (not because they were required to) and eagerly, being examples to their flock regarding how to live for the Lord. If they did so, they would receive the crown of glory at the appearing of the Chief Shepherd. As with the crown of life, the context of this passage is the time after the rapture and during the time of great tribulation. The faithful spiritual leaders would receive their crown when Christ their Messiah appears to establish His kingdom.

It is likely that many pastors, missionaries, and other spiritual leaders today are hoping or expecting to receive the crown of glory at the judgment seat of Christ. However, Paul never refers to members of the body of Christ as sheep or to Christ as our shepherd in his letters.¹⁵ These are designations directly

¹² See the author's **The Mystery (God's Secret Plan)** for a summary of events that will occur after the rapture.

¹³ They will not be saved by their works, but their works will be proof that they are saved (Ezekiel 36:22-28).

¹⁴ *Perhaps* all the believers during the great tribulation will receive the crown of life because all of them will have faced persecution to some degree. This might be implied in James 1:12. We know for certain, however, that those who are put to death for their faith will receive this crown.

¹⁵ In Romans 8:36, Paul quotes a passage from Psalm 44:22 to apply the principle that we are considered as sheep worthy of, or destined for, slaughter by our persecutors. He is not referring to us as the *sheep* of the Lord in the same sense that applied to the people of Israel. It is true in Acts 20:28 that Paul exhorted the elders of the church at Ephesus to shepherd their flock. The main purpose of the book of Acts is to fully demonstrate Israel's rejection of Christ their Messiah (Acts 7:51-58; 13:44-46; 18:5-6; 28:23-28), so many terms used in the book were familiar to the Jews. In this sense, however, all pastors (pastor means *shepherd* in Latin) are considered to be shepherds of their congregations or flocks.

related to the people of Israel and their promised Messiah (John 10:14-15). Therefore, this is a crown that faithful ministers of our Lord in this dispensation of grace are not promised to receive. Paul was confident that he would receive the crown of righteousness, so if the crown of glory applied to faithful ministers in this dispensation, then it is likely that Paul would have mentioned that he would be receiving it, also.

Finally, a common teaching is that believers who receive crowns at the judgment seat of Christ will cast them to the feet of Christ in recognition that they were earned because of Christ's work through us. That is a noble concept because it is absolutely true that any good works that we do for our Lord are because of what God is doing through us (Philippians 1:6; 2:12-13; Ephesians 2:10). However, what does Scripture say about this?

The twenty-four elders will fall down before Him who sits on the throne, and will worship Him who lives forever and ever, and will cast their crowns before the throne, saying, "Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed and were created. (Revelation 4:10-11)

So, casting crowns before the throne is in Scripture, but who are the 24 elders, what were their crowns, and who is on the throne? The 24 elders are mentioned several times in the book of Revelation, and only in that book (Revelation 4:4, 10-11; 5:8-14; 7:11-12; 11:15-18; 14:3; 19:4). The book of Revelation contains much symbolism, and it is possible that the 24 elders represent something other than actual men (e.g., some type of beings who are spiritual principalities and powers in the heavens in the service of God—Ephesians 3:8-11), considering that there are no other references to them in prophecy. In Revelation 4:4 they are described as wearing white robes and wearing gold crowns on their heads—crowns as a king would wear. It is these 24 elders who cast their gold crowns before the throne. Scripture appears to indicate that this is the throne of God the Father and not the judgment seat of Christ or the great white throne (Revelation 4:2-11). This is because Christ (the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, and the Lamb) is standing *next* to the throne and took the book out of the right hand of Him (God the Father) who sat on the throne (Revelation 5:1-10). Therefore, Revelation 4:10-11 can't be construed to mean or imply that we will cast our crown of righteousness before the judgment seat of Christ.

