



THE BEMA SEAT (The Judgment Seat of Christ)

In Ancient Greece's large Olympic arenas, there was an elevated seat situated at the finish line on which the Judge of the games sat -- called **the Bema Seat**. After the contests were over, the successful competitors would gather before the Bema to receive their rewards or crowns. This Greek word "Bema" means judgment; but the Greek language has two meanings for this word "Bema". In one sense, it has to do with damnation; while the other sense is the giving out of rewards. The Bible says unbelievers (lost) will be judged in the first sense - condemnation; while believers will be judged in the other sense - rewards. The Bema was not a judicial bench where someone was condemned; it was a reward seat. Likewise, the Judgment Seat of Christ is not a judicial bench. Paul says the Christian life is like a race; and the Judge is Jesus Christ. When the spiritual race is over for each believer, Christ will gather every member before the Bema for the purpose of examining each one and giving the proper reward to each. "Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but *only* one receives the prize? "Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then *do it* to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable." [1 Cor 9:24-25] "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in 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 Tim 4:7-8]

This is a lost teaching and doctrine in many of the American Evangelical churches today. I had a pastor once tell me that he did not believe in this doctrine. I showed him the multiple Scriptures that clearly showed this to be a true doctrine of the church; but he still refused to believe! Why should we care about this Bema Seat and what does it mean to the believer? What does the Scripture say about it and how does it affect me? "For we must *all* appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." [2 Cor 5:10] "But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will *all* stand before the judgment seat of God." [Romans 14:10] First we see that the Scriptures say *ALL* truly saved Christians will go before The Bema Seat of Christ. There is no escape from this; and we will have to meet Jesus Christ and be judged on what we did from the time of our salvation until the time of our death! This is not about our sins, for they are forgiven, forgotten, and covered with the blood! Rather, this is about the works we have done since our true conversion -- they are either dead works (self-actuated) or the works of the Lord (Holy Spirit actuated). If we make it to the Bema Seat, that is an incredibly good thing!! It means we are really saved!! What will happen at this Judgment Seat? "For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels and will then repay every man according to his deeds." [Matt 16:27] "...knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free." [Eph 6:8] Two things will happen at this Judgment Seat of Christ: (a) giving of rewards and (b) judgment of dead works by burning. Jesus Christ is going to be judging our deeds whether they are (a) rewarded, or they are (b) burned up!

What do the Scriptures say about our good works that leads to rewards? "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them." [Eph 2:10]. This Scripture shows us that God Himself created good works for us to do before we were ever saved. "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven." [Matt 5:16] As saved believers, we have the Holy Spirit in us to guide us to these good works; and these works are to always lead to the glory of God and not to us or our ministries! Reality check is the works that do receive a reward at the Bema are works performed by Christ in us for His glory. Where we get in trouble is when we pick what we think is a good work, but it has not been assigned to us by the Holy Spirit -- so it becomes a dead work. It is dead because it is created by us (self) and not by God. Any work that we do for the Lord which has a tinge of self in it will burn up! "So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." [Phil 2:12-13] The good work always comes from God and not us. The good is done by God (Holy Spirit) in us for His good pleasure. What is happening in the American Evangelical church is we have told many people to rush out and do service who have just walked an aisle, said a prayer, and are declared saved. The issue is they may have not: (A) shown evidence that they are truly saved; and (B) they have not been shown the road to sanctification, (which I will address in a later Blog) so their works will end up as dead works! They either do not have the Holy Spirit or they have not learned to discern what the Holy Spirit wants. The American Church says that the Christian-busy-in-service is the mature Christian. But the Bible says that the one on the path to holiness is the mature one -- is the one that Christ has purified for His works. "...looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds." [Titus 2:13-14]. Many ask what are the good works? My answer is always to live life by being ruled by the Holy Spirit with evidence of fruit of the Spirit [Gal 5:22-23] and what is listed in [1 Cor 13:4-8a] -- LOVE. Until we learn this lesson, we will do many dead works in our walk.

Now let's see what happens to the dead works we have done in our ignorance and self-centeredness. "According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work." [1 Cor 3:10-13] The lasting foundation is Christ Himself (gold, silver, precious stones) and the works He does through the Holy Spirit in us. Those works will be tested by the Fire of God and only the works that survive this fire will be rewarded. The dead works (wood, hay and straw) will be burned up by God's Holy consuming fire! "If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire." [1 Cor 3:14-15] These verses show that at the Bema Seat two things are happening: rewards and burning. The word "rewards" in verse 14 is the Greek word *misthos* which means literally the pay of one's wages. The Lord Jesus is going to pay His faithful servants for their good works which He did through the Holy Spirit in them. This can be in the form of crowns: *The Crown of Life* referred to in James 1:12 and Revelation 2:10 is bestowed upon those who persevere under trials. *The Incorruptible Crown* (also known as the Imperishable Crown) is given to those who demonstrate *self-denial and perseverance* and is referenced in 1 Corinthians 9:25. The *Crown of Righteousness* mentioned in 2 Timothy 4:8 is promised to those who love and anticipate the Second Coming of Christ. The *Crown of Glory* discussed in 1 Peter 5:4 is granted to Christian clergy who shepherd the flock in unselfish love being a good example to others (1 Peter 5:2-4). The *Crown of Rejoicing* (also known as the Crown of Exultation or Crown of Auxiliary) in 1 Thessalonians 2:19 and Philippians 4:1 is given to people who engage in evangelism of those outside the Christian Church. There is no detailed description in Scripture what the reward really is. We also see that the judgment is not on sin because the one whose dead works are burned up has a loss but is still saved.

The great tragedy and lesson in this doctrine is that we can do an entire lifetime of service for the Lord and have it all gone up in smoke at the Bema Seat of Christ! After all that Jesus Christ has done for us in our redemption and life and for us to have nothing to show for it is a great tragedy and waste! We see the twenty-four elders in Revelation 4:10-11 worshipping by bowing down and throwing their crowns before the altar of God. Can you imagine yourself there and watching other saints throwing their crowns at the feet of Jesus and you have nothing but ashes to show for your life's work? There will be many tears and the smell of smoke for many! I personally think of it often and seek the Lord before I do any ministry. In the 1850s a Methodist Minister named William Booth started the Salvation Army after having a vision of the Bema Seat of Christ and where he saw many prominent ministers of his day have their life works burned up at the Bema Seat and then had Christ stand before him to judge and the vision stopped. He was shaken to his core and repented of many dead works! (Visions of William Booth 1906.)



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