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THE CROWNS OF SCRIPTURE

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It may surprise some readers of the Bible to learn that there are at least seventy references in the Bible to the winning of crowns, and ten at least to the action of crowning. These crowns are not all alike. Some are spoken of as golden crowns, others of leaves; and we can never forget the 'Crown of thorns' our blessed Lord was made to wear in mockery on the cross of Calvary 'for us men and our salvation'. But for that crowning and agony on the cross, there would have been no crowns for us. But now having 'purchased for us so great salvation', He has opened the way for His redeemed people so to live and serve Him faithfully, that we in turn may prove our faithfulness to Him and be made worthy to wear such crown as He sees fit to bestow according to His purpose.

It is of practical concern and interest therefore for all true believers to study, in some brief measure at least, what these rewards are, and how they are to be won in this present day of witness and service for the Lord—until He returns. Questions of the relative sequence of events leading on to His coming again for His church need not detain us just now: it is the personal challenge in each mention of such predicted rewards as the Scriptures describe which demands our whole-hearted response in the day and sphere in which we are now living. The apostle Paul exhorts the believers in Thessalonica: 'that ye should *walk worthily of God*, who called you into His kingdom and glory': they had 'turned unto God from idols, to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven . . .' (1 Thess. 2:12; and ch. 1:9 and 10. Read the passages carefully).

We shall study briefly five out of the many references to crowns, keeping in view the practical lesson we may learn for ourselves.

(1) '*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.'

We are all open to testings and temptations of one kind and another in our daily life; Christ Himself warned us it would be so: 'In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world' (John 16:33). Therefore, in spite of the Devil's attempts to entice us away from our allegiance to Christ, there is always a 'way of escape': in fact, every such temptation endured and overcome by the Holy Spirit's enabling contributes to the winning of this 'Crown of Life'.

It should be remarked that some students of Scripture consider that this Crown is the same as the '*Martyr's Crown*' referred to in Revelation 2:10, 11, which is specially for those who have so wholly loved and served the Lord as to be willing to suffer death itself rather than deny Him in any manner. In this book of Revelation, chap. 3:11, a special word of encouragement by the Lord Himself is added: 'Behold I come quickly, hold fast that which thou hast, that no man take thy crown'. Whilst the eternal security of the believer is guaranteed in Christ, the matter of *reward* for faithfulness is conditioned by the measure and quality of our allegiance and devoted obedience to His will in daily life and our testimony before the world.

(2) '*The Incorruptible Crown*' (1 Corinthians 9:24-27). Read the verses in your own Bible carefully; It is the picture of the athlete running in a strenuous race with all kinds of competitors.

We are all 'running in the Race of Life': each individually and separately, from one standpoint; but from another standpoint it is collective; 'they which run in a race run *all*—but *one* receiveth the prize', not because the number of *prizes* is limited in any sense, but each individual must prove his or her 'worthiness' to receive the award. Each must learn the lesson of self-discipline in the 'school of Christ', Who is ever ready to teach us through

His Word, divinely inspired and open for all to 'read, mark, learn and inwardly digest'. 'If ye abide in My Word, then are ye truly My disciples; and ye shall know the truth and the truth shall *make you free*' (Jn. 8: 31 R.V.); that is, free from fleshly feebleness, and the fear of the world's criticism.

Let us quote verses 26, 27 in the Corinthian Letter as given in the New Translation by J. B. Phillips; it helps to bring out the contrast between the world's 'fading crown of leaves', for which men (and women) will strain every muscle and nerve to win in athletic contests, and the heavenly and '*eternal crown* that will never fade'. 'I therefore run the race with determination. I am no shadow-boxer, I really fight! I am my body's sternest master, for fear that when I have preached to others I should myself be disqualified'. Incidentally, the student-type of reader will find it worthwhile to compare the two versions used above with the authorised version.

