

THE PROMISED REWARD

The resurrection leads to the judgement seat of Christ at his coming. To that judgement the resurrected dead will be summoned. Not everyone will be called to judgement and it is God who will decide who will be called to account and who will be left to perish. What matters is how people respond to the invitation that God makes, and the warnings that He gives, in His Word the Bible.

People who ignore God and who choose to be ungodly and unrighteous will be punished, as Paul made clear early on in his Letter to the Romans (see 1:18-21). There he referred to people who had every opportunity to learn about God but who didn't want to know. In this chapter we want to think about what happens to those who are accepted by God and are rewarded accordingly.

In exploring Paul's letter, we have now reached that chapter which is all about the believer's new life in Christ. It gives us encouragement to "*walk in the Spirit*" and to join all those who are waiting for the coming transformation. In the apostle's words:

"We know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:22,23).

These are optimistic words to believers who were being encouraged to look forward expectantly to the coming transformation. Paul was not trying to frighten them by the thought of the judgement seat of Christ. On the contrary, he started this section of his letter by saying that they would have nothing to worry about if they lived in the right way – in faithful obedience to the things that God has revealed:

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus ... who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:1-4).

So the judgement seat of Christ is not something to be frightened of, providing we are now living in a right relationship with God and are developing a spiritual attitude and manner of life. It is very much a matter of what we do now that determines what will happen then. In Romans chapter 9, Paul goes on to say that God has the perfect right to decide the outcome of everything at the coming of Jesus. For God is Sovereign: He is the Ruler over all. He will express His anger towards those who deserve it and His mercy to those He chooses to favour.

❖ Sowing and Reaping

In another of his letters, Paul uses an image from farming to illustrate the way we need to prepare for the future when he says:

*"Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for **whatever one sows, that will he also reap**. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up"* (Galatians 6:7-9).

Again it's the choice between "*flesh*" and "*spirit*" – of either pleasing ourselves and living exactly as we want, or of living in a way which pleases God and gives Him glory. Notice that the outcomes are as stark as those we have seen from other passages of Scripture – we either end up with "*eternal life*" or our whole existence ends in "*corruption*". The best outcome is obvious! What we do now determines what will happen then – it's a classic case of "cause and effect".

Jesus used the very same figure – of sowing and reaping – in his parables. In one he talks about a sower who cast his seed on all different sorts of ground which then responded according to its characteristics. The path was too hard for the seed to take root; the stony ground was too shallow; the weed-strewn ground was too much of a tangle; the good ground yielded the harvest. Another parable was about a farmer who had sown a field but his enemy came and sowed weeds in it: Jesus said that the good and the bad would have to be sorted out at harvest time. He told another one about a man who planted seed and then watched it grow:



"The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come" (Mark 4:28,29).

These parables all teach that things change over time, whether for good or bad, and that eventually there comes a time of reckoning when the quantity and quality of the crop can be determined. Jesus said explicitly that the harvest in his parables represented the end of the age (Matthew 13:39), so the idea of sowing and reaping as a parable of life "in Christ" had been well established before Paul used it. One key point of this particular theme is that changes take time to accomplish and it is not always apparent whether something that has started well will last the course. Grain goes through several

stages before the growth cycle is complete – first the blade, then the ear and then the full grain which, when it has ripened, can be harvested. It is the same in our spiritual development. New ideas are sown in our minds and it takes a while before they take root and even longer before they are strong enough in our minds to change the way we behave.

❖ The Resurrection Harvest

The apostle Paul used the idea of fruit progressing and maturing over time, when he described what the resurrection body will be like. In the last chapter we looked at some of his careful reasoning in 1 Corinthians chapter 15 and you may have read the whole chapter at the time. If not, this is a good time to read it, for Paul sets himself this question to answer:

“Someone will ask, ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?’” (1 Corinthians 15:35)

He answers it by talking about the process of sowing and reaping and while doing so compares and contrasts the state we are in now with the condition that awaits all who are accounted worthy to be given the gift of eternal life:

“You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body” (15:36-38).

Seeing the two contrasting positions in the form of a table might make it clearer, but there is no real substitute for reading the passage.

1 Cor 15 verse:	How we are in this life	How we will be in the life to come
42	What is sown is perishable	... what is raised is imperishable
43	it is sown in dishonour ... in weakness	... it is raised in glory ... in power
44	It is sown a natural body	... it is raised a spiritual body
48	As was the man of dust (Adam), so also are those who are of the dust	... as is the man of heaven (Jesus), so also are those who are of heaven
49	as we have borne the image of the man of dust	... we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven
50-52	flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable	We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed
53	this perishable body	... must put on the imperishable
53-54	and this mortal body	... must put on immortality

Paul is describing a process of change and development which results in an outcome very different from things at the present time. The perishable becomes imperishable; the natural becomes spiritual; the earthly becomes heavenly and the mortal becomes immortal. It will all come to fruition at the return to earth of Jesus Christ and the sounding of the last trumpet. Then, as we learned from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, the dead who are raised and the living who remain will be caught up together to meet the Lord, before their appearance at the judgement seat, and the giving of immortality.

