

Peter's Epistles #18

Eternal Rewards

(also available on-line at Ichthys.com)
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Introduction: We have been making the case that the objective of the Christian life is to grow spiritually and help others do the same. So far in our study we have considered three of the four phases of God's plan which deal with the initial part of this proposition, namely our spiritual growth as individual Christians. These first three phases are: 1) *listening* (as a believer, taking positive steps to acquire information about God); 2) *believing* (accepting Biblical truths into the heart by faith, thus making them a part of one's thinking); 3) *living* (actively applying this truth to life; focusing one's thinking on principles of truth, especially in times of stress and testing; striving to live according to the truth; applying the virtues of faith, hope and love to one's life). These first three steps (which must continue throughout our Christian experience) provide the essential preparation and sustenance necessary for us to embark on the fourth phase of God's plan for our lives: *helping*. Helping other Christians (and helping others to *become* Christians) is the ultimate fulfillment of our purpose here on earth and the basis for our heavenly reward. It is also our duty. For once we have begun to mature through the help of others, it is our responsibility to reach out in love and help others do the same.

IV. Helping: Most people, upon hearing the word "minister", naturally think of the pastor at their local church, and while pastors certainly are "ministers" in the biblical sense, the word actually encompasses all of the help and service which believers give to other members of Christ's Church (and to unbelievers as well). The Greek word *diakonos* (δῆακονος) literally means servant, and when Christ tells his feuding disciples that whoever wants to be the greatest must become the servant of all (Matt.20:26-27), we would be justified in translating the word "minister". The problem, of course, is that the English word minister has connotations of authority, position, prestige and selectivity which are in no way present in the Greek word "servant". In reality, every member of the body of Christ is a minister (or servant) to the whole, and no single part can exist in isolation from the rest, any more than our eyes, or ears, or arms or legs can function independently from the rest of our body (1Cor.12:12-26). God has so designed Christ's Church that each one of us has a job to do. Every single Christian "member" has an important, unique ministry (that is, a service) to perform for the benefit of the rest of the "body". Some ministries may seem glamorous, others ordinary; some may attract a great deal of attention, while others seem to go almost unnoticed; some may be blessed with a plethora of rewards here and now, while others appear to be major liabilities to those who perform them. Only one thing is certain: God has assigned us all some service to perform with our Christian lives. The only really important question to be asked is "are we performing it or not?"

Bearing Fruit:

I am the true vine and my Father is the vine-dresser. Every branch in me which does not bear fruit He removes, and every branch which does bear fruit He prunes so that it might bear more fruit.

John 15:1-2

For those of us who are willing to follow Him (bearing fruit like the branches above), God directs our lives so as to maximize our Christian production. Moreover, it is for this very purpose that we have been created anew in Jesus Christ (Eph.2:10). It is important to remember, however, that while we "branches" may be the agency, God is the source of any good works we accomplish in this life. Apart from our master Jesus Christ, we cannot "bear fruit", but when we follow, obey, "abide" in Him, we are empowered by God to do the specific ministry for which we have been chosen (Jn.15:5).

Nor can effective production be separated from spiritual growth (for they are linked in Col.1:10). Spiritual immaturity necessarily limits the help we can give to the Church to assist in the spiritual growth of others. This does not mean that we are to be fruitless until we achieve a certain level of spiritual growth, but it does stand to reason that if we are to help others to grow, we also need to grow ourselves. The author of Hebrews faulted his listeners for their failure on this very point: although they had been Christians for a long time, they were still in need of certain help *from* others which they should long since have been providing *to* others (Heb.5:12).

Believers who persistently fail to make spiritual progress through hearing, believing, and applying God's Word find their production limited. The parable of the sower teaches us that the believer who fails to rise above the worries, wealth and pleasures of life is like a plant strangled by weeds: the distractions of life choke off the production of fruit for which very purpose it was planted (Matt.13:22-23; Lk.8:14).

