

THE JUDGMENT THRONE (BÉMA) OF CHRIST

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As born-again Christians, we truly rejoice at the thought of God's wonderful promise and provision, that "if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9, NKJV).

But how does this divine provision relate to Christ's confrontation with His Church, His Body and Bride, at the Judgment Throne? Does this mean that 1 John 1:9 eliminates the threat of losing a reward or a crown on that great day? This is a very confusing issue for many of God's people today.

The Purpose of the Judgment Seat Confrontation

One point must be settled immediately – the issue is *the gain or loss of rewards, not of salvation!* Thank God, "He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). "Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ . . . and rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:1-2). "He who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life" (John 5:24). "And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish . . . No one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. I and My Father are one" (John 10:28-30).

On the other hand, the provision of awards for faithfulness is intended by our Lord to provide *tremendous motivation* for His people. As a matter of fact, *all* human beings have been programmed by God with this perspective! How would a military unit function efficiently if there were no rewards for self-discipline and diligence and courage? And what about governments, and industries, and schools? Would a student do his very best if there were no grades or honors or recognition at the end?

Prizes, Crowns, Rewards

The Apostle Paul was well aware of the prizes offered to athletes who competed at the Olympics and the Isthmian Games of his day.¹ "Do you not know that those who run

¹"These Games, held every two years under the patronage of Corinth and second only to the Olympics, were extravagant festivals of religion, athletics, and the arts, attracting thousands of competitors and visitors from all over the empire . . . Paul would have been in Corinth during the games of A.D. 51 (in the spring)" (Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co.], p. 433).

in a race all run, but one receives *the prize*? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for *the prize* is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for *an imperishable crown*. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (1 Cor. 9:24-27).² “Let no one cheat you of *your reward*,” Paul admonished the church at Colosse (2:18).

Precious indeed are his final words to Timothy: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me *the crown of righteousness*, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing” (2 Tim. 4:6-8).

The apostle Peter encouraged pastors to be “examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive *the crown of glory* that does not fade away” (1 Peter 5:2).

James, the half-brother of our Lord Jesus, and pastor of the great church at Jerusalem, wrote: “Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive *the crown of life* which the Lord has promised to those who love Him” (James 1:12).

The apostle John warned his readers: “Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive *a full reward*” (2 John 8). And he recorded these solemn words from the Savior to the persecuted church at Smyrna: “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you *the crown of life*” (Rev. 2:10). And to the faithful church in Philadelphia, our Lord gave this challenge: “Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take *your crown*” (Rev. 3:11).

But someone might ask: Why do I even *need* a reward or a crown? Isn’t it enough to be assured of heaven with the Lord Jesus forever? Even if most Christians would not actually say this, they often act *as if a reward provides no vital motivation* for more faithful Christian living and service.

The answer to such questions seems clear: the crown a believer might receive will be for *His* honor, for we will “cast [our] crowns before the throne, saying: ‘You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor . . . ’” (Rev. 4:10-11). Presumably, then, we will be *ashamed* to have nothing to cast down before Him! Even the Lord Jesus was motivated by the anticipation of a reward, for we are told that He, “for the joy that was

²Lewis Sperry Chafer explains that the word “disqualified” [*adokimos*] is mistranslated “castaway” in the A.V., implying loss of salvation. “It is the negative form and its positive is rightly translated in 2 Tim. 2:15, ‘Study to show thyself approved [*dokimos*] unto God.’ The disapproval which the Apostle dreaded is none other than the burning of unworthy works of service (cf. 2 Cor. 5:11)” (*Systematic Theology* IV [Grand Rapids: Kregel Pub., 1993], p. 406.)

set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2).