Take careful note of what we just did, as it is another step in understanding the Bible for yourself. We have just looked in detail at 1 Corinthians 15, verses 42-54, and have seen the contrast that Paul makes between the two states, before and after the resurrection process. Earlier we looked at 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 in similar detail and listed our findings from that passage. Now we have just brought those two pieces of information together to get a more complete picture. That’s how the Bible conveys God’s message. It is not organised into topics, so that if you want to find out about life after death, for example, you just look up pages 25-35. You have to search out the full picture by reading it all and fitting what you have learned together, a bit like a jigsaw puzzle. That’s why Jesus said:

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened” (Matthew 7:7,8); and

“He who has ears, let him hear” (Matthew 13:43).

❖ God’s Prerogative

Immortality is the most wonderful reward God can give us, provided we are to live forever in a happy and fulfilling environment. Nobody wants to live forever in misery and constant unhappiness. But who decides who will live and who will die, and what right have they to make such vital and far-reaching decisions? That’s the issue the apostle now addresses, as he continues with his Letter to the Romans, in chapter 9. First he refers to God’s purpose with the nation of Israel and says that he is grief-stricken that they rejected Christ. But, he explains, they could never have been saved simply as a result of their natural descent from Abraham.

By nature we are all descended from Adam and we have already thought a lot about what that means – not only are we dying creatures, we are by nature inclined towards pleasing ourselves rather than God. We need a new nature: rebirth by water (in baptism) and by the Spirit (both in the development of a spiritual mind and eventually by resurrection to a new life in a ‘spiritual body’). This has been the same all through history, including that of the nation of Israel. Although God made it a special nation, it was necessary for the Jews to seek out God’s salvation by believing His promises. This is how Paul explains it:

*“It is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’ **This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring**” (Romans 9:6-8).*

He goes on to explain that, as salvation is God’s free gift, one which nobody could ever earn, it is God’s prerogative to decide who can inherit eternal life and who cannot. He uses the figure of a potter moulding clay and says that the clay has no right to complain to the potter what it becomes – whether a vase for public display or a pot for use only in the kitchen:



“Who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is moulded say to its moulder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honoured use and another for dishonourable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory?” (Romans 9:20-23).

There are some complicated arguments here about those whom God chooses and those He rejects which need not trouble us at the moment. The key thing to note is that God can do what He pleases because He is the Creator, and has complete sovereignty over His creation. He offers the same thing to all those who believe His promises and choose to obey His commandments. Those who decline will suffer “destruction”, while those who respond will be rewarded with “the riches of his glory”.

❖ “The riches of his glory”

When we come across a new idea like this one – the glory of God – we need a technique to work out what it means. By far the best method is to let Scripture interpret Scripture, rather than just looking to see what other people think it means, and there are two helpful principles we can apply.

- ✓ The first is to look at the immediate context, especially how the writer in question uses the word.
- ✓ The second is to track the development of the word or phrase through the Bible and see how it grows in meaning as different events are referred to.

Reading carefully, using cross-references in a Bible or looking things up in a Concordance, will help with both those things. For example, this is how the apostle uses that expression in Romans:

Romans	Word Study: "Glory"
1:23	exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles
2:7,10	to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; but glory and honour and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek
3:23	all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God
5:2	Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God
8:18	I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us
8:21	the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God
9:23	in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory
11:36	For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.
16:27	to the only wise God be glory for evermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.

From this it is clear that "glory" is quite an important idea in the apostle's thinking. It is:

➤ **an attribute of the immortal God –**

☞ God is glorious and majestic in all His ways – He is the "God of glory" (Romans 1:23; Acts 7:2);

➤ **something that we should give to God –**

☞ When we give God thanks and praise we are giving God glory and honour (Romans 16:27; Revelation 14:17);

➤ **something He is going to share with His creation, when He makes them free and shares with them the riches of His glory –**

☞ But how do we get to share in, or reflect, the glory of God in the way the apostle says will happen?

❖ **Sharing God's Glory**

From the immediate context in Romans we have narrowed down the question considerably. Using our second principle, we can now look at other parts of Scripture to find an answer. Here are some pointers:

1 God's creation displays His glory, for the Psalmist says: "The heavens declare the **glory of God**, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork" (Psalm 19:1). This is the equivalent of what we have already discovered in Romans, that "his invisible attributes, namely, **his eternal power and divine nature**, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made" (Romans 1:20).