As the branch cut off in John 5:2 can testify, a complete lack of production is a serious matter. We find a further example of this in the parable of the talents, where the productive servants are praised and rewarded, while the servant who buries his talent in the ground is cast into outer darkness by his master (Matt.25:14-30). Both the servant who buries his talent in this parable and the branch which is cast away in Jn.15:2 represent unbelievers. It is impossible for a true believer in Christ to be without any production whatsoever (Jas.2:26). Nevertheless, we should still strive not to be like the marginally productive servant in the parable, who, though blessed with a "talent" only managed a modicum of "interest" (Matt.25:27). Though some may seem to have more than others, we are all given a spiritual "talent" to employ for God in this life. We should take care not to lose "interest", and thereby allow our own unique opportunity for ministry to go unexploited. If we have grown spiritually, we have not done so without a great deal of help from more people than we can name. Should we not then be eager to give something back, to lend a hand to others and help them in their journey toward spiritual maturity as we ourselves have been helped?

What is Production?

I. Production is Giving

When a tree bears fruit, its production is a blessing to those who harvest and eat of it. In an analogous way, our Christian "produce" exists not for our own benefit but to bless the lives of others. "Bearing fruit" is essentially an act of giving. It always involves effort and self-sacrifice for the spiritual good of others. It is not the size of the gift which matters: the widow's mite was "more" in God's eyes than the larger sums of the rich (Mk.12:42; Lk.21:2). It is not even the type of gift which matters: even a cup of cold water in the Lord's name will not fail to find its reward (Matt.10:42; Mk.9:41). And the gift need not be material at all. To teach, to comfort, to encourage, a kind word, a helping hand, words and deeds of love, done in the name of the Lord, for the glory of the Lord, these are the sort of gifts which pour forth from Christian love, which best complement our spiritual gifts, which best recall the greatest gift of God to us in the form of His Son Jesus Christ.

The production, ministry, works, Christian service, or whatever the name we wish to employ for Christian "giving" thus transcend the bestowing of monetary gifts alone. While commending the Philippians for their gracious giving to him, Paul made it abundantly clear that he delighted far more in the reward that had been credited to their account for the legitimate production which their act evinced than in the money he had received (Phil.4:17; cf. 2Cor.8:1-4). In today's cynical world, we are prone to regard statements such as this with skepticism. Yet in the case of the apostle Paul, we can be assured that the sentiment is genuine, for no one is on record for living a life of more extreme hardship and deprivation in the service of our Lord than he (2Cor.11:16-33). For Paul, money is merely one type of "seed" or means with which to minister (2Cor.8-9). The giving of money then, which requires effort (to earn the money) and self-sacrifice (to part with it), is comparable to any act of Christian production in those two critical respects: whatever ministry we do for God must, to be a true ministry, be one in which we give of ourselves to promote the salvation and growth of others. Christ taught us to give to those who ask (Matt.5:42). Let us therefore not neglect the financial needs of the Church of Christ, but let us likewise never assume that money can be substituted for the act of kindness, the word of encouragement, the prayer of intervention, or the teaching of truth necessary for the edification of the Church of Jesus Christ.

Scripture tells us that Abel, though dead, still bears witness to the world of his faith in God through the sacrifice he offered (Heb.11:4). His blood sacrifice represented the need for a substitute, a savior, to pay the price of sin; by acknowledging this fact through his sacrifice, Abel did not benefit his fellow man in a material way (as in giving money to charity), but he did accomplish an important purpose which God had for him, a purpose that is still bearing fruit today, showing us that from the very beginning of human history, true believers understood both the need for and the promise of the coming Savior.

The same is true in the case of many believers of the past: some of their most enduring ministries are the acts of faith which inspire us to this day. When James castigates believers who say they have faith though they do no works, his example of good works is Abraham's willingness to obey God in an extremely difficult test: the sacrifice of his only son, Isaac (Jas.2:21-23). This act of obedience by Abraham imparted no material benefit to other believers, but still ministers to us today as it encourages us to trust God as Abraham did (Rom.4:17). And so it is with other great believers of the past. The Daniels, Davids and Stephens are not great because of their monetary gifts, but because of the fruit they bore in witnessing to the faithfulness of God through their acts of faith in Him. In all of these signal cases found in the Bible, this is the essence of the gift: the fruit which delights those of us who partake of it, is a vibrant, dynamic trust in God that glorifies Him while encouraging and inspiring us to push forward in our own Christian lives. This type of "fruit" surely requires a degree of spiritual maturity before it fully ripens.

