

An Overview of the Bema Seat of Christ

“If our deepest longing is for that consummating moment when we shall at last be transfigured into His image, then it should be our present concern to progress daily, by the grace of God, towards the goal of Christlikeness. Love for the Master because of His matchless love for us should be sufficient incentive for us to follow devotedly in His steps. But there is a further consideration, to which the Apostle draws attention here, namely, that even for the Christian there is to be a day of reckoning.” [Hughes, *NICNT, 2 Cor*]

What is the Bema Seat?

The word we want to look at tonight is the Bema (βῆμα = bēma) Seat of Christ. The word is used 12x in the NT and comes from the root word *basis* (βάσις) meaning *feet*, from another root word meaning *to walk, to go*, primarily *a step, a pace*. It is used in that sense one time in the NT: “*And he gave him none inheritance in it, no, not so much as to set his foot on*” (Acts 7:5, KJV) Other translations: “no, not the breadth of a foot” (Tyndale & Geneva Bible); “yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot’s length” (RSV) “Literally, *not even the stepping of a foot*. From the original meaning, *a pace or step*, which occurs only here in the NT, comes the sense of *a step considered as a raised place or seat*, and hence *a tribunal or judgment-seat*, which is its meaning in every other passage of the New Testament. [Vincent, *Word Studies*]

Mat 27:19; Jn 19:13 Pilate on the *judgment seat* when Christ was before him

Acts 12:21 Herod on his *throne*, his tribunal, judgment seat

Acts 18:12,16,17 Gallio on the *judgment seat* when Paul was before him

Acts 25:6,17 Festus on the *judgment seat* when Paul was before him

Acts 25:10 Paul appeals to appear before Caesar’s *judgment seat*

Paul takes that normal usage from the secular world and uses it 2x in reference to the believer’s coming judgment before our Lord Jesus Christ:

“*But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.*” (Rom 14:10) (NOTE: “*judgment seat of Christ*” in Douay-Rheims, Tyndale, Geneva, KJV, NKJV, Young’s Literal Translation; “*judgment seat of God*” in RSV, ASV, NASV, ESV, NIV)

“*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.*” (2 Cor 5:10)

Definitions:

- “A raised place mounted by steps; a platform, tribunal; used of the official seat of a judge, Acts 18:12,16 ... of the judgment seat of Christ, Rom 14:10 ... of the structure, resembling a throne, which Herod built in the theatre at Caesarea, and from which he used to view the games and make speeches to the people.” [Thayer, *Greek - English Lexicon*]
- “In Grecian games in Athens, the old arena contained a raised platform on which the president or umpire of the arena sat. From here he rewarded all the contestants; and here he rewarded all winners. It was called the ‘*bema*’ or ‘*reward seat*.’” [Sale-Harrison, *Judgment Seat of Christ*; quoted in Pentecost, *Things to Come*]
- “In Greek law courts, one *bema* was provided for the accuser, another for the accused; but in the NT the word designates the official seat of a judge, usually of the Roman governor; also of the emperor (Acts 25:10); then of God (Rom 14:10), of Christ (2 Cor 5:10).” [ISBE, article, *Judgment Seat*]

“The imagery used here for the future moment of eschatological revelation is that of the forensic process whereby the Roman governor sat on his tribunal to hear accusation and defence of an accused person standing before him. If he judged the accused guilty, the governor would order immediate punishment. Paul’s use of this language to the Corinthians may have been calculated; he himself had stood accused before the Roman governor Gallio in the Corinthian agora some years earlier (Acts 18:12, 16-17), as the original members of the Corinthian church doubtless remembered.” [Barnett, *NICNT: Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, p 275]

NOTE: these are word pictures used by the writers of the NT and we are not to think there are multiple thrones in heaven which God sits in dependent upon the situation. For example, Paul here speaks of the Judgment Seat of Christ but John also speaks of a throne encircled by a rainbow in Rev 4, and yet another white throne in Rev 20. Rather there is but one throne upon which the Lord sits; sometimes it is a throne of mercy (Rev 4) and sometimes it is a throne of righteous holy judgment (Rev 20) but it is the same throne. Here the Lord’s “Bema Seat” is a picture Paul takes which was common to those first-century recipients and uses it to teach a spiritual truth.

Who will be the Judge of the Bema Seat?

