

## CAN HUMANS RECEIVE A FORETASTE OF THEIR FUTURE DESTINES IN DEATH?

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In his *Answers to Objections*, Francis Nichol issues a popular Adventist argument against the notion of an intermediate (or, “particular”) reward between death and the resurrection. Directing his criticisms at a literal appropriation of the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk 16), he writes:

We affirm that the objector, by using this parable to prove that men receive their rewards at death, would cause Christ to contradict Himself.

Elsewhere Christ states definitely the time when the righteous receive their reward and the wicked are cast into the consuming fire: “When the Son of man shall come in his glory. . . . and before him shall be gathered all nations: . . . then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom. . . . Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, you cursed, into everlasting fire.” Matt. 25:31-41.<sup>1</sup>

The claim Nichol refutes (i.e., “men receive their rewards at death”) does not precisely represent the Catholic concept of the intermediate state. The ambiguity of the statement suggests that at death, one receives the fullness of his reward—a belief definitively excluded by the text he cites in his defense, but also rejected by Catholics. Instead, Catholics reckon the rewards received in the intermediate state incomplete, and believe they anticipate a full dispensation of benefits at the future resurrection (a proviso sometimes expressed by the application of the adjective “particular” to “reward”).<sup>2</sup> Still, the essential thrust of Nichol’s thesis remains untouched: if Christ states that the righteous will receive their re-

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1. Nichol, Francis D., *Answers to Objections*, Washington: Review and Herald, 1952, Objection 87.

2. These rewards are incomplete at least in view of the fact that their object (man) is incomplete in death, lacking his physical aspect. (St. Gregory the Great, Dial. iv, 25).

ward at the second coming, how can anyone receive a part of this reward before that time?

### *Anticipatory Reward*

First, one must recognize the New Testament asserts that the righteous participate in certain eschatological realities and rewards even in this life (Col 2:6; Heb 6:5; cf. Jn 4:36), and already possess at least a “first installment” of their future destiny (Eph 1:13-14; 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; NAB). Thus, the boundary dividing man’s spiritual experience in this life and the next is significantly more fluid than Nichol admits. The rewards dispensed at the judgment are not remote realities, relegated strictly to the future; rather they reach even into our present reality, in anticipation of the final glorification of the righteous.

When this observation is coupled to an existing belief in a conscious intermediate state, one arrives at the very concept of a “particular” reward formulated in Catholic theology.<sup>3</sup> Rev 6:9-11 unites these very ideas: portraying the righteous dead receiving a temporal compensation between death and the resurrection. In that passage, God provides the anxious “souls of those who had been slain” white robes, simultaneously instructing them to “wait a little while longer” for the fullness of their vindication (at the eschaton).

Parallel passages in contemporary apocalypses also portray the souls of the dead crying out for vindication (a common motif in Jewish apocalyptic: 1 Enoch 9; 22, and 4 Ezra 4), but do not portray the souls receiving a foretaste of their approaching vindication. In those texts, the souls are merely told to persevere in their earnest anticipation of a coming reward. John’s Apocalypse, by contrast, introduces a new element into the motif: the souls receive an early installment of the eternal reward awaiting them at the last judgment. (Of course, one could as easily ignore the intermediate state theology permeating the passage and still admit that it suggests that the righteous can receive a foretaste of their eschatological vindication.) Thus, Rev 6:11 reconciles the experience of a temporary vin-

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3. This survey assumes the existence of a conscious intermediate state, a biblical defense of which lies outside the parameters of this discussion. Nevertheless it is important to understand the relationship between that doctrine, and the suggestion of anticipatory rewards. Since man’s probation ends at physical death, after which no conversion is possible, death fixes his eternal destiny. Consequently, that experience more intimately binds him to that eschatological fate towards which his life was oriented, and in all likelihood, to its precursory benefits or consequences. Catholics refer to this transition as the “particular judgment” because it takes into account the person’s innocence of guilt.

dication to the anticipation of a future, full vindication, demonstrating that the two are not mutually exclusive.<sup>4</sup>

### *Anticipatory Punishment*

Likewise, the New Testament indicates that the wicked may experience temporal punishment in anticipation of their condemnation at the last judgment:

For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of deepest darkness to be kept until the judgment . . . then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment. (2 Pet 2:4,9)

Although the above passage describes the intermediate punishment resting upon the fallen angels, it does not explore the nature of that punishment resting upon wicked humans. Nevertheless, it demonstrates that one may live in a state of anticipatory punishment *before* his future and sure condemnation at the judgment. The fallen angels experience a foretaste of the retribution awaiting them at the future, full outpouring of God's wrath. Active verbs underscore the fact that God directly inflicted these castigations upon them; His wrath, though mitigated, is hardly passive in the time preceding the judgment.

This arrangement mirrors the fact that the wicked, in their sin, are effectively subject to a guilty verdict long before their legal sentencing on the last day. As Christ informed Nicodemus: "those who believe in [the Son] are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God." (John 3:18). One cannot, therefore, radically distinguish the lot of the wicked before and after the judgment.

### *Conclusion*

Biblically, one cannot exclude the notion of an anticipatory reward before the resurrection simply in view of the fact that Christ promises the righteous a full recompense at that time. This survey produced several texts indicating that the righteous and the wicked receive a foretaste of their respective recompenses in anticipation of the final judgment. At least one contextualizes the same experience within an intermediate state theology, inspiring the Catholic doctrine. So far then from contradicting scrip-

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4. Other scriptural passages may advance a similar theology, though the clearest didactic presentation of the same appears in Wisdom 3:1-10.

ture, the doctrine of a “particular reward” at death takes its origin from the same.

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