So we have come full circle. In order to be most effective in our spiritual production, we must first achieve some measure of spiritual maturity through the process of listening, believing and living that has been the focus of our study to this point. After all, if we have not yet reached the point where we really trust Him, how effectively can we witness to unbelievers to put their faith in Him? If we have not yet reached the point where we really believe in a heavenly reward, how can we comfort the grieving or help motivate the spiritually tired to go on in joy in Christ? If we have not yet truly learned to love God above and beyond everything else in life, how in the world can we expect to take on any task that involves strenuous sacrifice for Him? These are just examples, but whatever our ministry may be, it will never be fully effective (if it ever gets off the ground at all) until the "minister" has some spiritual capital stockpiled in the heart to offer to the "ministered".

Production is first and foremost giving, not to God, but to our fellow Christians, actual and potential. God has no need of anything from us (Acts 17:25), and in fact could, with no appreciable effort, undertake to do Himself every single act of ministry entrusted to the Church. So we need to see the fruit bearing process, the act of Christian giving, for what it truly is: it is a rare privilege for us to be allowed to work in a vineyard God could easily tend Himself, and thus give something of ourselves in appreciation for and emulation of the greatest gift of all, our Lord Jesus Christ (2Cor.9:15; Rom.5:15-17).

II. Production is Empowered

Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit.
Zechariah 4:6

We have already seen that as mere branches, we are incapable of production apart from the Vine in whom we reside (Jn.15:1-2). All of us are merely instruments in God's plan – except that our service depends upon our willing participation in the tasks God has for us. No act of production acceptable to God is ever accomplished purely by man's design or by man's energy. Before the

creation of time, God prepared the good works He wanted us to perform in this life (Eph.2:10), and no single one of them can be properly performed without the assistance of His Holy Spirit (1Cor.12:3). Just as rebuilding the temple in the days of the return of the Israelites from captivity in Babylon was a difficult and daunting task (the context of Zech.4:6 above), so many of the ministries we are called upon to set our hands to today may seem impossible to us. Yet nothing is impossible with God (Gen.18:14; cf. Lk.1:37), and as He reassured Zerubbabel that His Spirit would empower their task, so we Christians, who have His Spirit in us, not only with us (Jn.14:17), should take heart when facing opposition to ministry, even if it may seem insurmountable to us at the time.

The Holy Spirit is the one who empowers all ministry and the function of all spiritual gifts (1Cor.12:6b, 11b). As branches, He works through us to produce fruit, both the fruit of an upstanding Christian life (Gal.5:22), and the fruit of more direct ministry to others. Central to such production is the spiritual gift possessed by the individual Christian. Each and every one of us has a spiritual gift, and it is the Holy Spirit who decides on the choice of gift we receive, provides it, and empowers it (1Cor.12:11). If we are truly willing to minister, we must have faith that God will lead us to the true and proper function of whatever gift He has chosen for us. If perchance we do not seem to be cut out for the specific function in the Church which WE would have chosen, we must 1) remember that all members of the body are essential (1Cor.12:12-26); 2) remember not to try and escape the first, best destiny God has planned out for us (Jonah 1:1-3:3); and 3) remember that the choice of gifts was God's, and therefore we should respect that choice and trust Him that it is for the best. Finally, it is entirely improper to conceive (much less to pursue) a desire for spiritual gifts that are at present not operational, such as tongues, prophecy, healing and the like. As reasonable Christians (that is, Christians who do not eschew emotion, but insist that it be governed by reason: 1Cor.14:32-33; 14:40), we should accept the fact that these gifts are not currently being distributed by the Holy Spirit, in the same way that He is not at present appointing any more apostles, nor is He allowing anyone else to pen additional chapters to the Bible.

The Holy Spirit's selection and empowerment of our area of Christian service is not limited to determining the specific sphere of our gift, but embraces the totality of our production. In 1st Corinthians 12:4-7, we are told that every aspect of our ministry is under God's control: it is "the same Spirit" who oversees the many "gifts", "ministries", and "effects". These three categories represent 1) specific spiritual gifts (such as helps, encouragement, evangelism, etc.); 2) specific ministry situations (such as leadership and service billets in all the different churches here in the world); and 3) productiveness of the field. The first two categories are somewhat self-evident; for example, you may have the spiritual gift of helps, and be employing that gift by helping with the upkeep of the physical plant of your local church (the specific ministry). The third category mentioned in 1st Corinthians chapter twelve is, however, the most illuminating: the actual effectiveness of your ministry is not based solely on your own efforts, but also on the fertility of the field you are working. So the soil you are plowing may be rich, poor or in-between, but God takes all this into account and, indeed, has planned it all out ahead of time. This means that the evangelist, for example, is not going to have his production rated by the number of those saved.

