

Crowns

In Revelation 2:10 Jesus said, "*Be thou faithful unto death and I will give you a crown of life.*" Today, when we hear the word "*crown*," it brings to our mind a picture of a large golden crown, set with jewels, however, to impose this concept upon the New Testament word "*crown*," is to misconstrue and, even at times, lose the precious truth taught in God's Word. We see on television a king or queen, wearing an imperial crown of the British Empire. The king or queen does not earn a crown, it is theirs by inheritance . . . theirs by birthright. However, the child of God does not inherit a crown, he must *earn* it.

The Greek word from which we get "*crowns*" in our English Bibles, is the word, "*stephanos*" It was a familiar word to the First Century reader. Anyone living in that day would have understood the full implication of this word. It was a prize given to the victor in the Greek athlete games. To the runner who crossed the line first . . . to the athlete who would hurl the discs the farthest . . . to the wrestler who pinned his opponent to the mat . . . or, even, at times, for work deserving a reward. "*Stephanos*" were even worn at times of celebration, such as a marriage feasts, as a symbol of victory or deserved honor. This was not a jeweled head piece. It was not a diadem. It was not some imperial crown to be worn by a king sitting on his throne. This "*crown*," or "*stephanos*," was usually woven from oak leaves, ivy vines, pine leaves, parsley, myrtle, wild olive branches, violets, or even roses.

The word in Greek means something **EARNED REWARD, OR RECOMPENSE**. Sometimes the same word is used to speak of an employee's pay. That's a far cry from the idea of a royal diadem isn't it? When a man came to Christ, in the day in which the New Testament was written, he learned that he could earn a "*stephanos*." He knew exactly what it meant. His familiarity with the Greek games made that word an instant revelation to him. He knew at once there was something to be **WON** for Christ.

This word "*stephanos*" was something that was very common throughout the Roman Empire because of the Greek games. These Greek games were the outstanding sports spectacular of that day. These "*International Olympics*" dominated the entertainment field of that day. From peasant to Caesar, everyone was interested in them.

This is why the Apostle Paul used them so often as background for his teaching. Peter and John also found them useful for illustrating Christian truths. The language of the Roman Empire was not *Latin*, but **GREEK**. Greek was the universal language, therefore, it was the language of the games. When a new Christian found his faith expressed in words taken from the games, the meaning was precise and unmistakable. A truth clothed in this figure was crystal clear. The Christian saw at once how his new life in Christ was a **CONTEST**.

He understood the fantastic exertion required for progress in spiritual things. He felt himself in competition, striving for mastery. He was in a race, reaching for a prize at the end of the course. Had you and I been living in those days, we would have gained more than just the meaning of the word. We would have also felt the passion and excitement that went with it. Our whole beings would have sensed the electrification and animation of competition in Christ. Two thousand years later, those words are simply items of Biblical research.

Listen to Paul, now that I have shared with you what "*stephanos*" means:

1 Corinthians 9:24-25 - (I'll read from the Phillips Translation) "*Do you remember how, on a racing track, every competitor runs but only one can win the prize? Well, you ought to run with your minds fixed on winning the prize! Every competitor in the games goes into serious training. Athletes will take tremendous pains - for a fading crown of leaves. But our contest is for an eternal crown that will never fade.*"

Here Paul describes the Christian life as serious competition. He asks us to think of ourselves as running in a race where only one can win. Of course, in Christ, many can win, but Paul says to **RUN** (compete) as if there were only one prize.

Can you imagine those Greek contestants. They train for a minimum of ten months prior to the games. During that time they denied themselves many good things otherwise proper. They forfeited all sweets and anything fatty. They lived on sparse food and exercised faithfully in all kinds of weather. The apostle tells us to feel the desperate efforts of these athletes. Then to see ourselves striving **just as hard** to win the prize in Christ. Paul did not intend for these words to be just a nice lesson, or interesting sermon material, he meant for them to be telegrams announcing an emergency.

Paul says that we are to become as equally determined in making Christ the absolute Master of their lives, just as those Greek athletes were in winning their contest. Not only straining in our tasks, but, also, denying ourselves many of the good things in this life. Paul's illustrative use of the Greek games was not only to provide clearer teaching, he seeks to communicate the heat and desperation of all-out competition in Christ. Paul means for us to become contestants, *literally*.

