

## Remembering Greatness

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### Introduction

Every society has its own cherished ways of honouring people for their accomplishments, their generous deeds, acts of courage and service to humanity. The pursuit of fame has been a theme consistently shown in Western society. It requires publicity (Braudy 1986, pp. vii, 3). One of the best known and ancient forms of recognition occurs at the Olympic Games (since 776 B.C.). In early times the winner of events had a simple olive tree laurel placed on the head (Olympic Organization 2007), but in modern times this has been changed to the giving of medals. Western and other societies have countless ways of honouring people but they come commonly in the form of prizes, medals, titles, honorary degrees, fellowships, elevation to ceremonial posts, inscribing names on an honour list, building or name places, hanging portraits in galleries, building elaborate tombs, posting an entry into regional, national or world *Who's Who*, being immortalised on the front page of *Time* magazine or toasted as a celebrity. Few people fail to accept the honours bestowed on them (Braudy 1986, pp. 4-18; Campbell 2007; Ferreira, 2007; Gamson 1994, pp. 1-12; Rose 2007; Psalm 49:6-12). The Roman emperors and others thirsted for the adulation following battle and for the lines of adoring poets (Saunders 1952, pp. 32, 33). We find today adulation is still sought. Some are outspoken about their expectations of being honoured as illustrated by Doris Lessing, the 2007 Nobel Laureate in literature (Washington Post 2007). Some may be tempted to do uncharacteristic deeds, as was Idi Amin during the Entebbe rescue mission, given the possibility of being honoured by the world community (National Geographic 2007).

Today, as anciently, we find that some are willing to die for the honour of being remembered for feats of sporting prowess particularly at the Olympics. It was Arrichion, a remarkable Greek athlete, who died a victor with the accolade ringing in his ears "He was never defeated at Olympia." In his dying moments his opponent acknowledged defeat as Arrichion managed to dislocate the unrecorded competitor's ankle (Harker 1996, pp. 2, 3). His example is an extreme illustration of being prepared to die in the effort to win. The insatiable demands that covetous desires, pride, ambition and feelings of superiority place on competitors are palpable, as indicated by the episodes of disdain for others, cheating, fraudulent behaviour and hoaxes surrounding sport (Kuriloff 2005; Aston and Balogh 2007; Stocks 2008). This serves to highlight the darker side of human nature.

It has been felt in some circles that greatness in the mainly patriarchal public domains of politics and enterprise is marked by "unloving, violent, destructive struggles for power." Such behaviour "requires the exclusion of love." From a feminist viewpoint the parameters of greatness need to be reset to include "mutual recognition" and "sociable community" behaviour (Balogh 1990, pp 322-324).

Greatness is also recognised in the scriptural record and its writers find difficulty with the worldly concept of greatness. Those honoured by God often achieve it for quite different reasons than those recognised in the world. Not surprisingly, the familiar contests of strength, dexterity, and endurance are not mentioned as contributing to greatness. We briefly will make some comparisons in the following sections.

### Altruistic deeds?

Altruism represents unselfish acts of goodness and courage in order to benefit others with no expectation of rewards. Such acts are universally applauded. However, the glamour of such deeds is blunted by some of the explanations offered. For example, evolutionary biologists attempt to ascribe survival outcomes to such behaviour.

In this explanation it is noted that the struggle for existence does not exclude co-operative behaviour. It is argued that such activity contributes to an individual's survival or favours reproductive success irrespective that it may have an intentional element attached to it. 'Biological altruism' is held to always benefit the individual performing the deed. For example, in the animal kingdom, apparently reckless behaviour in order to warn or protect a flock or family group does not constitute a risk as far as survival of the animal's genes

are concerned. Even though an individual animal sacrifices itself, its genes effectively are carried by its offspring, siblings or relatives. Such kin altruism is, however, unsatisfactory in explaining human behaviour (Grant 2001, pp. 8, 9). Humans innately are prone to work together in a socially cooperative manner, but it is suggested that ultimately this will aid the individual (Ruse 2002, pp. 153-158). The individual risking safety will be highly likely to experience help in time of need resulting in little overall risk taking. This is on account of reciprocal benefit anticipated (Wilson 1975, p. 120). By such arguments, genuine altruism is shown to be an illusion. This outcome is required for the reality is that the existence of such behaviour is hostile to evolutionary theory (Darwin 1888, p. 228; Grant 2001, pp. 7-13).

