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The Christian and his crowns

*A study of the crowns or rewards of the Christian
according to the New Testament*

"Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been proved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him".

James 1:12

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Preface

The crowns that are received by believers are not granted to them because of their own efforts or their faithfulness. This appears from the fact that in Revelation 4, the glorified saints cast their crowns before the throne, giving all honour to Him who sits on it. Not we ourselves, but *He alone* is worthy to receive glory and honour!

On the other hand it remains true that the crowns symbolize *the Lord's approval* and His acknowledgement of His people. They stimulate us as Christians to be faithful in our trials, to persevere and to press on toward the glorious goal of our calling. But in the end, the crowns are actually nothing but the proof of His grace and favour to all those who love Him. Let us take to heart the teaching of the New Testament on this subject for our own encouragement, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.

London, Spring 2006

Trying to link James 1 with the first chapters of Genesis might seem a little far-fetched. Nevertheless, there is a certain connection between them, which can be supported by the following arguments. In the *first* place, we can find more of these references to Genesis in the general Epistles. James mentions Abraham and Isaac as well as Job, who very probably lived even before the patriarchs (Jas. 2:21; 5:11). Peter in his first letter speaks about Abraham and Sarah, about Noah and the ark (1 Pet. 3:6,20). In his second letter he mentions Noah again, as well as the flood, the sin of those angels who had left their original state (cf. Gen. 6:1-4), the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah and the rescue of Lot (2 Pet. 2:4-7; 3:6). John in his first letter mentions the fall of Satan and the murder of Abel by his brother Cain (1 John 3:8, 12). Jude too speaks about Cain, as well as Enoch and Adam, and, like Peter in his second letter, he mentions the sin of the angels and of Sodom and Gomorrah.

In the *second* place, some specific words occur in James 1 that remind us of the account of Creation and the Fall as we find it in Genesis 1-3. The following word groups are mentioned here:

- (1) trial, lust, sin;
- (2) death and life;
- (3) the Father of lights (i.e., the celestial bodies);
- (4) to bring forth;
- (5) firstfruits of His creatures (Jas. 1:12-18).

For these reasons I believe that we should read the first chapter of *James* against the background of the first three chapters of the book of *Genesis*. The apostle James in his argumentation presupposes the knowledge of creation and of the Fall, as he could of course expect from Jews who knew the writings of Moses. For a good understanding of our subject, the crown of life and the other crowns or rewards, this basic knowledge is also indispensable.

2

Death and Life

"Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin" (Rom. 5:12). These words are the introduction to an important part of the Epistle to the Romans, contrasting *Adam* and *Christ*. Through *the first man* sin and death entered into the world; through *the second Man* true righteousness and eternal life came to light. Whereas Adam is the head of a generation of guilty sinners, subject to death and judgment, Christ is the head of the new family of those who have been justified by grace and who, by faith in His accomplished work on the cross, are partakers of eternal life.

A sharper contrast than this one, the contrast of *death* and *life*, is hardly conceivable. When Adam had sinned, he was a child of death. God had warned him not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, otherwise he would die. However, following his wife's example, Adam violated God's commandment and ate from the fruit of the tree. From that very moment he was subject to death. Yet he did not die immediately, although God had told him: "In the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:17). Death has several forms, several dimensions. We know not only *physical* death, but also *spiritual* death. Every descendant of Adam is "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1), which means that in the sight of God he is spiritually dead. As far as the things of God are concerned he shows no sign of life whatsoever. He has become alienated from God, and lives without God and without hope in this world.

The final consequence of being estranged from God is "the second death, the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:6,14-15). This is the place where those who are spiritually dead will land eventually, although originally it was prepared only for the devil and his angels (Matt. 25:41). Physical death is only temporary; it will end both for believers and unbelievers. Spiritual death, however, is *eternal*. Therefore the unbelievers are called "the dead" in Revelation 20:11-15, although at that time they will no longer be physically dead. They will be thrown into the lake of fire - "the second death" - with body and soul. This is the place where death reigns supreme, and where people are eternally separated from God, the Source of life.

Immediately after he had sinned, Adam was spiritually dead. He had alienated himself from God, and was aware of the fact that he could not appear before God in his sinful state. He was "naked" in a twofold sense, standing also as a guilty sinner before God. Being in a state of death spiritually, he was heading for physical death as well as for "the second death", its final consummation. The same applies to all his descendants, unless God's grace changes this and grants new life in the new birth.

3

Life and eternal life

In the same way as there are various forms of "death", there are also various forms of "life". In view of our study of the crowns, and specifically the crown of life - the life of God which God gives to His children - we must now go into this matter more deeply.