In the Greek games, the judges took their places on an elevated stand called the "*Bema*." Remember that word. You'll understand why in a moment. From the "*Bema seat*," the judge, or empire, could watch the runners. As each event closed, he summoned the contestants before him. They lined up to receive their rewards. Can't you just see the picture? They are breathing heavily. Their bodies still trembling and wet with perspiration. As their names are called, they step forward. The judge leans over and places a wreath of woven leaves on the victor's brow. That woven wreath was the origin of the present day metals of gold, silver and bronze won in the Olympics of our day.

The Greek word "*bema*," means, "*the judges stand*." It is the very same word Paul uses for the Judgment Seat of Christ. "*We will all appear before the BEMA seat of Christ*," says Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:10. In the context of the setting against the sweaty, straining, competitive background of the Greek games is what Paul pictures this judgment of the Christians. It is not a matter of accepting gifts, but of being rewarded while still huffing and puffing as one comes directly from the competition.

The picture God draws in His Word is not nice, goody little Christians who gets a crown on his head because he has been wise enough to accept God's free gift in Christ. The "*Bema seat*" is not a place for handing out gifts. There is **NO** reward for accepting gifts. These Greek athletes were still perspiring and panting, when they came to the "*bema seat*" to receive a reward for winning in competition.

Christianity is a contest

Everyone of the awards is based on competition. That is why the "*Judgment Seat*" is referred to as the "*Bema Seat*." Along with that word, keep in mind the Greek word "*stephanos*". . . the competition crown . . . something that is **EARNED!** Only **competition** crowns are presented to the servants of Christ. They are for competitors only. Spectators are never crowned. Therefore, spectators in Christianity will NOT be crowned either.

All six crowns of the New Testament are reserved for those who **earn** them. They are:

1. The crown for those who love Christ's appearing - 2 Timothy 4:8
2. The crown of faithfulness - Revelation 2:10
3. The victor's crown - 1 Corinthians 9:25
4. The crown of rejoicing - Philippians 4:1
5. Worker's crown of glory - 1 Peter 5:2-4
6. Soul-winner's crown - 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20

Philippians 3:7-14 (Contemporary English Version) states, "*But Christ has shown me that what I once thought was valuable is worthless. Nothing is as wonderful as knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have given up everything else and count it all as garbage. All I want is Christ and to know that I belong to Him. I could not make myself acceptable to God by obeying the Law of Moses. God accepted me simply because of my faith in Christ. All I want is to know Christ and the power that raised Him to life. I want to suffer and die as He did. So that somehow I also may be raised to life. I have not yet reached my goal, and I am not perfect. But Christ has taken hold of me. So I keep on running and struggling to take hold of the prize. My friends, I don't feel that I have already arrived. But I forget what is behind, and I struggle for what is ahead. I run toward the goal, so that I can win the prize of being called to heaven. This is the prize that God offers because of what Christ Jesus has done.*"

Notice, also, in 2 Timothy 4:7-8 the picture is taken from those engaged in the athletic contest in the Greek stadium. Paul, awaiting martyrdom, like a runner, having won the race, resting at the goal line, he looks back over his life and says: "*I have fought well. I have finished the race, and I have been faithful. So a crown will be given to me for pleasing the Lord. He judges fairly, and on the day of Judgment He will give a crown to me and to everyone else who wants Him to appear with power.*"

The word "*fought*" as found here in 2 Timothy 3:7, is word that means "*exert strength to the point of agony.*" And, why do they do it? For an oak leaf laurel that would soon fade away. One of these days our race will be over, we will leave the stadium - (the stadium of "*life's battles*") - and then we will rejoice over the "*stephanos*" we have won, by the grace of God.

James 1:12 states, "*Blessed is the man who endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive a crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love Him.*"

Contemporary English Version of James 1:12 states, "*God will bless you, if you don't give up when your faith is being tested. He will reward you with a glorious life, just as He rewards everyone who loves Him.*"

The Greek word "*tried*," as found in James 1:12, means "*to test for the purpose of approving.*" The "*crown of life*" as promised here in James 1:12, is not eternal life, which all

born-again believers receive, but, rather, it is a particular kind of life, given as a reward in recognition of what the believer has done while on earth.