

Are there rewards in heaven?

By Dr. Jim Denison

The Academy Awards are presented each February. The winners each receive something called an "Oscar," though no one knows why. One possible answer is that early on, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences librarian said the statuette represented her Uncle Oscar.

An Oscar weighs 8.5 pounds and stands 13.5 inches tall. It depicts a knight holding a crusader's sword, standing on a reel of film. It takes twelve people twenty hours to make one of the 50 statuettes produced each year. The Oscars are then shipped in unmarked cardboard boxes for security reasons. Security isn't always effective, however—a few years ago they were stolen and found nine days later next to a dumpster.

Who won last year? Which movie? Which stars? The year before? How long will you remember this year's winners and losers? Millennia after our culture has disappeared, eternity will only have begun. Jesus promised the thief on the cross, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). What was "paradise" like for that convicted felon? What will it be like for you and me? Why does it all matter today?

What is heaven like?

When Ronald Reagan was running for Governor of California, a woman confronted him by his car one day and berated him severely. Finally she said, "I wouldn't vote for you if you were St. Peter." He smiled and replied, "No problem. If I were St. Peter, you wouldn't be living in my district."

What do we know about "St. Peter's district"? We're all fascinated with the subject of heaven. Every one of us has loved ones there; I assume we all would like to spend eternity there ourselves. So let's learn from God's word about his home.

What is heaven?

What does our Father tell us about our eternal destiny? First, he tells us that heaven is *real*. It is certain—no figment of religious imagination, no superstition, no "opiate of the people" (Karl Marx). He revealed it to John: "I saw a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21:1). According to God himself, heaven is real.

Second, heaven is a *place* (Revelation 21:1-2). John "saw" it. He didn't feel it, or dream of it, or hear about it. He saw it, and we only see things which are. Heaven is a place. Jesus said, "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a *place* for you" (John 14:2; emphasis mine).

Third, heaven is *where God is* (Revelation 21:3). John reveals, "Now the dwelling of God is with men." When we get to heaven, we get to God. Psalm 11:4 is clear: "The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord is on his heavenly throne." Jesus taught us to pray to

"Our Father in heaven" (Matthew 6:9). Heaven is a real place, where God is. It's being with God.

Fourth, heaven is a *blessed place* (Revelation 21:4). Because God is there, all that is perfect is there as well. There will be no death in heaven, thus no mourning or crying or pain. Our greatest enemy will trouble us no more. It's a place of incredible joy: "You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand" (Psalm 16:11). It's a place of reward: "Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Matthew 6:20). And this reward is eternal: "An inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you" (1 Peter 1:4).

Such a glorious place is celebration, a party: "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God" (Luke 14:15). We reign in heaven: "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne" (Revelation 3:21). In heaven, we're royalty. We'll have perfect understanding there: "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

To sum up, in heaven God makes all things new (Revelation 21:5). No more Fall, or sin, or death, or disease, or disaster; no more earthquakes or fears or tests or grades. Everything is new. No wonder Jesus called heaven "paradise" (Luke 23:43). It is a place of blessing beyond all description: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what the Lord has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9; cf. Isaiah 64.4).

What will we be like?

First, let's set aside a popular misconception: in heaven, people are not angels. God created angels before he created us, and we are completely different. When Jesus said that people in heaven are "like the angels" (Luke 20:36), he meant that we never die, as they do not. Not that we have "wings and a halo" (they don't either, by the way). We are not angels. But we do receive heavenly bodies: "The perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality" (1 Corinthians 15:53).

Will we recognize each other? I think so, for these reasons. Jesus said that in heaven we will take our places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Matthew 8:11), so apparently we will recognize them. On the Mount of Transfiguration the disciples easily recognized Moses and Elijah (Matthew 17:3-4). Paul promised that in heaven we will "know as we are known" (1 Corinthians 13:12). I like what one preacher said: "We won't really know each other *until* we get to heaven!"

Why does heaven matter?

I would imagine that the biblical truths we've rehearsed so far are good news. But let me ask: how often did you think about heaven this week? Did its existence change anything you did? Why should it? For this simple reason: when we lose heaven we lose the

transcendent. We lose our sense that there is something more than this world, and we who live in it. And that is always a bad decision.

If we don't live for heaven we will live for this world, for it is all there is. And that the Bible says we must not do: "Do not love the world or anything in the world" (1 John 2:15; cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17; Colossians 3:1-3; Philippians 3:20). Why are we not to love this world? Because it is not enough. The more we have, the more we want. It is not our home.