First of all, there is *natural* life: the life of man in a physical, psychical and spiritual sense. As we have already seen, this life is subject to death as a result of the Fall of man. The body is subject to physical death, the soul and the spirit are subject to spiritual death. So it is quite accurate to call natural man a "dead man", for in every regard he is subject to the power of death. As a child of death he is heading for "the second death", the place of eternal separation from God. No one but God is able to change this situation. He alone can raise dead people. He is able to give life, life of a new, spiritual order. The natural life comes first, then the spiritual (1 Cor. 15:46). Natural life has fallen under the spell of sin and death. But now God in Christ has introduced a new form of life, which is not subject to the power of sin and death. This new life is imparted by God in the new birth. It is totally different from the old life of sin, for the believer is a partaker of the *divine* nature (2 Pet. 1:4). He is God's workmanship, a new creation in Christ, having been created in the likeness of God in righteousness and holiness of the truth (Eph. 2:10; 4:24). He has been born of God (John 1:12-13), born of *water* and *the Spirit* (John 3:5-6). This means that the Spirit uses the water of the Word of God to cleanse us, causing us to judge our sinful state and confess our guilt. The Spirit applies the Word to the heart and the conscience, at the same time using it as a means to bring forth new life in the soul (Jas. 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23).

It is obvious that God is the Source of this life, and it is the Spirit who imparts it. But all this is done on the basis of the finished work of the Son, who came from heaven to accomplish the work of salvation. As a result of this He has laid a righteous foundation for the communication of this life to guilty sinners. Of course, this does not mean that the believers in Old Testament times were not born again. God anticipated the Coming of His Son, and granted them new life too. So in His forbearance He could pass over their sins (Rom. 3:25). But the life of God has been manifested fully now that Christ has come and has accomplished the work of redemption. When we believe in Him, we receive eternal life, more abundant life, that is, life in its most glorious form (John 10:10,28). This enables us to know God as the only true God, and Jesus Christ as the One whom He has sent (John 17:3). For this reason the Son had to come first in order to reveal the Father. The essence of the divine life is that we have fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ, so that our joy may be full (1 John 1:1-4).

Christ has abolished death - rendering it powerless for the believer - and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel (2 Tim. 1:10). He has overcome the power of death and has imparted His own life to us, the life which He manifested in such a wonderful and glorious way in His resurrection. This life will ultimately change also our lowly body at His Coming. It has already saved our soul and spirit, but soon it will transform our body, in order that that which is mortal may be swallowed up by life. We have already received new spiritual life, the life of the risen Lord, but then our body will be conformed to His glorious body (Rom. 8:1-11; 1 Cor. 15:44-54; 2 Cor. 5:4; Phil. 3:21).

4

Eternal life and the second death

So by the life of Christ we have been delivered from the power of death in every respect - body, soul, and spirit. By His mighty triumph Christ has brought life and immortality to light. The power of His resurrection delivers us from the bonds of death. He grants us abundant life, eternal life, which is not the same as an 'unending existence'. Eternal life enables us to know God in His most sublime and intimate being, by bringing us into fellowship with the *Father* and the *Son*.

Christ Himself is the Word of life. He is the true God and eternal life (1 John 5:6-20). God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. It could only be given to us by way of death and resurrection. Christ had to become Man, but this was not sufficient to grant us life. He had to take our place in the judgment of God, and to be made sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). He had to be lifted up on the cross, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:14-16). Only in this way could He become the bread of life for everyone who believes (John 6:27-58). By dying, Christ bore much fruit. It was just like the grain of wheat: unless it falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit (John 12:24).

Eternal life is much more than an 'unending existence'. This is also obvious from the fact that Scripture does not speak of its counterpart as eternal death. Without a doubt, the second death is everlasting, for Scripture speaks of "the everlasting fire", "everlasting punishment" and "eternal judgment" (Matt. 25:41,46; Heb. 6:2). But the term *eternal death* is not mentioned in Scripture. This proves that the word "eternal" in the expression "eternal life" means much more than just "unending". The contrast between life and death is much greater. The word "eternal" adds a particularly rich dimension to the truth of eternal life. It means that we partake of the divine life as it is has been revealed to us by the Son of God in Manhood. Eternal life does not have an exact counterpart. Its counterpart is death in the various forms that we have already discussed, the last of which is *the second death*. According to Revelation 20 the second death has power over all those who have no part in the first resurrection, the resurrection of life. In the judgment before the Great White Throne the names of the dead are not found written in the book of life. They remain "dead", although they have part in the resurrection of condemnation; and they are thrown into the second death, the lake of fire (Rev. 20:5-6,11-15).

