

CHAPTER 5

ADDITIONAL POINTS ABOUT THE JUDGMENT SEAT OF CHRIST

Look to yourselves, that you may not lose what you have worked for, but may win a full reward.

2 John 8 (RSV)

“....And all the churches shall know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve.”

Revelation 2:23(b) (RSV)

²⁵ only hold fast what you have, until I come. ²⁶ He who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, I will give him power over the nations, ²⁷ and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received power from my Father; ²⁸ and I will give him the morning star.

Revelation 2:25-28 (RSV)

The most important thing of all is just to hear Jesus praising you for how you lived your life

It must surely be the most thrilling and moving experience to hear Jesus praise and congratulate you when you stand before Him. What could ever compare with that? I would like rewards as well but, above all, I want to know He was pleased with me and to hear Him say so, rather than rebuke me. Consider how people speak of the immense honour they feel when they attend Buckingham Palace to receive a knighthood, peerage or other award.

They stand or kneel in front of the Queen for a few moments and have a brief conversation. Most of them never forget the experience. Some become very emotional during it, as do their families who are watching. Yet that is trivial in comparison to what is going to be done for those who please Jesus by their service to Him. I would like Jesus to say of me something similar to what the Bible says about King Hezekiah:

¹Hezekiah became king when he was twenty-five years old; and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Abijah, the daughter of Zechariah. ²He did right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father David had done.

2 Chronicles 29:1-2 (NASB)

Contrast that with the Bible's blunt assessment of King Ahaz:

Ahaz was twenty years old when he became king, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem; and he did not do what was right in the sight of the LORD his God, as his father David had done.

Kings 16:2 (NASB)

Remember that whatever Jesus' assessment of you is, *it will stand for all eternity*. His words about you at the Judgment Seat of Christ will be remembered with joy and satisfaction forever. Alternatively, they will be a source of deep, ongoing regret. We therefore need to bear that in mind and live each day with the Judgment Seat of Christ firmly in mind, because so much depends on how we are assessed on that Day.

Many will be surprised, and many will be disappointed, at the Judgment Seat of Christ

I suspect that there is hardly a person on this Earth who accurately sees themselves as Jesus sees them, or at any rate, who consistently does so. Virtually all of us get it wrong in one direction or the other. Some feel insignificant and cannot see much in their own service to God that is worthy of any praise or reward. They may well be in for a pleasant surprise. Conversely, those who feel quite smug and satisfied with themselves and who see no need for repentance or improvement, are probably heading for a nasty shock at the Judgment.

It would seem that there are likely to be many surprises in both directions. Those who assume they have done well may be astonished to find Jesus rebuking them. Others, who assumed that they were very ordinary during their lives and that they had done nothing impressive, may be delighted to discover that Jesus rated them very highly, although they never realised it.

There is a pattern to this. Both groups see themselves inaccurately but *for opposite reasons*. The overly confident people do not engage in much, if any, self-examination. It is unsurprising therefore that they find nothing wrong in themselves. Such people will only find out about their faults for the first time at the Judgment. By contrast, the sincere, earnest, repentant person is willing, and even determined, to examine himself. The trouble is he tends to do so overly critically. Therefore he finds plenty of faults in himself now as he goes through life, trying to change and grow.

The very nature of a godly, sincere person tends to cause them to see their own faults quickly and easily. But they often overlook, or are unaware of, their own qualities or achievements. They tend to focus only on what they need to do to improve. So they never feel they have arrived, which is correct in one sense. However, they have usually made more progress than they realise. So, the willingness to criticise oneself is a quality, but it too can sometimes be overdone and can lead us to form overly harsh conclusions.

So, let us examine ourselves as rigorously and honestly as we can. We must firstly ensure that we do not fall into the self-congratulatory camp which believes that it can confidently expect to get an A* at the Day of Judgment. But, we also need to avoid the opposite error of being unable to recognise any signs of progress in ourselves, such that we become discouraged by assuming that nothing we ever do is pleasing to God, or is of any value. That too is a false and unhelpful way to think.

God is pleased with every part of our progress, even where we are still a long way from the finishing line. Also, He will judge us relative to how long a period of time we were given. So, God does not expect us to make in one year the kind of progress that can only be made in 20 years. He is fair and realistic and He fully recognises those disciples who are on the way and are making some steps forward.

That said, if we look at the generation of Israelites who came out of Egypt and crossed the Red Sea, we find that with most of them God was not pleased:

I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ²and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³and all ate the same supernatural food ⁴and all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ. ⁵Nevertheless with most of them God was not pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

⁶Now these things are warnings for us, not to desire evil as they did. ⁷Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to dance." ⁸We must not indulge in immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. ⁹We must not put the Lord to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents; ¹⁰nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. ¹¹Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come. ¹²Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.

1 Corinthians 10:1-12 (RSV)

We are told about that generation of Israelites for our instruction, so that we can take note of how and why they went wrong and displeased God. By looking at them, with a genuine desire to learn and to avoid imitating them, we can prevent ourselves ending up as they did. Those who are willing to learn from their errors will do so, but those who are not are likely to go wrong in the same ways.

We get a glimpse of the surprisingly varied kinds of verdicts that Jesus makes about different Christians in the seven short letters that He dictates to apostle John in Revelation chapters two and three. In those letters we see Jesus giving His assessment of seven different local churches in the area of Asia Minor (which we now call Turkey) at the very end of the first century AD.

These were seven real churches and Jesus made some surprising assessments of them, both positively and negatively. In every case, what He has to say seems not to be what the church in question would have been expecting.

The assessments Jesus makes in His seven letters in the book of Revelation reveal a little more of how the Judgment Seat of Christ will operate

Revelation chapters two and three are unique because they contain the only letters we have that were directly written by Jesus Himself, albeit that they were written down and recorded by apostle John. In these seven letters Jesus sets out what He thinks of each church and how well, or how badly, they are doing.

He is surprisingly tender and generous with some of them, but also extremely frank and blunt with others. With some He is a bit of both. These seven letters give us a foretaste of what the Judgment Seat will be like. We see tenderness and encouragement, but also stern rebuke.

He appears to be particularly gracious and understanding towards those churches where the people have had to *suffer* on His account. But He is at His most forthright with those who are *complacent, self-satisfied and lukewarm*. Those are faults which most of us don't regard as being particularly bad or blameworthy, but Jesus evidently does.

Let's look at some brief extracts from each of the seven letters, because the way that Jesus handles these churches gives us a good indication of how He is likely to deal with us at the Judgment Seat and what issues He is likely to focus on:

Praise and rebuke for the church at Ephesus

In this first letter to the church at Ephesus, Jesus gives a mixed report. He both praises and rebukes them and He also calls upon them to repent. This is a letter written to a genuine church, containing real Christians. Yet Jesus still criticises them where it is due. Therefore we have no reason to suppose, that Jesus will be unwilling to criticise or rebuke us at the Judgment Seat. It seems clear that He will, and that He will be as frank as is warranted by our behaviour and attitudes. This is Jesus' assessment of the church in Ephesus:

¹"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: ²I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; ³and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. ⁴But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. ⁵Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your

lampstand out of its place--unless you repent. ⁶'Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.'

Revelation 2:1-7 (NASB)

Jesus praises them for their toil, perseverance and intolerance of evil men, and also for their discernment and endurance. But He also gently corrects them for having *left their first love*. He then calls on them to repent and warns them that unless they do, their '*lampstand*' will be removed.