Christ is said to be our final Judge: “God, in the Person of Jesus Christ, is to be the judge. Though God is the Judge of all (Heb 12:23), yet this judicial activity is exercised through Christ, at the last day, as well as in the present state (Jn 5:22, 27).... This, for three reasons: (a) Christ’s human nature enables men to understand both the law and the love of God, and so makes intelligible the grounds on which judgment is passed; (b) The perfect human nature of Christ, united as it is to the divine, ensures all that is needful in true judgement, i.e. that it be both merciful and just; © Human nature, sitting upon the throne of judgment, will afford convincing proof that Christ has received the reward of His sufferings, and that humanity has been perfectly redeemed.” [Strong, *Systematic Theology*]

“For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom he will. For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live. For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself; and hath given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man.” (John 5:21-22, 25-27)

“And he commanded us to preach unto the people, and to testify that it is he which was ordained of God to be the Judge of quick and dead.” (Acts 10:42)

“Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.” (Acts 17:31)

Who will be the ones judged at the Bema Seat?

Undoubtedly believers only, note the context of 2 Cor 5:

- v1,2 glorified body in heaven
- v5 have the Holy Spirit
- v6 present in the body, absent from the Lord
- v7 walk by faith
- v8 rather be absent from body, present with the Lord
- v9 desire is to be pleasing to Him

In like manner, Paul writes in Rom 14:10 “But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.” Kistemaker quotes Moulton & Turner “Grammar of NT Greek” – “for we ... all” has the sense of “*the sum total of us...*”, i.e., the “sum total” of all believers.

No believer will be exempt from that judgment, “*we must all ...*”, the word “*must*” being regularly used for actions decreed by God. It is not an option but a decree of God, a command to stand trial, Plummer says “**A divine decree which cannot be evaded.**”

Note as well that **it is an INDIVIDUAL judgment** — we will not be judged en masse or in classes but one by one. It is a judgment as individuals: Matt 25:14-30.

How will those present at the Bema Seat be judged?

FOR WE MUST ALL BE MADE MANIFEST — “appear” = to be revealed, to be made manifest, to show openly, we will be revealed as we are, a revelation of what had previously been hidden. The secret thing of our heart and life will be made manifest to all. We must all stand revealed in our true character before the judgment seat of Christ. “[M]eans not just to appear but to be laid bare, stripped of every outward façade of respectability, and openly revealed in the full and true reality of one’s character. All our hypocrisies and concealments, all our secret, intimate sins of thought and deed, will be open to the scrutiny of Christ — a clear indication, incidentally, of the absolute Deity of the Redeemer, for it is only the divine gaze which penetrates to the very essence of our personality: ‘man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart’ (1 Sam 16:7).” [Hughes, *NICNT, 2 Cor*]

*“Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the **motives** of men’s hearts; and then each man’s praise will come to him from God.”* (1 Cor 4:5 NASV)

“For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.” (Heb 4:12,13)

What will be judged at the Bema Seat?

PURPOSE: TO BE JUDGED FOR THE DEEDS DONE WHILE ON EARTH — “may receive the things done in his body...”. The verb here is in the middle voice and therefore some make the emphasis “to receive back, to receive back as his due, to receive back what is one’s own” in the sense of reward or recompense according to previous actions, that each may receive to himself, into his own hand, his own reward and his own wages. Several also expands the “done in his body” to include the idea of “in proportion to the deeds done in the body”

“Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free.” (Eph 6:5-8 NASV; see also Col 3:25)

Jesus said, *“Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done.”* (Rev 22:12)

THIS WILL NOT BE A CAKE-WALK OR A “NON-EVENT” ... THIS IS A SERIOUS, SOBER APPOINTMENT FOR ALL BELIEVERS —

We live in a culture of antinomianism where the average believer (if they are truly saved at all) has the mistaken attitude that the grace of God means God does not care how a believer lives. Paul taught otherwise: *“Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men...”* (2 Cor 5:11 NASV) Note the context is still believers, not the unsaved! “He is not speaking about overwhelming dread but rather about reverent fear of divine judgment. Paul subjects himself and his associates to an introspective examination. He desires a thorough examination to see whether their preaching has advanced the cause of judgment and whether their conduct has been exemplary.” [Kistemaker, *2 Cor*] “The teaching about the judgment seat before which all believers must come reminds us that we have been saved, not for a life of aimlessness or indifference, but to live as to the Lord. This doctrine of the universality of the judgment of believers preserves the moral seriousness of God.... The sure prospect of the judgment seat reminds the Corinthians — and all believers — that while they are righteous in Christ by faith alone, the faith that justifies is to be expressed by love and obedience (Gal 5:6; Rom 1:5), and by pleasing the Lord. Our ‘confidence’ that we will be ‘with the Lord (v 8) is to be held in tension with the ‘fear of the Lord’ (v. 11), from which we serve him. Confidence, while real, does not empty service of sobriety.” [Barnett, *NICNT: 2 Cor*, p 277]

What will be the standard of judgment at the Bema Seat?