Prize

brabōn (1017): an award, specifically a prize

But whatever things were gain to me [Paul], those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ [the faith of Christ—His faithfulness], the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do:

forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal [mark] for the *prize* of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:7-14)

Paul was pressing toward the goal (i.e., mark or finish line) for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. His desire was to be found in Christ and to fully comprehend and appreciate all that he had through the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (Romans 6:1-11). Paul realized that his status (background) and accomplishments were nothing compared to the blessings he had in Christ. He wanted to present the members of his body as instruments of righteousness (Romans 6:12-22), because he knew by faith that his righteousness was from God through the faith (faithfulness) of Christ. What is the prize? It appears to be the crown of righteousness that he knew he would receive and that all brethren will receive, because we are considered by God to be righteous in Christ. We, too, should desire to be found in Christ and to live as we ought to because of the prize that awaits us.

The only other use of this Greek word is in I Corinthians 9:24-27, which was previously discussed under *crown*. In that passage we are reminded that only one runner wins the prize, but that all of us should conduct our daily walk in the same manner that athletes train to honorably win a race. Our prize is the crown of righteousness—eternal life—that we will receive because we are righteous in Christ.

Praise (1868)

epainos (1868): a commendable thing; praise

Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy [faithful]. But to me [Paul] it is a very small thing that I may be examined [judged] by you, or by any human court [man's judgment]; in fact, I do not even examine [judge] myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted [justified]; but the one who examines me is the Lord. Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's *praise* will come to him from God. (I Corinthians 4:1-5)

Despite personally ministering to the Corinthian brethren for about 18 months (Acts 18:11), Paul continually had to defend his apostleship to them. This was because of their problems with pride that resulted in them aligning into different cliques (similar to denominational differences today) and being judgmental toward each other and toward Paul (I Corinthians 1:10-12; 6:1-8). Paul was frustrated with their judgments, knowing their spiritual weaknesses (I Corinthians 3:1-3; 4:6-8). He didn't even judge himself because he knew that his motives for his service to them were pure (I Corinthians 4:9-13).

Therefore, Paul was telling the brethren to stop judging because our true motives would be revealed, apparently at the judgment seat of Christ.¹⁶ Paul knew that he would be judged—praised—as a faithful servant (I Timothy 1:12; II Timothy 4:6-7). What this praise will consist of is not described. It is not referred to as a reward or a crown in this passage or context. Perhaps it will be verbal acknowledgment just as Paul considered his coworkers to be faithful servants of God (I Corinthians 4:17;

¹⁶ This is an assumption on my part because I Corinthians 4:5 refers to our motives being revealed, apparently as a form of judgment. However, this passage doesn't mention the judgment seat of Christ; it only refers to the time when the Lord comes, which for us implies the rapture. There are many things we won't know until the time comes.

Ephesians 6:21; Colossians 1:7; 4:7-9). Although all believers will receive the crown of righteousness, it is very doubtful that we will all be considered faithful in our service to God.

Peter referred to *praise* in a similar way in I Peter 1:6-9. The faithfulness of the kingdom brethren will result in praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Christ, which refers to His second coming to establish His kingdom on earth. Their faith will have been tested during the tribulation period, as though by fire. Therefore, perhaps it can be assumed that the faithfulness (including the motives of our service) of all brethren through the ages will be examined by God through Christ at some time or another.

Reign

sumbasilūo (4821): to be co-regent; reign with

It is a trustworthy [faithful] statement: for if we died with Him [Christ], we will also live with Him; if we endure [suffer], we will also reign with Him; if we deny Him, He also will deny us; if we are faithless [believe not], He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself. (II Timothy 2:11-13)

I am convinced that the first part of this faithful saying describes all believers—all members of the body of Christ. We have died with Christ, and we live with, and because of, Him (Romans 6:3-11; Galatians 2:20). Furthermore, because we have bodies of flesh and live in a sinful world, all believers suffer to some degree or another (Romans 8:16-23). It is true that we are guaranteed to suffer if we actually live for Christ (Philippians 1:27-30; II Timothy 3:10-12). Finally, *all* brethren are already in Christ at the right hand of God (Ephesians 2:4-7). Through our inheritance, *all* brethren have everything He has (Ephesians 1:3-14). Therefore, when He reigns, we will reign with Him. Because we are the same in Christ (there is no difference—Romans 10:12; I Corinthians 12:12-13; Galatians 3:28), this promise does not mean that some believers will have a special position over that of other brethren because of their works or extra faithfulness. It would be arrogant for us to think this way.

