

What is the Judgment Seat of Christ / Bema Seat of Christ?

Romans 14:10–12 says, “For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat ... so then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.” **Second Corinthians 5:10** tells us, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” In the context, it is clear that both scriptures are referring to Christians, not unbelievers. The judgment seat of Christ, therefore, involves believers giving an account of their lives to Christ. The judgment seat of Christ does not determine salvation; that was determined by Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf (**1 John 2:2**) and our faith in Him (**John 3:16**). All of our sins are forgiven, and we will never be condemned for them (**Romans 8:1**). We should not look at the judgment seat of Christ as God judging our sins, but rather as God rewarding us for our lives. Yes, as the Bible says, we will have to give an account of ourselves. Part of this is surely answering for the sins we committed. However, that is not going to be the primary focus of the judgment seat of Christ.

At the judgment seat of Christ, believers are rewarded based on how faithfully they served Christ (**1 Corinthians 9:4–27; 2 Timothy 2:5**). Some of the things we might be judged on are how well we obeyed the Great Commission (**Matthew 28:18–20**), how victorious we were over sin (**Romans 6:1–4**), and how well we controlled our tongues (**James 3:1–9**). The Bible speaks of believers receiving crowns for different things based on how faithfully they served Christ (**1 Corinthians 9:4–27; 2 Timothy 2:5**). The various crowns are described in **2 Timothy 2:5, 2 Timothy 4:8, James 1:12, 1 Peter 5:4, and Revelation 2:10**. **James 1:12** is a good summary of how we should think about the judgment seat of Christ: “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”¹

CHAPTER 2

What Will Happen to Believers during the Judgment?

We now turn to consider three events in which the believers will participate after Christ comes to take them to be with himself and while judgment is being poured out upon the earth.

The judgment seat of Christ is one subject about which there is much confusion among believers. Most believers know that there is such a thing as the judgment seat of Christ and picture it as some dreadful scene at which all of the sins that they have successfully hidden during life will be revealed. Others view it as a time when unconfessed sins done in life are paid for and punishment meted out. Two passages of Scripture are particularly pertinent for our study.

For it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.” So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God. (Romans 14:11–12)

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that every one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. (2 Corinthians 5:10)

THE TIME OF THE JUDGMENT SEAT OF CHRIST

It is apparent that the judgment seat of Christ must take place after the time that believers are taken to be with Christ because reward follows resurrection. This principle is made clear in Luke 14:14 when Jesus in conflict with the Pharisees encouraged his host to invite the poor, maimed, lame, and blind to his feast. These poor people could not in any way remunerate the host for his expense. Jesus said, “You will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” In other words, there is coming a time when all righteous deeds must be recompensed. This time of reward would take place when the just (righteous) are resurrected. That time of reward is the judgment seat of Christ.

When we use the word *judgment* it is generally in a punitive context in which someone who has done something wrong is called to account for his wrong deeds. However, such is not the case at the judgment seat of Christ. Its purpose is not punitive, that is, to punish believers for any sins that they have not previously taken care of. In the Romans 5 and 2 Corinthians 5 passages when Paul uses the terms *we, us, every one*, etc., he is referring to believers. At the judgment seat of Christ there will be only believers present. Unbelievers will appear at the great white throne judgment, which will occur one thousand years later. The subjects of the judgment seat of Christ, then, are only those who have believed in Jesus

¹ Got Questions Ministries. (2002–2013). [*Got Questions? Bible Questions Answered*](#). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

Christ as their own personal Savior. This is a time when they will appear before their Savior “that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10). But more of this later.

THE JUDGE OF THE JUDGMENT—JESUS CHRIST

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ....For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. (2 Corinthians 5:10; Romans 14:10)

From these portions of these two verses it is obvious that this judgment will take place before Jesus, the Son of God, into whose hands God the Father has committed this judgment. His presiding at this judgment is a part of his exaltation and to him has been committed the right to manifest divine authority in judgment. The fact that the judge is none other than Jesus Christ assures that the judgment will be objective, thorough, and completely righteous. It is Jesus Christ who will render judgment upon those for whom he has died and belong to him.

There are four bases—two negative and two positive—upon which judgment will be rendered at the judgment seat of Christ. The negative bases of the judgment are: (1) It is not to determine salvation because only believers will be there. Since only believers are there, the basis of this judgment cannot be to determine the salvation of the subjects. That was already determined while the subjects were still living upon earth and received Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin. (2) It is not a judgment or punishment of sin or sins because believers’ sins have already been judged. The most common misconception concerning the judgment seat of Christ is that it will be a judgment at which believers will be called into account for sins committed after they were saved, especially for any sins that they failed to confess, whether willfully or out of ignorance. This cannot be the case because Christ’s payment for sins was once for all and complete. It must be remembered that every believer’s sin was future with reference to the time when Christ died. The penalty for every believer’s sin past, present, and future was completely paid for by the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. That means that there is no sin for which the believer must pay anything. Jesus paid it ALL! The judgment seat of Christ will not be an investigation at which believers’ “dirty linen” is discovered and laid out to open view.

