

Eye on the Ball

I felt cheated! The man I hired to simply move an electrical line overcharged me by some \$8,000. Like an emotional eruption, as I gazed at the invoice, I began imagining all sorts of mean and vengeful things I could do in response – not just for a moment but pretty much the whole day! And of course, I was miserable as a result. Perhaps that gives you an idea of the depth of my pitiful spirituality. But God, in His mercy, dealt with me.

Not many of us have the luxury of being able to chuck out the window eight grand and carelessly continue on, but that wasn't the point at all. Yes, I thought I was robbed, but that wasn't the point either. God knew I needed a reminder, for my wicked heart had strayed from a foundational need. I'll illustrate this need with a story you know well...

Abram was a little perturbed. After risking his life to rescue his nephew Lot, he returned to the Kings Valley where he tithed to the King of Salem and refused the reward of the king of Sodom. His refusal was commendable and yet there was a weight on his shoulder – a chip so to speak.

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward."

But Abram said, "Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, ..." (Gen 15:1,2)

Now, don't get me wrong – Abram wasn't ticked with God like I was with the electrician. However, the

Lord was putting forth a magnificent point and that was the lesson Abram as well as all believers need to know and be reminded of periodically.

Now, Abram received the vision but not the message, not yet. Do you see his misunderstanding? God said to him, "*I (am) ... your exceedingly great reward.*" Yet, Abram replied, "*Lord GOD, what will you give me...?*"

Abram missed it. Maybe it was because of the mental 'noise' of his disappointment or self pity. (I can sure relate to that, sad to say.) God didn't say, "I have a reward for you." Or, "I'll send you something special." God said, "*I (am) your exceedingly great reward.*" It wasn't something He had with which to enrich Abram – more sheep or goats, more gold or servants. It was God Himself.

Now, the Hebrew word translated "reward" is quite interesting. This passage is its first mention in scripture. It's basic meaning is "wages". It is derived from the word meaning "to hire". In essence, God said, "I (am) your exceedingly great wages."

Of course, your mind immediately reacts with the question, 'Wages? How could Abram work to earn anything from God? Doesn't this fly in the face of grace?' To answer this, let's listen to what Jesus said on the subject...

He had just fed these folks an all you can eat feast – bread and fish, but they wanted more. Consequently, Jesus said to them, "*Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him.*"

Then they said to Him, "What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?"

Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent." (John 6:27:29)

Herein, Jesus made it clear that God's fundamental work is faith, specifically, saving faith. This type of earning is essentially different than physical work. It is, in a manner of speaking, an effortless earning, wages that aren't labored for literally but acquired by believing.

Back to our story – Abram had believed in God and obeyed Him by departing from Ur and then Haran. He had followed the Lord to the Promised Land. But this wasn't necessarily the kind of belief that resulted in righteousness. That's because it was really more an issue of obedience. (Like keeping the Law, if you would.) One leads to the other but not necessarily the other way around. Obedience, on its own, is known as religious observance. Faith, 'on its own', however, leads to righteousness. Of course, the scripture points out that it doesn't remain on its own but also leads to obedience out of a grateful heart. (see Jam 2:20)

So, at this point, God presented Abram with a crisis of faith. He had to believe God and not simply obey Him. He had to believe Him for something beyond his own ability – for something only God could do.

You see, simply believing that God exists does not give one salvation. James wrote, *You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!* (Jam 2:19) and the writer of Hebrews tells us, *But*

without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. (Heb 11:6)

So God said that He Himself was Abram's exceedingly great wages – wages earned by faith in God yet...
...Abram said, "Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!"

Abram didn't have this saving faith just yet. This kind of faith in the Old Testament is referred to as righteousness. In fact, Paul used this very passage in Romans 4 to illustrate that Abraham was saved by faith and that's the faith that was about to be born --

And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir." Then He brought him outside and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be."

And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness. (Gen 15:4-6)

Now, you may be thinking, 'How wonderful for God to bless Abram like this. To be his "exceedingly great reward" He must have meant that Abram would have a close intimate relationship with Him.' And indeed, He did. But, there was/is much, exceedingly much, more to this promise. For like all of us who believe, Abram was also a mortal man, prone to sin, and the wages of sin is death. For an intimate relationship with God to exist, sin must be dealt with; its wages must be paid.

So God also meant that He Himself was Abram's exceedingly great wages – wages earned by Abram's sin... In this, He was saying prophetically that He would pay the exceedingly great wages of sin by dying in Abram's place. Jesus Christ became our sin if you would on the cross – the Word says, *For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.* (2 Cor 5:21) Now, I'm convinced that Abram didn't understand that at this point, but it is recorded for our profit who look to the blessed cross of Calvary for our salvation.

Jesus Christ is Abram's exceedingly great reward; ours too, who believe. As a matter of fact, God confirmed that this was the primary point of His promise through the covenant He made with Abram which immediately follows this passage (see Gen 15:9, 10). In it, Abram was told to bring a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon. When he brought all these to the Lord, he cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. This was known as 'cutting covenant' and the practice of making a covenant in such a grizzly manner was not uncommon in that day. However, the specifics of this particular set up all speak very prophetically of Jesus and His sacrifice on Golgatha. In the law which was to come, the heifer was the sacrificial animal of dedication; the goat was the animal upon which the people's sins were laid vicariously and sent out to be

slaughtered outside the camp; the ram was the sacrificial animal of substitution. The dove is a symbol of the Holy Spirit and the nestling represents innocence and purity.