We live for heaven when we care more for people's eternal souls than for their temporal approval; when we use our money to build God's kingdom more than our own; when we ask God to use our suffering more than to solve it; when we remember that this life is the car and not the house, the road and not the destination; when we make sure every day that we're ready to die.

So, are you living for heaven?

How will we be rewarded in heaven?

A dear elderly saint was near death, and gave her pastor a strange request: "When my casket is opened at the funeral, and all my friends come by for a last look, I want them to see me ready to be buried with a table fork in my right hand."

She explained to her puzzled pastor, "I want you to tell the congregation, you know what it means when they clear the dishes from a big meal and someone says, 'keep your fork.' You know that something good is coming—maybe a piece of apple pie or chocolate cake. 'Keep your fork' means something good is coming. Pastor, I want to be buried with a dessert fork in my hand. It will be my way of saying, 'the best is yet to come.'"

And so it was. Everyone who saw her body in the casket saw her final witness. For her, death and judgment were not a disaster, but dessert. How can that be true for you and me, when we stand before God in judgment one day?

Living for heaven is in your best interest on earth and in glory, in time and in eternity. The Bible has much to say about our judgment and rewards in heaven. We'll look briefly at the subject, and relate it to our lives today.

Will your building last?

In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul paints the picture of life as a house we build. His discussion makes four facts clear.

First, *your "house" is the gift of God* (v. 10). Paul's abilities and opportunities to be an "expert builder" were given to him by God. His relationship with Jesus Christ is God's grace gift to him. All we have and are comes by his grace.

The doctrine of judgment does not teach a works righteousness. We cannot earn God's love or favor. Judgment means that we are to be faithful stewards of the grace gifts and opportunities of God, and are accountable for them. But no one deserves the rewards given at the judgment—they come by his grace.

Second, *your house must be founded on Jesus* (v. 11). He is the unchanging, stable rock upon which to build your life. Not just your religion, or your Sunday mornings, but every priority, commitment, and ambition. Your life must be bolted to him.

Third, *you are responsible for what you build* (v. 12). The foundation is determined. What we build on it is not. Some of us use "gold, silver, costly stones" such as marble and granite. We give God our best. We invest in that which is permanent and eternal. We put souls before success, family before finances, God before gold. When the "fire" of judgment comes, gold, silver, and marble stand the test. You've seen ancient marble ruins, standing for thousands of years, ready to stand for thousands more. So with some of us.

On the other hand, some of us build our lives out of "wood, hay, or straw." We give God what is cheap, convenient, easy. He gets the leftovers. And when we are judged, our disobedience will be obvious to all.

Fourth, *God will judge our lives* (vs. 13-15). One day the judgment will come—the "Day" (v. 13). Those who lived for God will be rewarded, as we'll see in a moment (v. 14). Those of us who lived for ourselves, for this fallen world, for that which is temporary and inferior, will "suffer loss" (v. 15a). God cannot reward disobedience.

If we have made Jesus our Savior, we will be saved. Our eternal salvation is not in question. But our eternal rewards are, and if our house has been built out of wood, hay, or straw, we will "be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames" (v. 15b). How do people run out of a burning house? With nothing.

You've perhaps heard about the crooked building contractor who built a house for a wealthy friend, cutting corners wherever he could. Inferior products and workmanship throughout. When the house was finished, the wealthy friend gave the man the keys and said, "It's yours."

There's a story about a business tycoon who made a fortune in money and fame, but gave little of himself or his wealth to God. When he died, Peter showed him to his home in heaven—a small shack. He protested loudly, and Peter shrugged his shoulders and explained, "I did the best I could with what you sent me."

You and I are responsible for what we do with the lives God has given us by his grace. They are to be founded on Jesus as Lord, built of our best commitment to him. One day the Building Inspector will visit our house. And his judgment will be eternal.

These are the facts of God's word. Now let's ask some questions.

Will you be judged?

First, will you be judged? Would a loving Father of grace and mercy judge his children? Hebrews 9:27 is clear: "Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment." All of us—no exceptions. Paul said, "Each of us will give an account of himself to God" (Romans 14:12).

A man in the congregation laughed when the pastor said, "Members of this church, you will all die one day and face the judgment of God." The pastor asked him why he laughed, and he said, "I'm not a member of this church." But he is. So are we all.