Rather, his service will be judged by other criteria (i.e., just how well he carried out his task relative to the potential of the field he was working). After all, Jeremiah and many of the other Old Testament prophets saw very little actual production come of all their efforts at the time. So let us not become demoralized if our particular ministries seem sometimes to have little point compared to others which are more successful on the surface, for we shall reap what God has purposed at the proper time (Gal.6:9). By the power of the Holy Spirit, as we fulfill the ministries purposed by God that we should do, God will achieve His intended effect (cf. Is.55.11).

III. *Production is Rewarded*

Now therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast and immovable, abounding in the work of the Lord at all times, for you know that our labor is not in vain in the Lord.
1st Corinthians 15:58

As believers in Christ, we shall live forever with our Lord. We shall be resurrected with glorious bodies and dwell together with the Lord for all eternity, and it is at the end of a lengthy discussion of the resurrection in 1st Corinthians chapter fifteen, that Paul makes the statement above: our labor is not in vain in Christ, because we shall be with Him to enjoy the fruits of it forever.

1. Judgment and Reward

Behold, I am coming quickly, and I bring my wages with me with which to repay each according to his work.
Revelation 22:12

As in many other passages of scripture (e.g. Is.40:10; 62:11; etc.), this passage makes it clear that everyone of us will stand judgment for our time here on earth, in order that we may be recompensed for "the things accomplished while in the body, whether good or worthless" (2Cor.5:10). The imminence of our Lord's return, and the knowledge that He Himself will evaluate our lives should be motivation enough for us to persevere in the work of His kingdom. If we are truly advancing spiritually in the way God would have us do, this should be a means of encouragement as we take heart in the principle of rewards for our time and service here on earth, for God is anything but stingy, giving instead a full measure flowing over, and promising an abundant return on whatever investment we make (Matt.10:42; 19:29; Lk.6:38; Eph.6:8).

2. Jesus Christ is the Judge

For we must all stand before Christ's tribunal, so that each of us may receive recompense for what he has accomplished through this body, whether it be good or worthless.
2nd Corinthians 5:10

God has appointed Christ judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42). In this capacity, our Lord will judge the world in His Father's place (Rom.14:10-12; 2Tim.4:1; 4:8). Christ's *bema* (Greek, βῆμα), or judgment seat, is a tribunal before which every believer will appear and answer for his time here on earth (Rom.2:16; cf. Heb.13:17 with 1Pet.4:5). Since each of us will have to give an accounting to the Lord for all we have (or have not) done (Rom.14:12), we should strive to be "pleasing to Him in all things" (2Cor.5:9), and seek to make that experience one which will confirm our everlasting reward, rather than expose a wasted life (1Cor.3:11-15).

3. The Nature of the Judgment

So now, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
Romans 8:1

The evaluation of the Christian's life is fundamentally different from other judgments that are to take place in the future. As believers in Jesus Christ, we are no longer under the punitive judgment of God (Jn.3:18); we shall not enter into a judgment of life and death (as unbelievers will), for we have already passed from death to life (Jn.5:24; cf. 1Cor.11:32). Our evaluation will, instead, be concerned with judging the worth of our earthly Christian ministry (1Cor.3:10-15).

