

## Kingdom Thinking: Rewards for a Life of Faith

Nothing in the word of God is quite as startling as the fact that God pays "wages" for services rendered. In other words, God pays us to be good. So, radical an idea encounters all kinds of obstacles in the mind of the Christian. One immediately wonders, "What happened to grace?" Or, "how can rewards make a difference in heaven?" Perhaps some will think with false modesty, "I haven't done anything that would merit a reward." However, in spite of all these possible obstacles and objections, the word of God is very clear about its teaching on the subject of "wages" or "rewards." The purpose of this short study is to define what the Scriptures teach on the subject, to examine the pervasiveness of the concept, and to draw some implications for the life of faith of the individual Christian.

### The First Occurrence

When a student is attempting to study an individual word or concept, it is often helpful to examine the first usage of the word or the first occurrence of the concept in the Bible. Such an opportunity presents itself in the case of the first occurrence of the word for "reward" in the Scriptures. The word appears in Genesis 15:1. The context for this passage is what is commonly called "the battle of the kings." Abram and his 318 retainers had gone out to battle to rescue his nephew Lot who had been taken captive. They had accomplished their mission and were in the process of dividing the booty from the battle. In Genesis 14:17 the reader sees that the king of Sodom and the other kings allied with him were in the process of going out to meet with Abram and the returning victorious band. Nevertheless, the narrative is interrupted with the appearance of the king-priest Melchizedek. He brings the elements of what we later understand to be a covenant meal and shares them with Abram and his party. He also pronounces a blessing upon him in the name of "the Most High God, the Possessor of heaven and earth". Then he mentions to Abram that this God most High was the one who "delivered your enemies into your hand."

Now it is easy to overlook the connection to Genesis 12:3, but it is certainly there. To be cursed by the Most High God is the same thing a suffering defeat especially here in the military realm. The five kings allied with Chedorlaomer had attacked Abram and his relative Lot and thus put the curse into operation. It is safe to say that 12:1 should be translated as a past perfect and we should read, "Now the Lord had said to Abram..." In other words, Abram had a covenant relationship with God even before he left Ur of the Chaldees. This writer believes that Abram had a suzerain-

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vassal treaty or relationship with God even before he left Ur. Stephen says in Acts 7:2 "The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia..." Now a standard happening in the Old Testament is that there is always a divine appearance when a covenant is being established or renewed. Therefore, it seems apparent that the so-called covenant in Genesis 12:1-3 is a recapitulation of a transaction that occurred many years earlier.

As a result of the fact that Abram was in covenant with God Most High, and because God had just prior given him a notable victory, Abram gives Melchizedek a tithe of all the spoils. The tithe is one of the most significant ways in the OT milieu that a vassal could demonstrate loyalty to the suzerain. However, there is a proverbial fly in the ointment in this situation. The King of Sodom offers Abram a share of the spoils. Abram has the opportunity to get rich quick at the hands of an earthly king, one of questionable morals. To Abram's credit, he refuses a share of the spoils and asserts that he had taken an oath of loyalty to the Lord, the Most High God, Possessor of heaven and earth." More than likely, he had been reminded of the oath by the appearance of Melchizedek.

Therefore, in order to be faithful to the relationship already established Abram refuses the opportunity for earthly enrichment. After he had done that, he may have had second thoughts. However to encourage him to live by faith, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision saying "Do not be afraid, Abram. (Why?) (Because) I am your Shield. (Another suzerain title in accordance with the Assyrian treaty documents) Your reward shall be very great." The scope of the reward is not mentioned here but we can imagine that if God is the Possessor of heaven and earth, then the scope of the reward is only limited by the extent of what God possesses. Do we see a hint here of what Paul explicitly states in Romans 4? "For the promise that Abraham would be the heir of the world..." It is apparent that Abram understood what the Lord was offering since he replied, "Lord God, what will you give me, seeing I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" What is intriguing in this response is the fact that both REWARD and INHERITANCE are closely linked in their first occurrence in Scripture.

Therefore, in the first occurrence of the concept "reward" we draw the following insights. First, a reward is granted in the context of a covenant relationship. Second, a reward is granted based on a significant act of

faith or loyalty in terms of the covenant requirement. Thirdly, the concept of reward and inheritance are closely linked in their first occurrence in Scripture. Fourthly, the concept of reward based on divine promises frustrates the desires for worldly enrichment. Fifthly, the scope of the reward can be as great as the possessions of the Most High God, Possessor of heaven and earth.

