

1 Sermon, August 25, 2013

Texts: 2 Peter 3:9-18, Romans 5:17-21

Title: "The Rewards of Christian Faith: Eternal Life"

1. The most obvious reward, spoken of in scriptures
2. The one we know the least about
3. Grand reunion
4. Beautiful – no pain or tears
5. God wants everyone to be a part of it

1. The most obvious reward, spoken of in scriptures

This sermon series is based on the passage from Matthew, where Jesus notes that some people who have made a show of their religion have received their reward.

And if those who are hypocrites about religion have received their reward, that is recognition by people, the reward of following Jesus is something different.

The rewards of Christian faith are not showy, not for recognition by other human beings.

One of these rewards is the experience of Christian Community. Another is a new sense of self. Still another is the fruit of the Spirit. Today, I'll focus on the most obvious reward, which Jesus himself talked about – the reward of Eternal Life. Some Christians have spoken of death as going to an "eternal reward." While that exact phrase is not in the Bible, it is certainly a Biblical concept.

In Daniel 12:13, we read:

"But you, go your way, and rest; you shall rise for your reward at the end of the days." Daniel 12:13, NRSV.

Jesus himself said, in Matthew 10:

"Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward." Matthew 10:39-42, NRSV.

The reward follows living a life of righteousness, of truth-telling, and even giving a cup of water as a follower of Jesus.

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Yes, Jesus spoke of heaven as a reward for faithful living in the face of abuse and persecution:

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."
Matthew 5:11, 12, NRSV.

And in the Gospel of Luke:

"But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked." Luke 6:35, NRSV.

Colossians also tells us the reward of faithful living is eternal life:

"Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ." Colossians 3:23, 24, NRSV.

2. Not divorced from this life, but integrated with it

I would like you to notice that these passages connect our lives here with a life beyond.

Polycarp of Smyrna, one of the early church martyrs, wrote about 120 AD the following:

But He who raised Him up from the dead will raise up us also, if we do His will, and walk in His commandments, and love what He loved, keeping ourselves from all unrighteousness, covetousness, love of money, evil speaking, false witness; "not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing," or blow for blow, or cursing for cursing, but being mindful of what the Lord said in His teaching: "Judge not, that ye be not judged; forgive, and it shall be forgiven unto you; be merciful, that ye may obtain mercy; with what measure you give out, it shall be measured to you again; and once more, "Blessed are the poor, and those that are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of God."

Here is someone, just one generation removed from Jesus himself, writing and quoting Jesus' words in the gospels. And his message is one of both living a holy, joyous life and a promise of Christ raising us up to eternal life, if we do Christ's will.

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Now I want to tell you something that may challenge your way of thinking. We are so used to living in a modern system of thought where each action has its equal and opposite reaction. We are used to thinking of actions and consequences.

So we might interpret these passages in that way: We make some choices, and then God makes a choice about whether we're in or out.

But in the Bible and early church, it was a different way of thinking about things.

Heaven was not a matter of earning points in a kind of celestial reward system.

It's more like how most marathoners think about finishing the race. Most of the thousands of runners in the marathon do not aspire to be first across the finish line. They instead just want to finish the race.

The reward is finishing the race.

The marathon has its pain and difficulties, but there is joy in running, and joy in finishing the race.

Among those early Christians, the joy of following Christ was a reality that brought its own rewards. They were in it because of the confidence it gave them, because they were being renewed in the image of God, because they could see the works of God among them.

Those early Christians had full confidence of life eternal because it was not to begin later; they were living it in the *present moment*. They didn't need to set up a rational justification for eternal life because they were living it. It was a joy brought about because they lived with simplicity, patience, kindness and hope.

Today's reading from Romans gives us that sense:

If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ... so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Justification, which means to be put in right relationship with God, naturally leads to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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3. Grand reunion

There are a few other things evident in the scriptures about eternal life beyond death. First, it will be a grand reunion! It will continue the joy of faith in this life because we will be with those who have shared it with us. As Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians:

"For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever." 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17

That's a grand reunion!

Various passages in the book of Revelation speak poetically about this grand reunion. One of them is:

"After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" Revelation 7:9, 10, NRSV.

4. Beautiful – no pain or tears

A second thing evident about eternal life after death is that it will be beautiful. The descriptions in the book of Revelation are filled with precious stones, with gold, with a cooling stream and trees that bear fruit every month of the year.

The joy of following the Lord will continue in the life eternal, and it will be lovely.

Today's reading from second Peter tells of new heavens and a new earth, *where righteousness is at home*. That's a spiritual beauty.

5. God wants everyone to be a part of it

Lastly, what is evident about eternal life is that God wants everyone to be part of it. Yes, we will all come before the judgment seat of God, but it is God's desire that everyone eventually come into that promise of eternal life.

Second Corinthians tells us:

"All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their

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trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." 2 Corinthians 5:18, 19, NRSV.

God is, in Christ, reconciling the whole world to himself. Bringing the whole world toward God.

Today's reading from 2 Peter says:

"The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

Thanks be to God, whose desire is that we be transformed in this life, and in the next. Amen.

"The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed. Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen." 2 Peter 3:9-18, NRSV.

"If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Romans 5:17-21, NRSV.

"This temporal and brief suffering, how shall it be exchanged for the reward of a bright and eternal honor!" -- St. Cyprian of Carthage -- 3rd Century AD