John M. Frame has helpfully commented: “I confess that I was surprised by the number of times Scripture uses rewards to motivate obedience. Like many of us, I tend toward the Kantian notion that we should simply do our duty for duty’s sake and never think about reward. But that notion is quite unbiblical. If God takes the trouble (this many times!) to urge our obedience by a promise of reward, we should embrace that promise with thanks, not despise it. That is, we should not only do good works, but we should do them for this reason. This teaching, of course, is not salvation by works or merit. Although the word *reward* is used in these passages, there is no suggestion that we have earned the reward in the sense that we have paid God what the reward is worth. Jesus says that even when we have done everything commanded of us (and not one of us has done that), we have done no more than our duty (Luke 17:7-10). Indeed, in that case we are “unworthy” servants. Elsewhere, Scripture represents the reward as something out of all proportion to the service rendered (Matt. 19:29; 20:1-16; 25:45-47; 25:21-30; Luke 7:36-50; 12:37).”³

The Béma in Paul, Peter and John

The apostle Paul used the term *béma* when he wrote to the Corinthian church about our final confrontation with Christ to determine the gain or loss of rewards: “For we must all appear before the judgment seat (*béma*) of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men . . .” (2 Cor. 5 :10-11). The Corinthians were very familiar with this word, for it was inscribed on the front of the large marble judgment throne where judicial issues were evaluated by the supreme judge (such as Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia, before whom Paul stood one day (cf. Acts 18:12, 16, 17).⁴ Amazingly, it was before the *béma* of Pontius Pilate that our Lord took His stand (cf. Matt 27:19; John 19:13)!

To the church at Rome, Paul wrote: “we shall all stand before the judgment seat

³John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Pub., 2008), pp. 283-284.

⁴It was my privilege to see this *béma* during a visit to Corinth on August 21, 1952. For a photo, see James L. Boyer, *For A World Like Ours* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1971), p. 51. For its location in ancient Corinth, see *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Vol. I (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Pub., 1980), p. 314. See also the photo and discussion in V. Gilbert Beers, *The Victor Handbook of Bible Knowledge* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1981), pp. 592-93.

(*béma*) of Christ . . . So then each of us shall give account of himself to God” (Rom. 14:10-12).

Even more ominous, perhaps, are the words of the apostle Peter: “For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God? If the righteous one is scarcely saved, where will the ungodly and the sinner appear?” (1 Pet. 4:17-18).

The apostle John warned his disciples (“little children”): “abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be *ashamed* before Him at His coming” (1 John 2:28). “The passive voice coupled with the expression *autou* suggests that a believer withdraws in shame. It suggests a shrinking back from Christ, perhaps from a sense of guilt, with the believer producing the action [rather than Christ putting the believer to shame].”⁵

Christ’s Qualifications for Judging Us

One fact will be agreed upon by all Christians: our Lord is fully equipped to examine and evaluate the thoughts, motives, words and deeds of every member of his Body, the Church! “Our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29), and He has “eyes like a flame of fire” (Rev. 2:14; cf. 19:12).

The Lord Jesus told us that “there is nothing *covered* that will not be revealed, nor *hidden* that will not be known. Therefore whatever you have spoken *in the dark* will be heard in the light, and what you have spoken *in the ear in inner rooms* will be proclaimed on the housetops” (Luke 12:2-3). Paul confirmed that “God will judge *the secrets* of men by Jesus Christ” (Rom. 2:16). These “secrets” include *the motives* behind all of our thoughts, words, and actions. Our God is infinitely concerned about *the true reasons* why we do and say things!

In this light, Paul could assure the Corinthian believers that it was not so much what they thought of him that mattered. “He who judges me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light *the hidden things of darkness* and reveal *the counsels* [motives] *of the heart*” (1 Cor. 4:4-5).

Our Lord Jesus Christ will also evaluate us on the basis of *how much we knew* of His will and word, because “from everyone who has been given much shall much be required” (Luke 12:48). Therefore, “that slave *who knew his master’s will*, and did not get

⁵Samuel L. Hoyt, “The Negative Aspects of the Christian’s Judgment,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137:129-30 (April-June, 1980). Quoted in Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), p. 598. See also John A. Sproule, “The Christian and Future Judgment” (a research paper for the course on Biblical Eschatology CTA 302 [Grace Theological Seminary, 1974], available from jcwhitcomb@juno.com).

ready or act in accord with his will, shall receive many lashes.” But *if we did not know His will*, are we not completely free of consequences? No, for *such ignorance is culpable*: we should do everything possible to learn what His will is for our lives through reading and believing His Word! Therefore, “*the one who did not know it*, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few” (vv. 47-48).