The positive bases for the judgment seat of Christ are: (1) It is to reveal the essential righteous character of the believers. Rather than to display the secret sins of believers, the judgment seat of Christ will display their righteousness and demonstrate that they rightly belong in heaven to be with Jesus forever.

(2) It is for the purpose of receiving rewards for Christian stewardship. This is Paul’s emphasis as he said:

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. (2 Corinthians 5:10)

The emphasis that is usually drawn from this verse is that the believer will stand before the judgment seat of Christ in great fear as all of his shortcomings and failures in life are rehearsed before everyone in heaven. Then there will be tears of regret as the believer weeps for his failure to share the gospel or do some good work. The judgment seat of Christ, however, is not punitive. Some will receive more rewards than others but there will be no jealousy or envy or regrets over rewards not received. Just to be in heaven forever with Jesus will in itself be reward enough!

THE PURPOSES OF THE JUDGMENT

There are two purposes for the judgment seat of Christ—one for the present and one for the future. Paul reveals to us the purpose of the judgment seat of Christ for the present:

Therefore knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men. (2 Corinthians 5:11)

The “fear of the Lord” is not something that is fearful or dreadful. It is the “awe” or “awesomeness” of the Lord. It is a reference to his majesty and omnipotence. Since Jesus Christ is the Judge at the judgment of believers, the only sensible thing for them to do in the present is to seek to persuade all mankind to receive him as their personal Savior. The purpose of the judgment seat of Christ for the present, then, is to motivate us to be faithful in our witness for him.

The purposes of the judgment seat of Christ are twofold. The first purpose is to examine the character and motivations of believers’ works. Paul states:

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. If any man’s work which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved; yet so as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3:13–15)

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In the immediately preceding verses, Paul points out that there are two categories of material that the believer can use to build upon the foundation “which is laid, which is Jesus Christ:” (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:11). They are perishable materials—“wood, hay, straw”—and imperishable materials—“gold, silver, precious stones.” The judgment seat of Christ will determine “of what sort” the believer’s works were. It is possible for one to give himself to “hay works,” which may seem impressive to some people in this life, but at the judgment seat of Christ they will all disappear. Another may give himself to small “gold nugget” works, which may not be at all impressive to man but will endure for all eternity and bring God’s eternal reward.

The second purpose of the judgment seat of Christ is to render one of two decisions: (1) the loss of rewards or (2) to give rewards. Paul describes the loss of rewards as he writes:

But I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified. (1 Corinthians 9:27)

In this statement Paul is not expressing fear that he might lose his salvation. Rather, he is expressing the possibility of standing before the judgment seat of Christ and being “disapproved.” In the whole context of Paul’s statement he is talking about receiving rewards and he does not want to come before the Judge and be disapproved for receiving a reward.

There are five rewards or crowns that will be given to believers at the judgment seat of Christ. They are (1) an incorruptible crown (1 Corinthians 9:25), which will be given to those who mastered their fleshly desires, (2) a crown of rejoicing (1 Thessalonians 2:10) for those who were soul winners, (3) a crown of life (James 1:12) for those who endured trials, (4) a crown of righteousness (2 Timothy 4:8) for those who loved his appearing, and (5) a crown of glory (1 Peter 5:4) for those who were willing to feed the flock of God. These crowns (or, diadems, from *diadema*) are rewards associated with honor and dignity and are bestowed upon the victors who overcame the world, the flesh, and the devil. These crowns are not for the eternal glory of the recipient but for the glory of God who gave them. In all likelihood those who receive the crowns, like the twenty-four elders (Revelation 4:4), will throw their crowns at Jesus’ feet in an act of worship and adoration.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless. (Ephesians 5:25–27)

Having demonstrated the righteousness of the believers and given them rewards for faithfulness, believers (the church) will be presented by God the Father as a gift to the Son to be his bride for all eternity. Then the holy, spotless bride will be presented to the Groom who has so recently presided as her Judge. Then comes the next momentous event, believers will participate in the marriage of the lamb.

And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude and as the sound of many waters and as the sound mighty peals of thunder, saying, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready.” And it was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. And he said to me, “Write, ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.’ ” (Revelation 19:6–9a; see also Matthew 25:1–13; 22:1–14; Luke 12:35–41)

It is necessary to distinguish between two events: (1) the marriage of the Lamb and (2) the marriage supper of the Lamb. The marriage of the Lamb is an event that takes place in heaven following the judgment seat of Christ in which the body of believers (the church) is eternally united to Christ. The marriage supper of the Lamb takes place on earth when Christ returns with his bride to set up his kingdom. The marriage supper of the Lamb is a parabolic symbol of the entire millennial age to which Israel will be invited during the tribulation period. Most of Israel will reject the invitation so they will be cast out. Many, however, will accept the invitation and will be received into the kingdom to participate in the marriage supper of the Lamb. Because of Israel’s rejection of the invitation, the invitation will likewise go out to the Gentiles of the tribulation period. The Gentiles who accept the invitation will be included in the millennial kingdom and will participate in the marriage supper of the Lamb. Let us now consider the marriage of the Lamb.

