

Is the "Bema Seat Judgment" Biblical?

by Tony Warren



One of the more frequently asked questions is of the *Bema Seat Judgment of Christians*. This phrase generally refers to the spurious Christian doctrine that teaches that believers must stand before God and be judged, not for their sins, but in order to determine the nature of rewards for their good works on earth. The proponents of this doctrine call this the Bema seat judgment to distinguish it from what they term *The White Throne Judgment*. The latter they believe to be the Judgment that God reserves for judicial verdict against transgressions by the wicked.

However, the truth is a lot less complicated. The Greek word [*bema*], which is translated seat, is from a root that means 'base' or the foot (*and by extension, step*). It is therefore used to designate a stepped seating area for Judgment. Thus bema simply refers to the raised seating of a judge or a king. For example, the throne of a King is usually stepped seating. In other words, seating that is raised above the level of the surrounding area. Much the same as our courts today have established for judgments. In our country one must approach the raised judgment area called the bench. Likewise, the bema seat is simply the raised seating of someone sitting to judge.

But the problem of the so-called *Bema seat judgment* is not really one of misunderstanding the Greek, it is an exegetical problem where some teachers are reading their own presuppositions into the text. They have formulated a doctrine that holds that there is an adjudication specifically to judge the value of the Christian's service to the Lord. So they attempt to shape the word bema to conform to these predetermined beliefs. There are two ways that this erroneous doctrine has been introduced into Christianity. The first, by using extra-biblical documentation to support their theories. Second, proof by assertion where the actual evidence of scripture on the matter is ignored, fragmented, suppressed or denied. So though their beliefs certainly cannot be proven Biblically, many of these theologians (*using secular testimony*) have gone to great lengths to justify the doctrine, even though it clearly contradicts the Bible text itself. Some claim that this particular seat was only used to reward, never to punish. However, these secular ideas are not only contrary to all other doctrines of scripture concerning God's rewarding us for our work, but they are contradictory to the way the Greek word [*bema*] itself is used in the scriptures. God's Word does not lend itself in support of such an obviously Biblically indefensible position. In fact, God clearly illustrates just the opposite. For example, Pilate sat on the judgment seat [*bema*] when Jesus was being accused of wrong doing. Clearly this makes these theories about its purpose only being for rewards, null and void.

Matthew 27:19

- "When he was set down on the judgment *seat*, his wife sent unto him, saying, Have thou nothing to do with that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him."

John 19:13

- "When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus forth, and sat down in the judgment *seat* in a place that is called the Pavement, but in the Hebrew, Gabbatha."

The Greek word translated seat is [*bema*]. Clearly, this isn't a seat for rewarding anyone. The word Gabbatha means the knoll, a vernacular term for the Roman *tribunal*. We see that the whole idea makes no sense. Why would his wife be warning him not to have anything to do with this "just" man, if all Pilate was there for was to hand out rewards? In both Biblical accounts of this episode, the Greek word translated seat, is the same word [*bema*]. We should note very clearly that far from being a seat to hand out rewards, it is a seat of Judgment in tribunal for crimes (perceived or otherwise). Pilate sits upon this Judgment seat and he makes a Judgment to have the the Lord Jesus Christ scourged, and handed over to be crucified. Quite clearly, this was a Judgment seat for judicial law. This is not only illustrated by the context, but also by the content. In both passages, Pilate sits on this *bema* and delivers a judicial verdict against Christ (beating and handing Him over to be crucified) which has absolutely nothing to do with rewards. Likewise, in the book of Acts we find the same scenario present with this Judgment seat.

Acts 18:12-13

- "And when Gallio was the deputy of Achaia, the Jews made insurrection with one accord against Paul, and brought him to the judgment *seat*,
- Saying, This fellow persuadeth men to worship God contrary to the law."

Acts 18:17

- "Then all the Greeks took Sosthenes, the chief ruler of the synagogue, and beat him before the judgment *seat*. And Gallio cared for none of those things."

Clearly we see from the context that this word '*bema*' is used in the sense of judgment in a trial, where Paul is accused by the Jews of some crime, which they ultimately could not prove. We can say without fear of rational contradiction that this was a seat where a judgment of the law was to be pronounced against or for the Apostle Paul. It was most certainly not a judgment seat for rewards, nor an award ceremony. For any Theologian to make such claims concerning the '*bema judgment*' is pure fabrication. It is a personal or private interpretation that most certainly is not evidenced by the scripture. As stated, the scriptures themselves testify against such an understanding. We lean explicitly that the *bema* was not used to hand out rewards, but as a place for judgment in a tribunal.