Mere human courts and judges, of course, cannot begin to compare with the absolute perfection of His examination of people! That is because “the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of *the thoughts and intents of the heart*. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but *all things are naked and open* to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account” (Heb.4:12-13).

At *the béma* our Lord will show no partiality. “Whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ. But he [i.e. the Christian servant] who does wrong will be repaid for what he has done, and *there is no partiality*” (Col. 3:23-25). “. . . the Father *without partiality* judges according to each one’s work” (1 Pet. 1:17). And the Bible ends with this word of divine assurance: “Behold, I am coming quickly, and *My reward is with Me*, to give to every one according to his work” (Rev. 22:12), to which the apostle John, and hopefully each believer, responds: “Even so, come, Lord Jesus!” (vs. 20).

The Most Detailed Description of the BÉMA of Christ

Paul had (under God) laid the foundation for the church at Corinth (Acts 18:1-18), and Apollos of Alexandria, a disciple of John the Baptist (Acts 18:24-28), effectively built upon that foundation. But the Corinthians, in a fleshly way, polarized around one or the other of these servants of God (1 Cor. 1:10-17)!

Now Paul confronted this sectarian mentality as a basis for teaching the doctrine of *the béma*. “Neither he who plants [i.e., Paul] is anything, nor he who waters [i.e., Apollos], but God who gives the increase. . . . Each one will receive *his own reward* according to his own labor. . . . But let each one take heed how he builds on [the foundation]. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:7-11).

Thus, the discussion concerns the destiny of *believers only*. What kind of *superstructure* have we built upon the foundation of our life in Christ? At this point the heavy part of the passage begins: “Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is. If anyone’s work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet

as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:12-15).

Tragically, hundreds of millions of Roman Catholics have been taught that this verse refers to *purgatory*, a place where imperfect Catholic believers supposedly must pay for their sins, perhaps for centuries! “But that is to miss Paul by a wide margin. This is metaphor, pure and simple. The Greek construction, *houtos de hos*, makes this certain: ‘thus, as it were, only through fire’. [Paul is] probably reflecting something like Amos’s ‘firebrand plucked from the burning’ (4:11).”⁶

“The Roman Catholic interpretation completely misses the point. Paul is using an analogy. He is not talking about a real fire. He is not talking about men and women burning. Paul is speaking of an imaginary building that represents a person’s ministry, not the individual himself. Figuratively speaking, it is a person’s *work* that will burn, *not the person himself*. The focus of the illustration is the potential loss of reward for poor service, not the atonement of sin or the cleansing of souls.”⁷

Thus, everything we have said, done, and even thought, as true Christians, must be brought to full light. Could it be any other way? Can our Lord be deceived by mere outward religious forms and appearances? If *any final recognition or honor or reward or crown* be granted to God’s servants at that day, must it not be done *in loving perfection*? Will not all Christians, in that day fully glorified and thus sinless, agree totally with His final evaluation of each and every one of us?

Plainly, it is the unworthy *works* that will be burned, not the believers themselves! In fact, even though a believer’s “*work* is burned . . . *he himself* will be saved” (3:15). But does not that reduce the *béma* confrontation to total insignificance? No, for “he will suffer loss . . . as through fire.” But does this mean that some believers will be in a state of depression forever? “It would not be heaven if we were to spend eternity in sadness because of what we did not do. Undoubtedly there will be regret, but our overwhelming emotion will be the realization of the wonderful grace of God that saved us and brought

⁶Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1991), p. 144.

⁷James G. McCarthy, *The Gospel According to Rome* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Pub., 1995), p. 111. Cf. Mike Gendron, “The Fatal Fable of a Sin-Purifying Fire” (*Proclaiming the Gospel*, 18:2 [April-June, 2009, at www.pro-gospel.org]). See also, Norman A. Olson, “Biblical Basis for Purgatory?” in *The Baptist Bulletin* (April, 2005, p. 9. Email: nolson@garbc.org); and, especially, Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology* 4 (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2005), pp. 362-380. The official Roman Catholic statement may be found in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1994, pp. 268-269).

us to heaven. There will be rejoicing in heaven instead of tears.”⁸

How, then, do we relate all of this to the forgiveness and cleansing He provides for us when we confess our sins (cf. 1 John 1:9)? Does this forgiveness and cleansing cancel out any potential loss of reward at the *béma*?