THE TIME OF THE MARRIAGE OF THE LAMB

From the passage quoted above (particularly Revelation 19:7) it is apparent that the marriage of the Lamb takes place between the time that the believers are taken to be with Jesus (the Rapture) and the time that he returns to the earth with his believers (the church) to set up his kingdom. It occurs in heaven during the period of judgment that will be poured out upon the earth. In our present study we have seen that the marriage of the Lamb is preceded by the judgment seat of Christ (Revelation 19:8) and the presentation of the believers to Christ as his pure and holy bride. It occurs before Christ returns to earth to set up his kingdom (the second advent).

THE PLACE OF THE MARRIAGE OF THE LAMB

And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses. (Revelation 19:14)

The marriage of the Lamb must take place in heaven because it follows the judgment seat of Christ. It is from heaven (the air) that Christ comes with his believers (the church) when he returns to earth to set up his kingdom. No other place would be fit for a heavenly people (see Philippians 3:²

PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY BEFORE GOD (2 COR. 5:9-11)

You have probably heard the television commercial on investments in which the actor says, "We make money old-fashioned way: we *earn* it." That may be true when it comes to making a return a financial investment. But when it comes to salvation, the only way you can be saved is not through earning it. Rather, you receive salvation as a free gift from God through Jesus Christ.

The central message of the gospel is that we are saved entirely by faith and not through any kind of human effort. The Bible teaches us that there is absolutely nothing we can do to earn salvation. The apostle Paul said, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and not of yourselves; it is a gift from God" (Eph. 2:8).

Many people who call themselves evangelicals, fundamentalists, or charismatics believe that they are saved by faith. However, many who have experienced the joy of salvation are not clear about what Scripture says about their accountability before God and what the Bible calls the "Judgment Seat of Christ" (2 Cor. 5:10).

WORD WEALTH

Judgment seat, *bema*, in Matt. 27:19 and 2 Cor. 5:10. From *baino*, "to go," the word originally described a step or a stride (Acts 7:5). Then it was used for a raised platform reached by steps, especially from which orations were made. Later, it denoted the tribunal or tribunal of a ruler where litigants stood trial. In the New Testament it usually refers to earthly magistrates (Acts 18:12, 16, 17), but twice it is used of the divine tribunal before which believers will stand (Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10).

What is the purpose of the *bema* in the believer's life? (5:10)

Paul states that every believer in Jesus Christ will stand before the judgment seat of Christ to "receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (5:10). In other words, we are personally accountable before God for what we have done with our lives after we have been saved.

It is important that we do not misunderstand Scripture here. It's not that we are trying to sneak religious works back into the salvation picture. But the Bible does teach that all believers are directly accountable to God with what they have done with their time, talent, and abilities.

Many believers in Jesus Christ seem to think that after they have been saved, God has given them carte-blanche with their lives. In other words, they think that after they have been saved they are free to live any way they choose as long as they don't

² McDowell, J. (1997). [*Josh McDowell's handbook on apologetics*](#) (electronic ed.). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.

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sin. But this belief is not what the Bible teaches. We are responsible for faithfulness as parents, husbands, wives, children, employee's, ministers, and citizens. God has invested many things into every one of our lives, and He expects us to be fruitful for His kingdom.

BIBLE EXTRA

The accountability of believers appears numerous times in the New Testament. Look up the following references, and list ways you will be held accountable for your work in this life:

Matthew 25:14–46

Luke 19:12–27

John 5:25–27

Acts 10:42

In your own words, briefly explain how we can be saved by grace and yet still be accountable before God for our lives.

How can we take our accountability seriously but not become legalistic?

Based on what you have learned from 2 Corinthians and the other passages you have looked up, what do you think is the relationship between the “judgment seat of Christ” in 2 Corinthians 5:10 and the “great white throne of judgment” in Revelation 20:11?

Will any rewards be given to believers at the judgment seat of Christ? (James 1:12)

If an individual Christians are faithful to what God has called them to do, what should be their attitude toward the judgment seat of Christ? (5:9–11, also 5:1–8)

What will believers who have lived their lives selfishly and disobediently experience at the judgment seat of Christ?

How does the blood of Jesus Christ affect what will happen at the judgment seat of Christ?

FAITH ALIVE

In what ways has your study of 2 Corinthians 5 caused you to understand your personal accountability differently?

Spend a few moments worshiping the Lord and thanking Him for His grace in your life. Meditate on the fact that God totally accepts you as you are and that there is absolutely nothing you can do to earn His love, favor, or acceptance. Ask God in prayer if there is any area in your life which needs change. Allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you about your faithfulness as a husband, wife, father, mother, child, student, parent, employee, citizen, or minister. Then write down the areas about which God has spoken to you. Develop a clear, simple, and concise action plan to begin living more accountably.

**Areas About Which God
Has Spoken To Me**

Action Plan For Change

Whether alive on earth or alive beyond the grave, what should be the aim of every believer? (5:9)

What form of accountability does Paul teach awaits all believers? (5:10)³

³ Hayford, J. W. (1998). *Ministering In the Spirit and Strength of Jesus*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.