

Rest, Responsibility and Reward

The great science fiction writer Isaac Asimov was an atheist with very warped ideas about God. He once wrote, "I don't believe in an afterlife, so I don't have to spend my whole life fearing Hell, or fearing Heaven even more. For whatever the tortures of Hell, the boredom of Heaven would be even worse."

I think there is more than one Christian out there that secretly, if not guiltily feels that Heaven will be boring. It sounds perhaps rather blank, rather unchallenging, rather unendingly similar, rather like something we can't imagine doing forever.

We considered what Heaven is. We saw that Heaven is a place. Not merely a state of being. We saw that this place is presently not yet on the Earth, but one day will be. Heaven and Earth will be one, and we will enjoy it in resurrected bodies.

But once we know where it will be, we naturally ask the next question: what will we do? What will Heaven be about? We are naturally active creatures. We work with purposes in mind: we make, we create, we shape, we order, we fix, we cultivate. We are rational beings who want to learn, discover, understand. We have goals and we try to reach them.

Again, one of the great difficulties we have with understanding Heaven is that we struggle to understand what we'll do. We know we will worship, and we know this is the climax and high point of Heaven. But we worship very imperfectly here, and so we try to think of one of our church services going on for eternity, and we can't grasp that. We understand in principle that nothing is more delightful than loving God, but we wonder if all we will do is sing and praise.

The Scriptures teach us several important things about our activities in Heaven. Though we'll consider them separately, in some ways, these three experiences are part of one another, deeply overlapping – rest, responsibility and reward.

I. Heaven Will Be A Place of Rest

11 Then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed. (Rev 6:11)

13 Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me 1, "Write: 'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.'" "Yes," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them." (Rev 14:13)

Heaven will be rest for God's people. Now this is not all Heaven will be, but it is a big part of it. Heaven is rest. You know how delightful rest is when you are exhausted. After pushing and pushing to get through the day's work, working into the night, finally you collapse on that bed, the soft pillows, the cool sheets seem to swallow up your aching muscles, and you let out a deep sigh. Rest is relief to the weary.

Now last week we learned that we will be in Heaven with resurrected bodies, free from sickness, decay, pain, and even weariness. We read Paul's words that the body is sown in weakness and raised in power. It may be that our resurrection bodies feel no need for physical rest at all. So in what way will we rest?

The rest of Heaven is not recuperation for aching muscles. The rest of Heaven is the enjoyment of

completed work. It is the ultimate Sabbath rest. Consider when the Lord created the universe in six days, we read that on the seventh, He rested. Does this mean God was tired, worn out, depleted in energy? That's impossible for the Omnipotent. It means that God completed His creative work, and took an entire day, the seventh to step back, admire and enjoy the work of His hands.

You know the feeling: whether it was a house project you were working on, something artistic you were drawing, painting, writing or composing, some project you were working on, a sale you were trying to make, a meal you gave yourself to preparing, even a physical task of exercise: there's that moment when you are finished, and you step back and look at what is finished: and you enjoy it. This is the Sabbath rest of Heaven, and Hebrews 4 speaks of it. *9 There remains therefore a rest for the people of God.*

Heaven is going to be the completion of certain works that were done on a sin-cursed Earth, works that were part of the battleground between God and Satan. What sort of works will we rest from?

First, we'll rest from fighting against sin. On earth, you labour to fight against your sin nature. It is an uphill battle, fighting the old man, resisting the gravitational pull of selfishness. It feels burdensome, and sometimes like climbing an escalator going down. One day, you will rest from that labour. You will be without that sin nature, and you will step back and see Christ's work of sanctification and glorification has now brought you to where loving Him is no longer a battle.

