

THE WORD OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

The Believers' Crown

In previous issues of *Affirmation & Critique* we examined the New Testament truth that after receiving eternal salvation in Christ, a believer remains accountable to God for his living and work in this age. This is a basic tenet of the word of righteousness (Heb. 5:13). At the judgment seat of Christ a believer will receive either a reward or a rebuke from Christ the Judge (Rom. 14:10-12; 2 Cor. 5:10). The reward or punishment issuing from the judgment seat is the believer's wages, his recompense and repayment. The New Testament characterizes the believer's reward as a crown.

As used in the New Testament, the word *crown* (Greek, στέφανος) refers to a chaplet made of leaves, which was woven as a garland of laurel, oak, ivy, parsley, myrtle, or olive, or of an imitation of these in gold. It was worn as a token of public honor for distinguished service, military prowess, nuptial joy, or festal gladness. As a noun, στέφανος is used four times in the Gospels for the crown of thorns, by which the Lord's kingliness was mocked (Matt. 27:29; Mark 15:17; John 19:2, 5). In Revelation it is used once in reference to the crown of glory worn by the Son of Man at the great harvest (14:14), twice as the sign of rule by the angelic elders (4:4, 10), and three times with other allegorical significances (6:2; 9:7; 12:1). Its primary usage, however, is as an award for victors of athletic contests as a symbol of their triumph; "hence, by metonymy, a reward or prize" (Vine, *Dictionary* 258). As such, it was the most coveted honor in the ancient Greek world. The noun στέφανος and its corresponding verb form are used nine times in reference to the believers' reward.¹ In each of these references, further details of the believers' reward are revealed, specifically its incorruptibility, its expression of the divine life, its surpassing righteousness, its joy and boast, and its glory.

The Incorruptible Crown

In speaking of the incorruptible crown awarded to the overcoming believers, 1 Corinthians 9 and 2 Timothy 2:5 contain the clearest allusions to athletic games. In 1 Corinthians 9:24-25 Paul says,

Do you not know that those who run on a racecourse all run, but one receives the prize? Run in this way, that you may lay hold. And everyone who contends exercises

self-control in all things; they then, that they may receive a corruptible crown, but we, an incorruptible.

The incorruptible crown, which the Lord will award to His overcoming saints who win the race, is a reward in addition to salvation. All believers have received salvation through faith in Him. This has been settled once for all. But whether we will be rewarded by Him depends on how we run the race. In 2 Timothy 2:5 Paul indicates that we need to contend lawfully in order to be crowned.

Our running is our contending, and in 1 Corinthians 9:24 Paul exhorts, "Run in this way," that is, run so as to secure a prize that is not otherwise assured the runner. Paul himself ran the race as one who feared that he might not receive the prize. Even in Philippians, one of his last Epistles, he was still running the race and pursuing toward the prize without the assurance that he would be rewarded by the Lord at His coming (3:12-14). At the time of Paul, athletes trained under a rigorous regimen of exercise, abstinence, and diet. Similarly, Paul says that he buffeted his body and made it his slave (1 Cor. 9:27). The Greek word for *buffet* in this verse means *beat the face under the eye black and blue*. This is not to ill-treat the body, as in asceticism, but a metaphor of Paul's intense endeavor to subdue his body and make it a conquered captive to serve him as a slave for fulfilling his holy purpose. Paul exercised self-control in all things "so that nothing of the flesh may...prevent the prospect and actual receipt of the reward at the Judgment-Seat of Christ" (Vine, *Writings* 106). He concludes this portion, "Lest perhaps having preached to others, I myself may become disapproved" (v. 27). *Lest* denotes the possibility of rejection, even of the great apostle, at the judgment seat of Christ. "It is a humbling thought for us all to see this wholesome fear instead of smug complacency in this greatest of all heralds of Christ" (Robertson 150).

The Crown of Life

A few verses, such as Revelation 3:11, speak of the believers' crown in a general way. Several passages, however, give a specific designation to the crown, revealing particular aspects of the requirements and nature of the crown as a reward. Revelation 2:10 speaks of the crown of life. It says,

Do not fear the things that you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison that you may be tried, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Life here is the divine, eternal, uncreated, and indestructible life of God, which is Christ Himself (John 1:4; 14:6). Christ is life to us firstly in our spirit and then in our heart, including our mind (Col. 3:4; Rom. 8:10, 6). When He returns and we are manifested with Him, He will be life to us even in our mortal body, fully overcoming death in us, of which we have the foretaste today (v. 11). This overcoming divine life is the resurrection life (John 11:25), the life of the One who became dead and lives again forever (Rev. 1:18; 2:8).

Revelation 2:10 is spoken to the church in Smyrna, the church under the tribulation of persecution. Therefore, to overcome in this context is to overcome persecution by being faithful unto death. The crown of life, as a prize to those who are faithful unto death in overcoming persecution, denotes the overcoming strength that is the power of the resurrection life (Phil. 3:10). It also denotes that these overcomers have attained to the out-resurrection from the dead (v. 11), that is, the outstanding resurrection.

James 1:12 corroborates this, saying, "Blessed is the man who endures trial, because when he has become approved by testing, he will receive the crown of life, which He promised to those who love Him." Here, the crown of life is the glory, the expression, of life. "The believers endure trials by means of the divine life, and this will become their glory, their expression, the crown of life, as a reward to them at the Lord's appearing, for their enjoyment in the coming kingdom" (Recovery Version, James 1:12, note 3).

Moreover, those who receive the crown of life will not be "hurt of the second death" (Rev. 2:11), which is the negative issue of the dealing of God's government at the judgments in the future. Since the overcomers will have overcome death through their faithfulness under persecution, they will require no further dealing by God after their resurrection.

