

Doctrine of the Bema Seat of Judgment

1. Part of Dispensational teaching is that there is a difference between the Bema Judgment Seat wherein Christians will be judged according to their works with a view towards rewards and the Great White Throne Judgment at which unbelievers will be judicially judged according to their works with a view towards eternal torment.
2. The question arises as to whether or not this dramatic distinction between the Bema Judgment and the Great White Throne Judgment is biblical.
3. The Greek word [bema], which is translated *seat*, is from a root which means 'base' or the foot (and by implication, step). It is therefore used to designate a stepped seating area for judgment.
4. Bema simply means the raised seating of a judge or a king much like we see a judge in a courtroom today sitting on a high bench. In like manner, the Bema seat is simply the raised seating of someone who is to judge.
5. The biblical and theological problems arise because certain teachers proclaim that the "bema" seat was used only to reward individuals and never to issue forth punishment.
6. Unfortunately for that position, the *Scriptures* do not support such teaching. In fact, the Word of God teaches just the opposite.
 - Example. Pilate used the bema to judge Christ, not to reward Him. The Bible teaches that Pilate sat on the judgment seat [bema] when Jesus was being accused of wrong doing.

Matthew 27:19 "When he [Pilate] was set down on the judgment seat [bema], 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 [bema] in a place that is called the Pavement, but in the Hebrew, Gabbatha." Gabbatha means the knoll, a vernacular term for the Roman tribunal.

While on the bema Pilate made a judgment to set Barabbas free and to have the Lord of Glory scourged and handed over to be crucified. This was a legal judgment and not a judgment of personal reward.

- Example. When Paul was accused by the Jews of doing evil, Festus brought him to Caesarea for judgment according to law. There are no rewards in view. *Acts 25:5 Let them therefore, said he, which among you are able, go down with me, and accuse this man, if there be any wickedness in him. And when he had tarried among them more than ten days, he went down unto Caesarea; and the next day sitting on the judgment seat [bema] commanded Paul to be brought. And when he was come, the Jews which came down from Jerusalem stood round about, and laid many and grievous complaints against Paul, which they could not prove.*
7. The believer's motivation for good works is not based on fear of loss of rewards. Rather, the believer's motivation for good works is a necessary evidence of true salvation as per Hebrews 10:23. *"Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;)"*
 8. To their credit Dispensational teachers do move away from the concept of the Christian having merited any rewards by saying that whatever rewards are received shall be cast down at the feet of Christ in humility according to 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."*
 9. There is a judgment seat [bema] on which Christ will one day sit and before which every person must one day appear.

The Righteous Shall Appear Before Christ

- *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 [bema] of Christ.*
- *2 Corinthians 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat [bema] 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.*

The Unrighteous Shall Appear Before Christ

- *Revelation 20:11 And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. 12 And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. 13 And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. 14 And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. 15 And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.*

10. The timing of this bema judgment for all is said to be after the resurrection. *John 5:28 Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, 29 And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.*
11. To make a dramatic distinction between the judgment of individuals in 2 Corinthians 5 and individuals in Revelation 20 is to go where Scripture does not allow.
12. When Jesus comes every person, believer and unbeliever shall be judged according to his work.

Revelation 22:12 And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be.

13. Those who have lived in the flesh shall receive the reward of having lived in the flesh.

- *Romans 8:13a For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die...but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.*

There is a reward of unrighteousness.

- *2 Peter 2:13 And [those who live in the flesh] 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;*

14. Those who have lived in the Spirit shall receive the reward of having lived in the Spirit.

Romans 8:13b ... but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.