Second, we'll rest from the Great Commission. Here we labour to serve Christ in evangelism and discipleship, and there are thorns and thistles that make the labour hard and often unproductive. We are selfish and we are told to serve other selfish people. We teach and disciple others, but we often see very little results for what we put in. One Christian said to me the other day, "I get to judge how well I'm doing in my job by how many clients I have. If I had the success rate of you pastors, I'd shoot myself!" Often evangelising and discipling people seems slow, it seems like throwing seed on hard ground, it seems like so little return for so much effort. One day we will rest from that. I love pastoring, and I am well-supported by my wife, deacons, and church. But I confess there are times (usually Sunday nights or Monday mornings) when I ask myself, "How in the world can I keep this up for another thirty or forty years?" And holidays or more rest can't really help that. It's just the soul-weariness of ministering in this world. But Paul said this:

***2Ti 4:7** I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. **2Ti 4:8** Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.*

You will step back, and see the conflict was necessary and worth it, but now you are forever with those who love what you love, and desire Christ.

And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. (Gal 6:9)

Third, we'll rest from resisting Satan and his world system. We live our lives in a counter-culture way. The strong current of the world tells us to think and act and spend and live just like they do. And if you go with that current, it takes you to the City of Destruction. But if you choose to not love the world, to not be this world system's friend, then your life feels like you are swimming against the current every day. You are in conflict with its values, with its entertainment, with what it rejoices in, and what it loves. Sometimes, that even brings you into conflict with people, through rejection, or ridicule, or persecution. God promises Heaven will bring rest from that.

6 since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, 7 and to give you who

are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, (2Th 1:6-7)

One day, like Psalm 37 says, we will look around for the wicked man, and his wicked system, and all the conflict and the pain it brought, and it will be just a memory. We will rest from swimming upstream. In God's country, God's city, God's house, we don't have to resist, abstain, deny, mortify, flee, avoid. Everything will be safe. Everything will be lawful. All will point to Christ. As Isaac Watts wrote in that hymn we sing: "To Jesus endless prayer be made, and endless praises crown his head; his name like sweet perfume shall rise with every morning sacrifice. "

Of course, the more intense the labour, the more satisfying the rest. Ecclesiastes 5:12 says, "The rest of a labouring man is sweet." If you are making your peace with this world, if you are hardly fighting your sin nature, if you do little to nothing for Christ, then you will miss much of this. So Hebrews encourages us: *Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience. (Heb 4:11)*

The rest of Heaven is not the absence of labour; it is the end of certain necessary labours in a sin-cursed world. But the Bible tells us a complementary truth.

II. Heaven Will be a Place of Responsibility

12 Therefore He said: "A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return. 13 "So he called ten of his servants, delivered to them ten minas¹, and said to them, 'Do business till I come.' 14 "But his citizens hated him, and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We will not have this man to reign over us.' 15 "And so it was that when he returned, having received the kingdom, he then commanded these servants, to whom he had given the money, to be called to him, that he might know how much every man had gained by trading. 16 "Then came the first, saying, 'Master, your mina has earned ten minas.' 17 "And he said to him, 'Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities.' 18 "And the second came, saying, 'Master, your mina has earned five minas.' 19 "Likewise he said to him, 'You also be over five cities.' (Luk 19:12-19)

The parable in Luke 19 suggests that our earthly responsibilities are preparing us for the real ones there. The Lord goes away, and you have the outright rebels, you have the false believers – the one who had one and hid it – and you have the true believers.

And here the believers receive a reward of responsibility in keeping with their faithfulness in trading the Lord's goods. An investment that produced ten minas results in authority over ten cities. An investment that brought five brings authority over five cities. Jesus could have chosen any other picture to suggest what happens to faithful stewards. But here He makes it clear that faithfulness brings more responsibility.

He said exactly the same thing to the disciples.

27 Then Peter answered and said to Him, "See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?" 28 So Jesus said to them, "Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 29 "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife¹ or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life. (Mat 19:27-29)

The promise to the disciples is that one day, in the resurrection, they will have the responsibility of ruling over the twelve tribes of Israel. There the work will not be burdensome, frustrating, and often fruitless.

And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. (Rev 22:3)

Some of the reason we struggle with imagining Heaven is we have too narrow an idea of what it means to serve God. Serving God is more than direct praise.

