

Incorruptible Crowns

Throughout the New Testament the Bible speaks of three different types of crowns. These crowns are given after death as a reward for a life well-lived. They are the crown of **righteousness**, the crown of **life**, and the crown of **glory**. These crowns are not crowns of authority, but are actually *prizes*. This is how my Greek Lexicon defines the word:

Crown (4735): A badge of royalty, a prize in the public games or a symbol of honor generally. "In classic Greek not used of the kingly crown but of the crown of victory in games, of civic worth, military valor, nuptial joy, festal gladness. Woven of oak, ivy, myrtle, olive leaves or flowers. Used as a wreath of the garland. Contrast diadema (1238), diadem, a white linen band encircling the brow to indicate the assumption of royal dignity."

The crowns in the ancient world were temporary things that quickly passed away. After all, a crown of leaves or flowers would not last very long. However, the crowns the Bible speaks of are much more permanent. The apostle Paul says that we are striving to obtain *incorruptible* crowns:

I Corinthians 9:24: "Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain.

25 And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible.

26 I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air:

27 But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway."

Notice how Paul explains that the prize we are racing for is something that can be lost. The Bible says that we cannot lose our salvation, so that is not what Paul had in mind. These crowns are something else – they are something that we have to work to obtain, lest we wind up short and become "castaways". If we want these crowns then we are going to have to earn them.

There are many people who believe that they can live however they please because "We're all going to go to Heaven anyway, so it doesn't really matter." That attitude is completely wrong. In this passage Paul tells us that it really *does* matter. There is a very real danger that if we do not live well we will lose something precious. We have to race well if we want to win the prize. If we do not then we will not be awarded anything. Paul put a great deal of effort into winning this prize; he says that he fought hard and brought his body under subjection so that he would win. These incorruptible crowns are worth striving and sacrificing for. These crowns are not meaningless trinkets; they have great value.

The Bible speaks of three different types of incorruptible crowns. The first one is the **crown of righteousness**:

2 Timothy 4:7: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith:

8 Henceforth is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing."

This crown will be given to all those who long for the return of Jesus Christ and who are excited about His return. These people don't dread the prospect of Jesus coming back, but instead long for it with great hope and anticipation.

Let me point out that the prize here is the *crown* of righteousness, not righteousness itself. Righteousness is not something we can earn. The only way we can obtain it is through the Lord Jesus Christ, who gives us His righteousness when we are saved. However, the crown of righteousness is different. In order to get it you have to earn it, and the way you earn it is by longing for the return of Christ.

It's worth noting that the crown of righteousness is *not* the prize for leading a holy life. Instead it is given to those who long for Jesus to come back. All those who are saved and who long for His return will be given this crown. All those who are indifferent, or who hate the idea of His return, or who hope He will stay away so that His return does not interfere with their plans, will not receive it.

James speaks of another type of crown – the **crown of life**:

James 1:12: “Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him.”

This crown is given to those who *endure temptation*. You see, Christ wants us to love Him, and the way we show our love for Him is by keeping His commandments. Those who keep His commandments prove that they really do love Him; their love is not just in words, but is in actions as well. Those who endure temptation and defeat it, choosing to walk in the ways of God instead of the ways of the flesh, will be given the crown of life.

This passage is *not* talking about eternal life itself, because that is something that God freely gives to us after we are saved. We cannot earn it and we cannot lose it. The only way to obtain eternal life is by faith in Jesus Christ, and those who believe on Him will live forever (John 11:26). James is *not* saying that if we give in to temptation we will be condemned to Hell regardless of whether we are Christians or not. This crown is something different; it is a reward for those who have endured trials and lived a holy life. Some Christians will receive this and some will not.

Christ Himself speaks of this crown in Revelation:

Revelation 2:10: “Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days; be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.”

Once again note that Christ promises the crown to those who are faithful unto *death*. He did not say “Your faithfulness does not matter because you get it either way”. Our salvation and the promise of eternal life *does not rest on our faithfulness*; instead it rests on the faithfulness of Christ. The crown of life, however, is different. Those who are faithful unto death will receive it, and those who were faithless will not.

Peter speaks of the third type of crown – the **crown of glory**:

1 Peter 5:1: “The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed:

2 Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by

constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind;
3 Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock.
4 And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that
fadeth not away."

This crown is promised to those who faithfully and selflessly take care of the Church. It will be given to pastors, evangelists, and elders that executed their job faithfully. Those who did well will be given the crown of glory, and those who were faithless will lose it.

As I have said before, these crowns *can* be lost. There are requirements attached to them, and success is not guaranteed. Some people will gain them and others will not. Jesus Himself warns us to be careful lest we lose our crowns:

Revelation 3:11: "Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown."

Our *salvation* cannot be lost and *eternal life* cannot be lost, so Christ is clearly not talking about either of those. What *can* be lost are our crowns, because they are rewards for a life well lived. If we dread the return of Christ then we will not be given the crown of righteousness. If we live selfish, carnal lives then we will never receive the crown of life. Finally, if we are pastors that choose to side with the world instead of the Bible then we will never receive the crown of glory.

Incidentally, the last time that these crowns are mentioned in Scripture is in the book of Revelation. Take a look at what people are doing with their crowns:

Revelation 4:10: "The four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

11 Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created."

The reason people are casting their crowns before God is so that they might honor Him with them. They are taking their glory and honor and giving it to the Lord. Why? Because God alone is worthy. God, after all, is the one who gave them the grace they needed to endure temptation and live faithfully. In the end, even our rewards are used to bring glory and honor to the Living God.

Incidentally, this is yet more evidence that the crowns are real, physical crowns and not just something symbolic or "spiritual". After all, how can you cast a "spiritual" crown at the feet of Christ?