

THE JUDGMENT SEAT OF CHRIST

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The name *judgment seat* comes from a Greek word (*bema*) referring to a raised step or platform located in a public area within a city. The civil magistrates would sit there to perform their judicial duties. Most of the NT references to this seat occur where either Jesus or the apostle Paul were brought before a ruling authority. Pilate, for example, sat on this judgment seat when he tried Jesus (Matt 27:19). On two occasions, the expression, “the judgment seat of Christ” (or “God”), is found describing Christians standing before Christ at His return and being held accountable for their lives (Rom 14:10; 2 Cor 5:10).

What exactly will take place at this judgment is the subject of much debate. Some view the judgment seat of Christ as a place of intense sorrow and shame, a place of terror. The believer’s sins are revealed publicly and the believer is punished for those sins not confessed or not adequately dealt with in this life. Others take the opposite position, viewing this as a place of no remorse or shame but only of rejoicing. Christ will strictly dispense rewards and every believer will receive at least some recognition for service. In light of such conflicting positions, it is important to examine the biblical evidence.

Three passages in the NT directly address this judgment: Romans 14:7–12; 1 Corinthians 3:10–15; and 2 Corinthians 5:6–10. From these and related verses the following points may be noted. First, this judgment is for Christians, that is, for believers in the body of Christ. Writing to the church at Corinth, Paul says “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (2 Cor 5:10). Other judgments are mentioned in God’s Word, but Christians are not involved in these. Two such examples are Matthew 25:31–46, which speaks of Christ’s judging the nations at the end of the Tribulation period, and Revelation 20:11–15, which speaks of the judgment of all unbelievers at the great white throne of God.

Second, this judgment takes place in connection with the Lord’s return. In 1 Corinthians 3:13, the judgment of believers is associated with “the day.” This expression is an abbreviation of the longer “day of the Lord” found in Paul and elsewhere to describe events surrounding the second advent of Christ. More specifically, the judgment seat of Christ as a part of this *day* follows the Rapture of the Church (1 Thess 4:13–18). It occurs while the believers are in heaven with Christ (John 14:1–3) and before Christ returns to the earth at the end of the Tribulation period to vanquish His enemies and to establish His kingdom (Rev 19:11–20:6; cf. 1 Cor 4:5; 2 Tim 4:8).

Third, this judgment involves an evaluation of the believer’s works. Notice that in 1 Corinthians 3:13–15 Paul states unequivocally that it is our “works” that are to be examined and, in particular, our works performed as co-laborers with Christ, as Christian servants (cf. 2 Cor 5:10). Furthermore, these works are judged by Christ to determine whether they are good or evil, that is, whether they are those that Christ can approve (“gold, silver, precious stones”) or not approve (“wood, hay, straw”). A good work, it may be assumed, is one that is done in obedience to God’s Word and motivated out of faith and love toward God (Eccl 12:13–14; Mark 12:29–31; Rom 13:8–10; 14:23; Heb 11:6; 1 John 5:1–3; 2 John 4–6).

Lastly, the purpose of this judgment is to issue rewards for service. Again, Paul says, “If anyone’s work...endures, he will receive a reward” (1 Cor 3:14). As such, the judgment seat of

Christ does not directly address the believer's sin, though it is understood that sin is the reason that a work would be worthless. Neither does this judgment place in jeopardy the salvation of the individual. In the very next verse, Paul states that if the individual's works are shown to be worthless, he himself is still saved (1 Cor 3:15). It is his *works* that are burned up, and the *loss* that he suffers must refer to the loss of reward that would have otherwise been his. He is said to be "saved, yet so as by fire," meaning his ultimate salvation is accompanied by the loss of reward.

Having said this, several questions remain. What about sins in the life of the believer, particularly unconfessed sins? When or where are these addressed? It cannot be stressed too strongly that the believer's sins have already been forgiven at the moment of salvation and that the believer will never face eternal condemnation. "Scripture teaches that the child of God...shall not come into judgment (John 3:18; 5:24; 6:37; Rom 5:1; 8:1; 1 Cor 11:32); in his standing before God, and on the ground that the penalty for all sin—past, present, future (Col 2:13)—has been borne by Christ as the perfect substitute, the believer is not only placed beyond condemnation, but being in Christ is accepted in the perfection of Christ (1 Cor 1:30; Eph 1:6; Col 2:10; Heb 10:14) and loved of God as Christ is loved (John 17:23)" (L. S. Chafer, *Major Bible Themes*, rev. by J. F. Walvoord, [Zondervan, 1974], p. 282).