This is interesting, because centuries later, the whole of Turkey, including Ephesus, was overrun by the Muslims. The whole area has been under the oppression and darkness of Islam ever since. Islam almost entirely extinguished the light of the gospel. Could it be that the church in Ephesus, and also the other Turkish churches, failed to take to Jesus' warning seriously enough?

Encouragement to the church at Smyrna

Jesus has nothing but praise and encouragement for the church at Smyrna. But note what He is encouraging them to do – to be faithful until death! In return for that, He says He will give them the crown of life (see below for a discussion of what this, and other, crowns might be):

⁸'And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this:

⁹'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰'Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.'

Revelation 2:8-11 (NASB)

Praise and warning to the church at Pergamum

Jesus both praises and rebukes this church. He commends them for remaining faithful to Him, even in the face of persecution. However, He also rebukes them for holding to *the teaching of the Nicolaitans*. When He says that, Jesus is rebuking them for their wrong doctrine and practice. That proves that having accurate doctrine does matter and that it is possible to be rebuked for holding the wrong *beliefs*, not only for our wrong *behaviour*.

This particular false doctrine, '*Nicolaitanism*', appears to be a reference to the practice, which was, even then, starting to creep into the churches, of having a distinction between leaders and those who are led. Jesus is talking about the creation of a special professional *clergy class* which is seen as different from, and higher than, ordinary Christians

There is not meant to be any such group as *clergy*. The very concept is a man-made invention and does not exist in the Bible at all. They should not therefore exist in the Church. But, by about the year AD 95 they had already begun to appear. Jesus does not want there to be any such thing as clergy and lay people. He wants churches where everyone participates and where there is also a group of several unpaid leaders, called *elders*, who protect and serve the people, not a single, paid leader who rules over them.

It is not biblical to have one man operating as a paid 'professional leader', least of all one who calls himself a *priest*. That concept of priesthood is another quite separate error. It has its origins in the vast influx of pagans who joined the churches at the time of Emperor Constantine. They brought the pagan concept of priests with them into the churches. But no such title or role exists in the Bible. (See Book Eight for more details.)

Here is what Jesus says to the church in Pergamum:

¹²'And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this:

¹³'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. ¹⁴'But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality. ¹⁵'So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶'Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth.

¹⁷'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.'

Revelation 2:12-17 (NASB)

Praise and rebuke for the church of Thyatira

Jesus praises this church for various things but then rebukes them for their willingness to tolerate a woman in their church who was operating as a false prophetess. That is a clear warning to us. Most of us do not have enough courage to stand up and confront any kind of wrong practice or wrong teaching in the church. But we should.

Note also the further reference to the need to be an *overcomer* and how much significance that clearly has to Jesus. Why else would He keep on referring to that factor in virtually every letter?

¹⁸'And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this: ¹⁹'I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first. ²⁰'But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. ²¹'gave her time to repent, and she does not want to repent of her immorality. ²²'Behold, I will throw her on a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds.

²³'And I will kill her children with pestilence, and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds. ²⁴'But I say to you, the rest who are in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, ho have not known the deep things of Satan, as they call them--I place no other burden on you. ²⁵'Nevertheless what you have, hold fast until I come. ²⁶'He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations; ²⁷and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to pieces, as I also have received authority from My Father; ²⁸and I will give him the morning star. ²⁹'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

Revelation 2:18-29 (NASB)

Nothing but rebuke for most, but not all, of the church in Sardis

This is a sobering letter, because what Jesus says to the church in Sardis could be said of most Western churches today. He says they are *dead*. By that it would seem that He means they are complacent, unmotivated and lacking commitment. He probably also means that they contain some people who are not genuine Christians.

Nevertheless, despite the *overall* condition of that church being unacceptable to Him, it does still contain at least *a few people whom He wishes to commend*. Again, it also implies that at the Judgment Seat, there will probably be more for Him to rebuke than to praise, at least amongst our own generation in the West.

¹"To the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars, says this: 'I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. ²'Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God.

³'So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. ⁴'But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.

⁵'He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. ⁶'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

Revelation 3:1-6 (NASB)

Praise for the church in Philadelphia

This is a letter to a church which is struggling in the face of hardship and difficulty due to Satanic/demonic opposition. Consequently they have had to persevere. Jesus urges them to "*hold fast what you have so that no one will take your crown*" This implies that it is possible to be in a position where we currently deserve rewards, and are in line to receive them, but that we then succumb to some pressure or deception and so cease to qualify for those rewards. That possibility must concern us, and it means there can be no complacency, even if we have been doing well so far:

⁷"And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this: ⁸'I know your deeds Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name. ⁹'Behold, I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie--I will make them come and bow down at your feet, and make them know that I have loved you. ¹⁰'Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.

¹¹'I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown. ¹²'He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and I will write on him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name. ¹³'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

Revelation 3:7-13 (NASB)

Nothing but rebuke for the church at Laodicea

This church receives nothing but rebuke. Again that is worrying, because they sound even more reminiscent of the Western churches of our own day. The church in Laodicea is complacent, lukewarm and self-satisfied. They imagine themselves to be rich and to be doing well, but they aren't. Jesus is very frank indeed and says He wants to spit them out of His mouth. That can hardly be described as a gentle correction. It is very blunt. But how can our generation expect a verdict any better than this? On average, we are probably even more lukewarm than they were.

14"To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this:

15'I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. 16'So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. 17'Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, 18'I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.

Revelation 3:14-18

Concluding comments arising out of Jesus' letters to the seven churches

The main conclusion one feels obliged to reach as a result of these seven letters is that none of us can expect an easy interview when we face Jesus. His remarks to the seven churches are just a brief summary of His view of them. However, when we face Him we will have to hear His detailed comments, concerning our entire lives since we became Christians. For many of us much of what He has to say will surely be as painful as what was said to some of these seven churches, and probably more so.

We have no valid basis to suppose that Jesus will pull His punches with us, i.e. go easier on us than He did with them. Why should He? Our generation in the West has had more comforts and privileges than any group of people that has ever lived. Yet we have largely failed to share the gospel. We have been even less faithful when it comes to making disciples. Many of us have also been unfaithful in a host of other ways too.

We can learn a lot from these seven letters. Even though they are not written to us, they are highly relevant. We should listen to them, take them seriously, and repent, wherever we are at fault in the same ways as they were. We should then turn back to Jesus now, *while there is still time for us to change the outcome of the personal judgment that awaits us*. Repentance changes everything and can be the basis for us to turn things round, so that we can be rewarded after all.

Jesus has therefore issued an invitation to all of us in the Church who are not right with Him, or who have left our first love, or neglected Him, or been unfaithful. He is asking us all to *open the door and invite Him back into our churches and into our own lives*. If we will do this then He promises to come in:

19"Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent. 20'Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me. 21'He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. 22'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Revelation 3:19-22 (NASB)

Some general points about the *rewards* that will be given out at the Judgment Seat of Christ

We do not know exactly what the rewards will be. They are spoken of only in general terms, without much detail. Even so, let us try to look at some of the references in the Bible to rewards and see what we can piece together to establish some broad themes and principles. That may help us to understand the rewards better.

