

Imminent! Part 4

We are continuing our series on the imminent return of the Lord. I said in the first message that the imminent return of the Lord, what we also call the blessed hope, is one of the sixteen fundamental truths of the Assemblies of God. Since the moment Jesus ascended to heaven as recorded in the first chapter of the book of Acts, that belief, that the Lord would return has moved and motivated the church. I quoted from Dr. George Wood that first Sunday, that there are at least five ways the imminent return of the Lord impacts the church. 1)It provides a powerful incentive for holy and righteous living in our daily life. 2)It motivates us to risk greatly for the King and his Kingdom. 3)It steadies our resolve to endure to the end. This morning we are looking at a fourth way the coming of the Lord impacts the church. **The imminent return of the Lord fills us with the anticipation of reward.**

That may sound a bit mercenary, that we are somehow just serving the Lord for what we can get out of it, for a final reward. To be honest, in some sense, all of us turn to the Lord for what we can get out of it. I want my sins forgiven, I don't want to go to hell, I want to go to heaven, I don't want to live in bondage to sin, I want to be free, clean, whole. So I come to Jesus for what I can get, salvation, a new life, eternal life. But knowing him, having loved him and lived for him and served him for 60 years, I'm not just living for him for what I can get, I'm living for him because of what I've found. I've found life in him. But bear in mind, Jesus is the one who brought up the whole subject of reward. For instance, **"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven."** Matthew 5:11-12 If there is a reward like Jesus says, and as the New Testament writers declare, then there is nothing wrong in anticipating that reward or in desiring the reward. As we experience the things Jesus mentioned, persecution and attacks, as we face trials and trouble, in order to maintain our hope, in order to endure to the end as we discussed last Sunday, in order that we not lose hope and give up or give in, it helps to remember his promise of reward. There is reason to press on and not give up: the reward is ahead, but understand, the reward comes at the end of the journey.

We live in a culture focused on instant gratification. We expect an immediate reward for everything. If we have to wait more than a few seconds for anything, we act like the world is crashing to an end. "The internet is so slow today." You are accessing information from who knows where and it's taking you six seconds longer than usual and you are ready to throw your

phone or laptop across the room. We want a reward and we want it now. If we sow seed, we expect an instant harvest. We want an immediate return on our investment. The idea of delayed gratification is foreign. The idea of investing, working, laboring for the future, working so you will have something in the years to come, thinking in terms of the long game...forget about it. I want my reward now.

Many look for instant reward and gratification in the Kingdom of God. I serve the Lord and pay my tithes so I can get a better return on my investments. Well, if you are just focusing on material things, on money, you may be disappointed. Yes, Jesus said give and it shall be given to you, good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over...but the rewards aren't necessarily financial and they aren't necessarily all given or received in this life. I can testify that the Lord has blessed me with material blessings. I think most of you can say the same thing. But it's not all about this life. Jesus spoke of not laying up for yourselves treasures here on earth, where thieves break in and steal, but to lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven. Our rewards are not just physical, not just material things. Paul spoke of the athletes in the Roman games who went into strict training to compete. He said they sacrificed and trained and gave their all to win a corruptible crown, a crown or reward that won't last. But we train and sacrifice and run the race of obedience to Christ in order to win a crown that will last forever!

It's not just about what we can get here in this life. I used to see a bumper sticker that read, the one with the most toys at the end wins. Actually, the one with the most toys and the one with no toys, at the end they will both be dead and they won't take anything they have with them. Each will stand before God and give an account not for what they had but for what they did, perhaps for what they did with what they had. Then the rewards come.

What are you working for? Who are you doing this for? Why am I doing this? When it comes to the things of God, service in the kingdom of God, in the church, if you are doing it for anyone other than Jesus, if you are doing it for anything other than a desire to please and serve the Lord, while your efforts are helpful, the danger is you will eventually get hurt, you'll burn out, you'll become discouraged, disillusioned. "I served the Lord all these years and I don't have anything to show for it." That's because what you have to show for it is in heaven and not in a bank account. "I served the Lord and never got so much as a thank you from the pastor or the church members." You were anticipating the wrong reward. Remember, Jesus hasn't handed out rewards yet.

The story was told of an elderly missionary couple returning to America after years of service in Africa. They arrived home on a ship that was also carrying President Teddy Roosevelt who had been in Africa on safari, hunting big game. As they disembarked a band played, there was a parade for the president, but there was no one there to welcome the missionaries, no acknowledgment for their years of service. After arriving at their modest hotel room the old man said, “It’s not fair. Years of sacrifice and no one meets us, no one here to even welcome us home” and his wife said, “that’s because we aren’t home yet.”

You may feel it’s all been for nothing, no one appreciated you or even noticed your contribution, but that’s because we aren’t home yet. The books haven’t been opened yet. The rewards haven’t been handed out yet. And you weren’t doing it for the recognition or the applause of men, you were doing it for Jesus. The Scripture warns us about the danger of seeking the approval of men rather than the approval of God. Jesus said in Matthew 6 that if you are doing “acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them...you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.” Instead, you have your reward – men’s approval. Don’t get confused about the motives, about the rewards. Remember why we are doing this, it’s for the Lord, for his kingdom. You may get nothing but persecution and trouble for your efforts in serving Jesus here, but keep going. You aren’t home yet and Jesus said there was a great reward awaiting.