The self-sacrificial love (*agape*) traditionally associated with Protestant theology gives no thought to the benefit that might rebound on the giver. Since such love originates with God and flows through the believer to others, it is spontaneous and “indifferent to value.” This is not the only view of love held within Christian circles. We find elements of the egocentric inserted so that the Reformation view of love is changing leading to a convergence between religious and evolutionary perspectives in some circles. However, regard for the other person as made in the image of God, is central to the Christian’s understanding of love, as is the belief that some acts of self-sacrifice are willed and empowered by God (Nygren 1982, pp. 77; 214-217; Browning 2002, pp. 335-345).

The concept of *agape* is indispensable to the gospel story. God is the source of absolute altruism. We continue to exist on account of God’s outrageous love and generosity (Grant 2001, pp. 189, 190). The apostle Paul noted that, in actual fact, Christ died for His enemies and those disinterested in Him or His philosophy (Rom. 5:20). The magnanimous nature of such an act will be recognised by noble minded individuals and the only reasonable response is whole-hearted commitment to the person making the sacrifice (Nygren 1952, p. 104). Not unexpectedly, we find Christ the Saviour (the Lamb slain – Rev. 5:12) is the focus of honour in heaven (Rev. 5:12; 15:2-4). This remarkable example of altruism pales all others recorded in Scripture.

The expression of “unselfish love of neighbour is inspired by the sustained faith in the unselfish love of God” (Grant 2001, p. 190). We might make special mention of Moses to illustrate this point at the human level. He was a type of Christ and was willing to offer his life for the people under his charge (Exod. 32:32). He was honoured, along with Elijah, by early promotion to eternal life as God’s special representatives of the children of men (Luke 9:29-32). Jesus added His voice to the debate by affirming the “greatness” of unselfish behaviour when he stated “Greater love has no one than this than to lay down one’s life for his friends” (John 15:13).

The annals of history are not deficient in acts of sacrifice and dedication of one individual for another. Where these deeds fit into God’s scheme of reckoning cannot be known fully. However, we suggest that the underlying principles which might be considered appropriate is “whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it” (Mark 8:35) and those who show disinterested concern for others will receive God’s approval (Matt. 25:36). Acting as effective channels of God’s love in an unobtrusive manner is undoubtedly one of the determining characteristics of those on God’s honour roll of altruistic individuals (2 Cor. 1:3-5). Those committed to self denial and service, through love and a heart-felt response to Christ’s example, will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (White 1940, p. 550).

## Wisdom

Those who display wisdom on earth or are able to make great leaps in creative imagination are given special places of honour. A good example of public acknowledgement of those displaying outstanding wisdom and creativity is at the Nobel Prize giving ceremonies. Academicians and others involved in the pursuit of conceptual advances in economics, physics, chemistry, physiology or medicine, and those making major contributions to literature and peace activities are recognized. However, there are many other forms of recognition conferred by monarchs, government organizations and foundations on worthy individuals who have showed great wisdom. Some of the recipients of honour display boundless pride and a touch of arrogance whereas others accept the honours with grace and humility. The achievements are not always gained ethically (e.g., academic dishonesty is well represented – Burns, 2005). However, the whole process can be soured by the almost inevitable debate about the deservedness of the award or the perceived injustice meted out to some who have been excluded (Hargitt 2003, pp. 50, 51; Nobel Prize Controversies 2007; Naughton and Tedmanson 2007).

Many act as though they have a mortgage on knowledge and wisdom. This is definitely not a new phenomenon (1 Cor. 4:7). Ancient Greece was renowned for its emphasis on human accomplishments, philosophy and reasoning (academic, humanistic and artistic cultures represent the ways of Athens – O’Malley 2004, pp. 4, 10, 11). The forces driving or motivating individuals to succeed at the highest level of accomplishment often involve desire for acclaim, power, excellence, fortune or prestige. In our times, achievers frequently have attributed their accomplishments to hard work; few acknowledge God as the giver of their talents (Simonton 1994, pp. 129-141).