What should be noted here too is the fact that death is not only a state by which the dead are characterized, but also a certain place or environment: *the realm* of death. The dead are cast into the lake of fire, the second death; then Death itself and Hades are cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14). Death is the last enemy that will be destroyed at the end of the millennium (1 Cor. 15:24-28). The same thing can be said of life. Life is not only a principle of life within us; it is also the sphere that we enter as the living. While the unbelievers are cast into the lake of fire, the second death, believers enter *into life* (Matt. 18:8; 19:17; 25:46). Eternal life is the realm of the living, the land of the living, the place where life can be enjoyed undisturbed. The righteous enter into eternal life, life with God and with Christ in the mansions of life. In fact, even now "life" is the believer's domain, for he has passed out of death into life, according to the Saviour's statement in John 5:24.

5

The crown of life

After these introductory remarks about "death" and "life", we now come to the proper subject of James 1:12, the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. Please note the following points:

- (1) The crown (or: *wreath, garland*) of life denotes the life that is to come, after a life full of trials here on earth.
- (2) The construction with "of" is *descriptive*. The "crown of life" symbolizes *life* itself, in all its fullness, as it awaits the believer in the glory of God.
- (3) This more abundant life, life in its divine fullness (John 10:10), has been promised by God to those who love Him, to His own *children* who recognize Him as their loving *Father* in Christ.

(4) This is not a reward for any accomplishment, but a *blessing* which He has given to us in Christ Jesus before time began (2 Tim. 1:1,9-10; Tit. 1:2; 3:7; 1 John 2:25).

The subject here, then, is the promise of life itself. Eternal life has been given to us in Christ Jesus *before* the foundation of the world. And as it is our portion *now* by faith, we shall possess it in all its fullness when we enter into the presence of God. The crown of life consists of life itself as we shall enjoy it in perfection after we have reached the end of our race here on earth.

No doubt it is true that we possess this life even now, for it is written: "He who has the Son has life", and "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:11-13). On the other hand, it is also true that all kinds of problems prevent us from enjoying this life. Moreover, as we are still waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body (Rom. 8:23), we do not yet possess it in the incorruptibility of the resurrection. Therefore we have this expectation, this glad hope: at the end of our pathway here on earth we will enjoy this life in all its richness and fullness.

We will be adorned with the crown of life, and we will have eternal life undisturbed - in the presence of the living God and of the Saviour, who could refer to Himself as "the Resurrection and the Life" (John 11:25), and who went into death in order to give us new life. It is this perspective that we as Christians have before us, which empowers us to persevere and to overcome all the difficulties that put our trust to the test while still here below. This glad hope of the life to come caused the apostle James to pronounce the blessing: "Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been proved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him" (Jas. 1:12).

At the beginning of this study we have noted that James reverts to the story of Creation, and the Fall. He contrasts the first creation, which is corrupted by sin and still groans under the yoke of degeneration and death, with the new creation of which we are the firstfruits. Adam and Eve succumbed to the lure of sin, and as a result, *lust*, *sin* and *death* entered into the world. Lust, or evil desire is the root of all evil in the human heart. This is revealed by the last of the ten commandments: "You shall not covet" (Ex. 20:17; Rom. 7:7). Eve saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise.

From the very moment of the Fall all that is in the world is marked by these three evil principles: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. Man had become a slave of sin and of the power of Satan in body, soul and spirit (Gen. 3:6; 1 John 2:16). It is in these three areas that Satan seeks our weak spots to lead us into temptation. When trying to defeat Christ in these areas, he could not find an opening (see Luke 4:1-13). However, it will be different with us when we are not watchful and do not keep ourselves dead to sin. As long as temptations cannot find a weak spot in our hearts, and it is

only a matter of things that come *from without* and are testing our faith, we can consider it all joy when we fall into various trials. This testing of our faith produces nothing but patience and endurance (Jas. 1:2-3). This is also the subject of James 1:12, where the crown of life is set before us as the glorious goal of our life of trials down here. We are blessed when we endure temptation or trial, since it strengthens our faith and directs our eye to the end of the race: the glorious future that awaits us.

But trials can also tempt us to sin. This is dealt with in James 1:13-15. Temptations to sin are but the result of the activity of lust in our evil hearts. We allow our own lusts to carry us away and we fail, just like Adam and Eve. A terrible development is set in motion by our evil desires. When *lust* has conceived, it gives birth to *sin*; and when sin is full-grown, it brings forth *death*. But this is not the work of God. This process of lust, and sin, and death is contrasted by James with the work of the Father of lights. He is a gracious God, the faithful Creator who bestows upon His people every good gift that they need. They do not have to appropriate anything by their own desires; they are dependent on God, who showers them with good gifts from above (Jas. 1:16-18).

In these verses James contrasts the old creation with the new. The believer does not need to live according to the scheme of lust, and sin, and death. He has received not only natural life out of God's hand, but also a new spiritual life, which was given to him in the new birth. The God who by His word called the worlds into being, has, in a new way, "brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures" (Jas. 1:18). As believers we look forward to a new heaven and a new earth, that will be inhabited by all those who have been delivered from the power of death and of Satan. We are the firstfruits of this new creation, the firstfruits of the great harvest that God will bring in. We are His workmanship, a new creation in Christ. We are partakers of the life of God, from which unbelievers have alienated themselves. We are waiting for it to be displayed in all its fullness. We are looking forward to receive the crown of life. What a great hope, and what a great expectation!