Unconfessed sins do affect the believer, but it is the believer's fellowship with God in this life that is affected. In order to restore unhindered fellowship with God, the believer must sincerely confess those sins to God. God has promised to cleanse and forgive the believer, thereby removing any obstacles to divine blessing (1 John 1:9). At the same time, such sins committed by a believer should never be taken lightly. They are those for which Christ died. And, they subject the believer to divine chastisement in this life (Heb 12:1–11). Nevertheless, the believer will *never* face eternal condemnation and punishment.

A second question is, "Does the fact that believers are rewarded at the judgment seat of Christ mean that there are levels of blessing in heaven?" A number of passages support the conclusion that there are levels of punishment in hell (Matt 11:20–24; Luke 12:41–48; 20:45–47; Rev 20:11–15) as well as levels of blessing in the Millennium and, by implication, in heaven (e.g., Luke 19:11–27). The very fact that rewards are distributed at the judgment seat of Christ and that there are those who suffer the loss of such seems to demand varying levels of blessing and responsibility for believers in the age to come.

Related to this issue is the question of the *crowns* that are mentioned in the NT. Do these represent the rewards themselves, or are these *crowns* simply figures to describe eternal life which every believer inherits? The evidence is somewhat mixed. Some crowns appear to be used synonymously with eternal life (Jas 1:12; Rev 2:10). Others appear to be offered to a specific category of believers, limiting their availability to those in that category rather than to all (e.g., 1 Pet 5:4, dealing with pastors). The best solution is to take each reference individually and to interpret each crown in light of the immediate context. Because the writers of the NT apparently do not use this concept uniformly, each reference must be understood on its own merits (cf. 1 Cor 9:25; 1 Thess 2:19; 2 Tim 4:8).

A third question is, "Will the judgment seat of Christ be an occasion where hidden sins are revealed and where believers face shame?" Again, the biblical evidence suggests a "yes" answer. According to 1 Corinthians 4:5, Paul states, "Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts; and then each one's praise will come from God." And, in 1 John 2:28 it reads, "And now little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be

ashamed before Him at His coming.” The elements of remorse, regret, and even shame cannot be avoided at the judgment seat of Christ as the believer’s works are judged. At the same time, these will not be the controlling emotions at this event or in the kingdom or in heaven. The overwhelming emotions throughout will be those of gratitude and joy. “The emotional condition of the redeemed is that of complete and unending happiness.... Hope will at last become reality for all those who are delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God (Rom 8:18–25). Elimination of the curse, pain and death will also remove sorrow, tears and crying (Rev 21:4)” (Herman A. Hoyt, *The End Times* [Moody, 1969], pp. 231–232).

From all of this we can conclude that the judgment seat of Christ is a serious matter. It reminds us of the importance and necessity of faithful living as we will certainly give an account of our lives on that day before an omniscient and holy Christ. At the same time, the coming of our Lord is a blessed hope. We will receive our resurrected bodies in which sin no longer dwells. We will stand glorified before Christ without fear of condemnation. Our Lord has once for all borne the guilt of our sins and has paid forever the full penalty of God’s wrath. Above all, it will be a time of joy and rejoicing in the grace and goodness of God in saving us and giving us eternal life. “The judgment seat of Christ might be compared to a commencement ceremony. At graduation there is some measure of disappointment and remorse that one did not do better and work harder. However, at such an event the overwhelming emotion is joy, not remorse. The graduates do not leave the auditorium weeping because they did not earn better grades. Rather, they are thankful that they have been graduated, and they are grateful for what they did achieve. To overdo the sorrow aspect of the judgment seat of Christ is to make heaven hell. To underdo the sorrow aspect is to make faithfulness inconsequential” (S. Hoyt, “The Negative Aspects of the Christian’s Judgment,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137 [1980]:131).