One general point to make is that if we are seeking for the praise of men now, then that will probably be our only reward. There will probably be no further praise or reward from Jesus for anything we do with that attitude. We must therefore do all our good works as quietly and secretly as possible, seeking only for *Jesus* to praise and reward us, not for praise from *people* now:

¹⁶"Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. ¹⁷"But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face ¹⁸so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

Matthew 6:16-18 (NASB)

One is reminded of people or companies who make a donation to a charity but ask to be photographed with a ten foot long cardboard cheque so that they can have their picture in the local newspaper. Why not simply give the cheque quietly instead, so that virtually nobody knows about what we gave?

From the next passage we can deduce that there are such things as a '*prophet's reward*' and a '*righteous man's reward*', *i.e.* the rewards that such people will receive. It refers to where ordinary people like us help a prophet or a righteous man and look after them, thereby assisting them in what they are doing for God. If we do, then we will be allowed to have some of the same kind of reward that they are due to receive:

⁴⁰"He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me. ⁴¹"He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward; and he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. ⁴²"And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward."

Matthew 10:40-42 (NASB)

What are the various *crowns* referred to in the Bible?

The passages we have looked at above tell us that there will be rewards, and of various types and levels but they don't say exactly what they will be. We get some further information on that from other passages, where some of the rewards are referred to as *crowns*. In Greek there are two different words which mean crown. The first is *diadem* which is the type of crown worn by royalty. The second type is a *stephanos* which means a crown given to a winner in a race or contest. Our equivalent to this today would be an Olympic medal. It is nothing to do with being royalty. It is a mark of success or achievement.

It is this second type of crown, the *stephanos*, that we are told will be given out to certain believers at the Judgment Seat of Christ. There are five different categories of these crowns referred to in various places in the New Testament. However, there are probably many others as well that haven't been mentioned and which we will only find out about at the Judgment. Let's now look at each of these five crowns that we are told about and see what they are intended to recognise and reward:

1) "*The crown that will last forever*"

We are not told what this crown is, or on what basis it is awarded. But we do learn that it is to last forever. So, it will still be there, all through the Millennium and then on forevermore, even in the eternal state in the New Jerusalem. Given that this crown is eternal, it is infinitely more valuable and worthwhile to pursue than any temporary possession or honour that we may get in this life.

This quality of being eternal seems not to be unique to this specific type of crown. They might all be eternal, or at least many of them probably are. In that case, they will last beyond the 1000 year Millennium and on into the eternal state, when there are new heavens and a new Earth. Alternatively, perhaps some of the crowns may only be for the Millennium?

²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. ²⁵ Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. ²⁶ Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. ²⁷ No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

1 Corinthians 9:23-27 (NIV)

It would seem that this particular crown is given to those who *exercise self-control, and discipline themselves* in their spiritual life, such that they are victorious in the tests they face and are not disqualified. How many of us can say that that accurately describes us? Paul disciplined himself very strictly, but few of us do.

Most of us enjoy our comforts too much and don't want any stress, difficulties or trials. We need to change that attitude. There is so much at stake, and so much available to be gained and kept forever. Therefore it would be tragic for us to miss out on any of these rewards just because we were too soft on ourselves in this life and always avoided hardship.

There has been much debate over what exactly Paul was concerned about when he spoke of the possibility of being *disqualified*. It seems clear that he was *not* referring to the possibility of losing his salvation entirely, i.e. losing his eternal life. I believe he meant that he might lose some or all of the *rewards, crowns or treasures* that he had already built up or become qualified to receive.

He was probably also concerned about those *further rewards* that he still hoped to be awarded. In addition, he must have been concerned about possibly losing the *role or position* to which he was hoping to be appointed in the Millennium and in the eternal Kingdom thereafter.

2) "The crown of exultation"

It would seem that this particular crown is given to those who *tell other people about the gospel* so that they can be saved. In other words, it looks like it could be a reward for evangelism and for making disciples. It would appear that in some sense the crown Paul is referring to here has something to do with the very people that Paul, Timothy and others had evangelised and discipled.

Perhaps when we reach the Judgment Seat of Christ we will find out the real extent of the effectiveness of our ministry work and how many people we ultimately influenced, whether directly or indirectly. Possibly this crown will be determined by the number of the people we have helped to reach or to train. It may also reflect how effective they, in turn, became.

¹⁷ But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short while—in person, not in spirit—were all the more eager with great desire to see your face. ¹⁸ For we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, more than once—and yet Satan hindered us. ¹⁹ For who is our hope or joy or crown of

exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? ²⁰ For you are our glory and joy.

1 Thessalonians 2:17-20 (NASB)

3) *"The crown of righteousness"*

Here Paul is writing to Timothy shortly before his own death. He knew that was coming soon, because he was in prison awaiting imminent execution:

⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; ⁸in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.

2 Timothy 4:7-8 (NASB)

This crown appears to be given to those who have *loved the appearing* of Jesus. That means those who have *looked forward longingly to the return of Jesus*. We are all meant to do that, but few of us actually do. We therefore need to focus our thinking on His return to the Earth, and to long for that day. The *rapture*, when Jesus returns for His Church to take all believers away, needs to be on our minds. It should motivate us to do our very best.

This longing for the return of Jesus at the rapture, or even at the Second Coming when He will appear visibly to the whole world, is not a widespread feature of the modern day Western church. In fact it is very rarely discussed or taught on. For most of us it barely even registers as an issue at all. If you are willing, you can choose to make sure that that is not true of you.

4) *"The crown of life"*

Here we have the words of James, who was Jesus' own physical half-brother. He was one of the natural sons of Joseph and Mary:

Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

James 1:12 (NASB)

This crown is evidently given to those who *persevere under difficult circumstances*, because of their love for Jesus. We also hear of this crown in the book of Revelation:

'Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Revelation 2:10 (NASB)

These people appear to receive this crown because they *have been faithful, perhaps even until death*. The emphasis is on long term, determined faithfulness that does not fizzle out or give way under pressure. One would have to assume that from the church in the West, in our day, there will not be very many who will receive this crown.

It would seem that many more are likely to receive it in those countries in our own day where the real Church is being persecuted and also from past centuries in the West, when the European churches were more faithful. A prime example of that would be the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when many men and women suffered and died for what they believed. They gained freedoms for us which most of us today do not value and cannot be bothered to use.

5) "The crown of glory"

It would appear that this is a crown given to those who are *faithful leaders of God's people* in the Church, i.e. to those *genuine shepherds*, or pastors, who lead and care for the people who are in Jesus' flock. It is a reward for faithful pastoral care and teaching, which comes not from the desire for financial gain, or the wish to have power over people, but from having a true shepherd's heart. Sadly, such leaders are rare, whereas those who seek for money, or for power over God's people, are far too common. (See Book Eight.)

¹Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, ²shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; ³nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. ⁴And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

1 Peter 5:1-4 (NASB)

There is also a specific reward or honour which Jesus refers to as 'the morning star'.

Jesus will give this reward to those who *hold fast what they have until Jesus comes, who conquer, and who keep His works to the end*. To such people Jesus says He will also give *authority over the nations*. That must surely be a reference to allowing them to reign under Him in positions of authority during the 1000 year Millennium and beyond. However, Jesus also says that such a person will be given 'the morning star'.