To be judged for things good or bad — The word used here means “evil under another aspect, not so much that either of active or passive malignity, but that rather of its good-for-nothingness, the impossibility of any true gain ever coming forth from it This notion of worthlessness is the central notion.” [Trench, *NT Synonyms*] “Thus the judgment is not to determine what is ethically good or evil, but rather that which is acceptable and that which is worthless. It is not the Lord’s purpose here to chasten His child for his sins, but to reward his service for those things done in the name of the Lord.” [Pentecost, *Things to Come*]

What will be the results of the Bema Seat?

NOT CONDEMNATION BUT EVALUATION — “[B]elievers do not face *condemnation* at Christ’s tribunal but rather *evaluation* with a view to the Master’s commendation given or withheld (1 Cor 3:10-15; 4:5; cf. Luke 12:42-48). Perhaps, too, they will receive back within themselves elements of what they had practiced in the body, as eternal reminders that they had been saved through God’s mercy, and not by their own efforts.” [Barnett, *NICNT: 2 Cor*, p. 275] So careful was Paul to make sure there were not misunderstandings he added the one that would lose all would still be saved. *“Paul even speaks of the heart-stirring possibility that a believer, though saved personally, may suffer such damage to be compared to a man escaping out of a fire with his bare life. Let us therefore live in practical faithfulness!”* [Erich Sauer, *From Eternity to Eternity*] The believer has already been delivered from the judicial guilt of sin by the cross (Rom 8:1; Jn 5:24; 1 Jn 4:17). Sauer describes it this manner: “In all, scripture speaks in a threefold respect fo the judgment of believers. First of their judgment as sinners, second as children, third as servants. As sinners they were judged in the past on the cross. There in their Substitute their sentence was fully executed: the chastisement lay upon Him, that we might have peace. This is their blessed confession. As children they are judged in the present, when they are chastened by the Lord (1 Cor 11:32). This is for their profit, so they may attain sanctification (Heb 12:10). Lastly as servants, in the future, before the judgment seat of Christ.” [Sauer, *From Eternity to Eternity*] “We see two ships coming into a harbor from distant ports. As one comes in sight we see that every mast is broken and every shroud torn, its cargo lost, it has sprung a leak, and a harbor tug must tow it in. It just barely gets into port. The other ship comes in with every mast standing, with every sail filled, cargoes to the water’s edge, meeting the shout of men and boom of artillery from the shore. That is the difference in dying Christians. Some have no reward. Others have great reward on account of their fidelity. When they believed in Christ, they were justified. That does not have to be done over. But a Christian’s fidelity will be judged by what a man does.” [B. H. Carroll, *Interpretation of English Bible*]

The results of the examination of the bema seat: 1 Cor 3:14,15 says there will be a two-fold result of the examination: rewards lost or rewards gained. 1 Cor 3:13 says what will be examined will be the believer’s works. This will not be based on external

judgment but rather “to see what sort it is”, i.e. the inner character and motivation. That which is honoring, pleasing and done as unto the Lord is classed as gold, silver, costly stones while that which is not is classed as wood, hay and stubble. The examination is portrayed as a “trial by fire” in which the products of our works are set ablaze to see what remains and what is destroyed. “There are two sides to this. Peter’s denial of his Lord, and Demas’ ‘turning back in the day of battle’ will be remembered there. But so will the widow’s two mites and Mary’s alabaster box of ointment. It was in circumstances of trial such as *we* have never known that Demas and Peter failed. But who is there who has not failed at times when faithfulness would have cost nothing more than reproach or ridicule? And let us not forget that the widow’s sacrifice would have been unrecorded had not the Lord been present to notice it; and that, but for Him, the reproach of ‘Why this waste?’ would have rested upon Mary. And in that day surely we shall have the grace to rejoice when service which brings honor from men will be appraised at its true worth, and many a humble Christian will be rewarded for sacrifices that no eye but His has noticed, or that men have noticed only to condemn.” [Robert Anderson, *Forgotten Truths*] The context / picture Paul is using in 1 Cor 3 is the builder — if this is connected, then the wood, hay stubble gold silver costly jewels are those items used in building the structure. If so when the building burns, that which is left standing is the rewards. Therefore: the basis for the examination is that which helps “build the building”; i.e. that labor which is done as unto the Lord in the building of His “building”.