The second part of this faithful saying appears to be referring to the unsaved. When we believe the gospel of salvation (by faith), we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and nothing can separate us from the love of God (Ephesians 1:13-14; Romans 8:31-39). If we truly deny the Lord Jesus Christ, it is because we weren't saved in the first place—we didn't actually believe that Christ died for us. If, as believers, we live sinful lives contrary to the will of God, we remain saved and sealed because Christ and God remain faithful—they will save us because they promised to do so.

So, in what manner will we reign with Christ? We are not told in Scripture. I don't believe we will have any part in Christ's reign on earth during His millennial kingdom. That kingdom is promised to Israel, and Paul never says that we (members of the body of Christ in this dispensation of grace) will have any part of it.¹⁷ I believe that although Christ will physically reign on earth in His kingdom, He is already reigning from His heavenly position and will continue to do so (Christ's presence is not confined by physical constraints). After all, we are already above the angels because we are in Christ and will judge them and the world (I Corinthians 6:1-3; Ephesians 1:19-23). Paul also briefly mentions the dispensation of the fulness of times when all things in Christ, both in heaven and on earth, are one

¹⁷ Scripture does say that the twelve apostles will be sitting on the twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel during the millennial kingdom (Matthew 19:28)—in that sense they will be reigning with Christ on earth. Furthermore, those who were put to death for their faith during the great tribulation will reign with Christ in some manner (Revelation 20:4-6).

(Ephesians 1:9-10; I Corinthians 15:20-28). This time will be after the millennial (1,000-year) kingdom and after death and Hades are cast into the lake of fire for eternity.¹⁸ It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that we will be reigning with Christ for eternity.

The only other use of this Greek word is in I Corinthians 4:6-8. In this passage, Paul sarcastically referred to the Corinthian brethren as those who reigned like kings because, through their arrogance, they didn't acknowledge that what they received was from God through Paul and Apollos. If indeed they did reign as kings, then Paul and Apollos could reign with them! This is another good example where we should be humble instead of arrogant. Too many believers are proud of their salvation, their knowledge, and their works, as if they were gaining or accomplishing these things by their own will.

We Will Give an Account

So far, we have looked at all the verses and passages in Paul's letters, supplemented by other Scripture as appropriate, regarding the words *reward*, *crown*, *prize*, *praise*, and *reign* as they pertain to our judgment. According to my understanding, our reward, crown, and prize are all referring to eternal life that we will receive based on Christ's righteousness through the work that He accomplished for us at the cross. That is, they have nothing to do with our works for our Lord.

Going back to the beginning of this study, however, what about the facts that all believers in this dispensation of grace will stand before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account of ourselves, and that we will be recompensed for the things we have done in the body, whether good or bad? This is a difficult question that I will try to address by giving my understanding of these passages.

But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God [Christ]. For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God. (Romans 14:10-12)

Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him [God]. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. (II Corinthians 5:9-10)

When we stand before a judge, it is usually to plead guilty or not guilty for whatever crime we are accused of. Through the trial process we may have the opportunity to present our own defense—our own explanation of why we believe we are not guilty. Or, if we are found to be guilty, we can plead our case to the judge or jury to receive mercy or lesser punishment. This may include admitting our guilt, expressing our sorrow for our actions, listing the good things we do in our life, and promising to be a better person.