### A Working Definition of Reward

When we turn to Numbers 18:31, we are in the midst of tabernacle instructions and worship. Of course, the Levites who performed spiritual activities had to be supplied physically with nourishment. So a tithing and offering system was put into place. The whole section in Numbers 18:25-32 describes the tithes and the gifts that were designated for the Levites. We read in 18:31 "You may eat of it (tithes and offerings) in any place, you and your households (Levitical). For it is your "reward" or "wages" for your work in the tent of the meeting. The main point here is that the Levites received MATERIAL BENEFITS IN EXCHANGE FOR SPIRITUAL SERVICE. This is one of the best operational definitions. When the Bible talks about rewards it is talking about giving believers material benefits in the future earthly kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ in exchange for a life of faith spent here on earth. This life of faith will include all sorts of good works because a believer knows that this is the purpose for which he/she has been saved (Ephesians 2:10). Notice we did not say that rewards pertain to heaven. In addition, we did not say that rewards pertain to this life, although at times there are temporal benefits for living an obedient, faithful life. However, many times believers are called to suffer and be rejected in imitation of their Lord. One more comment is appropriate here in the Book of Numbers. The writer links the concept of inheritance (18:26) and reward (18:31). We can see again that the two terms have the same semantic range.

### A New Testament Usage

Although it is not the main point of this article, this author believes that Biblical covenants fall only in three categories. The first of these is the suzerain-vassal model. This is equivalent to a treaty between nations of unequal strength. Whoever had the hegemony in the Ancient Near East could impose his will and his treaty upon minor kingdoms that did not have the military power to oppose the Great King. Sometimes, it was Pharaoh,

the king of Egypt; other times it was the king of the Hittites; at other times it was either the king of Babylon or the king of Assyria. In any case, there was always a treaty document in existence governing the terms of the relationship. It was thought to be impossible to have any sort of relationship in the Ancient Near East, especially between nations, without a covenant in place. When the Biblical writers wanted to describe the relationship between God and His people, they seized on this model of international politics with certain modifications. Now in the opinion of this author, the Adamic, the Noahic, the Sinai, and the New Covenant fall into this category.

Second, while serving under the terms of a suzerain-vassal relationship there was always the possibility that the faithful vassal could receive a covenant of grant. The Great King granted this in response to the vassal's faithful service. In modern parlance, we would say that the vassal performed beyond the call of duty. In the Scripture, the covenants that fall into this category are the Abrahamic, the Davidic, and the Levitical.

I want to develop these in more detail in another article.

Third, there was always the possibility of a parity covenant or a covenant between equals. This is demonstrated in the Scriptures in the case of Hiram of Lebanon and Solomon of Israel. Because of their trade agreements, they had a parity covenant in place to govern their relationship.

Therefore, assuming that the New Covenant is a suzerain vassal covenant whereby the one who lives by faith can participate in the blessings of Abraham, we find an interesting statement in Colossians 3:24. Paul says to the Colossians, "Whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men (causal participle) knowing that from the Lord you will receive the REWARD consisting of (reflects the nature of the genitive) the INHERITANCE." This astounding statement governs the believer in even the secular workplace. The Lord apparently is interested in the pursuit of excellence as something having testimony value wherever His people are found. Again, we see the persistent pattern that reward and inheritance are semantically linked.

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## The Pervasiveness of the Concept of Reward

The New Testament writings talk a great deal about the idea of rewards. Possibly, one of the reasons why this area has been so neglected is because the idea of reward appears under a number of figures of speech. For example, the first and the most widespread concept is the word "*misthos*" which may be translated "reward" or "wages". The Book of Matthew uses this term the most. At Matthew 5:42 Jesus says that people who respond to persecution properly will receive a great reward. Of course, it is understood that this suffering is for the sake of righteousness, not any old suffering. Furthermore, Jesus said that if we do not pray for our persecutors and bless those who curse us, we would not be in line for a reward. (5:46) In Matthew 6:1, 2, 5, and 16 the reader is told that the various practices of almsgiving, prayer, fasting and forgiveness are all practices that lead to reward. In addition, Matthew changes the figure to "treasures in heaven" when Jesus begins to discuss our attitude toward money and giving. That discussion about finances runs all the way from 6:19-6:34. Lastly, in Matthew 10:41-42 the reader is promised a reward is he is receptive to anyone bringing the message of the kingdom.