Jesus does not explain what this honour or award consists of, but it is referred to again, later in the book of Revelation. On that occasion it would appear that the 'morning star' is *Jesus Himself*. The term is used as a title, or description, of Him.

"I Jesus have sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star."

Revelation 22:16 (RSV)

Whatever the morning star may be exactly, we can be sure that it is something very good. It would appear to be given only to a quite small minority, i.e. those who hold fast and conquer etc and who are appointed to ruling positions in Jesus' Kingdom:

²⁵ But hold fast what you have till I come. ²⁶ And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations—

²⁷ 'He shall rule them with a rod of iron;

They shall be dashed to pieces like the potter's vessels'—

as I also have received from My Father; ²⁸ and I will give him the morning star.

Revelation 2:25-28 (NKJV)

I only know of two other references to the morning star in the Scriptures but neither of them really help to clarify what this reward would consist of. The passages are from Job and Isaiah:

*while the morning stars sang together
and all the angels shouted for joy?*

Job 38:7 (NIV)

*How you have fallen from heaven,
morning star, son of the dawn!
You have been cast down to the earth,*

you who once laid low the nations!
Isaiah 14:12 (NIV)

The first passage from Job does not make it entirely clear who ‘*the morning stars*’ were, but they sound like angels. The second passage is clearer. It is a reference to Satan, in his previous form as an archangel, i.e. when he was called Lucifer. That was before he fell into sin. At that time he was the highest created being in the universe and was more senior than all the other angels. At any rate, whatever this reward of being given the morning star may involve, it is clearly something that we are meant to want and which will be a huge honour to be awarded.

So, there are at least five crowns available for us to earn, plus this specific award called the morning star. There are almost certainly many others too, which haven't been mentioned in the Bible. There is no reason to suppose that the ones that we are told about add up to a complete list. The very fact that even these five crowns, and also the morning star, are only briefly mentioned suggests that, for whatever reason, this subject of rewards is not an area about which God has chosen to go into detail. So there could well be dozens, or even hundreds, of different types and levels of reward, honour, crown, medal, treasure, inheritance etc.

Different types of people will receive each of the various crowns or rewards for different types or levels of service. There would need to be a wide range to enable God to accurately reward the many different types of people and levels of service that He will want to recognise.

Consider the honours system in Great Britain. We have a huge range of peerages, knighthoods, medals and so forth. There are many different levels of peerage, going all the way up from a baron to a duke – and there are different levels of knighthood. One has to assume that God's system of honours will be broader, better and more varied than what the Queen has to offer.

Why is the Judgment Seat of Christ so widely ignored and forgotten?

Isn't it obvious that we should give high priority to trying to do well so as to be praised and rewarded at the Judgment Seat of Christ? We should be thinking about it every day. Yet, the reality is that most of us barely even consider it. Contrast that with the experiences of a former client of my firm. He was wrongly arrested after a football game. Two police officers lied about him and assaulted him, despite the fact that *he had not done anything wrong*. He then had to wait a year or so for his trial. During that year he felt very apprehensive, as he feared he could be wrongly convicted.

Thankfully he was found not guilty by the Magistrates Court and instead it was the police who were criticised. We later found CCTV evidence from the football club which proved our client's innocence. Therefore we sued the Police for assault, wrongful arrest and malicious prosecution. They eventually settled the case and paid full damages and costs. One of the things we claimed for in that case was the stress, anxiety and apprehension that our client felt for a whole year, as he awaited his initial criminal trial. It was a very difficult time for him, even though he knew he was innocent.

However, compare the heightened concern that he felt with the apathy of most Christians who ignore the infinitely larger prospect of the Judgment Seat of Christ. Admittedly, our face to face encounter with Jesus is not going to be a criminal trial. We will not be ‘prosecuted’ by Him. Nonetheless, what we face at the Judgment Seat of Christ is vastly bigger, more important, more long-lasting and more serious, than the trial our client faced.

The worst he could have received was a fine and a criminal record, albeit undeservedly. However that would only have affected him for a few decades at most, i.e. until he dies. Then it would no longer matter. But the results of our future appraisal before Jesus *will last forever*. Therefore it ought to matter to us far more than our client's impending trial mattered to him.

Nevertheless, the truth is that for most of us, at least in the Western church, the concept of judgment simply isn't real. We may say we believe in it, but if we really did, then our behaviour would surely be very different. We'd be motivated, zealous and determined to persevere and to do well. But most of us aren't any of those things.

In fact most of us don't even know about the concept of the Judgment Seat of Christ, let alone focus on it. It simply isn't preached on, or even mentioned, in most churches. There are probably many reasons for that widespread silence, including the following:

- a) There is a famine of hearing the Word of God. Most churches do not teach the Bible adequately. Such teaching as they do is limited and superficial, such that concepts like judgment never get spoken about.
- b) Many leaders and pastors don't know the Bible well enough themselves to be able to teach on this topic.
- c) Many leaders would not want to teach on judgment and choose not to do so, because they fear that they would become unpopular and lose members if they did.
- d) They also fear that they would also arouse the opposition of their denominational hierarchies if they ventured into this kind of territory. So they steer clear of it and deliver '*feel good*' messages instead
- e) They fear that if they were to teach that our works (from conversion onwards) are going to be judged/assessed/appraised, then they might be misunderstood to be preaching that salvation itself (justification) is on the basis of works rather than faith. Therefore they avoid this subject altogether, for fear of being misunderstood in that way.

Therefore, today, very few church leaders, let alone members, know anything about the Judgment Seat of Christ. Here are some of the most common errors that many preachers make, in so far as they ever think or speak about any of this at all:

- a) Some think that judgment is only for *unbelievers*, i.e. when they are sent to the Lake of Fire. Therefore they think that judgment, of any description, cannot be for Christians at all.
- b) Some think that not even unbelievers will be judged. They believe that the entire concept of judgment is an *old fashioned* one, which should be abandoned, even in relation to non-Christians.
- c) Some think that God is "*too loving*" to judge anybody at all - whether unbelievers or believers. But this is to seriously misunderstand His love and also to make the mistake of seeing it in isolation from His other characteristics like His justice, righteousness, holiness etc. Some people therefore focus on God's love alone, or else they over emphasise it to such an extent that His other characteristics are forgotten, ignored or under-emphasised.
- d) So, if such a person is objecting to the very concept of Judgment (of whatever kind) on the basis that it does not seem *loving*, then they are forgetting God's justice. That is actually the very thing which makes it necessary for God to judge us in the first place. Therefore, if we redefine or redesign God so as to eliminate judgment, we would also have to get rid of His sense of justice. But that would not be a good idea, even if it was possible.

Is it right to *want* to be praised and rewarded by Jesus at the Judgment Seat of Christ?

If God has chosen, to set up an *honours system*, such that He rewards and recognises those who serve Him well, then who are we to disagree or disapprove as some people do? In view of that, is it right or

wrong for us to try to pursue rewards, crowns, treasures in heaven, recognition, roles and positions in the Kingdom? Should we actively seek for those things or just wait for them passively and see whether we get them, without taking any interest in them? Should we be aiming to please God *in order to be honoured by Him*?

As we saw in Chapter Two, the answer is that the desire for rewards should be at least one of the factors which motivates us to seek to please God and to obey His Word. If you are still unpersuaded, consider the attitude that Nehemiah had. He not only sought for rewards and recognition; he openly prayed that God would not overlook his loyal deeds and good service for Him:

Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out my loyal deeds which I have performed for the house of my God and its services.