Was this doctrine of a *bema* seat judgment invented to be the believer's motivation to work? Are believers truly motivated by a desire for rewards (*above and beyond the reward of the inheritance of our salvation in Christ*) in the kingdom of heaven? The answer is an emphatic, no! To have a doctrine that postulates our possible loss of some reward if our works on earth are not up to standards, bridges on the heretical. Rather than have the Christian be motivated to persevere through love, this doctrine actually threatens our future reward at the *bema* seat based upon our good (or not so good) works. So despite all objections to the contrary, this is a doctrine that promotes "Merit" rather than "Grace," and it makes a total mockery of the passages (divinely inspired of God) that clearly demonstrate that our reward in heaven cannot be by both by Grace of God, and by our own merit.

Romans 11:6

- "And if by grace, then is it no more of works: *otherwise grace is no more grace*. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work."

Our labor is gracious only as it is through the work of Christ. There is no disagreement between God's Grace and human responsibility, but there can be no agreement between a merit system of rewards based upon our own works rather than the work of Christ in us. Neither should our responsibility be confused with human merit. But that is exactly what many of these theologians have done in formulating the *bema* seat judgment. Responsibility does not mean that Christians must in any way cooperate in their own perseverance in works. Nor does God motivate us to work through diverse crowns or rewards based on our effort. Those who misinterpret the scriptures that exhort work, do not truly understand why the Christian either wills or works. For the scriptures out of context, are pretext.

Hebrews 10:23

- "Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;)"

The exhortation to, "*hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering*," is not a proof of our indispensable cooperation, but an illustration of the necessary evidence of true salvation, which is the compulsory results inevitable when Christ is truly working within us. We are motivated by the Spirit, not by rewards. The fact of the matter is, of ourselves we merit no rewards. Because it is Christ's work in us by which we merit reward for our labors. Why then a *bema* seat judgment when we merit nothing of ourselves? Why such a doctrine when it is only by Grace of God that we merit the reward. For our own works are unprofitable without Christ, and would merit us no payment (translated, reward). The only reward we get is for the work that Christ has done for us.

Luke 17:10

- "So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do."

Do you see any merit of reward in that verse? It is by the sovereignty of God that Christians are good servants and are moved to do the faithful work of Christ. It is by 'His Work' within us (not our own) that we both have the will to do, and are wherewithal to do it. What then is this *bema* seat a test or judgment of? God's own work in us? If that is the case, then we shall all receive a full reward, because Christ's work is a perfect work in us. All credit goes to Him, and we thus merit nothing of our own. This is not mere speculation on our part, for God is not silent on this matter.

Philippians 2:13

- "For it is God which worketh in you *both to will and to do* of his good pleasure."

Hebrews 13:20-21

- "Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant,
- *Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you* that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."

Ephesians 2:10

- "For we are his workmanship, *created in Christ Jesus unto good works*, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them."

1st Corinthians 3:9

- "For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, *ye are God's building.*"

2nd Corinthians 4:7

- "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, *and not of us.*"

1st Corinthians 15:10

- "But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but *I laboured* more abundantly than they all: *yet not I*, but the grace of God which was with me."

How then are we standing before the so-called *bema* seat being judged for doing good things that we cannot 'honestly' take any credit for? Because Christ is the one who moved us to do that which we (in our sinful nature) would never do on our own? He gave us the will to do good. There is none that seeks after God, there is none that doeth good, no not one (Romans 3:12). We have to be moved of God to do good. That is how we find ourselves accomplishing good works after we are saved. But it is 'only' because the Spirit of God is now dwelling within us, making our body His habitation, His Holy temple, making us perfect in every good work that we do. What reward does a perfect man receive, and wow many rewards shall he lose for imperfection? Obviously, a full reward with none lost. Each good man in Christ, shall receive a good man's reward.

Ruth 2:12

- "The LORD recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust."

It is Biblically absurd to argue for additional personal rewards for the good that we do, or loss of them as Judgment for any imperfection (which is sin), while all the while arguing that it is not a Judgment for sin. If we are not perfect in our works, we are in sin. It was for this reason that Christ went to the cross that we "could" appear before Him blameless, perfect, and without fault in all our works, and that we "could" appear before the *bema* seat and be judged according to the work of Christ.

The *bema* seat is not to punish believers I agree, but it is not to reward anyone based on his individual righteousness (meritorious works) either, for we are all worthy of a full reward of inheritance because we are all without fault. If any of our works could be faulted as imperfect, it would constitute sin. The wages of sin is death, not the loss of rewards or diverse payments. All our punishment was paid for by Christ at the cross, and our full reward was "secured" for us by that very same work.