So, we will stand before the judgment seat of Christ and will give an account of ourselves. What might that entail? Are we going to recount to our Lord all the good things we did for Him? Are we going

¹⁸ See the author's **The Mystery (God's Secret Plan)** for a discussion of these events.

to try to convince Him that we are worthy to be in heaven and deserve to be rewarded? Perhaps we think that we are going to say some of the following things:

- I accepted You as my Savior through the exercise of my own free will; I decided to trust You.¹⁹
- I was a missionary, pastor, church elder, Sunday School teacher, or youth minister.
- I faithfully attended or served in such and such church.
- I gave this much of my income as tithe.
- I did far more good things than bad things, including such and such.
- I led this many people to salvation because of my witness or preaching.
- I started this many churches or Bible study groups.
- I wrote this many Bible study articles or books.
- I worked harder for You than other believers.
- I faithfully obeyed *the Great Commission*.
- I understand the gospel of grace because I studied harder and have more faith than other believers.

First of all, brethren, our Lord already knows what we have done and what we haven't done, and He knows our motivation for doing so. I think it would be rather arrogant for us to stand before Him to tell Him how good or faithful we were. I don't know what it will be like to stand before the judgment seat of Christ, but I expect that I will be humbled. I will be standing before my Savior because of what He did for me and not because of what I did for Him. Therefore, I will be standing before our Lord as one who is unworthy but who has been counted as righteous by the grace of God. I hope that my account of myself gives all praise to God and our Lord Jesus Christ, and that I won't use *any* of the claims listed above.

Present Ourselves Approved to God

Be diligent [study] to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling [rightly dividing] the word of truth. (II Timothy 2:15).

This is an incredibly important verse in Scripture. Unfortunately, it is often understood to mean some things that it does not say. Some brethren understand this verse to mean that if we study the word of God hard enough that we'll figure out how to rightly divide the Bible and, therefore, be approved of God at the judgment seat of Christ. Is this correct? Let's take a closer look at this verse, for it is truly significant.

In the KJV, the verse begins with "Study to shew thyself approved unto God..." The word *study* is an old English word translated from the Greek word *spoudazo*, which means *to endeavor* or *to be diligent*. The Greek word is used 14 times in Scripture, and is translated as *study* only in this verse. Because of the KJV translation, however, some brethren tend to consider themselves better, or more fully approved, than those brethren who don't study as much and haven't figured out how to rightly divide Scripture.

Studying the word of God is critically important if we want to understand what God wants us to know and how He wants us to live as His children. However, the degree to which we study and the measure of our understanding should never be used as a source of pride—we are not in competition

¹⁹ See the author's **Salvation and the Sovereignty of God** for a discussion on God's role in our salvation. Who chooses whom?

with each other. We are to be diligent in our service to God and our Lord Jesus Christ, and understanding the word of God is one factor in doing so (another is applying what we know in our daily walk). Furthermore, we need to humbly remember that anything of God's truth that we understand is because of the measure of faith that He gave each of us and because He opened our eyes to understanding (Romans 12:3; Ephesians 1:15-21; Colossians 1:9-10). We should be thankful instead of proud, and use our knowledge in ways that bring glory to God.

What is meant by *handling accurately, or rightly dividing*, the word of truth? It is absolutely true that all Scripture is inspired by God (II Timothy 3:16-17). However, it is also true that all Scripture is *for* us, but not *to* us. Although a hymn says that "every promise in the book is mine," this is not true, because there are many promises to individuals and to the nation of Israel that have nothing to do with members of the body of Christ in this dispensation of grace. We can't claim them because God didn't give them to us. Also, we are not under the Law of Moses (including the 10 commandments) because God took it out of our way by nailing it to the cross with Christ (Colossians 2:13-14). God does not expect us to be obedient to the *Great Commission* because it is not our commission.²⁰ Among other things it required repentance and baptism for the remission of sins, obedience to the Law of Moses, and exercising judgment toward those who didn't accept the gospel of the kingdom preached by the twelve disciples.