Nehemiah 13:14 (NASB)

Nehemiah felt able to pray like that and the Bible records his prayer without expressing any disapproval. Therefore why shouldn't we take the same approach? The truth is we should feel able to be much more open about seeking for rewards and not be ashamed in any way that we are setting out to get them.

Indeed, it will help others if we speak of this openly and let other Christians know that we are seeking for rewards, including treasure. That will help to prevent others from making the mistake of thinking that we should not seek for rewards, or that we should feel ashamed of doing so and thus keep quiet about it.

We shall do better at the future Judgment Seat of Christ if we start to judge ourselves and to voluntarily receive God's correction now

To improve our position at the Judgment Seat we should start to *judge ourselves* i.e. to critically assess ourselves now, in this life. Where we find sins, faults, bad habits, bad attitudes etc, we should confess them, and seek God's help to change. If we examine and judge ourselves now, we will not need to encounter God's judgment later, or at least not to the same extent.

We come across this concept of self-examination and repentance in relation to taking the bread and wine in an unworthy manner. If we do, then we are told that we bring God's judgment upon ourselves. We are also told that we can avoid that outcome simply by judging ourselves and repenting, as above, before God judges us. Surely the same point must apply in relation to the Judgment Seat?

²⁷Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. ³⁰That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. ³¹But if we judged ourselves truly, we should not be judged. ³²But when we are judged by the Lord, we are chastened so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

1 Corinthians 11:27-32 (RSV)

Paul tells us above that we are to judge ourselves now by examining ourselves, looking for areas which require repentance and self-improvement. However, earlier in the same letter to the Corinthians he suggests that he does *not* judge himself. It may sound like a contradiction, but it isn't. He is actually using the word *judge* in a different sense:

¹This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. ²Moreover it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. ³But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. ⁴I am not

aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵Therefore 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 4:1-5 (RSV)

When Paul says in the above passage from 1 Corinthians 4 that he does not *judge* himself, he does not mean that he does not *examine* himself. We know he does that, because he has said so previously and he says it again later.

Moreover, he tells us to examine ourselves. He would never say that if he considered it wrong or unnecessary for us to do so. What he means is that when he does look at his conduct and achievements *he neither acquits nor convicts himself*. Paul does not reach a verdict about himself of the kind that Jesus will reach, whereby He will find a person guilty or not guilty, worthy or unworthy, faithful or unfaithful and so on.

Neither was Paul willing to give any “grade” to himself about his own performance. He knew that it was not his place to do that. Such final conclusions and verdicts as those are only for Jesus to arrive at, just as He is the only Person who can judge other people.

So, it is not our place even to judge ourselves in that way. We are not to arrive at any definite, overall conclusions about how well, or how badly, we have done, or even try to decide what our motives were. We simply aren’t clever or honest enough to manage any of that, or to bear in mind all the right factors. That’s why we aren’t qualified to judge other people either, at least not in that sense. For the same reasons, we aren’t qualified to judge ourselves in that way.

But that brings us back to where we started, with the apparent contradiction of Paul telling us above, in 1 Corinthians chapter 11, that we *are* to judge ourselves. How therefore can we do that and what exactly should such judgment of oneself involve? We get further guidance from what Paul says in 1 Corinthians chapter 9:

²⁴Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ²⁵Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; ²⁷but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (RSV)

Paul explains in the above passage from 1 Corinthians 9 that he treats himself as a boxer or athlete would do. He sees himself as being in a race and is aiming single-mindedly to win the prize. He therefore disciplines himself, denies himself things, and takes care not to be disqualified. He wants to avoid losing out on the prize or rewards that he is aiming for. That involves being willing to see, and even to look for, faults and sins in ourselves and to want to eliminate them voluntarily. That sums up what our attitude should be towards carefully preparing ourselves for the Judgment Seat of Christ

God's minor acts of judgment and discipline in this life are meant to wake us up and warn us so that we can change, ready for the final judgment

God’s holiness means that He must judge us. However, His mercy means that He also warns us about this impending judgment because He does not actually *want* to punish us. He takes no pleasure from doing so:

Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?

Ezekiel 33:11 (ESV)

God therefore ensures that even while we live our lives now, we receive small doses of His judgment in the form of discipline or chastisement. He does what any good parent does. He makes sure that in our daily lives we reap what we sow. We are therefore corrected, convicted, and even punished, in small ways when we do things that displease Him. If we are willing to be taught, such correction helps us to learn about the things that are going to please, or displease, Jesus at the Judgment Seat.

If He did not discipline us during this life then that would be a sign that He does not consider us to be saved and that we are not His. Parents only discipline their *own* children, not someone else's. Therefore it's actually a good thing to be disciplined and corrected by God, even if it is painful. It confirms that we really are His children. It also helps us to realise our faults and to change now, before we get to the Judgment Seat of Christ:

⁵Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you. ⁶So you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God by walking in his ways and by fearing him.

Deuteronomy 8:5-6 (ESV)

***Blessed is the man whom you discipline,
O LORD, and whom you teach out of your law,
Psalm 94:12 (ESV)***

⁵And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. ⁶For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." ⁷It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Hebrews 12:5-11 (ESV)

***¹¹My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline
or be weary of his reproof,
¹²for the LORD reproves him whom he loves,
as a father the son in whom he delights.
Proverbs 3:11-12 (ESV)***

So, when we face God's correction in this life, then we should welcome it. It is for our benefit, both now and later. Any adjustments we make now to the way we live as a result of that correction will eventually result in us being rebuked less and rewarded more. Moreover, that will have eternal consequences, whereas God's discipline in this life is only temporary.

Therefore, instead of resisting God's correction and rebuke in this life, we should accept it all willingly, whether it comes directly from Him or indirectly via other people. You should actually go looking for it, and get as much of it as you can. If you are willing to listen and change, it has the potential to alter the outcome of the final Judgment that you will, one day, receive from Jesus face to face.

Don't lose or throw away your rewards

It is not easy to earn rewards. It takes effort, persistence and courage and it also takes time. However, one gets the impression that it is much easier to lose them or have them reduced. That does appear to be the case because we are warned a number of times not to act in such a way as to *lose* our rewards or crowns or to be *disqualified*:

Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward.
2 John 8 (ESV)

I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.
Revelation 3:11 (ESV)

But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

1 Corinthians 9:27 (ESV)

For us to *lose* our rewards or crowns, or to have them *seized* from us, or for us to be *disqualified* from receiving them, sounds very much like a *punishment* to me. See below for a discussion of why it may be correct to view such losses or disqualifications as being *punishments*, rather than referring to them in a more neutral sense as the mere *absence of rewards*.

Will the Judgment Seat of Christ involve any element of *punishment*?

This is a highly controversial question which very few people even ask, let alone attempt to answer. People get very sensitive and insecure about it. It can cause them to lash out defensively rather than face the question calmly and analyse what the Bible actually says. In attempting to deal with this question of the negative aspect of what might occur at the Judgment Seat of Christ we must be meticulously precise in our language and ensure that we define every word exactly.