We understand that here we serve God not only by praying and singing and ministering in the Body. We also serve God by doing our work well, by doing our jobs and our callings to the best of our ability. Remember Colossians 3:23: *23 And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, (Col 3:23)*. Or Colossians 3:17: *17 And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. (Col 3:17)*

So if we can serve God here as pilots, bankers, I.T. professionals, architects, directors, engineers, secretaries, accountants, drivers, salesmen, why do we think that on a resurrected Earth, we will not have differing responsibilities? Isn't it clear that God made us different, with different gifts? Isn't it clear that when resurrected we will still be who we are? And if so, will there not be thousands of different ways to serve God on the new earth? Certainly the new earth will not be burdened down with evil systems that exploit and destroy men, and all that will be gone. But does that mean we will not pursue arts, and technologies, and discovery, and innovation, and exploration? There is no reason to think that a resurrected people on a resurrected earth will not exercise their faculties, talents, reason, curiosity, imagination, affections, artistic ability to spread the glory of the Lord across the globe as the waters cover the sea.

The saints in the intermediate Heaven sing this song – looking forward to that responsibility:

*{you} have redeemed us to God by Your blood Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation,
10 And have made us kings and priests to our God; And we shall reign on the earth." (Rev 5:9-10)*

*5 There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light.
And they shall reign forever and ever. (Rev 22:5)*

*26 "And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations--
27 'He shall rule them with a rod of iron (Rev 2:26-27)*

*21 "To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with
My Father on His throne. (Rev 3:21)*

Scripture calls believers co-heirs with Christ, and Ephesians 1:10 tells us His inheritance is ours in Him.

We will subdue a perfect Earth for the glory of God, beautifying what is already beautiful, making it more and more beautiful, from one degree of glory to the next, advancing further and further in our expressions of how beautiful and glorious our God is. Did you ever consider the meaning of that prophecy in Isaiah 9:7: "Of the increase of His government there shall be no end". His rule will extend and extend as His under-rulers shape and beautify and order things to be more and more reflective of Him.

Here's the promise and the warning: the more faithful you are with what you are given now, the more of this glorious responsibility there. Do well with your riches, and your body, and your talents in this world under testing circumstances, and you are displaying how well you will do in the next. God has told us in an almost veiled way: humble yourself, accept the rule of servant, and authority will come your way. Live proudly, and independently, and the opposite will come to you.

In Heaven, we will rest from earthly labours. We will be responsible for new ones. But that rest, and that responsibility are both part of the third thing which Heaven is.

III. Heaven Will Be A Place of Reward

8 Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor. 9 For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building. 10 According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. 11 For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, 13 each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. 14 If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. 15 If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. (1Co 3:8-15)

Paul tells us two things about Heavenly rewards. First, different rewards are given in response to each Christian's service. Verse 8 says, it is according to his works. This is clearly not a judgement of merit to enter Heaven, for then all would fail. We can be thankful our sin has already been judged, and this is entirely a judgement of the very different service that Christians rendered on Earth.

Verse 8 tells us that the reward will be fitted to each individual's life and service. The one who sowed sparingly, reaps sparingly. The one who labours abundantly, is rewarded abundantly.

27 "For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works. (Mat 16:27)

12 "And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work. (Rev 22:12)

People get upset at the idea that believers will receive differing degrees of reward, but Scripture abundantly teaches it. "I had far rather walk, as I do, in daily terror of eternity, than feel that this was only a children's game in which all the contestants would get equally worthless prizes in the end." T. S. Eliot

People will receive different rewards. Gladly, because we will be perfect, there will be no envy, no jealousy. We will rejoice in the promotion of another.

The second thing Paul teaches is that the works will be tested for their quality. The image here is a building, with Christ as the foundation. Now if you want to get a quick, ramshackle structure up, you can use straw, and wood. It's fairly cheap, it's easier, and it goes a lot faster. Sound like a lot of ministry today: shortcuts, abbreviated approaches, do what is popular, pragmatic, and doesn't cost too much.