2 When God rescued His people from Egypt He showed them His glory in several different ways:

- a It was in the form of a devouring fire which appeared upon Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:17);
- b Sometimes the glory appeared in a cloud (Exodus 16:10);
- c Once Moses asked to be shown God's glory and was given an explanation – it was an expression of the nature and character of Almighty God.

❖ “Show me your Glory”

God had promised Moses that He would stay with His people and finish what He had started with them. So Moses asked if God would reveal something more about the sort of God He was, hence the request he made: “*Please show me your glory*” (Exodus 33:8). God explained that His nature is such that Moses could not behold Him and live, so He put Moses in a safe place and he heard this exposition of what the glory of God really meant:

“The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.’ And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshipped” (Exodus 34:6-8).

This is a very important explanation of what God's glory really means for us. Those who are privileged to receive God's gift of immortality in the age to come are to be made like the Lord Jesus Christ – to “*bear the image of the man from heaven*”; their bodies are to become “*spiritual*”, “*imperishable*” and “*immortal*” (1 Corinthians 15:42-54). But as they are also to be “*raised in glory*”, and as God will make known to them “*the riches of his glory*” (Romans 9:23), we now know what that means.

The *character* of those who are to be raised to glory will be like that of Almighty God. By *nature*, they too will be merciful and gracious, patient, loving, faithful and forgiving. There is to be an inner transformation as well as a bodily one; a mental and moral one as well as a physical one. It is not only that death will have no power over them: henceforth they will be untroubled by sinful thoughts, temptations, or any inclinations of that sort. They will be equal to the angels and just as untouchable by sin.

From the very beginning God wanted a race of people who would be like that. He wanted a world that would be inhabited by people who would honour Him and who would share His values and virtues. It has taken a long time and a huge initiative on God's part to achieve that objective, but now the opportunity exists because of His saving work, accomplished through Jesus. This glorious outcome is possible and we can be part of it. This is what God has declared at various times as His purpose has been revealed step-by-step:

*“But truly, as I live, and as **all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD ...**”* (Numbers 14:21);

*“Blessed be his glorious name forever; **may the whole earth be filled with his glory!**”* (Psalm 72:19)

*“For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it empty, **he formed it to be inhabited!**): ‘I am the Lord, and there is no other ... **In the LORD all the offspring of Israel shall be justified and shall glory**”* (Isaiah 45:18,25);

*“So they shall fear the name of the LORD from the west, and his **glory** from the rising of the sun; for he will come like a rushing stream, which the wind of the LORD drives. ‘And **a Redeemer will come to Zion**, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression,’ declares the LORD”* (Isaiah 59:19,20);

*“For **the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD** as the waters cover the sea”* (Habakkuk 2:14);

*“After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and **the earth was made bright with his glory**”* (Revelation 18:1);

*“I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, **the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.** He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.’ And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘**Behold, I am making all things new**”* (Revelation 21:3-5).

These passages combine to give us an overview of the purpose of God. He formed the earth with the intention of having it inhabited and will remake the earth into a glorious habitation for His people. That will require a lot of changes to the way things are now organised, not just to the political system but to the way people think and behave. That's why it's important for us to change now, so that we can be ready for all the changes that God will make when the Lord Jesus Christ returns to rule as king.

❖ **Earth not Heaven**

People have become confused about their true nature, and no longer realise they are mortal. In the same way, there is widespread confusion about the place where God will give His promised reward to the faithful when they have been raised to glory. People just assume that the Bible promises heavenly bliss, without realising that the Bible describes that happy state as something that is coming from heaven to earth, when the Lord Jesus returns as king. Think about these verses:

*"For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD **shall inherit the land**. In just a little while, the wicked will be no more; though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there. But **the meek shall inherit the land** and delight themselves in abundant peace" (Psalm 37:9-11);*

*"The heavens are the LORD's heavens, but **the earth he has given to the children of man**" (Psalm 115:16);*

*"For the upright **will inhabit the land**, and those with integrity will remain in it, but the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the treacherous will be rooted out of it" (Proverbs 2:21,22);*

*"If the righteous is **repaid on earth**, how much more the wicked and the sinner!" (Proverbs 11:31);*

*"Blessed are the meek, **for they shall inherit the earth**" (Matthew 5:5);*

*"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. **Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven**" (Matthew 6:9,10);*

*"In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, **I will come again** and will take you to myself, **that where I am you may be also**" (John 14:2,3);*

*"The promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be **heir of the world** did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith" (Romans 4:13);*

*"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, **coming down out of heaven from God**, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, '**Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God**'" (Revelation 21:1-3);*

*"You have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and **they shall reign on the earth**" (Revelation 5:10).*

It is exactly this outcome that the apostle Paul has in mind when he says that the earth is awaiting its freedom, to realise its true potential. That will be achieved only when the resurrection of the dead takes place:

"We know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:22,23).