If not, then words like *condemnation*, *punishment*, *rebuke*, *loss*, *disqualification* and so on are likely to be mistaken for each other, or merged together, creating confusion. So, let's begin by restating the question more carefully and defining exactly what we mean by it. The wider question could actually be broken down into the following series of shorter questions:

- a) Can a *real* Christian who goes to be judged at the Judgment Seat of Christ end up being *condemned* at it, such that he is classified as being 'unrighteous' and sent from it to the Lake of Fire?
- b) Can such a person, even if not condemned in that drastic way, nonetheless, be *punished* in some lesser way?
- c) What exactly do we mean by the word '*punishment*' and what kind of things might be included within it?
- d) Can punishment include the loss, withdrawal, reduction or cancellation of rewards, positions, roles, status, titles, crowns, treasures etc which we might otherwise have been given, or which might already have been provisionally allocated to us?
- e) Even if condemnation cannot be the outcome for anyone who actually goes to the Judgment Seat of Christ, is it possible that before they ever go to it the *venue* for their judgment could be changed, such that they are instead judged at the Great White Throne? Can that change of

destination ever happen to a *real* Christian, who is genuinely saved, but later becomes false or apostate?

Why is the question about the possibility of punishment for real Christians so sensitive and controversial?

If the question is asked about the possibility of real Christians being punished at the Judgment Seat, some people tend to become very agitated. Some people are so determined to uphold the valid doctrine that salvation (i.e. justification) is by grace alone and through faith alone, that they get alarmed if they think that anyone is even suggesting that we might be saved (i.e. justified) on the basis of our *works*.

The concept of us being *punished* for our works, or lack of works, appears to them like another way of saying that we are *saved* or justified by works. They therefore recoil from that instinctively and cannot cope with discussing something that even sounds like it.

Others are very committed to the (valid) doctrine which says “*He who believes in Him is not condemned....*” and that “*there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*” (See John 3:18 (a) and Romans 8:1) Therefore they become agitated by anything which sounds, even remotely, like saying that there might still be some form of punishment that might come upon real Christians.

They confuse *condemnation* and *punishment* for each other, as if they were the same thing. Such people therefore become agitated needlessly. They then try to defend the gospel from a charge which isn't even being made, but which they imagine is being made.

Others wrongly think that to say that real Christians may face punishment, of whatever kind, comes dangerously close to sounding like the Roman Catholic idea of purgatory. Roman Catholics (wrongly) believe that most people go to this place called purgatory after their death. The idea is that they will be *purged* of their sins, so as to be got into a fit state to go to Heaven.

However, the very concept of purgatory is a false and entirely man-made one. Only the sacrificial death and subsequent resurrection of Jesus Christ can actually pay for our sins. Nothing else can pay for them, or remove them, least of all a period to be spent in so-called purgatory, a place which does not even exist, and of which the Bible never speaks.

Others have simply never heard of the Judgment Seat of Christ. Many have never been taught anything about it and some may even have been taught not to believe in it. Therefore they “edit out” and ignore any reference to the Judgment Seat when they read the Bible. However, when they hear somebody else mention the subject they then feel insecure, and even threatened. So they panic and close down the conversation.

In that way they believe they are upholding right doctrine, but they are really just closing their own minds, and silencing other people, in order to make themselves feel more comfortable. However, consider this short passage from the letter to the Hebrews, in which the writer clearly indicates that *during this life* God disciplines, chastises and punishes us:

⁴ In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵ And have you forgotten the exhortation which addresses you as sons?—

***“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor lose courage when you are punished by him.***

***⁶ For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.”***

⁷ *It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?* ⁸ *If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.* ⁹ *Besides this, we have had earthly fathers to discipline us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?* ¹⁰ *For they disciplined us for a short time at their pleasure, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.*

Hebrews 12:4-10 (RSV)

Why is it that we can easily accept that in this life God should find it necessary to chastise, and even punish us, but find it unthinkable to suggest that He will also do so at the Judgment Seat? Surely, if it is right for Him to deal with us in those ways now, it is equally right for Him to do so when we are finally judged, if not more so. At any rate, one clearly cannot continue to argue that the concept of God chastising, or even punishing, a genuine Christian is in any way unbiblical.

Some of us will receive from Jesus what can only properly be described as *punishment*, even though we won't be *condemned*

If you are struggling, to accept the idea of Jesus going beyond rebuking us and actually punishing some of us, then the following analogy may help you. Imagine a situation which arises from time to time in the police. I used to be an officer myself. Consider how it would be for a policeman who has done something wrong or neglected his duties and is therefore summoned to appear before the Chief Constable or Commissioner to be *disciplined*.

Let's consider the wide range of responses that are available for the Chief Constable to use. Then let's ask whether we could properly classify any of them as punishments, or whether they must be seen as something less than that, such that it would be inappropriate even to use the word 'punishment'.

Imagine you were that policeman who had done something wrong and that your supervisors had gone through all the necessary investigative and disciplinary stages and procedures. What if at the end of it all the Chief Constable finds that you have acted wrongly and are in breach of the internal Police disciplinary rules, or even that you have broken the criminal law?

Let's briefly set out the range of potential options which are open to the Chief Constable, starting with the least serious and ending with the most serious. Then let's consider whether we would classify any of these as punishments:

- a) a mere *rebuke*, i.e. to tell you, just in words, about his disapproval, disappointment and concern and to say that he feels you have let him down.
- b) for him to go further and to impose some *sanction*, albeit a minor one, such as to deduct some of your wages for a month or more.
- c) to go further and to transfer you into a *less desirable role* such as to move you from CID into traffic, or to put you back onto an ordinary shift in uniform.
- d) to *demote you in rank*, for example from sergeant to constable, which means reduced status and also reduced pay.
- e) to knock you *down by several ranks* eg from Chief Superintendent down to Inspector, or even all the way down to Constable.

- f) to *dismiss you* from the Police Force entirely i.e. to sack you, but to allow you to keep your pension.
- g) to sack you and *strip you of your pension* as well.
- h) to go beyond the internal disciplinary procedure and to *charge you with a criminal offence* and prosecute you through the courts. That could lead to a fine, or prison sentence or even, (in the past) to a death sentence.

Now, which of those responses do you feel it would be right to classify as *punishments*? Most of us would say that they are *all punishments*, with the possible exception of (a) i.e. a rebuke alone with no other sanction. However some of us would say that even a rebuke by itself could be seen as a punishment. Who would relish the prospect of driving over to Force Headquarters to see the Chief Constable even if they knew it would *only* result in a rebuke and nothing more? Most of us would flinch even at the prospect of such a rebuke, let alone actually experiencing it.

Moreover, even a rebuke by itself could still have long term or even permanent consequences, It could blight your promotion prospects and cause you to be held back in future years. So, if someone was to say that only option (h), criminal prosecution, can properly be called a punishment, most of us would probably disagree. I suspect that you too would probably regard most or all of those responses as punishments, especially if it was you who was facing them.

Why then do so many people see it so differently when it comes to the Judgment Seat of Christ? Why do so many of us insist on saying that it will not involve any negative dimension, or at least nothing that could properly be classed as a punishment? Many of the responses that Jesus is likely to make in His assessment of our lives sound very similar to what our imaginary Chief Constable might do at a disciplinary hearing. If so, then they must surely be classed as punishments, even though they fall very far short of us being condemned and sent to the Lake of Fire.