The Crown of Righteousness

Second Timothy 4:7-8 unveils another aspect of the believers' reward. Paul says,

I have fought the good fight; I have finished the course; I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, with which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will recompense me in that day, and not only me but also all those who have loved His appearing.

In contrast to salvation, which is of grace and by faith (Eph. 2:5, 8-9), the reward of righteousness as a prize is not of grace nor by faith, but is of righteousness through works (Matt. 16:27; Rev. 22:12; 2 Cor. 5:10). It "consists in righteousness and is also the reward for righteousness, the victor's crown" (Robertson 631). The One who awards this crown is the Lord as the righteous Judge, not as the merciful God or the gracious Redeemer. Hence, the believers will be recompensed with such a reward, not according to the Lord's grace but according to His righteousness.

In Matthew 5:20 the Lord Jesus tells His disciples, "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall by no means enter into the kingdom of the heavens." Righteousness here, as in 2 Timothy 4:8, refers not only to objective righteousness, which is the Christ whom we receive when we believe in Him and are thus justified before God. It refers even more to subjective righteousness, which is the indwelling Christ lived out of us as our righteousness that we may live in the reality of the kingdom today and enter into its manifestation in the future. It is the righteousness of life, which the believers live out by taking Christ as their life. Such a surpassing righteousness becomes a crown to the overcoming believers.

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The Crown of Boasting

In 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20 Paul asks, "For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at His coming? Are not even you? For you are our glory and joy." Paul similarly addresses the Philippians as his joy and crown (4:1), but with the Thessalonians he is more deeply emotional. Since the apostles were the believers' nursing mother and exhorting father (1 Thes. 2:7, 11), the believers, as their children, were their inward joy and outward glory. Apart from them, the apostles had no hope, glory, or crown of boasting. This word indicates that those who work with the Lord in fostering the believers to walk worthily of God will receive a reward. This reward will be the believers themselves, whom the Lord's workers have fostered, as their crown, glory, and joy.

Paul's boast in the Thessalonians is reminiscent of the

Lord's word in Luke 16:9, which says, "And I say to you, Make friends for yourselves by means of the mammon of unrighteousness, so that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal tabernacles." If the believers use their money, and indeed all things, to help others according to God's leading, those who share the benefit of their prudence will receive them into the eternal habitations in the resurrection of the righteous (14:13-14) in the coming kingdom age.

Paul's crown of boasting did not come to him cheaply. He was fruitful because he was desperately absolute for the Lord's interests. As a slave of Christ Jesus he did all things for the sake of the gospel (1 Cor. 9:23), rejoicing in his sufferings and afflictions on behalf of the Body of Christ (Col. 1:24). As a minister of Christ he was in labors abundantly, imprisonments abundantly, in stripes excessively, in deaths often, beaten with rods, stoned, shipwrecked, lost in the deep, in journeys often, in dangers from many sources, in labor and hardship, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness, and pressed upon with a crowd of cares for the sake of the churches and the believers whom he had begotten (2 Cor. 11:23-28). How great his reward will be in that day! But how poor will be the lot of those who are "at ease in Zion" (Amos 6:1)! If they remain in this condition, they will be the unprofitable slaves (Matt. 24:45-51; 25:24-30), the barren branches who are cast out, dried up, and judged by fire (John 15:6). They will have no one to receive them into the eternal tabernacles; they will have no crown of boasting at the coming of the Lord.

The Crown of Glory

First Peter 5:2-4 speaks of an unfading crown of glory that comes from shepherding the flock of God. The churches are God's possession, but they are allotted to elders who function as overseers, and they are entrusted to them by God for their care. If as a result of their eldership the believers mature, that maturity will become a crown of glory to the elders. This positive issue of their work will be their reward before the Lord at His coming.

In verse 4 Peter refers to the coming Lord as the Chief Shepherd. In John 10:10-11 the Lord said, "I have come that they may have life and may have it abundantly. I am the good Shepherd; the good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep." *Life* in verse 10 is ζωή, the eternal, divine life, while *life* in verse 11 is ψυχή, the soul-life, which the Lord laid down to accomplish redemption for His sheep that they may share His divine life. To shepherd the

flock of God requires suffering for the Body of Christ as Christ suffered (Col. 1:24). This will be rewarded with the unfading crown of glory. The reward given by the Lord to the faithful elders will be for their loyal service, and the unfading glory of this reward will be a portion of the glory for the overcomers' enjoyment in the manifestation of the kingdom of God and Christ.

Among many Christians today there is a tragic, unfounded, and superficial expectation that physical crowns will be handed out arbitrarily when we meet the Lord in the future. As we have seen, however, a crown is a symbol of glory given as a prize, in addition to the Lord's salvation, to the triumphant runner of the race, and it is cultivated and developed throughout the course of an overcoming life. If we do not exercise to run the race victoriously, how can we receive such an incorruptible reward? If we do not overcome trials and persecutions by the power of the resurrection life, how can the divine life become our glory and expression as the crown of life? If we do not live a life of surpassing righteousness, how can we receive righteousness as a surpassing reward, as Paul will, at the end of our course? If we do not live unto the Lord for His gospel, begetting and perfecting spiritual children, who will be our crown of boasting? And if we do not deny our soul-life to shepherd the Lord's flock, how can we receive an unfading crown of glory at His coming? May we be faithful and diligent, and may the Lord grant us much grace that no one may take our crown (Rev. 3:11).

by John Campbell

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Notes

¹*Diadem* (διάδημα) is used three times in Revelation (12:3; 13:1; 19:12). It is a symbol of kingly or imperial dignity granted to an actual (or presumed) monarch. It is never used with respect to the believers.

Works Cited

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