

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS THE JUDGMENT SEAT OF CHRIST?

And he commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that he is the one ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead.

Acts 10:42 (RSV)

because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead.”

Acts 17:31 (RSV)

¹⁰ *But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. ¹¹ For it is written:*

*“As I live, says the Lord,
Every knee shall bow to Me,
And every tongue shall confess to God.”*

¹² *So then each of us shall give account of himself to God.*

Romans 14: 10-12 (NKJV)

¹⁰ *For we must all appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*

2 Corinthians 5:10 (NIV)

*Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.*

Isaiah 40:10 (RSV)

“Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay everyone for what he has done.

Revelation 22:12 (ESV)

³⁶ *You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.*

Hebrews 10:36 (NIV)

²⁴ *By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter.
²⁵ He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶ He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.*

Hebrews 11:24-26 (NIV)

“Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, says the Lord GOD. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin

Ezekiel 18:30 (RSV)

....for you will render to a man according to his work

Psalm 62:12 (b) (ESV)

And he commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that he is the one ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead.

Acts 10:42 (RSV)

5 Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then every man will receive his commendation from God.

1 Corinthians 4:5 (RSV)

For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.

2 Corinthians 10:18 (ESV)

The Judgment Seat of Christ is the judgment for *Christians*, at which their works or fruit will be assessed. It is not for the purpose of *condemnation* - nobody will be sent from it to the Lake of Fire

In this chapter we shall discuss the judgment facing every genuine Christian at which the fruitfulness or otherwise of their lives will be assessed, face to face, by Jesus Christ Himself. There is very little awareness of this judgment, and a lot of confusion about it, even amongst the minority who have heard anything about it at all. It is often mistaken for the judgment that awaits unbelievers.

Therefore we need to make clear at the outset that nobody who appears before Jesus at the Judgment Seat of Christ will ever be *condemned*. Nobody will be sent from it to the Lake of Fire, because it is not a judgment of our *sins*. That's because, for a Christian, those sins have already been forgiven. Therefore, the purpose of this judgment is not to *condemn* people or to find them *guilty*. It is not a place where God's wrath will be poured out, because those who go to the Judgment Seat of Christ are guiltless and are not condemned:

⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:7-8 (ESV)

Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.

Romans 5:9 (NASB)

¹⁶For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

John 3:16-18 (RSV)

So, let's get this straight. What if Jesus was to conclude that a person's life had produced no fruit at all, for example if they were converted on their deathbed and had no time to produce any fruit? The answer is they would still be saved. They would still have eternal life. They would, however, probably receive little or no reward. This judgment is for the purpose of deciding what reward, if any, a person should receive. It is a judgment of the person's *works or fruit*, not of the *person themselves*, or of their *sins*.

However, the Judgment Seat of Christ is not solely a place for congratulations and rewards to be given out. There will also be criticism, rebuke and even punishment.

Most Christians don't speak or think about the Judgment Seat of Christ at all. Of the small minority who do ever speak of it, they tend to take the view that it is a place where nothing other than rewards, congratulations and prizes will be given out. The *Bema* judgment or Judgment Seat of Christ gets its name from the '*Bema Seat*'. This was an official, formal position of authority from which to exercise judgment. It was also a place where cases were tried and judgments given in disputes. Apostle Paul was brought before such a *Bema* or judgment seat in Corinth where he was examined by Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia. It was quite clearly what we would call a *court*:

¹² But while Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him before the judgment seat, ¹³ saying, "This man persuades men to worship God contrary to the law." ¹⁴ But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of wrong or of vicious crime, O Jews, it would be reasonable for me to put up with you; ¹⁵ but if there are questions about words and names and your own law, look after it yourselves; I am unwilling to be a judge of these matters." ¹⁶ And he drove them away from the judgment seat. ¹⁷ And they all took hold of Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, and began beating him in front of the judgment seat. But Gallio was not concerned about any of these things.
Acts 18:12-17 (NASB)

Some people take the view that a *bema* seat was not a court, but only a place from which garlands and prizes were given out to winners in athletics competitions. They imply therefore that it only has positive connotations and cannot involve any element of rebuke or criticism. But that is not the case.