15. *“The wicked receive for his work the reward of damnation, and the righteous receive for his work, the reward of everlasting life in the inheritance of the Son. That is how Christ gives to every man according to his own work, whether good or bad” (Tony Warren).*

16. When a Christian is rewarded according to his work, he shall receive the exact same reward as every other believer for positionally, in Christ, every work of the man of God is without fault because it is produced by the Spirit. Because of Christ, God looks upon every believer as blameless. Therein is the hope and confidence of the Christian that, in the day of ultimate accountability at the judgment seat [bema] there will be *“no condemnation.”*

- *Romans 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.*
- *Revelation 14:4 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.*

17. The concept of being rewarded for spiritual service is also indicated in Matthew 6:19.
- *Matthew 6:19 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.*
18. Based on this text some theologians teach that not only does this verse justify individual meritorious rewards at the bema seat, but it tells us to pursue them. However, that seems to be a careless understanding of the text.
19. Matthew 6:19 does not in any sense teach that believers will receive varying rewards depending upon their own merit for the text does not even mention the bema seat. It certainly does not tell anyone to pursue spiritual rewards as a payment.
20. The true understanding of Matthew 6:19 is that Jesus points out the uselessness of possessing earthly 'treasures' while there is the glory of laying up spiritual 'treasures' which are incorruptible.
21. The specific treasure is Christ Himself, not some reward or payment for a good life lived for “*there is none righteous, no, not one*” (Romans 3:10).
22. What is the reward of a believer’s faith but Christ Himself who is full of spiritual riches which is in us a tree of Life?
23. The objective of the Christian life is not to receive some meritorious reward or payment because we have evangelized greatly, or worked harder than the next Christian in the mission field. The objective of the Christian life is to have Christ and be rich in Him.
- *2 Corinthians 4:6 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.*
24. The Bible is clear that there is one judgement of Christ, and it takes place at the last day.
25. On the last day individuals will stand before the judgement seat of Christ to give account of what he has done on earth, whether good or bad.
26. All those who were washed clean in the blood of Christ shall stand without condemnation and with 'good' works, being without fault before God.
27. All those who have not been washed in the blood of the Lamb shall stand condemned with their 'bad' works being exposed because there are guilty in the works of sins.

28. The question may arise as to why God calls where He is seated in Revelation 20 the “*thronos*” or throne and in other places the judgment seat [bema].
29. The answer is that the *Word of God* is filled with symbolism, figures and word images or pictures which signifies or illustrates a facet of spiritual truth.
30. Some chapters and verses such as Revelation 20 may be illustrating one aspect of the Lord such as His being the King who rules upon the throne, while another chapter and verse such as 2 Corinthians 5:10 may be illustrating how the Lord is seated as Judge to evaluate the soul.
31. This pattern of highlighting the various glories of Christ is replete in *Scripture*.
- Example. In Revelation 5:6 the Lord is presented as a Lamb and in Revelation 5:5 He is said to be the Lion of the tribe of Juda. One verse speaks of the Lord’s meekness and sacrifice, and the other of His power and Strength. This does not mean there are two different Lords.
 - Example. In Isaiah 52:3 the Messiah is called the Root, and in John 15:5 the Vine.
 - Example. In John 6:35 Christ says He is the Bread of Life and in John 4:14 the Living Water.
 - Example. In 2 Corinthians 5:10 Christ calls His chair the judgement seat [bema], and in Revelation 20:11 a great white throne. Herein is Christ as Judge and King.
32. There is only one time of judgment spoken of in *Scripture* and it is the last day. This is a time of judgment for all people. There are no multiple judgement days though some have suggested the following passages do indicate a special day of judgment for believers 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.*
- Special Note.** This verse says nothing about multiple judgments days, or of this being a judgment of rewards for Christians only.
- *2 Corinthians 5:9 Wherefore we labour, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of him. 10 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. 11 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.*
- Special Note.** This verse says nothing about multiple judgment days. It is clear from this text that it is a time of judgement 'both' for the good and the bad alike. There is terror associated with this event. This judgement seat [bema] is the same one all mankind must stand before. Those who are found righteous because of their relationship with Christ shall be made manifest and those who are not in Christ will also be revealed.

Conclusion.

“Let us have the confidence to know that while all 'our own' righteous works are as filthy rags before God, the righteous works of Christ in us make us appear before Him perfect. 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, reigns, or prideful lust 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, and we can never go wrong. For it is then that we will understand that when we stand before the Bema seat, we will stand a 'Righteous Man,' a man perfect in every way before God, having a Saviour who has delivered him a full inheritance, a full reward, by His work” (Tony Warren).