By whom will we be judged? By Jesus: "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:10).

The "judgment seat" was a raised platform where the ruler sat and judged those brought before him. At this "bema seat" Pilate once judged Jesus; now Jesus judges Pilate. Jesus was very clear on this: "the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son" (John 5:22). Peter said, "[Jesus] is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead" (Acts 10:42). Paul agreed: "God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ" (Romans 2:16).

When? At his return: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him," and he will judge them (Matthew 25:31-32).

Jesus will judge us all, at his return. We cannot escape. But if we're prepared, this will not be terror but triumph; not a curse but a crown. Let's see how to be ready today.

How will we be judged?"

How will this judgment happen? God's word describes two books of judgment: "Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done...If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:11-13, 15).

First, there is the book of works. Here God has recorded your deeds and mine. Now he will judge them. What will he find? "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. . . The wages [judgment] for sin is death" (Romans 3:23, 6:23). No one can get to heaven on the basis of the book of works. None of us is good enough.

And so there is a second book, the book of life, and it's the key. What is it?

I believe that when your life began, you were recorded in this "book of life." Moses said to God: "Please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written." The Lord replied, "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book" (Exodus 32:32-33).

God has your name in his book, and must "blot it out" if you choose to reject his free salvation in Christ. When you die without Christ, God is forced to remove your name from his book of life, and you'll be "thrown into the lake of fire." Scripture is very clear: "Nothing impure will ever enter [heaven], nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life" (Revelation 21:27).

But if you have accepted Christ as Savior and Lord, your name will be there forever. Jesus said to his disciples, "Rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20). Paul addressed the Philippian Christians as "my fellow laborers, whose names are in the book of life" (Philippians 4:3).

However, heaven is not the only question at the judgment. Heavenly rewards or loss of rewards is at issue as well: "If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss" (1 Corinthians 3:14-15). Why will we suffer "loss" of reward?

- Secret, unconfessed sins will be judged: "God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:14).
- "There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs" (Luke 12:2-3).
- Our words will be judged: "I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken" (Matthew 12:36-37).
- After listing all sorts of sin, Peter declared that those who do such things "will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead" (1 Peter 4:5).

Ungodly, unconfessed sins, thoughts, or words will be revealed at the judgment and burned away. Because heaven is perfect, these things cannot enter in; they must be burned off, destroyed. Sin is forgiven, but reward is lost.

On the other hand, "gold, silver, costly stones" are rewarded. What kind of rewards?

- There is the "crown of life": "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him" (James 1:12). Jesus said, "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10).

- There is the "soul-winner's crown:" "What is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy" (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20).
- There is the "crown of righteousness:" "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:7-8).
- For Christian leaders there is the "crown of glory:" "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away" (1 Peter 5:2-4).

Gold, silver, costly stones will be rewarded with everlasting crowns. For what? Enduring temptation; winning souls; staying faithful to God's purpose; serving God's people in love. This is the building which lasts forever.

Conclusion

Let's summarize. You and I will stand one day before Jesus Christ in judgment. If you have rejected him as Savior and Lord, your name will not be in his book of life, and you've chosen hell over heaven forever. If you've accepted him, heaven is already yours. Your name is in his book, forever.

But the book of works will determine your rewards or loss of rewards. Ungodly words, secret sins, immorality will be burned away and suffer loss; holiness, soul-winning, faithfulness, and loving service will be rewarded with eternal crowns. We need to be ready, today.

C. S. Lewis once said that there are two kinds of people. Some say to God, "Your will be done." For them the judgment will be reward and victory. To the others God must finally say, "Your will be done." They have rejected heaven, or rewards in heaven.

Is it his will or yours? You have only today to decide.

The largest statue ever carved from a single piece of stone weighed more than two million pounds. It was a figure of Ramses I, the Egyptian Pharaoh who died in 1317 B.C. When the children of Israel left Egypt, they passed his enormous statue.

Who would have dreamed that these ragged former slaves, trudging out into the hardships of the unknown desert, would amount to anything? But today Ramses' statue lies broken in the sands of Egypt. Meanwhile, the movement God began with those children of Israel, men and women willing to live in God's will and for his glory, have been used by

his hand to change our world forever. To touch your soul and mind. To glorify our Maker and King.

Such people of faith win the only Oscar that matters. Will you?