God is the originator and giver of wisdom (Proverbs 7) and is pleased when it is displayed to His honour and glory and when the sentiments expressed accord with the principles He has revealed (1 Cor. 3:19, 20). King Nebuchadnezzar stands as an example of one who initially wished to direct praise and honour to himself on account of his achievements. At first, he did not recognise God’s enabling hand in securing his place in history (Dan. 4:28-35). The prophet Daniel is a contrasting example of an individual given great wisdom and skill and who used it advisedly at all time (Dan. 1:8-21; 5:17, 26-29). Not all those accepted as being wise have acted honourably as illustrated by the account of King Solomon. God recognised his early humility by giving him wisdom in abundance (2 Chron. 1:9-12). However, he found the applause of mankind difficult to handle (1 Kings 11:1-13. Fortunately Solomon eventually achieved a balanced perspective of life and of eternal values, but limited his influence and usefulness by his earlier behaviour (Eccl. 12:1-14; White 1943, pp. 75-83).

Heaven specialises in remembering those who have wisdom of a different kind than commonly recognised in the secular world. For example, those who experience the great tribulation near the end of world’s history are said to be “wise for salvation” (2 Tim. 3:15); they have capitalised on the heaven-sent opportunities they have been given (White 1940, p. 490). On account of their loyalty to the principles of heaven, they will be honoured by being assigned a place and robes in the victory celebration in heaven (Rev. 7:9-14). Participation in heaven’s celebrations and joys is for those only whose names are on the special list of invitees (book of life – Phil. 4:3). All overcomers qualify for the privilege and will be invited (Rev. 3:12; 21:7).

The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom and those who delight to follow the principles of the Bible take on the understandings of ‘Jerusalem.’ This culture emphasises the transcendent, all powerful God who has given humanity insights into his unalterable will (O’Malley 2004, pp. 6-8). This is a culture we do well to study and appreciate experientially since its practitioners are entitled to dwell in the heavenly Jerusalem where God will reign supreme. Commitment to God’s ways gives abundant rewards in the present life, as one writer has commented. “Never did men achieve greater results for God and humanity than may be achieved in this our day by those who will be faithful to their God given trust” (White 1958, p. 574).

## Philanthropy

It was Alfred Nobel who created the famous Nobel Prizes because he did not wish to be remembered merely as the man who invented dynamite and be slated as the “merchant of death.” The sudden incentive to do something spectacular came upon him when a French newspaper mistakenly announced his death (Campbell 2007). Today, it is not uncommon for the rich and the famous of the world to be honoured when they engage in acts of philanthropy. This is sometimes done by pop stars in a public and sometimes spectacular manner in order to raise their profiles (Chocano 2000). While we do not assert that all fit into this category, heaven recognises a different order preferring to limit those who indulge in the praise of mankind to the rewards they have gained here. Jesus said: “they have their reward” (Matt. 6:2).

Jesus advised His followers to do their charitable deeds in private so that from a practical viewpoint one hand hardly knows what the other is doing (Matt. 6:1- 3). In reality eternal life is given to those who respond whole heartedly to the love of God that they have experienced. The fact that their faith is real is evident in the changed lives that they live (Matt. 10:42; 25:41-46). In practice it is hard for a rich man to enter heaven (Matt. 19:23-26). The difficulty is not with the riches possessed but on account of the fascination and attachment of individuals to their riches. This is well illustrated by the biblical accounts of Job and Abraham who were rich but had a successful relationship with both God and their neighbours (Gen. 12:16; 14:16-24; Job 42:10-13).

God treasures the motive driving philanthropic giving rather than the value of the gift as illustrated by the account of the widow who gave an exceedingly small donation or ‘mite’ to the temple out of her poverty (Mark 12:41-44). Bringing joy to others is one of the greatest gifts. The one gift of ultimate value

is the giving of our life to His care and the privilege of asking Jesus to carry our guilt (Luke 7:47). If the kingdom of God is placed first in our priorities, we are assured that everything else will come into balance (Luke 12:31).