Therefore, God wants us to rightly divide, or accurately handle, His word. To do so not only includes recognizing the difference between the Law of Moses and the grace of God, prophecy and the mystery,²¹ and the gospel of the kingdom and the gospel of the grace of God, it also means living in the manner God expects us to live. We are exhorted to walk worthy of our salvation. God has provided all of the information we need to do so through His word, and the means to do so through His Holy Spirit.

Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling²² with which you have been called [our salvation], with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:1-3)

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching [doctrine], for reproof, for correction, for training [instruction] in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate [complete], equipped for every good work. (II Timothy 3:16-17)

Finally, I am convinced that II Timothy 2:15 is not referring to standing approved before the judgment seat of Christ, for there is no mention of judgment or reward. Because we have been justified, glorified, and made righteous in Christ, we will stand before the judgment seat as being approved to God. The context of this verse (II Timothy 2) regards our daily walk as believers. Paul wanted Timothy to conduct himself in such a manner that he was approved of God, just as Paul considered his coworker

²⁰ See the author's **The Two Messages of Our Lord Jesus Christ** that explains why we are not under *the Great Commission* (which is not called as such in Scripture) in this dispensation of grace.

²¹ See the author's **The Mystery (God's Secret Plan)** that examines the differences between what was revealed *since* the world began (prophecy) and what had been kept secret in God since *before* the world began until revealed through the Apostle Paul (the mystery).

²² The KJV uses the word *vocation* instead of *calling*, and is erroneously considered by many to mean our job. This passage follows the first three chapters of Ephesians that explains the things we have in Christ. Therefore, this passage is referring to our calling of salvation (Romans 8:28-30; I Corinthians 1:9). The rest of Ephesians then instructs us how to walk worthy of our salvation. See the author's **Walk Worthy** for more on this subject.

Apelles to be approved in Christ (Romans 16:10). We, too, are to be strong in the grace of God, focus on serving our Lord in truth, and endure the suffering that results from doing so. Furthermore, we are to use the word of God accurately and not dispute over words—over things that aren't true or are of no purpose—because doing so leads to the ruin of the hearers and further ungodliness. We are to abstain from wickedness. This is what God approves of—it is what He wants us to do to be useful to Him and to be a worker who doesn't need to be ashamed.

Recompensed for the Things We have Done

In what way, then, will we be recompensed for the things we have done in the body—while we were alive on this earth? Many brethren use II Corinthians 5:9-10 to support their position that they will obtain greater rewards and positions in heaven than other believers based on their works. As previously discussed, I believe that all of our self-motivated works for our Lord will burn, regardless of how good we think they were. Perhaps our Lord will show us at that time all the good works that God accomplished through us so that our praise will go to Him instead of to ourselves.

Were people saved through our witness? What a wonderful thing to be an instrument of the Almighty God in the accomplishment of His will, but who changed their hearts and did the saving (I Corinthians 3:5-7; II Thessalonians 2:13-14; II Timothy 1:8-9)? To whom should the praise go? Did some fellow brethren come to a better understanding of the word of God through our teaching or preaching? That is wonderful, also, but who opened their eyes to understanding (Acts 16:14; Ephesians 1:15-21)? To whom should the praise go?

Brethren, I freely admit that *I don't know* in what form God will recompense us for our deeds, whether good or bad. I do know that all of our sins are forgiven, so our sins will not be judged at the judgment seat of Christ. I do know that we have been blessed with all spiritual blessings in the heavens because of what Christ accomplished for us at the cross. I do know that we are complete in Christ. And I do know that He who began a good work in us will complete it because He is working through us to will and to work for His good pleasure. Based on what God has done for us through Christ, I don't think it is in our best interest to see what we can gain back from Him through our works. Do we really *deserve* anything? He has promised us His peace, which is sufficient for me (Philippians 4:4-9).

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him [God] be the glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:33-36)

What is Our Motivation?

