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CHAPTER 1

TEARS IN HEAVEN

Tears in heaven!
In the minds of many Christians, *tears* and *heaven* simply do not belong together. Like war and peace, light and darkness, health and sickness, these simply cannot coexist.

But I believe there are good reasons why there will be tears in heaven. When we reflect on how we lived for Christ, who purchased us at such high cost, well might we weep on the other side of the celestial gates. Our tears will be those of regret and shame, tears of remorse for lives lived for ourselves rather than for Him who “loves us and released us from our sins by His blood” (Revelation 1:5 NASB). Perhaps we would

never cease crying in heaven if God Himself did not come and wipe the tears from our eyes (Revelation 21:4).

The judgment seat of Christ is, to our shame, almost universally ignored among Christians. Most whom I have talked with think it will not be a very significant event. When I ask why, I usually get one of several reasons, often based on some misconceptions that have found their way into the minds of so many.

False assumptions die hard. I discovered that I could not teach the subject of the judgment seat of Christ until I had dislodged some impressions that had largely emptied this doctrine of its significance. Until we are willing to set aside these opinions, we will not be able to appreciate the rich teaching of the Bible on this topic. Nor will we be transformed by a doctrine that should impact our daily lives.

Here are some common assumptions that must be challenged if we are to recapture the biblical teaching on the judgment seat of Christ.

THREE MISCONCEPTIONS

Leading the list of mistaken ideas is the belief that there cannot be a serious review of our lives at the judgment seat of Christ because as believers our sins are forgiven and “cast . . . into the depths of the sea” (Micah 7:19). After all, the argument goes, as far as God is concerned, our past failures and sins do not exist. “Doesn’t Calvary cover it all?” a friend of mine asked when I suggested that some people might experience deep regret along with lost privileges at the judgment seat of Christ. For him, the judgment seat of Christ is really no judgment at all. All believers will pass the judgment seat with flying colors.

Not so.

Let us hear the words of Paul. “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds [done] in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10 NASB). That phrase, “whether good or bad,” rids us of the cherished hope that our failures can never return to haunt us. It reminds us that our Father in heaven judges us even though we are secure in the knowledge that we are His children forever.

Recall the story of Ananias and Sapphira, who lied about the price of some property they had sold so that they might withhold a percentage of the proceeds while pretending to give all the money to the church (Acts 5:1–11). Though they were Christians, they were smitten by God and instantly died for their dishonesty. Perhaps when they arrived in heaven they might have said to themselves, “How could this have happened? Peter told us that Calvary covered it all!”

This experience of Ananias and Sapphira, along with others like it in the New Testament, is a powerful reminder that *God judges justified sinners*. And if He judges us on earth, sometimes even to the point of physical death, it is certainly not difficult to believe that He will judge us in heaven for the way we lived here. As Jim Elliff says, “Such warnings virtually bleed from the pores to Scripture.” So it is.

King David, who committed the twin sins of adultery and murder, was judged for his sin even after he had confessed it and was assured of God’s forgiveness. Nathan said: “The LORD also has taken away your sin; you shall not die. However, because by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also that is born to you shall surely die” (2 Samuel 12:13–14 NASB).

If Ananias and Sapphira remind us that God judges us for unconfessed sin, David reminds us that *God judges us for sins that have been confessed and forgiven*. Judicial forgiveness is one thing, but the discipline the Father inflicts on His wayward children is quite another.

Yes, those who trust Christ alone for their salvation are redeemed, eternally forgiven, and legally perfect before God. We are not under condemnation but have “passed out of death into life” (1 John 3:14). We enter heaven with the righteousness of Christ credited to our account; we are accepted on the basis of His worthy merit. To this all Christians must say “Amen.”

But—and this is important—we should not conclude that every Christian will do well at the judgment seat of Christ. We can suffer serious loss; many of us might stand in shame before Christ as we see our lives pass before us. It is not true, as some teach, that ten minutes after our personal confrontation with Christ our meeting will have little significance because all of us will essentially receive the same reward. What happens at the judgment seat can have permanent consequences.