Colossians 3:24

- "Knowing that *of the Lord* ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ."

The inheritance is not diverse crowns handed out at the *bema* seat, it is in being regenerated or born of God to live and reign with Him. We have the seed of Christ remain in us so that we are

true sons of God and thus heirs of the promise to the Son. Yes, there are scriptures that some theologians use to attempt to undermine this inheritance in Christ's reward, but once carefully examined, none of them either support these doctrines, nor speak of diverse rewards for the believer. One such passage that is often quoted as proof is Revelation chapter 22:

Revelation 22:12

- "And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be."

Their belief is that if every man is rewarded according to his own work, then believers shall receive different rewards. The problem with this assumption is that this scripture doesn't say believers, it says every man. In other words, one man will receive reward for good, and the other shall receive the reward for bad. Two different rewards, but for two different men. You see they totally misunderstand and thus misapply this verse. The wicked are paid (translated rewarded) also. What shall their wages or reward be? It will be God's wrath.

Let's look at the word translated reward. It is the Greek word [*misthos*], and means payment or wages for work. Thus (as it declares) every man shall be rewarded according to his own work. ***Whether it is good or bad.***

2nd Peter 2:13

- "And shall receive the ***reward of unrighteousness***, as they that count it pleasure to riot in the day time. Spots they are and blemishes, sporting themselves with their own deceivings while they feast with you;"

That is the exact same word [*misthos*] meaning payment or reward for our labors. The wicked receive for his work the reward of damnation, and the righteous receive for his work, the reward of the inheritance of sons in everlasting life. That is how Christ gives to every man according to his own work, whether good or bad. Because when every Christian is rewarded according to his work, then every one of them shall receive the exact same reward, seeing how every work of the man of God is without blemish. Every single one. God looks upon us all as blameless, and so how could any of us merit less than another? It is impossible.

2nd Timothy 3:17

- "That the man of God may be ***perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.***"

Revelation 14:4-5

- "These are they which were not defiled with women; for they are virgins. These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. These were redeemed from among men, being the firstfruits unto God and to the Lamb.
- And in their mouth was found no guile: ***for they are without fault before the throne of God.***"

God declares that they stand without fault before the King, and so how could one be faulted that he not receive the same reward that another receives? It is totally unbiblical to believe that one is better than another to be given greater rewards at the *bema* seat. When we are rewarded according to our own works. One (the reprobate) is rewarded according to 'his own' evil work, and the other (the believer) is rewarded according to the work of Christ on his behalf. He thus receives a full reward. There is no way to escape the obvious implication that our rewards would be earned by our own righteous good deeds in this untenable theory of the *bema* seat. All we can say to that is, "God forbid!"

Another passage that is often quoted by the proponents of meritorious rewards, is Matthew chapter six. The idea is that God is saying that we should all labor to heap up rewards in heaven.

Matthew 6:19-21

- "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal:
- But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal:
- For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

Some theologians use this verse to teach that not only does this justify individual meritorious rewards at the Bema seat, but it tells us to pursue them. But again, that is a careless reading of the text. First of all, this verse does not in any sense teach that believers will receive varying rewards depending upon their own merit, it does not even mention the *bema* seat, and it does not tell us to pursue such rewards (payments). Rather, it points out the uselessness of possessing earthly "treasures," and the glory of laying up spiritual "treasures" that are incorruptible. The incorruptible treasure in view is Christ, a spiritual reward that will be in us a tree of life. Not a meritorious reward or payment because we have evangelized so greatly, or worked so much harder than the next Christian in the mission field. We lay up for ourselves treasure in heaven when we become rich in Christ.

2nd Corinthians 4:6-7

- "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.
- But we have *this treasure* in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, *and not of us.*"

If this treasure is judged at the *bema* seat, then again, all the credit goes to God, for all the treasure laid up is by the power of God. What merit then is of our own righteousness in our work? There is none. If our treasure is in Christ's work, our reward is in Christ's work. Better than anything we 'of ourselves' could dream of meriting by our own labor.

The fact is, there really is no *bema seat judgment* for handing out rewards versus a later White Throne Judgment to hand out punishments. The Bible is clear that there is one Judgment of Christ, and it takes place at the last day. It is then that man will stand before the Judgment seat of Christ to give account of what he has done on earth, whether good or bad. And of course, all those who were washed clean in the blood of Christ stand before God clean and white with 'good' works that are faultless. While the rest of the dead stand with 'bad' works, and are found guilty in their works of sin.