## The Parable in Matthew 20:1-28

One of the most fascinating usages in Matthew of the concept of "wages" or "rewards" is found in the parable in Matthew 20:1-28. The word for "reward" is actually used in Matthew 20:8 although here it is translated "wages." The context in the preceding chapter is the very familiar story of the rich young ruler. In 19:21, Jesus states the principle that whatever is given away in this life to God or to others will produce treasure in heaven. Further, he explains that rewards are contingent upon discipleship. He tells the young man that if he really wants to be blameless (a covenant term meaning "whole hearted") then he must give away his many possessions to the poor and make a positive commitment to follow Christ. This requirement the young man was unwilling to do because his possessions were his real god and the source of his security. Thus he was a violator of the first commandment and had placed other gods in the place of the only true God. He was unwilling to give it away in view of the promise that will come later in this section. In other words, he was unwilling to live by faith.

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Now we would not understand what was going on here if Peter had not spoken up. It is obvious that Peter knows what was going on with the rich young man. To paraphrase in Matthew 19:27, Peter asks, "Lord we have left everything and followed you. What's in it for us?" Jesus' answer is very clear. Whenever His kingdom would be established, then the Apostles would share in His rule over the restored nations of Israel. Future thrones are promised for present sacrificial service.

However, a warning is sounded in Matthew 19:30. "But many who are first shall be last and the last (shall be) first." This almost sounds like Matthew 5:19. Therefore, the parable is included in 20:1-18 explaining how it is that the proverbial saying will come true. We know this to be the case since there is a literary enclosure with 20:16 where the same words are repeated.

Jesus starts this parable in verse one with an explanatory "for". This parable is an explanation of the preceding proverbial statement. We are told that the future kingdom of heaven is like a landowner that arose early (literally *at dawn*) for hiring workers for his vineyard. It should not stretch the imagination to view the landowner as God the Father. His purpose is to produce fruit. However, he has delegated the responsibility to men and women to care for the vineyard that is the believing community. Initially this purpose to produce fruit was governed by a contract. When verse 2 says, "he agreed with the laborers for a denarius" we again are in the realm of covenants and contracts. However, we realize from other study of Scripture that the contract was not effective in bringing forth the fruit God desired. The problem was not in the contract but with the OT people of God who constantly fell back under the power of sin.

Notice that when the landowner comes out again in verses 3 through 8, the contract is not mentioned. The individuals are hired based simply on their trust in the promise of the landowner. "Whatever is right you will receive." These various groups from the third to the eleventh hour are hired solely on the basis of their faith in the character of the landowner.

Of course, for any day laborer, payment was at the end of the day. The landowner calls the steward (a figure for the Lord Jesus Christ) and tells him to pay them in reverse order. The last hired worker was to be paid first. The amazing thing in this scene is that the worker who worked only one hour is paid a full day's wage. That is almost a ratio of twelve to one.

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The contrasting group raises a complaint. It says that they "murmured" against the landowner. Any reader familiar with the OT wanderings in the wilderness would immediately recognize this motif as like the rebellion by the children of Israel. In suzerain-vassal terminology, murmuring is always a sign, rebellion, or unbelief. However, since the group had approached God based on law and not grace, they did not have any basis to bring a charge against God. All He had to do was bring out the contract and prove that He was not breaking it. Interestingly, the landowner uses the term "Friend" in this context. To be a friend of the landowner or as Abraham was called to be a "friend of God" is to make a statement of future kingdom position. In Hellenistic time to be a "friend of the king" was to be honored by the king for loyalty and entrusted with his authority. (See 1<sup>st</sup> Maccabees 2:18; 3:38; 10:65; 3d Maccabees 4:23) In the early Roman Empire, the "friends of Augustus" were a well-known society. The coins of Herod Agrippa I frequently bear the inscription PHILOKAISAR meaning "a friend of Caesar."

Therefore, the landowner tells the Friend to go his way and to take what is his. Can we possibly see here a distinction between "being in the kingdom" and ruling in the kingdom?" The last man is paid what is right and allowed to remain in the presence of the landowner. In verse 15 we see the principle of law and grace in operation. The landowner says "Is it not lawful for me to do what I want with my own things? This is a rhetorical question with the semantic force of giving a reason. We could express it as "The reason why I can tell you to take what is yours (the denarius) and go your way is because it is lawful for me to do what I want with my own things." Then the second question would be stated as an imperative. "You should not be greedy for gain because I am generous." In my understanding, the abstract word "good" should be translated with the nuance "generous." So which would you rather have, a reward based on law or a reward based on grace? The moral of the parable is presented in verse 16. Those who are invited last in time, which we understand to be the church made up of Jews and Gentiles, will have precedence of place in the kingdom to come.