## Skills and Talents

On this earth some individuals are held in a special category of prominence on account of their self promoting efforts. This is one category of accomplishment that will not be recognised in heaven. God has a special dislike for selfish behaviour (White 1940, p. 436; cf. 1 Cor. 4:6-8), although we note that some in this category also are disliked on earth (Red's 20, 2007).

Those with special skills are honoured consistently in the areas of sport, theatre, and musical accomplishments. Some of the more unusual accomplishments are acknowledged in *The Guinness Book of Records*. Without attempting to generalize too liberally, some of the motives driving performers are recognition, adulation, access to wealth and the ability to enjoy the pleasures of life to the fullest degree with scant attention being given to others (Brijnath 2007, p. H13). The rewards are sometimes spectacular, but nevertheless temporal. Some rewards received clearly are not deserved (Kuriloff 2005; Aston and Balogh 2007; Hill 2007, pp. 87-93).

Those who rivet their attention on accomplishments, rewards and the acclaim of men have their reward on earth. Some, such as popular music stars, enjoy fame for only a few short years before death claims them on account of their poor lifestyle choices (Bellis *et al.* 2007, p. 896). Failure to acknowledge the claims of God and continuance of such behaviour presumably will exclude them from heaven (White 1940, p. 436). A different stream of thought, narrow and often unnoticed, flows in a different direction leading to spectacularly different forms of recognition (Matt. 7:13, 14). In God's sight the number of talents a person possess is not the particular feature bringing recognition, but rather the value placed on them and thus the extent to which they are developed within the peculiar environment the individual is operating (Matt. 25:14-30). The willingness of the person to do the bidding or fulfil the purpose of God is the outstanding characteristic highlighted in Jesus' parable of the landowner hiring labourers late into the day (White 1952a, p. 175). All the servants invited to work in the landowner's vineyard did not doubt that they could make a contribution. However, they were surprised when each was given a day's wage in reward (Matt. 20:1-16).

Those who unreservedly commit themselves to God and glorify Him in all their ways (1 Cor. 6:20) will be honoured. They are God's possession. He will never forget them. Heaven places its value on those who are humble, dependent on God's power and devoted to furthering the interests of His kingdom (Matt. 28:19, 20; White 1940, p. 436). God's blessing is bestowed on those who give themselves unreservedly to Him, who distrust self and allow Him to mould their characters and bringing forth humility, gentleness, obedience and have the passion to serve (Ps. 18:35; Isa. 66:2; Luke 22:26-30; White 1940, p. 437). Now it is evident that intellect, wealth and worldly greatness do not figure in the equation (White 1940, pp. 219, 437, 644; 1950, p. 456), although these talents do not exclude an individual. Heaven gauges greatness in terms of our willingness to serve and our attitude while serving (Matt. 20:26-28). In God's sight it is the attention to the seemingly small things of life having to do with love, kindness, purity, improvement of talents, and their opportunities for good and self denial that make people great (White 1940, p. 219; 1948a, p. 543).

## The Book of God's Fame

The great in heaven's estimation are recorded in God's book(s) (Rodriquez 2006, pp. 42, 43). The simple acts of His faithful disciples who treasure and teach His principles are written in His "book of immortal fame" (White 1952b, p. 238). The number of books and what each contains is not the issue. The fact that the saints' names are recorded in heaven's books in positive terms is the only important point. Without distinguishing among the records, we notice several characteristics of those whose names are noted therein. They are as follows:

- They meditate on the things of God and speak supportively with other believers (Mal. 3:16).
- They recognise their deep spiritual need (Matt. 5:4).
- They esteem/fear the Lord (Mal. 3:16).
- They speak consistently of God's goodness and love (Mal. 3:16).