David and Bathsheba

Perhaps the clearest answer to this question is provided for us in 2 Samuel 12. King David had sinned grievously against the LORD by having one of his faithful generals, Uriah the Hittite, killed, in order to obtain his wife Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11)! When David refused to confess his sin, God sent Nathan the prophet to get his attention with a tragic story about a rich man who took a poor man’s “one little ewe lamb” to prepare it for a guest.

David, of course, was enraged: “As the LORD lives, the man who has done this shall surely die!” (12:5). “Then Nathan said to David: ‘You are the man! . . . Now, therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife’” (12:7-10).

That did it! David immediately saw the magnitude of his own sin, and cried out: “I have sinned against the LORD!” (vs. 13). Psalm 51 is a profound expression of David’s deep repentance to God. Did this genuine confession change anything? Yes! Nathan replied immediately: “The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die.” Then was everything wonderful again? No! “However, because by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child who is born to you shall surely die” (vs. 14). Furthermore, “the sword shall never depart from your house . . . I will raise up adversity against you from your own house . . .” (vv. 10-11). Among the disasters that followed were the sins and rebellions of his sons Absalom, Amnon, and Adonijah.

Question: Did the LORD truly *forgive* David? YES.

Question: Were the full consequences of his sin *totally wiped out*? NO.

That is the ultimate issue. When we truly confess our sins, God graciously forgives us and restores fellowship with us. But *the full consequences of our sins* must still be brought to light and dealt with by the LORD. That will be the function of *the béma*.

⁸C. Swindoll and R. Zuck, *Understanding Christian Theology* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Pub., 2003), p. 1279.

The Public Testimony of Believers

What concerns our loving LORD is not only His daily relationship with us, but also the long-term influence and impact of our Christian lives and ministries upon others. For example, if a pastor commits a serious public sin, *his position of leadership in the church is* (with possible rare exceptions) *finished*, even though he might genuinely confess his sin to God.

As Paul wrote to Timothy, “a bishop [overseer] must be blameless . . . he must have a good testimony among those who are outside” (1 Tim. 3 :2, 7); and, “in purity, show yourself an example of those who believe” (1 Tim. 4:12). And to the church at Ephesus: “do not let immorality or any impurity or greed even be named among you, as is proper among saints” (Eph 5:3). And to Titus, “Appoint elders in every city . . . if a man be blameless, the husband of one wife . . .” (Titus 1:5-6). To be even more specific, “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge” (Heb. 13:4). Finally, James, the pastor of the great church at Jerusalem, said: “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment” (James 3:1). The public doesn’t know or even care about whether he has made a personal confession to his God. What they do care about – and will probably never forget – is his public sin. This deeply hurts and grieves our LORD, and will surely be a major factor in determining the gain or loss of a reward or crown at *the béma*.

“Adultery is not the only sin that disqualifies a minister from office, but it is one of the more visible and confusing sins plaguing the church of our time. What is particularly troublesome about this sin is the abuse of power that often attends it. Deep pain is brought to the sexual partner in a clergy affair, and even deeper pain to the minister’s wife. The minister, given an honored office through which he is called to serve abused and vulnerable people, violates that very trust by becoming, himself, a violator . . . Many borrow psychotherapeutic concepts such as *healing* and *recovery* as rationales for returning to pastoral ministry, but with no genuine recognition of the pathology that manifests itself in the abuse of power.”⁹

Thus, God intends the *béma* confrontation to motivate each and every believer – not just church leaders – to serve Him in spirit and in truth. It is not designed to be a horrible threat that produces depression and fear, but, rather, an encouragement to love and serve and obey Him from the heart. In this light, may we, as Christians, be more concerned than ever before about our testimony for the Savior who loves us with infinite love, and paid the ultimate price for our redemption and future glorification.

⁹R. Kent Hughes and John H. Armstrong, “Why Adulterous Pastors Should Not Be Restored: Repentance Is Not Enough for Returning Fallen Ministers to the Pulpit” (*Christianity Today* [April 3, 1995], p. 34).