What is wood, hay, stubble? ...

- pride in our teaching, preaching, singing, playing instruments in church
- denying help to others when it is in our means to be able to help them and it would align with the will of God
- coming to prayer meeting and hearing the requests and then not praying for those requests after leaving church
- failing to put priority on spiritual things in our homes
- failing to put priority on public meeting times
- failing to apply the talents God has given us, or failing to improve on our talents and abilities
- looking down our noses on someone who can’t do what we do
- being self-righteous or proud of our life in Christ
- neglect of the Word of God and prayer
- being hard or harsh to our children, or rebellious to our parents
- knowing someone for years and never testifying of Christ
- setting worldly goals for our children at the expense of the spiritual
- not wanting your child to be in a full-time ministry out of concern for their safety
- pilfering from work or failing to put in a good workday
- essentially can be summed up by *any and all efforts done through selfishness or pride, even Christian service*

What is gold, silver, precious stones? ...

- the obvious: time and finances given to honor God, sometimes quite sacrificially
- being tender to the ministry of the Holy Spirit while the Word of God is being preached
- tears over a lost loved one or a prodigal child
- serving or supporting the elderly in the name of Christ
- prayers in the middle of the night when your heart is burdened for those in the midst of trials
- broken hearts and prayers for the lost
- quiet time in communion with your Heavenly Father
- times when you attempted to do right and honor Christ but were misunderstood and railed against
- times when you try and try in some effort for the Lord but fail and fall flat on your face
- the encouraging words given to the discouraged
- sacrifices that goes unnoticed by those around you
- trusting God when all the answers seem to be “no”
- time in God’s word to search out an important issue or to search to see the truth of God’s Word
- times when you deny your feelings and worldly logic to be obedient to the Word of God

- being faithful when your world is falling apart
- essentially can be summed up by *any and all efforts done through selflessness and humility for the name of Christ*

Note: in 1 Cor 3:9-15 the strict context of these verses are directed towards ministers; however, the close connection with the change from “we” (ministers, “deacons” in v5) to “ye” in v16 makes for a close blend; as well as the fact that even if this strictly applies only to ministers, the picture provided still might be used to every believer’s works at the Bema Seat. “He speaks of the body of truth and doctrine which different teachers may erect on the one true foundation – Jesus Christ.... It is plainly implied that teachers may build upon the true foundation with perishable or worthless materials. [Vincent, *Word Studies*] Paul was not only a laborer, but an architect. To him was revealed the whole plan of the building, and he was inspired to develop that plan, and to prescribe the way in which it should be carried out. He laid the foundation. The same idea as was expressed above by saying, ‘I have planted, Apollos watered.’ He began the work in Corinth. Those who came after him were to carry on the edifice which he had commenced. The building must be erected upon the foundation and according to it. And, therefore, he adds, Let every man (i.e. every builder) take heed how he buildeth thereupon. *In the whole context he is speaking of ministers, and therefore this clause must be considered as a warning addressed to them. They are to take heed how, i.e. with what materials, they carried on the building of this holy temple.* Fidelity as well as diligence is required in a minister. No matter how laborious he may be, unless he employs the proper materials, he will lose his reward. Nothing but truth can be safely used in the development of Christian character, or in building up the Church. To mix the wisdom of men with the wisdom of God in this work, is, as the apostle afterwards says, like using alternate layers of straw and marble in the erection of a temple. Let no man deceive himself in this matter. He will prove himself a fool, if he attempts to substitute philosophy for the gospel in the work of saving men. [Charles Hodge; *1 Cor*]

What effect should the Bema Seat have on us here and now?