Let's make a similar (simplified) list of the range of potential options which appear to be available to Jesus in relation to a Christian with whom He is not pleased, or who has not achieved what he ought to have achieved with the talents and time he was given. His responses might involve some of the following things, in rising order of seriousness/importance:

- a) for Him to '*merely*' rebuke us, i.e. to speak of His disapproval or disappointment but with no other sanctions. I personally would be appalled by that, but, even so, let us concede for the moment, and for sake of argument, that a rebuke by itself is not a punishment in the proper or full sense, because no further sanction is involved.
- b) for Him to *withhold rewards* from us, e.g. crowns, or treasures, that we might otherwise have been given during the 1000 year reign of Jesus (the Millennium) or even beyond that in the eternal state, the New Jerusalem
- c) to *revoke or take away from us rewards, crowns, treasures, that we might already have qualified for* in relation to our past services to Him. This would be like a person being stripped of their knighthood. That happened with the dictator Robert Mugabe, the disgraced Chairman of Royal Bank of Scotland, Fred Goodwin, and the spy and traitor Anthony Blunt. The Queen revoked all their knighthoods and it must have been a major humiliation for them and a source of regret and grief. I would certainly class such a loss as a punishment. Yet to be stripped of rewards/crowns etc by Jesus must be infinitely worse. Why then should we deny that such a sanction is a punishment? We would all be devastated if it happened to us. Yet the Bible suggests that it will happen to at least some of us, i.e. that we will be stripped of rewards which we would, otherwise, have been given.

d) to *demote us* and to withhold from us, or strip us of, roles, positions, ranks, titles etc that we might already have earned, or which we might have been about to earn or be awarded. This would mean going through the Millennium, and probably also the eternal Kingdom thereafter, in a reduced role or rank, rather like being demoted from Superintendent to Inspector.

Surely one must accept that all of the above responses from Jesus, if they were to happen, would properly be described as:

- i) negative – they could hardly be called positive
- ii) punishments – they all involve a loss or sanction, with the possible exception of where He only rebukes us and does nothing else

Once you start to look at it in that way then it is hard to deny that the Judgment Seat of Christ will contain at least a negative *dimension* to it. For some people it may even be a negative, unpleasant experience *overall*. Those who insist on seeing it solely in positive terms are either missing the point or not being quite honest in their use of words.

If there was no negative element to the Judgment Seat at all, then why would any of us need Jesus to show mercy to us when judging us? Yet it is plain that we do need His mercy. Indeed, Apostle Paul wrote about his friend Onesiphorus who had helped him in the past when he was in great need. He then prays that Jesus will grant mercy to him (Onesiphorus) on that Day (the Day of Judgment):

¹⁵ You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes. ¹⁶ May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains, ¹⁷ but when he arrived in Rome he searched for me earnestly and found me— ¹⁸ may the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on that Day!— and you well know all the service he rendered at Ephesus.

2 Timothy 1:15-18 (ESV)

If we had no need of mercy, then why would Paul pray for Onesiphorus to be given it? It is clear that Onesiphorus is already a genuine believer. Thus we know that Paul is not merely asking for him to be given mercy in terms of having his *sins forgiven*. That cannot be Paul's meaning. He does not expect Onesiphorus to go the Great White Throne Judgment. Paul clearly means that He wants Jesus to take into account, at the Judgment Seat, the great help and mercy that Onesiphorus showed to Paul and for Jesus to grant equivalent mercy to him when He judges him.

One can only conclude therefore that Paul is asking for Jesus not to rebuke or chastise Onesiphorus for other sins or failings, or else to rebuke/chastise him less severely for those things. But, again why bother to ask for any of that unless the Judgment Seat will contain elements of rebuke, chastisement, loss of rewards, demotion etc?

What is more, there is an intriguing passage in 2 Timothy chapter 4 where apostle Paul is speaking of a time when he was facing criminal charges because of his evangelistic work. He names certain Christians who had let him down and failed to stand by him or speak up for him in his time of trouble. He says they 'deserted' him. Thus we can be sure they were real Christians, otherwise why would Paul have expected them to stand by him in the first place? But note what Paul says at the end of that passage:

⁹ Do your best to come to me soon. ¹⁰ For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. ¹¹ Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry. ¹² Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus. ¹³ When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. ¹⁴ Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. ¹⁵ Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message. ¹⁶ At

my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them!

2 Timothy 4:9-16 (ESV)

Paul ends by saying "...*May it not be charged against them*". Again, we have to ask why Paul would feel it necessary to ask Jesus not to charge these men with having deserted/abandoned/ let him down if there is no possibility of any real Christian being charged with, or punished for, anything anyway.

Whatever it might mean for Jesus to 'charge' us in relation to some sin, omission or act of disobedience or neglect, it is plainly not something we would want to be said or done to us. Paul therefore wanted those believers who had failed him to be let off. He wanted their wrongdoing to be overlooked by Jesus. The passage, and the prayer, can only make sense if there is a real chance for some or all of us to be charged with such things. Otherwise, Paul's request would be meaningless and unnecessary.

There is no *condemnation* for those who go to the Judgment Seat of Christ. However is it possible for a real Christian to *fall away* and to be sent instead to the Great White Throne Judgment where they would be condemned?

The question of whether a *real* Christian can fall away, so as to cease to be a Christian and be sent to the Great White Throne Judgment when they die, is a very complicated one. It cannot be answered in a short sound-bite. Please refer therefore to chapters 21 and 22 within Book One, in which I have attempted to give some balanced answers to the above questions.

However, if you doubt that there is even a question to be answered here, because you are convinced that no real Christian could ever fall away to that extent, then consider passages such as these from the letter to the Hebrews:

²⁶ For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. ²⁸ Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. ²⁹ How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? ³⁰ For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." ³¹ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God

Hebrews 10:26-31 (ESV)

³⁶ For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. ³⁷ For, "Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; ³⁸ but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him."

³⁹ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

Hebrews 10: 36-39 (ESV)

Consider also what apostle Paul says in Romans about Israel being the vine from which branches (some of the Jewish people) were broken off because of their unbelief. That would not concern us so much were it not for the fact that Paul then warns his readers, in the church in Rome, that *they too* could be cut off.

¹³ Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry ¹⁴ in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. ¹⁵ For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? ¹⁶ If the dough offered as first fruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches. ¹⁷ But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, ¹⁸ do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. ¹⁹ Then you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." ²⁰ That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. ²² Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off.

Romans 11:13-22 (ESV)

My argument is that these warning verses need to concern all of us, not just somebody else. We have no basis for complacency. However, it is essential that we also seek to be balanced about this, as with every other question. Therefore, if you have not already done so, please do refer to the fuller, more balanced discussion on this point within chapters 21 and 22 of Book One.

Are we meant to feel some *fear* about the prospect of facing Jesus at the Judgment Seat of Christ?

In the light of all that we have now seen, is it valid to feel some measure of apprehension, or even fear, at the prospect of being judged? I think it is, and it would appear that the Psalmist did too:

*My flesh trembles for fear of you,
and I am afraid of your judgments.
Psalm 119:120 (ESV)*

Moreover, so did apostle Peter. When referring to the subject of God's judgment, Peter urges us to "conduct (ourselves) with fear":

And if you invoke as Father him who judges each one impartially according to his deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile.

1 Peter 1:17 (RSV)

Therefore, we should not be coy or squeamish about using the word "*fear*" to describe how we should feel about the Judgment that awaits every one of us. Indeed, if we don't fear the Judgment Seat of Christ, then it is likely that we have not properly understood what it is.