4. The Judgment Process

The Lord is the One who judges me. Therefore, do not make judgments before the time, until the Lord shall come, who will illuminate the hidden things of darkness, and reveal the intents of every heart, and then the praise of each shall come to him from God.
1st Corinthians 4:4-5

The Lord's evaluation of our lives will not necessarily be according to the standards we hold here on earth. He knows the hidden motivations of our hearts, all of them; He knows not only what we have done, and whether He had called us to do it, but also why we have done all we have done (Rom.2:6-10). So even if the world does not understand or appreciate what we do, our labor for the Lord here on earth is not for that reason in vain (1Cor.15:58). By the same token, not all that is done in this world, ostensibly for the Lord, will have a reward. In 1st Corinthians 3:10-17, Paul explains the manner in which the Lord will judge our earthly works. The standard adhered to is a simple one: to gain a reward, whatever we do must build upon the foundation of Jesus Christ (v.11). In other words, to be legitimate, all our works must edify; they must turn people to Christ and build up the faith, hope, and love of those who believe in Him. All that we have done which meets this standard has true value (the "gold, silver and gems" of v.12); for this legitimate production, we shall be rewarded. But if, on the other hand, the use we make of the time and resources God has given us does not edify, does not "build" on the foundation of Jesus Christ, does not strengthen the faith, hope, and love of our fellow believers, then all our efforts in this vein are for naught. These works are "wood, grass and chaff". On the day of our evaluation, everything we have done will be made clear, and our deeds will be tested "by fire" (v.13); our legitimate works will stand the test of fire, but those works which did not further the gospel of

Jesus Christ and the progress of His saints will be destroyed. Is it not heartening to know that the Lord will be the arbiter of our Christian labors? Our faithful Judge will see the true value in anything we have accomplished for Him, while much of what is regarded by man as valuable and exciting will not stand up to that test of fire.

Even believers who have wasted their time here on earth are themselves delivered: if they persevere in faith, though their works be destroyed, yet they themselves are saved (v.15). It is important to note, however, that in this connection Paul includes another category of behavior besides legitimate works, and works which are merely a waste of time. If anyone's deeds are actively and perniciously detrimental to the Church of God, that person will come under the judgment of God (v.17). Finally, it must be said that being rewarded is ultimately dependent upon maintaining our faith: if we fail to maintain our faith in Christ secure until the end, our reward will perish with us, for, like the faith upon which they are based, rewards can be lost as well as gained (1Cor.9:24-27; 2Jn.1:8; Rev.3:11).

5. The Time of Judgment

And He will send forth His angels with a loud trumpet blast, and they will gather His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.
Matthew 24:31

When our Lord returns to the earth, in victory and glory, we too shall be gathered together to meet Him (1Thes.4:14-17; 1Cor.15:50-58). The time of our Lord's second advent and of our "gathering together with Him" (2Thes.2:1; cf. Is.27:12-13) also begins the time of our evaluation and reward (Matt.16:27; 19:28; 20:8; Lk.14:14; Rev.11:18). Following his glorious conquest of the devil's world at the 2nd Advent (Matt.24:29-31; Rev.19:1-20:6), Jesus Christ will conduct a thorough evaluation of Israel (Is.1:25-28; 4:2-6; Ezek.20:33-38; Zech.13; Mal.3:2-3; Rom.11:26). It is also at that time that He will judge all of the newly resurrected believers (for the purpose of granting eternal rewards on the basis of service: Rom.2:16; 1Cor.3:10-17; 2Cor.5:10). This extended "judgment-day" will terminate with the final resurrection and judgment of millennial believers at the conclusion of "the Day of the Lord" (a term encompassing the 2nd Advent and Millennium as one grand event: compare 2Pet.3:10 with 2Pet.3:8; see also Acts 2:20; 1Cor.3:13; 1Thes.5:2; 2Thes.2:2), their judgment, and the final judgment of unbelievers at the Great White Throne (Matt.25:31-46; Rev.20:11-15).

6. Legitimacy of Rewards

By faith, Moses, when he grew up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, and chose instead to suffer mal-treatment with the people of God rather than to enjoy the transitory pleasures of sin, because he considered the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasure vaults of Egypt. For he was looking to his reward.
Hebrews 11:24-26

As Hebrews 11:26 indicates, Moses was sustained in the difficult decision to give up the material blessings of power and prestige in Egypt by his absolute conviction that he would be rewarded by God. The promise of future reward is thus a legitimate means of motivation for all believers (Heb.11:39-40). As we endure trials and tribulations here on earth, we yearn for the heavenly fulfillment of all that God has promised us, and rewards are certainly part of that expectation (2Cor.5:1-10). They encourage us to maintain our faith, focus our hope, and act on our love. All Christian service brings rewards and serves to build confidence in our eternal future (1Tim.3:13), while, at the same time, the sure and certain knowledge that we shall undergo an evaluation of our service should inspire diligence and consistency in the stewardship of our time and opportunities here on earth (1Pet.1:17). So while it is true that we are "only servants doing what we ought" (Lk.17:10), we should never lose sight of the ultimate goal, the "prize" to which we are called in Christ Jesus (Phil.3:7-14).