Brethren, our motives driving the works we do for our Lord will be judged by our Lord. To me, this is of greater significance to us than the works themselves. Thankfully, there are people who do good things from pure motives. However, there are many good things done by people, both believers and unbelievers, that are accomplished for personal recognition or gain. We love to be recognized for our efforts or for being the best at something, and it is even better when we can make money from it.

However, this is man's way of thinking, and we think differently than God does (Isaiah 40:18, 25; 55:8-9; Romans 11:33-36; I Corinthians 2:11-16; Proverbs 14:12).

For consider your calling [salvation], brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame [confound] the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast [glory] before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord." (I Corinthians 1:26-31).

If we need some motivation to serve our Lord, consider *some* of the things God has done for us. He saved us from our sin by His grace through the work of our Lord Jesus Christ at the cross. He blessed us with all spiritual blessings in Christ. Through His grace we belong to Christ and He belongs to God. Brethren, God made us complete in Christ.

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. (Romans 5:8-10)

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me [Paul] His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us [believers] and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity. (II Timothy 1:8-9)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us [believers] with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He [God] chose us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him [God]. (Ephesians 1:3-4)

So then let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas [Peter] or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God. (I Corinthians 3:21-23)

For in Him [Christ] all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority. (Colossians 2:9-10)

We are exhorted to do good works. Why? First of all, God has told us that He wants us to do them. Secondly, our good works are intended to help others and exemplify what God through Christ has done for us. However, we must be humble and remember that any good works we do are because God is working through us according to His will.

Also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory. (Ephesians 1:11-12)

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10)

For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect [perform] it until the day of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:6)

So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12-13)

Realizing what God has done for us through Christ, and that He is working through us according to His will and not ours, should cause us to be thankful and should be the only motivation we need to want to do the right thing because it's the right thing to do. We should endeavor to walk worthy of our salvation in Christ.

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. (Romans 12:17)

Now we pray to God that you do no wrong; not that we ourselves may appear approved, but that you may do what is right [honest], even though we may appear unapproved. (II Corinthians 13:7)

Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men. (Colossians 3:23)

For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light. (Colossians 1:9-12)

Summary

All those in Christ—everyone who believes that Christ died for his or her sins—will stand before the judgment seat of Christ. Our works in the service of our Lord, as well as our motives for performing them, will be judged.

What rewards can we expect? Scripture only refers to *reward* in the singular. Therefore, we can't expect to receive more rewards than our fellow brethren. Paul said that we will receive the reward of the inheritance. What about crowns? Paul, a chosen apostle of Jesus Christ and the dispenser of the gospel of grace of God, only refers to expecting to receive the crown of righteousness. The reward of the inheritance and the crown of righteousness may be one and the same and, if so, likely refer to our inheritance of eternal life. Why? Because we have life and righteousness in, and because of, Christ.

Our goal as believers, therefore, should *not* be to conduct our lives in such a way as to *earn* rewards for our efforts. That is man's way of thinking, and man's ways are not God's ways. God, through His word, has exhorted us to do good works, to live according to the fruit of the Spirit, and to walk worthy of our salvation. Furthermore, God is performing His work, that He established from the beginning,

through us for His good pleasure. Therefore, any good works that we do will be judged as those works that God performed through us. There will be no room for boasting at the judgment seat of Christ.

Furthermore, I don't believe that any of the verses or passages referenced herein can be interpreted to say or imply that some believers will earn, through their service to God, greater positions in heaven than others. Let's not be like the Corinthian brethren who were proud of their works and who acted like kings, forgetting that everything they had and would receive was from God.

If we don't receive (earn) tangible rewards or greater positions in heaven over our fellow brethren because of our works, then what is the point in serving our Lord? For those who ask that question, I believe they should examine themselves to determine who they are working for—themselves or for our Lord. Instead, we should do the right thing because it's the right thing to do, including doing good to all people. Is there reward in that? Most certainly there is, because it should be our desire to be found in Christ.

But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ [the faith of Christ—*His faithfulness*], the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:7-11)

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord. (I Corinthians 15:58)

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