Three years speaks of the length of the Lord's earthly ministry which was terminated by His sacrifice on the cross. You see, there is no greater wage, no greater reward than Jesus Christ and yet along with Him, there's even more.

Paul wrote, *"He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?"* (Rom 8:32)

Wow! Eternal life, heaven's bliss, endless love, pleasures forevermore, an enormous happy family, a sinless character, indescribable joy and peace ... on and on it goes ... all things, ALL things. We are mind-numbingly blessed.

In heaven. It's in heaven. It's in heaven and it's forever.

It's so easy to get wrapped up in the "affairs of this life". I'm not advocating a mindless ignorance of our daily challenges but rather the need for a frequent realignment of our priorities. We so easily get enticed by the rewards/wages available in this life don't we. But our true rewards are in heaven. By comparison, all that we could possess in the here and now is only a vapor, dust in the wind.

For this reason, our Savior said, *"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal."* (Mat 6:19,20)

The Bible is full of promises, but perhaps the most wonderful of all is this: *"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him"* (1 Corinthians 2:9). There are many things we do not know about heaven but what we can be sure of is that it will fulfill our greatest longings, it will dazzle us with its beauty, it will obliterate our greatest problems with its power and splendor, it will be greater than anything we could imagine or dream, it will be a place where love and joy will reign unspoiled.

Joni Eareckson who became a quadriplegic as a result of a diving accident nearly 30 years ago has experienced more than her share of pain and heartache. She says that *"heaven has become my heart's home, the place where I will finally belong. The place where I will get a brand new body."* She continues, *"In the world's finale something so glorious is going to happen that it will atone for every single tear we've ever cried. God is going to give us the key that will make sense out of what now seems to be such senseless suffering. Heaven is going to be a place of no more disappointment, no more grief but joy. Heaven's joy."*

In Heaven there will be:

No more Death
No more Graves
No more Temptations
No more Sickness
No more Fear
No more Night
No more Depression
No more Disappointments
No more Pain
No more Separations
No more Divorce

No more Betrayal
No more Aging
No more Disease
No more Bills to Pay
No more Loneliness
No more Hate
No more Devil
No more Bad Memories
No more Not Having Enough.

In a manner of speaking, Heaven will be Eden restored. You could say we have been living east of Eden since Adam and Eve sinned, but the day will come when the original paradise God intended us to be a part of will be restored. The Bible gives this promise concerning the earth: *"The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God"* (Romans 8:19-21).

Heaven will be right. It will be a place of righteousness, or rightness. All the wrongs of the world will be made right. It will be a place where everything evil is absent, and everything good is present; everything sad will be gone, and only joy will exist; everything disappointing will disappear, and everything exciting will appear; everything depressing will be gone, and everything hopeful will come; everything violent and hateful will be gone, and everything born of love will prevail; every unfaithfulness will be in the past, and steadfast loyalty will be present; everything detestable will be gone, and everything desirable will abide with

us; every sickness will be gone, and complete wholeness will take over our lives; every struggle, frustration and failure will be over, and only success will be possible.

Every wrong done to you in this world will be made right. Every injustice will meet with justice. Every sorrow will be reversed, and joy will wash over you like a waterfall.

—R Buchanan

In addition, Heaven will be fantastically relational. As a matter of fact, you will be reunited again with those you may think you have lost who have known Christ and lived for him — if you belong to Christ. You see, as believers, our relationships are not lost; to the contrary, they will be regained and renewed. We will experience them at a level we have never known before. Deep, rewarding and fulfilling relationships are the essence of heaven. On earth, we let each other down and disappoint each other. Many times, without knowing it, we hurt each other and fail one another. But there, *“we will all be changed — in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed”* (1 Corinthians 15:51-52).

In addition, our love for God and our relationship with him will be unspoiled. There will be nothing between us at all — no separation. Our sinful nature will be taken away, and we will no longer struggle with sin and temptation. Our relationship with God will be so intimate that the book of Revelation describes it as a bride coming to her husband — full of love and passion, with arms open wide.

Dear friends in Christ, home is on its way, but it is not here yet. Don't make the mistake of thinking it is. And when it gets here He will make “everything new.” Jesus said, *“Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done”* (Revelation 22:12). Every sacrifice you have made will be remembered. Every sorrow you have experienced will be dispelled with countless joys. Every rejection will be overcome by an explosion of love. Every work will be rewarded. Far from every mistake being brought out, every good thing you have done will be honored and recompensed.

In C. S. Lewis' wonderful books The Chronicles of Narnia, the characters who have lived in Narnia have completed their time and work there. In a closing chapter entitled “Further Up and Further In,” Aslan, the lion who represents Christ, has come for them in order to take them home. They are headed away from Narnia and are about to enter Aslan's land. But they are met with familiar scenes. One of the characters cries out: “I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this.” -- Buchanan

May your vision and desire for the King of heaven be renewed. Keep your eye on the ball! Our time here is short. Live for Jesus then *“Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven...”* (Mat 5:12)