❖ **God's Rescue Plan**

The present problems that now confront people on earth – including matters such as global warming, rising sea levels, changing climatic conditions and a polluted environment – are in fact the birthpangs of a new age. At a time just like this – when the earth is facing massive problems due to human mismanagement – God will intervene to rescue the position and to direct matters to a much happier outcome. He is going to fill the earth with His glory by sending His Son to earth to take control. The resurrection of the dead will then take place and those who are found faithful will be made immortal: thereafter they will live to give God glory and honour and praise and they will do so in every aspect of their new lives.

The Book of Revelation – the last book in the Bible – was given to explain what would happen up to and including the return of Jesus to earth. It announces at the beginning that it is:

*“... from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. **Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen**” (Revelation 1:5-7).*

Notice that there will be people who are sorry to see Jesus return. Indeed, we learn from other Scriptures that there will be those who challenge and oppose him when he comes. Jesus is coming to rescue the world and to save all those men and women who have prepared for that great event. It will be judgement time for the earth when mankind is called to account for the way in which God’s earth has been despoiled and mismanaged.

*“Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, **‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.’** And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying, ‘We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for **you have taken your great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth**’” (Revelation 11:15-18).*

❖ God’s Kingdom is Coming

When Jesus comes to take control of the earth and to rule for God – when he comes to “*rule the world in righteousness*” – he will establish a new society on earth which Scripture calls the Kingdom of God. God’s immortal saints will live in this kingdom, at peace with one another and with God. Lots of word pictures are given in the Scriptures about the sort of life that will then exist. It will be hugely advantageous for the nations of the world to have a righteous government ruled over by a just and upright king, who will care for them and protect them from all harm. This kingdom is to last for a thousand years at the end of which those who have lived as mortals in that age will themselves be subject to judgement and will be given the chance to become immortal.

We have already seen that the Lord Jesus Christ is to rule as the world’s future King, but we have not yet collected information about the sort of king he will be; what his kingdom will be like; and what powers he will exercise to ensure his rulership is both supreme and sublime. This is where regular Bible reading is really helpful, for it is not that easy to track down the many descriptions that exist just by looking for key words or phrases. We will look at that in the next chapter.

But there is one thing that may have been worrying you as we have considered the promised reward. Is it right to be thinking about a reward at all? Shouldn’t we just follow the Lord Jesus and obey the commandments of God for their own sake, without any thought of what we get out of it, and just trust in the mercy and grace of God?

❖ God Rewards the Faithful

The disciples once asked Jesus outright what they would get for following him and he gave them an equally straight answer. Here’s the exchange:

*“Peter said in reply, ‘See, we have left everything and followed you. **What then will we have?**’ Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life’” (Matthew 19:27-29).*



Jesus was quite clear about it. If we make the effort in this life and do what is right in God’s sight, there will be a hundredfold reward – God will give us back far more than we can ever give to Him. He has always worked on that principle. In early days He encouraged those who responded to His bidding by giving them a reward; for example:

- ✓ **Abraham** was a very wealthy man, and God told him that was a reward for his faithfulness (Genesis 15:1). At that time part of the reward God gave was material prosperity, but later the blessings on offer were seen to be spiritual blessings – the forgiveness of sins, a hope of new life, the companionship of other believers, and suchlike.
- ✓ The **Psalmist** said that for keeping God’s commandments: “*there is great reward*” (19:11);

- ✓ The prophet **Isaiah** said that when the King comes, “Behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him” (40:10; 62:11);
- ✓ **Jesus** said that those who are persecuted in this life need not fear, for he will bring their reward at his Coming: “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:12);
- ✓ The apostle **Paul** said: “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ” (Colossians 3:23,24);
- ✓ The unnamed writer of the **Letter to the Hebrews** said this: “without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Hebrews 11:6).

So, whilst we have thought of the judgement seat of Christ as a place where the just will be separated from the unjust, where some will receive everlasting life and others “shame and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:2), it is also to be considered as that time and place when God will reward believers in all ages who have faithfully followed His Word and have lived their lives accordingly. And the many pictures of the coming Kingdom of God are given so that we can look forward with keen expectation to that day when a king will reign once again at Jerusalem and God’s kingdom will have been restored.

Things to Read

-  It’s time to look at some Scriptures about the coming Kingdom of God. Look at Isaiah chapters 2 and 11, to learn about the important position of Jerusalem in the future (as a centre of world government) and the qualities of the king who will reign from there.
-  Read the account of the disciples asking Jesus about the reward they could expect in Mark chapter 10 and notice how Jesus said that there would be blessings and benefits for his followers both in this life and in the life to come.

Questions to Answer

- 19.1 If you ask people to show you where the Bible promises that you go to heaven when you die, the only passage they usually offer is John 14:1-6. Read the passage and then work out what it actually teaches.
- 19.2 What do you understand Psalm 146 to teach about life after death? Does it tell us anything about God’s coming kingdom?