

REWARDS

There are moments in every believer's life when faithfulness feels painfully unnoticed. We quietly obey. We choose integrity when compromise would be easier. We serve without recognition. We pray for people who never know our names. We resist temptation in private. Sometimes we cannot help but wonder, "Does any of this really matter?"

The world measures success by applause, influence, promotions, and recognition. Even as Christians, we can begin keeping score the same way. Yet Scripture reminds us that we are running for an entirely different audience. The only opinion that ultimately matters belongs to One Judge.

That truth is exactly where Paul takes us in 2 Corinthians 5. He writes, "We make it our aim to please Him." Think about that for a moment. Paul does not say we make it our aim to become successful, admired, or comfortable. He says our purpose is to please Christ. Why? Because every believer is moving toward the same destination. There is coming a day when every runner will cross the finish line and stand before Jesus Christ.

Not to determine whether we belong to Him. That question was settled forever at the cross. Salvation is by grace through faith. Our sin has already been judged in Christ. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

So why do we stand before Him?

Paul gives the answer in verse 10. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ."

The word translated "judgment seat" is the Greek word *bema*. For Paul's original readers, this word immediately brought a familiar picture to mind. After the Isthmian Games, victorious athletes did not receive their prizes on the track. They walked to a raised platform where the judges publicly honored the winners. This platform was called the Bema.

Imagine the scene. The race is over. The crowd is cheering. Years of discipline, sacrifice, and endurance have finally reached their conclusion. The victor's name is announced. He stepped onto the platform to receive his reward.

No athlete feared standing on the Bema if he had won the race. The Bema was not a place of condemnation. It was a place of honor. To stand there meant victory.

Paul intentionally borrows that image because every believer who finishes the race of faith will one day stand before Christ at His Bema. That alone is wonderful news.

Notice who Paul is writing to. He is writing to believers. In the verses leading up to this passage, he speaks about our future resurrection bodies and our eternal home with the Lord. The entire context is filled with hope and assurance. Then he says, "We must all appear."

Every believer. Every redeemed child of God. Every runner who belongs to Christ.

No one is excluded because this is not about entering heaven. It is about receiving what our gracious Savior desires to give His faithful servants.

Then Paul adds something deeply personal. "So that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil."

Did you notice those words, "each one"?

We will all stand before Christ together, yet we will each be evaluated individually.

There will come a day when your race is over. You will stand before the Lord who loved you enough to die for you. Your life will lie open before Him. Every act of obedience. Every unseen sacrifice. Every opportunity embraced or neglected. Every motive of the heart. Nothing done for Christ will be forgotten. Nothing offered in faithful love will ever be overlooked.

The One seated upon that judgment seat is not a distant official. He is your Savior. The very One who strengthened you to run is the One who now rewards your faithfulness.

Paul expands this picture in 1 Corinthians 3. He describes our lives as a building constructed upon the foundation of Jesus Christ. The foundation cannot be changed because Christ alone saves us. The question is not whether the building stands. The question is what we built upon that foundation.

Some works resemble gold, silver, and precious stones. Others resemble wood, hay, and straw. One day the fire of Christ's perfect evaluation will reveal the difference. Everything done for His glory will remain. Everything done for selfish ambition or empty pursuit will disappear. Salvation remains secure because the foundation is Christ, but rewards are connected to how faithfully we build upon that foundation.

Suddenly, the smallest acts of obedience become incredibly significant. A quiet prayer. An unseen sacrifice. A faithful witness. Patient endurance through suffering. Every choice made for Christ carries eternal value.

So what kinds of things does Jesus reward?

The New Testament answers that question by describing five crowns that Christ will bestow upon faithful believers. These crowns are far more than heavenly prizes. Each one reveals something about the heart of our King. Together, they show us what Jesus notices, what He delights in, and what He values as we run our race.

The first is the ****Imperishable Crown**** found in 1 Corinthians 9. Paul once again returns to the language of the athlete. Just as runners willingly discipline themselves for a temporary prize, believers are called to exercise spiritual discipline for an eternal one. This crown belongs to those who faithfully run the race God has given them. They pursue holiness. They refuse to quit. They choose obedience day after day, even when no one is watching. The Lord is not impressed by talent nearly as much as He is by faithfulness. Long after natural ability fades, steadfast obedience continues to delight His heart. Jesus rewards those who faithfully keep running.

The second is the ****Crown of Rejoicing**** described in 1 Thessalonians 2. Paul looked at the believers he had led to Christ and asked, "What is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus?" Then he answered his own question. "Is it not you?" This crown belongs to those who invest in the spiritual lives of others. Some proclaim the gospel from a platform. Others quietly disciple a child, faithfully teach a class, encourage a struggling believer, pray for a friend, or simply share Christ with a neighbor. Every believer has the privilege of pointing someone else toward Jesus. Nothing thrills the heart of God more than seeing sinners rescued and saints strengthened. One of the greatest joys of eternity may stand before Christ surrounded by people whose lives He changed through our simple acts of faithfulness. Jesus rewards those who spend their lives bringing others closer to Him.

The third is the **Crown of Righteousness** in 2 Timothy 4. As Paul neared the end of his own race, he declared that a crown of righteousness was waiting for him and for all who have loved Christ's appearing. This crown belongs to believers who eagerly long for the return of Jesus. They do not simply believe He is coming again. They live as though He could come today. That expectation shapes their priorities, their decisions, and their hopes. They hold loosely to earthly treasures because their hearts are fixed on a coming King. They remember that this world is not their home. Jesus rewards those who live today with eternity constantly in view.

The fourth is the **Crown of Glory** found in 1 Peter 5. Peter specifically addresses elders who shepherd God's people, but the principles extend to anyone who faithfully cares for others spiritually. This crown is given to those who lovingly feed, protect, encourage, and nurture the people Christ purchased with His own blood. The world often measures leadership by influence, position, or recognition. Jesus measures leadership by humility, sacrifice, and faithful service. He notices every unseen act of care, every difficult conversation, every patient investment, and every burden carried for the sake of His people. Jesus rewards those who faithfully shepherd His flock with humility, love, and integrity.

The fifth is the **Crown of Life**, promised in both James 1 and Revelation 2. This crown belongs to believers who remain steadfast through suffering. It is not suffering itself that earns the reward. Many people experience hardship. Rather, Christ honors those who continue trusting Him when following Him becomes costly. They remain faithful through persecution, illness, rejection, loss, disappointment, and even the threat of death. Every trial becomes another opportunity to declare that Jesus is worth more than comfort, security, or even life itself.

Their endurance proves that Christ is their greatest treasure. Jesus rewards those who remain faithful when obedience costs them everything.

When we step back and look at these five crowns together, a beautiful pattern emerges. Jesus rewards disciplined faithfulness. He rewards hearts that bring others to Him. He rewards lives that long for His return. He rewards humble servants who care for His people. He rewards steadfast endurance through suffering.

Jesus rewards the very things the world often overlooks. Quiet obedience. Hidden sacrifice. Humble service. Patient endurance. Faithfulness that may never receive applause on earth.

The athletes competing in the Isthmian Games devoted years of training for a crown woven from pine branches that would soon dry up and disappear. They gladly sacrificed comfort for something that would not last.

How much greater is our reward.

No act of faithfulness is wasted. No sacrifice for Christ is forgotten. Every step of endurance matters because Jesus sees it all.

One day the race will end. The applause of earth will fade into silence. There will be no audience to impress and no competitors to outrun. There will only be one voice, one Judge, and one glorious moment as we stand before Jesus Christ.

May we live today with that day in view, making it our aim to please Him, confident that only one life will soon be past, and only what is done for Christ will last.