The word *bema* may also have been used in the context of a prize giving for athletics, but its primary meaning is as a court or seat of authority, as we saw above with Gallio. A further example is Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor:

¹ Now when morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus to put Him to death; ² and they bound Him, and led Him away and delivered Him to Pilate the governor.
Matthew 27:1-2 (NASB)

The venue for Jesus' trial is referred to in Matthew's gospel as a '*judgment seat*', i.e. a *bema*. But, in any case anybody thinks it was not a proper court, or that no negative decisions could be reached at it, remember that it resulted in Pilate issuing a death sentence against Jesus, albeit that he did so reluctantly:

¹⁵ Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the people any one prisoner whom they wanted. ¹⁶ At that time they were holding a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. ¹⁷ So when the people gathered together, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" ¹⁸ For he knew that because of envy they had handed Him over.

*¹⁹ While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent him a message, saying, "Have nothing to do with that righteous Man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him." ²⁰ But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to put Jesus to death. ²¹ But the governor said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." ²² Pilate *said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all *said, "Crucify Him!" ²³ And he said, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they kept shouting all the more, saying, "Crucify Him!"*

²⁴ When Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather that a riot was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this Man's blood; see

to that yourselves.”²⁵ And all the people said, “His blood shall be on us and on our children!”²⁶ Then he released Barabbas for them; but after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified.

Matthew 27:15-26 (NASB)

Another example of a judgment seat is found in Acts chapter 12 when King Herod sat on his throne and made an address to the people. He did it from a place of authority and power. It was certainly not an athletics award ceremony. At any rate, the throne on which Herod sat was a ‘bema’:

²⁰ He had been quarrelling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. After securing the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king’s country for their food supply.²¹ On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people.²² They shouted, ‘This is the voice of a god, not of a man.’

Acts 12:20-22 (NIV)

The Judgment we face before Jesus may also involve elements of rebuke or criticism and the loss of rewards, just as any court hearing might. We must not assume that all Jesus will do is to give out rewards, prizes and congratulations to all of us and that He will do and say nothing else. In other words, we cannot assume that it will be a wholly pleasant experience with no rebuke, criticism, punishment, demotion or loss.

It would be comforting if we could validly say all of that, but I don’t believe we can. The truth is that the Judgment Seat of Christ will be wide-ranging in its scope. It seems inevitable that Jesus will have negative things to say to many of us. So it won’t be congratulations and rewards all round. Many people certainly will be congratulated and praised, but we cannot assume that *all* of us will be.

It is going to be an intensive process of appraisal which will result in many of us being criticised, rebuked, demoted and perhaps even punished. It is therefore essential that we try to understand the purpose and scope of this judgment as accurately and realistically as we can. We also need to understand the various principles by which it will operate, so as to be best able to prepare for it.

Therefore, as well as being a place at which the most amazing rewards will be given out, it seems very clear that it will also involve an element of what we would classify as *punishment*, or at least *rebuke*. However, we need to clearly distinguish each of those things from the far more dreadful prospect of being eternally *condemned*. That is what awaits those who attend the Great White Throne Judgment. Condemnation is entirely different in both nature and degree from the rebuke, or even the punishment or chastisement, that Jesus will give to some of His followers at the Judgment Seat.

The difference between the Judgment Seat of Christ (*bema*) and the Great White Throne Judgment (*thronos*)

The only people who will attend the Judgment Seat of Christ are real, genuine Christians. Therefore, the very fact that a person goes to it at all demonstrates that they are already saved and have eternal life. It must not be confused with the Great White Throne judgment, which is for the sentencing of non-Christians (and false Christians) to eternal condemnation.

Everyone who goes to the Great White Throne Judgment will then go on from there to the Lake of Fire. But none of those who go to the Judgment Seat of Christ will end up in the Lake of Fire. They already have eternal life. That was decided before they ever went to the Judgment Seat:

Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.

John 5:24 (NIV)

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Romans 8:1 (RSV)

¹¹And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹²Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. ¹³I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.

1 John 5:11-13 (ESV)

So, the Judgment Seat of Christ is not for the purpose of deciding *whether* a person has eternal life or not. It is the place where believers' fruit is assessed after it has already been decided that they have eternal life.