### The Usage in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians

The language of reward is very popular with the Apostle Paul in the Book of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians. In chapter 3:8-17 the doctrine of rewards is presented under the figure of a new temple construction. The foundation stone of

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course is the doctrine of Christ, both His person and His work. However, ministers such as Apollos in the immediate context are called upon to build upon the foundation doctrine of Christ. However, there always seems to be the possibility of going astray doctrinally in the New Testament. Therefore, every pastor-teacher must be careful how he builds because his work in the form of teaching and doctrine will be tested by fire. Notice the key phrase in 3:13 "of what sort it is". "If any man's work endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss (of kingdom reward). But he himself will be saved yet so as by fire." The issue that determines reward here is the nature of the works not the quantity.

Chapter 9 of Corinthians pursues this idea. The concept of reward is presented in this chapter using three different words. In 9:18 Paul uses the idea of reward; in 9:23 presents the idea of being a "partaker" of the gospel; and in 9:24 he uses the idea of the "prize." In 9:18 he refuses his right to be paid for his services in order to receive an reward; in 9:23 he renounces his rights to live any way he wants to so that he can share in the future benefits of the Gospel; finally in 9:24 he denies his body the desire to self-gratify and maintains a strict self-discipline in order that he might gain the prize of the Christian life which is co-rulership with Christ.

### John's Writings

The issue of reward is in John's writings in many ways tied to your understanding of "eternal life". As a result, it is better discussed in other articles on this site. However, the idea of "wages" or "reward" is not entirely absent from John's writings. In John 4:36, Jesus says, "He who reaps receives wages and gathers fruit (resulting in) eternal life, so that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together." It seems apparent here that people who proclaim the truth of the Gospel will receive wages as well as those who bring in the harvest. The reward in this case is the mutual joy and celebration shared in by both the sower and the reapers. In the Epistles of John, 2:8 warns against doctrinal heresy that leads the believers to receive less than a full reward. In the Book of Revelation in 11:8 and 22:12, the promise of a reward is mentioned. It is a sobering thought that the last verse of the Bible mentions the fact that the Lord will be bringing His reward with Him when He returns.

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## Crowns

In discussing the issue of crowns, what is so often overlooked is that crowns imply some sort of domain to rule over. 1 Corinthians 9:25 already mentioned the idea of the victor's crown that is awarded to the individual that finishes the race. In 2d Timothy 2:8, Paul argues that there will be a crown of righteousness waiting for him. Christ will award this to him at the Day of Judgment. However, the promise is extended as well to everyone that looks forward to his appearing. We should understand his "appearing" to be referring to His appearing on the Day of Rapture that essentially is the Day of Judgment for the body of Christ. In James 1:12 the crown is promised to those who endure testing for the faith. James expands that promise as well to everyone who "loves" Him. This love is a commanded love and is measured by our willingness to obey. In 1<sup>st</sup> Peter, we have the remarkable elders' crown. Elders who have served faithfully will receive that crown. This crown is issued for willing rather than constrained service; for motivation based on others things than money (all elders were likely paid); for limited use of authority over fellow believers but extensive influence by example. All these ideas suggest that the concept of reward is extensively used in the New Testament.

## Show Me the Money

Jesus surprisingly spoke more about money than any other issue of the Christian life. One of the key parables dealing with this issue is found in the Gospel of Luke. It is the familiar parable of the minas found in Luke 19:11-27. The parable was apparently told in the house of Zaccheus, the tax collector, who had come to faith in Christ while having the Master dine with him. As a result, he makes a faith statement. He declares that he was giving half of his goods to the poor and refunding any funds he had received in a fraudulent manner. Jesus then announces to all who were there that the reason that Zaccheus was doing this was because he was indeed a son of Abraham. We know from Galatians 3:24 that to be a son of Abraham was to be a person of faith. Zaccheus was willing to part with his income the same way that Abraham was willing to part with his son Isaac, believing that the funds given up in the present would ultimately come back in the future kingdom.

Therefore, to encourage Zaccheus in his new walk of faith, Jesus offered the audience the parable in 19:11-27. Notice the following things about

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this parable. First of all the coming of the kingdom of the Messiah was not to be in agreement with popular expectation. Jesus told the parable to alert his audience and present day readership that the kingdom of God was not going to appear at His first coming. The popular expectation was that "the kingdom of God" would appear immediately. This expectation was heightened since they were near Jerusalem. However, Jesus wanted to warn about the delay of the kingdom.