There are degrees of punishment in hell and degrees of reward in heaven. This does not mean that heaven will be divided into the haves and the have-nots. Eventually, everyone will be happy in heaven because God will comfort us by wiping the tears from our eyes. Everyone will be a servant and enjoy the fellowship afforded to all who enter the presence of God through Christ. But we shall not all have the same privileges, for the way we live will have a ripple effect that will go on for an eternity. Paul did not see a contradiction between teaching justification by faith and the related fact that we shall be judged for all our “deeds [done] in the body”

since our conversion. The hows and whys will be explained in later chapters.

A second misconception is the belief that even after we have been converted our works have no merit before God. When the Reformers preached (and rightly so) that we are saved by grace alone and not by works, some theologians went on to say that our works after salvation are also nonmeritorious. They concluded that in heaven all Christians will either receive the same reward, or else any differences will be due to God's sovereign will. Many Bible students since that time have accepted the same basic premise.

Almost all Christians agree that some believers will receive the approval of Christ, whereas others will receive censure and disapproval; nevertheless, it is argued, any negative consequences will soon be forgotten. If some would have a different status in heaven, the argument goes, that would imply that works had some merit, which God accepted, and this, it is said, would be contrary to the grace of God.

Let us test this premise.

Of course, I passionately agree that when we put our faith in Christ we are declared righteous by God because of Christ and not because of our works. Our deeds before our conversion are of no merit in the sight of God. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8–9 NASB). If anyone reading this book thinks that he will be saved because of human effort, he will be tragically disappointed for all of eternity.

But works done *after* we have received the free gift of eternal life are special to God. Indeed, the same passage (quoted above) that affirms we are saved by faith alone because of grace continues: "For we are his workmanship, created in

Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (v. 10). These works are sought by God and honor Him. We should strive to please Him, and for such works we shall be rewarded. Although we shy away from thinking that something we do has merit, Christ did not hesitate to promise that those who performed sacrificial acts would be “repaid” (Luke 14:14).

Melanchthon, Luther’s confidant and a theologian in his own right, made an important distinction between works prior to salvation, which lack merit, and those after conversion, which he calls meritorious. He wrote:

We teach that good works are meritorious—not for the forgiveness of sins, grace, nor justification (for we obtain these only by faith) but for other physical and spiritual rewards in this life and in that which is to come, as Paul says (1 Corinthians 3:8), “Each shall receive his wages according to his labor.” Therefore there will be different rewards for different labours. . . . There will be distinctions in the glory of the saints.¹

Of course, the works we do after our conversion do not have merit in and of themselves; they have merit only because we are joined to Christ. He takes our imperfect works and makes them acceptable to the Father. Also, we should not think that God must pay us like an employer who has a legal obligation to pay his employee. As we shall learn later, our good deeds are done only because God gives us the desire and ability to do them. They are a gift of His grace to us. Furthermore, no child is expected to work for his inheritance; indeed, it is not possible that he could “earn” all that the Father is pleased to give him.

But—and this must be stressed—the father *tests* his son

to prove him worthy; the father uses that which is least to see if his child can be trusted with a greater share of the inheritance. *Dependability on earth translates into greater responsibility in heaven.* Just so, Christ will judge us on the basis of our worthiness, and thus our present faithfulness or lack thereof will have eternal, heavenly repercussions!

This does not mean that rewards are based on a day's pay for a day's work. God will reward us out of proportion to the work we have done. Though it appears that He would have no reason to reward us, He has placed Himself under a loving obligation to do so. If He didn't reward us, the author of Hebrews says, He would be "unjust." "For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints" (Hebrews 6:10 NASB).

When we consider that the ultimate reward is to rule with Christ as a joint-heir, charged with the responsibility of authority over all God's possessions, it is clear that rewards are never earned in the usual sense of the word. God has obligated Himself to give us rewards, but this is strictly because of His grace. We can demand nothing; indeed, after we have done our best we are still unworthy servants, having "done only that which we ought to have done" (Luke 17:10 NASB). God has chosen to give us what we have no right to either demand or expect. *We are rewarded because of His generosity, not His obligation.*

A third and final misconception is that it is selfish to think of rewards as a proper motivation to serve Christ. After all, the argument goes, we should serve God out of love, and love alone. Shouldn't a basketball player give his best just for the sheer love of the game?