The crown of life is mentioned only once more, in the last book of the Bible, and again it is in contrast with death and with the second death. There we read: "Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life (...) He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death" (Rev. 2:10-11). Here the crown of life is mentioned to encourage believers who were facing death. But they did not need to be frightened by *death*, and they did not even have anything to fear from *the second death*, that is the lake of fire. Christ has gone into death, and He has overcome it. He is alive for evermore, and we will live with Him.

We know that John, the author of the book of Revelation, has written a great deal about "life". In his Gospel we see divine life as it was revealed in Christ here on earth, while in his first Epistle we find the features of this life in the believer. In the last book of the Bible, the book of judgments, we read of the crown of life, but also of the water of life and the tree of life, which is in the

midst of the Paradise of God (Rev. 2:7; 22:1-2). These expressions remind us of the first chapters of the book of Genesis, where a description is given of the garden of Eden with its river and the tree of life. But here it is the *Paradise of God*, not the paradise of man on earth, and its character is divine and heavenly. The tree of life and the water of life are used here as symbols of Christ and of the Spirit, the divine Persons from whom the believer takes his life.

6

Other crowns and diadems

Apart from the crown of life, the New Testament speaks about a number of crowns, or wreaths, which within the framework of this study should be briefly mentioned now:

(1) *An imperishable crown.* This is the remaining, and enduring glory which the Christian will receive after completing his course here on earth. Therefore we have to run the race and fight the good fight (1 Cor. 9:25). This imperishable crown refers to the state of incorruption and power that our mortal bodies will put on at the Rapture (1 Cor. 15:50-54).

(2) *The crown of rejoicing.* This is a picture of the fruit of the ministry: the beloved saints will be the worker's joy in the glory (Phil. 4:1; 1 Thess. 2:19).

(3) *The crown of righteousness.* This is the perfect righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to all who have loved His appearing. It is the perfection in which we as believers will appear together with our Lord, perfect righteousness on the principle of faith but also from a practical point of view (2 Tim. 4:8; Rev. 19:8).

(4) *The unfading crown of glory.* This is a promise given to those who shepherd the flock, but at the same time it is applicable to all Christians, to all those who are called to the glory of God. It is the eternal glory which, in all its beauty, will be given to those who are the called and who now share in Christ's rejection (1 Pet. 5:1-4,10).

It is remarkable that the same Greek word (*stephanos*) is also used for the crown of thorns that the rejected Lord wore here on earth (Matt. 27:29; Mark 15:17; John 19:2,5). The word occurs as a name (Stephen) in the book of Acts, and as a verb in 2 Timothy 2:5 ("If anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules") and in Hebrews 2:7,9 ("crowned with glory and honour").

Furthermore, there are a few crowns mentioned in the book of Revelation:

- the crown of the faithful believers in Philadelphia, who kept the Word and did not deny the Name of the Lord (3:11);
- the golden crowns of the glorified saints (4:4,10);
- the crown of the conquering power which appears after the first seal has been opened (6:2);
- the crowns of the demonic powers that are symbolized by locusts (9:7);
- the crown or garland of twelve stars as the adornment of the woman, that is, Israel as the 'mother' of the Messiah (12:1);
- and finally, the golden crown that will adorn the Son of Man as He comes to judge the earth (14:14).

In all these instances, the New Testament uses the same Greek word 'stephanos', the crown being the sign of reward, acknowledgement, triumph or simply the dignity of the crowned person. Sometimes it is a sign of royal dignity, as is always the case with the word 'diadema', which in the Authorized Version is rendered 'crowns' and in other versions 'diadems'. While occurring only in the book of Revelation, this word is used to indicate the power of the dragon (Satan), of the beast out of the sea (the head of the revived Roman empire), and of Christ Himself as the great Victor over all His enemies (12:3; 13:1; 19:12).

The crowns that are received by believers are not granted to them because of their own efforts or their faithfulness. This appears from the fact that in Revelation 4, the glorified saints cast their crowns before the throne, giving all honour to Him who sits on it. Not we ourselves, but only He is worthy to receive glory and honour! On the other hand it remains true that the crowns symbolize the Lord's approval and His acknowledgement of His people. They stimulate us to be faithful in our trials, to persevere and to press on toward the glorious goal. But as we have said earlier, they are actually nothing but the proof of His grace and favour to all those who love Him. As we cast our crowns before Him we shall say:

*"Worthy art Thou,
our Lord and our God,*

to receive glory and honour and power".

Revelation 4:11