Balance between cowering fear and lawless disobedience (antinomianism): the balance: “Most Christians seem to oscillate between these two extremes of error. Many are strangers to settled peace because they fear to trust ‘the word of the truth of the Gospel’. And those who know what it means to have ‘a heart established by grace’ need to be reminded of the solemnities of the judgment seat of Christ.” [Robert Anderson, *Forgotten Truths*] “Because much is required of those to whom much has been given, the thought of the judgment seat of Christ has for the Christian a peculiar solemnity. It is not meant to cloud his prospect of future blessedness, but to act as a stimulus.” [Tasker, *2 Cor*]

Reminder to do our best: Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Cor 10:31). Therefore let all we do be for Him alone. Knowing that however, it should make us better workers, better husbands / wives / children / parents, better church members, etc. All we do should be our best as unto the Lord and in obedience to Him.

Reminder not to compare others with others: There is the movement in our culture to lift up certain Christians and make them “Christian celebrities”. Not only is this damaging and a hindrance to the glory the Lord alone should receive but it is crippling to many pastors who “cannot preach like Charles Stanley or Chuck Swindoll”, who cannot “council like James Dobson”, who cannot “sing like Steve Green”, etc. The believer that is always comparing others is trapped in a spiritual child-like bad habit and needs to grasp the truth of the Bema Seat. All men will be compared individually for the talents given them by the Lord and will answer accordingly. It is not for us to lift up certain while minimizing others; the talents given each has been sovereignly bestowed by the Lord. E.g. I was in a Christian Book Store several years back looking at some music when I overheard some teens comparing their favorite Christian singers. One made the comment the other’s favorite singer was much over-rated and his favorite was much more talented and gifted. I walked away to avoid getting involved in another’s business. The comment I wanted to make is that is the world’s outlook, not the believer’s. If one is used by the Lord to touch my life then praise God. If another would have more talent than another, that is again in the hands of the Lord and not something to be used in comparing one with the other, as if one is better than another.

Reminder not to compare myself with others: The question we should ask is “am I doing my best?” Am I not doing something because “I can’t do it like so-and-so”? This is not important to the Lord; what He desires is for each to do his best regardless of the others. We are each to “use the talent” the Lord has loaned us, and that alone is what we will be answerable for, not for things we cannot do!

Should receive peace and satisfaction knowing the Lord knows! We are all misunderstood at times. In the midst of troubles and false accusations, while we are to make peace if at all possible, ultimately our goal is to keep our hearts right in the sight of God whether others understand the situation or not! *And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward.* (Matt 10:42)

Should make us more gracious towards others that differ in the “gray” areas: *But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God. Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother’s way.* (Rom 14:10-13) To set ourselves as judge over others in non-doctrinal areas is in violation to this verse. We are not other’s masters, they are not *our* servants. Why are we so critical towards other believers that are different (again, non-doctrinal areas)?

Reminder that we should be aware of our influence upon others: Rom 14:7,10-12 we all influence others; Question: how do we influence others?

Should make us more gracious towards others who cannot do something as well as we might (or think we can). If we come to grips with the fact that all we have are talents on loan from the Lord, each of which we are answerable for only unto Him, then we might not be so proud and boastful in the areas which the Lord has blessed us, and might not cast the downward look towards others that cannot do something as well as *we think* we can. Ultimately it is not who can do it best but which was done as unto the Lord? Which person gave His all? Which person tried His best? Which person had his heart right when the deed was done? The Lord alone can answer these questions, and that being so we should remember not to be overly critical.

Conclusion

What we do matters! How we live matters! Not as before others, not to impress others — but as *unto the Lord!*

“And now, little children, abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming.” (1 John 2:28)

“Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.” (1 Cor 9:24-27)

“Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ.” (Col 3:24)

“Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt 5:19)

“Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward.” (2 John 8)

“And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be.” (Rev 22:12)

“Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.” (Rev 3:11)

The Bema Seat at Corinth

This is the platform of what supported the Bema seat (judgment seat) of the local officials in the city of Corinth. The seat would be used to award athletes for their performances (usually a wilted celery leaf) and to address legal charges brought against individuals. Paul was very familiar with this seat since he was brought before Gallio who was the proconsul of Achaia at the Bema seat (Acts 18:12). This seat was also what Paul referred to in 2 Corinthians 5:9-11 as the “judgment seat of Christ” (the word “judgment seat” is “bema”) where the Christian will receive an evaluation for works done in the body whether good or bad. (copied)