Furthermore, I have heard it said, "Will we not cast our

crowns before Him anyway?” implying that we will give up our rewards and they will not mean anything beyond our initial meeting with Christ. This is based on the assumption (false, in my opinion) that the rewards are nothing more than the crowns themselves. Certainly rewards are sometimes spoken of symbolically as crowns, but the rewards themselves have to do with levels of responsibility that will be given to us. Regardless of what we do with our crowns, our rewards will reach into eternity.

Of course, it is quite right that we should serve God simply because He is God and worthy of our devotion. Yes, we should serve Him because we love Him rather than wanting a better position in the kingdom. Servants should simply serve, expecting nothing in return. But, as we shall see, there is more than one motivation for serving Christ. Love is one; fear, another.

Another motivation for serving is a strong desire that we would please Christ, who is eager to share His inheritance with us. It is not selfish to want Christ’s approval. He wants us to win the right to rule with Him in the kingdom, and that should be our passionate yearning. A basketball player who loves the game will give his best, but he would be especially motivated if he knew the coach whom he loves had chosen to openly reward the faithful.

Let’s not overlook the connection Paul makes between pleasing Christ and doing well at the judgment seat of Christ. “Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. *For* we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:9–10 NASB, italics added). I would like to hear Christ say, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21 kjv), and I believe you would too. I would like to live in such

a way that Christ would count me worthy to rule with Him. You feel the same way. Obviously no credit goes to us; in heaven, ruling with Christ will have no overtones of pride and self-seeking. But being found worthy to rule because we love Christ was Paul's desire and should be ours.

Christ often and unapologetically motivated the disciples with the prospect of rewards. He told them that they should put their treasures in heaven where their money would have more security and a better rate of return. "But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal" (Matthew 6:20). In a future chapter we shall see that He often promised them that if they were sacrificially obedient their "reward will be great" (Luke 6:35; see also 6:23; Hebrews 10:35).

Think of the biblical saints who were driven to serve Christ because of the prospect of a reward. Abraham was willing to leave Ur and live in tents, "for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:10 *NASB*). He died without having received the promise, but it was this promise that motivated him to obey God. He was rewarded in the life to come.

Moses was willing to leave the treasures of Egypt, "choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward" (Hebrews 11:25–26 *NASB*). A careful calculation made him realize that it made sense to give up the visible earthly reward for the invisible future reward. Anyone who exchanges a lesser reward for a greater one is wise.

Paul feared that he might fail and thus be disqualified in

the race of life (1 Corinthians 9:27). He urged believers in Philippi to prove themselves to be blameless in this perverse generation, “holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain” (Philippians 2:16 NASB). He was motivating them to do well “in the day of Christ.” In fact, he wanted “reason to glory” in the life to come.

Christians who piously avoid any suggestion that the prospect of rewards should motivate us would be wise to admit their mistake and take up the challenge of Jonathan Edwards:

Resolved: To endeavor to obtain for myself as much happiness in the other world as I possibly can, with all the power, might, vigor and vehemence, yea violence, I am capable of, or can bring myself to exert, in any way that can be thought of.²

I agree with Iosif Ton, who points out that rewards are not decorative medallions in which we can take pride. “The deepest reward is in the very fact that we will become what our Creator intends us to become. It is the reward of being made into the likeness of Christ. When we will be like Him, we will be qualified to share with Him in the inheritance, and to work with Him in important positions of high responsibility over the whole universe.”³ Our rewards are a continuation of our responsibilities begun on earth.

I am convinced that those who have been unfaithful will suffer serious loss. I agree with A. J. Gordon, who wrote, “I cannot think of a final divine reckoning which shall assign the same rank in glory, the same degree of joy to a lazy, indolent and unfruitful Christian as to an ardent, devoted, self-denying Christian.”⁴ If this life is a training ground for

greater responsibilities, believers will be thoroughly judged; then once eternity begins they will differ in glory as light-bulbs differ in brightness.

Hell will not be the same for everyone, and heaven will not be the same for everyone. The way we live here will have eternal, unchangeable, and profound consequences. The cup of cold water given in the name of Christ will not be forgotten; nor will the impure, self-indulgent Christian inherit the full blessings of the kingdom.