7. Significance of Rewards

For I consider that the sufferings of this present age do not deserve to be compared to the glory about to be revealed to us.

Romans 8:18

The blessings and rewards for believers so far outweigh any possible difficulties we shall have to face here on earth that Paul, a man acquainted with suffering of every sort, using the analogy of a scale calls them "light" when put in the balance with the "weight of eternal glory" which they produce (that is, salvation, resurrection and reward). Our faithfulness in what seems to the world to be the "little things" here on earth will reap a great reward in the kingdom of heaven (Lk.19:17), and the opposition we encounter to our respective tasks only serves to make our rewards all the more secure (Matt.5:12). For these reasons, it is very important for us to have the proper "mind-set" toward rewards: we should strive to be rewarded by God, not men (Lk.14:14); we should set our hearts on the eternal rewards of heaven, not the transitory material pleasures of life (Matt.6:20-21); we should seek to make following the Lord our first priority, knowing that in the long run we shall only gain thereby (Lk.18:22).

8. Levels of Rewards

There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory.

1st Corinthians 15:41

Salvation is the free gift of God, brought about entirely by His work in Jesus Christ and due in no degree to any effort on our part as Ephesians 2:8-9 makes clear (cf. Tit.3:5). Verse ten of that same context, however, also makes clear that as God's new creatures, we are created in Christ "for the purpose of walking in the good works which God has prepared before hand for us to accomplish." The accomplishment of the "good works" we have been charged to carry out does involve commitment and follow-through on our part, and the degree of our legitimate effort and production is concomitantly rewarded by God (Matt.25:20-23; 1Cor.9:24-27). It is in the hope of

such reward for our efforts that we are told "not to grow weary of doing good" (Gal.6:9-10), for God is just to look favorably upon all our efforts, whether great or small, and to compensate us accordingly (Dan.12:3).

The Doctrine of Crowns: Scripture talks about our eternal rewards in rather general terms, and understandably so, for we see now only a dim reflection of the glories to come (1Cor.13:12). One of the clearer representations of the rewards Christians will receive, however, is given to us in the image of the crown. The Greek word *stephanos* (the origin of the name Stephen) properly refers to a garland of leaves, flowers or, occasionally, gold, and is technically distinct from the *diadema* (diadem) which is exclusively a mark of royalty (cf. Rev.12:3; 13:1; 19:12). The *stephanos* "crown" has a long and colorful history in the Greek and Roman world, but there is a common thread which connects its multifarious uses: whether the context be the military, athletics, the arts or politics, the *stephanos* crown is invariably given as a reward for meritorious service or exceptional conduct of some sort. Likewise in the New Testament, crowns represent rewards given to believers for legitimate accomplishments performed during our earthly service. Scripture identifies three distinct crowns, each representing a different level of achievement here in life.

1. The Crown of Righteousness: The crown of righteousness corresponds to the virtue of faith and is awarded to all believers who grow up to maturity in Jesus Christ and maintain that spiritual status solidly until the end. In 1st Corinthians 9:25-27, Paul compares the Christian life to a race, and tells us that, like a race, not everyone is awarded a crown of victory. As is the case with athletics in our present day, great glory attended the winners of competitive sport in the ancient world. Paul reminds us that the reward represented by the heavenly crown is eternal, imperishable and not to be compared with the fleeting rewards of this present life on earth (Rom.8:18). It is important to note that even a great believer of the stature of the apostle Paul was not about to take his past accomplishments for granted, but was seriously concerned with his present and future conduct as well. In verse 27 of 1st Corinthians chapter nine, he is intent upon passing on to other believers this same concern, along with the desire to continue striving for spiritual advance (as is the case in many other passages of scripture; cf. Phil.3:13-14). For it is only by continuing our spiritual advance that we can ensure that we do not slip backwards (2Pet.1:10). For all those who "overcome" in this life by growing up in Jesus and living a life which is consonant with the righteousness we have through faith (1Jn.5:4; Rev.2:7; 2:11; 2:17; 2:26; 3:5; 3:12; 3:21), for all who have thus "loved the Lord's appearance", in the day of His return, the crown of righteousness will be awarded by our "righteous judge", Jesus Christ (2Tim.4:8).