With all of this evidence of our reward in Christ, one may ask, "*why is there this belief by some Christians in multiple Judgments?*" The answer is twofold.

One: Man in his pride and vanity wants credit for what he thinks he has done of his own (*alleged*) free will.

Two: Premillennial (and particularly dispensational) theologians, of necessity must create more than one Judgment because they have Christ returning more than once. If Christ returns only once (at the last day), their need for multiple judgments disappear.

The Premillennial eschatology of a thousand year reign of Christ on earth necessitates a double Judgment. For they have some judged for rewards before the thousand years, and some judged after the thousand years. This is problematic if there is a pretribulation rapture and no *bema* seat

Judgment.

Some will ask, 'Why then does God call where He is seated in Revelation chapter 20, the [thronos] or throne, and in other places say the Judgment [bema] or seat.' The answer is actually very simple. God's Word is replete with symbolism, figures and word images or pictures that vary signifying or illustrating some particular spiritual truth. Some chapters and verses may be illustrating one aspect of God (such as, being the King who rules upon the *throne*), while others chapters and verses may be illustrating another aspect of God (such as his position *seated as Judge* to mete out punishment). There really is no mystery in this. No more than the mystery of how in one chapter God calls Himself the Lamb, and in another chapter the Lion. One signifies His meekness and sacrifice, and the other His power and Strength. It doesn't mean it's two different Gods. In one verse Christ is called the Root, and in another the Vine. In one He's called the Bread, and in another the Water. There is no mystery, nor is it curious that God in one verse calls His chair the Judgment seat, and in another the throne of God. They signify different aspects of God's magnificent nature and design. Judgment and Kingship.

Surely, it should be self evident that there is only one time of Judgment, and that day is spoken of in scripture as "the last day." It is the day when judgment will take place for all people. There are no multiple Judgment days, although many theologians have gone to great lengths in an effort to prove that there are. One of the most popular scriptures used in support of this teaching is Romans chapter 14. This even though it says nothing about multiple judgments days, nor of this being a judgment of rewards for saints only.

Romans 14:10

- "But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ."

This verse doesn't in any way defend or prove the theory that there are two judgments. The only way that we can see the doctrine of two separate judgment times in this verse is if we "read it into" these scriptures. Because it was obviously not inspired of God to be written there. Moreover, we have the identical language in 2nd Corinthians, and it is clear from this text that it is a time of Judgment both for the good and the bad alike. Not coincidentally, this is totally harmonious with what we've already learned when looking at the actual word "*bema*" and its example uses for judgment for those at a tribunal.

2nd Corinthians 5:9-11

- "Wherefore we labour, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of him.
- For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, *whether it be good or bad*.
- Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; but we are made manifest unto God; and I trust also are made manifest in your consciences."

The terror of the Lord doesn't sound to me like a time of rewards for Christians. This Judgment seat [*bema*] is the same one all mankind must stand before. We know Christians cannot be judged for anything bad (this verse clearly says this Judgment is also for that). So this passage must be illustrating one Judgment of those the Lord will find good (those made righteous), and those whom the Lord will find bad (the unsaved in whom is sin), when they All stand before this Judgment seat. Not only all believers (as is surmised), but all both good and bad.

And so knowing all these things, let us go forth with confidence that all our sins (bad works) were made white as snow by Christ at the cross that we could never be held accountable for anything less than perfect works when we stand before the seat of Christ. Let us have the

confidence to know that while all 'our own' righteous works are as filthy rags before God, the righteous work of Christ in us make us perfect before Him. Confidence to know that while our own prayers may be imperfect (as we are finite beings), the burnt offering of the sacrifice of Christ brings them up before the Lord as a sweet incense (Romans 8:26; Revelation 8:3). Let us not get caught up in seeking our own rewards before a *bema* seat, but trust in the reward of Christ, the inheritance that the Son secured for us by His own work. Let us not set our eyes upon gain, diverse reigns, or prideful lusts for rewards, but upon the riches which cannot be earned by us. The treasures which are received by faith. Let us trust in the work of Christ wherein we can never go wrong. For it is then that we will understand that when we stand before the *bema* seat Judgment, we will stand a 'Righteous Man,' a man perfect in every way before God, having a Savior who has delivered him a full inheritance, a full reward by His work.

We pray that the Lord, who is Gracious above all, will give us the wisdom to understand His most Holy Word, and discern between the right hand and the left.

Amen!

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Peace,

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Created 12/24/02 / Last Modified 08/03/14

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