What should we be doing now to *prepare* for the Judgment Seat of Christ?

Hopefully this book has convinced you, if you didn't already know it, that we all face Judgment, either at the Judgment Seat of Christ or at the Great White Throne. If we really believe that then we would be fools not to take it seriously and not to prepare ourselves. Of course, the first priority is to avoid even being present at the Great White Throne Judgment.

We achieve that by becoming a genuine Christian, i.e. by repenting, believing the gospel and putting our trust in Jesus Christ to save us from our sin. Doing that prevents us from being judged for our sins at the Great White Throne. If you have not yet taken that step, then take it now. If you are not yet sure how to do so, then I would recommend that you look at Book One and follow the advice given in that.

However, if you already know that you are a real Christian and are aware that you are going to be judged at the Judgment Seat of Christ, then how can you best prepare for that? What steps can you take now in the years, months or days that you have left to prepare yourself for that judgment? Let us firstly face the fact that you do not know how long you have got left to prepare yourself. You cannot just assume that you will live until you are about 80 or more. Therefore you cannot be sure that you have plenty of time to get ready and that you can safely leave it for now and think about it later.

I can remember being deeply affected when I was a new convert, aged 19. A student I knew who was very active in the Christian Union, died very suddenly aged 20 due to an accident in his home. It shook me to think that I had seen him only a short time before, alive and well. Then he was suddenly gone, literally overnight. Then a couple of years later another Christian student from the same CU was killed while mountaineering. His life literally came to an end in seconds, with no warning.

Again, his death made me think deeply about the fact that I could not know when I would die. It could be at any moment. Perhaps you consider that to be a morbid and unhelpful thought? In fact, as I see it, dwelling upon such questions has been one of the most useful things that I have ever done. It has helped me to become judgment-focused, which I have found to be very helpful, and even life-changing.

Let us return to the key question, i.e. what should we be doing now to prepare for our own judgment at the Judgment Seat of Christ? Indeed, is it even possible to prepare ourselves? I believe it is, and that God wants us to do so. That is the very reason why He has gone to such lengths to inform us, and warn us, of that judgment and to make us aware of the many criteria by which we shall be judged.

So, to attempt to answer the question, let us begin by reminding ourselves of the main purposes and objectives of the Judgment Seat of Christ. It will enable Jesus to:

- a) evaluate and assess our lives and in particular our faithfulness, obedience and fruitfulness
- b) decide what rewards and/or rebukes are due to us and to allocate us a place, position, role and rank within His Kingdom, i.e. during His 1000 year millennial reign and even beyond that, in the eternal Kingdom.

Accordingly, it would seem that we can best prepare for the Judgment Seat of Christ in the following ways:

a) Seek to be made aware of your own faults

Actively seek for correction, criticism and even rebuke now, rather than wait to be given those things at the Judgment itself. Would it not be foolish, and sad, to leave it until that Day of Judgment to learn things about yourself and your habits, attitudes, sins, faults and failings that you could have discovered now, and sought to reduce or eliminate?

Such knowledge can be obtained, first and foremost, by careful study of God's Word and by sincerely praying for God to open your eyes to your own faults. It can also be got by being willing to listen to the criticism and correction that can be given to us by other people, i.e. our bosses, colleagues, friends, family and especially our husband or wife. By all of these means we should test and examine ourselves. Then we should change whatever needs to be changed so that we can get back to God and live His way:

***Let us test and examine our ways,
and return to the Lord!
Lamentations 3:40 (RSV)***

Apostle Paul specifically tells us to judge ourselves now, so that there is then no need for God to judge us or chasten us. We can judge ourselves, by simply comparing the way we *actually* live with what the Bible says about how we *should* live:

³¹ *But if we judged ourselves truly, we should not be judged.* ³² *But when we are judged by the Lord, we are chastened so that we may not be condemned along with the world.*

1 Corinthians 11:31-32 (RSV)

We therefore need to go out of our way to look for, and welcome, such discoveries about our faults and failings, wherever they may come from, and however painful they may be to hear. Above all we need to look for them in the Bible. Willingness to be corrected and to see one's own shortcomings as they really are, rather than in the self-justifying way in which we tend to portray them to ourselves, is rare. But it is extremely valuable.

It is obviously better to seek for and accept rebuke/correction/criticism now, from the Bible, or from a boss/colleague/friend or spouse. Then you can do something about your faults and seek to change, rather than wait to receive these rebukes for the first time from Jesus Himself. By then it will be too late then for you to change so as to alter His assessment of you

So, ask God to judge you now and to make you aware of your faults during this life. Ask Him to do it *in whatever way seems best to him*, whether it be through your spouse or other people or bosses or through His Word. We all go wrong and we all do wrong, but it is much better to be made aware of what you're like now, rather than later.

Therefore ask God to make you aware of your shortcomings now. It is perfectly legitimate to ask Him to do this gently, so that it does not overwhelm you. Look how Jeremiah went about it. He asked God to correct him, but not to do so in anger:

²³ *I know, O LORD, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps.* ²⁴ *Correct me, O LORD, but in just measure; not in thy anger, lest thou bring me to nothing.*

Jeremiah 10:23-24 (RSV)

b) Actively seek to change now, while you still have the chance

What is the point of learning more about how God wants us to be, or of learning about our faults, if we do not set out to do something about it and to change? Whatever period of time you have left to you in this life is your opportunity to change. Don't waste any of it. However little time there is left, even if it is only minutes, that time can, at the very least, be used to sincerely acknowledge and repent of whatever sins or failings you are aware of.

Even if that was all you did, you would at least change the nature of your meeting with Jesus on that Day because He would no longer need to rebuke you for those sins. They would have been removed from you as far as the east is from the west. They would even be deleted from God's memory, at least for purposes of judgment.

Therefore such repentance is profoundly worthwhile, even if the only thing it achieved was to reduce the extent to which we will be rebuked at the judgment. But repentance has so much more potential than that, if we allow it to lead to real change in our character and in the way we live. If so, then those changes will also have a very material effect on the outcome of our judgment in terms of rewards and also the role/rank allocated to us.

c) Seek to invest in God's Kingdom right now and to build a stockpile of 'treasure'.

I have met very few people who take this point seriously. If people think of it at all, or if they respond to things I have said on the subject, it is usually only to brush this aside. They speak as if it was inappropriate, or even improper, to seek for rewards. But God very clearly wants us to think this way and to see every day as an opportunity to invest in His Kingdom and to add to our stockpile of rewards or treasures.

The Bible refers to these things frequently and Jesus Himself emphasized them. Therefore make it your aim to start to focus more and more on taking God seriously when He refers to rewards, treasures, roles, inheritance, positions etc. Make it possible for Him to allocate more of these good things to you.

It is hard enough to focus on these issues when one is trying to do so. It is virtually impossible if one isn't even seeking to do so, because the question of rewards is not even on one's agenda. We therefore need to deliberately put it on our agenda. And we must keep putting it back on the agenda again, every time it falls off or gets forgotten.

Jesus did not repeatedly emphasise rewards so that we could just ignore and forget them. He wants those rewards to be very much on our minds. The difference is that it is with the treasure of the *next world*, not *this world*, that He wants us to be concerned.