- They test beliefs by the word of God and resist contrary teachings (Rev. 2:2, 6, 7).
- They recognise God's will and offer willing obedience (Matt. 5:5, 6, 19; 1 Peter 3:4).
- They understand and diligently pursue the interests of God's kingdom on earth (Neh. 13:6-31; Rodriguez, p. 43).
- They pray for guidance through life's trying circumstances and patiently wait on God (Ps. 56:8; Matt. 5:10; Rev. 14:12). Remain faithful (Rev. 2:9-11).
- They experience the changing effects of Christ on the character (Matt. 5:8, Rom. 12:1, 2; White 1940, p. 313).
- They become channels of God's love to others (Matt. 22:39, 40; 2 Cor. 1:5; White 1940, p. 219).
- They exhibit purity in living (Rev. 14:1-4; White 1940, p. 219).
- They leave a legacy of goodness among family members (Deut. 6:4-7; cf. 2 Cor. 3:2).
- They perform faithful service for others (Matt. 5:7, 20:26; Phil. 4:3; James 1:27; White 1940, p. 550; 1952b, p. 238).
- They dedicate themselves to maintaining peaceful relationships (Matt. 5:9).
- They do not seek pre-eminence (Matt. 20:20-28; 1 Cor. 13:4, 5; cf. Rev. 3:12, 21).
- They are active in preserving God's second book, the book of nature (Rev. 11:18).
- They are thankful and give praise to God (Rom. 15:9-13; Jude 1:25; cf. Deut. 28:47, 48).

The most significant thing to notice about every name recorded in these books is that they are only there on account of God's efforts to rescue mankind from the "Wages of 'greatness'" (death) which they have on account of being fallen beings (Genesis 3:3-7: Romans 5:12-17) – Macarthur 2008, pp. 10, 11.

### Reward Expectations for the Less Informed

Some individuals may not fit comfortably into the categories outlined in the above section, but they will also have their reward (cf. Ps. 87:4-6) and this will be an utter surprise to both them and for many of the saved when they hear their stories related. Here I have in mind those who have not experienced the opportunities available to many in Christian lands. The apostle Paul speaks of them in the following terms: "Even Gentiles, who do not have God's written law, show that they know his law when they instinctively obey it, even without having heard it. They demonstrate that God's law is written in their hearts, for their own conscience and thoughts either accuse them or tell them they are doing right. And this is the message I proclaim—that the day is coming when God, through Christ Jesus, will judge everyone's secret life." (Rom. 2:14-16 NLT).

One of the most intriguing passages in Scripture informs us that: "He has set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end" (Eccl. 3:11 NIV). There has been and continues to be a fascination among many peoples with the idea of a supreme power(s) beyond reality involved in regulating the affairs of men. To illustrate, the Karen of Myanmar in bygone years possessed elaborate hymns and stories which honoured the Supreme God which had uncanny similarities to well-known stories in the Christian scriptures (Richardson 1985, pp. 84-92). No certain contact with Christians had been established yet they believed that a white brother from the west would bring a lost book which would enlighten them concerning the Supreme God. When the Bible arrived in their language they received it with joy *en masse* for it testified to their long held beliefs and answered to their hopes. Other groups in remote areas of Southeast Asia's hill districts responded similarly as the Bible account was explained to them concerning the existence of a Creator God who died for the salvation of the world. The Bible account had many similarities to those contained in their folk religions but went far beyond these beliefs to bring certain knowledge and eternal hope (Richardson 1985, pp. 92-99). The question which we are bound to ask is what God will do in the judgment with those who respected the Supreme God presented to them in folk tales yet imperfectly understood the gospel message? And what will He do to those who come from other religious persuasions that hold there is only one true God, but do not have a full understanding of His will or ways?

God has a special concern for those who have had few privileges to learn His will yet wish to find a nobler way. He will gently lead them to a greater understanding of His principles through His providences (White 1943, p. 368). The account of King Nebuchadnezzar recorded in Scripture illustrates the point well. The king and the empire were permitted to come upon the scene of action in order to fulfil God's purpose

in providing protection and sustenance for the peoples under their care. This was represented by the great tree which was fair and fruitful and provided protection (Dan. 4:11, 12; White 1952a, p. 175). While the king operated by just principles and acted righteously, his future was assured (Dan. 4:27). However, pride and unwillingness to listen to the voice of conscience inhibited him from fulfilling God's purpose (Dan 4:30-33; Jer. 50:10, 11, 33; 51:7-9). His subsequent downfall, repentance and dedication to fulfilling his God-given duties, as he understood them, led to the restoration of his kingdom and the return of his greatness (Dan. 4:34-37). Each of the nations which were allowed to gain prominence after Israel's failure (e.g., Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome) had been given the opportunity to uphold God's principles. However, their disappearance illustrates their successive failure to fulfil their purpose (White 1952a, pp. 177-179).