Secondly, in the parable proper we observe that each of the servants received the same amount. Likewise, each of us has received equally the PROMISE TO RULE AND REIGN WITH CHRIST. That is the right of the firstborn sons, to rule the household when they inherit it. The only difference in this parable between the servants is the amount of effort the individual believers put forth. The most energetic servant had produced a ten-fold increase on the initial investment the king had made in his life. Notice the word "faithful" is used by the returning king in his evaluation. He is given a ruling share in the kingdom for cities. The next servant to be evaluated had produced a five-fold return for the king. He is granted five cities but no words of commendation that accompany the grant of ruling authority. Apparently, he did not work as hard as he could have. Finally, the parable comes to the very familiar third servant who has nothing to show for the king's investment in his life. All he can do is make lame excuses. The latter part of verse 19:22 should be translated as a question. Literally, it says, "You knew that I was an austere man, collecting what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow, did you? (Assuming that is true for the sake of argument) then why did you not put money in the bank that I might have collected it with interest."

Thirdly, the reader notices that the two faithful servants receive rulership grants over specific cities. These words only make sense in view of a future earthly kingdom.

Fourthly, the disobedient servant loses the possibility of ruling over any city. That privilege is taken away based on his unfaithfulness and given to the one who was most faithful.

Lastly, a third group does not want the reign of God in their lives at all. These are designated "the enemies of the King." Some interpreters would argue that the unfaithful servant was not even a believer at all. There is nothing in the parable to support that position. In fact, the existence of the third group prevents that interpretation. It is better to let the text speak for

itself and view the issue as a matter of faithfulness in this case expressed in terms of money.

### The Argument of the Book of Hebrews

This largely misunderstood book is the capstone of the teaching of kingdom rewards in the New Testament. Without developing all the background for this fascinating book, it is enough to say that the issue being considered is APOSTASY. In this instance, there is a danger of falling away from the apostolic faith and rejoining sectarian Judaism. To combat this possibility the writer says some interesting things.

The author gives us a key interpretive clue in 2:5 where he says, "For he has not put the world to come, of which we are speaking, in subjection to angels." In other words, we are in this book reading about a future experience. This world to come will be ruled over by a king of God's choosing. This of course we realize to be Jesus Christ at His Second Coming. However, the king of the world to come has royal companions. He will not rule alone. These companions are first mentioned in 1:9. Now to be a Royal Companion is not small thing. The Companions constituted the Royal Bodyguard who rode with Alexander the Great when he went into battle. The title is also found in the writings of Suetonius when he writes about Julius Caesar, Augustus Caesar, and Titus Caesar. As mentioned above an equivalent title was to be named "A Friend of the King".

Apparently, this companionship can be lost. The same word found in 1:9 is also found in 3:1 where the NKJV translators have used "partakers". This is elaborated to be "partakers of a heavenly vocation." In other words to be a partaker of the heavenly vocation is to rule the world to come in fellowship with the anointed king of God's choosing. Now how can this companionship be lost? In 3:14 we are told that we are "partakers" IF WE HOLD FAST THE BEGINNING OF OUR CONFIDENCE STEADFAST UNTIL THE END (of our lives or of this age). We are told the same thing in 10:35. "Therefore do not cast away your confidence which has a great REWARD."

Next, we are told in 11:26 that Moses was willing to give up the treasures of Egypt because he was looking to the REWARD that he would receive. The reward is closely related to the city mentioned in 11:16. Finally, we

are told in 12:28 that we are in the process of receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken. The condition for receiving that kingdom is that we hold fast to grace. Grace in this instance is a term almost synonymous with the New Covenant. The opposite would be to go back to some form of law.

### Conclusion

This completes a short study of the doctrine of rewards in Scripture. The following conclusions are supported by the survey. First, the idea of rewards is substantial and pervasive in both the Old and New Testament. Secondly, there is a close relationship between the idea of rewards and the concept of future inheritance. It seems apparent that the inheritance is conditioned upon faith and obedience. Thirdly, the word of God talks far more about the future Messianic kingdom than it does about heaven itself. Once a person comes to faith in the death of Christ, heaven no longer becomes an issue. Fourthly, rewards are offered as motivations to believers' faith and obedience. There are times when pressure of enemy attacks or circumstances of life can so discourage faith that a believer may lapse into unbelief and stop living as a Christian. Lastly, rewards may be lost at the judgment seat of Christ if a man or woman of faith lapses into unbelief in the future promises of God. As we have seen in the verses studied, to lose one's reward is not a small thing because not all citizens have equal access to the king.