Jesus said in this world we would have trouble. Instead of reward we may receive hatred and disdain, our motives questioned and misunderstood, we may be denied jobs or promotions because we live for Jesus. “Where’s my reward?” In the last chapter of the last book in the bible, 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** Jesus is coming and his reward is with him. Your reward hasn’t been forgotten. Jesus hasn’t lost sight of your actions, your sacrifice, the long hours. Don’t be discouraged if the reward is not in this lifetime.

I want to make sure you understand so let me point this out again. We aren’t serving Jesus just for what we can get in this lifetime. The so called prosperity gospel confused things for some people. “I’m going to serve Jesus and give to my church and pay my tithes so I can get things – money, wealth, possession, fame, houses, cars, jets, you name it.” That isn’t reward. That’s stuff, stuff that can be lost, stolen, burned up, blown away in a tornado, gone in a moment. Why would God reward us with stuff that is useless in eternity? He will reward us with stuff that can be useful now, for the cause of Christ, for his kingdom, to advance the gospel, to win the

lost. He will bless us with resources, “bread for food and seed for sowing.” But the reward he promises, the reward he is bringing, is greater, richer, beyond anything we can comprehend.

So what is the reward he is bringing? We only think in terms of physical things based on the reality we know in this life. We think of rewards like a treasure. Wealth, houses, clothes, food, material blessings. But when we talk about the reward of heaven, we are talking about a new existence in a heavenly kingdom where the old order of things has passed away and God has made all things new. What was of value or seemed like reward here would be of no value there. What good is wealth when there is nothing to buy, when streets are paved with gold, when heavenly value is something entirely different. We don't have the vocabulary or the knowledge to really say what the reward will be because we are speaking of an existence beyond what we can imagine or comprehend. The bible declares, **“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him, but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.” 1 Corinthians 2:9-10.** We don't have the words, we can't conjure up the image, but in our spirit the Holy Spirit testifies that it will be worth every sacrifice and every effort.

The bible does speak of rewards in terms of receiving various crowns, sharing in Jesus' inheritance, inheriting a kingdom, sharing in his possessions, sharing in his authority to rule the nations, sharing in his glory, we will have reached the purpose for which we were created and saved. Jesus is coming and his reward is with him. How do we understand that reward?

In the book of Genesis, God calls Abraham and tells him to leave his family, leave the land of his birth, leave everything he has known and follow the Lord to a land God said “I will show you.” “I'll tell you when you get there, and if you obey me and follow me, I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you and all the peoples of the earth will be blessed through you.” He tells him, although he and his wife Sarah were childless, that his descendants will be like the stars in the heavens. He promises great reward, but years go by and there's no children. Abraham is 99, Sarah is 90, long past child bearing age. Where is that reward?

Some of you may be wondering where the reward is? I thought God promised this or that. Where is the promise? It's what the childless Abraham is wondering when God speaks this word to him. **“Do not be afraid Abraham. I am your shield, your very great reward.” Genesis 15:1.** God gave them the child he promised in their old age. He gave Abraham the land as his inheritance, but ultimately, God himself was his great reward.

Don't miss it. He is our great reward! He promised us heaven and heaven is going to be unbelievable, walls of jasper, streets of gold, sounds and colors and blessings beyond compare, everything I've mentioned, but the ultimate reward is Jesus. He said he was going to prepare a place for us and come and receive us so we could be with him. Do you hear me? With him. That's the reward. It's not streets of gold, it's not mansions over the hilltop, it's being with Jesus, the One who loved us, died for us, saved us, gave us His Spirit, kept us by his grace, watched over us and walked with us through all the troubles of this life, the one who is coming to take us home to that place he prepared for us so we can be with him!

Lanny Wolfe wrote a song that said "If the walls there aren't made of jasper, if the streets aren't made of gold, if the mansions were to crumble and if folks still grew old, still I'd see everything I've been longing to see, for if Jesus is there, it will be heaven for me." The reward is Jesus. When we see him, we will be like him for we will see him as he is, John says. The reward is being with him for the Psalmist said in his presence is fullness of joy. It's completeness in him, with him. It's being with him, the one who is life and truth and peace. He is our shield and our great reward!

If you're discouraged, weary and tired, you feel overlooked, unappreciated, you've given and given and there seems little or nothing to show for it. You were expecting a different result, a quicker turnaround, a reward here and now. Let me remind you, you may not see it in this lifetime. There will be blessings here, but the reward is yet to come. You may not understand what happens or why. You may not understand what the Lord asks of you or what he expects of you in this life, but that's okay, because Jesus is coming and his reward is with him. Keep serving, keep living for him, remain faithful. A little while longer and Jesus will come and his reward is with him. Then, accounts will be settled, then, justice will prevail, then secrets will be revealed, then we will understand, then we will realize that it has been worth it all, every sacrifice, every loss, every trial and mountain we had to overcome or to climb, it was all worth it all because Jesus will come and his reward is with him and we will be with him.

The cost may be great, but the reward far outweighs every sacrifice made, every tear shed, every price paid. Let the hope of his imminent return fuel you again with determination to keep living for him, looking for him and for his return, until he comes. Don't allow your heart to become bitter or resentful because sacrifices were made and seemed to go unrewarded. We aren't home yet but Jesus is coming, his reward is with him and He is our great reward!