On the other hand, you can build with precious metals and precious stones, which takes a long time to get the material, and is costly, and doesn't go up as quickly. The idea seems to be, if you served God your own way, using your own methods, for your own befits, then you were building with combustible material, and it's not going to make it through the fire of God's scrutiny. You will lose out, though you yourself will be saved. *8 Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward. (2Jo 1:8)*

But if you were serving God His way, for His glory, by His grace, then you were building with what God regards as precious and permanent.

42 "And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward." (Mat 10:42)

So the rewards will be individually granted, and the rewards will be based on the quality of our service on Earth. But what will the rewards actually be?

Scripture keeps describing them as crowns. James 1:12 speaks of the crown of life, 1 Corinthians 9:25 speaks of the imperishable crown, 1 Peter 5:4 speaks of the crown of glory. I am not sure these refer to different things. I think the idea behind them is the same. A crown, especially in the Graeco-Roman world symbolised three things.

First, it meant **responsibility**. There were crowns given to athletes and others, but crowns are most often given to rulers. We've already seen how responsibility is going to be given out to rule on Christ's behalf.

Second, a crown meant **honour**. You were praised and revered by others. This needn't be sinful pride. Each of us seeks the approval of those we love. We well know the famous words which the Lord said He will speak to His faithful servants, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant." The reward will be eternal honour – approved and commended by God. Having pleased God, and having the pleasure of God rest upon us. For some, the honour will be very great, Heaven's heroes, those who laboured abundantly, sacrificed heroically, fought valiantly.

5 Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God. (1Co 4:5)

Should we seek this reward? Yes- the pleasure of pleasing God. The honour of having been honoured by God. This is a good and natural reward to seek, that we would so please God now that we would forever live with that upon us.

Third, a crown meant **glory**, or beauty. Crowns add beauty and glory to the one who wears them. Now, let's not pretend that we have no desire to look beautiful. And in fact, before the Fall, there was no conflict between that desire and the glory of God, because we understood we are His reflectors.

The promise of crowns in Heaven is that we will share, and reflect that glory and beauty of God. Scripture doesn't only say we will see the glory of God; it tells us we will share in it, partake of it.

2Th 2:14 to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Rom 8:17 and if children, then heirs heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.

18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. (Rom 8:17-18)

Joh 17:22 "And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one:

3 Those who are wise shall shine Like the brightness of the firmament, And those who turn many to righteousness Like the stars forever and ever. (Dan 12:3)

God's plan is not only for His children to see His glory, but for us to look like it, reflect it, become diamonds that sparkle and refract His glories through us. Spurgeon: "If you have ever stood in the middle of a hall of mirrors, you have seen yourself repeated on all sides; even so shall heaven be full of lovely reflections of him who is altogether lovely; for every blood-washed one shall wear the likeness of the Lord from heaven. The Father can never have too much of his dear Son. He would have him live in ten thousand times ten thousand beloved ones; and as this, also, would be your highest joy, you have in this desire a wonderful bond of union between you and the Father."

The crown is not only a symbol of ruling for Christ, a symbol of having pleased Christ, the crown is

the very beauty and glory of Christ. One writer put it this way:

“We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words--to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it.” That's the crown – Christ's beauty that I am wearing.

Quite simply, the greatest reward will be know more deeply, and display more clearly the Person of Christ. Each of us will reflect Christ, but the greater reward will be greater glory, greater reflection of Him. We won't only see the beauty of God from afar, we will enter into it, taste it, penetrate it, experience it, wear it, and display it. We will all be full, but some of us will be more full than other. We will all shine our brightest, but some will reflect more of Christ.

A.W. Tozer strolled through summer camp engaged in deep conversation with his dear friend Robert W. Battles - “Junior, I want to love God more than anyone in my generation.” Is that selfish ambition? No, anymore than it is selfish to want to hear Jesus say “Well done”, or selfish to want to extend His glory across the world.

Heaven will be rest from what burdens us here. Heaven will be joyful responsibility with our resurrected bodies. Heaven will be the reward of honour from God, and the reward of knowing and showing Him for all eternity.

Does that sound, like Isaac Asimov thought, that it will be boring? It sounds to me like this life is just the prologue, just the foreword to the real book, the real story, the greatest tale of all.