Earl Radmacher says that “the person I am becoming today, is preparing me for the person I shall be for all of eternity.” Much will change about us in eternity, but much shall also remain the same. We will be the same people we were here on earth, though with a new nature and eventually a new body. And because our position in eternity will be momentous, the life I live today is momentous—*eternally* momentous! *Only in this life can we impact our eternity.*

We must pause long enough to let the reality of standing before Christ sink into our consciousness. Just Christ and you. Just Christ and me.

TWO JUDGMENTS

To be clear, we must distinguish between two different judgments. Each involves a different group of people, each occurs at a different time, and those who are judged have a radically different destination.

The judgment seat of Christ, to which I have already referred, will take place when Christ returns to take all believers to be in heaven with Him. The purpose of this judgment will be to evaluate us so that we can be properly rewarded for the way we have faithfully (or unfaithfully) served here on earth.

All who appear at this judgment will be in heaven, but the question that needs to be settled is the extent of our rule (if any) with Christ. This judgment is the subject of this book.

In contrast, the Great White Throne Judgment convenes many years later, just before the final phase of eternity begins. All who appear here will be thrown into the lake of fire, or what is called hell. The purpose of this judgment is to assess the degree of punishment that will be experienced for all of eternity. (I discuss this judgment briefly in chapter 10 of this book.)

There is a popular notion that we will appear before God to determine whether we will go to heaven or hell. But there is no such judgment mentioned in the Bible. Whether we go to heaven or hell is determined already in this life. At death, those who know Christ as Savior go directly to heaven where the judgment seat of Christ will take place; those who do not know Him go to a place called hades and will eventually be brought before God at the Great White Throne Judgment. Either way, everyone will encounter God.

That you will appear before God is more certain than the sunrise. And the judgment at which you will be summoned is determined in this life, based on your relationship with Christ. There is no opportunity to reroute your travel plans after you have died. One minute after you die, your eternal destination is unalterably fixed.

Standing at the Great White Throne Judgment will be hordes from every country of the world, from every religion in the world, with the best intentions in the world. They will learn too late that God is serious about justice, and if Christ does not bear their punishment, they must bear their own. And since it is not possible for them to now accept Christ on the other side of death, they will be “thrown into the lake of

fire” (Revelation 20:15).

If you are not sure at which judgment your name will be called, you still have the opportunity to settle the matter. You must admit your sinfulness and transfer all of your trust to Christ alone, for only He can fit you for heaven. “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (John 3:36).

In fact, if you want more information on how to be sure of heaven, I suggest you skip to chapter 10. I’ve included the terrifying biblical description of the Great White Throne Judgment, along with an explanation of how you can avoid this frightful event. Take time to make your peace with God *now*.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

For several years I pondered the possibility of studying the judgment seat of Christ, or what is called the *doctrine of rewards*. It is with sobriety and not a little trepidation that I have finally had the courage to preach and write about this subject. The fact that you and I will be one-on-one with Christ, and He shall review our lives, is enough to give us pause.

The thesis of this book is that *the person you are today will determine the rewards you will receive tomorrow*. Those who are pleasing to Christ will be generously rewarded; those who are not pleasing to Him will receive negative consequences and a lesser reward. In other words, your life *here* will impact your life *there* forever.

If the knowledge that we will give an account to Christ “for [the] deeds [done] in the body, . . . whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10 NASB) does not motivate us to faithful living, it is quite possible that nothing else will. Here at last

we must own up to the question of how much we really do love Christ. In that day there will be no place to hide.

Resist the temptation to think about how others might fare while standing in Christ's presence. Indeed, no doctrine should make us more hesitant to judge our brothers and sisters, for we shall stand before the same Christ as they. Let us not think we can do God's work of judgment for Him. There is a place for church discipline, but there is no place for a critical, unforgiving, judgmental spirit.

Also resist the temptation to hide behind a preconceived theological bias that would render the judgment seat of Christ of little consequence. Read with an open mind, willing to grapple with the full impact of what God has revealed. Along the way we will continue to expose those misinterpretations that have weakened the biblical teaching on the subject.

Join me on a journey that will challenge your thinking and, I pray, change your life. Let's prepare for that day when you and I will be alone with Christ; just reality and no pretense. Matthew Henry wrote, "It ought to be the business of every day to prepare for our last day."

Let's begin the journey.