(3) '*The Crown of Glory*' (1 Peter 5: 4). 'When the chief Shepherd shall be manifested, ye shall receive a *Crown of Glory that fadeth not away*.' The reward spoken of here is for such as have been given the privilege and gift of 'eldership' in the assemblies of God's people as constituted according to New Testament teaching and principles. Such gifts of eldership are of the greatest importance, and are to be exercised for the building up and strengthening of the members collectively and individually. Their character and service are to be 'ensamples to the flock' (v. 3). Christ Himself was careful to warn as well as instruct His disciples as to what should be avoided and what should be the right spirit in directing any collective company of true believers and amongst other things He stressed the serious danger of allowing unholy ambitions and self-seeking to gain the upper hand, (cf. Matt. 20:25-28; Mark 9:34, 35; Luke 22:24-26).

But the apostle Peter earnestly exhorts: 'be subject one to another', and adds: 'ye younger submit yourselves unto the elder' (v. 5). At the same time he is very definite in stating that all such under-shepherds of the Flock of God (vs. 1-2) will have to give an account of their spiritual stewardship when the Chief-Shepherd returns for His Flock. In that Day of solemn reckoning

His shepherd-servants shall receive from His own blessed hands, and bear off in triumph amid the acclamations of assembled saints and angels '*The Unfading Crown of Glory*': note that the Greek text has the article, singling out this Crown as the only one of its kind. Such under-shepherds shall reign as kings, and glory itself shall be their Crown.

In view of such prospects of coming glory, let us live out in our individual experience and in our *collective* testimony the Apostle's gracious and earnest appeal as recorded in Hebrews 13 : 15-17. It is no mere verbiage to urge the practical application of the appeal in this day of subtle temptations to 'live the *easy* life'.

(4) '*The Crown of Righteousness*' (2 Timothy 4 : 7, 8) 'I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith : Henceforth there is laid up for me the Crown of Righteousness which the Lord, the Righteous Judge, shall give to me at that Day; and not to me only, but to all them that have loved His appearing (R.V.). Whatever other meaning we may find in this passage, it is primarily a reference to quality of character disciplined in the Word of God, as indicated in the previous chapter, verses 14-17. The divine objective is that the 'man of God may be perfected, thoroughly furnished unto all good works'. Hence we are to 'follow after righteousness' (1 Tim. 6 : 11; 2 Tim. 2 : 22. And see 2 Tim. 3 : 16, 17). The great objective is to be 'pursued' with all the intensity of our redeemed faculties : heart, mind and will.

At the end of the 'race' is the 'Crown of Righteousness, which the Lord the Righteous Judge will bestow upon all them who have their love set on His appearing' (2 Tim. 4:8, R.V.). It is not possible to dogmatise as to what actually constitutes this crown, but if we take it as strictly parallel with 'the crown of life,' or 'the crown of glory', the reward here would be righteousness *as a crown*. But whatever it is, it will be nothing less than that which speaks of glory and perfection: is not its 'Great Designer' and Awarder the Eternally Righteous and Holy God?

(5) In closing, brief mention may be made to the scene of Glory recorded by the apostle John in the Book of Revelation (chap. 4 : 4):

‘And round about the Throne were four and twenty seats : and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment ; *and they had on their heads crowns of gold.*’

The ‘elders’, as they are termed, wearing crowns, represent the company of redeemed and glorified saints in Heaven *after* the Resurrection has taken place (see 1 Corinthians 15:23; 1 Thesalonians 4:17). ‘Their Crowns and Thrones betoken their royal dignity; the Harp and Song indicate their joy in worship; while their robes and vials point to priestly character and action. (W. Scott).

The Throne in the midst is occupied by none other than Christ Himself, the Son of man and Son of God, in transcendent Glory. What do these glorified saints do with their crowns? For answer read Revelation 4:10 and 11.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

H. L. ELLISON, B.A., B.D.

1. The Fertile Crescent

In a day when the Gospel has gone round the world, it is sometimes hard to grasp that the history of man and of salvation contained in the Old Testament was played out in a relatively small area until the rise of Cyrus, king of Persia. By conquering the empires of the Medes and of Croesus, king of Lydia, as well as Babylon, he permanently widened the stage in which God's purposes were being worked out. Since the establishment of the Persian empire is one of the latest historical incidents in the Old Testament—Cyrus captured Babylon in 539 B.C., and Nehemiah's second visit to Jerusalem was in 433 B.C.—it and its results will be virtually ignored here. A closer description of Palestine, where so many of the main incidents of the Old Testament took place, is reserved for the second half of this study.

The lands of the Old Testament, apart from Egypt and omitting