Nevertheless, it is not only the wicked who are going to be judged – all of us will be judged, including the righteous. The only question is where, i.e. at which judgment?

There is a widespread assumption that because genuine Christians are not going to be *condemned*, and will not go to the Lake of Fire, that means they will never face any judgment at all. As we have seen, that is to make the error of equating the words *judgment* and *condemnation*, as if they were the same thing. They are not. All people are going to be *judged*, whether they are Christians or not. However, they are not all going to be *condemned*.

Therefore the real question is which judgment will we attend, and for what purpose? Consider these verses which make clear that we *all* have to be judged at one or other of these very different judgments. That is the case whether we are righteous or wicked, wise or foolish, believer or unbeliever:

¹⁷For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸And "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"

1 Peter 4:17-18 (ESV)

¹⁶Moreover I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. ¹⁷I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work.

Ecclesiastes 3:16-17 (RSV)

Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.

Ecclesiastes 11:9 (RSV)

¹³The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man. ¹⁴For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 (RSV)

The Judgment Seat of Christ is for all genuine Christians who are alive now and also for all those who have died in the past. It is for the purpose of assessing their faithfulness and the quality and quantity of fruit produced by their lives and then for giving rewards where they are due.

Moreover, it is only concerned with the way we lived *after* the point when our sins were forgiven, i.e. from the point when we became Christians. It is not a judgment of our lives in the years *before* we become a Christian. All of what we did in those years is washed away when we are forgiven. At that precise moment, when we are *justified*, God instantly removes all our guilt from us completely:

*As far as the east is from the west,
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.
Psalm 103:12 (NASB)*

No matter how bad our sins may have been, if we are a genuine Christian, then we have had all our sins transferred to Jesus and all the righteousness of Jesus Christ transferred to us. That is true despite the fact that we all continue to sin even after becoming a Christian. Therefore, from the moment of our conversion onwards, i.e. from the point when we are *justified*, God considers us to be as white as snow, with no guilt remaining at all:

*"Come now, and let us reason together, "Says the LORD, "Though your sins are as scarlet. They will be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They will be like wool.
Isaiah 1:18 (NASB)*

If God regards us as spotlessly clean, then you might ask what is the point of Jesus judging us at all? However, you would only ask that question if you have still got the idea fixed in your mind that judgment is solely about condemning people for their *sin* and sending them to the Lake of Fire. But it isn't. That is what the *Great White Throne Judgment* is about, but it is not what the *Judgment Seat of Christ* is about.

The main purpose of the Judgment Seat is to enable Jesus to evaluate our lives, the extent of our faithfulness, the quality and quantity of the fruit we produce and the calibre of our discipleship from the moment when we first became a Christian. It is not concerned with the lives we lived and sins we committed in the years that we lived as non-Christians, before we were converted/justified.

Therefore any events prior to our conversion will not count at all, either for us or against us. That is because, for a real Christian, any sins or transgressions have already been wiped away. Therefore there is nothing left which could cause us to be found guilty or be condemned. However it also follows that there won't be anything from those years to reward either. That is because before being saved (justified) we were operating entirely in our flesh nature.

Therefore nothing that we did before our conversion was ever righteous. During those years, when we were unsaved, we were incapable of doing anything righteous. All our flesh knows how to do is to sin. Consequently, anything done in, or through, our flesh can never please God:

*¹And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ²in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience- ³among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ--by grace you have been saved-
Ephesians 2:1-5 (ESV)*

*.....and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.
Romans 8:8 (RSV)*

Even after we become a Christian we still continue to have a sinful flesh nature. That nature remains incapable of doing anything other than sin. That is why it is an ongoing problem for us, as it was even for the apostle Paul. However, the difference is that from the point when we are born again we also have a new nature. It operates within us, alongside our flesh nature. (See Book Seven). So,

Jesus will assess the extent to which we lived in accordance with our new nature, thereby bearing good fruit, as opposed to living through our old flesh nature, and therefore sinning:

¹⁸For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. ²⁰Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

Romans 7:18-20 (ESV)