2. The Crown of Life: The crown of life corresponds to the virtue of hope and is awarded to all believers who sustain their spiritual growth in this life under pressure, giving proof of that growth as their faith is tested and refined in various trials, and maintaining hope in their ultimate glorification until the end God has appointed. For this reason, the mature believer can view the tribulations of life with joy, because he knows that such testing "proves" his faith and produces the patient fortitude of hope that penetrates the present veil of tears to behold the glories of

eternity beyond (Rom.5:3-5; Jas.1:2-3). With the approval of this hope, forged in the fiery furnace of life, comes the "praise, glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" represented by the crown of life (1Pet.1:6-7). By maintaining our faith and demonstrating our hope in times of trouble, we show the world that we love Jesus Christ more than the world, and are promised the crown of life as a tangible reward (Jas.1:12). The crown of life is a powerful incentive for us to endure whatever trials and temptations the devil sends our way, knowing that God is faithful to reward our consistent faithfulness in this way (Rev.2:10).

3. The Crown of Glory: The crown of glory corresponds to the virtue of love and is awarded to all believers who faithfully and properly fulfill the ministries assigned to them in life, thereby reflecting the love of God until the end He has appointed. It is for this reason that Paul can call his parishioners "crowns", because they are proof of his faithful, loving service to the Lord and the reward it represents (Phil.4:1; 1Thes.2:19). In 1st Peter 5:1-4, the crown of glory is promised by the apostle Peter to all pastors whose ministry is properly carried out (it is not denied to other believers, merely specifically promised to pastors by way of example). With a few choice contrasts, Peter characterizes the attitude of service we should all adopt: "not out of necessity, but willingly as God would have it; not looking for gain, but with eagerness, and not as overlords, but as examples to your flock" (v.2-3; cf. 1Cor.9:16). Peter's emphasis on this point is not surprising, for caring for Christ's flock, the very thing which all ministers are charged to do, was the issue foremost in our Lord's thinking when He held His last recorded substantive conversation with Peter (Jn.21:15-19), and repeatedly and emphatically made the point that all true love for Himself must manifest itself in ministry. If we truly do love Jesus Christ, then we will minister to His body, the Church, according to the ministry we have each been assigned. Such ministry is the proof of our love, and is rewarded with the crown of glory. As Jesus told us in the parable of the faithful servant, service of this type will be richly rewarded at His return (Matt.24:45-51; Lk.12:41-48).

4. The Crown of Thorns: Given the propensity of modern day so-called Christian groups to promise prosperity in this life, one final note on the doctrine of crowns is necessary. It should be remembered that our Lord, after living a life of perfect service, service to the point that He died on behalf of us all, was rewarded in this life by an ungrateful world with a crown of thorns (Matt.27:29), this despite the fact that He is its rightful King (Heb.2:9). Just as we must wait for God's proper time for Christ to assume His legitimate sovereign rule (Rev.19:12), so we, as enemies of the present ruler of the world, the devil, should not set our sights on the rewards of this life (Ps.17:14; cf. 1Thes.3:3-4). Our hope should focus instead on our imperishable inheritance in the coming kingdom that will never fade away (1Pet.1:4).

Conclusion: For all those who listen to the Word of God, believe it, and strive to live according to it, spiritual growth is the result, accompanied by the virtues of faith, hope and love. The end of Christian love (which faith and hope support) is ministry: that is, helping others gain Christ and grow in Him as we ourselves have done. Let us therefore persevere in whatever spiritual tasks God has given us here on earth, knowing that this labor is not in vain in Jesus Christ our Lord (Gal.6:9-10). In this way, we can be assured that "grace and spiritual prosperity" will be

abundantly supplied to us (according to Peter's prayer in 1Pet.1:2) to sustain us in all our work as we strive in Christian love to help others carry out God's plan for their lives.