The apostle Paul gives us some insights into how God intends to deal with those who never received the full illuminating light of the gospel yet responded positively to the information that they were given (Rom. 2:14-16; White 1952a, p. 29). The suggestion is that elements of the great principles of heaven are revealed through the working of the Holy Spirit, for God speaks to all (John 1:9). This knowledge is supplemented by information from the book of nature and reasoning about the existence of a Superior Being under the guidance of the Spirit (Rom. 1:19, 20; Nichol *et al.* 1957, pp 478, 489, 490). Those who follow the promptings to live by a higher moral and ethical code "worship God ignorantly" and will be rewarded, if they do not neglect to use every opportunity sent to appreciate truth (White 1940, pp. 490, 638).

The experience of Naaman might be cited as an illustration of one drawn by the Holy Spirit to acknowledge the Supreme God. When this Syrian nobleman was brought into contact with Elisha the prophet in Israel and he was healed of his leprosy on account of his faith, it had a remarkable impact on him. He took soil from Israel to Syria and vowed to worship no other god but the Lord. He asked understanding of his behaviour in advance when he needed to accompany his master into the temple of the god Rimmon to worship (2 Kings 5:17-19). Clearly, his faith and experience were growing by degrees and sadly the text does not tell us how mature his understanding became. It is tempting to think that the wise men who were attracted to honour Jesus' birth were also among this category of honest seekers for truth. All this in no way should diminish our eagerness to introduce people to God's ways. Many will die unwarned and unsaved. Some of these undoubtedly could have been among the saved if given a fuller opportunity (Matt. 11:21-24; White 1952a, p. 263). This appears to be one of the main points that can be read into the Prophet Jonah's account. Even among the most outwardly unlikely group of people, some will respond in a most unexpected and positive manner.

One of the reasons why some are impelled to go into unattractive and dangerous places is to encourage a more directed search for a greater understanding of the true source of wisdom, remnants of which may be found among those attracted by the noble and uplifting principles seen among all national groups (White 1940, pp. 464, 465). Jesus' experience with the woman of Samaria (John 4:5-43) indicates the rich field of interest that may be present in worship communities that may have some elements of truth admixed with falsehoods and misunderstandings. This is an example repeated today among Muslims and that has been the subject of considerable debate (Martin 2006, pp. 128-134). Finding Muslims who are intrigued by the teaching of Isa the Messiah and who eventually accept Jesus as their Saviour is the aim of missionaries to this group of people. Perhaps some in this community will awake to the reality of the choice to be made during the great crisis about to engulf the world before Jesus returns. A scene as in the days of the apostles may be repeated where a great body of priests became followers of Christ after His crucifixion and resurrection (Acts 6:7). Certainly, it has been predicted that a great army of believers will flock to the church from unexpected sources (White 1940, pp. 238, 638; 1948b, pp. 182, 183). We may be surprised to find many great disciples of Christ coming from unusual backgrounds. After all, God promises to consider in the judgment where a person is born (Ps. 87:6).

## Conclusions

The characteristics of those considered great by the secular world may show some sharp differences from those honoured by God. While the world does not ignore the finer dimensions of human endeavour dealing with motives, graciousness, humility and the process of achievement, it does not frown overly on the fierce desire for pre-eminence, arrogance and outspokenness. The heavenly smile is upon those who operate by the highest ethical and moral codes at all times and who show love, kindness, purity, self-denial and improvement of opportunities and talents and are motivated to serve others because Christ gave so much. The principle of humility and service stands in stark contrast to the spirit of self-promotion

and recognition found commonly in the world. Those who heaven counts as great do not actively seek greatness here. They receive it as a result of character developed under the moulding influence of God's Spirit (Rev. 3:20, 21). The most prominent characteristic of such individuals is their giving of self to save others (White 1911, p. 543; 1956, p. 81).

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